

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 6, Theistic Arguments, Part 5, The Religious Experience and Its Relevance for Theistic Belief

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 6, Religious Experience.

Okay, we've looked at a number of different arguments for the existence of God, ways that one might justify his or her belief in God to try to show that it's rational.

As it turns out, though, perhaps the majority of people who are religious or who believe in God take the view they do because of certain experiences that they've had. So that raises the question, what significance does religious experience have for justifying our belief in God? So, we'll talk about that here. Is religious experience valuable or useful in building a rational case for Christianity or for theism more generally? And if so, to what degree? If not, why not? So, let's begin first by asking the question, what is religious experience? Now, our answer to this question will depend on our conception of religion.

Depending on one's definition of religion, a wide array of experiences could qualify as religious, from a feeling of a kind of oneness with nature to an experience of self-realization to something more specific in terms of a feeling of direct awareness of the God of the Bible. But for many religious believers, a truly religious experience should be characterized as a personal encounter with God. That's how a lot of religious people would characterize it: a personal encounter with God.

This is what religious studies scholar Rudolf Otto has called numinous experience. A direct apprehension of a personal being who is holy, good, awesome, separate from the subject, and one upon whom the subject depends for life and care. That's Otto's definition of a numinous experience.

I think it's important to highlight several aspects of this. One is that this must be a personal being somehow. We're not just talking about a kind of force or energy or the universe as a whole.

We're talking about a personal being, which would entail a kind of consciousness, awareness, and concern. A being that's holy and good. There's a kind of moral quality to this being.

Awesome. There's a certain greatness here. And distinct or separate from the subject.

That's important. In a numinous experience, as Otto's defined it, it's not just a kind of indirect way of experiencing one's own self. We're talking about a being that is separate from us.

And then, finally, the idea that it is a being upon whom the person depends. There's a sense of dependence here. This is a being who is my source or the reason for my existence.

So, all of these things are part of this idea of a numinous experience. William James in his great classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, analyzes scores of such experiences. It's fascinating.

I highly recommend that book. I do believe that it remains the best scholarly inquiry into that subject all these decades later. So, can we argue from religious experience to the existence of God? And some have attempted such arguments.

We'll look at two different forms that the argument from religious experience takes. One is sometimes called the causal argument, which reasons from the effects of a person's experience to the existence of God as the cause. Then, there is the direct perception argument, which reasons that one's perception of God is analogous to one's perception of sensible physical objects that we perceive with our senses.

That's the direct perception argument. So, let's begin with the causal argument from religious experience, reasoning from the effects of a person's experience, particularly when there's a dramatic transformation in a person's life. Reasoning from that to God as the ultimate cause of that transformation.

It's often the case that the people who are converted to Christianity or maybe some other religion will identify and give testimony regarding the changes in their lives. I was like this, and then I came to Christ, converted, and repented. Now, my life has changed in all these ways. I gave up all these bad habits and vices, and now I'm living in a way that's virtuous or more healthy, and God is the reason why.

That kind of testimony is, at least, implicit in many cases, if not explicitly, a causal argument for the existence of God. Now, some object to this, that such religious experiences and especially the subsequent life changes can be explained psychologically and sociologically in terms of, say, the kinds of people that the new convert is spending a lot of time with. And also, the idea that just the beliefs that the person now holds and say the moral duties or obligations that they seem to entail, that that just had a psychological effect on the person, and now this explains why they're living their life so differently.

So, those would be psychological and sociological ways of naturalizing this account. J.P. Moreland has done work on this issue, addresses this objection, and notes that religious experiences do not exclude psychological and sociological factors. Those who are making this causal argument based on religious experience don't need to deny that there are psychological and sociological causal components here.

The question is whether those considerations or those factors explain all of the changes in a person's life. The idea here is that there are certain aspects to the person's transformation that cannot be entirely accounted for in purely psychological and sociological terms. Moreland also notes that the strategy of psychologizing or explaining sociologically the person's life changes; this becomes less plausible as the variety increases in the nature and scope of religious transformation.

That is the different contexts in which people are transformed. Again, in James' study, there is a very wide array of contexts, socioeconomically and culturally, in terms of age groups, and so on, as well as the psychological states of the people involved. When you see the same kinds of transformations, dramatic life transformations, across such a wide array of social and psychological conditions, it lends more credence to the claim that there is something supernatural going on here.

And then thirdly, Moreland notes that Christian religious experience is tied to objective events. We can also call it an interpretive grid, a framework through which we can interpret the phenomena of human experience. When we consider those objective events, especially the resurrection of Christ and the history of transformations from the early church to our present day, we really welcome the expectation that similar transformations will continue to occur in the lives of Christians.

And then, of course, scripture gives us a framework for understanding what's really going on when a religious transformation takes place. We have these categories in scripture. The idea of a person's sinful nature prior to conversion is such that they're really limited in terms of how virtuously they can live. And then, with conversion and the entrance of the Holy Spirit into a person's life, they are enabled and empowered to live more virtuously and honorably before God.

That is a kind of background theology that gives us, again, a kind of expectation that these sorts of transformations would occur. And it confirms their truth. So that's the causal argument from religious experience.

Now, let's turn to the direct perception argument from religious experience. This is a kind of analogy between religious perception or spiritual perception of God and the more ordinary kinds of perception that we experience throughout the day as we see,

hear, taste, touch, and smell different objects in our environment. So, the idea is that a person could argue that, at least in many cases, numinous experience and numinous perception are sufficiently similar to sensory perception such that we could conclude that the former is authentic.

Just as we can see and touch physical objects directly, we actually can spiritually sense God. Now, this argument, the whole analysis using this analogy, is developed by the great recent Christian philosopher William Alston, who is an epistemologist who deals with this in his book *Perceiving God*. Alston was one of the leading figures in the Renaissance of Christian philosophy 30 to 40 years ago, along with people like Alvin Plantinga and, Marilyn and Robert Adams, and several others.

But Alston argues that there are potentially good epistemological grounds for the claim that one has had direct experiential awareness of God. He makes the case for this by comparing two practices that are called doxastic or belief-forming. Those are sensory perceptions, which may be called numinous perceptions, which can also be called mystical perceptions.

J.P. Moreland has developed and applied a number of Alston's ideas here, so I'll be drawing from Moreland's work as well as I present this. So, consider the features or basic aspects of sensory perception. Whenever you look around you, and you see tables and chairs and trees and rocks and grass and clouds, what's going on there as you sense the world around you? Well, first note that certain conditions need to be met by the subject in order to have the capacity for sensory perception.

The person needs to be conscious. They can't be asleep, there needs to be a certain degree of attention, and their sense organs need to be functioning properly. In order to see your eyes and the visual center of your cerebral cortex and that neurology, it needs to be functioning reasonably well. So, the subject needs to meet certain basic conditions.

Secondly, sensory perception is about when it's veridical when it's reliable and authentic; sensory perception is about or directed to an object. An object that exists independently of the perceiver. So, when I look in a certain direction, and I see a chair, my perception is directed to that chair, as it were, and that chair exists independently of me.

It's not a figment that my own mind is producing, and it exists independently of my mind. Thirdly, sensory perception has a public and a private aspect. Even though I'm seeing the chair and having my unique experience of it, if you were here and looking at the chair from another angle, it would look different to you than it does to me.

So, the public aspect is that that chair is available for both you and I and others to perceive, but depending upon our point of view, it's going to look a little different.

There are any number of angles from which we could view an object like that chair, such that its appearance would be slightly different from all those angles and it would look different depending on the lighting and so on. So, there's a public as well as a private aspect to sensory perception.

Fourthly, sensory perception admits of a part-whole distinction. One need not perceive all of an object in order to genuinely perceive it. Again, when I look over that chair and see it, I only see certain surfaces of it, which really constitute a very small percentage of the overall physical makeup of the chair.

No matter how thoroughly you inspect any physical object, in fact, you're only looking at a fraction of it because of the interior matter you're not able to perceive. So, there's a part-whole distinction there. Just because you only experience it in part, even in a small part, doesn't mean that you're not genuinely experiencing the object.

And finally, there are public checks or tests for sensory perception. How can we confirm what we seem to be seeing? Are we really seeing? We've all had the experience of driving down the road, say, at a high rate of speed on the freeway, and something catches our eye, and it looks like, say, a deer. Or some sort of animal that strikes us as unusual in a certain place.

Hey, did you see that? What? Well, it was a deer. Yeah, I saw that. Okay.

And that confirms that, yeah, I wasn't seeing things. What's a deer doing out here in the middle of the city or in some strange place? And that's when we ask for confirmation. You know, wow, look at that.

What is that doing there? I was driving along here in central Indiana a few years ago, and I noticed on one of the trees we were driving by that it looked like a bald eagle. I asked my son if that was a bald eagle. He said, yeah, it is. Turns out others have spotted bald eagles in this area as well, but it was surprising.

So, I was questioning just how reliable my sense perception was in that case, and I looked for a public confirmation, as it were, in asking my son. And he confirmed it. Of course, that's not infallible, but the more people you ask to confirm a sensory perception you're having, the more reliable it is.

So, those are five features of sensory perception, which are rather ordinary and straightforward. And as we'll see, as Alston and Morland point out, these same sorts of conditions apply to mystical perception. Beginning with the fact that certain conditions must be met in the context of mystical or numinous perception.

The subject needs to have a kind of, say, religious or spiritual awareness. Whatever that is in us that enables us to spiritually perceive. And we could add that there has to be a certain willingness, maybe even a kind of inclination, to seek God.

Maybe that's necessary as well. Certainly, a willingness to respond and the ability to recognize God or at least a certain spiritual reality for what it is. However, certain conditions need to be met in order for the person to have a mystical perception.

Secondly, mystical perception is about or directed to God as its object. So, when a person has a mystical experience, again, they're not just experiencing their own mental state. But if it's genuine, the experience is directed to and is intentionally directed at God as its object.

Thirdly, mystical perception has a public and private aspect, just as with sensory perceptions. Other people may experience God. Other people do experience God.

But no one else has exactly my experience. Nobody has exactly your experience. This is why we like to talk about religious experiences.

Wow, I want to hear your point of view or your perspective. What is the view from where you stand in terms of the relationship or encounter with God? So, God is, as it were, publicly available to be experienced by human beings. But each human being has a unique approach or perspective on God.

Fourthly, mystical perception admits to a part-whole distinction. One need not exhaustively perceive God in order to genuinely perceive God. And, of course, it would be impossible for anyone to perceive God because he's an infinitely great being exhaustively.

There is no end to the things that we could learn or potentially understand about God. So, maybe every experience of God is getting at some infinitesimally small or limited aspect of God when you think about that encountering an infinite being. There's this tantalizing narrative in the Pentateuch where Moses asks if he can see God or have some sort of direct encounter with God.

He's informed that, well, you couldn't handle that, right? It would wipe you out. It would kill you. So, I'll pass by, and I think he has Moses kind of shelter himself, and I'll show you my backward parts.

At least, that's how one biblical translation puts it. The backward parts of God or the rear end of God or whatever. It's just a kind of hint of the divine being.

And, of course, when God passes by, and he gets this glimpse of the backward parts of God, it completely illuminates Moses. And his face then shines so brightly that his fellow Israelites can't even look at him. So, put a veil over your face.

You're blinding us, which is a powerful demonstration or illustration of the glory of God. It would affect this mortal to the extent that even a brief glimpse of the backward parts or rear end of God would have that effect on Moses.

So, he just had a very limited direct encounter with God, but he genuinely experienced God nonetheless. And then, there are public tests for genuine mystical perception. And we can itemize some of those.

One of those is consistency. Logical consistency. No object and sensory experience, if we're genuinely experiencing a physical object, can be logically contradictory.

If somebody approaches you and says, hey, I just found a round square out on the sidewalk, it's fascinating. You say, well, I don't know if what you found was round or square, but I know it wasn't both. It can't be logically contradictory like that.

There has to be logical consistency. So, that's how it is when it comes to numinous or mystical perception as well. If it's genuine, the claims about it need to be at least logically consistent.

So, anyone who says, well, I've experienced God, God is both personal and impersonal. That would be self-refuting or self-undermining. Maybe the person did experience God, but they're just confused about how to articulate it.

But God cannot both be an entirely personal and entirely impersonal being. Another test for veridical mystical perception is a certain similarity to exemplars. And here we're talking about a certain model, religious experiences over the centuries.

We will go back to biblical accounts and experiences of God by people like Moses, Ezekiel, the Apostle John, and Isaiah. To take all of those as examples, they all experienced extreme humbling. I know Ezekiel, Isaiah, and John; I think they all fell down in the presence of God as though they were dead.

Isaiah says about it, I was disintegrating, I am undone, I am disintegrating here in the presence of God. And Ezekiel and John both fall face down. And that's how it's been for many Christian mystics or godly people who've experienced God directly over the ages.

There's a kind of extreme humbling. And many would argue, I think plausibly, in terms of a direct encounter of God, that that is one of the hallmarks of a genuine direct perception of God. Frequency, one would expect mystical or numinous

experiences, if they're genuine, to be followed by similar experiences in oneself and other people.

Maybe you don't experience the same kind of intensity or the same degree of drama in a routine way in terms of your experience of God. But the kind of awareness of God at some level should be or might be expected to be repeated in certain ways in a person's life. So that's within one person's life, but then looking at other people having similar experiences, that is just what you would expect if these sorts of accounts are reliable.

And then, fourthly, beneficial consequences. The consequences of such experiences should be good for the subject as well as for other people. The person's outlook on life should be improved.

They should be edified morally. It should increase their ability to get along in the world and to treat people well, to live virtuously, to be more honest, sincere, trustworthy, and so on. All the virtues should at least increase in a person's life. They should be living more virtuously and with more integrity as a result if they really are experiencing God.

Finally, there should be a certain coherence with scripture. The experience should conform to this objective body of revelation that we have.

And again, there are so many stories about people experiencing God and the changes that this brings in their lives. There should be something comparable to that in a person's life if they've really experienced God. So, Alston and Moreland argue that there is an epistemic parity between the sensory perception of physical objects and the mystical perception of God.

If the former can be epistemically reliable as a belief-forming practice, then so maybe the latter. Now, here are some objections that have been registered by a guy named Keith Augustine. He argues that the Alston parity argument fails because of, on the one hand, a lack of publicly deployable investigative methods to establish the nature of the divine being.

For one thing, one problem here, and we might say disanalogy, is we can't control these experiences like we can control sensory experiences. I can be confident that when I walk back into a room, I'm going to have certain kinds of experiences of tables and chairs and so on. It's predictable, but I can't make the same kinds of reliable predictions when it comes to the experience of God and mystical encounters.

Augustine also argues that the tremendous diversity of beliefs about God, and as he puts it, the existence of massively incompatible mystical practices, and the lack of any independent reasons for regarding anyone mystical practice as being more likely

to be reliable than any of the others, that that is a reason as well why Alston's argument fails. So, here is how I would reply to these two arguments from Augustine. First, with regard to the lack of publicly deployable investigative methods, I think we could turn to scripture here, special revelation, and say that this provides opportunities for public investigation regarding the nature of the divine being.

There's a plethora of information in scripture that gives us a very robust understanding of the nature of God, and even if it's still limited, there's still a lot of information there. Then, we can compare a biblical conception of the nature of God to the kinds of claims that a person might be making about the nature of the being that they encountered in their mystical experience. Then, when it comes to the lack of independent reasons for regarding any mystical practice as being more likely to be reliable than any of the others, I think that problem, too, can be addressed via appeal to special revelation.

The question is, which alleged special revelation is the most reliable one? This takes us into a discussion of a separate but vital issue, and that is comparative religion, comparative religious analysis, looking at different religions and assessing their sacred texts to see which, if any, are divinely inspired. What good reasons do we have, historically and otherwise, to believe that, say, the Old and New Testament scriptures are a divinely inspired revelation from God? We can ask the same questions about those texts as we can ask about the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the sayings of the compassionate Buddha, and so on. But that's a separate issue.

It's germane to what we're talking about here, but that is a massive field of study that has implications for our thoughts on which religious tradition is the correct one.

So, that concludes our discussion of religious experience and its relevance for belief in God.

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