

thought he was. What seems particularly callous about God is that his flashy, second-rate conjuring act is a kind of grisly parody of Jonah's black despair; God's gratuitous cavortings, pulling worms and winds from his sleeve like so many rabbits, writes cruelly large on Jonah's on nauseated sense of the gratuitousness of all meaning under God's libertarian regime. It's in that sheer unfounded gratuitousness of meaning, that abyss of all signification, that God brutally, therapeutically, rubs Jonah's nose. God's mercy is indeed a kind of absurdity, but there's no need for Jonah to make a song and dance of it, which is why God makes a mocking song and dance of it. Jonah just has to find some way of living with the fact that he can never know whether he is doing anything or not, which was perhaps the point of the whole futile narrative after all.

Religious Experience and the existence of God

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Philosophers of religion sometimes appeal to religious experiences as evidence for the existence of God. To take one notable and philosophically sophisticated example, Professor Swinburne argues that religious experience constitutes good C-inductive ground for belief in the existence of God; and that the contribution of the argument from religious experience to the ensemble of arguments for the existence of God as a whole makes the ensemble a good P-inductive rather than just a C-inductive argument.¹ This is a substantial claim: a C-inductive argument merely adds to the probability of some claim, without making it more probable than not. A P-inductive argument, by contrast, establishes that the probability of the claim it defends is greater than fifty percent.

Not all religious experience is covered by Swinburne's claim. Non-theistic experiences and theistic experiences not claiming to be of God are excluded from this discussion. This article will deal with unequivocal claims to have had experience of God, not with weaker claims (to have had an experience *as of* God touching one, for example). Weaker claims might be indefeasible, but offer little joy for the theist. Univocal claims, by contrast, are non-trivially true if true at all.

What marks an experience as an experience of God? H.P. Owen's definition of God as 'the Creator, who is infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable, impassible, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent'² is useful in answering this question. A claim to have had an experience of an infinite, eternal, omniscient and omnipotent being, say, is a claim to have had an experience of God: here, a sufficient number of attributes secures the identification. A claim merely to have encountered an incorporeal being would not warrant a claim to have encountered God. More elements of the definition are required to warrant the claim.

Many reports of experiences of God, particularly those which Swinburne defends, are perceptual or like perceptual experience. Swinburne points to two principles of rationality, that of credulity and that of testimony, which govern our attributions of veracity to our own perceptual experiences and to those of others. The principle of credulity is that experiences are, *ceteris paribus*, the way they seem to us to be; the principle of testimony is that the perceptual testimony of others is, *ceteris paribus*, true³. These two principles are rightly held to be fundamental, for they are presupposed to successful linguistic communication; but there are obvious constraints upon their scope, hinted at by the *ceteris paribus* clauses, to which Swinburne accords recognition. I shall examine these constraints, and suggest that they are wider than Swinburne concedes, and that they defeat his defence of the argument from religious experience. I shall also point to a circularity in his assessment of the inductive force of his claims to have had religious experience which, independently of other objections against these claims, brings into question both his argument from religious experience and the P-inductive soundness he attributes to the ensemble of arguments for the existence of God as a whole.

I

Swinburne recognises a number of special considerations which defeat perceptual claims. They include unreliable conditions or an unreliable subject (let us call it the 'unreliability caveat'); general circumstances which cast doubt upon the veracity of the claim (the 'perceptual limitations caveat'); the probable absence, given our background knowledge, of the object of the claim (the 'absence caveat'); and the

probability that the object of the claim, even if present, did not casually effect the experience (the 'casual caveat'). Swinburne argues that none of these caveats defeats all claims to have had an experience of God. Sober and reliable people have reported such experiences; we are acquainted with common-or-garden degrees of wisdom, power, durability and the like, and might recognise them when manifested in immeasurably larger degree; no convincing argument against the existence of God has been produced; and God, causally involved in all experience, is therefore a cause of experiences of God. I agree with Swinburne that the unreliability and absence caveats can be given short shrift. The causal objection warrants more discussion, and perceptual limitations pose what seem to be insuperable difficulties. Let us take the causal caveat first.

A theist would agree that God, if he exists, grounds all experience. The form of this agreement is conditional. If 'p' stands for 'God exists', and 'q' for 'God grounds all experience', the argument runs: $((p \rightarrow q) \& p) \rightarrow q$. But it demands somewhat more than the absence of a decisive refutation of theism to back this claim. What is required is proof—P-inductive at least—that God exists. Swinburne does argue, to be sure, that the cumulative force of all arguments he brings for the existence of God is P-inductive. This claim is in fact circular, for it is the argument from religious experience itself which, on Swinburne's account⁴, makes the corpus of arguments into a P-inductive rather than a C-inductive one. This circularity, in its own right, brings both the inductive strength attributed by Swinburne to claims of religious experience, and to the corpus of his own arguments for the existence of God, seriously into question.

Not just any causal claim will ground perceptual claims. God features in any causal story at all, according to theists, but that does not warrant the claim on the part of someone who has seen a flower to have experienced the beatific vision. If God exists, the claim that any experience at all derives from him as Creator and Sustainer of all that is, is a *trivial* claim. It tells us that God is a necessary condition for any experience; it does not tell us what that experience is like. God is implicated in this sense in experiences involving mistaken identification and hallucinations as well, and makes these perceptual errors and hallucinations, including mistakes and hallucinations claimed to be of God, what they are. Neural firings are necessary to perception as well, as far as we know. This does not mean that we *perceive* our own neural firings, or that claims to perceive them are indefeasible. It would seem, by the same token, that the theist's claim that God is necessary to any and all causal stories will not, in itself, warrant Swinburne's argument that claims to have experienced God are indefeasible.

This brings us to the question of perceptual limitations, which has

connexions with the causal caveat. I sometimes listen to the radio. Radio waves are a basic part of the causal story involved in this, yet I cannot hear them or see them. Their *effect* is apparent to me, but there is no way I can perceive the waves themselves because I lack the necessary perceptual equipment. Martians may be constituted differently, and may be able to see radio-waves as we see colours. The point of this remark is that arguments from causal chains to perception of some link in such chains depend on the assumption that we are equipped to experience what is claimed. It holds only if a perceptual-limitation caveat does not apply to the experience in question.

Let us return to what is entailed by a putative experience of God: experience of an infinite, incorporeal, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent being. I am not sure that it is possible to make sense of a claim to have perceptual experience of something incorporeal, given that the four basic forces of nature are physical, that is, corporeal in the relevant sense. Even if we grant the possibility of such experience, other attributes pose problems. What would warrant the claim that some (incorporeal) being before me is actually infinite? I may be unable to perceive the limits of some finite object—an ocean, for example. An actual infinity would seem to transcend our perceptual capacities. The eternity, whether timeless or not, of some object of our experience presents similar difficulties. Dons are often wise; but it is a far cry from even the most quintessential donnishness in some being to the judgement that one has encountered an omniscient being. And something like that applies, *mutatis mutandis*, with respect to omnipotence. We encounter wise people, large and durable objects, powerful people and very old but youthful-looking people. We learn to infer that people who look donnish may be wise, and that those with large biceps are likely to be strong; but our recognitional capacities are limited, and do not warrant the claim that we are able to recognise wisdom and so on not only as wisdom, but also as present in an unlimited degree. One would need to share God's unlimited knowledge and so on to ground such a perceptual claim.

II

It tells against some perceptual claims that they are amenable to more reasonable explanation. A claim by someone unfamiliar with electrical appliances to have seen a group of snakes in an office is rendered less plausible by the fact that the office has many conspicuously-placed electric cables. In what follows, I shall present a non-theistic framework which interprets religious experience, and shall use it as a foil to theistic claims.

The theoretical literature and accounts of the practice of concentration (*samatha*) in Theravada Buddhism make claims to religious experiences symptomatically similar to those of some theists,

but they are explained in a way which differs dramatically from theistic explanations. The experience of *jhāna*, a high level of calm and concentration, could easily be taken for an experience of God by a naive theist. Very often, the advent of *jhāna* is preceded and accompanied by an experience of light or of an object of religious devotion. It is accompanied by the experience of rapture, bliss, love, joy and awe. This *nimitta*, as it is called, is said to be concomitant of refined and calm concentration, an involuntary 'creation' of the meditator. No prior expectation is required for its appearance; indeed, many meditators, ignorant of the theory of meditation, are puzzled when it first arises⁵. A Christian, achieving or approaching *jhāna*, might well mistake the *nimitta* for an experience of God, Traditional Christian tests—a saintly life, sanity and the like—would not undermine this judgement, for the attainment of *jhāna* is associated with the temporary acquisition of these at the least.

Buddhist experience associated with *jhāna* and some theistic experiences could well be type-identical: the *symptoms* might coincide perfectly. But the strikingly different ways in which the two traditions describe them raise questions. The Buddhist construal might be argued to be more plausible than the theistic one. Unlike the theistic construal, it does not depend on the assumption that God exists, though it would not necessarily be falsified by the existence of God. The theistic construal stands or falls with the existence of God; and the causal caveat and human perceptual limitations render it controversial even on the assumption that the existence of God is not in question. How can the theistic construal distinguish between the beatific vision proper and the vision of a superlatively wise and powerful but non-divine being?

III

I do not wish to be understood as denying that there are grounds for belief in the existence of God; it does, however, seem to me to be dangerous to build a case for the existence of God on claims to have had religious experiences. I have discussed problems raised for such claims by causal considerations, our perceptual limitations and more plausible construals of such experiences. I have also pointed to a circularity which infects and threatens to undermine Professor Swinburne's argument for the existence of God insofar as it depends upon the argument from religious experience, and which threatens his defence of the claims of religious experience.

1 The terms 'C-inductive' and 'P-inductive' ('conclusion-inductive' and 'premise-inductive'), formulated by Richard Swinburne, sound more formidable than the distinction between the forces of inductive arguments to which they refer. In contrast to deductive arguments, which, given the truth of their premises and the

validity of their logical form, establish with certainty the truth of the conclusion they present, inductive arguments establish degrees of probability that something or other is the case. As such, they proffer empirical evidence of some sort or other for the conclusion which they seek to defend, and can differ in the degree of credibility which they inspire. A report by someone prone to paralytic bouts of drunkenness claiming to have seen the Loch Ness monster in the course of a party at the Loch would not inspire credence: it would not count as an inductive argument of any kind. A new photograph of some distant monster-like object in Loch Ness taken by a tourist of sober character would inspire greater credibility. It is unlikely that it would warrant the judgment that it is more likely than not that Nessie exists. It would nevertheless constitute an addition to the body of evidence for the existence of Nessie, perhaps raising the likelihood that the monster exists from 3% to 5%. As such, it is C-inductive proof, part of the C-inductive argument for the existence of Nessie. C-inductive proof increases the likelihood that some state-of-affairs obtains without making it more likely than not. It leaves the likelihood of a claim less slender than it was before, but still slender for all that. P-inductive proofs, by contrast, establish that it is more likely than not that the state-of-affairs they present does obtain. Were a scrupulously scientific expedition to produce subterranean photographs of a monster-like creature lurking at the bottom of Loch Ness, or sonar-echo material usually associated with sea monsters, this would constitute a P-inductive argument for the existence of Nessie if a more plausible explanation was not available. For a discussion of C-inductive and P-inductive arguments, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979), chapter 1. For an analysis of the distinction in terms of Bayes' Theorem, see Swinburne, pp. 15–19. For Swinburne's assessment of the inductive force of the ensemble of arguments for the existence of God, see *ibid.*, p. 290f.

2 H.P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London, 1971), p. 1.

3 Swinburne, pp. 254–276.

4 Swinburne, p. 290 f.

5 On the development of *jhāna* and the *nimitta* in Theravada Buddhist meditation, see Vajirānāna, *Buddhist Meditation* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1975), p. 32ff. and p. 248ff. A less technical discussion can be found in Saddhatissa, *The Buddha's Way* (London, 1971) pp. 76–79. For the appearance of the *nimitta* to someone unversed in the theory of meditation, see J. Hamilton-Marritt, *A Meditator's Diary*, (Harmondsworth 1979), pp. 40–49.

Correction

A line fell out of last month's *Comment*, written by the four Dominicans who were arrested during a demonstration in London on Ash Wednesday. They quoted moral philosophers who have recently been arguing that civil disobedience could be justified as showing that policies of 'nuclear terrorism', because of their extraordinary wickedness, are always outside the law and in fact undermine it. Our writers then said (but we failed partly to print): 'A general call to repentance which does not speak clearly to such an all-pervading corruption of our communality is a waste of breath.'