

Religious Experience

“Analyse and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the argument for the existence of God based on Religious Experience.”

The argument for the existence of God based on religious experience is a posteriori in its very definition since it is based on people's encounters with God. Unlike other arguments, this argument is based on a direct link to God - if we can show that God is experienced then we surely cannot deny his existence.

Quite what a “Religious Experience” is defined as is rather vague, but there are some underlying commonalities between what most people would accept to be religious experiences. Rudolph Otto derived the term “*numinous*” for the feeling of the presence of a greater being, which is with you but yet somehow detached. Otto also observed that in many religious experiences the subjects were drawn into the experience by a mixture of fear and fascination, they were scared of the experiences – not because of any risk to their lives but because what they were experiencing was so unknown to them, and so incomprehensible to their brains. This feeling is termed “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*”, whereby there is a fear of the fascinating.

The psychologist William James studies many religious experiences, and in his lectures entitled *On the Varieties of Religious Experience* he outlines four key characteristics which define a religious experience. There is a sense of noetic quality, meaning that by virtue of the experience the subject becomes aware of some revelation. Religious experiences tend to be transient, which means that whilst the experience may have a profound effect upon the subject, it lasts a relatively short period of time, and often the details are forgotten afterwards. The experiences are usually ineffable, which makes it particularly difficult to interpret (and in some respects *believe* them) because the experience simply cannot be expressed with words, it is so overwhelmingly beyond our comprehension that it is beyond language. The last characteristic is passivity; in religious experiences the subject plays a passive role, the experience being lead by a dominant (usually God).

Now we have a better definition of what we mean by religious experience we can see how it can be applied as an argument for the existence of God. Essentially a religious experience is something “internal”, it is something personal to oneself, what Richard Swinburne does is link this internal belief to something external, and that is to say that since a subject believes they have experienced God; it is probable that God exists. Swinburne attempts to go from religious experience, to an argument for the existence of God; taking empirical evidence from those who experience ‘God’, and saying that

God therefore exists. Swinburne backs up this statement with two principles, that of credulity and that of testimony.

The principle of credulity maintains that in the absence of opposing evidence, a person's experience is probably "real". That is to say, that "*if it seems to a subject that X is present, then X is probably present.*" Swinburne is only saying "probably", which is a vital weakness in his supposition that what we see and experience actually exists. The principle of testimony states that "*in the absence of special considerations the experiences of others are probably as they report them*", again note the use of "probably", Swinburne suggests that if a person says they experience X, then X exists (probably). If we combine these two principles, we can say that since numerous people seem to have experienced God, God therefore probably exists, and we should trust the testimony of those who say they experienced God, because there is no direct evidence to suggest they might be erroneous in their beliefs.

If we are opposed to the idea of assuming God's existence based on an individual's testimony, we do have to consider corporate experiences. If we consider modern examples such as the Toronto Blessings, the fact that the experience happened in *undeniable*, they have been recorded and documented. What is *not* provable though is that those experiences were the result of the divine influencing people. A problem with group experiences is that there is much more opportunity for psychological influences on the group, they may be the result of some strange mass-hypnosis – but many would argue which is the simpler explanation; a strange and unknown form of group self hypnosis, or God.

Many argue that if God is interacting with humankind, why doesn't he make contact with more humans – why is it only a select few. The classic response to this is to say that experience qualifies faith, meaning that if God were to reveal himself to everyone it would make the idea of faith irrelevant since everybody would **know** God existed. Kierkegaard said that religious belief had to be the result of a leap of faith, and this leap must be based on some human experience, which may include a religious experience. Swinburne seems to disagree with this slightly, saying that "*an omnipotent and perfectly good creator will seek to interact with his creatures*", although he provides no evidence to support this claim. Swinburne seems to imply that God makes contact with some, but not others, without any real *reasoning* behind that, which doesn't seem to make for a very 'just' God. One response to this from a psychologist at the University of Birmingham is that more of us have what can be classed as "religious experiences" but we repress them, perhaps through fear or disbelief, John Hall comments "*a major educational task remains to encourage people not to repress such significant experiences*".

The idea that people may be having religious experiences but not realising it very much links to Wittgenstein's notion of "seeing-as". This notion works on the basis that whilst people may be experiencing the same thing, they perceive it in different ways. If we backtrack to the idea of what 'an experience' is, it involves senses (we assume these to be near enough the same to all people), then interpretation... It is the interpretation where people can differ.

Applying this to religious experience again it may be that if two people were to have a sense of calmness and serenity, one would interpret that as a numinous experience – and thus deduce the existence of a divine, whilst the other may appreciate that serenity as just something environmental – or even dismiss it entirely. We have no way of knowing which of these interpretations is correct, or even if it possible to say any interpretation is more valid than another. RM Hare gives us the term "*blick*", used to describe someone who has an unverifiable way of looking at the world.

The argument for God's existence on the basis of religious experience is based on our experience of the world, yet it cannot be empirically tested. There is no way of empirically linking 'peaceful thoughts' or a numinous sensation to God. We may be able to observe the effects of a religious experience on people, but we cannot observe the cause. This break in the causality chain means we can only guess at what causes religious experiences, and taking that cause to be God is an inductive leap. The logical positivists argued that whatever could not be proved either rationally or empirically was irrelevant. Since religious experience cannot be either rationally or empirically proved, they would argue that the entire concept is meaningless; therefore basing an argument for the existence of God on it is also entirely meaningless. It can also be said that everyday experiences can be misleading, for example eyewitness reports used in court are notoriously unreliable, in which case how much **more** unreliable is a religious experience?

It is usually fair to say that most religious experiences take place within an a context of 'religious expectancy and hope', this could be taken two ways, firstly it may imply that God steps in when he feels he is most needed, this would support the idea of a benevolent God, however it does beg the question why God would let His followers get into such a state in the first place – when He knows the 'cure' is to reveal Himself. Alternatively it could be said that if people are hoping for a religious experience, they whilst they do experience one, it is not created by God – but instead it is a psychological construction. The brain invents something and tricks itself into believing it just to alleviate the current crisis. This idea would be supported by the current research which suggests 'religious experiences' can be artificially stimulated by altering with brain signals, of course this does not mean that genuine experiences

exist as well, but it adds weight to the idea that religious experience is nothing more than an elaborate dream concocted by the brain to make itself feel better.

One other significant issue with the argument from religious experience is that it does not present a universal form of God. If there is one divine being, why do Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jews etc all have religious experiences involving *different* Gods? Surely if there was a God influencing these experiences, He would only be the God of one religion – whilst the Judeo-Christian and Islamic God can almost be amalgamated, the Hindu and other eastern traditions have an almost entirely different concept of God, and different again is the concept of divinity experiences by Buddhists. It can be argued that because of the ineffable nature of a religious experience, the exact language used to describe the experience is meant very metaphorically, and so the differences we see are from the different cultures influencing the language used to describe the experience. Fundamentally most religious experiences *do* follow a similar idea – as William James identified.

Swinburne wraps up the argument from religious experience with the cumulative argument. This says that *on their own* all of the arguments for the existence of God have their weaknesses, and are not entirely convincing. Swinburne proposes that whilst they are weak on their own, if we combine them and add on the argument from religious experience we “tip the scales” of atheism Vs theism, and *collectively* the arguments form a proof for the existence of God.

On the surface this seems sensible; God may not be **proved** by the other arguments, but combining them, and then adding something which seems to *directly* link to a God the arguments seem to form one far stronger conglomerate. However, logically and mathematically this argument does not follow, you simply cannot ‘add’ several weak arguments to gain a strong one. Mathematically speaking you should be multiplying the weak arguments, to gain a *very* weak argument, not a strong argument.

Swinburne concludes that all of this means that there is an overwhelming probability of God’s existence, however there is still a key flaw in that: “probability”. The argument from religious experience may allow us to say that people have experiences which currently we don’t fully understand and which *may* have been caused by, or influenced by a form of divinity, but it does not follow that therefore God, and specifically a Judaeo-Christian God exists. Moreover Swinburne’s cumulative argument seems to unintentionally argue against itself in its flawed logic of adding probabilities.