

Philosophy of Religion

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Alston's "Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief"

Article Outline

Question: To what extent does the experiential awareness of God justify beliefs about God based on such experiences?

Alston's View: The experiential awareness of God can (and often does) justify beliefs about God based on such experiences.

I. Inferring God's Existence from Religious Experience vs. Experiential Justification

A. Argument from Religious Experience: An argument that aims to infer God's existence from premises that state facts about people's religious experience.

For example:

- (1) Religious experience is a universal experience.
- (2) Universal experiences constitute some significant evidence for the existence of the percept of the experience.

So it is probable to degree N that:

- (3) God exists

B. Alston's argument is *not* an argument for the existence of God from the facts of religious experience. It is an argument for supposing that people can be rationally justified in believing in God on the basis of their experiences of God. It seems a least initially plausible to suppose that arguments for God's existence from religious experience may fail to provide evidence for God's existence, even if the facts of religious experience do provide good evidence for supposing that people may be rationally justified in believing that God exists on the basis of their experience. Cf. My sensory perceptual experience of a house surely provides a justification for my belief that there is a house in front of me, but does this give me a good argument for the existence of houses as constituent elements of an objective, external world?

II. Perceptual Experience of God

A. A person S perceives God in the phenomenological sense; that is, it seems to S or S takes it that God is presented to S's experience. (A perception of something, x, in this sense is not a success term; it does not insure that x actually exists and that the person is really perceiving x).

B. By “God” Alston understands “God” in the western theistic sense, but in his argument “God” may cover any supreme reality.

C. The beliefs, based on experiential awareness of God, include (1) beliefs about what God is doing in relation to the subject, comforting, guiding, strengthening, communicating some message and (2) beliefs about God’s character, e.g., being powerful, loving, merciful. He calls these “M” (for manifestation) beliefs.

III. Characteristics of the Experiential Awareness of God

- A. Experiential, and so does not involve thinking or reasoning about God.
- B. Direct, in the sense that one is immediately aware of God, rather than being aware of God by being aware of something else.
- C. Often non-sensory, and hence unlike sense perception.
- D. Focal experience, in that one is temporarily unaware of other things.

IV. Principle of Credulity (POC)

A. POC: beliefs based on experience (perceptual beliefs) are prima facie rational in the absence of sufficient overrides. Overrides may be sufficient reasons to think that the belief is false (rebutters) or reasons for supposing that the experience is not conducive for the production of a true belief (underminers).

B. The justification for POC is that the alternative is radical skepticism about experience. We must afford to our experiences initial credibility otherwise we could never show that experience is reliable.

V. The Analogical Argument: Sense Experience and Mystical Experience

In essence Alston argues that mystical experiences are sufficiently analogous to sensory experiences. Since we are rational to form beliefs on the basis of the former (in the absence of overrides), we are also rational to form beliefs on the basis of the former (in the absence of overrides).

Two ways in which Alston’s argument is vulnerable. First, if in general there are known overrides for all mystical experiences. Second, mystical experience is relevantly not analogous to sensory experience.

VI. Differences between Sensory and Mystical Experience

A. Alston concedes that there are significant differences between sensory experience and mystical experience: (1) sense experience is universal (mystical experience is not), (2) sense experience is continuous (mystical experience is not, and (3) sense experience is vivid and detailed (mystical experience is not).

B. Alston rejects the idea that these differences negatively impact the justification of religious beliefs based on mystical experience, as none of these issues seem epistemic (or truth-directed) in nature.

VII. Naturalistic Explanations of Mystical Experience

- A. Natural explanations attempt to state the cause of mystical experience without invoking the existence of God.
- B. Alston argues that citing natural causes of a mystical experience no more eliminates God than citing brain processes as causes of sense experience eliminates external objects. Naturalistic explanations can only address proximate causes of the experience and therefore cannot rule out God as someone involved upstream in the causal chain.

VIII. Independent Testing or Cross Checks

- A. Some argue that mystical experience is different than sense experience because the latter is open to a public checking procedure to test or independently verify/confirm aspects of the subject's experience. E.g. If I have a sensory perceptual experience of a dog in the classroom, my experience can be checked for accuracy by other people having a similar experience.
- B. Alston argues that mystical experience *does* have checking procedures: (1) conformity of the experience to what would be expected on the basis of doctrines of God, (2) "fruits" of the experience (in the sense of personal spiritual development) conforming to expectations, and (3) a content in the experience that a person would not have developed on their own.
- C. Alston concedes that these tests are different than the tests conducted for the veridicality of sense experience, but we cannot impose the same tests on different kinds of experiences without falling into epistemic imperialism. There is no good reason to suppose that all experiences must be tested by precisely the same criteria.