

Religious Experience and Religious Belief

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Can religious experience provide any ground or basis for religious belief? Can it serve to justify religious belief, or make it rational? This paper will differ from many others in the literature by virtue of looking at this question in the light of basic epistemological issues. Throughout we will be comparing the epistemology of religious experience with the epistemology of sense experience.

We must distinguish between experience directly, and indirectly, justifying a belief. It indirectly justifies belief B_1 when it justifies some other beliefs, which in turn justify B_1 . Thus I have learned indirectly from experience that Beaujolais wine is fruity, because I have learned from experience that this, that, and the other bottle of Beaujolais is fruity, and these propositions support the generalization. Experience will directly justify a belief when the justification does not go through other beliefs in this way. Thus, if I am justified, just by virtue of having the visual experiences I am now having, in taking what I am experiencing to be a typewriter situated directly in front of me, then the belief that there is a typewriter directly in front of me is directly justified by that experience.

We find claims to both direct and indirect justification of religious beliefs by religious experience. Where someone believes that her new way of relating herself to the world after her conversion is to be explained by the Holy Spirit imparting supernatural graces to her, she supposes her belief that *the Holy Spirit imparts graces to her* to be directly justified by her experience. What she directly learns from experience is that she sees and reacts to things differently; this is then taken as a reason for supposing that the Holy Spirit is imparting graces to her. When, on the other hand, someone takes himself to be experiencing the presence of God, he thinks that his experience justifies him in supposing that God is *what* he is experiencing. Thus, he supposes himself to be directly justified by his experience in believing God to be present to him.

In this paper I will confine myself to the question of whether religious experience can provide direct justification for religious belief. This has implications for the class of experiences we shall be considering. In the widest sense ‘religious experience’ ranges over any experiences one has in connection with one’s religious life, including any joys, fears, or longings one has in a religious context. But here I am concerned with experiences that could be taken to *directly* justify religious beliefs, i.e. experiences that give rise to a religious belief and that the subject takes to involve a direct awareness of what the religious belief is about. To further focus the discussion, let’s confine ourselves to beliefs to the effect that God, as conceived in theistic religions, is doing something that is directed to the subject of the experience—that God is speaking to him, strengthening him, enlightening him, giving him courage, guiding him, sustaining him in being, or just being present to him. Call these “M-beliefs” (‘M’ for manifestation’).

Note that our question concerns what might be termed a general “epistemic practice”, the accepting of M-beliefs on the basis of experience, rather than some particular belief of that sort.¹ I hold that practices, or habits, of belief formation are the primary subject of justification and that particular beliefs are justified only by issuing from a practice (or the activation of a habit) that is justified. The following discussion of concepts of justification will provide grounds for that judgment.

Whether M-beliefs can be directly justified by experience depends, *inter alia*, on what it is to be justified in a belief. So let us take a look at that.

First, the justification about which we are asking is an “epistemic” rather than a “moral” or “prudential” justification. Suppose one should hold that the practice in question is justified because it makes us feel good. Even if this is true in a sense, it has no bearing on epistemic justification. But why not? What makes a justification *epistemic*? Epistemic justification, as the name implies, has something to do with knowledge, or, more broadly, with the aim at attaining truth and avoiding falsity. At a first approximation, I am justified in believing that *p* when, from the point of view of that aim, there is something O.K., all right, to be approved, about that fact that I believe that *p*. But when we come to spell this out further, we find that a fundamental distinction must be drawn between two different ways of being in an epistemically commendable position.

On the one hand there is what we may call a “normative” concept of epistemic justification (*J_n*), “formative” because it has to do with how we stand *vis-a-vis* norms that specify our intellectual obligations, obligations that attach to one *qua* cognitive subject, *qua* truth seeker. Stated most generally, *J_n* consists in one’s not having violated one’s intellectual

obligations. We have to say “not having violated” rather than “having fulfilled” because in all normative spheres, *being justified* is a negative status; it amounts to ones behavior not being in violation of the norms. If belief is under direct voluntary control, we may think of intellectual obligations as attaching directly to believing. Thus one might be obliged to refrain from believing in the absence of adequate evidence. But if, as it seems to me, belief is not, in general, under voluntary control, obligations cannot attach directly to believing. However, I do have voluntary control over moves that can influence a particular belief formation, e.g., looking for more evidence, and moves that can affect my general belief forming habits or tendencies e.g., training myself to be more critical of testimony. If we think of intellectual obligations as attaching to activities that are designed to influence belief formation, we may say that a certain epistemic practice is normatively justified provided it is not the case that the practitioner would not have engaged in it had he satisfied intellectual obligations to engage in activities designed to inhibit it. In other words, the practice is justified if and only if the practitioner did not fail to satisfy an obligation to inhibit it.

However epistemologists also frequently use the term ‘justified’ in such a way that it has to do not with how the subject stands *vis-a-vis* obligations, but rather with the strength of her epistemic position in believing that *p*, with how likely it is that a belief of that sort acquired or held in that way is true. To say that a practice is justified in this, as I shall say, “evaluative” sense, (J_e) is to say that beliefs acquired in accordance with that practice, in the sorts of circumstances in which human beings typically find themselves, are generally true.² Thus we might say that a practice is J_e if and only if it is reliable.³

One further complication in the notion of J_n remains to be canvassed. What is our highest reasonable aspiration for being J_n in accepting a belief on the basis of experience? Being J_n no matter what else is the case? A brief consideration of sense perception would suggest a negative answer. I may be justified in believing that there is a tree in front of me by virtue of the fact that I am currently having a certain kind of sense experience, but this will be true only in “favorable circumstances”. If I am confronted with a complicated arrangement of mirrors, I may not be justified in believing that there is an oak tree in front of me, even though it looks for all the world as if there is. Again, it may look for all the world as if water is running uphill, but the general improbability of this greatly diminishes the justification the corresponding belief receives from that experience.

What this shows is that the justification provided by one’s experience is only defeasibly so. It is inherently liable to be overridden, diminished, or cancelled by stronger considerations to the contrary. Thus the justification of beliefs about the physical environment that is provided

by sense experience is a defeasible or, as we might say, *prima facie* justification. By virtue of having the experience, the subject is in a position such that she will be adequately justified in the belief *unless* there are strong enough reasons to the contrary.

It would seem that direct experiential justification for M-beliefs, is also, at most, *prima facie*. Beliefs about the nature and ways of God are often used to override M-beliefs, particularly beliefs concerning communications from God. If I report that God told me to kill all phenomenologists, fellow Christians will, no doubt, dismiss the report on the grounds that God would not give me any such injunction as that. I shall take it that both sensory experience and religious experience provide, at most, *prima facie* justification.

One implication of this stand is that a particular experiential epistemic practice will have to include some way of identifying defeaters. Different theistic religions, even different branches of the same religion, will differ in this regard, e.g., with respect to what sacred books, what traditions, what doctrines are taken to provide defeaters. We also find difference of this kind in perceptual practice. For example, with the progress of science new defeaters are added to the repertoire. Epistemic practices can, of course, be individuated with varying degrees of detail. To fix our thoughts with regard to the central problem of this paper let's think of a "Christian epistemic practice" (CP) that takes its defeaters from the Bible, the classic creeds, and certain elements of tradition. There will be differences between sub-segments of the community of practitioners so defined, but there will be enough commonality to make it a useful construct. My foil to CP, the practice of forming beliefs about the physical environment on the basis of sense-experience, I shall call "perceptual practice" (PP).

Actually it will prove most convenient to think of each of our practices as involving not only the formation of beliefs on the basis of experience, but also the retention of these beliefs in memory, the formation of rationally self-evident beliefs, and various kinds of reasoning on the basis of all this. CP will be the richer complex, since it will include the formation of perceptual beliefs in the usual way,⁴ while PP will not be thought of as including the distinctive experiential practice of CP.

One final preliminary note. J_n is relative to a particular person's situation. If practice P_1 is quite unreliable, I may still be J_n in engaging in it either because I have no way of realizing its unreliability or because I am unable to disengage myself; while you, suffering from neither of these disabilities, are not J_n . When we ask whether a given practice is J_n , we shall be thinking about some normal, reasonably well informed contemporary member of our society.

Let's make use of all this in tackling the question as to whether one can be justified in CP and in PP. Beginning with J_n , we will first have to determine more precisely what one's intellectual obligations are *vis-a-vis* epistemic practices. Since our basic cognitive aim is to come into possession of as much truth as possible and to avoid false beliefs, it would seem that one's basic intellectual obligation *vis-a-vis* practices of belief formation would be to do what one can (or, at least, do as much as could reasonably be expected of one) to see to it that these practices are as *reliable* as possible.⁵ But this still leaves us with an option between a stronger and a weaker view as to this obligation. According to the stronger demand one is obliged to refrain (or try to refrain) from engaging in a practice unless one has adequate reasons for supposing it to be reliable. In the absence of sufficient reasons for considering the practice reliable, it is not justified. Practices are guilty until proved innocent. While on the more latitudinarian view one is justified in engaging in a practice provided one does not have sufficient reasons for regarding it to be unreliable. Practices are innocent until proved guilty. Let's take J_{ns} as an abbreviation for 'justified in the normative sense on the stronger requirement', and ' J_{nw} ' as an abbreviation for 'justified in the normative sense on the weaker requirement'.

Now consider whether Mr. Everyman is J_{nw} in engaging in PP. It would seem so. Except for those who, like Parmenides and Bradley, have argued that there are ineradicable inconsistencies in the conceptual scheme involved in PP, philosophers have not supposed that we can show that sense perception is not a reliable guide to our immediate surroundings. Sceptics about PP have generally confined themselves to arguing that we can't show that perception is reliable; i.e., they have argued that PP is not J_{ns} . I shall assume without further ado that PP is J_{nw} .

J_{ns} and J_e can be considered together. Although a practice may actually be reliable without my having adequate reasons for supposing so, and *vice versa*, still in considering whether a given practice is reliable, we will be seeking to determine whether there *are* adequate reasons for supposing it reliable, that is whether Everyman *could* be possessed of such reasons. And if we hold, as we shall, that there are no such reasons, the question of whether they are possessed by one or another subject does not arise.

I believe that there are no adequate non-circular reasons for the reliability of PP but I will not be able to argue that point here. If I had a general argument I would unveil it, but, so far as I can see, this thesis is susceptible only of inductive support, by unmasking each pretender in turn. And since this issue has been in the forefront of the Western philosophical consciousness for several centuries, there have been

many pretenders. I do not have time even for criticism of a few representative samples. Instead I will simply assume that PP is not J_{ns} , and then consider what bearing this widely shared view has on the epistemic status of CP.

If J_{nw} is the most we can have for perceptual practice, then if CP is also J_{nw} it will be in at least as strong an epistemic position as the former. (I shall assume without argument that CP can no more be non-circularly shown to be reliable than can PP.) And CP will be J_{nw} for S, provided S has no significant reasons for regarding it as unreliable. Are there any such reasons? What might they be? Well, for one thing, the practice might yield a system that is ineradically internally inconsistent. (I am not speaking of isolated and remediable inconsistencies that continually pop up in every area of thought and experience.) For another, it might yield results that come into ineradicable conflict with the results of other practices to which we are more firmly committed. Perhaps some fundamentalist Christians are engaged in an epistemic practice that can be ruled out on such grounds as these. But I shall take it as obvious that one *can* objectify certain stretches of one's experience, or indeed the whole of one's experience, in Christian terms without running into such difficulties.

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One may grant everything I have said up to this point and still feel reluctant to allow that CP is J_{nw} . CP does differ from PP in important ways, and it may be thought that some of these differences will affect their relative epistemic status. The following features of PP, which it does not share with CP, have been thought to have this kind of bearing.

1. Within PP there are standard ways of checking the accuracy of any particular perceptual belief.
2. By engaging in PP we can discover regularities in the behavior of the objects putatively observed, and on this basis we can, to a certain extent, effectively predict the course of events.
3. Capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found universally among normal adult human beings.
4. All normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience.

If CP includes PP as a proper part, as I ruled on above, how can it lack these features? What I mean is that there is no analogue of these features for that distinctive part of CP by virtue of which it goes beyond

PP. The extra element of CP does not enable us to discover extra regularities, e.g., in the behavior of God, or increase our predictive powers. M-beliefs are not subject to interpersonal check in the same way as perceptual beliefs. The practice of forming M-beliefs on the basis of experience is not engaged in by all normal adults. And so on.

Before coming to grips with the alleged epistemic bearing of these differences, I want to make two preliminary points. (1) We have to engage in PP to determine that this practice has features 1.-4., and that CP lacks them. Apart from observation, we have no way of knowing that, e.g., while all cultures agree in their way of cognizing the physical environment they differ in their ways of cognizing the divine, or that PP puts us in a position to predict while CP doesn't. It might be thought that this is loading the dice in favor of my opponent. If we are to use PP, rather than some neutral source, to determine what features it has, shouldn't the same courtesy of self-assessment be accorded CP? Why should *it* be judged on the basis of what we learn about it from another practice, while that other practice is allowed to grade itself? To be sure, this is a serious issue only if answers to these questions *are* forthcoming from CP that differ from those we arrive at by engaging in PP. Fortunately, I can avoid getting involved in these issues by ruling that what I am interested in here is how CP looks from the standpoint of PP. The person I am primarily concerned to address is one who, like all the rest of us, engages in PP, and who, like all of us except for a few outlandish philosophers, regards it as justified. My aim is to show this person that, on his own grounds, CP enjoys basically the same epistemic status as PP. Hence it is consonant with my purposes to allow PP to determine the facts of the matter with respect to both practices. (2) I could quibble over whether the contrast is as sharp as is alleged. Questions can be raised about both sides of the putative divide. On the PP side, is it really true that all cultures have objectified sense experience in the same way? Many anthropologists have thought not. And what about the idea that all *normal* adult human beings engage in the same perceptual practice? Aren't we loading the dice by taking participation in what we regard as standard perceptual practice as our basic criterion for normality? On the CP side, is it really the case that this practice reveals no regularities to us, or only that they are very different from regularities in the physical world? What about the point that God is faithful to His promises? Or that the pure in heart will see God? However, I believe that when all legitimate quibbles have been duly registered there will still be very significant differences between the two practices in these respects. So rather than contesting the factual allegations, I will concentrate on the *de jure* issue as to what bearing these differences have on epistemic status.

How could the lack of 1.-4. prevent CP from being J_{nw} ? Only by providing an adequate ground for a judgment of unreliability. And why suppose that? Of course, the lack of these features implies that we lack certain reasons we might conceivably have had for regarding CP as reliable. If we could ascertain that PP has those features, without using PP to do so, that would provide us with strong reasons for judging PP to be reliable. And the parallel possibility is lacking for CP. This shows that we cannot have *certain* reasons for taking CP to be reliable, but it doesn't follow that we have reasons for unreliability. That would follow only if we could also premise that a practice is reliable *only if* (as well as *if*) it has 1.-4. And why suppose that?

My position is that it is a kind of parochialism that makes the lack of 1.-4. appear to betoken untrustworthiness. The reality CP claims to put us in touch with is conceived to be vastly different from the physical environment. Why should the sorts of procedures required to put us in effective cognitive touch with this reality not be equally different? Why suppose that the distinctive features of PP set an appropriate standard for the cognitive approach to God? I shall sketch out a possible state of affairs in which CP is quite trustworthy while lacking 1.-4., and then suggest that we have no reason to suppose that this state of affairs does not obtain.

Suppose, then, that

- (A) God is too different from created beings, too “wholly other”, for us to be able to grasp any regularities in His behavior.

Suppose further that

- (B) for the same reason we can only attain the faintest, sketchiest, and most insecure grasp of what God is like.

Finally, suppose that

- (C) God has decreed that a human being will be aware of His presence in any clear and unmistakable fashion only when certain special and difficult conditions are satisfied.

If all this is the case, then it is the reverse of surprising that CP should lack 1.-4. even if it does involve a genuine experience of God. It would lack 1.-2. because of (A). It is quite understandable that it should lack 4. because of (B). If our cognitive powers are not fitted to frame an adequate conception of God, it is not at all surprising that there should be wide variation in attempts to do so. This is what typically happens in science when investigators are grappling with a phenomenon no one really understands. A variety of models, analogues, metaphors,

hypotheses, hunches are propounded, and it is impossible to secure universal agreement. 3. is missing because of (C). If very difficult conditions are set it is not surprising that few are chosen. Now it is compatible with (A)-(C) that

- (D) religious experience should, in general, constitute a genuine awareness of the divine,

and that

- (E) although any particular articulation of such an experience might be mistaken to a greater or lesser extent, indeed even though all such articulations might miss the mark to some extent, still such judgments will, for the most part, contain some measure of truth; they, or many of them, will constitute a useful approximation of the truth;

and that

- (F) God's designs contain provision for correction and refinement, for increasing the accuracy of the beliefs derived from religious experience. Perhaps as one grows in the spiritual life ones spiritual sight becomes more accurate and more discriminating; perhaps some special revelation is vouchsafed under certain conditions; and there are many other conceivable possibilities.

If something like all this were the case then CP would be trustworthy even though it lacks features 1.-4. This is a conceivable way in which CP would constitute a road to the truth, while differing from PP in respects 1.-4. Therefore unless we have adequate reason for supposing that no such combination of circumstances obtains, we are not warranted in taking the lack of 1.-4. to be an adequate reason for a judgment of untrustworthiness.

Moreover it is not just that the A.-C. constitute a bare possibility. In the practice of CP we seem to learn that this is the way things are. As for (A) and (B) it is the common teaching of all the higher religions that God is of a radically different order of being from finite substances and, therefore, that we cannot expect to attain the grasp of His nature and His doings that we have of worldly objects. As for (C), it is a basic theme in Christianity, and in other religions as well, that one finds God within one's experience, to any considerable degree. only as one progresses in the spiritual life. God is not available for *voyeurs*. Awareness

of God, and understanding of His nature and His will for us, is not a purely cognitive achievement; it requires the involvement of the whole person; it takes a practical commitment and a practice of the life of the spirit, as well as the exercise of cognitive faculties.

Of course these results that we are using to defend CP are derived from that same practice. But in view of the fact that the favorable features of PP, 1.-4., are themselves ascertained by engaging in PP, our opponent is hardly in a position to fault us on this score. However I have not forgotten that I announced it as my aim to show that even one who engaged only in PP should recognize that CP is J_{nw} . For this purpose, I ignore what we learn in CP and revert to the point that my opponent has no basis for ruling out the conjoint state of affairs A.-F., hence has no basis for taking the lack of 1.-4. to show TP to be untrustworthy, and hence has no reason for denying that TP is J_{nw} .

I conclude that CP has basically the same epistemic status as PP and that no one who subscribes to the former is in any position to cavil at the latter.

NOTES

¹Alternatively we might say that it concerns the acceptability of a certain general epistemic principle: M-beliefs can be directly justified by experience; but since people seldom formulate and appeal to such principles we will be staying closer to our subject matter if we think in terms of the practices, rather than in terms of the principles implicitly imbedded therein.

²And not just that the practice has a good track record up to now; rather it is a lawlike truth that beliefs formed in accordance with that practice, in those kinds of circumstances, are at least likely to be true.

This formulation can be weakened in various ways, without violating the spirit of the conception. If we want to allow that perceptual beliefs about the physical environment are, by and large, justified in this evaluative sense, while admitting that they may all be somewhat off the mark, we can weaken 'truth' to 'closely-approximating the truth', and further require the practice to include procedures for progressively correcting and refining these first approximations.

³If we go the route of the last footnote, we may want to substitute some such term as 'trustworthy'. I shall freely interchange these terms in this paper.

⁴Without this the practitioners of CP could hardly appeal to what is written in some sacred book.

⁵Note that even though the normative and evaluative senses of justification are non-equivalent extensionally as well as intensionally, the above point indicates a crucial conceptual connection between the two senses. Roughly speaking, to be normatively justified is to have done as much as could be reasonably expected of one to see to it that one is evaluatively justified.