

Assess Whether Religious Experience Demonstrates the Existence of God

Religious experience can be dissected into different varieties. Alvin Plantinga argued that everyday experiences such as the sun rising should constitute as a religious experience as the sun rising is so inspirational and conjures up religious belief out of awe. Some would argue that miracles or extraordinary occurrences are proof of God's existence. If one was to view a man turning water into wine one would see it as spectacular and possible cause religious belief. Both miracles and everyday occurrences are public experiences as they can be witnessed by anyone; however there are more private/personal religious experiences. Dreams and visions, such as St. Paul on the road to Damascus (where he heard the voice of Jesus), only apply to the person visualising them. These are also used as religious experiences if you heard the voice of Jesus it would obviously be considered a religious event. There is also the ongoing feeling that God is around you, he is guiding you through life, and this again is indescribable but rational justification for the theist as it connects to the idea of God's omnipresence. Finally there are also mystical experience as William James explained them these are ineffable (cannot be put into words) transient (very intense experience but not necessarily a long experience, the effects however can last a lifetime) passive (cannot be controlled by the recipient) experiences that are simply indescribable. Rudolf Otto described mystical experiences as "numinous" this is the feeling of awe and wonder when confronted with the divinity that is God. Numinous experiences are one of terrifying and compelling mystery. Should religious experiences be the basis of God's existence or are they simply anomalous events that are meaningless.

David Hume and A.J. Ayer are well known empiricists. They would argue that unless something empirically verified it should not be deemed meaningful so if I was to see God that should be seen as meaningful as it is empirically verified. If I were to see a cat walking across a street I would think to myself that is a cat, no doubt would enter my mind I would simply establish that a cat was walking across a street. When one sees/experiences God why the same sort of logic should not be applied is ridiculous. If I were to see God I would think that is God no questions asked. Visions of God and miracles are empirically verifiable religious experiences, Hume and Ayer cannot dismiss these as that would be contradictory to their well established beliefs, thus empirically verified religious experiences can be used as a sufficient justification for God's existence. The sceptics retort to this argument is how can we trust our empirical methods of justification. One could be hallucinating, the only reason St. Paul saw God was because he was deprived of water and had social pressures from the rising Christian religion. A.J. Ayer noted that a straight stick appears bent in water, if our senses can deceive us once they will deceive us again, we cannot trust empirical evidence therefore it cannot be

used as justification for a religious experience and definitely cannot be used to justify God's existence. Also what if the subject of supposed religious experience has taken some sort of mind altering drug surely then empirical evidence cannot be used to justify any sort of vision. Finally the sceptic would note that a religious experience is not an ordinary experience, one sees trees everyday but experiencing God is quite different. As philosophers we must view these extraordinary experiences differently and be more analytical into the causes (such as looking at the recipient of the experience). In Brian Davies book "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion" he highlights that to reject empirical evidence without any major reason to doubt is simply absurd. He says that if one is of sound mind, has good eyesight and is of reasonable intelligence unless then there isn't really any reason to doubt yourself, we use empirical evidence to make everyday assertions therefore it should be no different when seeing "God", He also highlights that if it is possible to hallucinate it is also possible to see correctly, although this sounds very basic it does reject the argument from illusion (used by most sceptics to doubt sense data). Sure we can see things that aren't really there but most of the time we are not hallucinating. Brian Davies also uses the example of a man called Fred. He states that Fred is "as mad as a hatter and as drunk as a Lord" Fred also regularly hallucinates and because of this not many people listen to what he has to say. Despite Fred perpetual hallucinations it is not right to say that everything he says is wrong, sometimes he could be telling the truth. Davies concludes that "the fact that some people are prone to get things wrong is not a sufficient reason for others to suppose that they always get things wrong"

"Behold the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have his voice... we have this day seen God speak with man and man still live" This was taken from the Old Testament's book of Deuteronomy. Religious experience is not a contemporary miracle but one of great age, we all believe in gravity yet this has only been apparent for 300 years, yet something that has been around for millennia is still questioned. These sightings of God have been continuous since early Christianity and Judaism before that. This is not an argument about the verifiability of religious experience but simply highlights the possibility of experiencing God and also its importance in justifying the existence of God. This is the argument of John Baillie; he argued that religious experience is not just justification for God's existence but the ultimate justification. Sceptics would reply how do you know it is God? How do you know you did not simply see an old man with a beard? Unless you have seen God before you do not know what he/she looks like. Some would argue that you need an agreed method of identifying God, if no such method has been agreed then you cannot truly say you have seen God. Also if God is transcendent of humans and surpasses them in every way then surely we cannot relate to him/her. We don't even know if God is a physical entity to be seen. Brian Davies response to the sceptic's argument is despite not having an identification method

that is inconsequential, something may be the case even though it does not conform to the testing method, someone can still be intelligent despite getting a U in all their exams. A religious experience can still be justification for God's existence despite not being satisfying any a priori testing method. John Hick presented the argument that our interpretations of events all differ. This dismisses the sceptics claim that there should be some sort of testing method about justifying religious experience. A person may claim to have seen God where as another might argue they have seen the devil, as both are basing this experience on a personal a priori perception of God/Devil it means that if these predetermined perceptions are different they are obviously going to disagree. William James argued that religious experience is extremely personal therefore it means different things to different people.

Richard Swinburne and William Alston put forward the argument from credulity. Swinburne argued that if one has seen God one has sufficient justification to believe in God. Unless there is something manipulating this experience there is no reason to doubt a religious experience. Until your religious experience is disproven (through suspicion of evidence such as one was on drugs) then it can and should be used as justification for God's existence. William Alston proclaimed a similar argument to Swinburne's arguments from credulity. He said "people sometimes do perceive God and thereby acquire justified beliefs about God". He too believed that religious experience can be used as justification for God's existence. He said justification about God is "prima facie" this means one is justified in supposing unless there are strong enough reasons to the contrary. Both argued the religious experience should be innocent until proven guilty. A sceptic's retort to Alston and Swinburne would be one should always doubt. Like mentioned earlier one could be subject to hallucination, we could be seeing God when he/she is not really there, you could be of total sound mind however you have a random hallucination due to water deprivation meaning you "see" God. How can we truly know that our subconscious is not malicious concocting mad religious visions? This is why the sceptic would always argue that we should always be doubtful they argue that religious experiences are not indubitable.

Richard Swinburne not only proposed arguments from credulity but also arguments from testimony. Swinburne stated that unless you have sufficient reasons to doubt someone claim of religious experience you should consider it true, if a person states they have seen God you have and you have no reason not to believe them you should consider their experience as true. Brian Davies gives the example of a group of explorers who see a cat in the Amazon rainforest; they go home and tell their explorer buddies they saw a cat in the Amazon rainforest. If a second group of explorers go to the Amazon rainforest and do not see a cat, does that mean the first group were wrong? Of course not! Swinburne would argue you should believe the first group of explorers are there is no reason to doubt

their word. The sceptic's reply would be why trust the explorers? There could be social/professional pressures meaning they lied about seeing a cat because they thought it would be beneficial or because they felt pressurised by the group around them, also there could be irregularities with their testimony, maybe all cats in the world are extinct so seeing a cat is very unlikely, or what if one of the explorers said they saw a black cat and another thought they saw a ginger cat. Brain Davies responds to this by noting that people interpret things in different ways (an argument used by the sceptics), two people may see a red Ferrari one may argue that it is an ugly car where as the other could argue it is a beautiful piece of machinery, they have both seen a car yet have different views/interpretations of what they have seen. So two people may both have seen God however one may think it was God the other might think it was the Devil. Therefore to say there are problems with a testimony because of different interpretations is absurd because the fact is God was there. One can perceive God in as many ways as they want it does not matter the only thing that matters is God was there.

Religious experience can be used for religious conversion and religious belief but not necessarily for the existence of God. If one believes they have seen God and as a result of this vision they believe in the existence of God that is fine, but that doesn't necessarily mean God exists from a philosophical perspective. As the sceptic would regularly point out there are many other factors that may have influenced the subject who viewed God (such a water deprivation or drug consumption) however on an ordinary basis I feel that a vision of God or some kind of numinous experience is sufficient justification for the existence of God and religious belief. On an ordinary level religious experience can justify the existence of God but on a philosophical level it cannot, one cannot claim religious experience to be an objective truth in philosophy, but in ordinary life it is a personal matter and provides justification for God's existence on a personal level. This is similar to what William James said in his work "Varieties of Religious Experience" he believed that religious experience was a very personal matter and is impossible to verbalise but can be used as self justification for God's existence. He also stated that philosophy is useless in trying to prove a religion true but can show up obvious errors. One must also note that Swinburne, Alston and Davies arguments are not really proving the credibility of religious experience but simply defending it against sceptic's attack. Personally I feel this is fine, why should the recipient of a religious experiences have to prove themselves, however I do feel some of Swinburne's and Davies arguments to defend religious experience are not sufficient. To conclude I feel the sceptics are right in dismissing religious experience on a philosophical level, but as many previous philosophers have highlighted (such as G.E.Moore) scepticism cannot be applied to ordinary life.

