

Religious experience presents a convincing argument to prove the existence of God. Analyse this claim (12 marks)

The religious experience is an a posteriori argument with the philosophical proof if based on experience. The actual argument is as follows:

P1 – I have a strange experience

P2 – The explanation for the experience lies beyond me

P3 – All things which are beyond me I attribute to God

C – Therefore God exists

Religious experience can be split into three types; mysticism, conversion and prayer. A mystical experience is the name given to the experience of having apprehended an ultimate reality that is difficult to express using normal vocabulary. Conversion is the changing from one set of beliefs to another. The word prayer includes every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognition, thanksgiving and petition.

As the argument is based on a prior believe in God and the thought that he manifests himself occasionally and privately in some people's lives. This argument requires spiritual recognition as it cannot be proven by any form of rational justification.

**The principle of credulity**, set out by **Swinburne**, supports this argument which asserts that we must accept what appears to be the case unless we have evidence which suggests that we are wrong to do so. The implication of this is that unless there are sufficient grounds for asserting that the experience was not authentic then we should take what they say to be true. Many of us think that many of the experiences described can be explained by natural causes but the fact remains that if God does exist then it will always be a greater chance of such experiences taking place.

**The principle of testimony**, also set out by **Swinburne**, also supports this argument as in the absence of special consideration, it is reasonable to believe that the experience of others are probably as they report the. This means that we should believe what people tell us unless we have good reason not to. This puts the onus on the sceptic to show that religious experience should be rejected, rather than for the believer to show that it is true. This is particularly important as a cumulative argument if all the other arguments for the existence of God are evenly balanced.

Many people argue that encountering God is a like a sense experience in that just as you can encounter a table, you can also encounter God. Saying this it is also argued that the two things are still very different. God is not material and does not have a definite location. The main problem with this point is that you can check the claim of a material object where as you cannot check the claim of a religious experience with God.

Many people would argue that you cannot recognise God from other possible objects of experience. For example as God is the creator, how would you recognise this attribute if you were to have a religious experience. The argument that 'you know' is too insufficient as there must be reasons as well as convictions.

Swinburne states, in support of the argument, that there is no good reason to suppose that 'God exists' is somehow meaningless, or contradictory, or not possibly true. He says that one should not reject claims to experience of God by rejecting the whole idea of God. Swinburne also says that when someone explains about a religious experience they are only reporting how it appeared to them. Evidence has shown that experiences can give us grounds for supposing that things are as we take them to be. He argues that we can acquire knowledge from experiences and that we can acquire knowledge of God by religious experience. Swinburne also says that God does not defy human understanding and there is no reason, in principle, why people should not be able to correctly identify an object of their experience as divine.

A common argument against the criticisms of this argument is that although people can make mistakes when describing how things are, does not mean that they are always mistaken.

Following these strengths of the argument the religious experience argument for the existence of God seems to be very strong. Many famous philosophers do support this argument including Swinburne and Trethowan but many other philosophers claim the argument fails. I have considered these philosophers' views and criticisms of this argument in the following answer.

Discuss criticism of this argument (8 marks)

As the argument is a posteriori means that the conclusion is only possible or probable leading many people to thinking the argument fails. Unlike the other a posteriori arguments for a belief in God, this argument needs a belief in God to succeed.

**Freud** believed that religion is wishful thinking and that the mind creates the illusion as part of its attempt to deal with the 'outside' world. He thought that religion is a '**universal obsessional neurosis**' which addresses fears about the world and about society. Freud claims that religion is a form of neurotic illness and arises from the unconscious mind. He says that neuroses arouse repressed memories that re-emerge into the conscious mind.

In his work '**The Future of an Illusion**' Freud argues that religion provides a consolation for people. Along with this he argues that religion has been used to suppress people. A supporter of Freud is Karl Marx who made the same criticisms of this argument. He went on to say that religion is the 'opium of the people' a sedative that kept the people under control.

Logical positivists would argue that there may not be a God so therefore there may not be any religious experience occurring. This would mean that people who claim to have had a religious experience would either have been mistaken or there was another way of explaining the experience they encountered.

Aquinas argues against the religious experience argument as he says that God is a reality which defines human understanding so he argues that if God accounts for the experiences we have, we are not in any position explicitly to recognise that any object of our experience is God.

The main criticism of this argument is that experiences can often present false impressions, an example being that it looks as if the sun moves around the earth but it doesn't. People who suffer from various kinds of drug addictions may genuinely believe that the world contains fifty foot penguins but this is obviously not the case. These lead to many people believing that experiences can carry little weight when it comes to the question of God's existence.

These criticisms often lead people to not supporting this argument and so many people question the premises and the believability of this argument. Aquinas puts forward many criticisms for this argument but these stem from his strong belief in God prior to this argument. Freud, looking from a more psychological approach, also opposes the argument looking at the area of making a mistake rather than the likelihood of God appearing to people.

Words = 1,170