

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE ON THE VALIDITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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The Experiential Roots of Religion

Religion is characterized by the passion that it can arouse, either for or against religion. Why is religion capable of such enormous effects on human life? Apart from the fact that religion is about the ultimate concern of human beings, we also need to bear in mind that religion often has an *experiential* basis. God is not just a hypothesis for the religiously devoted. He is a Living Reality who permeates all their lives. Hick has a good account here:

To the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, for example, whose religious experience lies behind the biblical writings, God was an experienced reality. He was known to them as a dynamic will interacting with their own wills; a sheer given reality, as inescapably to be reckoned with as destructive storm and life-giving sunshine, or the fixed contours of the land, or the hatred of their enemies and the friendship of their neighbours. The biblical writers were (sometimes, though doubtless not at all times) as vividly conscious of being in God's presence as they were of living in a material environment. Their pages

resound and vibrate with the sense of God's presence, as a building might resound and vibrate from the tread of some great being walking through it.¹

God is what they can experience directly, what impinges on their consciousness and what turn their lives around. These characteristics can clearly be seen from the paradigmatic religious experiences: Abraham's hearing of and responding to Elohim's calling, Moses' encountering Yahweh in the burning bush, Isaiah's vision of the Holy God in the temple, Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Augustine's conversion, Luther's experience of the justifying grace, Wesley's feeling a strange warming of his heart.... The list goes on and on. Those people who experience God will echo with Job:²

I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee.

Religious experiences sometimes convey such a heightened sense of reality that the conviction they instill transforms the lives of the experiencers. Furthermore, religious experiences are not only life-transforming. They are often world-transforming as well – just contemplate the immense impact of people like Moses, Paul, Augustine, etc. on Western civilization.

Although religious experience is an ancient phenomenon, the *discourse about* religious experience is relatively new. When people feel completely at ease about talking about God, why do they bother to talk about *experiences* of God instead? The popularization of the discourse about religious experience more or less coincides with the turn to subjectivity in modernity. For example, Schleiermacher's emphasis on religious experience, especially the feeling of absolute dependence, is well-known. William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* greatly helps the entrenchment of the idea of "religious experience." Rudolf Otto does a similar job for the idea of "numinous experience."³ These authors are all concerned to show that the capacity for religious experience is somehow natural to the human psyche. Their work can be seen as efforts to break loose of the modern epistemological straitjacket of British empiricism or Kantian agnosticism. However, they are not always clear whether religious experience is merely a

¹ John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1967), 209.

² Whether Job is a historical figure does not affect my main point.

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collins, 1960); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924).

feeling or a cognitive experience. So these thinkers do not explicitly formulate any argument from religious experience, i.e. the argument that the occurrence of religious experience provides grounds or justification for the existence of God. However, the argument from religious experience is now defended by sophisticated philosophers and taken seriously by many others. In this paper, I will discuss some of the epistemological issues surrounding this argument from religious experience. Let me first introduce its development in this century.

The Argument from Religious Experience in the Twentieth Century

Before going into the argument from religious experience, I clarify some related terms and concepts here. By a *religious experience* I mean an experience which the subject takes to be an experience of God or some supernatural being. Such an experience is *veridical* if what the subject took to be the object of his experience actually existed, was present, and caused him to have that experience in an appropriate way.⁴ The claim that "S has an experience of God" does not entail "God exists." So the undeniable fact that religious experiences have happened does not prejudice the issue of the existence of God.

Earlier defenders of religious experience include both theologians and philosophers, e.g. Farmer, Frank, Waterhouse, Knudson.⁵ Some of them claim that religious experiences provide immediate knowledge of God, and that they are *self-authenticating* because within the experience the subject directly encounters God and receives God's revelation. For example, the British theologian H.H. Farmer said,

the Christian experience of God... in the nature of the case must be self-authenticating and able to shine in its own light independently of the abstract reflections of philosophy, for if it were not, it could hardly be a living experience of God as personal.⁶

⁴ The last phrase is added to safeguard against the so-called deviant causal chains. This condition is hard to specify in details. The same problem occurs for the explication of the concept of veridical sensory perception. See Grice's "The Causal Theory of Perception" in Jonathan Dancy, ed., *Perceptual Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Ch. III.

⁵ Cf. H.H. Farmer, *The World and God* (London: Nisbet, 1935); S.L. Frank, *God With Us* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946); Eric S. Waterhouse, *The Philosophy of Religious Experience* (London: Epworth, 1923); Albert C. Knudson, *The Validity of Religious Experience* (New York: Abingdon, 1937).

⁶ Farmer, *The World and God*, 158.

Similarly, the Russian philosopher Frank claimed that

faith is such an intimate possession of the object of faith that the very fact of possession is a self-evident and certain proof of the reality of that object.⁷

However, philosophers tend to be very critical of such claims to self-authentication. They point out that religious experiences are heavily shaped by the conceptual framework of the experient and that no knowledge can be inferred from mere emotional states or conviction, no matter how intense they are.⁸ In fact it is very hard to make sense of the notion of self-authenticating experience. Keith Yandell, himself a defender of religious experience, offers devastating criticisms of this notion.⁹

C.D. Broad is perhaps the most philosophically competent among the early defenders. He in fact anticipates a form of argument from religious experience that is hotly debated nowadays:

The practical postulate which we go upon everywhere else is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception is veridical. We cannot *prove* that what people agree in perceiving really exists independently of them; but we do always assume that ordinary waking sense-perception is veridical unless we can produce some positive ground for thinking that it is delusive in any given case. I think it would be inconsistent to treat the experiences of religious mystics on different principles. So far as they agree they should be provisionally accepted as veridical unless there be some positive ground for thinking that they are not.¹⁰

From the fifties to the seventies, able defenders of religious experience include A.C. Ewing, John Hick, H.D. Lewis, Elton Trueblood, John

⁷ Frank, *The World and God*, 48.

⁸ Cf. C.B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), Ch. 5; Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), Ch. 6.

⁹ See Keith E Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Ch. 8. I also eschew the claim that religious experience has to be ineffable. Literally interpreted, this claim is self-defeating and contradicted by the many accounts of religious experience produced by the mystics and the like. I take the core of truth in this claim is that God (or other objects of religious experience) is intrinsically beyond the capacity of human language to describe it *fully*. This does not entail that human concept as such is not applicable to God. See *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Chs. 3-5 for detailed criticisms.

¹⁰ C.D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), 197.

Baillie, Rem Edwards and H.P. Owen.¹¹ However, they have not drawn much attention from professional philosophers because at that time, verificationism was still influential and hence even the meaningfulness of religious language was in doubt. The situation by now is very different. First of all, as Taliaferro in a recent introduction to philosophy of religion said,

Since then many philosophers have conceded that concepts of God and other components of different religions cannot be ruled out as obvious nonsense or clear cases of superstition. Important work has gone into building a case for the intelligibility of the concept of God. There is also important criticism of such work, but the debate on these matters is now more open-ended without being less rigorous.¹²

Secondly, starting from the end of 1970's, a number of analytic philosophers have produced increasingly sophisticated defence of religious experience. Richard Swinburne defended religious experience via his *Principle of Credulity* in *The Existence of God* which was first published in 1979.¹³ The Principle of Credulity says that it is rational to treat our experiences (including religious experience) as innocent until proven guilty. In other words, religious experiences are treated as *prima facie* evidence for the existence of God until there are reasons for doubting them. This attracts quite a lot of attention in the circle of philosophy of religion. There are of course many critics of Swinburne, e.g. William Rowe, Michael Martin but he has also inspired the support of quite a few professional philosophers, e.g. the philosopher of science Gary Gutting.¹⁴ Whole books are written on religious experience which basically follow Swinburne's line of reasoning, expanding it, modifying it, and replying to objections. They include Caroline Davis's *The*

¹¹ A.C. Ewing, *Value and Reality* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973); H.D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959); Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), Ch. 11; John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); Rem Edwards, *Reason and Religion: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), Chs. 13-14; H.P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God* (London: Athlone, 1969).

¹² Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 3. Ch. 8 of this book also contains an elaborate defence of religious experience.

¹³ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), Ch.13.

¹⁴ William Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982), 85-92; Michael Martin, "The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience," *Religious Studies* 22 (1988), 79-93; Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).

Evidential Force of Religious Experience (1989), George Wall's *Religious Experience and Religious Belief* (1995) and Jerome Gellman's *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (1997).¹⁵ There are also other philosophers who work independently towards a similar conclusion, e.g. William Wainwright¹⁶ and Keith Yandell. Yandell has written on this topic for a number of years and his work culminates in his recent book: *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* in 1993.

Another landmark of this debate is William Alston's *Perceiving God* which was published in 1991.¹⁷ In this book, Alston brings his analytical skills to the issue of religious experience and defends a doxastic practice approach to epistemology. This approach says that it is practically rational to trust our socially established doxastic practices (including the Christian Mystical Practice). His arguments were discussed in major analytic philosophy journals, e.g. *Nous*, *The Journal of Philosophy*. Both *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* and *Religious Studies* have specially organized symposia to discuss his book in 1994.

Another influential figure is Alvin Plantinga. He started with an attack on classical foundationalism in order to leave the room for belief in God as a properly basic belief.¹⁸ He then embarked on an ambitious epistemological project. In 1993, he published two books: *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*.¹⁹ In the first, he surveyed and criticized almost all the major epistemological approaches in vogue. In the second, he elaborated his new approach to epistemology, Proper Functionalism. He is now working on the third book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, which will apply his approach to defend the Christian faith. His work is more epistemological in nature

¹⁵ Caroline Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); George Wall, *Religious Experience and Religious Belief* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995); Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ William Wainwright, *Mysticism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).

¹⁷ William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991). Also see his earlier articles: "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); "Perceiving God," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), 655-65; and "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988), 433-48.

¹⁸ Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Philosophy*.

¹⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

and he has said comparatively little on religious experience as such. However, he makes it clear that his epistemological project is intended to be compatible with the *sensus divinitatis* as a basic source of epistemic warrant. In this way, his work can be seen to be complementary to the above work. His work has also caught the attention of analytic epistemologists. Many leading epistemologists (e.g. Keith Lehrer, Laurence Bonjour, Bas C. van Fraassen, Ernest Sosa) pay him a tribute by collaborating on a book about his proper functionalism,²⁰ offering criticisms of it. Plantinga in turn responds vigorously to their criticisms. This project shows that the old-fashioned empiricist epistemology, which is one major obstacle to the acceptance of religious experience as a source of justification, can no longer be taken for granted. The argument from religious experience seems to be alive and well, having both able defenders and detractors. It is also exciting and fascinating because it often raises deep epistemological questions and helps us rethink crucial issues in epistemology. Let's examine this debate in some details.

The Argument from Religious Experience: Its Intuitive Force and *Prima Facie* Difficulties

The argument from religious experience has strong intuitive force for many people. For example, Hick thinks that we are "in the last resort thrown back upon the criterion of coherence with our mass of experience and belief as a whole; there is no further criterion by which the criteriological adequacy of this mass can itself be tested. This is surely our actual situation as cognizing subjects."²¹ If it is the case, then isn't it plausible to say that "it is proper for the man who reports a compelling awareness of God to *claim* to know that God exists"? At least it seems to Hick that the "onus lies upon anyone who denies that this fulfills the conditions of a proper knowledge claim to show reasons for disqualifying it."²² Moreover, we need to contemplate the implication of the allegation that religious experience as a type is unveridical. It amounts to the claim that *not a single instance* of the myriad religious experiences of humankind is veridical, i.e., all these experiences are totally delusory. Is it reasonable to believe that all "God-experients" are

²⁰ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, ed., *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

²¹ Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 205.

²² Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 210.

either deceiving themselves or others? Gutting, for one, does not think so:

religion, throughout human history, has been an integral part of human life, attracting at all times the enthusiastic adherence of large numbers of good and intelligent people. To say that something that has such deep roots and that has been sustained for so long in such diverse contexts is nothing but credulity and hypocrisy is... extraordinary.²³

When we ponder the numerous religious experiences, their enormous effects sometimes, the honesty of the witnesses, the depth dimension of life and so on, it seems hard to believe that *all* of them are delusory. Moreover, we may encounter the life story of a person who has dramatic experiences of God throughout his life. We find that the person is honest, sane, wise and intelligent. We also find his story corroborated by many others' stories throughout history in many countries. Isn't it rash to say that *all of them are entirely and chronically deluded*? Ordinary people may well fail to produce an explicit and water-tight argument for his belief that the earth is round rather than flat. Yet we will not deny that their intuitive judgment, which is based on many empirical clues, is rational. Can't we also claim that ordinary believers, which have access to the relevant experiential evidence for God, can be rational in believing God?

Nevertheless, there are also many reasons that tend to throw doubt on the trustworthiness of religious experiences. Here is a catalogue of the stock objections to the argument from religious experience:

1) The Abnormal Condition Objection

The mystics having the mystical experiences are under abnormal conditions, e.g. drugs, starvation. Their claims are therefore unreliable.

2) The Logical Gap Objection

We have to distinguish the experience and the subjective conviction it produces from the objectivity (or more technically, *veridicality*) of the experience, e.g. a very "real" hallucination or dream is a live possibility. The critics such as Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre²⁴ admit that religious experiences often produce subjective certitude in the subjects. However, it does not follow that the experience is objectively

²³ Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 2-3.

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Difficulties in Christian Belief* (London: SCM, 1959), 72.

certain. Any experience could be mistaken. No experience is self-authenticating. In other words, there is a logical gap between the psychological data and the ontological claim of the religious experiences. To bridge the gap, we need independent certification of the religious belief. Hence if the experiences are used to support the religious belief, it is circular. For example, Flew challenges the defenders of religious experiences to answer this basic question:

How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of religious experience, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective religious truths?²⁵

3) The Theory-ladeness Objection

The religious experiences are heavily (or, some even claim, entirely) shaped by the conceptual framework of the experiencers. Hence they are not useful as evidence for ontological claims.²⁶

4) The Naturalistic Explanation Objection

The religious beliefs formed by having religious experiences are susceptible to naturalistic explanations, psychological, sociological and the like. The religious experiences are hence discredited. At least their evidential force, if there is any in the beginning, is then cancelled.²⁷

5) The Privacy Objection

According to Rem Edwards, "the foremost accusation leveled at the mystics is that mystical experiences are private, like hallucinations, illusions, and dreams, and that like these 'nonveridical' experiences, religious experience is really of no noetic significance at all."²⁸

6) The No Criteria/Uncheckability Objection

There is no criterion to distinguish the veridical religious experiences from the non-veridical ones. If so, it is not rational to believe that a certain religious experience is veridical. Hence it cannot be used as evidence for religious claims. Even if there are criteria from within the religious framework, we still lack objective, non-circular criteria. In contrast, when we doubt a sense experience, it can be subjected to

²⁵ Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 129.

²⁶ Cf. Peter Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience* (London: Sheldon, 1979), Ch. 5.

²⁷ Cf. John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 183.

²⁸ Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, 318.

further tests, e.g. others' reports, photographs. C.B. Martin put it this way:

the presence of a piece of blue paper is not to be read off from my experience as a piece of blue paper. Other things are relevant: What would a photograph reveal? Can I touch it? What do others see?²⁹

Since religious experiences cannot be tested in similar ways, they are unreliable.

7) The Disanalogy Objection

This objection actually consists of many related challenges to religious experiences. But there is a common structure. Usually the first step is to assume that a certain kind of experience is reliable in general, e.g. sensory experience. Then it is pointed out that religious experiences are so disanalogous with this kind of reliable experience that we must treat them with suspicion. The commonly cited disanalogies are that religious experiences are not universal, private, lacking in details, etc. For example, critics commonly claim that while a religious experience is private/subjective, a sense experience is public. A chair is there for everyone to see but religious experiences seem to be subjective states of a person which cannot be shared by others.

8) The Conflicting Claims Objection

Every religion professes its own kind of religious experience. The claims of these religious experiences are so various and mutually contradictory that we should regard all these claims with suspicion. In other words, these conflicts show that the alleged process to form religious beliefs is not reliable. Even if we grant some force to the religious experiences, different religious experiences cancel one another's force in the end.³⁰

9) The Impossibility Objection

It might be argued that from the concept of God (especially the transcendence of God), it can be deduced that the concept of "an experience of God" is incoherent.³¹

²⁹ Martin, *Religious Belief*, 87-88.

³⁰ Cf. Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 126-27; Martin, "The Principle of Credulity," 87-88.

³¹ Cf. Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

10) The Unrecognizability Objection

God possesses infinite attributes and it is implausible to say these attributes are given in the experiences. It is difficult to see how we can recognize these from our experiences. If they are not given, they have to be inferred but this inference is even more difficult to conceive.³²

Although objections 8-10 are by no means unimportant, due to limitations of space, I will only deal with objections 1-7 in this essay (but I can assure the readers that the rest have already been taken care of by many theistic philosophers).

Theists' Response to Some Objections

I provide brief responses to the first six objections.

1) The Abnormal Condition Objection

One might be tempted to reply as Broad did:

Suppose that there is an aspect of the world which remains altogether outside the ken of ordinary persons in their daily life. Then it seems very likely that some degree of mental and physical abnormality would be a necessary condition for getting sufficiently loosened from the objects of ordinary sense-perception to come into cognitive contact with this aspect of reality.... One might need to be slightly 'cracked' in order to have some peep-holes into the super-sensible world.³³

Anyway this objection is very limited in its application because as a matter of fact most religious experiences, especially experiences of a personal God, do not occur under such conditions. Mystical experiences which occur under abnormal conditions constitute only a small portion of the whole family. Even if drugs could induce hallucinatory religious experiences, it does not follow that non-drug-induced religious experiences are then unveridical. Nobody seems to be confused about the logic in the case of sense experience: the fact that drugs can induce sensory hallucinations does not impugn the trustworthiness of other sense experiences.

³² Brian Davies, *Thinking About God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 67ff; Martin, "The Principle of Credulity," 89-90.

³³ Broad, *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research*, 314.

2) The Logical Gap Objection

It is very interesting to compare this particular objection to religious experiences with the sceptical arguments in various cognitive fields. Ayer points out that many sceptical arguments have such a general form:

Step 1) Point out that for certain knowledge claims we only have a certain kind of evidence.

Step 2) There is no deductive route from the evidence to the claim.

Step 3) There is no inductive route either.

Step 4) Hence there is no justified route from the evidence to the conclusion. The knowledge claim then is not justified.³⁴

The logical gap objection to religious experiences basically conforms to the structure of the general sceptical argument. This can be seen from Gutting's parody of Flew's question mentioned earlier on:

How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of experiences of material objects, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective truths about material objects?³⁵

The certitude/certainty distinction applies to almost all kinds of experience, including sense experience. A hallucination is exactly an unveridical sense experience which nevertheless produces subjective conviction. If the certitude/certainty distinction threatens religious experiences, it will also threaten sense experience. So anyone who pushes this objection needs to show why the logical gap is not damaging in other cases. If the critics only apply the objection to religious experiences but not to other experiences, it would be extremely arbitrary. This would also confirm Alston's charge that critics of religious experiences often adopt a double standard with regard to sense experiences (among other fallacies): "I have identified certain recurrent fallacies that underlie many of these objections – epistemic imperialism and the double standard. The objections in question are made from a naturalistic viewpoint. They involve unfavorable epistemic comparisons

³⁴ A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), Ch. 2. Also cf. Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 14ff.

³⁵ Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 147.

between mystical perception and sense perception; it is not difficult to show that they either condemn the former for features it shares with the latter (double standard) or unwarrantedly require the former to exhibit features of the latter (imperialism).³⁶

3) The Theory-ladenness Objection

Again, this objection raises a general problem in epistemology. Even ordinary perception is theory-laden³⁷ and a similar problem plagues scientific realism. The empiricists and the positivists have searched hard for the rock-bottom "given" which is interpretation-free. In this way, it can be the neutral arbiter of different theories or interpretations. However, the development of modern philosophy and especially contemporary philosophy of science bespeak the downfall of this project. All the major philosophers of science, e.g. Popper, Hanson, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, agree that all observations are to some extent theory-laden. For example, Nancy Cartwright writes:

We can be mistaken about even the most mundane claims about sensible properties, and once these are called into question, their defense will rest on a complicated and sophisticated network of general claims about how sensations are caused, what kinds of things can go wrong in the process, and what kinds of things can and cannot be legitimately adduced as interferences.³⁸

Modern psychology also confirms the idea that interpretation "is absolutely essential to there occurring a perceptual experience at all.... We are not passive recipients of ready-made representations of our environment; rather, stimuli from that environment must be processed by various interpretive mechanisms before they can have any significance for us."³⁹ Since this is widely recognized, I won't belabour the point.⁴⁰ Now the critic requires that the interpretive elements of religious experience be independently supported before we deem the experiences reliable. However, since sense experiences also have interpretive

³⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 255. A list of double standards is provided on pp.249-50.

³⁷ Cf. David Papineau, *Theory and Meaning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

³⁸ Nancy Cartwright, "How We Relate Theory to Observation," in Paul Horwich, ed., *World Changes: Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science* (Cambridge: The MIT Press), 259.

³⁹ Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 149.

⁴⁰ The above is still necessary. Davis points out that although "a narrowly empiricist and foundationalist position is rarely found now outside discussions of religious experience," the philosopher of religion comes up time and again against this outdated assumption. This is indeed frustrating (Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 143).

elements, "if we were always required to provide independent evidence that the beliefs in terms of which we had unconsciously 'interpreted' a perceptual experience were probably true before we could take the perceptual experience to be probably veridical, we would be trapped in [scepticism]."⁴¹ So if the critic is not a sceptic, he should explain in what way this is a special problem for religious experiences. Double standard again! Perhaps to avoid scepticism, the wiser policy is to treat the incorporated interpretations in our experiences as *prima facie* justified.⁴² Furthermore, prior religious frameworks need not be corrupting; they may instead help to "tune" people to perceive a reality that they would otherwise miss.⁴³

Anyway, the claim that religious experiences are entirely conditioned by the pre-existing conceptual framework of the experiencers is false. First of all, "examples of spontaneous 'senses of a presence' unrelated to the subject's prior religious concepts (if any) abound. Many cases are documented in which the subjects had overwhelming, puzzling experiences which they only realized were religious" afterwards.⁴⁴ For example, many children have religious experiences unrelated to their training. Secondly, many religious experiences are in fact at odds with the received traditions, and the people "emerged from their encounter with the Holy as moral and theological reformers." For example, many mystics in a supernaturalist tradition insist that "the relation between man and God is much more intimate than supernaturalism allows."⁴⁵ It does not seem that the content of religious experiences is just a reflection of the experiencers' theological preconceptions.

4) The Naturalistic Explanation Objection

First of all, many have the suspicion that there are as yet no general naturalistic explanations of religious experiences which are empirically well-established and theoretically plausible. For example, the Freudian explanation of religion is a prominent example of naturalistic explanation. But nowadays Freudianism itself is in doubt.⁴⁶ Its

⁴¹ Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 144.

⁴² Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 153.

⁴³ Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 163ff.

⁴⁴ Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 162.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, 322.

⁴⁶ See Hans Eysenck, *Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire* (London: Penguin Books,

explanation of religious belief has been carefully examined and found wanting, even by atheists.⁴⁷ Indeed, Alston comments:

the most prominent theories in the field invoke causal mechanisms that themselves pose thus far insoluble problems of identification and measurement: unconscious psychological processes like repression, identification, regression, and mechanisms of defense; social influences on ideology and attitude formation. It is not surprising that theories like those of Freud, Marx, and Durkheim rest on a slender thread of evidential support and generalize irresponsibly from such evidence as they can muster. Nor do the prospects seem rosy for significant improvement.⁴⁸

Of course, this sweeping assertion needs to be supported by more detailed discussions.⁴⁹

However, regardless of the merits of the naturalistic explanations, there is one prior philosophical question to ask: in what ways are the availability of naturalistic explanation relevant? If we infer from the availability of naturalistic explanation of a religious experience to its unveridicality, we seem to commit the genetic fallacy. Even the fact that an experience of God has proximal natural causes seems to be compatible with its ultimate origin in God. As Wainwright says,

Suppose we are presented with a causal account of religious experience which is believed by the scientific community to be fully adequate. Are we entitled to infer that the experiences are not genuine perceptions of God, etc? We are entitled to draw this conclusion... only if we have good reason to believe that the causes which are specified in that account can, when taken alone, i.e. in the absence of (among other things) any divine activity, produce the experiences in question. Without a disproof of the existence of God and other supra-empirical agents, it is totally unclear how we could know that this was the case.⁵⁰

Alston reinforces this point by pointing out that sense experiences can likewise be "adequately causally explained in terms of neural processes in the brain without mentioning the putatively perceived external

1985); Richard Webster, *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis* (London: Fontana, 1995).

⁴⁷ See Robert Banks, "Religion as Projection: Re-appraisal of Freud's Theory," *Religious Studies* 9 (1973); Adolf Grunbaum, "Psychoanalysis and Theism," *Monist* 70 (1987), 152-92.

⁴⁸ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 230.

⁴⁹ See Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, Ch. 8; Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Chs. 6-7; and Gellman, *Experience of God*, Ch. 5. Wall, *Religious Experience and Religious Belief*, is entirely devoted to this issue and he utilizes concrete examples of religious experiences to point out the inadequacy of various naturalistic explanations.

⁵⁰ William Wainwright, "Natural Explanations and Religious Experience," *Ratio* 15 (1973), 100-101.

object."⁵¹ Since this does not in itself render sense experiences unreliable, it is not clear why the corresponding fact will do harm to religious experiences.

5) The Privacy Objection

Let us examine the allegation that unlike sense experience, religious experience is private and subjective. In what sense is a sense experience public? My *experience* of a chair occurs essentially in my mind – it is every bit as private as other experiences in this aspect. I cannot directly experience how you experience the chair and vice versa. There is a danger that the critics are "confusing the claim that the experience is private with the quite different claim that the object of the experience is private."⁵² What makes a sense experience public is that verbal reports of different persons can be compared. However, reports of people having religious experiences can also be compared. For example, experiences of God are present in almost all ages, all places and all cultures. The reports also to a considerable extent match. The experience also develops in a tradition. So in these aspects religious experience is also public. As Edwards emphasizes,

the experience of the Holy seems to be very much *unlike* dreams and hallucinations. Extremely large numbers of people from extremely diverse cultural backgrounds claim to experience the Holy One, and there is a significant amount of transcultural agreement about what the experienced object is like. This is not the case with the objects of hallucinations – most hallucinators do not see pink elephants... *Pink elephant* is simply a convenient symbolic abbreviation for the immense variety of weird entities encountered by people having hallucinations.⁵³

It can also be added that even essentially private experience, like introspection, can be veridical.

6) The Uncheckability Objection

As a matter of fact, religious experiences can be checked in principle, for example, by other experiences (religious or non-religious) or by the Bible. The critics will surely say, "These checks already assume some

⁵¹ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 249-51. I have a fuller treatment of this problem: Kai-man Kwan, "Naturalistic Explanations of Religious Experience: Do They Matter?" Paper presented in the Fourth Sino-American Philosophy and Religion Conference, 19-23 Oct 1998, Peking University.

⁵² Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, 318.

⁵³ Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, 320-21.

religious beliefs, and hence are circular. We need some non-circular checks."

This requirement, however, is not even satisfied by sense experience. Check by others' reports depends on our hearing experience and capacity for understanding. Check by photographs requires your visual experience of the photographs. If you doubt the latter, perhaps you can take a photograph of the photograph and so on! All these checks are ultimately circular. This point is made trenchantly by Mavrodes in response to C. B. Martin:

Suppose that I do try to photograph the paper. What then? Martin asks, "What would a photograph reveal?" To discover what the photograph reveals I would ordinarily look at it. But if the presence of blue paper is not to be "read off" from my experience then the presence of a photograph, and *a fortiori* what the photograph reveals, is not to be read off from my experience either. It begins to look as though I must take a photograph of the photograph, and so on... The same sort of thing happens if I try to determine "what others see." I send for my friend to look at the paper... But his presence is not to be read off from my experience either. Perhaps I must have a third man to tell me whether the second has come and the infinite regress appears again. Interpreted in this way, Martin's thesis fails because it converts into a general requirement something that makes sense only as an occasional procedure. At most we can substitute one unchecked experience for another.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the veridicality of a sense experience can only be checked with respect to other sense experiences (unless we countenance an *a priori* proof of the veridicality of sense experience). So to hold this as a debilitating factor for religious experience *alone* is again committing the double standard fallacy. As Losin says, the critic "has simply assumed that reasons drawn from experiences of God cannot themselves be "reasons for thinking that particular experiences of God are delusive," that experiences of God cannot themselves provide a (fallible and provisional) means for the critique of other such experiences. I see no reason to think that this assumption is true, and good reason to think that, when suitably amended and applied to sensory experience, it is false. Nor do I see the slightest reason why we cannot use knowledge or beliefs about God not gleaned from experience of God to identify and dismiss particular experiences of God as non-veridical." ⁵⁵

⁵⁴ George Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1970), 75-76.

⁵⁵ Peter Losin, "Experience of God and the Principle of Credulity: a Reply to Rowe,"

The Disanalogy Objection

The logic of this objection is as follows:

- i) Religious experience does not resemble sense experience.
- ii) If a kind of experience is reliable, it will resemble sense experience.
- iii) Hence, religious experience is not reliable.

Various criticisms can be offered for this argument. Firstly, (i) is often an exaggeration. For example, it is often said that whereas sense experience is universal, religious experience is not. However the significance of this disanalogy is not clear.

1) Obviously a kind of experience shared just by a minority of people can nevertheless still be veridical. Not all people can see or hear. So vision or hearing is not actually universal. Conceivably a nuclear war can happen which causes all but one to be blind. In that case, the vision of the only sighted person left would not become unveridical just because he is the only one to have visual experience. Furthermore, many are tone-deaf. This fact in itself does not render others' experiences of the tones unveridical.

2) The suggestion that religious experience belongs only to a very small group may be an exaggeration. Firstly, religious experiences occur all through the ages all over the world in all kinds of culture. Just consider the experiences of St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, etc. Nowadays religious experiences are reported in almost all the continents.⁵⁶ Secondly, we are not talking primarily of "bizarre" mystical experiences. We are mainly concerned with experience of the presence of God, awareness of God, etc. It is plausible that most religious people in the theistic tradition have had such experiences on some occasions. Thirdly, according to recent research, "it is a mistake to think that the realm of human experience I am choosing to define as 'religious' is something remote, esoteric, or the preserve of an aristocracy of spiritual

Faith and Philosophy 4 (1987), 69. Cf. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 249. I have dealt with this problem at length in chapter 8 of my D. Phil. thesis: "The Application of the Principle of Critical Trust to the Evaluation of Theistic Experience."

⁵⁶ For example, despite the great difference between the Chinese culture and Western culture, the surprising fact is that many Chinese in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. do not have much difficulty in having "experiences of God" which are similar to those of St. Paul, Augustine, and so on.

adepts."⁵⁷ The statistics show that in the West, at least one-third of the people asked profess to have had religious experience, including atheists and agnostics among them.⁵⁸ Fourthly, plausible explanations are available for the absence of reports of religious experience from the rest of interviewees. Some may actually have had religious experience but will not confess it openly because of a "widespread taboo concerning religion, arising from Enlightenment ways of thinking."⁵⁹ Some others do not have religious experiences simply because they have never sought the spiritual things due to absorption in materialistic concerns. We should only be surprised⁶⁰ when those who are seeking actively and are spiritually ready do not have religious experience. There may be a handful of these people but the number does not seem to be great.

Finally, if we count all the people in the whole history, people having religious experience may outnumber those who have not. It might be the case that the opposite is true of our secular age. Daniels claims that "over the centuries as more and more comes to be known about the universe fewer and fewer educated people believe there to be veridical experiences of encounters with God."⁶¹ The atheist will congratulate this as a victory over superstitions and attribute this decrease to higher educational level and enlightenment. However, interpretation from the opposite perspective is possible: this decrease may just reflect the prejudice of our age and witness the fact that our religious sensibility can be "socialized away." Alston comments,

Fads and fashions are at least as influential among the educated as among the vulgar. If it is true that fewer of the educated believe that there is genuine perception of God than in, say, the fourteenth century, it is, I suspect, less because more is known about "how things actually work" than because of the general decay of religious faith in Western society and the spurious plausibility lent to naturalistic metaphysics by the development of science.... The supposition that

⁵⁷ David Hay, *Religious Experience Today* (London: Mowbray, 1990), preface.

⁵⁸ Hay, *Religious Experience Today*, 79-85.

⁵⁹ Hay, *Religious Experience Today*, preface.

⁶⁰ This surprise is not, however, a decisive objection. God may have good reasons to withdraw from these actively seeking people. (cf. the dark nights of the soul described by the mystics.)

⁶¹ Charles Daniels, "Experiencing God," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XLIX (1989), 487-99, 499. I am aware that Daniels is "strictly speaking" talking about the number of people *believing* in veridical religious experience rather than about the number of people claiming to have religious experience. However, the two are closely related and the points made by Daniels and Alston are relevant in our context.

knowing more about the way things work in the physical universe puts one in a better position to determine whether there is veridical perception of *God* is the most blatant kind of question begging.⁶²

3) In view of the fact that religious experiences occur to many diverse kinds of person, it is not implausible to say that the capacity for religious experience is at least potentially universal. This view can be strengthened by some existentialist analysis of the structure of human existence.⁶³ It is plausible to view religious experience as the culmination⁶⁴ of the human search for meaning and wholeness. If it is true, the contingent fact that religious experiences are not actually universal is not that damaging. (Only a few people can actually be completely rational and fair. This fact does not detract from the ideal of rationality and fairness.)

I do not have the space to go into detailed discussions of other disanalogies. Fortunately, I do not need to because the above argument has a very problematic premise (ii): If a kind of experience is reliable, it will resemble sense experience.

This is just a bare assertion that sense experience is the model for *all* reliable experiences. What is the ground of this assumption? Why should we expect that there is only one kind of reliable experience? Isn't it possible that our experience can have *some* access to different kinds of contingent truths? If it is the case, isn't it to be expected that there will be several kinds of experience accordingly? Each may be reliable in its own way and to different degrees. How can we know *a priori* that it is not the situation we are in? It seems to me the contrary expectation reflects the *a priori* nature of the presupposition of a narrow empiricism. It is laid down beforehand that only sense experience can be reliable and then it is used as *the* yardstick to measure all other kinds of experience. Those who are disanalogous with sense experience are then deemed unreliable. There is no obvious reason why we should follow this question-begging procedure. Furthermore, on the face of it, (ii) seems false because both memory and introspection, which we deem reliable, do not resemble sense experience. In general, disanalogy

⁶² William Alston, "Reply to Daniels," *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* XLIX (1989), 503.

⁶³ Cf. John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity* (London: SCM, 1982); Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

⁶⁴ Again this is not automatic. We have to allow for the freedom of God.

with a well-established principle is not a sufficient reason to discredit another principle unless there is reason to think that the known principle and its like are the only possible principles. In the case of religious experience, it amounts to the assumption that,

we were entitled to assume that, if it is veridical, religious cognition will be like other kinds of cognition which are veridical. *Prima facie* we should however expect it on the contrary to be very different, since its object is so different.⁶⁵

So the disanalogy of religious experience with sense experience *as such* is not an adequate reason for asserting the unreliability of religious experience. Of course, considerations of disanalogy are important and the critics are not mistaken in urging the defenders of religious experience to face them squarely. It is because the relevant disanalogies all point to the fact that sense experience has an extraordinary degree of internal coherence *relative to other types of experience*.⁶⁶ However, they have drawn the wrong conclusion that religious experience is thereby impugned. A more judicious conclusion is that religious experience is *less reliable* than sense experience. Similarly, that a scientist is intellectually inferior to Einstein does not entail that he is not a competent scientist at all. The disanalogy objection seems to presuppose a kind of epistemic imperialism, as Alston calls it, which illegitimately elevates sense experience to the position of supreme cognitive authority.

So far I have argued that many common objections to religious experience do not suffice to show that they are unreliable.

Conclusion

I do not claim to have proved that the argument from religious experience is successful. However, I hope to highlight the crucial issues surrounding the debate on the validity of religious experience. I also hope that sufficient has been said to show that it is not implausible to claim that the common criticisms of religious experience may weaken the force of the argument but they fail to show that religious experiences are unreliable. I have also mentioned the route of taking religious

⁶⁵ Ewing, *Reason and Religion*, 115.

⁶⁶ However, sense experience is not absolutely reliable and conceivably some ETs can have an (nearly) infallible mode of sense perception. Is it correct for them to argue from the disanalogy of our sense experience with their perception that our sense experience is not even *prima facie* reliable?

experience as *prima facie* evidence for the transcendent realm – this is Swinburne's approach to religious experience. I think his approach is a promising one but his approach depends crucially on his Principle of Credulity, the further defense of which will inevitably raise many deep epistemological issues. There are also some objections to religious experience that I have not yet dealt with. These matters must be left for another time.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the field of analytic philosophy of religion has greatly flourished. One hotly debated topic is the validity or veridicality of religious experience. This is due to the revival of the argument from religious experience which is ably defended by Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Gary Gutting, and Jerome Gellman among others. In this paper, I first survey the revival of this argument among contemporary philosophers, and then explain both its intuitive force and *prima facie* difficulties (which are due to ten stock objections to religious experience). Six objections are briefly discussed:

- 1) that religious experiences are induced under abnormal conditions;
- 2) that there is an unbridgeable logical gap between subjective experience and objective reality;
- 3) that religious experiences are heavily theory-laden;
- 4) that naturalistic explanations of religious experience are readily available;
- 5) that religious experiences are essentially private;
- 6) that the validity of religious experience is uncheckable and unverifiable;

I contend that none of these objections succeeds to discredit religious experiences.

I then discuss the objection that since religious experiences are so unlike sense experiences, they must be subjective. I argue that the disanalogy is often exaggerated. I further point out that the argument presupposes an illegitimate premise which amounts to a kind of epistemic imperialism or chauvinism. I conclude that although many objections still need to be assessed, the argument from religious experience is alive and well, and well worth serious investigation.

撮 要

近年來，分析哲學中的宗教哲學甚為興盛，宗教經驗論證亦因而復蘇。其中一個爭論非常熱烈的課題便是「宗教經驗的真實性」。不少哲學家有力地維護這論證，他們包括斯溫伯恩 (Richard Swinburne)、奧爾斯頓 (William Alston)、格庭 (Gary Gutting) 和格爾曼 (Jerome Gellman)。筆者在本文中首先概述這論證如何

在當代哲學家復興，接著解釋這論證為何在直覺上有一定的說服力，然而也有不少表面上的困難——這些困難可歸納為十種常見的反駁。筆者會簡評以下六種反駁：

- 1) 宗教經驗是在不正常的情況下產生的；
- 2) 在邏輯上來說，主觀經驗和客觀實在之間有不可逾越的鴻溝；
- 3) 宗教經驗嚴重地被理論滲透；
- 4) 我們很易為宗教經驗提供自然主義的解釋；
- 5) 宗教經驗在本質上是私人的；
- 6) 宗教經驗的真實性是無法檢證和無法證實的；

筆者的主張是：以上的反駁沒有一個能成功推翻宗教經驗的可信性。

筆者接著討論另一個反駁：「因為宗教經驗跟感官經驗是如此不同，所以宗教經驗都是純主觀的。」筆者論證兩者之間的差異往往被誇大，並進一步指出這反駁預設了一種知識論的帝國主義為其前提，而這是不合理的。筆者的結論是：雖然還有很多反對理由要評估，但據以上討論顯示，宗教經驗論證仍未被推翻，且很有活力，它是相當值得我們認真研究的。