

Michael Martin, Critique of Religious Experience

Reid Blackman

Defining 'religious experience'

Question: What is religious experience?

Answer: "[A]n experience in which one senses the immediate presence of some supernatural entity" (65).

- But the entity might not exist, nor need the experience lead one to believing that it exists.
- Can be god in the Judeo-Christian sense, or a finite god, or angels, demons, *etc.*, though one need not conceive of the entity as existing independently of the person having the experience.

Different types of Religious Experience: One experiences a nonreligious object as a religious one, *e.g.* a dove as an angel, one experiences an object that is a "public object" (one there for everyone to experience/observe), an experience of a supernatural entity that others cannot experience/observe, experiences that resist being captured by words, an awareness of an entity, though there is no sensation.

Question: Do any of these types of experiences indicate that there is a supernatural entity being perceived?

Possible answer: Yes.

Argument: The Argument from Religious Experience

The Argument from Religious Experience

Step 1

1. Under certain conditions, beliefs generated by perceptual experience are likely to be true.
2. Those conditions (at least sometimes) obtain.
3. Thus, one's beliefs on the basis of perception are (at least sometimes) justified.

Note: When they are not justified, it is because we are victim of illusion, delusion, sometimes under bad external conditions (as when the room is lit with a red light bulb), *etc.*

Step 2

1. Under certain conditions, beliefs formed on the basis of a religious experience are justified.
2. Those conditions (at least sometimes) obtain.
3. Thus, beliefs formed on the basis of a religious experience are (at least sometimes) justified.

Arguments Against the Argument from Religious Experience

Argument #1 (Inspired by, but not in, Martin)

1. Different people have different religious experiences.
2. These religious experiences conflict with each other.
3. Thus, not everyone's religious experiences can be true.
4. There is no reason for thinking one person's religious experiences reveal the truth while another person's do not.
5. Thus, we should not trust religious experiences to be revelatory (they do not reveal the truth).

Argument #2

Claim: The argument from religious experience depends upon a bad analogy with perception in general.

1. The analogy with perception only works if one can specify what counts as good/bad conditions.
 - We need to specify conditions because people have conflicting religious experiences.
2. One cannot do this in the case of religious experience.
3. Thus, the argument fails.

But some possible conditions: We ought to rule out those that are i) incompatible with the bible and ii) those that have a bad affect on the experienter.

Objection to (i): This presupposes that the bible is the word of god, and hence presupposes that god exists, and so cannot be used in an argument trying to prove god's existence.

Objection to (ii): We have no reason for thinking that seeing the world for what it is will make us better.

- "One could have a vision of God and yet, on account of weakness of will or the overpowering and dreadful nature of the vision, degenerate morally" (69).

Additional source of disanalogy (not in Martin): We have eyes for seeing physical things, ears for hearing physical things, *etc.*, but no faculty for perceiving supernatural entities.

Argument #3

Claim: There are two hypotheses for explaining religious experiences.

The External Cause Hypothesis: "[E]ach experience is caused by a reality external to the person who is having it" (67).

The Psychological Hypothesis: "[A] person's religious experience is caused not by some external reality but by the working of the person's own mind" (68).

- "[A] religious experience would have an origin similar to that of delusion and delirium" (68).

Question: Which hypothesis should we endorse?

Answer: The Psychological Hypothesis

Argument (note: I have modified Martin's argument):

Example of case in which the Psychological Hypothesis is Best:

1. Experiences should be taken to be revelatory (and not a concoction of one's own mind) to the extent that they tend to tell a coherent and uniform story.
 - The world is coherent and uniform, so our experiences, when accurate, mirror that order.
2. Experiences resulting from drugs and mental illness do not tell a coherent and uniform story.
3. Thus, drug and mental illness experiences should not be taken to be revelatory.

Similarly:

4. Experiences should be taken to be revelatory (and not a concoction of one's own mind) to the extent that they tend to tell a coherent and uniform story.
5. Religious experiences do not tell a coherent and uniform story.
6. Thus, religious experiences should not be taken to be revelatory.

Evidence of (5): Religious experiences in one culture conflict with those of another.

Argument #4

1. We should endorse the hypothesis that best explains why a) people in the same culture have similar religious experiences while b) people across cultures have dissimilar religious experiences.
 - People raised to be Christian (strongly tend to) have Christian experiences, people raised to be Hindus have Hindu religious experiences, *etc.*
2. The psychological hypothesis best explains (a) and (b) better.
3. Thus, we should endorse the psychological hypothesis.

Objection to Martin: People have experienced/observed Jesus coming back to life.

Martin's response: The gospels contradict each other, the story is not supported by Paul's letters, which many scholars believe were written earlier, and the story is not supported by Jewish and Roman sources" (70).

Religious Experiences Do Not Justify Belief in Any Particular Religion

Claim: Religious experiences do not support belief in an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God.

Argument:

1. Religious experiences, at best, reveal that there are supernatural entities.

2. But one may experience a supernatural entity without understanding the characteristics it has.
 - "Jesus may have been the incarnation of a finite god or one of many gods or even of the devil"
3. Particular religions attribute particular characteristics to the supernatural entity followers perceive.
4. Thus, the claims by particular religions concerning what characteristics god has cannot be supported by appeal to religious experiences.