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Credibility and commitment in the making of truly astonishing first-person reports

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ABSTRACT: Truly astonishing reports are an inveterate feature of the practice of making claims based on personal experience. In this paper, the author focuses on reports of apparent experiences of God in order to develop a proper understanding of the nature of such reports and to suggest a model of the strategies required of those who wish to use them in arguments supporting truly astonishing existential claims.

KEY WORDS: testimony, religious experience, credibility, gullibility, commitment, sincerity, assurance warrant, self-deception, rational ethos

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, some philosophically minded Christian apologists have advanced the argument that the occurrence of experiences that seem to their experiencers to be experiences of God justify or provide evidence in favor of the claim that God exists. One such writer is Keith Yandell (1999). In his book *Philosophy of Religion: A contemporary introduction*, Yandell presents the following argument:

- (1.) Experiences occur which are a matter of their subjects at least seeming to experience God.
- (2.) If the subjects of experiences of this sort (non-culpably) have no reason to think that these experiences are cancelled or counterbalanced or compromised or contradicted or confuted or logically consumed or empirically consumed, then their occurrence gives them evidence that God exists.
- (3.) The subjects of experiences of this sort typically have no reason to think that these experiences are cancelled or counterbalanced or compromised or contradicted or confuted or logically or empirically consumed. Hence:
- (4.) These experiences give them evidence that God exists. (Yandell 1999: 231)

In a subsequent passage, Yandell goes on to clarify what he means by the various terms that he introduces in premise (2). As Yandell defines them:

Mary's experience is *cancelled* as evidence if she has reason to think that she would seem to experience God whether or not God exists.

Mary's experience is *counterbalanced* as evidence if she has reason to believe that it is just as likely that she seem to experience God if God does not exist as it is if God does exist.

Mary's experience is *compromised* as evidence if Mary has reason to believe that it is not logically possible that *God exists* be experientially disconfirmed.

Mary's experience is *contradicted* as evidence if Mary has reason to believe that it is logically impossible that God exist, or to believe that the existence of the initial physical conditions we have reason to think obtain plus the laws of nature are incompatible with God existing.

Mary's experience is *confuted* as evidence if Mary has reason to believe that there is a being that is not God but produces what appear to be experiences of God.

Mary's experience is *logically or in fact consumed* as evidence if it is logically impossible, or inconsistent with the existence of the initial physical conditions we have reason to think obtain, plus the laws of nature, that there be experiences of the same kind as Mary's experience which provide evidence against *God exists*. (Yandell 1999: 232)

In addition, Yandell presents—and spends much of his time defending—a general principle of experiential evidence that he believes provides the basis for premise (2).

- (P*) If a person S has an experience E which, if reliable, is a matter of being aware of an experience-independently existing item X, and S (non-culpably) has no reason to think that E is cancelled or counterbalanced or compromised or contradicted or confuted or logical consumed or empirically consumed, then S's having E is evidence that X exists. (Yandell 1999: 231)

In this paper, I shall not be evaluating the strength of this argument as it stands. Instead, for the sake of getting at what I am really interested in, I shall make the following three assumptions at the outset: (a) the principle of experiential evidence presented in premise (2) is correct as it stands, (b) the arguments given in Yandell's text in favor of this principle are all good ones, and (c) this principle is properly employed in connection with any experiences that seem to their subjects to be experiences of God. Granted, these may all be terrible assumptions to make. And it would probably be a good idea to look into them at a future date. But for the purposes of my discussion here, I am going to make them and leave this part of Yandell's argument alone.

For what is interesting to me about this argument and others like it is what happens next. Notice that Yandell's argument is about whether the individual who has seemingly had an experience with the content in question has evidence or justification for the claim that God exists. On the argument, that individual, in the circumstances specified, does have such evidence or justification. But is that the end of the story? Surely not! For it seems that such an individual would also want to communicate this evidence or justification to others: especially to those who have not had an experience of this kind. Indeed, without the ability of such an individual to do so, the utility and value of arguments like Yandell's would be severely limited. They could perhaps be used to assure those who contend that they have had an experience of this kind that they are not unreasonable in holding certain theistic existential beliefs as a consequence. But they could not contribute to what has always been the promise of arguments from religious experience: that they rely upon a source of evidence or justification that is compelling for non-experiencers as well, especially for those who reject the claim that God exists or who have suspended judgment on its probable truth.

This is not to say that Yandell is not interested in questions of this kind. He is. And he gives an argument in favor of the view that such evidence or justification as apparent experiences of God provide those that have them can be communicated to those who have not.

CREDIBILITY AND COMMITMENT

Suppose one learns that explorers in northern Minnesota have discovered thick-furred black squirrels, hitherto thought to inhabit only the East with their center on the Princeton University campus, that thrive on pine cones and fish as well as nuts and weigh as much as forty pounds. The explorers' squirrel-spotting and squirrel-weighing experiences...are evidence for their being the squirrel giants...and so provide the explorers with evidence for their conclusions. There is nothing to prevent one from learning from all this that northern Minnesota is blessed with giant black squirrels without oneself making a trip there. Similarly, if religious experiences ... are evidence ... they provide evidence for the claim that God exists. There is no reason why one cannot learn of the occurrence of such experiences ... and conclude that these experiences, had by others, provide one with evidence that God exists. Indeed, there would be nothing unreasonable in taking them to be such evidence, even if their subjects did not, provided one had no reason to think that those subjects were anything other than mistaken in whatever reasons they might have for not accepting their own experiences as evidence that God exists. (Yandell 1999: 234-235)

But even this argument leaves many issues unaddressed. Yandell is surely right in seeing apparent experience of God reports as being part of a larger category of reports—what are sometimes called “astonishing reports” (Coady 1992: 179)—to which something like reports of giant black squirrels in the north Minnesota woods also belong. But in and of itself, this does not tell us very much. First, there is the issue of just how similar these two different sorts of astonishing report actually are. Maintaining that one has encountered several forty pound fuzzy black squirrels in northern Minnesota, for example, at least leaves open the possibility that those to whom such a claim has been addressed can go out and double-check that claim themselves. With an apparent experience of God report, however, this option is not available. More fundamentally though, without a clear sense of how an astonishing report—or indeed any first person experiential account—can provide evidence or justification to its reader or auditor for a set of relevant existential claims, it does little good to say that an apparent experience of God report is one of them. For just doing that alone fails to give us a perspicuous picture of the conditions under which any such report succeeds or of the strategies that might be needed by those who make such reports to increase the likelihood that they will be accepted.

In this paper I want to try to provide such a picture, using reports of apparent experiences of God as the focus of my discussion. In doing so, I shall not be trying to determine the likely truth of the existential claims that have been based upon apparent experience of God reports. Nor shall I be trying to determine the credibility of any particular first-person experience of God account. What I shall be doing instead is showing how reports of apparent experiences of God could be used as a form of evidence or justification for the claim that God exists, given the truth of a certain theory of how testimony (in general) operates: a theory that I have previously had occasion to develop and defend. Astonishing—and indeed truly astonishing—first-person experiential reports are an inveterate feature of the indispensable practice of persuading others of the truth of putatively factual claims based upon one's knowledge or experience. As such, they must be closely considered and strategies for their effective use carefully outlined.

2. THE NATURE OF TESTIMONY

There are some who dismiss out of hand any report of a state or event that is beyond the scope of their own experience. David Hume famously recounts the story of a certain Indian prince who refused to believe the accounts of Europeans regarding the existence of ice

(Hume 1935: 119). In the present day, members of the politico-religious group “Focus on the Family”, as evidenced by the information provided on their website, are firmly convinced that gays and lesbians are all lying about their relative levels of happiness and the manner in which they came to realize the existence of their sexual desires (Myths and Facts About Homosexuality, n.d.). It is safe to assume that many of the communicants of the world’s major religions believe as a matter of course that the founding religious experiences of their various rivals cannot be true and must instead have some sort of naturalistic explanation. Mohammed, for example, was out in the sun too long (a student actually said this to me in class) and Buddha was experiencing nothing more than his own somewhat stripped down mental states. Indeed, there are people who deny that the American Civil War was about slavery, despite the vast written testimony to the contrary, that the witnesses to the Holocaust are telling the whole truth about the horrendous experiences that befell them, and that officials in the State of Hawaii’s Department of Health are telling the truth when they say that they have on file a certificate of live birth for a certain Barack Hussein Obama.

With the possible exception of the prince, most of these people are, of course, appallingly biased. Some are just plain nuts. But it is easy to see why many are tempted towards and feel comfortable with this sort of targeted skepticism. After all, it is not as if people don’t frequently try to bamboozle one another when it comes to very important matters. As the prophet Jeremiah put it, “The heart is deceitful about all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” (17: 9). Moreover, it is not as if it is that hard to do. Manufacturing a false report, especially about an inner state or an occurrence in a place or time that is practically or metaphysically inaccessible is not like manufacturing a delusive perception or a false memory. Unlike these others, testimony is utterly dependent upon agency. As Robert Audi puts it:

In many cases, then, testimony-based beliefs commonly pass through agency twice over. This passage does not entail an *exercise* of agency. The point is that testimony is subject to its power. The attester can falsify it, and the recipient commonly has both a monitoring system and the voluntary capacity to withhold belief of a huge range of propositions even if not of just any belief. (Audi 2006: 70)

In other words, in order to change others’ deeply-seated and far-reaching beliefs about human history and the structure and destiny of the universe, all one need do potentially is open one’s mouth and utter a few words—and other people know this.

The idea that some level of caution is required when it comes to testimony is certainly reflected in the writings of those who have closely considered this topic. Trudy Govier, for example, maintains that the only time that it is appropriate to rely utterly upon the word of another is when one is very young. For mature life, she advocates something that she calls “reflective trust.” This is the sort of trust granted by those who are capable of doubt and skepticism regarding the claims of others (Govier 1997: 66-7). Similarly, Jonathan Adler, in defending an approach to testimony somewhat more lenient than Govier’s, finds that this leniency will only go so far. While perfectly willing to allow, for example, that it is rational for an individual who does not know his or her way around an unfamiliar city to rely upon the directions provided by a randomly questioned stranger, he will not countenance such open-ended trust when the subject matter is less straightforward. Instead, as he puts it, “on controversial matters, the speaker’s assertion is not default-accepted” (Adler 2002: 156). Even in embracing a “presumptive right” view of testimony, he says:

We draw all manner of distinctions between classes of potential informants. Car salespersons are not as trustworthy (in their role) as librarians; professional journalists are more reliable than the popular press; *Consumer Reports* is better than your neighbour for deciding whether a particular car is worth buying (Adler 2002: 156).

Tony Coady, too, is willing to rule out certain classes of testifiers where we have “independent reason to be skeptical about this or that class of witness or the circumstances of their testimony” (Coady 1992: 196). He gives an example which has been especially apposite of late, “Government spokesmen ‘briefing’ the press on the details of a war their masters are currently waging” (Coady 1992: 196). And even Thomas Reid might be interpreted as presenting a view of this kind when he attributes to those who have “a knowledge of human life, and of the manners and characters of men” an overall level of trust in testimony lower than those who lack such “culture” (as he calls it) and experience (Reid 1997: 195).

Granted, such a distinction needs to be drawn: the distinction between acceptably forming a testimonially-based belief and mere gullibility. And granted many have seen the need to draw it. But what is the proper basis upon which to do so? In the past, I have argued against the notion that this distinction can be made on the basis of the subject matter of the testimonial assertion or on the basis of some sort of unconscious monitoring on the part of an auditor or addressee of a speaker for signs of insincerity or incompetence (Fields 2007: 4-8). I have argued instead that the key is to be found in the idea of a speaker’s commitment to the veracity of his or her assertions and concern for his or her reputation for trustworthiness, a reputation that a history of inaccurate or insincere assertions could potentially undermine (Fields 2009: 5-8). That is what I will argue for again today. This view, usually called “the Assurance View of Testimony” has been advocated in different forms by both Angus Ross (1986) and Richard Moran (2006). But I was first exposed to it through the work of my colleague Fred Kauffeld, who developed it independently of Ross and Moran through his work on the concept of presumption (e.g., Kauffeld 2003).

On Kauffeld’s view, what distinguishes a credible from a dubious testimonial source is the undertaking on the part of a speaker or writer of an open commitment to stand by what she or he has said. Part of such a commitment is a willingness on the part of the speaker to answer probing questions about what has been maintained. As Kauffeld sees it, there are in fact four separate elements involved in any such situation:

- (i) a speaker who serves as the *Testimony Source* (*S*) and an addressee(s) to whom the testimony is given, the *Testimony Recipient* (*R*);
- (ii) a statement which serves as *S*’s testimony;
- (iii) an expression of *S*’s consent to critical examination of her statement(s); and
- (iv) *S*’s pledge to speak truthfully. (Kauffeld & Fields 2005: 233)

At times these elements are quite distinct. For example, a speaker *S* may on occasion not only aver that something is the case (based on his or her experience or expertise) but add to this some sort of informal oath or intensifier. That is, she or he may say something like “On my mother’s grave, that’s the way it happened” or “Believe me, that wasn’t my intention at all.” In legal proceedings, of course, this practice of separating out oaths and affirmations to the effect that one will utter the truth to the best of one’s ability is ancient and essential. In common life, not coincidentally, it tends to be associated with those cases where the testimony being delivered is generally held to have a lower prior probability or where its acceptance would have serious doxastic implications for the individual doing so. In addition, there will be occasions on which a speaker will overtly invite criticism or

cross-examination of his or her claims, saying things along the lines of “Check it out yourself if you don’t believe me.” As in the previous case, such an open invitation (or challenge, as the case may be) seems intended to aid the testifier in navigating through higher levels of initial disbelief.

It is Kauffeld’s contention, however, that in a well-formed testimonial exchange, these elements are present even when they are not overtly expressed. In those situations where they are not expressed, it is the act of testifying itself, of “deliberately and openly” asserting that something is the case that does the work, tacitly communicating to the testimonial recipient R that elements (iii) and (iv) are present here as well (Kauffeld & Fields 2005: 233). Kauffeld’s argument in favor of this claim is to some extent a transcendental one (though it is unlikely that he would call it that). It is premised upon what must be the case pragmatically in order for testimony to operate: in other words, in order for it to exist at all. What Kauffeld visualizes is a world in which each of us, as a potential testimonial recipient R, is attempting “to collect and evaluate statements as evidence bearing on R’s inquiry into matters of serious concern to R” (Kauffeld & Fields 2005: 235). Since this world is essentially our world and such attempts can “rarely be conducted entirely on the basis of [the] inquirer’s first-hand experience,” it turns out that this is also a world in which each R needs to collaborate with at least some of the other Rs in order to get what each of them needs. Perhaps in another sort of world, this would not raise any sort of practical problems. But again, in a world like ours, it raises some significant ones. For, given the primacy of agency in the production and transmission of testimony, “persons responsible for a serious inquiry typically cannot just accept what others are willing to tell them on the basis of the other’s say so” (Kauffeld & Fields 2005: 235).

Of course, one strategy for dealing with this problem would be to subject each potential testimonial source to an MI5-style interrogation, seeking to establish thereby that individual’s *bona fides* with regard to the claim in question. Another would be to rely upon the testimony of others with respect to the competence and sincerity of those upon whom one wished primarily to rely. But neither of these strategies would be any more practical than that of simply believing what the individual in question originally said. Indeed, there seems to be something conceptually confused about this whole way of proceeding. As Coady has pointed out, if R relies upon S’s word to establish whether S’s word is to be relied upon, the danger of a vicious circle arises. If, on the other hand, R relies upon the word of others to establish S’s trustworthiness, then the question becomes one of whether R ought not to interrogate and cross-examine these other sources first, raising the likelihood of an infinite regress (cf. Coady 1992: 79-100).

Fortunately, with Kauffeld’s account, neither of these problems arises. That is because, on his view, in the collaboration among those seeking to collect and evaluate crucial statements of fact, the basic situation is known to all. R comes to S in an attempt to further her vital inquiries. S shares with R her beliefs about a matter of relevant concern. But in doing so, S is aware of the predicament R is in with respect to that which S has proffered. Indeed, S is in the same predicament in other contexts, where she is the one who requires others to help her in her inquiries. But, more importantly, S is aware that R is aware that S is aware of her predicament. And so S offers something to R to assure R of her sincerity and competence in this situation. She offers the only thing that she can offer. She offers her reputation. In other words, she gives to R something that she hopes will convince R that she (S) is cooperating with her (R) on at least some of R’s goals.

This is the potential embarrassment and loss of status that would result from overtly maintaining a false or insincere claim, embarrassment and loss of status that could readily follow from the increased inspection that such an open maintenance naturally—and foreseeably—invites (Kauffeld & Fields 2005: 236).

Now many may wonder how we can know that this is what is going on here. The epistemic dynamic between R and S in the situation described and the value of offering one's reputation as a strategy for resolving a potential stalemate are almost certainly not items of which the respective parties are consciously aware. At least, this is not so in those cases where no overt oath or assurance is made; and maybe it is not so in those cases either. But there are of course many sorts of collaborative situations—indeed there are many sorts of non-collaborative or even hostile situations—where the strategies employed by participants, while clearly rational and even capable of being modeled, are nonetheless not employed consciously. If this were not so, economics and a host of related disciplines would have no predictive power whatever.

What is crucial to the truth of this account is not how well it mirrors the streams of consciousness of various S's and R's. It is rather the extent to which it makes sense of various puzzling features of testimonial interaction and transfers of information. And this it is able to do. It provides us, for example, with a ready model for explaining the difference between testimony and gossip, a phenomenon that linguistic ethnographers distinguish from more reputable utterances not on the basis of content, but on the basis of the expressed desires of those who engage in it to distance themselves from the statements that they utter and to block any attempts at their corroboration (Bergman 1993: 99). In addition, it provides a ready explanation for the repeated employment of what are usually called "assurance warrants" in attempts to mitigate the effects of so-called "lemons markets" in certain structures of informational exchange. Such markets arise in situations of severe informational opacity and are endemic not only to various sorts of economic interactions (Akerlof 1970), but may be seen as well in the voting patterns of some elections (Dharmi 2001) and in some of the secret actions of national security policy-makers (Cohen 2002). Assurance warrants are explicit commitments undertaken by various actors in these markets to make explicit in a time of crisis what in more normal interactions must already have been there: the willingness to risk a reputation on the strength of the various claims that are being made.

Indeed, in his most recent writing, Kauffeld (2010) has emphasized the extent to which the Assurance View of Testimony is not only invaluable in explaining the nature of the epistemic warrant on which testimony is credible and the pragmatic responsibilities towards one another than speakers and addressees have within the context of various negotiated social spaces, it can also be used to account for the overall character of the set of complex speaker intentions that are conceptually required to make sense of the act of speaker assertion and its comprehension by another. If this line of reasoning is correct, then the Assurance View of Testimony possesses both explanatory depth and explanatory range. It has value, in other words, as a philosophical, rhetorical, and linguistic explanatory model. And that is no mean feat.

3. WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ASTONISHING REPORTS

If these are the sorts of negotiations that must take place in the case of more ordinary assertions, imagine the situations that arise when a testimonial source S presents a testimonial recipient R with an account of S's first person experience that seems to R unlikely, incredible, outré – in short, astounding. Such accounts proliferate. People claim to have had experiences supporting the existence of extraterrestrial visitors to our globe. They claim to have experienced the pleasures and pains of a past life. They claim to have witnessed terrible satanic rituals. They claim to have had experiences of God.

Of course, in each of these cases, if the astounded R were to have had an experience or set of experiences that provided evidence against what each of these S's was saying, then the issue of S's credibility would not arise. R would know what to think of S as a testifier no matter what protestations S might make. For, after all, while a person's testimony certainly has an independent force as a source of evidence or justification, necessarily it cannot be greater than that provided by a series of direct perceptions to the contrary regarding the same subject matter. Your claim that Max has gone abroad, for example, will have no value to me as evidence if later that day I encounter him strolling down the avenue. Similarly, if I have a knock-down, drag-out argument against the existence of something that you claim to have come upon or against the likelihood, or even the possibility, that you came upon it, I need not pay much attention to what you have to say. I may wonder what prompted you to make such an assertion and any questions that I ask you may be directed towards finding that out. But in my eyes your assertion would have been defeated and whatever responsibility you openly undertake in its favor would have little effect on my relevant beliefs.

However, it is important to notice that in the cases that I have mentioned the situation is not as straightforward as all that. It is true that I have never seen an alien being or had an experience of God. Moreover, it is my guess that this is something that a great many other people can say. However, so far as I know, there is no such thing as a knock-down, drag-out argument against the existence of such entities or of the possibility of people encountering them. In addition, there is no perceptual experience or set of perceptual experiences that anyone has had that would constitute a decisive defeat for the various claims to the effect that these entities have been experienced. For while, again, it is true that I have never seen an alien being or had an experience of God, this fact merely indicates an absence of supporting evidence for the claims that these entities have been experienced and exist. In order for the force of my experiential evidence to be stronger than the force of testimony in this case, it would have to consist of some direct experiential disconfirmation of these reports.

This is not to say, by the way, that these reports cannot be properly subject to severe doubt and suspense of judgment. There being so is a consequence of their being taken by many as astonishing. And it is not to say that there is not in many of these cases evidence that tends to undermine the likelihood of the reports in question. In the case of so-called Satanic Ritual Abuse, for example, a big bugaboo of the nineteen-eighties and nineties, extensive forensic investigations by the FBI led that agency to conclude that probably all of the accusations of SRA during that period were false (Ofshe 1999). But it is to say that with at least some of these reports the question of their truth is not an open and shut case. Such reports could count as evidence under certain circumstances. And so

it would not be vain for those who would like to make a report of this kind attempt to do so. Nor would it be foolish on the part of potential recipients to listen.

Given what has been said so far, we should by now have a fairly clear idea of what a testimonial source S would have to do in a case of this kind. First, given the extraordinary nature of the situation, it would seem that S would want to draw explicit attention to the underlying dynamic of the testimonial interaction, a dynamic that is typically submerged and understood. In other words, S would want to communicate to the recipient of her testimony R her understanding of the difficulty of the predicament that R may well be in. For, after all, a claim to have had an apparent experience of God, for example, will seem to be a very surprising one to many people, even when they have an ostensible belief in God's existence. What will be involved in making such a claim, therefore, will be a much more explicit taking of responsibility on the part of S, with an exceedingly generous level of questioning and cross-examination being encouraged and allowed. For example, if one made a claim to the effect that one was abducted by aliens, one would not want to resist talking about how it happened and when. Nor would one want to communicate that one felt put off by queries regarding details of the aliens' appearance, technology, and so on, or indeed questions about one's own past experiences, traumas, beliefs, presents states and the like.

But secondly, one would also want to share one's report as widely as possible and make oneself available for questioning to the same degree. Failure to confront responsible and knowledgeable critics in particular in cases of this kind is one of the deficiencies among makers of astonishing reports that David Hume, in a famous passage, justly derides:

It was a wise policy in that false prophet, Alexander, who though now forgotten, was once so famous, to lay the first scene of his impostures in Paphlagonia, where, as Lucian tells us, the people were extremely ignorant and stupid, and ready to swallow even the grossest delusion. People at a distance, who are weak enough to think the matter at all worth enquiry, have no opportunity of receiving better information. The stories come magnified to them by a hundred circumstances. Fools are industrious in propagating the imposture; while the wise and learned are contented, in general, to deride its absurdity, without informing themselves of the particular facts, by which it may be distinctly refuted. (Hume 1936: 126)

It is easy to see why Hume is disgusted by such behavior. If one can in effect shop for a venue in which to present claims of this kind, the strength of a relatively weak epistemic hand can be significantly strengthened. What one has as a result is almost a sort of argument from ignorance: the force of one's argument resting almost entirely on the fact that no one seems able to present a cogent objection.

Fair enough! However, with certain sorts of astonishing reports even this may not be enough. Specifically, this seems to be the case with reports of apparent experiences of God. Notice that with these other kinds of reports there exists at least the possibility that those that are questioning their makers will be able to look into and corroborate some of the answer that they latter give. There can be evidence left behind by aliens. Memories of past lives can line up with the appearance of real places or the records left behind in a city hall. But reports of apparent experiences of God are not like that because apparent experiences of God are not like that. Unlike these other types of reports, which are about natural, though unusual objects and states of affairs, reports of the appearance of a supernatural object or entity, such as God, are infected by the metaphysical "absolute elusiveness" (Conway 1972: 164) typical of their purported content. What this means is that:

The circumstances under which some people report having experienced the presence of God do not seem to be different from the circumstances under which other people report having an experience of His absence. For example, some religious people seem to experience God when they pray or meditate or perform various spiritual exercises. But other people do the same thing and experience the absence of God. Unlike our experience of material objects, we have no plausible theory to account for this. Indeed, if God exists, we have no idea under what circumstances He would be experienced and under what circumstances He would not. (Martin 1990: 174)

This is one reason why reports of apparent experiences of God can be called truly astonishing. One individual could have such an experience while standing right next to another and yet the second person would have no experience at all. One person could, as Michael Martin points out, engage in a series of practices or disciplines that in that case was effective for putting him or her in touch with God. But another individual doing exactly the same thing might have no such experience.

The problem with this sort of elusiveness, of course, is that makes it extremely easy for a testifier to make claims that do not involve risking his or her reputation. It creates, in other words, a situation of extreme informational asymmetry – essentially a kind of lemons market – with all of the negatives that are attendant upon it. Among these is a natural tendency towards deception. As Seth Cohen (2002) puts it:

In systems marked by an asymmetric distribution of information, there exists not only a potential but an endemic tendency toward misrepresentation. In seller-buyer or service provider-client relationships – with very few exceptions – it is the seller or the service provider who has exclusive access to information regarding the quality and costs of the product. In relationships which exhibit asymmetric information distribution, the inherent temptations can turn sinister. (Con-artists often earn the trust of their victims by relying on both the built-in asymmetry and the good standing of the real estate, finance, or investment industries.)

What can the honest testifier do in such a situation to convince those who receive his or her testimony that he or she is on the up and up? The only answer that I can offer is for such an individual to also attempt to demonstrate or model his or her commitment to rational investigation and a high level of what is sometimes called doxastic continence. This means exemplifying a rational ethos as a speaker. But it also means assuring one's addressees of one's awareness of and concern over common distortions in experience and belief-formation, such things as:

- (1.) *Negative Misinterpretation*: *S*'s desiring that *p* may lead *S* to misinterpret as not counting against *p* (or as not counting strongly against *p*) data which, in the absence of the desire that *p*, he would, if the occasion arose, easily recognize to count (or to count strongly) against *p*.
- (2.) *Positive Misinterpretation*: *S*'s desiring that *p* may lead *S* to interpret as supporting *p* data which count against *p*, and which, in the absence of this desire, *S* would easily recognize to count against *p* (if he considered this data).
- (3.) *Selective Focusing/Attending*: *S*'s desiring that *p* may lead *S* both to fail to focus his attention on evidence that counts against *p* and to focus instead on evidence suggestive of *p*.
- (4.) *Selective Evidence-Gathering*: *S*'s desiring that *p* may lead *S* both to overlook easily obtained evidence for not-*p* and to find evidence for *p* which is much less accessible (Mele 1987: 125-6).

Doing this would go a long way towards convincing those confronting such truly astonishing reports that the authors and those whom they address are involved in a truly collaborative epistemic endeavor.

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Commentary on “CREDIBILITY AND COMMITMENT IN THE MAKING OF TRULY ASTONISHING FIRST-PERSON REPORTS” by John Fields

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1. ORDINARY CASES

There is a good deal that is admirable in this paper. In particular, there is the general account of when testimony can function as legitimate evidence in ordinary cases. Fields maintains “the Assurance View of Testimony,” which seems to be correct in holding that one cannot determine whether testimony is credible simply by considering “the subject matter of the testimonial assertion” or simply by monitoring the speaker “for signs of insincerity or incompetence,” though the Assurance View does hold that a requirement of legitimate testimony is the speaker’s “pledge to speak truthfully.” Instead, the Assurance View proposes that “what distinguishes a credible from a dubious testimonial source is the undertaking on the part of the speaker or writer of an open commitment to stand by what she or he has said” (p. 5). The paper nicely explains and presents some argument for this view.

Nevertheless, it seems that this cannot be the whole story. I think what is missing is some kind of requirement to the effect that the testifier *is in a position to know* what he or she claims, or at least is in a position to have significant evidence that it is true. You might sincerely testify that *p*, not be in any position to know or have significant evidence that *p*, and yet still be fully willing to stand by what you have claimed. For example, you might be stubbornly or obstinately guessing, speculating, or betting that *p*. Or you might not realize that you are not in a position to know that *p*—for instance, a claim about what time it is—having fallen asleep and lost track of the time. Such hardly seems to be credible testimony.

At this point, one might wonder about the kinds of questions that we usually have about testimony as it is commonly conceived, especially expert testimony. Here is a partial list from Doug Walton (2008: 246): “How credible (knowledgeable) is *E* as an expert source? ... Is *E* an expert in the field that [proposition] *A* is in? ... Is *E* personally reliable as a source—for example, is *E* biased? ... Is *A* consistent with what other experts assert?” But I take it that this is not Fields’ intended sense of ‘testimony’. Rather, I take that Fields is tackling the spectacularly pared-down question, as Jonathan Adler puts it, “*What reason, if any, is there for a hearer to just take the speaker’s word?*” Adler goes on to explain as follows:

In order to focus on this fundamental problem, a good deal of abstraction is required. ... First, speakers’ contributions should be limited to brief assertions to avoid internal support due to coherence among the set of assertions. Second, corroboration or convergence of a number of testifiers, who are presumed independent, should be set aside. Third, testimony is

to be the sustaining, not just the originating, source of the corresponding belief. ... Fourth, we set aside cases of a hearer's attribution of expertise to a speaker on certain topics, as well as a speaker's acting under professional or institutional demands for accurate testimony. ... Fifth, and most obvious, the hearer has no special knowledge about the speaker—the speaker is a *stranger* to the hearer. (Adler 2006: 3)

Adler adds to this list the assumptions that the speaker is sincere and speaking literally (p. 4). He recognizes that these specifications of the bare-bones situation of testimony are idealized, particularly the fifth, since it is hardly ever the case that the hearer has no special knowledge about the speaker (3). So one focuses on cases that are as close as possible to the idealized situation: the “*core cases*,” which Fields (5) and Adler seem to agree consist of “simple informational exchanges over *easily know matters*” (my emphasis), “e.g., the time, the weather, driving directions ... sports scores, the whereabouts of acquaintances, explaining your action” (Adler 2006: 4).

Even given this exquisite specification of the intended kind of case, it still seems to me that in order to have credible testimony, the testifier must be in a position to know what he or she claims, or at least be in a position to have significant evidence that it is true. I think that this requirement is reflected in Adler's “Default Rule” for cases of bare testimony: “If the speaker S asserts that *p* to the hearer H, under normal conditions, then it is proper or correct for H to accept S's assertion, unless H has special reason to object” (2006: 5). The special reason to object could be that you (S) are not in a position to know that *p*—what time it is—since you fell asleep. But for Fields' stated view, the only kind of special reason to object would be S's lack of a commitment to stand by what she or he has said. (Adler's example of a special reason to object is where the driving directions are “very complex” and conflict with H's “own judgment of plausibility.”)

2. EXTRAORDINARY CASES

Let us now turn from ordinary to extraordinary cases of bare testimony. Fields distinguishes two kinds—“astonishing” and “truly astonishing.” His primary example of an astonishing first-person report is of having an experience of an extraterrestrial or alien being. His only example of a truly astonishing report is of having an experience of God. The critical difference between astonishing and truly astonishing reports for Fields is that the former “are about natural, though unusual objects and states of affairs,” whereas the latter are about the “supernatural” (pp. 9 f.). Fields seems to see quite well that the likelihood of there being special reasons to object to such reports is directly proportional to how astonishing they are. So, after the bare, astonishing testimony involving “an open commitment” on the part of the testifier “to stand by what she or he has said,” things can become considerably less bare. As compared to ordinary cases, Fields says there should be “a much more explicit taking of responsibility on the part of S, with an exceedingly generous level of questioning and cross-examination being encouraged and allowed” (p. 9). Not only might there be such interrogation, there might also be a kind of independent checking and fact-finding. Fields says that for astonishing reports, it is at least possible that “those that are questioning their makers will be able to look into and corroborate some of the answer that they [*sic*] latter give. There can be evidence left behind by aliens” (pp. 9 f.). Of course now we are more than drifting into kinds of evidence other than testimony. But the key point is that such independent corroborative evidence is, seeming-

ly by definition, not available in the *supernatural*, truly astonishing, God-case. Fields himself emphasizes this—indicating that here there is a ‘metaphysical absolute elusiveness’ (p. 10)—so what does he offer instead for his central case of a report of having an experience of God?

I think the paper is weakest in its brief attempt to answer this question. What can this “honest testifier” do to legitimately convince recipients? Fields answers: firmly exhibit a “commitment to rational investigation,” with special attention to ways that experience may be distorted or beliefs mal-formed, such as where bias leads to misinterpreting “data” or selectively attending to or gathering “evidence” (pp. 10 f.).

I think I can see the applicability of this, for example, where one is generating a statistical report or graph—which of course are notoriously subject to manipulative bias—but I have no clear idea of what it means for a report of having an experience of God. How could *data* ever even be relevant? The fundamental problem seems to be formulated well by Wallace Matson (1965: 19): “It looks then as if an experience, to be evidence for the existence of a god, must be indescribable; but an indescribable experience cannot be evidence for anything; therefore no experience can be evidence for the existence of a god.” Fields seems to fully agree with Matson’s first premise (given the ‘metaphysical absolute elusiveness’ of purported experiences of God) and with his second premise (given the “commitment to rational investigation”), so why doesn’t Fields agree with Matson’s conclusion? He clearly does not agree with Matson’s conclusion, for Fields says that the point of his paper is to show “how reports of apparent experiences of God could be used as a form of evidence or justification for the claim that God exists” (p. 3).

Maybe the reason Fields doesn’t agree with Matson’s conclusion goes back to Adler’s “Default Rule” for cases of bare testimony: “If the speaker S asserts that *p* to the hearer H, under normal conditions, then it is proper or correct for H to accept S’s assertion, unless H has special reason to object.” Maybe Fields thinks that ultimately somehow there are not special reasons to object to a report of having an experience of God, even though this hardly seems consistent with his apparently holding (as above) that the likelihood of there being special reasons to object to astonishing and truly astonishing reports is directly proportional to how astonishing they are. At one point near the beginning of the paper, Fields seems to be saying that he will be *assuming* that there are not special reasons to object to a report of having an experience of God *for the sake of argument* (p. 2). (What argument? A question-begging argument?) Yet at another point, speaking of alien or extraterrestrial beings and God, he says positively that “so far as I know, there is no such thing as a knock-down, drag-out argument against the existence of such entities or of the possibility of people encountering them” (p. 8). Aside from this being a puzzling expression—isn’t it the case that if an argument is “knock-down” it is not “drag-out,” and if it is “drag-out” it is not “knock-down”?—one wonders about arguments such as the argument from the existence of pain and evil. Or about arguments that the concept of God is a self-contradictory concept, perhaps infinitely self-contradictory, for example: no being can be both omniscient and immutable since to know what time it is, is to have *changing* knowledge (e.g., Kretzmann 1966; Grim 1985). Such arguments certainly purport to be “knock-down.”

Finally, Fields claims that “astonishing—and indeed truly astonishing—first-person experiential reports are an inveterate feature of the indispensable practice of persuading others of the truth of putatively factual claims based on one’s knowledge or ex-

perience” (p. 3; note that this seems to require that the testifier be in a position to know what he or she claims). I don’t see this. As compared to ordinary reports, astonishing and truly astonishing reports seem to be more of a sideshow than an inveterate feature. It seems that extraordinary reports have a tendency to be dispensable in proportion to how astonishing they are.

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Reply to Gilbert Plumer

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I thank Dr Plumer for his many valuable comments. I especially want to thank him for forcing me to make clearer two important aspects of my work that were not more explicit in the text.

(1) In this essay, I was concerned to extend my account of testimony to a special case: one where it would be impossible in principle to double-check what someone had said, impossible in other words to hold them accountable. In such a situation, my view seemed to imply that one could not of necessity have a testimonial transmission. People could not report experiences of this kind, even in those cases (let us imagine) where God had truly appeared to them. Such a consequence appeared to me both artificial and preemptory. If the account of testimony I was offering had this implication, it would be a very cheap way of foreclosing an entire range of potential evidence about the world. For that reason, it also seemed to me that it would be a mark against this view. A proper account of testimony, it seems to me, should be neutral with respect to such an important and pervasive form of testimony.

This is why I bracketed question of competency in my discussion, assuming for the sake of argument a view of competency with respect to religious experience that essentially said that it is acceptable to assume competency unless one has a good reason to the contrary. My issue was with the unique way in which I believe accounts of such experiences can be communicated, involving as I have argued a tacit invitation to look into this matter more closely – something that seems to be blocked in this case.

(2) But since Dr Plumer raises the issue, I do want to state for the record that I am sympathetic with the view of competence I have assumed (that outlined by Keith Yandell). For it seems to me that unless one is just going to arbitrarily demand of religious experiences at the outset exactly what one would demand of experiences of ordinary physical objects, one has to make an assumption of this kind. For it certainly seems to a person having such an experience that they are experiencing an independently existing reality. And while they can of course be mistaken about this, so long as there is no evidence that they are in one of the conditions on Yandell's list what more can one reasonably demand of them in terms of competency? For a genuine experience of God, if there were such a thing as God, would not require one to have one's God-sensing organs oriented in a particular direction. Nor would it require a special God-transmitting medium. By definition, one would have such an experience because God willed it. No special orientations or mechanism would be required. In the opinion of Yandell and the others that I alluded to, to reject these observations would be to rule out the possibility of experiences of God by fiat: a bit of epistemic imperialism that they would strongly reject. And I am inclined to agree.