

**Hans Van Eyghen. *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs*.
Routledge, 2023. viii + 159 pp. \$160 (hbk).**

Jonathan Hill
University of Exeter

Is it rational to believe in God? Philosophers of religion are, naturally, divided. Is it rational to believe in fairies? Well, there you'll find rather more unanimity. Some atheists think that theism at least deserves to be taken seriously as a possibility, even if it is ultimately rejected, while others do not. But almost all theists and atheists alike tacitly agree that some supernatural beliefs merit no rational engagement at all. A standard objection to arguments for the rationality of theism (or other beliefs or practices associated with "respectable" religions) is to point out that they could equally well be used to defend belief in ghosts, or fairies, or the like. And the standard response to such objections is to insist that there is some significant difference between theism (or whatever "respectable" thing is being defended) and belief in fairies (or whatever "unrespectable" parallel is being drawn), because everyone agrees that this *reductio*, if successful, would indeed be *absurdum*.¹ Nobody ever seems to retort instead: "Yes, perhaps my argument *could* be repurposed in such a way – and what is wrong with that?"

So it is very refreshing to find Hans Van Eyghen not merely biting this bullet but going out of his way to attract it. Van Eyghen argues that belief in "spirits" – defined with conscious imprecision as, more or less, supernatural agents that are not gods – is just as rationally defensible as belief in God. In fact, sometimes it is *more* rationally defensible (63–64). And for Van Eyghen, this leads to the conclusion not that theism is absurd but – surely far more interestingly – that spirit-beliefs are (or can be) perfectly rational. As such, this book is an important contribution to a small but growing subsection of literature in the tradition of analytic philosophy seeking to defend, or at least take seriously, religious beliefs and practices outside the usual narrow focus on monotheism normally treated by philosophers of religion.² For there are, after all, many people today who *do* believe in ghosts, fairies, house elves, nature spirits, and all sorts of supernatural entities. To ignore these people, or to dismiss them all as obviously stupid without the need for discussion – even while in the next breath defending the rationality of "our" supernatural beliefs – seems problematic on many levels.

Van Eyghen's approach is straightforward. After introducing the topic and attempting to define "spirit beliefs" in Chapter 1, he devotes Chapter 2 to arguing that theism, if rationally defensible, gives reasons to accept spirit beliefs. This is partly because if theism is true then

¹ See, for example, Mawson (2010, 177–178).

² Early hints in this direction can be found in the sympathetic treatment of polytheism in Mavrodes (1995) and Rorty (1998). More recent work in analytic philosophy and theology engaging with belief in non-theistic supernatural entities (very broadly conceived) in both Christianity and other religions includes Steinhart (2012, 2013), Lataster and Philipse (2017), McGraw and Arp (2017), Hunt (2020), Smith (2020), Leidenhag (2021), and Johnson (2022), as well as the papers in volume 8 of this journal on "Diversifying Analytic Theology".

at least one supernatural agent exists, raising the possibility that more do; and also because at least some theistic traditions themselves teach the existence of non-divine spirits, such as angels. Chapter 3 introduces a new argumentative strategy which underpins much of the rest of the book: taking an established argument for God's existence, and redeploying it in support of the existence of spirits. In the case of this chapter, the traditional argument is that miracles justify belief in God, and Van Eyghen reworks it into an appeal to "unusual events" that could be caused by spirits.

The rest of the book – chapters 4 to 8 – all focus on versions of one argument, the appeal to religious experience. In its theistic form, this is the familiar train of thought that Richard Swinburne (2004, 293–327) influentially made the centrepiece of his argument for the probable truth of theism: it is rational to suppose that experiences are veridical (the "Principle of Credulity") in the absence of reasons to think otherwise ("defeaters"); there are experiences which appear to be of God; no putative defeaters for these experiences are successful; it is therefore rational to suppose, on the basis of these experiences (whether one's own or others'), that there is a God. After discussing this approach in outline in Chapter 4, including a defence of the Principle of Credulity, Van Eyghen turns in the remaining chapters to a variety of different kinds of experiences apparently of spirits: perception-like experiences, medium-like experiences, possession experiences, and finally animistic experiences. In each case he describes the kinds of experiences in question before presenting a series of possible defeaters for them, concluding in each case that none of the defeaters is successful. The final conclusion, accordingly, is that belief in spirits is indeed justifiable.

For Van Eyghen, the argument based on "unusual events" in Chapter 3 is relatively weak, but the arguments from theism and particularly from the different varieties of experience are much stronger. Van Eyghen is careful to point out that in the case of perception, medium-like, and possession experiences, his discussion does not "aim to show that culturally specific spirit-beliefs are justified" (155), since more in-depth analysis of specific beliefs would be needed for that. But he thinks that his analysis "does strongly suggest that even such culturally specific spirit-beliefs are not in danger of being defeated by the most commonly proposed naturalistic explanations" (155). The discussion of animistic experiences, meanwhile, goes somewhat further, with the claim that "animists can continue to regard their beliefs as justified in the light of surveyed scientific evidence" (149). We are also given an additional, though brief, argument for the rationality of animism on the basis of its strong moral benefits (149–50). If the book can be said to argue for the rationality of a *specific* kind of spirit-belief, then, it is animism – the belief that many animals, plants, minerals, and geographical features are intelligent agents.³

Throughout, the discussion is clear and straightforward. I do have a couple of general points of criticism. The first is that the treatments of different kinds of experiences feel rather repetitive: although different experiences are being considered, much the same kinds of potential defeaters are listed, and much the same responses to those defeaters are offered.⁴ This is particularly acute in those cases where the nature of the experience is left rather vague. Most of the time, Van Eyghen provides clear (and often fascinating) examples to illustrate what is meant, but this is not so in the chapter on "perception-like" experiences.

³ I use the word "belief" here for simplicity's sake. As Van Eyghen points out (131–135), the older way of categorising animism, as a belief or set of beliefs, has more recently given way to a view of it as a practice or set of practices.

⁴ At some points there is straightforward repetition, as in the discussions of Stewart Guthrie on pp. 77–78 and p. 143.

Here, the main example is explicitly described as a dream (72–73), but the subsequent discussion strongly implies that waking experiences are meant, where somebody thinks they see or feel the presence of a supernatural being. How does a dream fit into this discussion, and why should a dream be thought to have any evidential value? The answer is not clear. The question of the nature of these experiences, and the beliefs they may support, is raised again at the end of the book, where Van Eyghen comments that people often have a caricatured notion of spirit-beliefs, and that “various spirit beliefs do not resemble mythological depictions” (156). This comes as something of a surprise, because the issue of how spirit beliefs are represented and whether the actual beliefs differ from this representation has not previously been raised.

Second, and perhaps relatedly, the wide scope of the discussion inevitably means a lack of depth in places, with occasional more serious lapses. For example, the basic argument from unusual events (42) is described as “formally valid” (45), though in the form given, it certainly is not. The probability formulae in the chapter on theism (27, 29) do not seem to me to express the claims that Van Eyghen says they do.⁵ Often, potential defeaters for spirit experiences are dismissed very quickly, without consideration of how their proponents might respond to the dismissal. For example, in the discussion of animistic experiences, Van Eyghen considers the argument that humans have an innate tendency to misattribute agency, and that this undermines the evidential value of experiences in which objects such as trees or mountains appear to be agents. His response is that such an argument begs the question by assuming that the attribution of agency to trees or mountains is a *misattribution* at all (146). But even if true, this hardly robs the argument of its force. Its proponent could simply rephrase it to say that humans have an innate tendency to attribute agency to things *whether or not they actually have agency*. That makes no assumptions about whether trees etc. really have agency, but it still surely gives us a reason to be suspicious of experiences that seem to indicate that they do.

More fundamentally, there is some lack of clarity over what kind of justification for spirit-belief the various arguments are meant to provide. This comes across in the ways in which some defeaters are undermined. In the chapter on perception-like experiences, Van Eyghen considers the potential defeater of “suggestion”: perhaps people hold prior beliefs about the existence of spirits, as a result of cultural conditioning, and this leads them to interpret naturalistic phenomena as caused by spirits. Van Eyghen responds:

To argue for a defeater, attribution to prior spirit-beliefs does not suffice. One needs to argue that prior beliefs lead subjects astray or cause them to *wrongfully* attribute phenomena to spirits. There are two ways to argue for this. First one can show that spirit-beliefs are false and misinform people’s experiences. Doing so would require an argument against the existence of spirits, which is rarely provided. Second, one can point to cases where people who hold spirit-beliefs process sensations that are clearly not caused by spirits as caused by spirits. To my knowledge, no such experiment has been performed. Without either of [these] two, the subject of spirit-experiences could argue that her prior spirit-beliefs guide her on the right path and allow her to detect spirits where others see none. (85, italics original)

⁵ For example, Van Eyghen interprets “ $P(\text{spirits} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ B) > P(\sim\text{spirits} \mid \text{God} \ \& \ B)$ ”, where B stands for background knowledge, as “[t]he probability of the existence of spirits increases if there is a God” (27). But the formula actually states that the probability of the existence of spirits given God’s existence is greater than the probability of the non-existence of spirits given God’s existence, which is quite different. (Perhaps the probability of the existence of spirits is greater than 0.5 whether there is a God or not!)

It is apparent here that very different standards are being applied to the argument from experience and the defeater to that argument. All of the onus of proof is laid upon the debunker, who in order to be successful must provide evidence that the proposed naturalistic process does in fact cause people to hold false beliefs. Merely proposing this process as an alternative possible explanation is not enough. The spirit believer, meanwhile, is not called upon to provide evidence that experiences of the kind she has are ever actually caused by spirits. It seems that merely having the experiences themselves is evidence enough.

If we are thinking of the two possibilities (the experiences were caused by spirits, or the experiences were caused naturalistically) as rival hypotheses, then these different standards are clearly unfair. Evidently, then, Van Eyghen is not thinking of them in this way.⁶ The idea seems, rather, that the claim that these experiences are really caused by spirits is not one attempt among many to explain their cause, but their *natural* interpretation, to which it is rational to default in the absence of a very good reason to do otherwise.

Why think this? Van Eyghen provides the rationale in Chapter 4, on justification from experiences, and the Principle of Credulity, also known as “phenomenal conservatism”. He approvingly quotes Michael Huemer’s well-known definition:

If it seems to S as if *p*, then S thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that *p*. (54, quoting Huemer 2001, 99)

But “at least *prima facie*” is doing a lot of work in Van Eyghen’s argument. Suppose, for the sake of argument, we accept Huemer’s principle. It would be consistent with this to think that, while spirit-experiences give a person *prima facie* justification for believing in spirits, that justification is very slight, and melts away in the face of even tentative alternative hypotheses. It is clear from Van Eyghen’s discussion that he does not take this interpretation: for him, the “*prima facie* justification” is much more resilient, and can be overturned only by an alternative explanation which has been *shown* to be correct in other cases of mistaken belief. But why? Merely defending phenomenal conservatism, as Van Eyghen does in his discussion, does not give us a reason to accept this strong version of it. One might, perhaps, adopt a very broad definition of “rationality”, according to which it is rational to believe something, even in the face of strong reasons not to, if one has *some* reason to believe it. In that case, someone who had undergone spirit-experiences might indeed be rational in believing they were caused by spirits, even if alternative (and probably superior) explanations were available. But that would surely be too broad an understanding of “rational”: it would allow virtually any belief to be rational. Alternatively, one might define “rational” more

narrowly, such that one needs a more robust reason for one’s belief for it to count as rational. But then the spirit-believer needs to explain why spirit-experiences provide such a reason, and not just a weakly *prima facie* one. Such an explanation might well be possible, but Huemer’s principle alone does not give it to us, and I do not think Van Eyghen does either.⁷

⁶ He does, though, sometimes frame them in these terms, as when he describes the possible strategy of the spirit-believer like this: “The alternative causal explanation can be argued as not plausible or inferior to an explanation involving spirits” (60). Here, at least, it seems that the spirit-believer and the debunker are offering rival hypotheses, and that the task of the believer *is* actively to show why her hypothesis is to be preferred, but in his actual discussions of alternative causal explanations Van Eyghen does not attempt this.

⁷ On another note, I must mention that something seems to have gone very wrong with the copy-editing or proof-reading for this book. It has an unusually high number of errors in spelling and punctuation. Fortunately

Overall, then, I cannot quite share Van Eyghen's confidence that "beliefs concerning the nature of spirits can be justified" on the basis of spirit-experiences (156). But I do share his conviction that such beliefs are not obviously less epistemologically respectable than those with which philosophers of religion are usually concerned, as well as his optimism that this timely book may help to encourage philosophers to consider them more seriously.

References

- Huemer, Michael. 2001. *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hunt, Marcus William. 2020. "Exorcism and Justified Belief in Demons." *Forum Philosophicum* 25 (2): 255–271. doi: 10.35765/forphil.2020.2502.17
- Johnson, David Kyle. 2022. "On Angels, Demons, and Ghosts: Is Justified Belief in Spiritual Entities Possible?" *Religions* 13 (7): 603 doi: 10.3390/rel13070603
- Lataster, Raphael and Herman Philipse. 2017. "The Problem of Polytheisms: A Serious Challenge to Theism." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 81 (3): 233–46.
- Leidenhag, Joanna. 2021. *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*. Clark.
- Mavrodes, George. 1995. "Polytheism." In *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, 261–186, edited by Thomas Senor. Cornell University Press.
- Mawson, T.J. 2010. "Praying to Stop Being an Atheist." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 67 (3): 173–186. doi: 10.1007/s11153-010-9227-8
- McGraw, Benjamin and Robert Arp. 2017. *Philosophical Approaches to Demonology*. New York: Routledge.
- Rorty, Richard. 1998. "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism." In *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, 21–36, edited by Morris Dickstein. Duke University Press.
- Smith, Tiddy. 2020. "The Common Consent Argument for the Existence of Nature Spirits." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2): 334–348. doi: 10.1080/00048402.2019.1621912
- Steinhart, Eric. 2012. "On the Number of Gods." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72 (2): 75–83. doi: 10.1007/s11153-011-9325-2
- Steinhart, Eric. 2013. "On the Plurality of Gods." *Religious Studies* 49 (3): 289–312. doi: 10.1017/s0034412512000285
- Swinburne, Richard. 2004. *The Existence of God*. Second edition. Clarendon.

Van Eyghen's style is always clear and easy to follow, so the errors rarely cause any difficulties of comprehension. The lack of any page numbers in the references, though, does make it harder to follow them up.