Philosophy of Religion

6. Religious Experience

What are the principal varieties of religious experience? How far is "experience of the presence of God" analogous to sense perception, and can this analogy be used to give it epistemological support? Overall, can religious experience provide significant evidence for the existence of God?

Overviews

Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 1998), chapter 8, pp. 246-98 provides a useful overview, though it is now a bit dated. The first part sets the debate in a general epistemological context, linking with issues such as internalism, externalism, naturalism, reliabilism, and considerations about "burden of proof". The main focus on religious experience is from p. 264 onwards, and from pp. 287-90 Taliaferro touches on its role within a "Cumulative Case" for religion, as advocated by Basil Mitchell and Richard Swinburne.

A more recent overview is by Kai-man Kwan, "Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy", *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006), pp. 640-61.

Another (less even-handed) overview is in Keith Yandell's book *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (CUP, 1993), chapter 10 (pp. 215-232), entitled "The Argument in Twentieth-Century Philosophy".

Typologies of Religious Experience

Keith Yandell, "Religious Experience", in Quinn, P, and Taliaferro, C., eds., *A companion to philosophy of religion* (Blackwell, 1997), pp. 371-2, suggests a basic typology of religious experiences.

Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Clarendon, 1989), pp. 33-54 lists six (non-exclusive) aspects of religious experiences. Note also her chapter 7, "The Conflicting Claims Challenge", on the apparent conflicts between "numinous" and "mystical" experiences, and chapter 8 "The Reductionist Challenge", on naturalistic explanations of religious experience.

Alston versus Fales

A good understanding of many central points can be gleaned from this interesting debate:

William P. Alston and Evan Fales (paper, plus reply, from each) in Peterson, Michael L. and VanArragon, Raymond J. (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 135-63.

Swinburne versus Mackie

Swinburne puts a great deal of emphasis on his "Principle of Credulity" (p. 254 or 303), ascribing this sufficient force to give religious experience a key role in his case for the existence of God:

Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* chapter 13, 1st edition (OUP 1979), pp. 244-76, or 2nd edition (OUP, 2004), pp. 293-327. A shorter version is in *Is There a God?* (OUP 1996, 2010), chapter 7.

The opposite case, in favour of naturalistic explanations of religious experience (and religious belief generally) is made by John Mackie, who makes reference to Hume's *Natural History of Religion* of 1757, the greatest work in this naturalistic tradition (obtainable through www.davidhume.org).

J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982), chapter 10, pp. 177-98.

A Novel Sceptical Approach

Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 71 (2015), pp. 1-49, is jointly written by a sceptical philosopher and a religiously sympathetic cognitive scientist. It faces the believer with a dilemma, in so far as conflicting religious experiences tend to mutually undermine their evidential value, whereas the "common core" features they share appear to be best explicable in naturalistic terms. But the article also raises the possibility of a more conciliatory "second-order" approach to religious diversity.

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