

Perceiving the Imperceptible

An Analysis of Religious Experience by Braden MacDonald, August 2007

Introduction

“God’s not dead – I talked to him this morning!” This claim, typically made on bumper stickers, is an example of an argument for the existence of a Supreme Personal Being based on religious experience. Are such claims convincing? That is, can religious experience sincerely described as being an experience of the Supreme Personal Being play central role in establishing the existence of that being?

Before that question can be answered, I must define some terms. By “Supreme Personal Being,” I mean an omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent, creator god. From here on, I will simply take the term “god” to mean this supreme personal being. I am only going to discuss claims of direct personal experience of god. I will not directly discuss other religious experiences, such as interaction with lesser supernatural beings, or the profound sense of selflessness; however, much of this analysis will be relevant to those experiences as well.

One Example of a Relevant Claimed Experience

“The subject of meditation begins to take on a new significance; to glow with life and light... It ceases to be a picture, and becomes a window through which the mystic peers out into the spiritual universe, and apprehends to some extent – though how he does not know – the veritable presence of God.”¹

The Face Value Argument

The most common argument in favour of using religious experiences as evidence for god’s existence is known as the “face value argument.” Richard Swinburne calls this the Principle of Credulity, and defines it as “a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present (and has some characteristic), then probably x is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so”². In other words, if a person is usually reliable such that you have no reason to distrust their non-religious experience claims, you should accept their religious experience claims as well. If the face value argument was valid, then it would be reasonable to use religious experiences as evidence of god’s existence. However, the face value argument is an impractical oversimplification; many counter-arguments show it to be invalid.

¹ Underhill 315

² Swinburne 303

Problems with the Face Value Argument

Contradicting Experiences

It was a thoughtful Christian who first pointed out this problem to me: we know that not all religious experiences can be veridical, even when reported by otherwise reliable people, because they conflict with each other. For example, otherwise reliable people from each of the three major Abrahamic religions claim to have experienced the supreme personal being – whether Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Allah, or Yahweh. Obviously, an experience of the divine Jesus contradicts a claimed experience of a god (Allah) who asserts³ that Jesus is not divine. Further, some otherwise reliable people claim to experience their own intrinsic divinity, in diametric opposition to the idea that there is one supreme god. The only way to deny that such a variety of claims contradict is to revert to epistemological pluralism. Thus, we can be sure that many religious experiences are not veridical, even though they are presented as such by otherwise reliable people. This in itself shows the face value argument to be false. Some, such as William Alston⁴, essentially argue that all those who hold a different religious worldview are not “reliable”, but that is begging the question.

Experiences are not Verifiable

Scientific evidence gives another reason to doubt the face value argument. Scientists have identified three completely physical causes of apparent religious experience. First, according to Huston Smith, “drugs can induce religious experiences indistinguishable from ones that occur spontaneously”⁵. Second, diseases such as temporal-lobe epilepsy can cause religious experiences⁶. Finally, Canadian scientist Michael Persinger found that up to 80% of people have strong religious experiences in response to a specific magnetic stimulation of their brain⁷. These three physical causes simply exploit the hallucinatory ability of the human psyche that is always present. Thus we have good reason to believe that other religious experiences (even in the absence of drugs or disease) may just be imagined events contained within a person’s brain. Given that and the fact, as Smith points out, that the experiencer often cannot tell that an induced experience is illusory, it is not reasonable to accept a report of religious experience that cannot be supported and tested by non-experiential lines of evidence.

Although some, such as William Wainwright, claim that “there are tests for checking religious experience claims,”⁸ these tests generally are not convincing. In fact, applying tests to claimed experiences tends to cast doubt on the claim. In a wonderful article, Ronald Johnson argues that “it is typical for the heroes of the world’s religious narratives to be surprised by the things their gods say and

³ See, for example, Qur’an 4:171

⁴ Alston “holds that there may well be independent reasons...for epistemically preferring one form of religious experience to others.” (Peterson, et al. 29)

⁵ Smith 520

⁶ “Subjects affected by focal temporal-lobe epilepsy report profound religious feelings during seizures, feelings that may persist...after seizures have ceased.” (Ratcliffe 324)

⁷ For example, “when we applied specific complex magnetic fields over the right hemisphere, most normal people who were not aware of the purpose of the experiment experienced a ‘sensed presence’ or sentient being. Many individuals felt the presence interact with their thinking and ‘move in space’ as they ‘focused their thoughts’” (Persinger)

⁸ Peterson, et al. 29

do,” and that we would expect an encounter with God to “challenge some of our current beliefs or even require us to rearrange our entire network of beliefs.” Yet, “as Alston has noted, most modern reports of divine encounters give the opposite impression: that the beliefs and values of the people having the experiences are right, by and large. In short, there is no reason to suppose that these people have actually encountered a superior intellect.”⁹

Incompatible with Existing Knowledge

Another problem with the face value argument is that our knowledge and everyday experiences are not obviously compatible with the idea that god exists. We know that humanity is the result of evolution by natural selection¹⁰; many consider this to be incompatible with a divine creator. However, some (such as Pope Benedict XVI¹¹) argue with some success that evolution is compatible with belief in god.

Far more important is that the suffering of innocents and the natural evil (such as disease or natural disasters) we observe in the world should not be present if a benevolent god exists. It is hard to tell a man born blind or a little child horrifically abused by a clergyman that a benevolent god is all-powerful but did not or could not intervene in their case. In response to this problem, some confidently assert “that [Alvin] Plantinga, Keith Yandell, and other theistic philosophers [have] cast serious doubt on all formulations of the logical problem”¹² of evil, primarily through Plantinga’s Free Will Defence: that in order for people to have free will and the ability to choose moral good, god must have created the capacity for people to choose to do evil.

There are several problems with the Free Will Defence. For one, it does not address natural evil, which really has never been well addressed by theism. Second, it ignores the fact that god could allow people to *choose* to do evil but still stop them in some cases from acting on their choice. If I decided right now to go and kill my enemy Jordan Serway, but was stopped by the police, my free will would not have been impinged. In the same way, god could have stopped the Holocaust without depriving any Nazis of their free will. Third, god could create people with the capacity to do evil but with enough knowledge or good nature for them to solely make good moral decisions. I consider myself to be fairly good natured and have never done anything truly evil; this does not at all diminish the free will that I have. Finally, it seems a bit presumptuous for a being that cannot be threatened by evil (due to his very nature) to decide that his creation would be better off if they experienced evil. Any human that could have singlehandedly stopped even just one of the numerous genocides that have marred the history of humanity but did not would be absolutely despicable. A god that could have stopped every single genocide (to pick just one evil) but has not is at least morally appalling, if not downright malevolent or sadomasochistic. Therefore, our current knowledge and experience gives us incredibly strong reasons to doubt god’s existence.

⁹ These three quotes are from Johnson

¹⁰ “It is in the very nature of things that precious few ideas put forth to date in science have entirely withstood the test of time. Biological evolution is one of those ideas. So is the idea that the Earth is round.” (Eldredge 20-21)

¹¹ See MSNBC News Services. [Pope: Creation vs. evolution clash an ‘absurdity’](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19956961/). 25 July 2007. 2 August 2007 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19956961/>>.

¹² Peterson, et al. 133

Conclusion

Any one of the problems of contradicting experiences, lack of verifiability, or incompatibility with existing knowledge is enough to discredit the face value argument. Taken together, these three problems show decisively that the intuitive-sounding face value argument is not valid. Thus, religious experiences are not useful as evidence for establishing god's existence.

Works Cited

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