

Religious Experience & Miracles

Alston: *Religious Experience as Perception of God*

Considers direct, supposed experiences of God

(By direct, Alston doesn't mean *sensory*; God is, after all, spiritual, and not the kind of thing that one *could* see!)

How can we possibly have an experience that isn't sensory in character?

Generalize from perception: my perceiving X consists in X appearing to me in some way

To perceive X,

- 1) X must exist
- 2) I must be causally related to X (for example, light from X must hit my eye...)
- 3) Perceiving X gives rise to further beliefs about X

Religious experiences are like normal kinds of experience, except that they are not perceptual (and are thus conceptualized differently). If God exists, these conditions could be satisfied in cases of religious experiences.

An Alston-inspired argument:

- 1) Religious experiences are akin to perceptual experiences of God
- 2) Perceptual experiences of X give us evidence that X exists
- 3) If (1) and (2), then religious experiences give us evidence that God exists
- 4) Therefore, religious experiences give us evidence that God exists

What would the causal relation to God look like?

Martin: *Critique of Religious Experience*

What reasons can we have for supposing that religious experiences generate true beliefs?

Psychological hypothesis: Religious experience is caused not by something external (eg, God), but by something internal (eg, the person's own mind). Religious experience is hallucination.

The more plausible the psychological hypothesis is, the weaker the evidence from religious experience.

Generally, we don't trust hallucinations because they tell no coherent story about the world. Our dreams do not tell a coherent story in the same way that waking life does. Is there a common core to mystical experiences? Unity, Oneness, etc. But compare perceptions of a loving, caring God who created the world from perceptions of a pantheistic, holistic God who (in some sense) *is* the world.

Even if this is true, why do we favor the veridical religious experience hypothesis over the psychological hypothesis?

Principle of Credulity (PC): If it seems to a subject that X is present, then probably X is present. (If it seems to me that there's a chair here, there's probably a chair here!)

Negative Principle of Credulity (NPC): If it seems to a subject that X is absent, the probably X is absent. (If it seems to me that there's no chair here, there's probably no chair here!)

Mackie: *Miracles and Testimony*

A **miracle** is a divinely-caused violation of a natural law.

Miracles are possible, since both supernatural intervention and violations of natural law are possible.

Someone who purports to see a miracle must hold that:

- a) Some event E occurred
- b) E is a violation of some natural law.

Note that making one of these plausible makes the other one less plausible!

Since agnostics and atheists find these kinds of violations to be antecedently implausible, miracles will not provide arguments for the existence of God.

This argument applies in the first-person as well as third-person; how can we trust that we have actually witnessed some miracle? How can we trust someone's account when they describe something so implausible?