

BOOK REVIEW

## Hans Van Eyghen, *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs*

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Eduardo Viveiros de Castro opposes what he takes to be a strong ethnocentric undercurrent in much Western philosophy. His principal example is Richard Rorty's self-confessed refusal to take seriously ideas that are too far from those of Western liberal intellectuals. Viveiros de Castro thus reactively characterizes his own discipline, anthropology, as taking seriously that which (Western liberal) intellectuals cannot take seriously. In *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs*, Hans Van Eyghen follows Viveiros de Castro, and not Rorty, by taking seriously, in a manner unprecedented in analytic epistemology of religion, the question of whether beliefs in spirits are justified. In taking into consideration traditions that have been neglected or outright ignored in the philosophy of religion – and because he does so – Van Eyghen examines religious phenomena that are nearly absent from the pages of philosophy of religion journals and books, chief among them mediumship, possession, and animistic experiences. The author draws on ethnographic sources and anthropological case studies from a wide variety of religions such as West African traditions and their Afro-Atlantic offshoots (e.g. Brazilian Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería), but also Tibetan Bön, Siberian as well as South Indian (Nayaka) animism, new religious movements, and many others. This makes the book a welcome addition to the growing efforts to diversify the philosophy of religion, carried out and exemplified by such endeavours as the University of Birmingham's Global Philosophy of Religion Project and Bloomsbury's *Expanding Philosophy of Religion* book series.

The book begins by fixing the reference of 'spirit-belief', by which the author means beliefs in the existence or nature of supernatural beings that are not gods. Van Eyghen surveys spirit-beliefs in major world religions as well as in smaller-scale traditions, and concludes that if spirit-beliefs lack evidential support and are founded on misunderstood explanations for spiritual experiences, many religious beliefs and practices would be relegated to mere superstition. This underscores the motivation and necessity behind the efforts made in the book. In chapter 2, Van Eyghen examines the first metaphysical argument supporting the existence of spirits, which contends that the likelihood of the existence of spirits is higher if God is assumed to exist. He provides three reasons to bolster this claim: first, an omnibenevolent God desires to reveal himself through messengers; second, the likelihood of spirits existing increases with the presence of a supernatural realm; and third, the probability of spirits existing is higher if sacred scriptures are trustworthy. Acceptance of the existence of God can be justified if any of the three arguments is sound, thereby indirectly supporting the existence of spirits through arguments for

God's existence. Consequently, the conclusion extends its influence widely, challenging the notion of mere theism, which posits that God is the sole supernatural agent.

The second metaphysical argument consists in attributing unusual events to spirit activity, but such a strategy requires meticulous examination of the specific event and arguments demonstrating why spirit activity provides the most coherent explanation. Upon closer examination, Van Eyghen finds the second argument less compelling due to substantial disparities among unusual events. Chapter 3 delves into this discussion, providing a defence against common counterarguments challenging the attribution of unusual events to spirit activity, such as the contention that explanations involving spirit activity are inherently less parsimonious or possess weaker explanatory power compared to naturalistic alternatives. Van Eyghen navigates the complexities surrounding the attribution of unusual events to spirits and offers a nuanced response to potential objections. He concludes that arguments for spirits require reliable event accounts and case-by-case assessments. As the author affirms in the conclusion of the book, akin to theology, a *spiritology* should be culturally specific. Frequently, explanations involving spirit activity struggle to surpass naturalistic alternatives, posing a challenge to a generalized argument for spirits based on events.

In chapter 4, Van Eyghen succinctly introduces phenomenal conservatism and its application to experiences of God which, in the subsequent chapters, he extends to other kinds of religious experiences. Phenomenal conservatism is an influential stance on the justificatory power of experiences, asserting that individuals are *prima facie* justified in believing that things are as they appear in the absence of counter-evidence. The *prima facie* condition acknowledges that justification can be undermined by 'defeaters', usually classified into rebutting defeaters, which support the negation of a proposition, and undercutting defeaters, which cast doubt on the reliability of the belief's basis. This stance is the foundation of Richard Swinburne's argument that there is no epistemically relevant difference between religious and non-religious experiences. While acknowledging that many religious experiences differ from 'ordinary' sense experiences by not being public, he contends that this does not negate their evidential value. Swinburne only denies taking an experience at face value if it was made under unreliable conditions, in circumstances where similar claims have proven false, if the object of experience was absent, or if the experience was not caused by the presumed object. Van Eyghen then explores how phenomenal conservatism supports spirit-experiences and while acknowledging numerous and conflicting accounts of spirit-experiences, the author contends that differences in spirit-experiences are not necessarily mutually conflicting, since variations may arise from spirits' alternating moods or temperaments. Finally, aligned with Linda Zagzebski's perspective on the authority of testifiers, Van Eyghen asserts that spirit-experiences reported by others should be granted justificatory force since there are no compelling reasons to view subjects reporting spirit-experiences as unreliable testifiers.

The last four chapters of the book offer an original application of phenomenal conservatism to spirit-experiences. Each chapter has the same structure, presenting distinct kinds of spirit-experiences before asking what spirit-beliefs could be justified by them, offering several possible undercutting defeaters which the author roots in current scientific literature, and then assessing the ability of such theories to provide an alternative causal account that might render the relevant spirit-beliefs epistemically unjustified. The systematic epistemological treatment of spirit-beliefs presented in the latter half of the book is unique in the literature and defies expectations by offering a well-balanced exploration of extant and novel arguments both for and against justification claims based on spirit-experiences.

In chapter 5, Van Eyghen tackles 'perception-like' experiences of spirits, which occur with different sense modalities, mostly visual, auditory, and tactile. Van Eyghen sees

them as situations where a subject perceives a sensation, thought, or awareness as caused by a spirit – what Swinburne terms ‘seemings’, acknowledging the potential for a different cause. He further divides them based on their directness, illustrated by the following example. Suppose Anne believes a spirit visited her after experiencing a strong cold shiver upon entering a room, while Adam believes a spirit visited him after seeing a peculiar being moving in his garden at twilight. While both felt a spirit visited them, Adam seems to have stronger justification. Anne’s is termed an indirect experience as she interpreted bodily sensations, while Adam’s, involving a direct visual image, is labelled a direct experience. Van Eyghen considers both internalist and externalist theories of justification, but even accepting process reliabilism, the assessment of indirect spirit-experiences is largely negative. Although there are no strong defeaters for the claim that certain bodily sensations can be caused by spirits, the presence of numerous alternative explanations for these sensations weakens the case for believing that spirits are the cause. In contrast, direct experiences fare better. Under phenomenal conservatism, subjects with direct spirit-experiences can attain *prima facie* justification for spirit-beliefs. Additionally, subjects can derive justification for a spirit’s attributes directly from these experiences. Identifying a spirit’s identity may rely on background knowledge, but the issues encountered in indirect experiences, stemming from numerous alternative explanations, are less prevalent or absent in direct experiences.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with two closely related kinds of spirit-experiences: mediumship and possession. Although both occur concurrently in some traditions, mediumship-experiences and possession-experiences diverge primarily in the degree of control and personality retained by the medium. In mediumship, the spirit’s role is relatively limited, often confined to delivering messages, while possession episodes often involve spirits taking complete control of the subject’s personality and body. While possessing spirits also convey messages, this aspect is not the focal point of possession-experiences, as it is in mediumship. Unlike perception-like spirit-experiences, mediumship-experiences justify beliefs linked to a spirit’s existence and visual attributes. While these experiences don’t provide initial justification for the existence of a spirit for most believers, they offer supporting evidence, reinforcing beliefs applicable to both the subject and observers. Possession-experiences, akin to mediumship-experiences, unveil the nature of a spirit but can especially justify beliefs regarding the possessing entity’s behaviour. As possession-experiences are often not recalled by the possessed subject, their primary role lies in justifying beliefs for witnesses rather than the subject themselves.

Finally, in chapter 8, Van Eyghen engages in an epistemological defence of animistic beliefs. Distinct in the realm of spirit-beliefs, they posit that spirits inhabit objects, plants, and animals (and, in some cases, also rivers, forests, mountains, etc.) and are prevalent in various cultural and religious contexts, including African, American indigenous, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Polynesian traditions. Animism diverges from most traditions by not perceiving spirits as disembodied entities, but rather, animists commonly believe spirits inhabit and exert control over a physical carrier, although it’s crucial to note that animists don’t usually assert that all objects or animals possess spirits. Van Eyghen argues that this perspective implies a tacit acknowledgment that spirited entities share similar capacities with humans, including the ability to communicate, reflect, and engage in intentional actions. According to Nurit Bird-David, unlike Westerners, who tacitly accept a rigid dichotomy between human persons and non-human non-persons, animists generally view humans and animals as subcategories within a broader category of persons. This expansive concept of personhood shapes the animists’ worldview, leading them to experience the world differently and interact with animals, plants, and even objects in a manner similar to their interactions with humans. Whether or not these commitments are tacit, Van Eyghen argues that they can undergo epistemic assessment since

they make a claim that can be true or false, backed by evidence or not. After examining several ethnographic accounts of animistic experiences, Van Eyghen argues, in similar fashion to the preceding three chapters, that they *prima facie* justify the resulting beliefs. Chapters 5–8 thus find no epistemically significant differences among perception-like, mediumship, possession, or animistic experiences. Each of these experiences can provide initial justification for spirit-beliefs, and Van Eyghen argues that they withstand defeat by common naturalistic alternative explanations.

Kevin Schilbrack has recently voiced concern about the potential pitfalls associated with expanding the scope of philosophy of religion. He worries that, in their attempt to show respect for diverse religious perspectives, philosophers may distance themselves from their distinct role in the interdisciplinary field of religious studies. According to Schilbrack, this unique contribution entails a critical examination of the truth of religious beliefs, the ethical dimensions of religious practices, the accuracy of religious experiences, and the fairness of religious institutions. In Schilbrack's view, it is crucial to avoid the shortcomings of 'traditional' philosophy of religion, which tends to focus narrowly on (Christian) theism, overly prioritize intellectual considerations over experiential and practical aspects, and resist engagement with neighbouring disciplines. Van Eyghen serves as an admirable example of the kind of effort Schilbrack advocates, steering clear of these pitfalls while broadening the discourse in philosophy of religion.

Due to the varied diet of examples in the book, Van Eyghen does not extensively delve into any single tradition. While this introduces readers to various religious forms involving perceptual, mediumship, possession, and animistic experiences, there is an understandable sense of wanting more. However, I don't see this as a flaw but a strategic choice by the author. Engaging in the kind of 'thick description' advocated by philosophers like Mikel Burley would have been time-consuming, making the systematic approach taken by Van Eyghen a monumental task that is more likely to be carried out collectively. Despite this, the author lays the groundwork for future research, suggesting that a similar epistemological approach could be applied to traditions individually. The latter half of the book sets the tone for what could – and, in my opinion, should – become a research programme. My addendum would be to recommend that future researchers not only follow the author's advice in assessing specific cases but also employ ethnographically informed thick description to achieve a more nuanced understanding of religious phenomena in specific traditions. As Timothy Knepper insists, philosophizing about *religion* requires understanding its messy cultural-historical diversity. This implies leaving differences in place, resisting the craving for generalization.

In conclusion, Van Eyghen effectively achieves his goal of scrutinizing the justification for believing in spirits, and he firmly concludes in the affirmative. *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs* is a succinct, clearly written, well-argued, and well-researched book that breaks new ground in the epistemology of religion while not being overly technical. I recommend its use in class for modules on epistemology and/or the philosophy of religion, since it didactically explains and exemplifies phenomenal conservatism and process reliabilism in arguing for the *prima facie* justification of beliefs that arise out of a great variety of religious experiences that have been so far been almost absent from the literature.