

How far does Swinburne's argument for the existence of God based on religious experience succeed in overcoming the challenges to it?

Richard Swinburne developed an argument that argued for the existence of God through religious experience as he argued 'on our total evidence, theism is more probable than not'. However he doesn't completely base his proof for god on religious experience but takes an accumulative approach as he also a number of other approaches such as the design argument and cosmological argument etc. There are still, as with most arguments for the existence of god, many challenges made to this argument and Swinburne addresses some of them in order to try and overcome them.

Swinburne begins his argument with his definition of a religious experience and then goes on to split his argument into two areas, the principle of credulity and the principle of testimony. He defines a religious experience as 'an experience which seems...to the subject to be an experience of god (either of his just being there, or doing or bringing about something) or of some other supernatural thing.' (Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* 1991). This definition is therefore saying that a religious experience does not have to involve God himself to be accepted as a religious experience but it can involve other religious figures such as the Virgin Mary for example.

The Principle of testimony deals with what people tell us and works along the rational idea the people generally tell the truth. He argues that we usually believe what other people tell us has happened to them because they say it happened and we have no reason not to. However as the case may be in some circumstances there may be a reason not to follow this principle, such as when positive grounds show the testimony to be mistaken. If this is the case then the testimony can not be considered to be one of an authentic religious experience and will have no value in proving God's existence. The testimonies that don't have positive grounds for dismissal however they will be classed as authentic and will be usable in demonstrating the existence of god.

The Principle of credulity says that what we perceive is usually the case and that 'this is what I experienced and you must believe my unless you can prove it did not'. This concept goes against what is generally demanded at this time, that everything must be proved first empirically before it is accepted as fact. The idea of religious experience is rejected by many people as they are skeptics and therefore simply don't believe that what the person says happened did actually happen in that way or even happen at all and they or say that the person has misunderstood the experience they had. In order to change their views they would generally turn to the person making the claim and tell them to prove what they say is true however this principle reverses this concept to say the skeptic must believe until it can be proved false.

There are many challenges to Swinburne's argument and he himself accepts this and tried to address the criticism he saw about the reliability and authenticity of religious experience. The possible criticism Swinburne saw with his argument were summarized by Caroline Franks Davis who put the criticisms into four key challenges that limit the Principle of Credulity. The first challenge was that the experience produced unreliable results or the recipient themselves were unreliable due to drugs and alcohol or the person being a pathological liar, respectively. The second is that the person who had the experience doesn't have the ability to understand and interpret the experience due to age or another form of barrier preventing understanding. These two problems it is can be addressed not using the principles of credulity and testimony but using William James who argues that an experience being induced by drug etc does not make it less credible as the substance enhances the understanding of an experience when in that state and even if some of the understanding is lost when a normal state is returned there will still be retained sense of profound experience. William James also argues that because someone has a barrier affecting understanding for example neurosis it doesn't mean they are not having religious experiences it is possible that neurosis make a person more able to understand religious experience better than a person who does not so we cannot dismiss what. These two criticisms would therefore seem to be successfully overcome.

The third key challenge as summarized by Davis is if it possible to show that whoever or whatever the person is saying they experienced was not actually there and the final challenge is that it possible to show that whoever or whatever is not responsible for the experience even though they claim that it was there. These two challenges on face value seem very valid criticisms as if we can say God was not there or was

there but not involved then we can dismiss the claim of religious experience to proving God's existence. However this is not an easy thing to do as it not as though we can ask God if he was in a place at a certain time or if he was there are did nothing so the challenge doesn't get very far as he may have been or me may not, we can't find out for ourselves we just have accept what person making the claim is saying. These last two criticisms would therefore also appear to be overcome and Swinburne's argument who seem to be succeeding.

These four key challenges however are not the only challenges to Swinburne as Davis places criticisms on the validity of religious experience into classifications similar to Swinburne but also raises a problem with his definition of a religious experience. The Classifications are description-related challenges, subject-related challenges and object-related challenges. The subject-related challenges is very similar to the first of the four key challenges and states that if the subject making the claim/s credibility or reliability is generally questionable due to drugs or alcohol, then the claim they make can be rejected and is therefore already been partly overcome through James' argument and with further independent evidence could lead to this challenge being completely overcome. The descriptive-related challenges reject the alleged religious experience based on the description of it and if there is any reason to reject what the person says based on their description then it cannot be used as evidential proof. The object-related challenges raise problems with the authenticity of God's involvement in religious experiences as if what the subject claims they experienced of God is different to our presumed nature of God we will find it incredible and who is to say whether my view on God's nature is right or the subjects view. Lastly the problem Davis raises with the definition is that it excludes aspects of nature-mysticism which affect many of the testimonies from new age religious movements or Buddhism that some people class as religious experiences and could be useful in proving God's existence. Swinburne argument does not appear to have much or a response to the last three challenges/criticisms and therefore does not succeed in overcoming them.

In conclusion it would look as if though Swinburne's argument for the existence of God based on religious experience does successfully overcome some of the challenges made against it, such as the four key points, but does not overcome them all. Although the fact it doesn't overcome all of the challenges put forward by Davis it raises some questions Swinburne's argument is still a very strong argument as he does not claim that one persons religious experience can irrefutably prove that God exists but uses religious experience as part of an accumulative approach towards make this conclusion. Overall it would therefore seem that Swinburne is fairly successful in overcoming the challenges made against was he says as he addressed many of them and the argument has not disintegrated because of the challenges made against it.