

Why Religious Experience Cannot Justify Religious Belief

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Abstract: *Theists often claim that neither the diversity of religious experience nor natural explanations for religious experience can threaten the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief. Contrarily, this paper argues that not only do they pose such a threat, but the diversity of religious experiences and natural explanations for them completely undermine their epistemic justificatory power. To establish this, the author first defines the supposed role of religious experience in justifying religious belief. Then the author shows how the diversity of religious experience raises an inductive problem that negates religious experience's ability to justify religious belief. The author then shows that available natural explanations for religious experience do the same by simply providing better explanations of religious experiences (i.e., explanations that are more adequate than religious explanations of those experiences).*

Keywords: Religious Experience, The Problem of Religious Diversity, Neurological Explanation for Religious Experience, The Unanimity Thesis, Perceptual Models of Religious Experience

“As [Paul] was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground ...” (Act 9:3–4, NASB)

In Chapter 9 of their 1999 book, *Phantoms in the Brain*, entitled “God and the Limbic System,” neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee told the story of a patient named Paul—a Goodwill store assistant manager who has been blessed—or haunted—by intense religious experiences all his life. Ironically, Paul’s experiences mirror, almost exactly, those of his biblical namesake: the Apostle Paul. “I remember seeing a bright light before I fell on the ground and wondering where it came from.”¹ Like the

¹ V. S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 180.

Apostle, Paul's experiences completely changed his life, and he goes on to write, at great length, about the profundities of religious truths—"an enormous manuscript ... [that] set out his views on philosophy, mysticism and religion; the nature of the trinity; the iconography of the star of David; elaborate drawings depicting spiritual themes, strange mystical symbols, and maps."² But unlike the Apostle's, Paul's brain can be directly observed by modern science—and we now know what causes his religious experiences: focal seizures in his temporal lobe. Each one coincides with a religious experience and produced in Paul what has come to be known as "temporal lobe personality."

Similar experiences happen to individuals of every religion, yet they teach those individuals vastly different, even contradictory, things. The Apostle Paul's experience, for example, taught him that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God, and (arguably) that he was identical to God himself.³ Muhammad's religious experiences, which inspired his writing of the *Qur'ān*, taught him the exact opposite—that Jesus was "no more than a messenger," (Q al-Mā'idah 5:75), that "[i]t is not befitting to (the majesty of) God that He should beget a son," (Q Maryam 19:30–35), and that it would have been blasphemy for Jesus to have claimed to be God (Q al-Mā'idah 5:116–17). Of course, similar disparities among those who have religious experiences abound. A Buddhist's religious experience will likely teach him that there is no God, no persons, and no afterlife, whereas a Christian's will teach him that there is a God and if a person worships him properly, one can enter heaven.

These facts seem to raise serious doubts about the ability of religious experiences to justify religious beliefs, especially for the modern academic theist who is aware of them. Why this is true, however, has not yet been clearly identified. To be sure, many have attempted to argue that these facts *do not* threaten the justificatory power of religious experience; but those say they do have yet to accurately articulate why.⁴ It is the goal of this essay to do so. The author will argue that, at least for those aware of such facts, such as the

² Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 181.

³ Whether Paul actually thought Jesus was God is contentious, but no crucial part of this author's argument hangs on this issue. The author will leave the reader to do their own research.

⁴ For a nice rundown of such arguments, see Mark Webb, "Religious Experience," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified December 13, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience/>.

his epistemic duty. He is epistemically blameworthy and, as a result, his ability to be justified in this belief is non-existent.

In the same way, an academic theist who has remained ignorant of the natural explanations for religious experiences cannot hide behind this ignorance. He should be aware of such things; at the least, it is his duty to learn about things directly relevant to his theistic belief—and this is obviously one of them. He has neglected his epistemic duty. He is thus epistemically blameworthy, and his ability to be justified in this belief is non-existent.

Interestingly, however, religious experience might have been able to justify religious belief in earlier times. If natural explanations are not completely available (e.g., undiscovered), one cannot be expected to know about them and, thus, be derelict in one's epistemic duty. The Apostle Paul, for example, could have been justified in thinking that disease was caused by demons and that his religious experience on the road to Damascus was one of supernatural origin. But if he were alive today, he could not—for he *should* know the germ theory of disease and that his conversion experience mirrors exactly the symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy.

So perhaps the Apostle Paul could have been justified, by his religious experience, in believing that Jesus was the Messiah. He did not know about the better natural explanations for his experience, nor could he have been expected to. But an academic theist cannot be so justified, either by their own religious experience (they should be aware of the better natural explanations) or by relying on Paul's (for one knows it is much more likely that Paul was a temporal lobe epileptic). And the same holds for all religious experiences; they cannot, for the modern academic theist, justify religious belief.

Conclusion

Ramachandran, in his chapter about Paul the Goodwill store assistant manager, essentially dodges the obvious questions regarding the legitimacy of Paul's religious experience: "But why do patients like Paul have religious experiences?...One [possibility] is that God really does visit these people. If that is true, so be it. Who are we to question God's infinite wisdom? Unfortunately, this can be neither proved nor ruled out on empirical grounds."²⁹ While he is right that it can neither be proved nor disproved that God visits Paul (because nothing in science can be proved or disproved), it

²⁹ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 182.

would be an appeal to ignorance to suggest this is a reason to accept the hypothesis that God does. It also does not mean that evidence and scientific reasoning cannot be brought to bear on the question, nor does it mean that there is not good reason to reject this possibility. And clearly, since the neurological explanations for religious experience are more adequate, they should be preferred. To not accept them is unscientific and irrational, just as it would be to think that demons cause disease. As seen, one could lump God on as an additional causal mechanism, where God is the cause of the neurological state, but this is unnecessary. Such states can be, and are, accounted for completely by natural mechanisms—the effects of God helmets, seizures, drugs, fasting, illness, stress, and even the environment—on one's brain. Lumping God onto the explanation makes it less simple, raises more questions than it answers, invokes the inexplicable, and conflicts with existing knowledge. Therefore, it should be avoided.

Ramachandran also wrote that natural explanations for religious experience have no bearing on whether or not God exists: “My goal as a scientist ... is to discover how and why religious sentiments originate in the brain, but this has no bearing one way or the other on whether God exists or not.”³⁰ However, again, while it is true that neurological explanations for religious experience do not *disprove* God's existence, it is clearly false that they have no bearing on it since natural explanations for religious experiences negate their ability to provide evidence for God's existence. If one relies on religious experience to provide justification for one's belief in God, as many theists do, clearly discovering natural explanations for religious experiences has great bearing on one's justification for belief in God. In addition, if it can be effectively argued that belief in God (or religious belief in general) originally arose because of religious experience, but religious experience has a purely naturalistic cause, then significant doubt arises about God's existence.

One might reply that such reasoning commits the genetic fallacy, but such a reply misunderstands that fallacy. The genetic fallacy entails that one cannot *dismiss evidence* for a theory by identifying the origin of that theory. For example, one cannot dismiss the hypothesis that the structure of Benzene is circular (“ring shaped”) based on the fact that the idea came to Kekule in a dream because the subsequent evidence that he was right is insurmountable. But the genetic fallacy does not mean that the origin story of a thing is irrelevant to whether or not that thing exists. One could, for example, provide

³⁰ Ramachandran and Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain*, 185.

good reason for not believing in El Chupacabra by pointing out that the myth started when Madelyne Tolentino confabulated a story after watching the movie “Species” in 1995.³¹ Identifying the belief’s origin cannot be used to dismiss the subsequent “evidence” for El Chupacabra (there are other ways of doing that); but the fact that belief in El Chupacabra does not actually originate from an genuine sighting of a blood-sucking, goat-killing crypto-creature—but instead from a confabulated story—is good reason to think that there is no such thing. Likewise, without good evidence for God’s existence—something that many who rely on religious experience admit—the fact that belief in God does not originate in God, but instead in naturally caused religious experiences, would be good reason to think that there is no God.

Swinburne has defended the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief with the “principle of credulity”: “(in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present (and has some characteristic), then probably x is present (and has that characteristic).”³² In other words, unless there is some reason to think otherwise, if a person has an experience which seems to be of x , then it is rational to believe that x exists. This paper has not argued that this principle is false. It has shown why (when $x = \text{God}$), there are indeed “special considerations.” The diversity of religious experience and the existence of natural explanations for religious experience entail that, when it comes whether religious experiences are genuine, there is always some reason to think otherwise.

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³¹ Ironically, Madelyne came to believe that she actually saw something, but Radford clearly shows that her memory of the experience was obviously a confabulation based on her experience of watching the movie (Benjamin Radford, *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore* [Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011], 183–4). The description she gave, months after the “sighting,” matched directly with the “species” alien character in the film.

³² Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 303.

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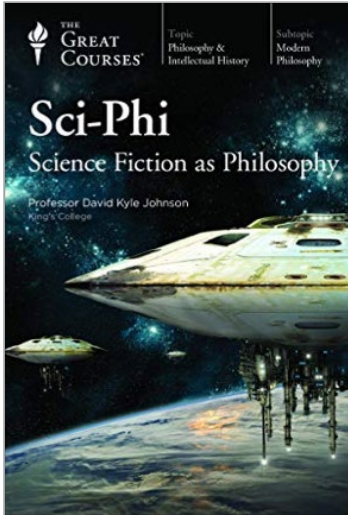
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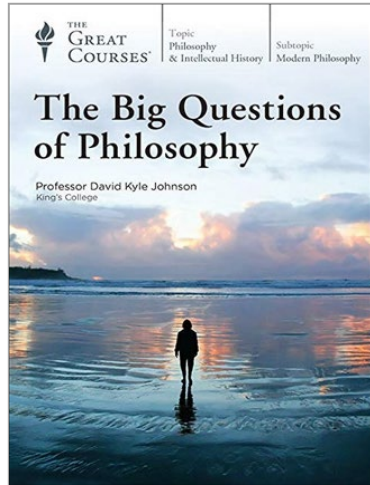
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