

## Assessing the reliability of memory-based beliefs of religious experiences

(Abstract word count: 742; Total word count: 884)

In a recent paper, Munro (2024) addresses two questions concerning religious beliefs that originate in religious experiences, understood as experiences whose objects are supernatural entities or events. The first is the *Psychological Question* (PQ), which concerns the causal relationship between religious experiences and religious beliefs. The second is the *Reliability Question* (RQ), which asks whether this psychological role is reliable, thereby yielding reliably formed religious beliefs. The most common response to PQ holds that religious experiences play a role analogous to that of perceptual experiences in the formation of perceptual beliefs.

Munro criticizes the perceptual answer to PQ on the grounds that it makes RQ dependent on much more difficult questions. Assessing the reliability of religious experiences would require determining whether they are perceptual or hallucinatory, which depends on whether supernatural entities/events exist and can be perceived. Moreover, if perception and hallucination are the same type of process, they would have the same reliability. These are difficult questions a perceptual account of PQ must answer before addressing RQ. Munro proposes a memory-and-reflection account of PQ, on which RQ can be addressed more easily, since the reliability of memory and reflection can be evaluated independently of these difficult issues.

In this talk, I pursue two aims. Negatively, I argue that Munro's attempt to avoid these "difficult questions" either returns us to them or depends on different, but still difficult debates. Positively, I suggest that the reliability of religious beliefs formed by remembering religious experiences should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, since remembering different kinds of religious experiences can be more or less prone to error, and remembering religious experiences can reliably support some kinds of beliefs but not others.

The reliability of a belief depends not only on the reliability of the final process that produces it, but on the reliability of the entire causal chain leading to it. Even a valid inference, which is a reliable process, can result in an unreliable belief if one of its premises originates in an unreliable process, such as wishful thinking (Goldman, 2021). For this reason, Goldman (1986) and others have argued that the reliability of memory beliefs depends on the reliability of the experience that originally caused the memory, given a preservationist view of memory. On this view, assessing the reliability of memory

does not help answer RQ, since memory-based beliefs inherit the reliability of the experience. We are thus pushed back to the “difficult questions” he aimed to avoid.

Recent developments in the philosophy of memory might seem to offer Munro a way to avoid this result. He could, for instance, appeal to post-causalist views, according to which memory need not be caused by the remembered experience (Michaelian, 2024), or to generativist views in the epistemology of memory, according to which memory generates new justification independently of perception (Tooming & Miyazono, 2024). However, adopting these views merely replaces one set of difficult questions with others, namely those raised in the (anti-)causalism debate and the generativism/preservationism debate.

Moreover, Munro would also need to take a stand on the debate about the accuracy of memory: whether memory aims to accurately represent the past event (*alethism*), the past experience (*radical authenticity*), or both (*authenticism*) (McCarroll & Perrin, 2025). This choice matters because it determines which kinds of beliefs can be reliably formed. Radical authenticity licenses reliability only for beliefs about past experiences (e.g., “I had a religious experience”), whereas alethism licenses reliability only for beliefs about the world (e.g., “There are supernatural entities or events”). Thus, assessments of reliability vary significantly depending on the view of memory accuracy adopted.

For these reasons, Munro’s proposal that the reliability of religious beliefs can be assessed by evaluating the reliability of memory processes either returns to the same questions or depends on answering other difficult questions. It is therefore unclear whether his strategy genuinely makes RQ more easily answerable.

That said, there is an alternative route. Empirical studies on the accuracy of remembering religious experiences can be used to assess the reliability of beliefs about past experiences without settling foundational questions about the nature of memory. Such studies show, for example, that factors like emotional arousal and emotional regulation affect how accurately religious experiences are remembered (van Mulukom, 2017). This suggests that different emotional processes have distinct epistemic consequences for belief formation. Accordingly, the reliability of particular religious beliefs should be assessed in light of the specific processes that influenced memory formation in each case, in particular, emotional processes.

## References

Goldman, A. I. (1986). *Epistemology and cognition*. Harvard University Press.

- Goldman, A. I. (2021). Reliabilist epistemology. In Zalta, Edward N. (ed.). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- McCarroll, C. J., & Perrin, D. (2025). Between truth and authenticity in episodic memory: The case for veridicalism. *Asian Journal of Philosophy*, 4(2), 104.
- Michaelian, K. (2024). Radicalizing simulationism: Remembering as imagining the (nonpersonal) past. *Philosophical Psychology*, 1–27.
- Munro, D. (2024). Remembering religious experience: Reconstruction, reflection, and reliability. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences*, 5.
- Tooming, U., & Miyazono, K. (2024). Prospects for epistemic generationism about memory. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences*, 5.
- Van Mulukom, V. (2017). Remembering religious rituals: Autobiographical memories of high-arousal religious rituals considered from a narrative processing perspective. *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 7(3), 191–205.