

The argument from religious experience

THE ARGUMENT

Many people have experiences they identify as 'religious'. Experiences that are part of a religious life include the ups and downs of faith, doubt, sacrifice, and achievement. We are interested in only those experiences in which it seems to the person as though they are directly aware of God or God's action.

Some philosophers have argued that these experiences are importantly similar to perception, an immediate awareness of something other than oneself. We usually treat perceptual experiences as veridical, unless we have good reason to doubt them. Furthermore, the fact that other people have similar perceptual experiences supports the claim that perceptual experiences show the world accurately. Some philosophers have argued that religious experiences are also similar to each other, despite occurring to very different people in very different circumstances. The best explanation of these experiences, and their common nature, is that they are veridical, i.e. they are experiences of something divine. Therefore, God exists.

There are three important questions to discuss. First, what is the similarity between religious experiences, and how do their characteristics support the existence of God? Second, what philosophical problems are there for thinking that these experiences can give us knowledge of God? Third, is there an alternative explanation for the experiences?

JAMES: WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James argued that, for all the apparent differences between religions and religious experience, it was possible to detect a 'common core' to all (genuine) religious experiences.

1. Religious experiences are experiential, like perception. They are quite different from thinking about God or trying to imagine God's nature.
2. However, they aren't connected to any particular mode of sense perception (sight, hearing, etc.). Sometimes they can be, e.g. the person may feel God is speaking to them; but the 'inner words' are not normally everything about the experience. They are part of an awareness that transcends sense perceptions, that doesn't have sensory content.
3. The person feels they are immediately aware of and connected to God.
4. This awareness tends to block out everything else temporarily, perhaps even to the degree that the distinction between the person and what they are aware of disappears ('mystical union').

The heart of religious experience, James argues, is a immediate sense of the reality of the 'unseen'. By this, he means to contrast what we are aware of in a religious experience with the usual 'visible world'. Our awareness of the 'unseen' may be inarticulate, beyond even an ability to think in any usual terms about it. Conceptualization, an attempt to describe it, say what was experienced, comes later.

Experience and consequence

If we are to take such experiences seriously, as something other than momentary insanity, we must connect them up to the rest of our lives, thinks James. Religious experiences are connected to having a religious attitude to life; those experiences that have no impact on how someone understands life are dubitable, and may not be genuine. James argues that a religious attitude is 'solemn, serious and tender', and has five main characteristics. We should understand religious experiences in relation to them:

1. the visible world is part of a spiritual universe which gives it meaning;
2. a harmonious relation with the spiritual universe is our true purpose in life;
3. this harmony enables spiritual energy to flow into and affect us and the visible world.
4. a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life; and
5. an assurance of safety, a feeling of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving emotions.

All religion, he argues, points to the feeling that there is something wrong with us as we stand, and that this is corrected by becoming in touch with higher power. Realizing this is connected to an awareness of being in touch with something 'more' in religious experience.

All of this, notes James, is very interesting psychologically, but do they show that religious experience is experience of God? In being aware of something 'more', is this 'more' just our own 'higher self' or something objectively real? We should think it is something real for two reasons. First, there is 'more' to us than we consciously realize – so in religious experience we are in touch with something external to ourselves as we usually experience ourselves. James is happy to call this reality, considered abstractly, 'God'. Second, religious experience has real effects upon us. 'God is real since he produces real effects'.

James claims that if we try to say more about God than this, then we speculate. But we might argue we can know something about God by the type of effects produced – a zest for life, the predominance of love, the sense that there is something wrong with us without God. We may also argue that God is not only the spiritual side of people. For example, how could human beings have a spiritual side if there is no divine being? Philosophers may argue that although it remains a hypothesis, the existence of God is the best explanation for the experiences James describes.

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

We noted that religious experiences are similar to perception and that we usually assume perceptual experiences are veridical unless we have reasons to think otherwise. However, philosophers have argued that religious experiences are not really like perception, so we shouldn't assume they are veridical; and that there, in any case, other reasons to doubt them.

Religious experience is not like perception

First, sense experience is universal among people, and is continuously present to us when we are awake. It provides a very rich amount of detail and information ('a picture is worth a thousand words'). By contrast, only some people have religious experiences, and only rarely. They find it very difficult to say anything that is very informative.

However, only a small number of people can recognise an 18th-century piece of furniture, but that doesn't mean they aren't right or reliable. We can't tell the truth of something from its frequency. Furthermore, while the experience doesn't give much information, that doesn't mean it doesn't give any.

However, the objection is that because religious experiences are rare, we shouldn't assume they are veridical until we have reason to doubt them. Surely part of the reason we trust perception is because it is so widespread, common, and informative.

Another reason we trust perception is that we have intersubjective agreement; if you and I start seeing things very differently, we wouldn't be so sure. And if I'm not sure about what I see, I can check with you. This isn't true of religious experience, which is more private.

In response, we may appeal to James' five characteristics of a religious attitude. If a religious experience has no transformative consequences, we may doubt it was veridical; if it does transform the person, then we have reason to think it was. Second, we can argue that religious experiences are more like experiences of what we feel than what we perceive. And I don't check how I'm feeling by seeing how you feel, nor do you have direct access to what I feel. But we can respond that our feelings, unlike perception, are not assumed to be veridical, as they can often be misguided.

Reasons to doubt religious experiences are of God

By and large, people from different cultures have used similar ways of understanding the world, in terms of objects with colour, size, solidity and so on. By contrast, religious experience has produced very different ideas of what the 'divine reality' might be, from the Christian idea of God to Buddhist ideas of 'nothingness'.

James would respond that we shouldn't think that religious experience can give us a whole theological system. At most, we can argue to the reality of something spiritual, and perhaps reach tentative conclusions about what that reality is like. We may also argue that people can experience the same thing while disagreeing about what it is they have experienced (think of witnesses in court). So disagreements between religions don't show that religious experiences aren't veridical, only that they can tell us very little about the nature of the divine.

However, we may still wonder whether the existence of God is the best explanation of religious experiences, or whether some other explanation is as good. For example, we might argue that people who have a religious experience are simply imposing certain religious ideas or expectations onto an emotional experience which is not awareness of the divine at all. One response to this points out that there are many cases of conversion as a result of religious experience, in which the person wasn't expecting anything religious to occur.

FREUD: A PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud presents a different explanation of what might be happening in religious experiences. He argues that they could be hallucinations, like dreams, caused by a very deep unconscious wish that human beings have. This wish goes back in history to the emergence of the human race, and in each individual, to their earliest infancy. The wish is for consolation and reassurance.

In the face of the uncontrollable forces of nature, we feel vulnerable, afraid and frustrated that there is so little we can do. We want to rob life of its terrors. Likewise, when we are infants, we are completely helpless and dependent and need protection. Both motives come together in the thought that there is a God, a protector, a means by which we can control nature (for early religions) or feel safe in the face of danger and uncertainty. Our relationship to God takes on the intimacy and intensity of our relationship to our parents.

Religious beliefs are 'fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.' Isn't it remarkable, he says, that religion describes the universe 'exactly as we are bound to wish it to be'? A belief that is based on a wish, rather than on evidence, Freud calls an 'illusion'. It isn't necessarily false; it's just that it isn't based on seeking the truth.

Just as religious beliefs are based on wishes, so religious experiences are as well. Freud argues that dreams are caused by deep desires we are unaware of, and he argues that religious experiences are similarly caused. They are hallucinations that happen when we are awake, caused by the wish for security and meaning, for things to 'be ok'.

Freud's theory seems to account for many of the characteristics James noted about religious experiences. If they are hallucinations, then we can expect them to be experiences, rather than thoughts, in which the person seems to be aware of something directly. Given the nature of the wish, we can expect them to involve intense feelings; and because the wish is abstract, they won't be particularly related to any mode of perception. They will feel like there is something beyond or outside oneself that can offer security, upon which one can depend.

Objections

James argues that Freud's theory doesn't undermine the possibility that religious experiences are experiences of God.

1. We can't evaluate the truth of an experience just by its origin. We should look at its effects, its place in our lives. We must evaluate it by other things we feel are important and what we know to be true. Religious experiences produce real effects, which are positive.
2. We can agree that religious experiences come to us in the first instance from the unconscious. But it is entirely possible that the unconscious is a conduit of spiritual reality. Almost everyone who believes in a spiritual dimension to human beings thinks this goes beyond what we are aware of.
3. Even if religious experiences are caused by a wish for security and meaning, if God does exist and we do need him, then our wish for contact with God would be realistic – if we are made by God, then a relationship with God would be one of our deepest desires. The wish Freud identifies may not be the result only of the experiences he describes.

Freud would agree with much of this. Knowing why an artist paints may be no help at all in saying whether the painting is beautiful; knowing why a scientist dedicates their life to research won't tell us if what they discover is true. Freud only argues that religious experience, in itself, gives us no reason to think it is an experience of God. It is perfectly possible for religious experience to have an entirely psychological cause, and seem exactly

