

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE ARGUMENT FROM AGREEMENT

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The most influential version of the argument from religious experience was formulated by C. D. Broad in his 1939 essay "Arguments for the Existence of God."¹ This "Argument from Agreement" runs as follows:

- (1) Many people, widely dispersed over place, time, and tradition, have claimed to have experienced God. And,
- (2) there is a common core found in many of these experiences. And,
- (3) whenever there is considerable agreement among observers as to what they take themselves to be experiencing, it is reasonable to conclude that their experiences are veridical, unless there is some positive reason to think them delusive.

Therefore,

- (4) it is rational to believe that God exists.²

The first premise is a true empirical claim. Of course, it does not follow from this fact alone that the object of those experiences, God, really exists. But (1) is a necessary first step toward the existential claim.³

The justification for (2) is the distinction, usually associated with W. T. Stace, between experience and interpretation.⁴ According to Stace, if we peel away the layers of inference down to the core of pure experience, what we find is that apparently different experiences are in fact quite similar. The surface differences are due to cultural influences, diverse religious traditions, and different linguistic backgrounds.

Premise (3) is Broad's version of the doctrine of unanimity: if there is considerable agreement among percipients and if one knows of no good positive reason to think the perceptions delusive, then one has a good *prima facie* reason to think those percipients are all in contact with some objective

aspect of reality.⁵ The agreement of the experients and the absence of any known reason to think otherwise yields an epistemic presumption to the experiences: perception-like experiences of any sort should be considered innocent until proven guilty. This presumption is *defeasible* in that it can be overridden if there is good reason to think the perceptions delusive. For example: those who have ingested the drug Santonin commonly report seeing white objects as yellow, but this agreement is no reason to hold that the objects really are yellow. Because of the ingested drug, we discount the agreement by attributing it to something that distorts perceptions.

In the following, I look at a recent objection to Broad's Argument from Agreement offered by William Forgie. Forgie's objection is a Kantian attack on (3). The objection is "Kantian" in the sense that it applies to any apparent experience of an object that purportedly lies outside the possible bounds of sense experience. I argue that Forgie's objection fails. It is the contention of this paper that if theistic experiences are delusive, then this is due to some reason other than the one offered by Forgie.

According to Broad, (1)-(3) entail that:

- (A) There is good reason to think that the experients are experiencing one and the same object.

Without (A) the doctrine of unanimity loses much if not all of its evidential import. It would be reasonable to accept the testimony of others concerning some object X only if one were justified in holding that the experients really were experiencing one and the same object: that it really was X that was experienced.

But does (1)-(3) entail (A)? Could there be a reason to think that, even though the religious experiences had by many persons are phenomenologically similar, (A) is not entailed by (1)-(3)? In other words, that there is no good reason to hold

that the experiencers are in fact experiencing the same object. William Forgie has recently presented such an argument. According to Forgie, "we have no reason to think that there is something with which mystics are commonly in contact, and so no argument from agreement."⁶ This conclusion is reached by means of what, following Forgie, we will call the "gel objection."

A set of experiences, $E_1, E_2, E_3, \dots, E_n$, gel just in case there is good reason to think that $E_1, E_2, E_3, \dots, E_n$ are all perceptions of one and the same object.⁷ Multiple experiences apparently of the same object are evidential only if they gel. That is, the doctrine of unanimity is operative over a certain set of experiences only if the experiences in question gel. Now what would constitute gelling or at least provide a good reason for thinking that certain experiences do gel? Phenomenological indistinguishability, though perhaps an attractive candidate, does not seem to be either a necessary or sufficient condition for gelling. It is not necessary because of different perspectives: Jones and Smith may both be looking at the same donkey, even though what they see is, because Jones is at the north end and Smith at the south, greatly different. Nor is phenomenological indistinguishability sufficient for gelling. One can imagine objects that may appear exactly alike but are nonetheless quantitatively distinct. Examples might be certain stars as they appear in a telescope or several bodies of water that may appear indistinguishable and are yet distinct.

Phenomenological similarity, however, may be necessary. At least the objects of diverse perceptions cannot be too different and yet be thought to be of the same object. Similarity alone, nevertheless, is not sufficient. Suppose Jones reports seeing Thomas at time t_1 in New York. Smith, however, claims to have seen Thomas in Chicago at t_1 . Because of the great disparity of locales, and despite the fact that the reports of Smith and Jones are phenomenologically similar, one knows that they did not both see Thomas. The experiences of Jones and Smith did not have a common object because such things, humans, cannot be at two distant places at the same moment. The

content of the experiences alone is not sufficient to determine whether the experiences of Jones and Smith gel.

What else then must be added to phenomenological similarity in order to generate the constitutive conditions of gelling? Forgie suggests two conditions: spatial and temporal criteria.⁸

Not every object, however, requires that both spatial and temporal criteria be specified. For instance, say both Smith and Jones report observing a hemlock tree, a rarity, let us suppose, in this area. But Smith said he saw it on Monday; Jones on Tuesday. In this case one could determine whether the reports gel by simply determining the locale where the two claim to have seen it. If the locations match, then this is sufficient to hold that so too do the experiences. Or, again imagine that now Jones and Smith report having spied a golden eagle and again suppose that these are rare birds. Even if the location of the reports differ, as long as their timing roughly matches, then this would be sufficient to hold that the two really saw the same bird, rare though it may be.⁹

The import of Forgie's claim is obvious: if spacio-temporal criteria are necessary, either jointly or individually, for determining whether different perceptions gel, then religious experiences are indeed in a precarious position with respect to gelling. The object of theistic religious experiences, God, does not admit of spatial and temporal criteria; and so, assuming for the moment that Forgie is right, proposition (3) cannot properly apply to such experiences because they would not gel. With respect to religious experiences, proposition (A) would have to be rejected as false: there would be reason to hold that the doctrine of unanimity is not operative in these cases.

But is Forgie right? Is the presence of spatial and temporal criteria a logically necessary condition of different perceptions gelling? Is there no other way open to determine whether a set of experiences gel that does not require the presence of either spatial and temporal criteria? As seen earlier, whether *both* spatial and temporal criteria are necessary or only that *one or the other* is necessary is a

function of the object of the perception. That is, with a human person as the perceptual object, both spatial and temporal criteria may be necessary. But in the case of trees, birds, and other such objects, the presence of only one—whether spatial or temporal—may be necessary. So, the question becomes: is there any object that is such as to render *both* spatial and temporal criteria *unnecessary*?

According to classical theism, God is essentially singular.¹⁰ It is necessarily true that there is but one god. Monotheism is not a contingent state of affairs; it is necessary given the concept of God involved. For instance, Thomas argued that:

if, then, many gods existed they would necessarily differ from each other. Something, therefore, would belong to one which did not belong to another. And if this were a privation, one of them would not be absolutely perfect; but if a perfection, one of them would be without it. So it is impossible for many gods to exist.¹¹

Thomas' argument, then, is something like the following. Suppose by "God" is meant "the most perfect being" and suppose that there are two putative deities, A and B; then, by Leibniz's law, A and B must differ in some of their properties. Say A has a property "f" that is lacked by B. Necessarily, either "f" is a perfection or a privation; but, either way, there would exist a qualitative distinction between A and B. So, either A or B, but not both, would truly be God.

William Wainwright has persuasively contended that this argument of Thomas' relies upon the illicit assumption that the class of divine properties can be exhaustively subdivided into perfections and privations. This assumption is false on two counts.¹² First, not all properties possessed by God need be essential properties. So, our two deities, A and B, may be distinct because of a contingent property had by one and not by the other. Second, even the class of properties essential to God cannot be exhaustively divided into perfections and privations.

So, for instance, if there is a god, then it would be a necessary though perhaps trivial property that this being is either divine or a number greater than one thousand. But the possession of this property seems neither a perfection nor a privation. Thomas' classification of divine properties just seems wrong.

But perhaps an argument similar to Thomas' could succeed by concentrating not upon the possession of individual properties, but rather on the single property composed of the conjunction of all those properties necessary for a being to be properly considered God. Could there be two beings such that each possesses this property, call it 'D', and such that the two are yet distinct? This does not seem possible because of the following argument. D entails the property of being unsurpassable. A being is *unsurpassable* just in case, in Anselmian terms, that being is such that no greater is possible. God is the greatest possible being. According to Ockham, however, it is not clear that there cannot be two unsurpassable beings that are both such that no other possible being could surpass them.¹³ But this is mistaken. Taking a move from Anselm, one could argue as follows: it is better to be logically unique than it is to be logically replicable.¹⁴ So, there cannot be two beings A and B which are both unsurpassable, because one could imagine then a third being, C, that is such as to be logically unique. But C would then surpass both A and B. So, if there is any being that possesses D, then that being must be unsurpassable in such a way as to be essentially singular.

The point is this: if God exists, then there is at most only one god. But if there could be only one such being, then the absence of spatiotemporal criteria seems irrelevant. The presence of spatiotemporal criteria is necessary to identify a perceptual object Z as being some real object P rather than some other object Q only when there are several members of an object-kind.

II

Two consequences would then seem to follow. First, spatiotemporal criteria are not logically necessary for the

judgment of whether experiences gel or not. At least, they are not so for *all* possible objects. Second, given the nature of the alleged object involved in theistic experiences, the doctrine of unanimity may well be applicable even though the purported object of these experiences does not admit of spatiotemporal criteria. Forgie's "gel objection," because it is invalid, does not deleteriously impact the Argument from Agreement.

A possible objection would run as follows: spatiotemporal criteria are necessary even when an object is logically unique because of the possibility of misidentification. Even if X is a single object-kind, one may yet confuse X with some other object Y. So, spatiotemporal criteria are necessary to pick out the correct perceptions of X from the delusive ones.

Can one misidentify her experience of God? Are some putative experiences of God delusive? Most certainly so. Indeed, found within theism itself is the distinction between genuine experiences of God and deceptive experiences. As Paul put it, even Satan can parade as an angel of light.

Nonetheless, this objection fails because classical theists like John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, and Jonathan Edwards, among others, have set out certain marks or tests that are to distinguish between genuine religious experiences (veridical) and delusive ones. The tests include the moral results of the experience, the depth and texture of the experience, and the compatibility of the experience with orthodoxy. These tests, independent as they are of spatiotemporal criteria, suggest a response to the objection: it does seem possible that one could distinguish a veridical religious experience from a delusory one via some criteria other than spatiotemporal criteria. If that is so, then the objection fails: to succeed it would have to be the case that spatiotemporal criteria are essential in distinguishing veridical experiences from delusive ones. This is true even if the particular tests suggested by John of the Cross, St. Teresa, and others do not work. Some such test seems a genuine possibility, and so spatiotemporal criteria seem unnecessary. For instance, if someone claimed that she had had an experience of God in which she was instructed to kill all who could not run

a seven-minute mile, the rest of us—the fast as well as the slow—would be dubious indeed. We would rightly hold her experience to be delusive: it just does not have what a real experience of God, if any there be, would have. At the least, Forgie would need to show that one cannot distinguish between relevant perceptual alternatives by means of some such nontemporal, nonspatial test.

Forgie's gel objection, then, receives no help from this quarter. Perhaps theistic experiences are not veridical; but, if they are not, then this is due to some problem other than that of gelling.

NOTES

¹ Reprinted in *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research* (New York: Humanities, 1969) 190-201.

² Actually, for validity, (1)-(3) require the addition of another premise:

(3*) There is no good reason (known) to think otherwise.

Broad in fact held that something like (3*) was true. For a recent defense of (3*), see C. Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 115-42.

³ It should be noted, Broad seems to have held that religious experience served as evidence for a deity other than the god of theism. See his "Belief in a Personal God," *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research* 173. Because it is irrelevant to my focus, I will ignore it throughout the rest of this paper.

⁴ See Stace's *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: MacMillan, 1961) 31-38, 41-133. William James also subscribed to this view. See his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; reprinted, New York: Modern Library,

1936) 415, 498.

⁵Stace objected that mere unanimity does not prove anything about objective reality. See *Mysticism and Philosophy* 134-39, and see also James' similar claim in *Varieties* 415. This objection is faulty on two counts. It misses, first, Broad's inclusion of the qualifying clause that *there is no good reason known to think otherwise*; and so it is not unanimity alone. Second, unlike Thomas' five ways or Anselm's ontological argument, (1)-(3) is not an argument for the existence of God. It is, like Pascal's Wager or Plantinga's parity argument in *God and Other Minds*, an argument for the rationality of theistic belief. Broad is trying to show a presumption of rationality for religious belief.

⁶"Mystical Experience and the Argument from Agreement," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 17 (1985): 106.

⁷"Mystical Experience" 101.

⁸"Mystical Experience" 104-6.

⁹Of course, the locations could not differ too much in order for it to be plausible that the experiences gel.

¹⁰For a contrary view see Richard Swinburne, "Could There Be More Than One God?" *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 225-41.

¹¹*Summa Theologica*, trans. A. Pegis (1270; reprinted, New York: Modern Library, 1948) Ia Q 22, a3.

¹²"Monotheism," *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and W. J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 294-95.

¹³*Philosophical Writings*, trans. P. Boehner (1324;

reprinted, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964) 139-40.

¹⁴This sort of Anselmian argument has come to be known as "perfect being theology." Perfect being theology utilizes the concept of divine perfection as the primary limiting case in the development and articulation of a philosophically adequate notion of the nature of God. For more on perfect being theology, see Thomas Morris, "Perfect Being Theology," *Nous* 21 (1987): 19-30, and Morris' *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1986).