

RELI 4015 Mysticism and Religious Experience

Tutorial reading (4.3): Kai-man Kwan, “Religious Experience.” In Stewart Goetz & Charles Taliaferro, eds., *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

[A shorter form of the essay below is contained in the above article.]

The Challenge of Constructivism: Is Religious Experience *Sui Generis*?

Introduction to Attribution Theory of Religious Experience

Attribution theory is a psychological theory about emotional states and other states. Proudfoot applies this theory to religious experience, and contends that religious experience is nothing but an interpretation of some special bodily state by the subject. In general, “unmediated experience” is not possible (Proudfoot 1985, p. 217). “The force of the experience is due to judgments and assumptions” which “are *constitutive* of the experience” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 214; italics mine). These judgments include reference to an explanatory claim, namely, “the subject’s belief that the experience can only be accounted for in religious terms” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 223). These terms come from the subject’s distinctive religious tradition (Proudfoot 1985, p. 216).

According to this theory, there is no such thing as religious experience *per se*, and religious experience has no essence (Proudfoot 1985, p. 179). “Any bodily changes or feelings may be accounted for in religious terms” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 107). “Those who identify their experiences in religious terms are seeking the best explanations for what is happening to them” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 227), and “believe that the best explanation of what has happened to him is a religious one” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 108). This judgment, i.e., the cause of that bodily state is attributed to some religious reality, is made in accordance with the subject’s prior religious framework. For example, the “consciousness Schleiermacher accurately describes may ... turn out to be the product of prior religious beliefs and practices” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 225).

Ann Taves defends and develops Proudfoot’s theory, and believes that there is only such a thing as “experience deemed religious;” and there is no intrinsically *religious* experience (Taves 2009, p. xii). Generally speaking, this is a form of constructivism which challenges the understanding of religious experience adopted here. For Proudfoot, “Neither the felt quality of an experience nor its intentional object is sufficient to identify it as religious” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 114). I beg to disagree. Moreover, if *religious* experience does not have an essence, it can also hardly serve as evidence (Proudfoot 1985, p. 152). I believe that attribution theory can explain some religious experiences. In Hay’s research, he asked the subjects of religious experiences “whether they themselves defined their experience religiously. About two-thirds of them said yes, and when I asked why, about half simply said it was self-evident; they *knew*. Most of the others said that it fitted with their understanding of religion, and *a small number deduced that it must be religious because they could not explain it in any other way*” (Hay 1990, pp. 55-56; italics mine). So we can see that there are a small percentage of the people who do attribute a religious cause to their experiences mainly because they could not explain it in any other way. This indeed fits Proudfoot’s theory. However, from the same survey, we can also see that many religious experiences do not fit attribution theory’s model.

Critical Assessment of Proudfoot’s Attribution Theory of Religious Experience

First, the problem of regress. Proudfoot thinks that the “cognitive value of a particular experience can be show only constructing the best theory to explain that experience, and not by appeal to its felt quality” (Proudfoot 1985, p. 63). Now suppose a religious experience (E1) is merely the best explanation of a state

of arousal. But then access to the state of arousal is only possible through another experience (E2). Since no experience is unmediated, this experience E2 should also be regarded as the best explanation available to the subject which is used to explain yet another experience E3, so on and so forth. So either there is an infinite regress, or we stop somewhere- but the stopping point will also be through and through interpretations. For example, let us suppose an experience of the Holy Spirit (E1) is in fact the best explanation of the experience of the palpitating heart. But the experience of the palpitating heart is also the best explanation of some kind of throbbing sensations or feelings. Due to our prior framework of commonsense realism, we attribute the cause of those feelings to the existence of a beating heart. The problem of skepticism looms large in this line of reasoning.

Second, the problem of phenomenological inadequacy. The attribution theory proposes that an religious experience is constituted by the best explanation of a separate state of arousal. So there is a kind of inferential process going on, but judging from the phenomenological reports of many religious experiences, there is clearly no conscious inference involved (see Hay's research above). So Proudfoot's theory is contradicted by a lot of *prima facie* data. William Barnard has criticized Proudfoot along this line.

Proudfoot discusses Alphonse Ratisbonne's vision of Virgin Mary, compares this experience with his own imaginative visualization of Virgin Mary. He suggests that the "images may be exactly the same," but "the experiences are vastly different," because of the divergence of the implicit judgments about the cause of the two experiences (Proudfoot 1985, p. 231). Barnard thinks that "Proudfoot's Spartan, abstract depiction of Ratisbonne's experience is extremely misleading... Ratisbonne's experience is not simply a matter of having a vision of the Virgin which, because of his previous religious beliefs, he then concludes is real. Instead, Ratisbonne's experience is a sudden, personality-transforming, emotionally complex confrontation with a powerful presence that shattered most of his previously held religious beliefs" (Barnard 1997, p. 104). Proudfoot's account is "a severe impoverishment, if not outright distortion of the experience's phenomenology... If we remain faithful to the phenomenology of the experience, it is clear that Ratisbonne's experience is noetic... that content comes with the experience itself; it is not added on by Ratisbonne" (Barnard 1997, pp. 106-107).

Third, the problem of counter-examples. If religious experiences are constructed out of previous beliefs, then religious experiences should not contradict subjects' prior framework beliefs. However, many religious experiences are not like this:

- Religious experiences can cause changes of prior religious beliefs. According to the survey by Newberg and Waldman mentioned above, "many people reported that their spiritual experiences altered their... traditional ideas about God... half of the people changed their religious orientation as a result of such experiences" (Newberg and Waldman 2009, p. 80).
- There are plenty of cases of religious conversion, which "show repeatedly how the unexpected ... may happen, and the man is persuaded against himself, compelled to yield, fighting every step of the way " (Waterhouse 1923, p. 118).
- While religious experiences may seem very real to the subject, one can in fact maintain a skeptical stance about one's experience at the same time. For Richard Jefferies, a kind of nature mysticism "*seemed absolutely real to him*, but in the sober light of rational reflection" he believed *t/* the experiences did not correspond to the realities disclosed by science (Zaehner 1972, p. 50-51; italics mine).
- According to a survey of religious experience in Britain (Hay and Morisy 1978), among self-classified agnostics and atheists, 23-24% of them claimed to have some religious experiences.

Fourth, the conflict with scientific evidence. As discussed below, there is some scientific evidence for the claim that different kinds of religious experience are associated with the activation of distinctive regions of the brain.

Conclusion

The attribution theory may be applicable to a certain percentage of religious experiences, mainly those interpretive religious experiences, but cannot be readily applied to a large percentage of religious experiences, which include direct epistemic seemings about the divine and the like. Concerning these experiences, unless there are strong reasons for the general truth of the attribution theory, and good evidence to support the applicability of the attribution theory to these experiences in particular, then it is implausible to deny that their epistemic seemings do have the characteristics of a distinctive religious experience. Of course, Ann Taves has modified Proudfoot's theory, and certainly the discussions will go on.

Reference

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