

Is Belief Based in Religious Experience Rational?

1. Rational Evidence Is Inconclusive: John Hick does not think that any of the “proofs” for God’s existence are adequate for religious belief. (With the exception of the Ontological Argument) even if the proofs WERE conclusive (and he thinks they are not), they would only prove some sort of “necessary being”—but this thing might be different from the sort that we consider to be worthy of worship. Such creator might be imperfect, or even EVIL, for example.

In order to have a belief in a God that is worthy of worship, we must supplement the rational evidence with the emotional evidence that we gain from religious experience. The question to be asked is, Is it rational to place belief in God based on religious experience?

2. Experiential Evidence Is Rational: Hick believes that the answer to this question is “Yes.” It IS rational to believe in God based on one’s own religious experience.

Consider our belief in an external world. We all assume every day that we are not dreaming, that we are not in The Matrix, that we are not digital people in a child’s computer, or brains in a vat of chemicals being stimulated by scientists. But, we cannot PROVE that these things are not the case. Can we? We believe that there is a real, external world only on the basis of experience. But, not just any sort of experience; our experience of an external reality is IRRESISTIBLE and VIVID in such a way that we would be clearly insane if we did not accept those experiences at face value.

These are the sorts of experiences that are “innocent until proven guilty.” That is, they are so vivid and irresistible that we are rational to form beliefs on the basis of them unless we are provided with some reason to REJECT them (i.e., if we are provided with some “defeater”).

The Moorean Shift: Skeptics about the external world propose an argument like this:

1. If I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat, then I do not know that I have hands.
2. I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore, I do not know that I have hands.

Moore raised a counter-argument, as follows:

1. If I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat, then I do not know that I have hands.
2. I do know that I have hands.
3. Therefore, I do know that I am not a brain in a vat.

Notice that both of these arguments are valid. They have the following format:

Pro-Skepticism

1. If P, then Q
2. P
3. Therefore, Q

Anti-Skepticism

1. If P, then Q
2. Not Q
3. Therefore, not P

Both arguments have exactly the SAME first premise. Only premise 2 differs. But, both arguments cannot be sound. Only one of them can be. Moore argues that, whenever we are trying to decide between two conflicting premises, we should go with the more plausible one. We might think of him as giving something like the following argument in favor of this:

1. Whenever two beliefs are in conflict, it is rational to reject the less plausible belief and accept the more plausible one.
2. The common sense belief that I know that I have hands is more plausible than the philosophical belief that I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat.
3. Therefore, we ought to accept the former belief instead of the latter.

In short, we ought to accept the common-sense view that we DO know that we have hands (which entails that we DO know that we are not brains in vats), rather than accept that we do not know that we are brains in vats (which entails that we do not know that we have hands).

This strategy is a common one and is actually known as "The G.E. Moore Shift."

But, people like the Biblical prophets, and Jesus, and Paul, and various saints have all claimed to have had such religious experiences. In both cases, one is confronted with evidence of a reality that is external to and transcends their own consciousness. Therefore, if it is rational to believe in an external world on the basis of experience, then it is also rational to believe in a spiritual world on the basis of experience.

So, if we have accepted that there are no PROOFS for God's existence, we might construct the following two competing arguments:

1. If there are no overriding reasons to believe in God, then I have no overriding reasons to believe that I have experienced the divine.
2. There are no overriding reasons to believe in God.
3. Therefore, I have no overriding reasons to believe that I have experienced the divine.

The first argues that, since the evidence for God is lacking, I should discount any experiences supposed "divine" experiences that I have. But, a competing "Moorean Shift" argument also arises, then:

1. If there are no overriding reasons to believe in God, then I have no overriding reasons to believe that I have experienced the divine.
2. I DO have overriding reasons to believe that I have experienced the divine.
3. Therefore, there ARE overriding reasons to believe in God.

This second argument points out that certain personal, mystical or supernatural experiences CAN provide reasons to believe in God. For, they may—like the experience of the existence of my own hands—be so vivid and irresistible that I cannot HELP but trust in them. So, since my religious experiences are strongly supported, I should discount the fact that there is a lack of philosophical evidence for God's existence.

This view is a bit like that of Bergmann and Huemer. Recall that Bergmann stated that, while the PROPOSITIONAL evidence for the reliability of our senses may be lacking (i.e., the sort of evidence that you might be able to present to a jury), nevertheless the NON-PROPOSITIONAL (i.e., personal experiential) evidence might be overwhelming enough to justify the belief anyway. So, with Huemer, Hick might agree:

If it seems to me that God exists, then I am prima facie justified in believing that God exists.

Religious experiences would provide this prima facie justification. For instance, many people claim to have heard the voice of God, or witnessed a miracle, or felt God's presence, or have been given various spiritual gifts or experiences by God, such as having visions, predicting the future, speaking in a divine language, and so on.

[Hick also notes that, if God revealed himself completely, we would have no CHOICE but to devote our lives to God. Yet, Hick thinks that an intellectual response, believing THAT God exists falls far short of the emotional response to then believe IN God and choose to love and worship him. So, on Hick's view, EVEN IF there were philosophical proof for God's existence, TRUE belief will be based in the PERSONAL experience of Him.]

3. Neurological Explanation of Religious Belief: But, perhaps religious experiences should NOT provide justification for religious belief. It is becoming common to suspect that the phenomenon of religious belief is due to certain neurological phenomena. Some even claim that the brain is naturally “hard-wired” to believe in God or the supernatural. According to some, if we can establish this fact, then this will support the conclusion that so-called “religious” experiences ought NOT provide prima facie justification for belief in the supernatural.

Objection: But, even if we discovered that this were true, would it matter? seems that, those who propose that the brain is hard-wired (i.e., naturally pre-disposed) to deliver belief in the supernatural, and that this is evidence that such beliefs are unjustified, must appeal to an argument such as the following:

1. If the human brain is naturally pre-disposed to deliver belief in X, then belief in X is unjustified, or irrational.
2. The human brain IS naturally pre-disposed to deliver belief in X.
3. Therefore, belief in X is unjustified, or irrational.

But, premise 1 of this argument is false. Doesn't it seem that the brain is “hard-wired” to believe in the external world? The brain delivers belief based in SENSE perception all the time; i.e., we take the faculties of sight, hearing, taste, etc.—not to mention other faculties such as intellectual and conceptual faculties—as reliable all the time. When I have the visual sensation that there is a table in the room, I take this intuition to be an indicator that there IS a table in the room. Likewise, when I mathematically intuit that $2+2=4$, I take this intuition to be an indicator that $2+2$ DOES equal 4. The mere fact that beliefs based in THESE sorts of perceptions have a neurological explanation—even one that seems to be deep-seated, or “hard-wired” into the brain—does not seem to render them unjustified. Are beliefs based in religious experience somehow different?

4. Confirmation Bias and Cognitive Filtering: Perhaps religious belief IS different in some relevant way. As early as 400 years ago, Francis Bacon noticed a strange psychological phenomenon, which fostered irrationality; a phenomenon we now call “confirmation bias”.

Confirmation Bias: The tendency to favor evidence or information that confirms one's pre-existing belief while overlooking or discounting evidence that disconfirms it.

Bacon noticed that human beings have a tendency to accept without question those things which conform to their pre-existing beliefs, and either ignore or rigorously

scrutinize those things that oppose them. While this tendency is generally advantageous—for instance, you might happily accept without question someone’s claim that they saw a squirrel today, you would seriously question someone’s claim that they saw a unicorn today—this tendency is often used in instances where it should not be. Bacon cited religious belief as one of these instances.

Consider a more neutral case: When people read off their astrologically-based personality profiles, they have a tendency to place a heavy emphasis on those parts of the reading that are in line with what they already believe, or want to hear, while ignoring (the often much greater portion) which does not.

But, the same may go for things such as answers to prayer, or dreams, or supernatural “signs”, or prophetic predictions. Consider:

- When one prays that a sick person be healed, when they are healed they may interpret this as a confirmation that God has answered their prayers, while ignoring the other (vast majority of) cases where prayers are not answered, or else explaining these away by saying something like, “It must not have been part of God’s plan.”
- If a holy person makes 100 predictions about the future, the believer may cite the one that happened to turn out true as proof that the speaker is a prophet from God, while ignoring the other 99 predictions that turned out to be mistaken.
- If one has a dream that their loved one died in a horrible accident, they may interpret this as a sign that their loved one should avoid dangerous situations for a few days; meanwhile ignoring the other 99% of dreams where they are flying, or attending class without pants.
- If someone is feeling anxious or sad about something, and sees a billboard on the highway and hears Bob Marley singing “Everything is going to be alright” on the radio, they may take this to be a message from God, while ignoring the next song where the Beastie Boys instruct them to “fight for their right to paaaaaartay!” (along with 99% of all other lyrics).

Such biases may not be wholly our fault; i.e., they may not be due to intentional negligence. For, the brain NATURALLY filters out a majority of the information it receives in order to keep us sane. Constantly, we are bombarded with sense-data. Hundreds of people pass you on the sidewalk, a million leaves are shiver in the breeze, a thousand cars pass by, 10,000 products fill the shelves in the grocery store, and so on.

If we had to pay attention to ALL OF THAT we would never get anything else done. Naturally, the brain has a built-in “spam filter” which filters out 99% of the world around us, and delivers only the information that it takes to be relevant to our consciousness. Consider this example:

Cognitive Filtering: Have you ever bought a new pair of shoes, or a new phone, or a new car, or laptop, or whatever, and suddenly the next day you notice that EVERYONE has those shoes, or that phone, or that car, or laptop, etc.? It has happened to all of us. Now, which is more likely: That yesterday a thousand other people went out and bought the same item that you did, or rather that they’ve had those items for quite some time and you are just now NOTICING this?

Surely the latter is more likely. This is because your brain is constantly FILTERING the data that it receives from your senses. Once you buy a certain product, your brain may tag that item as suddenly “relevant” and be more likely now to deliver it to your consciousness. Unfortunately, evidence that CONFIRMS your pre-existing beliefs is far more likely to be tagged “relevant” than evidence which DISCONFIRMS them. So, you may be hard-wired to not even NOTICE evidence that contradicts your present beliefs. Similarly, we have a natural tendency to see persons, or faces, even where they are not (recall the “face” on Mars, or the “Mother Mary” image on grilled cheese), because our brains are PRIMED (i.e., either our brains are “hard-wired” or else we are conditioned by experience) to pick out faces. As such, people who have been primed to see the supernatural probably WILL see the supernatural all around.

Suggestion #1: Might it be the case that beliefs delivered by your regular senses (e.g., vision, hearing, and so forth) is much more strongly justified than beliefs in the supernatural based on religious experience because the former have been subjected to much more rigorous scrutiny and verification by people whose jobs it is to investigate them (i.e., scientists)? If so, it seems then that what we need is a scientific investigation into religious experiences (e.g., answer to prayer, near death experiences, and so forth).

Suggestion #2: Nevertheless, even if the above mentioned varieties of religious experience may be subject to certain biases, might there still be SOME types of experience that are undeniable? For instance, what if one hears a booming voice in their head claiming to be God? Or, what if an angel appears to you, performing wondrous miracles and claiming to deliver a divine message? Or, what if you see someone who claims to be a prophet from God resurrecting a corpse from the dead? Surely THESE sorts of experiences deliver very strong justification for religious belief?

These suggestions will be the topic of our next two lessons.