

Review

# Religious Disagreement, Mystical Experience, and Doxastic Minimalism: Critical Notice of John Pittard's *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*

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**Abstract:** In his recent book, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*, John Pittard challenges J.L. Schellenberg's rejection of mystical experience as worthy of enjoying presumptive doxastic trust for two main reasons. First, Pittard holds that Schellenberg wrongly focuses only on avoiding error while placing no emphasis on gaining truth. I argue that, contra Pittard, Schellenberg's account nicely balances the competing epistemic goals of gaining truth and avoiding error. Second, Pittard thinks that Schellenberg's criteria for presumptive trust in that of universality and unavoidability are arbitrary. I counter that Schellenberg's criteria are not arbitrary since they are the best way of achieving these goals. I conclude that despite not enjoying presumptive doxastic trust, this in itself does not entail that mystical experiences are never trustworthy.

**Keywords:** Pittard; Schellenberg; doxastic minimalism; mystical experiences



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## 1. Introduction

For some years now, philosophers of religion have discussed the problem of religious diversity; see (King 2008). The world is a global village, and any reflective religious believer knows that her particular set of religious beliefs are just one among many others. If different religions make contradictory claims (as it appears they do), then not all of them can be true. Why think that your religious beliefs are any more epistemically trustworthy than someone else's religious beliefs (including ones that are incompatible with yours)? These observations are meant to put pressure on the rationality of religious belief, particularly those who make exclusivist claims about their religion.<sup>1</sup>

A fairly recent debate in epistemology nicely highlights challenges to religious belief from diversity by focusing on disagreements between epistemic peers. The *epistemology of disagreement* literature focuses on questions surrounding the appropriate response an agent should have upon discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with her. Two main positions have been defended in the literature. Non-conciliationism is the view that two peers can continue to rationally disagree with one another after the disagreement has been disclosed, e.g., (Bergmann 2009; Kelly 2005; Lougheed 2020; Oppy 2010). Conciliationism, on the other hand, holds that each party is required to revise their respective beliefs in the face of peer disagreement, e.g., (Christensen 2007; Feldman 2007; Matheson 2015). Strong versions of conciliationism say that an agent must lower their confidence in their original belief below the threshold for rationality.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, if strong conciliationism is true, then a serious challenge has been levelled against the rationality of religious belief. Religious believers are no longer rational in maintaining their religious beliefs in the face of widespread (apparent) peer disagreement about them. If strong conciliationism is true, then a very serious skeptical challenge to the rationality of religious belief is on offer. One way to avoid the conciliationist challenge is to say that it does not apply to doxastic practices that should be given presumptive

trust. If certain mystical experiences are one such type of practice, and agents sometimes based their religious beliefs on such experiences, then at least those religious believers can avoid this challenge. J.L. Schellenberg, however, argues that *only* those doxastic practices which are universal and unavoidable should be given presumptive doxastic trust and hence treated as basic. As such, a doxastic practice such as mystical experiences is not to be given presumptive trust because it is basic.

In his recent book, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*, John Pittard argues that Schellenberg's reasons for refraining from giving presumptive trust to mystical experiences are mistaken. If right, this could potentially serve to (at least partially) resolve the threat from strong conciliationism. In arguing that Schellenberg's scope for presumptive trust is too narrow, Pittard first says that Schellenberg wrongly focuses only on avoiding error while placing no emphasis on gaining truth. Second, he holds that the criteria of universality and unavoidability are arbitrary. I argue that Pittard's rejection of Schellenberg is mistaken, and we would be wrong to give mystical experiences presumptive trust. Schellenberg's account nicely balances the competing epistemic goals of gaining truth and avoiding error. It is for this very reason that the criteria are not arbitrary. However, my rejection of Pittard does not imply that mystical experiences should never be trusted; they just should not enjoy presumptive trust. The evidential import of mystical experiences needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis unless one already has a defeater for the doxastic practice in general.

Finally, while I will not attempt the impossible task of providing necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes a mystical experience, it may be helpful for the reader to see some examples before proceeding to the debate between Schellenberg and Pittard:

Amelia: "It all began one spring morning when, as a little girl, I ran out of the house before breakfast and to the end of the garden which led to the orchard. In the night a miracle had been wrought, and the grass was carpeted with golden celandines. I stood still and looked, and clasped my hands and in wonder at the beauty I said 'God'. I knew from that moment that everything that existed was just part of 'that sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst'. Of course, I didn't put it in those words, but I did know that I and everything were one in the life. When I grew older and read philosophy I thought of all creation as the Shadow of Beauty unbeheld, and felt that Beauty was God". Amelia remarks that even in the inevitable changes that life brings, she has felt certain that "God is there, and in it all, and part of it all. So I could rest in Him" (Wiebe 2015, p. 47).

Carol: "I looked up at the snows, but immediately lost all normal consciousness and became engulfed as it were in a great cloud of light and ecstasy of knowing and understanding all the secrets of the universe, and sense of goodness of the Being in whom it seemed all were finally enclosed, and yet in that enclosure utterly liberated. I 'saw' nothing in the physical sense... it was as if I were blinded by an internal light. And yet I was 'looking outward'. It was not a 'dream', but utterly different, in that the content was of the utmost significance to me and in universal terms. Gradually this sense of ecstasy faded and slowly I came to my ordinary sense and perceived I was sitting as usual and the mountains were as usual in daily beauty". Carol says that the aftermath of the experience was in the form of a wonderful mental and spiritual glow, and then adds: "I became convinced later that a spiritual Reality underlay all earthy reality, and the ultimate ground of the universe was benevolent in a positive way, surpassing our temporal understanding. This conviction has remained with me, but in an intellectual form; it has not, however, prevented me from feeling acute personal depression and disappointment time and again, throughout my life". She also relates that, later in life, she developed a strong interest in Buddhism, but felt that it was founded on a negative premise, whereas the universe seemed to her to be positive (Wiebe 2015, p. 71).

## 2. Presumptive Doxastic Innocence

Much of Schellenberg's focus is on ideal epistemic inquiry. Namely, it asks how should an inquirer proceed when it comes to investigating religion? This is the general context of his discussion about which doxastic practices should enjoy presumptive doxastic innocence. A doxastic practice enjoys presumptive innocence if its outputs (i.e., the beliefs one forms based on it) should be taken as 'innocent until proven guilty.' It is true that sense perception sometimes does not function properly and deceives us (indeed it can deceive us even when it is functioning properly). However, for a variety of reasons, many agree that sense perception should be given presumptive trust. One such reason is that we simply need to assume sense perception is reliable to function at even the most basic level. Whether mystical experiences are a doxastic practice that should be granted doxastic minimalism is an important question. For, it impacts where the burden of proof lies when examining the evidential import of mystical experiences. If they are not granted presumptive trust, then it is an uphill battle for the religious believer to show why they are veridical. Schellenberg and Pittard have an interesting disagreement on this point, with Schellenberg denying that mystical experiences should enjoy presumptive trust and Pittard rejecting Schellenberg's reasoning. It is this disagreement that is the focus of this critical notice. In what follows, I explain Schellenberg's argument against the claim that mystical experiences should enjoy presumptive trust. I then argue that they cannot be saved by Pittard's rejection of Schellenberg. However, I conclude that mystical experiences should not be granted presumptive trust does not mean that they can never be trusted.

## 3. Schellenberg's Rejection of Mystical Experience

Pittard explains that Schellenberg's "argument occurs in a context where he is arguing against the rationality of appealing to religious experience as a way of supporting religious belief in the face of religious disagreement" (Pittard 2020, p. 68).<sup>3</sup> It also occurs in the context of interacting with William Alston's *Perceiving God* (Alston 2014). Pittard says that "a key claim of Alston is that reliability of many broad doxastic practices cannot be *independently* confirmed—that is, confirmed in a manner that utilizes other doxastic practices but *not* the practice whose reliability is under consideration" (Pittard 2020, p. 70). For example, Alston does not believe that sense perception can be defended in a way that is non-circular (Pittard 2020, pp. 70–71).<sup>4</sup> For instance, I cannot demonstrate that my eyes are working properly and that I am looking at the screen of my laptop right now while seated in a local café without implicitly assuming that my eyes are working properly. Alston leverages this idea to defend Christian doxastic practices, but his point generalizes. While it is impossible to defend the reliability of various religious doxastic practices in a way that is non-circular, they are no worse off than any of our other doxastic practices. While this does not entail that religious doxastic practices are rational, it rules out rejecting them on the basis that non-circular defenses of them cannot be offered (Pittard 2020, p. 71). If Alston is right, then in a religious dispute, the believer might be entitled to appeal to mystical experience as evidence because it is no different than appealing to some piece of evidence gathered from sense perception. This is the dialectical context in which Schellenberg rejects mystical experience as a doxastic practice that should enjoy presumptive innocence.

Neither Schellenberg nor Pittard offer a standardized formulation of the argument against mystical experience enjoying presumptive innocence. However, standardizing the argument is a good way to get clear on precisely what is being claimed by Schellenberg. I am thus going to offer a standardized version of what I think is the most charitable interpretation of Schellenberg's argument. Even if Schellenberg himself would not endorse this argument, I think it is close to what someone sympathetic to his ideas might embrace. Here is the argument:

*The Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism in Inquiry*

Assumption: Widespread skepticism is false.

- (1) Inquirers (who are epistemic peers) in a dispute should aim at beliefs *grounded in inquiry*.

- (2) The best way for inquirers to gain the beliefs grounded in inquiry is to avoid placing presumptive trust in as many doxastic practices as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]
- (3) In order to avoid skepticism and gain beliefs grounded in inquiry, presumptive trust should only be placed in those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable. [Basic]
- (4) Religious doxastic practices are neither universal nor unavoidable. Therefore,
- (5) Inquirers should not place presumptive trust in religious doxastic practices. Therefore,
- (6) Inquirers should not place presumptive trust in mystical experiences (which are a religious doxastic practice). Therefore,
- (7) Strong conciliationism threatens the rationality of religious belief.

Before explaining each of the premises, it is important to note that a fundamental assumption for Schellenberg is that widespread skepticism is false (indeed, an assumption that his dialogue partners in Pittard and Alston affirm too). This is why Schellenberg writes that “[a]n investigator will be moved by whatever is needed to get past the most general skepticism” (Schellenberg 2007, p. 171).

Premise (1) is needed because Schellenberg’s argument focuses on inquirers. Premise (2) is likely where the controversy begins to arise for Schellenberg. This is a claim about limiting the number of doxastic practices that we endow with presumptive trust. Schellenberg therefore advocates for a kind of *doxastic minimalism*. What are his reasons for endorsing (2)? According to Pittard, part of Schellenberg’s problem with Alston’s defense of mystical experience is that Alston’s account is overly permissive. In order for mystical experiences to be presumed trustworthy they would have to be ultimately grounded in ‘epistemically unassailable practices’. Since they are not, they are not trustworthy. Pittard explains that for “Schellenberg, the only practices that should be treated as ‘innocent until proven guilty’ are those that are both *universal* among human beings (or at least nearly so) and *unavoidable*. Any other doxastic practice must be shown to be reliable before it is rational to rely on it” (Pittard 2020, p. 72). Inquirers should only assume a doxastic practice is innocent if it is absolutely necessary to get inquiry off the ground in the first place (Pittard 2020, p. 76). Schellenberg thus wants to minimize default trust (i.e., presumptive trust) one has in cognitive faculties.<sup>5</sup>

Pittard’s interpretation of Schellenberg on (2) seems accurate thus far, though I will later note some important differences. For Schellenberg, if we really want the truth, we simply need to proceed with presumptive trust in at least some practices (though as few as possible):

One might want to say [...] that universality and unavoidability are required because only where they are present is one forced by the human cognitive condition to go along; we would like to substantiate more fully even such belief-forming practices if we could, but because we cannot, and because to do so is a necessary condition for arriving at any truth and understanding that might be possible for us, we concede defeat and settle for what is basically a naked assumption instead (Schellenberg 2007, p. 172).

Premise (3) says the way to avoid (widespread) skepticism is to trust only those practices that are universal and avoidable. However, why these criteria? Well, “it is reasonable to extend default trust when failing to do so would result in general skepticism and severe epistemic impoverishment” (Pittard 2020, p. 81). According to Pittard, Schellenberg is more concerned with what is unavoidable to human inquirers:

Because we find ourselves unable to form and revise beliefs that are not on the basis of sense perception, introspection, memory, and rational intuition, a certain basic picture of the world has been generated involving birth and conscious experience and physical objects and relations with other conscious beings and the reality of things past and death and also the appropriateness of valuation (presupposed by the humblest desires, and sanctioned by intuition) Schellenberg quoted in (Pittard 2020, p. 78).

Thus, Pittard suggests that Schellenberg’s claim is better understood as implying “rationally ought implies humanly possible” (Pittard 2020, p. 79). For, “[i]f doubting some doxastic practice is not humanly possible, then one is not required to doubt it. But if

my inability to doubt some doxastic practice is particular to me or my particular group, then this does not exempt me from the skeptical prescriptions of doxastic minimalism” (Pittard 2020, p. 79). Therefore, the criterion of unavoidability entails the criterion of universality.

Premise (4) should be an uncontroversial claim: Doxastic practices that produce religious belief are not universal or unavoidable (Pittard 2020, p. 73). For Schellenberg, one reason to think this is so is based on the diversity of such practices that often lead to those of different religious stripes holding incompatible beliefs. They are also clearly not unavoidable since there are cases where people abandon their religious faith upon reflection. On the other hand, “practices of relying on memory, sense perception, introspection, and certain sorts of inductive and deductive inference are nearly universal and are practically unavoidable” (Pittard 2020, p. 73). A commitment to the truth implies that we should not give presumptive trust to any doxastic practice that is not absolutely unavoidable to all humans.<sup>6</sup>

The truth of (5) follows from (1) to (4). (6) just says that mystical experience is a religious experience which is a truism. If (1) to (6) are true, then (7) is true and the problem of religious disagreement remains. Since mystical experiences are not universal and unavoidable doxastic practices, they should not be given presumptive trust. This leaves the burden of proof entirely with the party in a religious dispute who wishes to claim that mystical experiences are evidence. This concludes what I hope is a charitable interpretation of Schellenberg’s (and Pittard’s understanding of Schellenberg’s) advocacy for doxastic minimalism. In the next two sections, I describe Pittard’s reasons for rejecting Schellenberg’s minimalism along with my replies.

#### 4. Problems for Pittard’s Critique of Schellenberg: *Seeking Truth versus Avoiding Error*

I now turn to Pittard’s first objection to the Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism and Strong Conciliationism and then show why it fails. Pittard begins his first criticism by explaining that:

“A more adequate account of the aims of inquiry does not lead one to conclude that committed inquirers are doxastic minimalists. In addition, I will argue that the restrictions Schellenberg imposes on doxastic minimalism are epistemically arbitrary. There is no good reason for thinking that all and only those practices that are part of humans’ natural inheritance should be exempt from the otherwise unsparing axe of the doxastic minimalist” (Pittard 2020, p. 81)

While Pittard grants that one should trust doxastic practices that are humanly unavoidable, he holds that it should not *only* be granted to those practices. His objections, then, are primarily aimed at (2) and (3) of the argument. With respect to (2), Pittard denies that Schellenberg’s doxastic minimalism can “supply answers to all of the questions that may be of interest. In order to arrive at views on questions that are controversial (and that would remain so even after evidence sharing), it would be necessary to employ additional doxastic practices that are not humanly unavoidable” (Pittard 2020, p. 82). In other words, Pittard holds that additional doxastic practices are needed to answer many of our questions about the world. However, according to Schellenberg, we are not allowed to use those additional practices.

William James serves as the main inspiration for Pittard’s critique of Schellenberg. It is well known that according to James, inquirers often have two conflicting goals; that of avoiding error and believing the truth (Pittard 2020, p. 82).<sup>7</sup> Pittard contends that Schellenberg’s account is too sided with respect to these goals; it only cares about avoiding error. However, Pittard says that “it should not be assumed that the investigator who is concerned for the truth will remain agnostic on some question anytime the evidence is less than fully conclusive” (Pittard 2020, p. 83). Thus, if an investigator values truth, it is perfectly reasonable for her to use non-basic doxastic processes even if doing so increases the possibility of error. Pittard explains that “[i]n holding that the committed investigator will (as far as possible) be a doxastic minimalist, Schellenberg presupposes

without argument that the aim of error avoidance always trumps the aim of believing the truth" (Pittard 2020, p. 83). Pittard is thinking of a Schellenbergian argument in terms that focus more on veritism than on beliefs grounded in inquiry. To see why there is an important difference here, consider Pittard's version of the argument:

A Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism and Strong Conciliationism

- (\*1) Peers in a dispute should aim at the truth. [Veritism]
- (\*2) The best way for peers to gain the truth is to avoid placing presumptive trust in as many doxastic practices as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]
- (\*3) In order to avoid skepticism and gain true beliefs, agents should place presumptive trust in only those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable.
- (4) Religious doxastic practices are neither universal nor unavoidable.  
Therefore,
- (\*5) Peers should not place presumptive trust in religious doxastic practice. Therefore,
- (\*6) Peers should not place presumptive trust in mystical experiences (which are a religious doxastic practice). Therefore,
- (7) Strong conciliationism threatens the rationality of religious belief.

Notice that this interpretation of the Schellenbergian argument is importantly different from the initial interpretation of it that I outlined above. Interpreting Schellenberg in this way makes his claims less plausible, though I will still show they can be defended. Furthermore, even though Pittard clearly thinks that veritism is essential to Schellenberg's argument, he appears to interpret (\*1) along the following lines:

- (\*\*1) Peers in a dispute should aim at *avoiding error*.

When understood in these terms, it is easy to see why Pittard rejects the Schellenbergian argument. He holds that if forced to choose between avoiding error and gaining true beliefs, we should pick the later because that is more central to inquiry. Thus, for Pittard, (\*\*1) is false because if forced to choose, the focus of inquiry should be gaining the truth. However, on this new interpretation, (2) and (3) do not have the appropriate connection to (\*\*1) since those premises are about gaining the truth. They should thus be modified to something closer to:

- (\*\*2) The best way for peers to avoid error is to avoid placing presumptive trust in doxastic practices inasmuch as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]
- (\*\*3) In order to avoid skepticism and avoid error, peers should place presumptive trust in only those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable.

Even if Schellenberg says he means something like (2) and (3), Pittard holds he is really committed to something closer to (\*\*2) and (\*\*3). However, since according to Pittard, the focus should be on gaining true beliefs, (4) does not follow from (\*\*1), (\*\*2), and (\*\*3). He holds that inquiry makes little sense if gaining true beliefs is not at least part of the motivation in question. According to Pittard, "[o]nce it is allowed that committed inquirers may value believing the truth alongside error avoidance, there is no straightforward way of arguing from the aims of inquiry to the conclusion that extending default trust to an avoidable doxastic practice is always bad (or always good)" (Pittard 2020, p. 83). Hence, the Schellenbergian argument fails.

Reply:

Even if Schellenberg would not endorse Pittard's veritistic interpretation of his argument, I still believe it is possible to defend it. Contra Pittard, advocating for doxastic minimalism does not entail a sole commitment to avoiding error and nor does it entail only pursuing the truth. I do not see anything that commits Schellenberg to only avoiding error. In *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion*, Schellenberg actually draws on James and places more emphases on the epistemic goal of gaining truth than on false beliefs (2009). The context in which Schellenberg is writing is one where he is defending the rationality of non-doxastic faith in ultimism given human immaturity. Ultimism involves the claim that there is something more in terms of what exists and also in terms of value. By immaturity, Schellenberg means that humans are quite young in evolutionary terms

and hence really only at the beginning of religious inquiry (notice how different this view is from how we normally approach things). Indeed, Schellenberg says that:

At this early stage of the game [i.e., of inquiry into religion], some lightness of heart and willingness to act beyond the evidence must therefore be intellectually preferable to the heaviness and severe caution of those who order us always to wait for stronger evidence (evidence that may just for that reason never come) before committing ourselves in faith (Schellenberg 2009, p. 222).

I will not belabor the point, as it is in a slightly different context. I am simply emphasizing that Schellenberg is indeed well aware of these competing duties.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, if anything, he considers our duty to the truth more important than our duty to avoid error. With this discussion in view, consider how easily we can modify the Schellenbergian argument to include both epistemic goals:

(\*\*1) Peers in a dispute should aim at the truth *and at avoiding error*.

(\*\*2) The best way for peers to gain the truth *and avoid error* is to avoid placing presumptive trust in doxastic practices inasmuch as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]

(\*\*3) In order to avoid skepticism, discover the truth, and *avoid error*, peers should place presumptive trust in only those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable.

Pittard, however, claims that on this interpretation, both (\*\*2) and (\*\*3) are false. Or, more carefully, he does not seem to ever consider Schellenberg's remarks in *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion*.

Perhaps there is another sense in which this critique of Pittard is too strong. With James, part of what Pittard might be claiming is that there is actually no appropriate criteria for telling us how to weigh the competing goals of avoiding error and gaining true beliefs. This is why they are rightly labelled as 'competing'. Therefore, Pittard may well respond that he does not really owe us the criteria I criticize him for not offering. However, later in the book, Pittard offers a defense of a rationalist view of 'partisan justification', which implies that mystical experiences may sometimes be justified (though not necessarily) if they yield an appropriate type of rational insight. This view is worthy of serious consideration in its own right, though space constraints prevent me from taking it up here. My point is that Schellenberg has offered an account of how to balance these competing aims, and if Pittard's critique holds, then it paves the way to an unpalatable permissiveness. What we do not want is a method of inquiry that maximizes the number of an inquirer's true beliefs, while simultaneously maximizing the number of her false beliefs.

Maybe part of the disagreement here is one about burden of proof. Who owes who a set of criteria about which practices we ought to presumptively trust? After all, in the parts of the book I focus on, Pittard is criticizing Schellenberg's endorsement of doxastic minimalism, not offering his own account as to which practices we should trust. The problem, however, is that Schellenberg has offered criteria and Pittard is wrong that it only prioritizes avoiding error. We thus do not have a reason to reject Schellenberg's criteria on the grounds that it focuses on one epistemic goal to the exclusion of another important one.

### **5. Problems for Pittard's Critique of Schellenberg: *Unavoidability and Universality Are Arbitrary***

I now move to Pittard's second main objection to Schellenberg and show why it is also misguided. Pittard says that even if he is wrong and we should not extend presumptive trust to other doxastic practices, Schellenberg's account remains incorrect because "there is no principled basis for singling out universal and unavoidable practices other than the fact of their unavoidability" (Pittard 2020, p. 84).<sup>9</sup> According to Pittard, Schellenberg does not treat basic doxastic practices as basic because they help our inquiry. Rather, he does so merely because we cannot help but use them. Schellenberg does not offer principled reasons for not wanting to include other avoidable practices, especially those that could possibly benefit our inquiry. We might standardize this objection as follows:

*Pittard's Arbitrary Objection*

- (8) “If one’s reason for giving special treatment to universal and humanly unavoidable practices is the fact of their unavoidability, then one must admit that radical skepticism would be rationally required if it were possible and that one’s nonskeptical outlook is in a certain sense lamentable” (Pittard 2020, p. 84).
- (9) “And this [i.e., admitting that radical skepticism would be rationally required if it were possible and that one’s nonskeptical outlook is in a certain sense lamentable] concedes too much to the skeptic” (Pittard 2020, p. 84).
- (10) “There is no principled basis for singling out universal and unavoidable practices other than the fact of their unavoidability” (Pittard 2020, p. 84). Therefore,
- (11) Giving special treatment to universal and unavoidable practices either concedes too much to the sceptic or lacks a principled reason for giving such practices special treatment.

Pittard bolsters this argument by suggesting that if one were offered the chance to make an unavoidable belief-forming practice avoidable, that in Schellenberg’s view, we ought to take it. Imagine being able to take a pill that causes one to no longer automatically believe in other minds or the external world. We should take the pill because for Schellenberg, our current non-skeptical outlook is in some sense lamentable.

Reply:

For Schellenberg, the universality and unavoidability criteria reflect an important fact about humans, especially with respect to the nature of ambition. We want to fill out the picture of our world as accurately as possible and as such other practices are required while others are denied presumptive trust (which is just what one would expect of good inquirers). Furthermore, Schellenberg seems concerned with offering advice for human inquiry given our current and actual epistemic situation, i.e., given the way humans actually evolved. The principled reason right now is that the practices Schellenberg defends are unavoidable. It is the best we can do given our actual epistemic circumstances. Pittard is likely correct that were it to become possible to change unavoidable doxastic practices into avoidable practices that Schellenberg would probably have to revise what he says about which practices deserve presumptive trust. However, this does not seem to conflict with the point that Schellenberg is just offering us advice for how to inquire *right now*.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, an easy amendment to avoid this worry is simply to modify Schellenberg’s position to say that we should grant presumptive doxastic trust to doxastic practices that are unavoidable and universal without human intervention. This would, it seems, still bracket practices such as mystical experiences since they are not universal. It would also still exclude religious beliefs more generally since they almost always formed with the help of other humans (and when they are not, those experiences are not universal). Of course, more work would have to be done in order to develop this suggestion since right now Pittard could fairly accuse of it being ad hoc.

## 6. Conclusions

In light of the above criticisms of Pittard, the Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism and Strong Conciliationism remains intact. One item that appears sometimes lost in Pittard’s analysis of Schellenberg is that what is under dispute is whether mystical experience should be granted *presumptive trust*. However, this does not mean that the outputs of doxastic practices not granted presumptive trust should *never* be trusted. This is important. For even supposing that my defense of Schellenberg against Pittard is correct, the Schellenbergian argument does not entail that mystical experiences can never be appeal to as grounds for rejecting strong conciliationism. Unless one possesses a defeater for the reliability of the entire doxastic practice, then the evidential merits of mystical experiences must be assessed on a *case-by-case basis*.<sup>11</sup> While I agree with Schellenberg that mystical experiences should not be granted presumptive trust, it does not follow that mystical experiences cannot be used as an evidential tiebreaker to defend against strong versions of conciliationism.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Exclusivists claim that their religion is the one unique true religion (and must be explicitly endorsed by an individual in order to rightly consider them a member). For example, (Plantinga 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> A minority of epistemologists advocate for hybrid views which call for conciliating or remaining steadfast depending on the specific details of the disagreement in questions. For example, (Lackey 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Since I am most concerned with analyzing and ultimately rejecting Pittard’s criticisms of Schellenberg, I will primarily stick to Pittard’s interpretation of Schellenberg.
- <sup>4</sup> See also (Alston 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> Before arriving at his official critique of Schellenberg, Pittard raises the following worry: “If one finds oneself with some basic doxastic practice that is unavoidable (for oneself) but not universal, why is not one rationally entitled to trust this practice? As an example, consider someone in colonial America who was raised to believe that chattel slavery is morally abhorrent and who simply cannot get ride of this belief even after discovering that belief is not universally shared. Is this person’s unavoidable belief in the wrongness of slavery irrational because it is the product of a nonuniversal doxastic practice?” (2020, 77). See also (Plantinga 2000, p. 450). I do not want to wade too far into this objection since it is not central to my focus in this paper. However, it is odd Pittard does not address the fact that this is a sword that cuts in both directions. Consider another unavoidable but nonuniversal doxastic practices such as *forming beliefs on the basis of childhood authority figures*. What if the belief formed in question is less pleasant than the one Pittard suggests? What if the person in colonial America was raised to think chattel slavery was part of God’s natural order? Surely these doxastic practices should not be given presumptive innocence. We often rightly reject things we were taught as children from authority figures.
- <sup>6</sup> Pittard notes that Sanford Goldberg makes a similar argument to that offered by Schellenberg. We should only trust those doxastic practices which failure to do so would lead to ‘epistemic impoverishment’. Sense perception is one such practice while religious doxastic practices are not (Pittard 2020, pp. 80–81). For more, see (Goldberg 2013).
- <sup>7</sup> See also (James 2012).
- <sup>8</sup> For more, see (Schellenberg 2009, pp. 220–26).
- <sup>9</sup> Pittard also criticizes Schellenberg with respect to how he approaches avoiding skepticism. According to Pittard, Schellenberg should lament the fact that we cannot but avoid our nonskeptical outlook (i.e., we need it to get inquiry off the ground). He also says that Schellenberg might be able to appeal to practical reasons to ground our use of perception, but not our belief in other minds. There is much to say here but doing so would take us too far afield. I am simply going to assume that we want to avoid skepticism and that Schellenberg’s account is not somehow fundamentally incompatible with this fact. For more, see (Pittard 2020, pp. 84–91).
- <sup>10</sup> A further interesting issue worth exploring here is whether Schellenberg’s defense of doxastic minimalism amounts to an instance of pragmatic encroachment (and whether such encroachment is legitimate).
- <sup>11</sup> As I mention above, Schellenberg concludes his chapter on mystical experience by suggesting two such candidates in that of religious diversity and alternative explanations. Given space constraints and that my focus is on Pittard, I will not discuss these here.

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