

# EVIDENTIALLY COMPELLING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES AND THE MORAL STATUS OF NATURALISM

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**Abstract.** Religious experiences come in a variety of types, leading to multiple taxonomies. One sort that has not received much attention as a distinct topic is what I will call ‘evidentially compelling religious experience’ (ECRE). The nature of an ECRE is such that if it actually occurs, its occurrence plausibly entails the falsity of metaphysical naturalism. Examples of ECREs might include visions / auditions / near-death experiences conveying information the hearer could not have known through natural means, later verified; unambiguously miraculous healings; fulfilled prophecy; supernatural rescues; inter-subjective religious experiences (e.g., multiple people simultaneously having the same vision of the Virgin Mary), etc. After presenting a representative set of published case studies of ECREs, I argue that for most settled metaphysical naturalists (though not all), the combination of a settled metaphysical naturalism with an awareness of the relative commonality of testimony to ECREs is either irrational or immoral. This is because that conjunction entails either an unjust and uncharitable judgement on a great many of those testifying to ECREs (namely that they are liars), or an irrational refusal to acknowledge this entailment.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are many competing definitions of ‘religious experience,’ just as there are many of ‘religion’; Franks Davis’ (1989: 29) assessment seems plausible: ‘Because there are so many religious traditions and so many types of experiences within those traditions, I look upon the quest for a neat, precise definition of “religious experience” [...] as fruitless. Most people have a working idea of what counts as a religious experience, based on the many uncontroversial examples available.’ I will take the

presence of such a working idea for granted in what follows. Still, even without providing necessary and sufficient conditions constituting an experience as 'religious', we can develop taxonomies of distinct types of experiences plausibly counted as such. One such distinction is that between religious experiences the content and context of which leave open the question of a supernatural origin versus those the content and context of which seem to imply a supernatural origin. It is safe to say that most reported religious experiences fall within the first category, but it is undeniable that there are also many, many instances of testimony to what I will here refer to as 'evidentially compelling religious experience' (ECRE). If these really are experienced, then metaphysical naturalism is plausibly falsified.

I will provide a number of examples of published claims to ECREs below, but to help clarify the distinction initially one might contrast (1) someone's claim to have heard a message from God during intense prayer, a message of moral support (which audition could perhaps, in theory, have been the product of self-delusion, mental illness, or a variety of other naturalistic factors), and (2) someone's claim to have heard a message from God during intense prayer, warning her to dodge to the left because a gunshot was about to come through the wall (fired from a passing vehicle perhaps), which warning was taken to heart and which prediction immediately and exactly came true, saving the individual from harm. Claims of the latter kind are by no means unheard of. If the individual did not hallucinate the event / is not mentally ill / has not unconsciously manufactured a false memory / is not lying about it, etc., such that her report of the experience is accurate, then plausibly metaphysical naturalism has been falsified. ('Metaphysical naturalism' is understood here as involving at least the claim that there are no *supernatural entities*, which in turn implies minimally that there are no *wholly non-physical / spiritual agents* – thus no gods, ghosts, angels, Cartesian egos, etc.) Experiences of that sort are ECREs.

Of course, for those who take the Duhem / Quine thesis and related ideas seriously, the data could *somehow* be made to fit with naturalism, just as any data can be creatively re-interpreted to accord with any hypothesis. On such a view no theory is ever definitively falsified. Even in the example just cited, one could posit that there may be a bizarre, heretofore undiscovered but thoroughly natural human capacity for perceiving future oncoming dangers (a 'spider sense'?) that a person unconsciously recasts as the voice of God. Or perhaps one could maintain

it was just a truly one-in-a-million coincidence.<sup>1</sup> For the Duhem / Quine proponent, such a claim cannot be definitively disproved. But even if one adopts such a strong understanding of the underdetermination thesis, there can still be *plausible* falsification of an hypothesis, or in slightly different terms, *rationally adequate* undermining of an hypothesis, however difficult it may be to lay out criteria for when precisely that takes place. So, wishing to leave debates about underdetermination aside, I will here stick to talk of 'plausible' or 'rationally adequate' falsification.

What sort of attitude must a settled naturalist take to testimony of ECREs? (And by 'settled' naturalist I simply mean someone with a firm commitment to the truth of metaphysical naturalism, in contrast to someone adopting it merely tentatively. To make that rather vague characterization a bit more precise: a necessary condition for being a settled metaphysical naturalist is a belief that there is no rational or other requirement to reconsider seriously the reality of the supernatural.) He/she must believe that all such testimony is unreliable, that the subject was either honestly mistaken about the content of the experience (again, perhaps via some sort of false memory), or hallucinating due to drug use or physiological defect, or mentally disturbed, or lying. A great many claimed ECREs do not plausibly admit of the first few sorts of explanation (as will become evident through a number of the published case studies below), leaving the final option – intentional deception – as the only rationally available naturalistic explanation.

I will argue that an awareness of the widespread nature of testimony to ECREs places most settled naturalists in a difficult position: they must either judge a very great number of individuals claiming ECREs as liars, which is immoral (for reasons I will elaborate on), or they must suspend judgement on the question, which in this context would be irrational (since inconsistent with *settled* naturalism). Consequently, for most (not all) settled naturalists who are well-informed concerning contemporary testimony to religious experience, it is either immoral or irrational to maintain their settled naturalism. They should instead shift from settled naturalism to tentative naturalism, where 'tentative naturalism' involves at least the belief that there is a rational or other requirement to reconsider seriously the reality of the supernatural.

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<sup>1</sup> That option could plausibly be undermined by further tweaking the hypothetical case – e.g., specify that the warning voice said it would be a gunshot from a .357 magnum, which calibre the police later verify upon digging the bullet out of the wall.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section I present a range of published testimonies to ECREs. This is designed to familiarize the reader with these experiences, and to provide some idea of just how common they are in the literature. (Those presented below constitute but a small sampling.) Then in section three I develop the argument that most settled naturalists, upon becoming aware of the commonality of such testimony, face a dilemma between immorality and irrationality. Section four sees a discussion of various objections, and in the concluding fifth section I briefly draw some links between the present argument and some other treatments of the supposed immorality of naturalism.

## II. PUBLISHED CASE STUDIES OF ECREs

The following selection of published ECREs is culled from a much wider set that the author has encountered. They are taken from a variety of kinds of publication: academic sources, popular / devotional religious literature, etc. A selection of six ECREs is provided here; I expect some readers will not wish to wade through all six. However, in order to grasp the nature and import of these experiences there is no substitute for a broad exposure to actual testimonies.

### *First Case Study*

This case is excerpted from van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, and Elfferich (2001: 2041), a study on cardiac patients' reports of near-death experiences published in one of the world's leading medical journals:

During the pilot phase in one of the hospitals, a coronary-care-unit nurse reported a veridical out-of-body experience of a resuscitated patient: 'During a night shift an ambulance brings in a 44-year-old cyanotic, comatose man into the coronary care unit. He had been found about an hour before in a meadow by passers-by. After admission, he received artificial respiration without intubation, while heart massage and defibrillation are also applied. When we want to intubate the patient, he turns out to have dentures in his mouth. I remove these upper dentures and put them onto the 'crash car'. Meanwhile, we continue extensive CPR. After about an hour and a half the patient has sufficient heart rhythm and blood pressure, but he is still ventilated and intubated, and he is still comatose. He is transferred to the intensive care unit to continue the necessary artificial respiration. Only after more than a week

do I meet again with the patient, who is by now back on the cardiac ward. I distribute his medication. The moment he sees me he says: 'Oh, that nurse knows where my dentures are'. I am very surprised. Then he elucidates: 'Yes, you were there when I was brought into hospital and you took my dentures out of my mouth and put them onto that car, it had all these bottles on it and there was this sliding drawer underneath and there you put my teeth.' I was especially amazed because I remembered this happening while the man was in a deep coma and in the process of CPR. When I asked further, it appeared the man had seen himself lying in bed, that he had perceived from above how nurses and doctors had been busy with CPR. He was able to describe correctly and in detail the small room in which he had been resuscitated as well as the appearance of those present like myself. At the time that he observed the situation he had been very much afraid that we would stop CPR and that he would die. And it is true that we had been very negative about the patient's prognosis due to his very poor medical condition when admitted. The patient tells me that he desperately and unsuccessfully tried to make it clear to us that he was still alive and that we should continue CPR. He is deeply impressed by his experience and says he is no longer afraid of death. 4 weeks later he left hospital as a healthy man.'

### *Second Case Study*

The following is taken from Morse and Perry (1990: 1-5). Morse is a paediatrician who, among his other duties, has studied near-death experiences among children. He here tells of his first encounter with a child reporting an NDE:

I stood over Katie's lifeless body in the intensive care unit and wondered whether this little girl could be saved. A few hours earlier she had been found floating facedown in a YMCA pool. No one knew how long she had been unconscious or exactly what had happened to cause her to lose consciousness .... I didn't really expect to find out what had happened. The machines to which she was now hooked up told a grim story. An emergency CAT scan showed massive swelling of the brain. She had no gag reflex. An artificial lung machine was breathing for her .... Looking back even now, I would guess that she had only a ten percent chance of surviving. I was the doctor who resuscitated her in the emergency room .... [Morse then recounts a prayer vigil held by the child's immediate family.] Three days later she made a full recovery.

Her case was one of those medical mysteries that demonstrate the power of the human organism to rebound .... When she was feeling well enough, I had her come in for a follow-up examination. One of the things I wanted to know was what she remembered about her near drowning. The answer was important to the type of treatment she would receive as an outpatient. Had she been hit on the head? Had someone held her under water? Had she blacked out or experienced a seizure? .... Katie clearly remembered me. After introducing myself, she turned to her mother and said, 'That's the one with the beard. First there was this tall doctor who didn't have a beard, and then he came in.' Her statement was correct. The first into the emergency room was a tall, clean-shaven physician named Bill Longhurst. Katie remembered more. 'First I was in the big room, and then they moved me to a smaller room where they did X-rays on me.' She accurately noted such details as having 'a tube down my nose', which was her description of nasal intubation. Most physicians intubate orally, and that is the most common way that it is represented on television. She accurately described many other details of her experience. I remember being amazed at the events she recollected. Even though her eyes had been closed and she had been profoundly comatose during the entire experience, she still 'saw' what was going on. I asked her an open-ended question: 'What do you remember about being in the swimming pool?' 'Do you mean when I visited the Heavenly Father', she replied. Whoa, I thought. 'That's a good place to start. Tell me about meeting the Heavenly Father.' 'I met Jesus and the Heavenly Father', she said. Maybe it was the shocked look on my face or maybe it was shyness. But that was it for the day. She became very embarrassed and would speak no more. I scheduled her for another appointment the following week. What she told me during our next meeting changed my life.

### *Third Case Study*

John White is a psychiatrist and Christian author. He describes an apparently miraculous healing in which he and his spouse participated (1988: 122):

I remember praying with my wife for a two-year-old child in Malaysia. Her body was almost completely covered with raw, weeping eczematous areas. She ran around the room restlessly so that her parents had to catch her to bring her struggling to us. We began to pray and extended our hands to lay them on her. The instant our hands touched her she fell into

profound and relaxed slumber in her parents' arms. But there was more to follow. I shall never forget our sense of exhilaration and excitement as the weeping areas began to dry up, their borders shrinking visibly before our eyes like the shores of lakes in time of drought ... A person who has never experienced the impact of such a sight has no idea of its effect on one's emotions ....

Being a medical doctor, White presumably is a competent judge of the apparently non-natural manner in which the healing took place (esp. with respect to speed and timing).

#### *Fourth Case Study*

Leanne Hadley is a United Methodist minister and former chaplain at a children's hospital. In a book on her chaplaincy experiences, she recounts an interaction with a ten-year old boy who was awaiting surgery to remove a brain tumour. His attendant nurse was concerned that he manifested a fear of death and poor attitude to the surgery, and asked Hadley to talk to him (2013: 59-60):

I went into his room, expecting to see an upset or angry child. But James was sitting up and smiled as I walked into the room. We talked for a few minutes, and there was nothing abnormal about him. He wasn't upset, he wasn't angry, and he wasn't depressed. I asked him how he felt about the surgery, and he said fine. I asked if he was upset because they would have to shave off even more of his hair, and he wasn't. I saw no sign of a bad attitude. Finally I told him that I had been called in because his nurse was worried that he had a negative attitude about the surgery. He had no idea what I was talking about. I decided I needed to ask his nurse what he had said that made her so upset. As I was leaving the room, James said, 'Leanne, I need to ask you something.' 'Yes?' I replied. 'Is there time for me to be baptized before my surgery?' 'I think so,' I said. 'But why? Is there any special reason you want to be baptized?' 'Because God told me to in my dream,' he replied nonchalantly. It began to dawn on me that this dream might have been what he had shared with the nurse.

He goes on to tell her about meeting Jesus in a dream, who shows him a glimpse of heaven (ibid.: 61-63):

Jesus asked me if I wanted to cross the bridge with him, I did! I wanted to go wherever he went! So he took my hand and we crossed the bridge, and he showed me heaven. Leanne, heaven is so beautiful. It isn't what

you expect, because we have never seen anything as beautiful as it is .... I don't know how long I stayed in heaven, but Jesus told me it was time to go home. Then he told me that he showed me heaven because I would be coming here in three months and he didn't want me to be worried or be afraid. He said my surgery will go fine, but I'll still die in three months. He promised to meet me on the bridge again .... And he told me that I needed to be baptized before surgery. So can I be baptized?' [James and his family were Baptists, who delay administration of that sacrament until the age of reason.] I was speechless .... 'Yes, of course', I said, coming back to reality. 'I mean, we have to ask your parents, but I can't imagine they won't agree.' I went back to the nurse and told her that James wanted to be baptized before surgery. We had only a few hours until he would be taken to the operating room. She didn't want him to be baptized. 'He's preparing to die, and he needs to have a positive attitude for surgery', she said. 'He has no fear of dying in surgery', I reminded her .... The nurse reluctantly called his parents .... They, of course, agreed .... And the surgery was a success. James recovered quickly and was released from hospital within a few days .... About two months after his release from the hospital, he had started having trouble swallowing and speaking. He'd been taken into the cancer centre for more tests, and it was discovered that his brain tumour had some fingers that were embedded deeply in his brain. They could not be removed, because doing so would have destroyed his brain and the surgery itself would have killed him. James's mother said that he never showed any signs of anxiety or fear .... It was three months after his surgery when he died.

#### *Fifth Case Study*

The Religious Experience Research Centre, formerly housed at Oxford, now at the University of Wales, has for more than forty years collected and archived reports from the general public. They periodically publish collections of these reports. Here is one from the anthology edited by Maxwell and Tschudin (1990: 77-78):

M. & F. 81 (26) #3015<sup>2</sup> This happened in the year when Lord Derby was calling for army recruits, before conscription, for World War I. We were 'boy and girl' friends, and married when the war was behind us.

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<sup>2</sup> These numbers record the gender of those involved in the experience, the age of the individual at the time the report was made, the age of the individual at the time the experience occurred, and a # for archival reference of the report.



My husband-to-be knew he would have to enlist and he dreaded the idea, but he did not want to be a conscript, so decided to join the Derby scheme that summer. It was a Saturday evening, a glorious evening, with a most brilliant moon, when he asked *my* opinion about this 'joining up', but I refused, as I said if anything happened to him, I should always blame myself! We were on a country lane near my home, now built up, but then pasture land on both sides, which I knew well on each side of the road. As we walked along, scarcely speaking, as the decision was little nearer, we suddenly saw a brilliance most unusual, even more than the loveliest moon I have ever seen: there was an opening in the stone wall, with much more light than the moon, the width of a farmyard gate, which I knew a gate did not exist for several yards further down the road. Then a figure emerged, a most brilliant sight. We were both speechless, but not afraid, it was so beautiful. The figure, Jesus Christ, glided on to the centre of the road while we were on the rough pavement. We were spellbound as the figure walked up and we were walking down. We could see the white gown with a broad, twisted girdle around his waist, knotted and falling down his left side. The figure glided along, but we could see no feet, and as it got nearer, we tried to make out his face features, but could not, and as it got level with us, it gradually faded away from the bottom of the gown up to the head, and it had vanished! When we got down to the 'wall opening', it was the solid wall, as I knew it for many years, further down, and it had got to near midnight; but, still, we never spoke to each other, we were spellbound! When we got to my home, as he was about to leave me, we at last spoke, cross-questioned each other on what we had seen, without a hint on the matter, each and every answer coincided. We still remember every detail, but our views on religion have deepened; although, still, we are not *too* religious. When I got in, home, I told my mother about this strange happening, and her remark, 'Oh! If he goes a soldier, he will come back all right!' Funnily enough, he got a 'nasty packet' of 'poison gas' out in France one night when sleeping. He was sent to hospital for treatment for six months, then back on service, and left the army A1, we are thankful to say, when war ended.

#### *Sixth Case Study*

For her doctoral dissertation in anthropology at the University of Birmingham, Emma Heathcote-James decided to study contemporary belief in angels. As part of her research, she solicited reports of encounters with what people took to be angels; initially the requests

appeared just in local church newsletters, then circulated much more broadly throughout the UK as public interest in the project mounted. She received more than 800 accounts from across the country. There is actually quite a variety in the reports; some tell of seeing beings that do accord with Biblical and other traditional depictions (about 30% of the reports); others relate audible messages, supernatural rescues or warnings, etc., that are interpreted by the recipients as being of possible angelic origin. Here's an example of the latter kind (2002: 41-42):

Paul Dunwell lost control of his motorbike going round a bend at 70 miles per hour in the dark. Minutes before, he had passed a red sports car (also going at speed). Paul wrote: 'All I could think of was I'd risked [the life of] the driver now that my bike lay in his path on the blind bend. Telling myself that my own idiocy had brought all of this about, I resolved [to try] to move the bike despite its weight and my hands being a bit pulped. Time was, I knew, running out .... then an odd thing happened .... [the car] appeared on the bend at a snail's pace, his hazard warning lights already on. He stopped there and ran to me and said "You'll never guess what's just happened .... there was a light in my car. And I was told, like there was somebody there in the car with me, and actually shown that you were lying there in the road .... I was told I mustn't hit you."

### III. SETTLED NATURALISM AS IMMORAL OR IRRATIONAL

The experiences listed above all count as ECREs because for each the following holds true: if the event really transpired as the person reports having experienced it, then metaphysical naturalism is plausibly falsified. Moreover, for all of these examples it is implausible to suggest that the subject of the experience honestly misinterpreted the nature of the experience. Likewise it is implausible to think that all the subjects of these experiences suffer from a mental illness serious enough to prompt major delusions. And where a substantial amount of biographical information is available, the lack of relevantly serious mental illness seems empirically established. Unconscious implanting of false memories also will not work for many such cases, assuming the basic mental health of the individuals reporting them. Individuals of normal mental health may misremember past events in certain respects, but do not unknowingly confabulate entire series of events, let alone events of substantial existential significance (excluding cases where false memories

have been implanted via hypnosis). Excluding those explanations, what can a settled metaphysical naturalist say about such cases? It seems the only plausible option left is to accuse the subjects of deception.

And what's wrong with that answer? If deception is the only plausible explanation remaining, surely we ought to have no hesitation in calling these people liars. They invite the designation when they make claims to ECREs, and make those claims in such a way that we are forced to choose between affirming naturalism and affirming the possibility of their good character. Moreover, in the past a number of prominent philosophers have not hesitated to attribute deception in such cases. Hume, for instance, famously argues that it is always more likely that a person is lying than that a miracle took place (or at the very least that the two probabilities cancel each other out), such that we can always dismiss any testimony to a miracle.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, there is a certain sort of naturalist for whom such a reply is perfectly acceptable, namely the sort for whom deception literally is the only rational explanation left. That is, there are some naturalists who are not merely settled in their naturalism, but who think that any sort of non-naturalism is absurd – who think that belief in the God of classical theism (for instance) really is equivalent to believing in the Flying Spaghetti Monster, or that belief in an immortal human soul is equivalent to belief in leprechauns. Correspondingly, from their perspective, to make an accusation of deception in response to a claimed ECRE is no more unjust, uncharitable, slanderous or whatnot than to make it in the case of an alleged leprechaun sighting. In both cases, the accusation is justified, morally and rationally, by the absurdity of what is being claimed.

To those naturalists, the following argument has no application. However, it does apply to most self-professed settled naturalists, because most would claim that while belief in theism (for instance) is mistaken, nevertheless it is neither absurd nor a proposition whose falsehood is absolutely certain. Most would even admit to having occasional, fleeting doubts about their own atheism, or speculative thoughts about the possibility of a life after death, etc. God and the soul are rejected by them, but not rejected as absurdities, and not rejected with airtight confidence. Nevertheless, they remain *settled* naturalists because think

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<sup>3</sup> See section 10, part 1, of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1975/1748: 115).

there is no rational or other requirement to reconsider seriously the truth of non-naturalism. They feel no need to pick up a book of miracle-testimonies and subject it to serious scrutiny, or to keep up with the latest developments in natural theology. They have a firm, basically stable confidence in their worldview. The following argument is aimed at that broad category of settled naturalists:

*Assumption 1* – For a great many ECREs, deception is the only rationally available naturalistic explanation.

*Assumption 2* – It is wrong (because unjust, uncharitable, and a violation of the Golden Rule) to attribute deception to someone (especially on a matter of great importance) without adequate evidence of deception having been committed.

*Premise 1* – *If* most settled naturalists view metaphysical non-naturalism as neither absurd nor dismissible with certainty, *then* for them the mere claim to an ECRE is not by itself adequate evidence of deception (even where deception is the only rationally available naturalistic explanation).

*Premise 2* – *If* for them the mere claim to an ECRE is not by itself adequate evidence of deception (even where deception is the only rationally available naturalistic explanation), *then* it is wrong for them to attribute deception to the person claiming an ECRE without further, adequate evidence of deception.

*Premise 3 / Conclusion 1* – Therefore *if* most settled naturalists view metaphysical non-naturalism as neither absurd nor dismissible with certainty, *then* it is wrong for them to attribute deception to the person claiming an ECRE without further, adequate evidence of deception.

*Premise 4* – Most settled naturalists view metaphysical non-naturalism as neither utterly absurd nor dismissible with certainty.

*Premise 5 / Conclusion 2* – Therefore, it is wrong for them to attribute deception to the person claiming an ECRE without further, adequate evidence of deception.

*Premise 6* – The settled naturalist who is aware of the relevant facts about ECREs can only retain settled naturalism by either acting against the moral stricture just laid, or by ignoring premise 5 / Conclusion 2 altogether.

*Premise 7* – The previous premise entails the following dilemma: if the first of the two options is taken, an immoral act will be committed, since that strategy involves attributing deception where it is immoral to do so.

If the second of the two options is taken an irrational attitude will be adopted, since Premise 5 / Conclusion 2 implies that ECREs require further investigation prior to dismissal, and recognizing a need for such investigation is incompatible with settled naturalism.

*Final Conclusion* – Therefore, for most settled naturalists, it is either immoral or irrational to continue being a settled naturalist (once aware of the relevant info regarding ECREs).

A justification for assumption 1 has already been presented (if briefly), in the form of the observation that innocent misinterpretation or unconscious confabulation / false memory are just not plausible options in the cases provided above (and many other like cases). With respect to honest misinterpretation, consider for example case #3: one could not honestly mistake seeing the spontaneous disappearance of serious lesions before one's eyes (especially if one is a medical doctor, as in this case). As to false memories, wholesale manufacture of complex false memories does not occur in individuals of normal mental health (outside of unique situations like hypnosis); in particular, wholesale manufacture of complex *existentially significant* false memories does not occur in individuals of normal mental health, and ECREs are of undeniable existential significance. Relatedly, physically sound non-drug users are not subject to spontaneous, detailed hallucinations. Along these lines consider case #2. It is simply not plausible to maintain that Morse, a paediatrician, unconsciously manufactured a false memory of this child's NDE report, especially given the magnitude of its importance in his later personal and professional life. And in at least some of the cases above, enough biographical facts are known of the reporters of the experience to ascertain that they are clearly not mentally ill nor suffering from relevant physical defects (brain trauma, etc.) or addictions.

Further empirical support for assumption 1 would require further case studies of testimony to ECREs. Having already taken up a good bit of space (perhaps excessive space) with case studies in this paper, I cannot expand on this here. But the reader can easily access further cases for him/herself by turning to some of the primary sources cited here, and many, many others not cited. Personal inquiry among trusted family and friends may also turn up cases. (It has done so for me, and I doubt that my own sphere of acquaintance is much of a statistical outlier in this respect.)

The idea behind assumption 2 is fairly commonsensical: it is unjust and uncharitable to attribute a bad deed or character trait to someone without adequate evidence that the deed was done or that the trait is really present. It amounts to slander. Moreover, to do so is a violation of the Golden Rule: no one likes being called a liar, especially on a matter of great importance. A settled naturalist can certainly sympathize with the situation that the subject of an ECRE would find herself in; we can all imagine what it would be like to have such an experience, and how we would feel if we were dismissed as liars upon mentioning it.

While the moral principle at play here should, I think, be generally acceptable,<sup>4</sup> the injunction to refrain from making harsh judgements of others, except where absolutely demanded by the facts, is particularly important within Christian ethics (for Biblical precedent see especially Matthew 7:1-5 and Luke 6:37). This injunction has of course been the subject of much commentary and discussion in the subsequent history of moral theology; Aquinas provides an influential treatment, writing that ‘from the very fact that a man thinks ill of another without sufficient cause, he injures and despises him. Now no man ought to despise or in any way injure another man without urgent cause: and, consequently, unless we have evident indications of a person’s wickedness, we ought to deem him good, by interpreting for the best whatever is doubtful about him.’<sup>5</sup>

The claim of premise 1 is that because most settled naturalists still view non-naturalism as neither absurd nor certainly false, they cannot properly take testimony to an ECRE as *ipso facto* adequate evidence of deception, even where deception is the only plausibly available naturalistic explanation. This premise is simply a more specific instance of the general principle that viewing a proposition as neither absurd nor certainly false is incompatible with being completely dismissive of testimony relevant to the truth of that proposition (whether via an allegation of deception or some other means).

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that it is devoid of complications, or free from possible objections (some of which are treated briefly in section 3 below). See Oderberg (2013) for a recent explication and defence of the ethical perspective adopted here. (Actually, in certain respects Oderberg’s stance is stricter than the one employed here, in that he thinks that being charitable can in some cases demand assuming someone’s innocence even in the face of adequate (but not decisive) evidence. While such a stance is certainly defensible, I will not make use of that more robust thesis.)

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 60, art. 4, resp.

Premise 2 follows readily from the combination of assumption 2 and premise 1, while premise 3 / conclusion 1 is deduced from premises 1 and 2. Premise 5 / conclusion 2 is in its turn deduced from premises 3 and 4. And what is the justification for premise 4? In the absence of any social science literature that looks into the content of people's naturalism in depth (i.e., not just polling rates of belief in naturalism but also providing detailed data on the degree of confidence with which that belief is held, whether they see non-naturalism as a live option in the sense employed here, etc.) I have to rely on my own (admittedly unscientific) interactions with many thoughtful and self-reflective naturalists and engagement with much recent and past naturalistic literature. Based on that experience I believe premise 4 is true and would be supported by rigorous social science data, if such studies were to be undertaken. However, I grant that I could be wrong about this – certainly some of the so-called New Atheist literature promotes a version of naturalism in which non-naturalism is seen as utterly absurd. It may also be that while I am right about this at present, I may not be right about it years down the road, if the sort of naturalism pushed by the New Atheist becomes much more common. If therefore I am wrong about this, or become wrong about this, then the formulation of the argument will have to change, with the target class switching from 'most settled naturalists' to 'many settled naturalists'.

Regarding premises 6 and 7, the two options laid out seem exhaustive. Given that there are many testimonies to ECREs the only rational naturalistic explanation for which is deception, upon becoming aware of these the settled naturalist must either go that route and attribute deception, or decline to put forward a response. The former is option is immoral, while the latter is irrational. The latter would not be irrational for tentative naturalists, for whom suspension of judgement pending further investigation into individual ECREs seems a workable response. But it is not a response open to the settled naturalist, since a suspension of judgement regarding the reality of ECREs is inconsistent with maintaining naturalism as a firm, stably held view, implying as it does that non-naturalism warrants further investigation.

Let me emphasize again the restricted nature of the resulting conclusion. I am not claiming that all settled naturalists are doing something either immoral or irrational in holding to naturalism as a settled belief. The argument just provided applies only to settled naturalists who still see non-naturalism as neither absurd nor certainly false and who are aware of the commonality of ECREs – more specifically, the commonality of

ECREs the only rational naturalistic explanation of which is deception. At present therefore the argument may apply only to a small number of naturalists, which I freely admit. (Hopefully that number will increase after this article is widely read!) Moreover, the argument conclusion does not entail that the settled naturalist must abandon naturalism; rather, it entails that at the least the settled naturalist must shift to a tentative naturalism.

#### IV. OBJECTIONS

*(4.1) Maybe it is immoral to dismiss as liars those claiming ECREs for which deception is the only rational naturalistic explanation. Nevertheless, it is rational to do so, given the prior balance of probability of naturalism over non-naturalism. That balance may not be so tilted as to render non-naturalism absurd or certainly false, but it renders it sufficiently improbable that it is perfectly rational, if immoral, to dismiss the relevant testimony as deceptive. We live in a messed up world where sometimes we're faced with a conflict between morality and rationality, and when that happens we should go with rationality.*

This objection touches on a much larger philosophical debate concerning whether moral reasons always trump other sorts of reasons. I lack the space to review adequately the arguments in favour of considering moral reasons as overriding, and will not attempt to do so. However, I will say that I believe moral reasons are indeed trumps. In fact I would go a bit further and maintain that seeing other reasons as competitors is a problematic way of framing the issue – moral reasons constitute a different and incommensurable class of reasons, such that other sorts could not function as competition. Again, I cannot hope to make a case for this here; suffice it to say that a view of morality as overriding is widely advocated in the ethics literature.<sup>6</sup> In consequence, the present objection is a risky one for the settled naturalist.

As a counter-reply, one might re-conceive the present objection, such that the situation is not one in which one sort of reason is competing with

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Fairbanks (2012), Hare (1981), and Stroud (1998). Pojman (1991) makes an interesting case that while the moral overridingness thesis holds on theism, it does not hold on any kind of atheism. That would add an interesting complication in the present context; if correct, it would imply that my argument would be an effective critique of settled naturalism *from a theistic perspective*, but not from a naturalistic one. In that case it would retain some interest, but its intended audience would be badly curtailed.



morality, but rather a situation in which one moral duty (the duty to seek the truth) conflicts with another (the duty to follow the Golden Rule). Seen in that light, the situation is really that of a moral dilemma, such that the moral overridingness reply would not automatically address it.

By way of a counter to the counter: the demand to switch from settled to tentative naturalism in the face of ECREs does not conflict with the duty to seek the truth. Indeed, by prompting someone to reconsider seriously the evidence for the supernatural, it might be truth-conducive.<sup>7</sup> Since the settled naturalist who does not consider belief in the supernatural absurd or certainly false cannot rule out the possibility of that shift's being truth-conducive, it is not the case that the shift would violate the duty to seek the truth.

*(4.2) Surely to judge harshly someone whom one has never met, indeed a person whose name may not even be known (as in the anonymous cases included among the case studies above), does that person no clear harm. That speaks against its immorality. Moreover, if such judgement is immoral it must be a very minor immorality – even if moral reasons do usually trump other sorts of reasons, surely the import of a minor immorality can be outweighed by the importance of preserving one's settled naturalism.*

A person can be harmed without knowing she is harmed, and a person can be wronged without knowing she is wronged. Still, it is wrong to wrong people. It is wrong to judge your neighbour a jerk on inadequate grounds, even if you don't inform your neighbour of this judgement. And it is wrong to judge someone a liar prematurely even if that person is unaware of it.

And is it true that such a judgement would be merely a minor wrong whose import would be outweighed in this case? This gets into the tricky question of how to weigh wrongs. To the extent that people take their reputations to be important, slandering someone might be seen as a serious wrong. Doing so in public would be worse than doing it merely in thought, but the latter still wrongs the person.<sup>8</sup> As to whether that

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<sup>7</sup> A related point will come up at the end of the reply to objection (4.4).

<sup>8</sup> Doesn't this amount to a kind of thought-police, inimical to liberal values? Oderberg (2013) takes this up in his general discussion of judging others, writing that 'the application of morality to states of mind is hardly novel. Even liberal-minded people disapprove morally of hatred, spite, jealousy, and other corrosive states of mind – and presumably not just because of their tendencies to outward manifestation. We can make sense of a society of hate-filled people who nevertheless managed to get along well due to certain firmly built-in codes of proper conduct. But would the neutralization of external

wrong is outweighed by the good of preserving one's settled naturalism, one might question whether that really is a good, on the grounds that naturalism might be false, and indeed might perhaps be demonstrably false depending on how one comes to evaluate testimony to ECREs. One might also question such a reaction on the more general grounds mentioned in the previous reply: if morality is a trump, presumably it is always a trump, even where the competing non-moral reasons seem particularly important. Trumps are only meaningful, after all, if they retain their force even when the temptation to ignore them is substantial.

*(4.3) If we adopt the perspective advocated here then we will rapidly get an expansion problem. Do we have to maintain an open mind about flying saucers, Yetis, ghosts, etc. because there may be instances of testimony to these the only rational naturalistic explanation for which is deception? How far do we take the injunction not to judge others harshly?*

Based on the criteria I've used above, if one finds the proposition 'ghosts are real' to be absurd or certainly false, one can dismiss all such testimony as deceptive and not wrong anyone in doing so. If on the other hand one thinks of that proposition as neither absurd nor certainly false, then to judge someone a liar simply because he/she has given testimony to a ghost sighting (the only rational naturalistic explanation for which is deception) would indeed be immoral.

*(4.4) But if we follow the demands laid out here, important beliefs might be held hostage to liars. Why should one's degree of belief in naturalism (or any important belief) be left vulnerable in this way?*

Aquinas, in the same article of the *Summa* quoted earlier, considers a similar objection: 'It would seem that doubts should not be interpreted for the best. Because we should judge from what happens for the most part. But it happens for the most part that evil is done, since "the number of fools is infinite" (Ecclesiastes 1:15), "for the imagination and thought of man's heart are prone to evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21). Therefore doubts should be interpreted for the worst rather than for the best.'

Aquinas replies by reiterating the relevant moral injunction: 'He who interprets doubtful matters for the best, may happen to be deceived

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manifestation equally neutralize the internal states themselves, morally speaking? ... In any case, whether you concur with this latter consideration or not, it remains that every rash judgment puts a dent or hole in someone else's reputation (given that a reputation just *is* the sum total of opinions everyone has about an individual), and if reputation is a highly valued good, that good is thereby, however slightly, under- mined.'

more often ... yet it is better to err frequently through thinking well of a wicked man, than to err less frequently through having an evil opinion of a good man, because in the latter case an injury is inflicted, but not in the former.' This fits in well with the notion that moral reasons override reasons of personal self-interest. It also accords with the Platonic idea that it is always better to suffer evil than to do evil, and indeed with a basic tenet of our own justice system: namely, that people are presumed innocent until proved guilty, on the assumption that it is better to risk letting some guilty men go free than to condemn the innocent. Such views are difficult and dangerous to maintain and put into practice. But then, if morality were easy everyone would do it ....

To soften the blow, recall that avoiding the habitual attribution of lying motives to others when they testify to ideas one disagrees with is surely not only virtuous but also beneficial. It is part of being open-minded, and may be conducive to learning important new truths one would otherwise remain ignorant of. The habit of refraining from harsh, inadequately supported judgements of others can thus receive further support (not that it needs it) from its being potentially truth-conducive.

*(4.5) Must the settled naturalist really shift to tentative naturalism? Mightn't she instead rationally and morally adopt the following stance: I don't know how to explain what's going on with ECREs. These experiences do indeed seem compelling, and the witnesses sincere and reliable. It must be granted that at present naturalism has no workable explanation for them. But that needn't weaken the evidential status of naturalism, certainly not to the point where one is obligated (morally or otherwise) to reconsider seriously the reality of the supernatural. Every theory, no matter how plausible and well-supported, has to contend with anomalies, certain findings that are difficult to integrate into the theory. For now, ECREs are an example of such an anomaly. The naturalist can admit this while still rationally maintaining that one day the anomaly will be explained.*

This objection underestimates the evidential significance of ECREs. Think again of the experiences related in our six sample case studies. These experiences, if they really occurred as reported, are not merely difficult to explain on the assumption of naturalism, or in tension with naturalism; rather, they are to all appearances *incompatible* with naturalism (keeping in mind of course the points made regarding the Duhem / Quine thesis in the Introduction). As such, mere faith in the possibility of a future workable naturalistic explanation is not a tenable strategy of reply for the

settled naturalist. Such faith may suffice to permit the settled naturalist rationally to remain a naturalist, but it will not suffice to avoid the need to shift from settled naturalism to tentative naturalism. This is particularly apparent given that ECREs are not isolated, terribly rare experiences, but rather are reported often enough that any researcher could easily assemble a much larger set of case studies than I have presented here, simply by dipping into the relevant existing literatures.

*(4.6) Shouldn't this sort of argument give pause to many non-naturalists? How could one be a settled Christian (for instance) if one had to take seriously every claim to an ECRE with unambiguously Hindu content (a vision of Krishna perhaps), or Buddhist content, or some other religious tradition whose principal tenets are inconsistent with Christianity?*

There are claims to religious experience within a variety of religious traditions, not all of which are compatible in all of their main teachings. But they are all agreed on the falsity of naturalism, and any ECRE, in any tradition (or none), tells against naturalism. As the relationship between ECREs and naturalism is the concern of the present paper, this point does not constitute an objection to the argument of section 3 above. Consequently, while the general issue of how to understand religious experiences across conflicting traditions is extremely important, and one that has rightly received sustained attention in the literature (from a variety of perspectives),<sup>9</sup> I will not take it up here. Certainly the Christian has resources within his/her tradition for explaining at least some experiences had by Hindus, Buddhists, etc., and I expect that the latter also have resources for accounting for experiences had by Christians. The question then becomes one of whose explanatory resources are most effective and plausible, a question that has to be resolved, in part, by reference to broader issues of dogma and morality, etc. The most relevant point for our purposes is simply that the Christian needn't dismiss as deceptive testimony to an ECRE with content appropriate to Hinduism, nor need the Hindu dismiss as deceptive testimony to an ECRE with content appropriate to Christianity.

However, one might press the present objection further by asking whether ECREs could be counted against naturalism if in fact they did *not*, collectively, point to some single, coherent alternative. If indeed they did not, mightn't one just see them as brute facts, fundamentally

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Alston (1991: 255-285), Heim (2000), Maritain (1944: 225-255), and Yandell (1993: 279-321).

meaningless indications of the world's underlying absurdity? Well, it must be granted that it would be a problem were there not indeed some single worldview at which ECREs collectively pointed. However, it would not necessarily be a problem if we could not (or not yet?) *discern* such a worldview *through* them. They might be coherent in the relevant respect, despite seeming diversity, and yet not in a way that was discernible to us. (As a matter of fact I think that ECREs, even in the midst of their diversity, do collectively point toward a single worldview, though to argue for this would be require a very different and much lengthier project.)

## V. CONCLUSION

Various cases have been made against naturalism on the grounds of its moral implications. Some have argued that naturalism is inconsistent with moral realism, or at least is liable to undermine belief in moral realism. Others have argued that naturalism undermines moral accountability, given its attendant denial of the possibility of post-mortem judgement. The case made here is quite different. It assumes that naturalism is consistent with moral realism, and relies on what is taken to be a commonly shared moral intuition, namely that premature harsh judgement of others is morally problematic. Some past naturalists have been too quick to dismiss certain kinds of ECREs as the products of deception, without considering in detail the moral implications of such dismissal. The argument made here is designed to draw attention to those neglected implications, and to the extent it does so it ought to prompt serious reflection on the part of naturalists.

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