RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY AND KNOWLEDGE

Gregory W. Dawes

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Editorial Board
Dunedin
New Zealand

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Printed on acid-free paper

To Alan Musgrave, mentor and friend

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Philosophy and Religion

Abstract There are reasons to be dissatisfied with the philosophy of religion, as currently practised. While it includes some excellent work, it is shamefully narrow in its focus on Christian theism and the range of topics it covers. The broader approach adopted here is comparative and episte-mological: it focuses on claims to knowledge within the world's religions.

What you have in your hands (or on the screen in front of you) is an intro-duction to the philosophy of religion. It is, however, quite unlike other introductions to the subject. My reason for writing it was a sense of frus-tration with other such works, indeed with the philosophy of religion, as currently practised. I am not the only person to feel this way. Many of my colleagues in the academy – in both philosophy and religious studies – have come to regard the philosophy of religion as a marginal field, of little interest to anyone outside a small group of practitioners. What I want to offer you, then, is a fresh perspective on what has become a tired subject.

What is this fresh perspective? My particular focus is the theory of knowledge, 'epistemology', as philosophers call it. Devotees of any reli-gion make claims to knowledge. This raises a number of questions. Firstly, in what idiom are these claims couched? Is it poetry, prose, or something that shares the characteristics of both? Secondly, what kind of knowledge

do religions claim to offer? Is it factual knowledge, knowledge of how to live, or both? Thirdly, what sources of religious knowledge do devotees refer to? Do we have any reason to regard these as reliable? These are the questions to which this study is devoted.

1.1   The Philosophy of Religion

Let me begin, however, with what has motivated this work. Why am I unhappy with the philosophy of religion, in its current form? While philosophers of religion do produce work of the highest intellectual calibre – careful and rigorously argued – the range of topics they discuss is shamefully narrow. That narrowness reflects not only the history of the field, but also its current domination by Christian apologetic concerns. Its focus is almost entirely Christian theism, 'theism' being understood as belief in God, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect, one who created the world. Philosophers ask, first of all, whether the idea of such a God is coherent. (Could there exist such a being?) They then examine the arguments for and against the belief in his existence.

For many years, I, too, taught the philosophy of religion in this way. But I gradually became dissatisfied with this approach, which suffers from two disadvantages. The first is that it ignores any religion that does not profess belief in such a God. That might, at first sight, seem defensible. After all, a little more than half the world's population are, at least nominally, theists. There are subtle differences in the conception of God defended by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers. But all three traditions agree that there is a Creator God, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect. Some forms of Hinduism also rest on belief in such a deity.

It remains the case, however, that almost half the world's population are *not* theists, in this sense. There are polytheistic traditions, with many gods, such as the West African religion of Yoruba. (This may have more adherents today than does Judaism.[1]) There are also forms of monotheism that do not regard the divine as a personal being. Versions of this view are found within the Advaita Vedānta (non-dualistic traditions) of Hinduism. Finally, there are religions, such as Theravada Buddhism, in which the gods play a role, but which lack the idea of a single high deity who created the world.

A second problem with the philosophy of religion, as currently practised, is that it focuses on only one aspect of religion, namely explicitly held religious beliefs. Religious studies scholar Ninian Smart famously

distinguished six (or, in some studies, seven) dimensions of religion.[2] Religions have, first of all, a *ritual* dimension. People practise a religion (by attending a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple) as well as believe in it. Indeed, most people practise their religion before believing in it. Think, for instance, of a child brought up in a religious family. Secondly, religions have a *mythological* dimension. They have traditional narratives, rich in metaphor and imagery, which capture the imagination as well as engage the intellect. Thirdly, religions have an *ethical* dimension. They do not merely describe reality; they demand that their adherents behave in particular ways. Fourthly, religions have a *social* dimension. Religious practices are inherited from a community, and being religious involves being a member of that community. Fifthly, religions have an *experiential* dimension. Religious rituals evoke powerful feelings: of belonging, of awe, of sorrow, of joy, or of peace. Finally, religions have a *doctrinal* dimension: that of explicitly held beliefs. While it is this last dimension that is of particular interest to philosophers, we should not ignore the others.

There is a final problem with the philosophy of religion as traditionally practised. Focusing on arguments for and against the existence of God ignores the fact that much religious belief is not based on such arguments at all. It is based on what are thought to be direct experiences of some ultimate reality (mystical experiences) or on faith in what is believed to be a divine revelation. Of course, intellectually inclined believers may also produce arguments, which need to be taken seriously. I shall outline some of them later. But those arguments are rarely the basis of their faith. The philosophy of religion should examine and assess the *actual* grounds of religious belief, not merely the arguments put forward in support of views held on quite different grounds. Many defenders of theistic arguments are quite unashamedly Christian apologists, that is to say, defenders of the Christian faith. But we should not allow the philosophy of religion to be reduced to the philosophy of Christian apologetics. Religion is bigger and more interesting than that.

1.2   A Focus on Knowledge

I am not the only person to make such criticisms. A number of distinguished philosophers – thinkers such as John Schellenberg, Paul Draper, and Graham Oppy – have expressed similar concerns. Some, such as Kevin Schilbrack, Timothy Knepper, and Nick Trakakis, have put forward proposals for the reform of the field. Those proposals are various and

sometimes contrasting, but I shall not discuss them here. All I shall offer is one example of how a philosopher might approach religion differently.

What approach shall I adopt? Rather than examining arguments for and against the existence of the Christian God, I shall examine some issues of philosophical interest that relate to all forms of religion. These include (a) the nature of religious language and thought, (b) the aims of religion, and (c) the sources of religious knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, much of the following discussion will focus on the last of those issues, namely *religious epistemology*. But while this study has an epistemological slant, I make no apology for this. Epistemology is, in a certain sense, foundational. It is important to know *what* people believe; it is more important to know *why* they believe it.

This is certainly not the only way in which the philosophy of religion could be done 'in a new key'. Wesley Wildman's *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry* offers a good example of a quite different approach. But my focus on epistemology makes it possible to discuss a wide variety of religious traditions. While religious beliefs are extraordinarily diverse, the kinds of sources from which devotees draw their religious knowledge are limited in number. I have identified four of these, which cover most, if not all, of the world's religious traditions. They are

    (a) knowledge by way of *signs*,
    (b) knowledge by *acquaintance*,
    (c) knowledge by way of *discursive reason* (arguments), and
    (d) knowledge by way of *testimony* (authority).

It follows that the key question for this study will not be (at least in the first instance), 'Are these beliefs true?' Religions involve claims to know certain things: about how to live and about God, the gods or some other ultimate, unconditioned reality. My question will be, 'On what basis do religious people claim to know these things? Are these reliable sources of knowledge?'

Notes

1. Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions*, p. 12.
2. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, pp. 15–25.

Religious Language and Thought

Introduction to Part One

The academic study of religion is a multi-disciplinary affair. A philosopher will bring to that study a particular set of questions, which will differ from those asked by an anthropologist, a historian, a psychologist, or a sociologist. The traditional focus of philosophers has been the doctrinal dimension of religion: the beliefs that devotees explicitly profess. The particular beliefs they are interested in are those that constitute what we might call a 'worldview': a particular conception of the universe and of human beings' place within it.

The problem, as we have seen, is that this focus can distort our view of religion. Religions do much more than express a worldview. The doctrines of a religious community emerge from myth, are expressed in ritual, and have a normative dimension. They tell us not just how the world is, but also how it ought to be. It follows that we must be particularly careful not to assimilate the language of religion to that of the sciences. Religions do make factual claims, which are comparable (in some respect) to those of the sciences. But they do much more than this.

The first two parts of the present study will be devoted to understanding what it is that religions are trying to achieve. I shall begin by focusing on religious language and the distinctive mode of thought that it expresses. In a later section, I shall try to spell out the aims of religion. Only after undertaking this preparatory work will we be in a position to assess religious claims.

Religious Language

Abstract Using speech act theory, this chapter examines the differing roles played by religious utterances. These are not just assertives (stating what are thought to be facts); they can also be commissives (committing the speaker to a course of action) and declarations (bringing about new states of affairs). Such utterances have a double direction of fit, being both *models of* the world and *models for* how it ought to be.

Keywords Assertives · directives · commissives · expressives · declarations · models of · models for

Our first task is to examine the nature of religious language or (to use my preferred terminology) the role of religious utterances. I spoke a moment ago about the temptation to assimilate the language of religion to that of science. This tendency is particularly evident in the work of the so-called new atheists. Richard Dawkins, for instance, argues that the existence of God is 'a scientific hypothesis like any other'.[1] This is not, of course, entirely wrong. (Dawkins is too clever a man to be entirely wrong.) But it does overlook the diverse roles played by religious utterances in the lives of devotees.

2.1 The Theory of Speech Acts

One way of thinking about these roles is by way of what is called 'speech act theory'. Philosopher J. L. Austin pointed out that we use words not

merely to state facts, but also to bring about new facts, new states of affairs. Perhaps the simplest example is that of making a request. When I say to you at table, 'Please pass the salt', I am attempting to influence your behaviour. Unlike some other kinds of speech acts, this does not work automatically – you might refuse to pass the salt – but that is my intention in uttering it. When I say to my class, on the other hand, 'I promise to return your essays on Monday', I have performed a different kind of speech act. It commits me to behaving in a particular way. This *does* bring about a certain effect automatically: not, of course, the action to which it refers (I might fail to return the essays), but the existence of an obligation. Having made this commitment, I ought to act accordingly. Another kind of speech act is illustrated by my uttering the words, 'I, Greg, take you Kristin to be my wife', in the appropriate context. Once again, this automatically brings about a certain effect. It brings about the existence of a new instance of a social institution, namely marriage, which carries with it certain rights and privileges.

Philosopher John Searle has argued that there are five different types of speech acts. These are

(a) *assertives*, which state matters of fact, describing how things are,
(b) *directives* (orders, commands, and requests), whose intention is to get others to behave in a certain way,
(c) *commissives* (promises, vows, pledges, and so on), which commit the speaker to a particular course of action,
(d) *expressives*, which express the speaker's feelings or attitudes, and
(e) *declarations* (like those involved in the pronunciation of a marriage vow), in which 'we make something the case by declaring it to be the case'.[2]

Searle argues, in fact, that these are the *only possible* kinds of speech acts, but we need not follow that argument here. What I am interested in is the question, 'What kind of speech acts are religious utterances, such as those that profess belief in God?'

2.2   Religious Utterances

A key idea that will emerge from this study is that religious utterances cannot be thought of as simply assertives, or statements about the way the world is. Take, for example, the action of pronouncing the words of the

creed, the Christian statement of faith. This begins with, 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth'. What are Christians doing when they pronounce these words? They are not merely saying that God exists (uttering an *assertive*, to use Searle's term). They *are* saying this, of course. (Some followers of Ludwig Wittgenstein neglect this fact to their peril.) But a believer's profession of faith also commits that person to a particular way of life. It is, in Searle's terms, a *commissive*. This is a different kind of utterance from, 'I believe the earth orbits the sun'. The latter does not commit me to a certain way of living: the acceptance of a Copernican view of the solar system carries with it no corresponding set of moral obligations. A profession of faith does. Those obligations are often spelled out in the form of commandments which are, of course, *directives*.

This is perhaps even clearer in the case of Islam. It is very easy to become a Muslim. All you must do is to pronounce the Muslim profession of faith, the *shahāda* (or 'bearing witness'), before two Muslim witnesses. The *shahāda* reads:

> *lā ʾilāha ʾillā l-Lāh, Muhammadun rasūlu l-Lāh*
> There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.

This looks very much like what Searle calls a *declaration*. It not only states what is thought to be a fact (as an *assertive* would); it also brings about a new state of affairs. Having made this declaration, I have gained a new status, that of being a Muslim, and a new set of obligations, that of living according to the *sharīʿa*, the 'straight path' revealed to the Prophet.

2.3 DIRECTION OF FIT

Another way of thinking about this issue is in terms of 'direction of fit'. Philosophers often distinguish between beliefs and desires by saying that they have differing relations to the states of affairs to which they refer. Both beliefs and desires are *intentional states*, states of mind that are 'about' something. Each aims at a particular kind of relation between the mind and reality. But the relation between the mind and reality differs between beliefs and desires. When I say, 'I believe that it is raining', the appropriate direction of fit is from my utterance to the world. What must change if my intentional state is to be satisfied is my utterance, since what I say ought to reflect the way the world is. But if I say, 'I wish it were raining', what

I am expressing is a desire that the world should conform to the content of my utterance. So the appropriate direction of fit here is from the world to my utterance. What has to change if my intentional state is to be satisfied is the world.

One characteristic of religious utterances is that they often have a double direction of fit. They are – to use another common distinction – both 'models of' and 'models for'. (Scientific models, by way of contrast, are simply *models of* some aspect of the world.) Religious utterances *both* state what is thought to be some fact *and* commit the speaker to bringing his or her life into conformity with that fact. And not just his or her life. In modern liberal democracies, we are used to a certain separation of religion and politics, of church and state. But this is, by no means, the case elsewhere. Nor was it the case in the Christian world before the eighteenth century. In many contexts, religious believers are committed to bringing not just their own lives, but the entire social world into conformity with what they believe to be a divinely sanctioned order. Religious beliefs often have a strongly political dimension, as well as an ethical one. That is one of the features that makes religion such a powerful force in the contemporary world.

Notes

1. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 50.
2. Searle, *Making the Social World*, p. 59.

Modes of Thought

Abstract Going beyond language, this chapter asks whether there is a distinctively religious mode of thought. Using Merlin Donald's distinction between mimetic, mythic, and theoretic culture, it argues that the native idiom of religious thought is mythic. Mythic thought typically uses narrative and is heavily reliant upon metaphor, although it often fails to distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical.

I have just been discussing the character of religious utterances in the sense of the particular roles they play in the lives of devotees and the communities to which they belong. But let me pass now from language to thought. Are there distinctive forms of thought that are characteristic of religion?

This question has a long history. The idea that differing groups of people might employ differing modes of thought was first proposed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who spoke of the difference between 'participatory' and 'causal' orientations to the world.[1] More recently, Donald Wiebe has distinguished between religious and scientific thought, describing religious thinking as 'mythopoeic',[2] a term first used by Henri Frankfort and his fellow authors.[3] Michael Barnes offers a different categorization, drawn from the psychology of Jean Piaget (1896–1980), which distinguishes between 'concrete operational' and 'formal operational' thinking.[4] Each of

these has something to offer. But the categories I shall use are drawn from the work of Merlin Donald, whose 1991 book *Origins of the Modern Mind* speaks of three stages in the development of human culture, each of which corresponds to a distinctive mode of thought.[5]

Before I outline these modes of thought, I should warn against a possible misunderstanding. These thinkers sometimes speak of 'stages in the development of human culture' or 'stages in the development of thought'. Such talk can be misleading. These stages are not discrete, in the sense that having moved from one stage, we leave it behind. On the contrary, earlier ways of thinking persist in modern culture. An analogy here can be found in our modes of communication. New modes come along, but the old modes do not cease to exist. Radio continues to exist in an age of television and the Internet. Handwriting did not disappear with the invention of the typewriter. What happens is that a new mode of thought takes over the role of the 'central processor' in human cognition, with earlier modes of thought persisting in a subordinate role.[6] The modern mind is, as one author writes, a 'storied mind',[7] with modes of thought that build on one another.

3.1   Mimetic Culture

What Donald argues is that the earliest form of distinctively human culture was *mimetic*. Mimetic actions are deliberate attempts to represent some event or fact about the world, but in ways that do not (yet) involve language. An example is that of the Australian aboriginal dance that acts out the actions of a totemic animal. Mimetic thought goes beyond mimicry, that is to say, the simple reproduction of a pattern of behaviour (perhaps a facial expression or a sound), something already found among birds (such as parrots). It also goes beyond imitation, of the kind that occurs when offspring copy their parents' behaviour (something found among monkeys and apes). Mimesis incorporates both, but in the service of 'a higher end, that of re-enacting or re-presenting an event or relationship'.[8] Mimesis is also creative, in the sense that mimetic gestures are invented in the service of this goal. Donald suggests that mimetic culture was characteristic of *homo erectus* (upright man), a (now extinct) form of hominid that seems to have emerged about 1.5 million years ago.

Here, too, we should note the persistence of this mode of thought. We see it, for instance, in our ability to play charades. Some forms of children's play are also mimetic, and quite creatively so. Some forms of art, such as

plays that contain little dialogue, are largely mimetic. But most dramatic works, including opera and cinema, are 'cognitive hybrids', employing both mimesis and language. Even here, however, the mimetic dimension is essential. As Donald writes, 'very little of what a good film communicates is capturable in words'.[9]

Mimesis plays an important role in religion. Religious rituals are not just mimetic, since they involve other kinds of symbolism. But mimesis remains central to many rituals. The Christian Eucharist (the 'Mass', 'Lord's Supper', etc.) involves a re-enactment of the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper. The Jewish festival of Tabernacles (*sukkōt*) re-enacts the experience of the Hebrew tribes living in the wilderness after the Exodus. The rites of the pilgrimage to Mecca (the *hajj*) within Islam re-enact the experiences of Abraham and the mother of Ishmael, Hagar. Other examples include Christian nativity plays (commemorating the birth of Jesus), passion plays (commemorating his death), or the re-enactments of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn ʿAlī performed in many Shiʿite Muslim communities on the day of ʿĀshūrāʾ.

3.2   Mythic Culture

A second mode of thought and culture is *mythic*. The word 'myth' is troublesome, since in everyday speech it means little more than a persistent falsehood. But it has a more precise meaning within anthropology, where myths are thought of as sacred narratives which tell stories of origins or transformations, shape the rituals of the communities that hold them sacred, and function as patterns that are used to interpret later events.[10] Mythic culture relies upon language in ways in which mimetic culture does not. So it could not emerge before the development of language. It does, however, thrive in cultures that lack writing, where complex myths can be transmitted orally for many generations, often with a remarkable degree of accuracy. How does myth differ from mimesis? Well, while mimetic actions represent particular events or facts, myths model much larger states of affairs, in ways that bestow significance on the lives of individuals and their community.

Three features of mythic thought are worth noting in this context. The first is its use of narrative. A myth generally tells a story, commonly a story about the origins of a community or (in some cases) the origins of the world. The Māori people – the indigenous people of my own country – have a creation myth, involving the sky-father Ranginui and the

earth-mother Papatuanuku. This is a vivid account of creation, in which the embrace of these primeval parents traps their sons, one of whom, Tāne (the god of forests and birds), eventually separates the parents, creating the world in which we live. The biblical book of Genesis also includes one or, perhaps, two creation myths in its opening chapters, which are echoed in the Qurʾan's repeated claim that God created the world in six days. The earliest sacred text of Indian religion, the Ṛg Veda (10.90), includes a myth (the *Puruṣasūkta*) about the sacrifice of a giant man, from whose body parts the world was created.

A second feature of myth is its employment of metaphor. Indeed, Donald defines myth as a 'collectively held system of explanatory and regulatory metaphors'.[11] In the myth found in the Ṛg Veda, for instance, the body parts of the cosmic man represent different classes of people: the brahmins (or priests), the *rājanyas* (princes), and the *vaiśyas* (commoners). The lowly status of the *śūdras* (the servant class) is indicated by the fact that they emerge from his feet. These metaphorical identifications are regarded as regulatory, saying something about the proper structuring of society. They have often been used to lend support to the caste system.

The reliance of myth on metaphor means that myths generate differing interpretations, even within a community that regards them as sacred. We can understand this generative ability if we stop for a moment to examine the nature of metaphor. A metaphor is a particular use of language, which is literally false. If I say, following the Roman author Plautus (ca. 254–184 BCE), that 'man is a wolf to man' (*homo homini lupus*), I am not saying that human beings form a species of pack animal belonging to the genus *canis*. What am I saying? Well, that will depend on the context in which I am making this claim and our everyday beliefs about wolves. If the context is one in which we are witnessing human exploitation and if we all believe (perhaps quite unfairly) that wolves are fierce and rapacious, my intended meaning will be clear. In itself, however, a metaphor does not have a *meaning*; it has *a range of possible applications*. Metaphors are flexible; they are open to reinterpretation in new contexts. Our use of the wolf metaphor might alter if we develop a different view of humans or a less jaundiced view of wolves.[12]

A third feature of myths has to do with the authority they enjoy within the community that employs them. A myth is not just a story told in order to entertain, although myths may have this role as well. Often this is the only role they retain in societies shaped by theoretic modes of thought. (A good example is the use of Greek myths in the recent *Percy Jackson* books

and movies.) In traditional societies, however, myths express an authorita-
tive account of reality. As Donald writes,

> in conquering a rival society, the first act of the conquerors is to impose their
> myth on the conquered. And the strongest instinct of the conquered is to
> resist this pressure; the loss of one's myth involves a profoundly disorient-
> ing loss of identity.[13]

In these contexts, a myth is not just entertaining; it has normative signifi-
cance, indicating how one ought to act. I shall come back to this point in
a moment.

3.3   THEORETIC CULTURE

A third form of thought and culture is *theoretic*. Theoretic culture employs
a different mode of thinking from that of myth. Its mode of thinking is
analytic or 'logico-scientific'. While myth provides a sense of our place in
the world and how we ought to behave, theoretic thinking seeks the best
available explanation of what we see around us. While myths enjoy a taken-
for-granted authority, theoretic culture encourages conscious reflection. It
relies upon argument and proof rather than story and metaphor, being
concerned with logical relations among propositions and their relation to
evidence. Its distinctive ways of operating include 'systematic taxonomies,
induction, deduction, verification, differentiation, quantification, idealiza-
tion, and formal methods of measurement'.[14]

The contrast between mythic and logico-scientific thinking helps to
explain the cultural divide between the humanities and the sciences. As a
humanist myself, I would be reluctant to say that the humanities embody
a more primitive mode of thought. After all, humanistic disciplines also
employ theory. But their modes of thought are closer to those of mythic cul-
tures. Historians, for instance, commonly explain events by telling stories:
their explanations are narrative explanations. History employs theoretic
thought insofar as different possible narratives are compared, in the light
of the evidence provided by documents and artefacts. But the development
of theories – general statements testable by observation and experiment – is
more characteristic of the social sciences. It would be wrong, however, to
overstate this contrast. Evolutionary biology, for instance, combines theo-
retic thought (such as that found within population genetics) with a grand
narrative scheme. The latter also explains by telling a story. Even within the
sciences, narrative thinking has not disappeared.

Theoretic culture is dependent, not just on language, but on written language. Myths can be handed on orally, by word of mouth. But if theoretic thinking is to be maintained, for any period of time, it must be recorded in writing. We see this development in ancient Greece, for the Greeks discovered that 'by entering ideas, even incomplete ideas, into the public record, they could later be improved and refined'.[15] Insofar as theoretic thought depends upon interaction with such records, as well as with its own systems of symbols (such as those of mathematics and logic), it involves what is sometimes called 'extended cognition'. Thinking of this kind does not all happen 'inside the head'; it extends beyond the individual and relies upon a broader culture infrastructure.

3.4   Philosophy and Myth

The distinction between myth and theory ought to be important for philosophers of religion. Why? Because the native idiom of philosophy is theoretic, while much (although not all) religious discourse is in the idiom of myth. Let me highlight this fact by looking more closely at two features of mythic thought.

I have argued that mythic thought is characterized by its employment of symbolism and metaphor. But it also fails to make clear distinctions between literal and metaphorical uses of language or between the symbol and that for which it stands. This is most obviously the case when it comes to the myths of preliterate societies,[16] in which (for instance) a mountain range may be identified with the canoe (*waka*) on which the ancestors arrived in the land. Such an identification was not traditionally thought of as 'merely' metaphorical.[17]

The same phenomenon can be found in later religious traditions. While these traditions do make distinctions between the literal and the metaphorical, there are certain claims they do not regard as 'merely' metaphorical (even when they cannot be literally true). Roman Catholic theologians may be prepared to admit that the biblical description of the Church as 'the Body of Christ' is a metaphor. But they would not say this when the same phrase is used for the consecrated bread of the Eucharist. This use of language is neither literal nor metaphorical, for the Eucharist is thought to make present the reality of which it speaks.

A second feature of mythic thought that distinguishes it from theoretic is its normative dimension. Myth presents the world as a realm of action, rather than a realm of contemplation.[18] It indicates how the world ought to be, rather than simply how it is. The mythic narratives of the Dreaming

in Australian aboriginal cultures are (among other things) a 'guide to the norms of conduct'.[19] The biblical story of the creation in Genesis 1 is not merely an account of how the world came to be; it also encourages observance of the sabbath.[20] Plato wanted to censor the ancient Greek myths (those of Homer and Hesiod) because of what he saw as their morally corrupting influence.[21] But he also suggested creating a new myth (his 'noble lie'), which would have a good effect on the population.[22] What this means is that myth tends to be affectively charged, rather than detached and dispassionate. All narrative tends to elicit emotions,[23] but this is particularly true of a narrative that has implications for how we live.

Philosopher Karl Popper suggested that scientific (theoretic) thinking developed out of mythic thought.[24] Scientific thinking began, he argued, when thinkers began to compare differing forms of mythic 'explanation' in order to decide which was preferable. It follows that theoretic culture is associated with the emergence of critical thinking about religion and myth. Indeed, it often goes hand-in-hand with a kind of 'demythologization',[25] in which the taken-for- granted authority of myths is undermined.

Religious authorities have often opposed this process, as can be seen from the reaction to the critical study of the Bible in the nineteenth century. It is true that religious communities also employ theoretic modes of thought in the form of theology. But there is a tension here, for theology can be critical only within limits. The authority of the foundational myths of a community must remain unchallenged. The myths can certainly be reinterpreted – theologians become very skilled at this task – but their authority cannot be denied.

The development of theoretic thinking also involved a separation of the factual and normative dimensions of thought. Myth has a normative dimension that science lacks. Ernest Gellner describes this as the process by which cognition is granted a kind of 'diplomatic immunity'. With the development of theoretic thought, he writes, 'greater and greater expanses of truth acquire an autonomy from the social, moral and political obligations and decencies of society'.[26] This shift is related to the differing functions of scientific and religious utterances, which I mentioned when discussing speech acts. Religious utterances, you will recall, function as commissives, expressives, and declarations, as well as assertives. Indeed, a society dominated by mythic thought simply does not distinguish these differing functions.[27] Scientific utterances, on the other hand, are (or are supposed to be) merely assertives. This does not mean that scientists are

not motivated by normative considerations. Those scientists who produce reports on climate change are surely motivated by concern for its consequences and are anxious to ensure that governments and individuals act accordingly. The practice of science is not (and should not be) value-free. But if scientists allowed their ethical judgements to influence their selection of data, that would be considered a corruption of their science.

Notes

1. Lévy-Bruhl, *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality*, p. 92.
2. Wiebe, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought*, pp. 213–216.
3. Frankfort, et al., *Before Philosophy*, pp. 19–36.
4. Barnes, *Stages of Thought*, pp. 21, 203, et passim.
5. The idea of distinctive modes of thought remains controversial, but even its critics find it difficult to dismiss (Wiebe, 'The Prelogical Mentality Revisited', pp. 35–45). G. S. Kirk, for instance, rejects the idea of a mythical mode of thought, but admits there are poetic and religious modes of thought, which are employed by myth (Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, pp. 282, 292–293).
6. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 271.
7. Abbott, 'The Evolutionary Origins of the Storied Mind', p. 247.
8. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 169.
9. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 170.
10. Cohen, 'Theories of Myth', p. 337.
11. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 214.
12. For a defence of the wolf, see Midgley, *Beast and Man*, pp. 24–25.
13. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 258.
14. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, pp. 273–274.
15. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 342.
16. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, p. 38.
17. Beattie, 'Traditions and Legends Collected from the Natives of Murihiku', p. 109.
18. Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, p. 3.
19. Stanner, '*The Dreaming*', p. 272.
20. Guillaume, *Land and Calendar*, pp. 41–42.
21. Plato, *Republic*, books 2–3 (377c–392c).
22. Plato, *Republic*, book 3 (415c–d).
23. Oatley, 'Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact', pp. 112–114.
24. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, pp. 169–71.
25. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 275.
26. Gellner, 'The Savage and the Modern Mind', p. 180.
27. Gellner, 'The Savage and the Modern Mind', pp. 174–175.

Theology/Dharmatology

Abstract If the native idiom of religious thought is mythic, that of philosophy is theoretic. In order to assess religious beliefs, we need to engage in a process of 'translation', from one mode of thought to another. There are pitfalls here. Myths are notoriously open to reinterpretation, and the messages they convey are sometimes lost in translation.

Keywords Dharmatology · hermeneutics · allegory · analogy · apophatic theology · kataphatic theology

We have seen that the primary sources from which religions draw their inspiration are generally products of mythic thought. But as I mentioned a moment ago, religious communities – at least those that have developed within literate cultures – also employ theoretic thought. Theoretic thinking about religious matters is often described as *theology*. But since the term 'theology' comes from the Greek *theos*, meaning 'a god', it is not always appropriate. It does not seem applicable to traditions in which belief in gods is not central (such as Buddhism) or that hold everything to be a manifestation of one impersonal reality (such as the Advaita Vedānta traditions of Hinduism). So an alternative term might be 'dharmatology', since the term *dharma* is used in a number of South Asian traditions to refer to what we would call 'cosmic order', 'virtuous behaviour', or 'religion'.

To keep things simple, however, I shall keep calling this way of thinking 'theology'. But whatever we call it, this form of religious thought

turns the myths of a tribe into a series of doctrines, arranged in a more or less systematic form. Theology is, then, what philosophers call a 'rational reconstruction' of the beliefs of a particular community.[1] It sets these beliefs out in a systematic way, one that shows how they are related to one another. Theology functions as a kind of logical substitute for what we might call the 'native idiom' of religious thought, turning what was originally expressed as metaphor and narrative into a series of propositions that aim to be as literal as possible.

The New Testament, for instance, speaks of Jesus using a variety of images, such as that of the 'Word' of God. 'Word' of God is clearly a metaphor, drawn from the mythic account of Genesis 1, in which God creates the world by speaking. (God, if he is a spiritual being, cannot 'speak' in any literal sense of that term.) Early Christian theologians sought to systematize such ideas using terms drawn from Greek philosophy. In a definition still found in the Christian creed, for instance, they claimed that Jesus shared a common 'nature' (*ousia*) with the Creator. An activity of this kind is clearly that of an educated élite. The average Roman Catholic, who recites these words every Sunday (claiming to believe that Jesus is 'of one substance with the Father'), may have only the foggiest idea of what they mean.

4.1   FROM MYTH TO THEORY

Theology, then, involves a kind of translation. It is not a translation from one language to another (although that may occur as well), but a translation from one mode of thought to another. I have just given one example of that process, from the history of Christianity. An example from the history of Judaism can be seen in the commentaries on the biblical book of Genesis written by Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE–50 CE). The second chapter of Genesis says that God 'planted a garden in the East' (the Garden of Eden). Talk of God's 'planting a garden' is, of course, the kind of anthropomorphic speech typical of myth. What does Philo make of it?

> So far as the literal meaning is concerned, there is no need to give an explicit interpretation. For it [the garden] is a dense place full of all kinds of trees. Symbolically, however, it is wisdom or knowledge of the divine and human and their causes.... For it is not possible for nature to see, nor it is possible without wisdom to praise, the Creator of all things. [So] His ideas the Creator planted like trees in the most sovereign thing, the rational soul. But

as for the tree of life in the midst [of the Garden], it is the knowledge, not
only of things on the earth, but also of the eldest and highest cause of all
things [i.e. God].[2]

Note that the literal meaning here is not being denied; on the contrary, the
literal truth of Scripture is assumed. But a new meaning is being drawn from
the text by way of an allegorical interpretation. The 'trees' of the garden are
thought of as metaphors for the eternal ideas planted by the Creator in the
human soul, which are the source of our knowledge of God.

What is striking about this passage is that while the words being inter-
preted are those of Genesis, the thought is that of Plato. A commentator who
is not a Platonist might offer a very different interpretation. Once one begins
to treat a text as an allegory, it leads to a plethora of possible interpretations.
This range of possible meanings can be a problem for theology. Medieval
Christian theologian, Thomas Aquinas, was aware of this difficulty. To avoid
some of the theological uncertainties to which it could give rise, he insisted
that theological arguments should be based on the literal sense of Scripture.[3]

Sometimes the transition to theoretic thought has already begun within
the primary sources. Take, for instance, the most popular of all Indian
religious writings, the *Bhagavadgītā* (Song of the Lord). While commonly
published as a single book, this forms part of a much longer work, the epic
Mahābhārata. The *Bhagavadgītā* begins with a discussion between the
hero of that epic, Arjuna, and his charioteer Krishna, who turns out to be an
incarnation (*avatāra*) of the god Vishnu, just before a battle. So the context
of the work is that of a narrative, a story dealing with heroes of an ancient past.

What sets the *Bhagavadgītā* apart from this context is that much of its
content is straightforward religious teaching, including statements about
the nature of the world and the soul. Take, for instance, the following
lines, spoken by Krishna.

> There are these two spirits in the world
> The perishable and the imperishable.
> All beings are the perishable;
> The unchanging is called the imperishable.
>
> But the highest Spirit is another,
> Called the supreme Self,
> Who, entering the three worlds as the eternal Lord,
> Supports them.

> Since I transcend the perishable
> And am higher than the imperishable,
> Therefore I am, in the world, and in the Vedas,
> Celebrated as the supreme Spirit.[4]

Such sayings could easily be picked up by theologians, as indeed they were. Abhinavagupta (950–1020 CE), for instance, offers a commentary on them, attempting (among other things) to make sense of the idea that Vishnu is 'above the imperishable'.[5]

What implications does this have for philosophers of religion? First of all, we need to be aware that any doctrinal claim (in theoretic mode) is one interpretation of the community's myths. It may have emerged from within the religious community itself, but it will be the work of an intellectual élite. It may not correspond to the way in which ordinary members of that community intuitively think.[6] More importantly, there will almost certainly be people who offer differing interpretations of the same mythic narratives. There are 'heretical' doctrines within the history of all communities, which represent another way in which their myths can be interpreted.

A second issue philosophers need to be aware of has to do with the limits of interpretation. It may not be possible to express in theoretic terms all that is expressed by mimesis and myth. 'Poetry', it is sometimes said, 'is that which is lost in translation'. Similarly, it may be impossible to capture in literal, theoretic language the variety of meanings that are suggested by myth. You will recall Merlin Donald's remark that 'very little of what a good film communicates is capturable in words'.[7] We have all had the experience of trying to describe a movie to a friend; often we end up saying, 'You have to see it yourself'. Any description will fall short of the original experience.

The problem here is wider than that of myth. It extends to those forms of religious discourse that make use of riddles, non-sequiturs, and paradox to achieve their effects. (The famous *kōans* of Zen Buddhism are the best known example.) Sayings of this kind are intended to jolt us out of our habitual patterns of thought; there is no chance of reducing them to a series of propositions. Here, too, there is a gap between the native idiom of religious thought and the theoretic language of a theologian or a philosopher. When believers express impatience with the philosophy of religion, it may be because its abstract propositions seem far removed from the lived experience of the religious life, with its richly evocative myths, puzzling sayings, and powerful rituals.

4.2 Expressing the Inexpressible

We have seen that even the most rational theologian cannot entirely abandon the mythic thinking of his or her community, since those myths constitute an authoritative source to which he or she must continually return. But there is another reason metaphorical thinking characteristic of myths remains important. It has to do with the difficulty in capturing the realities of which religions speak in precise, literal language.

Theistic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) speak about a God who is infinitely powerful, knowing, and good. But such a God so greatly differs from any reality we ordinarily experience that it seems we could say nothing about him at all. Even if God himself were to give us the words that describe his being, it would be remarkable if we could understand them. Wittgenstein famously said that if a lion could talk, we could not understand him, since his form of life is so different from our own.[8] There is even more reason to think that if God were to speak, we could not understand what he was saying.

A similar problem arises within traditions such as that of (Theravada) Buddhism. Here, there is no revealing God whose words we need to understand. But Buddhism does speak of the state that follows the extinction of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion, a state known as *nirvāṇa*. This lies 'outside', or at least can be distinguished from, the causally conditioned world of appearances, the world we grasp by means of sense perception. If *nirvāṇa* is so different from anything with which we are familiar, how can we speak of it at all? If religious believers are attempting to say what cannot be said, does this not reduce their claims to nonsense?

4.2.1 Apophatic Theology/Dharmatology

Religious thinkers have long recognized this problem. Their response has often been to develop a theology of the kind known as *apophatic* (from the Greek *apophasis*, meaning 'denial' or 'negation'). Terms like 'infinite', 'immutable', and 'incorporeal' belong to a theology of this kind: they simply deny certain things about the reality of which they speak. They insist that God, for instance, is *not* finite, is *not* subject to change, and does *not* have a body. If such claims are true, they are literally true. God, if he exists, is *literally* 'incorporeal', 'immutable', and 'not-identical with Richard Nixon'.[9] But in themselves they have no positive content.

We find the same tendency within Buddhism. This is how the Buddha is said to have described *nirvāṇa*.

> There is, monks, a domain where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind, no sphere of infinite space, no sphere of nothingness, no sphere of infinite consciousness, no sphere of neither awareness nor non-awareness; there is not this world, there is not another world, there is no sun or moon. I do not call this coming or going, nor standing; nor dying, nor being reborn; it is without support, without occurrence, without object. Just this is the end of suffering.[10]

One might argue that while this is all very impressive, rhetorically, it tells us very little. If I ask you to describe your cat and you say that she does *not* resemble an elephant, a giraffe, or a turtle, you have surely spoken the truth. But you have not yet described your cat.

So alongside the apophatic tendency, all theological traditions exhibit a kataphatic one, a tendency to try to develop positive statements about God, or the unconditioned, or the ultimate reality that underlies all things. Even Buddhist thinkers sometimes grew tired of the relentless apophaticism of their teachers.[11] The problem is: how can one speak positively of that which lies beyond the possibility of human knowledge? How can one know the unknowable and express the inexpressible?

4.2.2   *Metaphor and Analogy*

Let me give just one example of how a theologian answered this question. The theologian in question is a Christian one, namely Aquinas (1225–1274), although a similar answer had already been given by eighth-century Indian thinker Ādi Śaṅkara when discussing how to speak about *brahman*.[12] Aquinas agreed with the apophatic theologians that 'we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not'.[13] But he also insisted that creatures bear a certain relation to God. Created things are effects of God's creative activity. An effect will, Aquinas assumes, in some way resemble its cause,[14] no matter how faint that resemblance might be. It follows that we can know something of God by examining the things he has created. What does this mean? It means that certain terms drawn from our everyday language can be appropriately applied to God. But because the resemblance is faint, they can be applied to God only by way of metaphor or analogy.

The language of metaphor is, however, that of mythic thought. So once again we are employing the tools of myth. Aquinas's doctrine of analogy

is a little different. To use a term analogically of God (such as the term 'good'), we must take its usual meaning, strip from it any of the limitations that arise from everyday use, and extend its positive implications to infinity. The problem is that both forms of language – metaphorical and analogical – give rise to a certain vagueness or indeterminacy. We cannot pin down the meaning of such terms in any precise way. If we cannot pin down their meaning in any precise way, it becomes very difficult to know whether the beliefs these words express are consistent. Testing religious claims becomes difficult because their meaning escapes precise formulation. Aquinas liked to think that theology was a 'science'. But there seems to be limits to the extent to which it can be truly 'scientific', at least in our modern sense.

Notes

1. Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction*, p. 5.
2. Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, book 1, para. 6.
3. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a, qu. 1, art. 10. ad 1.
4. *Bhagavadgītā* 15.16–17, tr. Winthrop Sergeant, pp. 604–606.
5. *Abhinavagupta's Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, p. 307.
6. Barrett and Keil, 'Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity', pp. 240–244.
7. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, p. 170.
8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 223.
9. Alston, 'Speaking Literally of God', p. 365.
10. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, pp. 76–77.
11. Gimello, 'Apophatic and Kataphatic Discourse in Mahāyāna', p. 131.
12. Lipner, 'Śaṃkara on Metaphor with Reference to Gita 13.12–18', p. 179.
13. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a, qu. 3.
14. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a, qu.4, art. 3.

The Aims of Religion

Introduction to Part Two

Philosophers are anxious not just to describe religious beliefs, but to assess religious claims to knowledge. I, too, shall undertake this task in the third part of this study. But before I do so, we need to have some idea of what kind of knowledge is on offer here.

What do I mean by 'what kind of knowledge'? Once again, it will be helpful to make a comparison with the sciences. It is reasonably clear what kind of knowledge the sciences offer. It is knowledge of what Wesley Salmond calls 'the causal structure of the world', which will allow us to predict and control the course of events. The sciences achieve this aim by creating theories. These are general statements about the phenomena in question, which have empirically testable consequences. The testing in question should be such that it can be undertaken by any qualified person and checked by others.

I have already noted the tendency among critics of religion to assimilate the language of religion to that of the sciences. In response to this, I have argued that religious utterances do much more than offer factual claims. I would now like to broaden this discussion by speaking more generally about the aims of religion. Religions do make factual claims, but are these aimed at prediction and control? Or do they have some other aim? If so, what is that other aim and how do religions seek to achieve it?

CHAPTER 5

A Sacred Order

Abstract The first aim of religion is to outline and ensure conformity to a sacred order: a state of affairs that is considered in some sense normative. This order is sacred insofar as it is grounded in a realm other than that of the every day, a realm of realities that are occult or hidden.

What are the aims of religion? Broadly speaking, religions have two aims. The first, shared by all forms of religion, is that of outlining and ensuring conformity to what I shall call 'a sacred order'. This is a collective aim. It is focused not directly on the well-being of individuals, but on the proper order of things, in the social realm. The second aim, shared by at least many forms of religion, is that of ensuring an individual's salvation or liberation. That salvation or liberation is to be achieved by acting in conformity with this sacred order.

The order of things that religions speak of is a *normative* order: it has to do with the ways things *ought to be*. We have already come across this idea when discussing the various roles played by religious utterances. Such utterances, as we saw, do not merely state facts (acting as assertives). They also commit the speaker to a certain way of life (as commissives). Religious teachings describe the way the world is while indicating how we ought to act.

5.1   A NORMATIVE ORDER

The most common kind of normative order is a moral one. Moral rules are rules one ought to observe because failure to do so would make one (to some degree) a bad person. But there are other kinds of normative judgements, other senses in which a person ought to act in a certain way. We may have, for instance, legal obligations (for instance, towards someone with whom we have entered into a contract). There is also a prudential or pragmatic sense of 'ought'. (If I want to pass an exam, I ought to study for it.) Failure to observe such norms would not necessarily merit the judgement that you are wicked. There are occasions when I would be morally justified in flouting a legal obligation, as in the case of a seriously unjust law. Similarly, failure to study for an important examination might indicate you are foolish, but not (necessarily) that you are bad, in any moral sense.

The normative claims of religion are related to a matter I discussed earlier, namely the roots of religion in the world of myth. Myths, as we saw, are oriented to action. They indicate, through their stories of ancestors or the gods, how we *ought* to act. But the normative order spoken of by religions is not necessarily a moral order. It can consist of any set of exemplars, maxims, or rules that are considered prescriptive, determining how one ought to behave.[1] It may, for instance, consist of pollution rules or rules regarding ritual purity. These may, in turn, safeguard various forms of what is considered proper social order,[2] distinguishing social roles according to gender or age or marking out territories as proper places for particular groups.[3] The normative order may even consist of rules that seem prudential or pragmatic in character. One way of thinking of the Buddhist eightfold path, for instance, is that it represents how you ought to behave if you wish to escape suffering.

5.2   A SACRED ORDER

The idea of a normative order of things is not distinctively religious. All groups and societies are shaped by norms: ways of behaving that are considered in some sense obligatory for members. What is distinctive of religion is the idea of a *sacred* order. This is a normative order that is thought to be grounded in a realm other than that of the every day, a realm of realities that are occult or hidden. That grounding can take a variety of forms. The normative order can be thought of as commanded by the gods, as derived from some mythic creation narrative, or

as policed by superhuman beings, who will either punish transgressors or restore the proper order of things.[4]

In speaking of a normative order grounded in an occult realm, I am making use of a distinction between two modes of existence that is widespread in human cultures. This is often referred to as the distinction between the *natural* and the *supernatural*. But that particular distinction is culturally specific. It has its roots in the pre-Socratic philosophers' discovery of a natural order whose workings are largely independent of the actions of the gods,[5] although it is fully developed only by Christian thinkers, grappling with the Jewish idea of a transcendent creator.[6] So I shall refer to these two modes of existence as that of the *occult* and the *patent*, the hidden and the manifest.[7] The realm of the gods is that of the occult, a hidden order of things.

The occult and the patent represent differing ways of thinking about agency and causality. There is the agency and causality of everyday life, which can be known through observation and inference. The action of termites eating away at the supports of a granary is a manifest action, characteristic of the everyday world.[8] We can actually see the termites at work. But the action by which a witch ensures that certain people are injured when the granary collapses is an occult action. It is not characteristic of the everyday world, but represents a form of causality that is, to some degree, counter-intuitive. Occult agents violate our everyday expectations about agency: they can do things that everyday agents cannot. This means that occult agents are notoriously unpredictable. But they can be controlled, or at least persuaded to show favour, through prayer and ritual.

Not all occult agents are associated with a normative order of things. (Witches, for instance, are not, being often regarded as malign agents.) But some occult agents are. The distinction here is related to that between religion and magic. Religion does not just invoke occult agents, such as spirits, gods, and ancestors, as a magician might. It also considers their words and actions to have normative significance. When injunctions are grounded in this occult realm, they are no longer thought of as 'merely human', rules we have formulated as we try to understand the best way to live. On the contrary, they are thought of as independent of humans, something that is dictated to us and that we are not free to ignore or to change.

It is this fact that gives religious morality its particular force. Those who hold certain values to be sacred are often unwilling to enter into arrangements that compromise these values. Pragmatic agreement among people

of differing values is harder to achieve when each side sees its position as divinely ordained. Indeed, the very thought of compromise can lead to angry reactions.[9] Such firmness of conviction is not, of course, limited to religious believers. Members of the National Rifle Association in the United States, for instance, can be similarly uncompromising in their attitude to gun laws.[10] But it does seem particularly common in religious contexts.

Notes

1. Weber, *The Theory of Economic and Social Organization*, pp. 124–126.
2. Douglas, 'Pollution', p. 340.
3. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, pp. 15–25, 65–115.
4. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 56–57; Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*, pp. 255–261; Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the Person*, p. 78.
5. *Lloyd, Early Greek Science,* p. 8.
6. Saler, 'Supernatural as a Western Category', pp. 44–49.
7. Fortes, 'Religious Premises and Logical Technique in Divinatory Ritual', pp. 410–411.
8. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, pp. 12, 69.
9. Clarke, *The Justification of Religious Violence*, pp. 143–145.
10. Clarke, *The Justification of Religious Violence*, pp. 141–142.

Individual Salvation

Abstract The second aim of religions is that of ensuring the salvation or liberation of an individual devotee. This salvation comes about through conformity to the normative, sacred order of which religions speak. This chapter discusses some of the conceptions of salvation found within the world's religions.

Keywords Salvation · liberation · hades · sheol · heaven · hell · *mokṣa* · *nirvāṇa*

The first goal of religions, I have argued, is the maintenance of a normative order, a prescribed pattern of individual and group behaviour. This seems to be characteristic of all religions. This already distinguishes religion from the sciences, which do not have this normative aim. There is, however, a second goal that many religions seek to attain, which also sets them apart from the sciences. It is that of the salvation or liberation of those who observe this normative order.

6.1 The Idea of Salvation

There is a sense in which *all* religions offer a kind of salvation. They claim that the observance of the normative order of things is a condition for receiving certain collective benefits. If the gods are worshipped or the ancestors honoured, then the harvest will be successful or the tribe will

achieve victory over its enemies. But certain religions go further. They shift their focus (a) from *collective* well-being to the salvation of an *individual* and (b) from *this-worldly* to *other-worldly* benefits.

We can see this in the development of biblical religion. In the earliest traditions of the Bible, it is certainly the case that individuals receive benefits from God. But those benefits are immediate and this-worldly: an infertile woman may be given the gift of a son (Judges 13) or an individual may be delivered from his enemies (Psalm 7). There is no idea of a benefit to be gained after an individual's death, no idea of heaven (or hell), as modern Christians understand these terms. Like most people in human history, the Hebrews found it inconceivable that death was simply the end of one's existence. But the only post-mortem existence that the Hebrew Bible speaks of is a shadowy existence in Sheol, the underworld or abode of the dead. While this is an undesirable state, to be avoided for as long as possible, it was not a realm of punishment.

While individuals may receive benefits from God, the major salvific events spoken of by the Hebrew Bible are collective: they have as their object the nation as a whole. It is the nation that is saved: from slavery in Egypt, from the enemies in Canaan, and then from exile in Babylon. Note that these forms of collective salvation are also this-worldly. They are associated with the establishment of a kingdom in Canaan (Palestine) under the leadership of a divinely appointed ruler.

In the second century BCE, however, the focus begins to shift. An idea developed that those individuals who had faithfully observed the Torah would experience a reward in the afterlife, while those who had not, would be punished. It is this idea that Christianity takes over, coupling it with a strong sense that individuals are enslaved by the power of evil and require God's grace in order to be saved. 'Salvation' now has a strongly otherworldly sense. Whatever this-worldly benefits faith might offer, they fade into insignificance when compared with the reward that awaits the believer after death.

In later Christian tradition, this reward comes to be associated with an individual's personal union with God. As St Augustine writes in a famous prayer, 'you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are ever restless until they rest in you'. 'Why did God make me?', the old Catholic Catechism used to ask. The answer? 'He made me to know, love and serve Him in this world, and be happy with Him forever in the next'.

Muslim thinkers regard salvation in a similar way, as union with God. The mainstream tradition regards that union is attainable only after death.

But some, particularly within the Sufi (mystical) traditions of Islam, believe it can be attained even within this life, by means of spiritual exercises that go beyond simple observance of the *sharīʿa* (Islamic law). The goal of these exercises is extinction of the self (*fanāʾ*), a state of existing in and through God (*baqāʾ*). When a devotee reaches this state, God becomes 'the ear with which he hears, the sight through which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks'.[1]

6.2   Types of Salvation

What I have just been describing are Christian and Muslim conceptions of salvation, which have their roots in Judaism. But not all religions have this idea of what it means to be saved. Keith Yandell defines 'salvation' as 'the condition of being rightly related to God, with sins forgiven'.[2] But this seems a very Christian idea of salvation. Indeed, the very term 'salvation' is Christian. Within Hindu tradition, the corresponding idea is that of *mokṣa*, which is perhaps better translated as 'liberation' or 'release'.

In some theistic Indian traditions, the liberation of an individual is attained by means of devotion to a deity. This path to liberation is known as *bhakti-yoga*, a version of which is found in the *Bhagavadgītā* with its message of devotion to Krishna. *Bhakti-yoga* at least resembles the Christian path to salvation. But it is not the only path to salvation. There is also *karma-yoga* (the path of action), in which a devotee performs the actions required by *dharma*, but with an attitude of complete detachment from any desire for its rewards. Finally, there is the ascetic's way, that of *jñāna-yoga* (the path of knowledge). This is thought to lead to an intuitive insight into the union of *brahman* (the underlying reality of all things) and *ātman* (the self).

Even when these spiritual paths resemble those found within Christianity and Islam, the goal of the path is thought of differently. Where *brahman* is thought of as manifest in the form of a deity, one could describe *mokṣa* as union with God. But the overriding goal here is that of liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). Buddhism, of course, thinks of liberation in a similar way, as a state in which one is freed not just from the cycle of rebirth, but also from the suffering (*duḥkha*) that this entails.

Both these conceptions of salvation – the Christian and the Muslim, on the one hand, and the Hindu and the Buddhist, on the other – seem other-worldly. The goal of the path is not some tangible benefit, such as wealth, a good harvest, or victory over enemies, but something that is

more 'spiritual'. In practice, however, these two kinds of goals are often combined. Devotees seek *both* this-worldly benefit *and* some ultimate state of liberation or union with the divine. A Christian may pray to pass an exam, as well as for salvation.

This is particularly striking within Buddhism, where it is widely believed that *nirvāṇa*, the ultimate state of release from suffering, is practically unattainable. It requires many thousands of rebirths, and the present age is particularly unsuited to the attainment of this goal.[3] The most a present-day Buddhist can do is gain the merit that will allow for a better rebirth. But since even that goal is still rather distant, many Buddhists will also offer sacrifices to gods, seeking their favour. In Sri Lanka, for instance, shrines to deities (*deviyās*) are commonly found within Buddhist temple compounds. Although they are kept separate from shrines to the Buddha himself, devotees will go to these shrines and venerate the gods *after* venerating the Buddha and his symbols.[4] The gods are venerated in the hope that they may convey more immediate, tangible benefits.

Notes

1. Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism*, p. 15.
2. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 363.
3. Ames, 'Magical-animism and Buddhism', pp. 25–26.
4. Ames, 'Magical-animism and Buddhism', p. 36.

Knowledge and Skill

Abstract Insofar as they seek to bring about the aims of religion, religious teachings represent a form of knowing-how. They seek to inculcate a particular skill – that of living well – rather than merely stating what is the case. Theological non-realists embrace the practical knowledge religions provide while rejecting their factual claims, at least when these have to do with supernatural beings.

Keywords Knowing-that · knowing-how · declarative knowledge · procedural knowledge · antirealism · non-cognitivism

It should be clear by now that we should not simply identify the aims of religions with those of the sciences, even though the two overlap. Insofar as religious utterances are assertives, they make claims about the origins and nature of the world and our place within it. It is these claims that are broadly comparable to those made by the sciences. (They may not be of a form that allows them to be tested experimentally, but they do assert what are thought to be matters of fact.) But the language of myth, which is the native idiom of religion, is oriented to action. It has, therefore, a normative dimension, stating how the world ought to be as well as how it is. As we have seen, the emergence of science from myth involved a distinction between factual and normative claims, science leaving normative claims to others.

What I want to reflect on now is another implication of this discussion. The aims of religion I have outlined – ensuring conformity to a normative order of things and the salvation or liberation of individuals – involve two forms of knowledge. Among philosophers, these are often referred to as *knowing-how* and *knowing-that*. Psychologists tend to use a different terminology, speaking of *declarative* (or factual) knowledge and *procedural* (or practical) knowledge. If we are to assess religious claims, we need to be aware which kind of knowledge we are dealing with. Only then will we know what kinds of criteria to apply. It may also be the case that the two kinds of knowledge are separable. A religion could make true procedural claims (about how to achieve a particular goal) even if the factual (declarative) claims associated with its spiritual path are false.

7.1   Knowing-That and Knowing-How

A clear distinction between these two forms of knowledge was first made by Gilbert Ryle. Ryle rejected what he described as 'the ruinous but popular mistake that intelligence operates only in the production and manipulation of propositions'.[1] On the contrary, he argued, thinking also occurs in the performance of certain actions, in making jokes, conducting a battle, or behaving appropriately at funerals. These are instances of intelligent action, which need not be accompanied by statements of belief, reflective thought, or any sense that some proposition is true. As Ryle writes, 'a good experimentalist exercises his skill not in reciting maxims of technology, but in making experiments'.[2]

Knowing how to behave in a certain way may not involve reflective thought; it may not entail entertaining certain propositions and assenting to their truth. But then, in what sense is it a form of knowing? Knowledge, after all, has traditionally been described as justified true belief. How can you have a belief if you have never reflected on what it is you believe? The answer, Ryle argued, lies in the fact that this is simply a different kind of knowing, which consists in the possession of a skill. It *is* a form of knowing because exercising a skill involves certain 'principles, rules, canons, standards, or criteria'.[3] When we cook an omelette, design a dress, or persuade a jury, we know the difference between a good performance and a poor one, even if we have never reflected on the standards involved. In performing an action, we will continually adjust our actions to ensure conformity to those standards. But this, too, need not involve conscious reflection.

Ryle clarifies what he means by way of an analogy. 'The observance of rules and the using of criteria', he writes,

> resemble the employment of spectacles. We look through them and not at them. As a person who looks much at his spectacles betrays that he has difficulties in looking through them, so people who appeal much to principles show that they do not know how to act.[4]

If there are explicit rules and procedures that need to be learned, skilled performance involves learning them in such a way that they no longer need to be reflected on. A skilled practitioner just knows what to do. The right course of action has become, as we say, 'second nature'. If you are a doctor, and a patient is suffering from a heart attack, you should not need to reach for a textbook to know how to react.[5] In a similar way, an airline pilot must learn to respond 'instinctively' to an emergency, without having to reflect on what is required.

Since the publication of Ryle's essay, there has been much discussion about whether these two forms of knowledge are really distinct. In particular, the discussion has focused on whether knowing-how is *reducible* to knowing-that. I shall not enter into this discussion here, except to note that Ryle's distinction still has its defenders. What I do want to note is the importance of this debate, for Ryle's central idea seems to be at odds with certain trends in our contemporary, 'managerialist' culture. As two defenders of Ryle's distinction note, 'We live in an age of explicit rules and guidelines; of aims and objectives; of benchmarks and performance indicators, standardized tests and league tables'.[6] Our managers assume that any activity – that of a teacher, a doctor, a nurse, or a lawyer – can be reduced to explicit criteria against which performance can be judged. If Ryle is right, the managers are wrong.

7.2   Religious Knowing-How

Much philosophy of religion assumes that the knowledge religions offer is a *knowing-that*, a particular vision of the way the world is. But as we have seen, making statements about the way the world is forms only part of what religions do. The metaphysical claims made by religions – their claims about the way the world is – are conditioned by the broader goals they seek to achieve: ensuring conformity to a normative order and the salvation of individuals.

Take, for instance, the following story attributed to the Buddha. A monk expresses his dismay that he has not yet received the answers to certain important questions. These include whether the world is eternal or not, whether it is infinite or finite, or whether the life-principle is identical with the body or separate from it. How does the Buddha reply? 'It is as if', he says,

> a man were struck by an arrow that was smeared thickly with poison; his friends and companions, his family and relatives would summon a doctor to see to the arrow. And the man might say, 'I will not draw out this arrow as long as I do not know whether the man by whom I was struck was a brahmin, a *kṣatriya*, a *vaiśya*, or a *śūdra* [the traditional classes of Vedic society]…as long as I do not know his name and his family…whether he was tall, short or of medium height…' That man would not discover these things, but that man would die.[7]

This story suggests the Buddha had no interest in answering metaphysical questions for their own sake. The reasoning he was interested in was *practical* reasoning: it had to do with how to attain a particular goal. As one scholar writes, 'the knowledge that the Buddha was trying to convey… is more akin to a skill, like knowing how to play a musical instrument, than a piece of information, such as what time the Manchester train leaves tomorrow.'[8]

It would, of course, be wrong to set this knowing-how in opposition to a knowing-that, or to regard the two as mutually exclusive. After all, the first step on the eightfold path to enlightenment is adopting a 'right view' of reality, which means accepting (among other things) the four Noble Truths. Buddhism has also produced more than its fair share of philosophical theologians (or, if you prefer, dharmatologists). Still, the fact that some religious knowledge is primarily a knowing-how has two interesting implications.

Firstly, a religious practice may be able to attain a goal in a way that is independent of the doctrinal claims with which it is associated. Take, for instance, Buddhist meditation practices. These may enable individuals to attain a state of detached calm in the face of life's tribulations. But their success in achieving this aim may have nothing to do with Buddhist doctrines regarding the self, *saṃsāra*, and *nirvāṇa*, still less with the elaborate cosmology with which these doctrines are associated. In a similar way, groups that engage in rituals that aim to placate the ancestors may flourish. But their flourishing may be attributable to the psychological and

ecological effects of their rituals, rather than to any non-natural influence from the realm of the dead.[9]

This observation relates to a second point, namely the question of how religious claims may be evaluated. If a religious practice purports to provide material benefits (as in the case of certain sacrificial practices), its success or failure can be readily assessed. Similarly, if it purports to provide psychological benefits, these, too, are not beyond the scope of what can be tested. But there are alleged benefits of religious practice that seem harder to test. How can we evaluate, for instance, a monk's ability to live 'selflessly, without suffering' or the power of Buddhist practices to bring this about?[10] What about moral gains? Does engaging in certain practices really make one more compassionate or more generous? There have been studies that have compared the moral state of religious and non-religious groups within a population.[11] But due to the variety of factors that influence moral behaviour, it is hard to know what they actually tell us.

7.3 Theological Non-realism

The idea that a religious practice may help us to achieve a certain aim, even if its associated doctrinal claims are false, has given rise to a particular view of religion. It is commonly known as 'theological non-realism' or 'anti-realism', although in older texts, it is often called 'non-cognitivism'. This urges us to simply reject the metaphysical claims made by religions, while holding onto religious practices because of the values they embody. This resembles the view held by scientific non-realists, such as Bas van Fraassen. Scientific non-realists insist that talk about unobservable entities – such as electrons, quarks, or bosons – should not be regarded as true. For all we know, it may be nothing more than a useful fiction that enables us to make successful predictions. In a similar way, theological non-realists hold that while religious utterances serve various useful purposes in the lives of individuals and communities, they need not involve asserting the existence of supernatural beings: gods, spirits, and demons.

What you make of this idea will depend on several factors. It will depend on whether you believe that religious practices do embody values we wish to preserve. (A particular religion may embody values we wish to reject.) It will depend, too, on whether you think religious practices are the only (or the most effective) way of learning these particular skills. Could we not become better people, perhaps more disinterested or reflective, by way of *non*-religious practices? A final factor has to do with the practicality of

such a stance. Could we continue to pray, or to engage in collective acts of worship, if we no longer believe that there is a God to whom such prayer and worship is directed? One of the best known theological non-realists – former Anglican priest Don Cupitt – eventually ceased to participate in the rituals of his own church. If non-realism leads to a gradual estrangement from religious practices, it seems to become indistinguishable from atheism.

Notes

1. Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p. 8.
2. Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p. 8.
3. Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p. 8.
4. Ryle, 'Knowing How and Knowing That', p. 9.
5. Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 50.
6. Gascoigne and Thornton, *Tacit Knowledge,* p. 1.
7. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 66.
8. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 36.
9. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, p. 224.
10. Collins, *Nirvana*, p. 43.
11. Argyle, *Psychology and Religion*, pp. 141–153.

Embodied Knowledge

Abstract As a form of knowing-how, religious knowledge is often *embodied* knowledge: it activates and relies on our various sensory modalities. Religious rituals are powerful means of producing such knowledge. The knowledge that religious practices convey may also be *tacit* knowledge, which cannot be fully articulated in words.

Keywords Embodiment · computationalism · metaphor · simulation · ritual · tacit knowledge

We have seen that the knowledge that religions seek to convey is not merely a form of *knowing-that*, making claims about the way the world is (in a manner comparable to the sciences). It is also a form of *knowing-how*, indicating how we ought to behave in order to achieve certain goals. Often that knowing-how is made explicit, in the form of instructions about how to live, instructions that a devotee is expected to 'internalize' so as to become a certain kind of person. On other occasions, however, this knowing-how is not expressed in words or consciously reflected on. It is simply implicit in certain ways of acting. A devotee acquires the skill in question not by way of reflection, but by taking part in a practice. What I want to note here is that such knowledge is *embodied* knowledge. It involves thinking with the body, not just with the brain.

8.1   EMBODIMENT AND MIND

The idea of embodied knowledge has recently become prominent within both cognitive psychology and the philosophy of mind. Defenders of this idea set themselves in opposition to what are sometimes called *amodal* theories of cognition, much favoured by those who compare the human mind to a digital computer. The latter are also known as *computational* and *representational* theories of mind.

Amodal theorists freely admit that information about the world is first received by means of the body: the five senses and our physical interaction with the environment. (These are the 'modes' of knowledge acquisition.) But they assume that once such information enters the mind, it is 'translated' into symbols whose relation to the original mode of knowledge acquisition is purely formal. These symbols, in other words, resemble those used in algebra or formal logic: just looking at the symbol will tell you nothing about that to which it refers. Once this translation into formal symbols has occurred, the mind can ignore the means by which the information was received and operate on the inner symbol system alone. On this view, the body is merely a set of 'input-output' mechanisms distinguishable from the central processor that actually does the thinking.[1]

By way of contrast, advocates of embodied cognition insist that cognition involves aspects of the body other than the brain. On this view, the original modes of knowledge acquisition – the senses and our physical interaction with the environment – continue to play a role. They are never entirely 'left behind'. To put this in computing terms, the body in interaction with its environment is not merely an input-output mechanism; it forms part of the central processor that does the thinking. It follows that 'only a creature with certain features – e.g., eyes, hands, legs, and skills – can possess certain kinds of cognitive capacities'.[2] A brain in a vat could not think unless the 'vat' were equivalent to a living organism, interacting with its physical environment by means of a culture. Even then, it would be the organism that was thinking, not (merely) the brain.[3]

A simple illustration of this view comes from one of the earliest works on embodied cognition: a study by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on metaphor. There are many metaphors that play prominent roles in everyday thought. One of these has to do with consciousness. According to this metaphor, 'conscious is up; unconscious is down'. We see this idea in common ways of speaking.

Get *up*. Wake *up*. I'm *up* already. He *rises* early in the morning. He *fell* asleep. He *dropped* off to sleep. He's *under* hypnosis. He *sank* into a coma.[4]

The bodily basis for this seems to be the fact that humans and most other mammals lie down to sleep and stand up when they awake. But as the last three examples show, the metaphor continues to be used when it has no literal application.

More recent writers distinguish between three types of theories relating to embodiment and the mind.[5] The first set of theories are *simulation* theories, which focus on the continuing role, within cognition, of the sensory and motor systems through which we interact with the world. (These resemble Lakoff and Johnson's observations.) Take, for example, the sentence 'The road runs along the cliff'. There is no literal sense in which a road 'runs'. Yet in order to understand this sentence, hearers mentally enact some kind of actual motion, perhaps by imagining themselves walking down the road.[6]

A second set of theories focus on the role of the *body itself*, arguing that posture and movements influence thought. There are some fascinating experimental findings here, which have obvious implications for the study of religion. For instance, people who are engaged in the action of drawing an object towards themselves are more likely to make positive judgements about a newly presented symbol than those who are making the opposite movement, pushing something away.[7]

A third set of theories examine ways in which thinking is *situated* in a particular environment. A key idea here is that the environment does not merely provide the ideas with which we think. It also provides the tools that enable our thinking: laboratory instruments, graph paper, calculators, algorithms, tricks of the trade, and words of advice from others.[8] Those who explore this line of research sometimes argue for what they call the 'extended mind': the idea that the subject that does the thinking extends not just beyond the brain, but also beyond the body.[9]

8.2   THE RITUAL DIMENSION

I argued earlier that one of the aims of religion is to ensure that the behaviour of individuals conforms to a normative order. It is, therefore, unsurprising that religions do not merely propose certain matters for belief. They also insist that devotees engage in certain practices, particularly rituals, which embody those beliefs. In many religions (Protestant Christianity is

perhaps an exception), practice is primary. Belief comes later. The knowledge involved is first and foremost embodied knowledge.

Within Islam, for instance, there is a famous report (*hadīth*) in which Muhammad is questioned by a stranger about the central elements of the religion he is proclaiming. (The stranger turns out to be the angel Gabriel, or *Jibrīl*.) Muhammad first responds to describe the act of submission (*islām*), which involves the five sets of practices often described as 'pillars' of the religion: the profession of faith, daily prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and pilgrimage. Only after this does he go on to speak about faith (*īmān*) and 'perfection' (*iḥsān*), the proper disposition of the heart.

8.2.1   Ritual and Acceptance

Of particular importance here are religious rituals. What is a ritual? Anthropologist Roy Rappaport describes it as 'a more or less invariant sequence of formal acts and utterances encoded by other than the performer'.[10] The key idea here is that the acts and utterances involved exist before any particular performance. They are not invented by the people who enact them. (They must have been invented on some occasion, but on that occasion, they did not yet constitute a ritual.) This means that ritual is inseparable from authority and conformity. The ritual is authoritative and demands that an individual conform himself or herself to it. To put it bluntly, taking part in a ritual is *not* an act of self-expression. As one Jewish writer put it, 'Our liturgy is a higher form of silence'. The individual participant 'does not bring forth his own words. His saying the consecrated words is . . . an act of listening to what they convey'. *The spirit of Israel speaks, the self is silent*.[11]

We have seen that religions seek to ensure conformity to a normative order. Rituals give expression to that normative order. Participating in the ritual, the devotee accepts that order, becomes identified with it, at least for the time being. So while taking part in the liturgy does not demand belief in the propositions it embodies, it does involve acting *as if* these propositions were true. To use a common distinction, it means *accepting* the propositions in question, whether or not one *believes* them.[12] This is not to say that belief is unimportant. As we shall see in a moment, religious ritual tends to lead to belief and will not have its full effect without belief. My point here is that even taking part in the ritual demands an initial act of acceptance.

8.2.2   Acceptance and Belief

I have just suggested that the acceptance involved in participating in a ritual can easily pass over into belief. By what mechanisms does this occur? Firstly, a ritual can help to inculcate certain attitudes. Take, for instance, the simple act of kneeling for prayer. In ordinary social situations, kneeling indicates submission. Adopting this posture while praying will activate the same attitude so that participants are more likely to accept the teachings being proposed.[13] The power of ritual to inculcate attitudes is heightened by the way they are marked out from everyday life and given a particular status. Religious rituals often take place in particular places, not used for everyday activities, and are marked off from other activities by transitional rituals. (Muslims recite particular formulas before and after a reading the Qurʾan, while Roman Catholics begin and end prayer with a sign of the cross.) Some religions have more dramatic means of bringing about this dissociation from everyday life. They include sensory deprivation, music and dance, the use of drugs, and sleeplessness or hunger.[14] In Western Christian practice, the dissociation brought about by camps and retreats can be used to bring about similar (if, perhaps, less dramatic) effects.

The tendency of religious practices to lead to belief was already noted in the seventeenth century, when Blaise Pascal put forward his argument for belief in God based on the idea of a wager. The argument begins with the observation that belief in God carries with it a finite risk, but the promise (if God exists) of an infinite reward. Failure to believe, on the other hand, carries with it an infinite risk (the possibility of eternal punishment, if God exists), but only a finite reward. It follows that one is acting rationally in choosing to believe; belief is one's 'best bet'. If God exists, you gain an infinite reward. If he does not, you lose very little.

The argument may or may not be sound, but it raises a question, namely: Can we choose to believe? Possibly not. (Try it. Close your eyes and try to believe – not just imagine – that there was a cat on my desk as I was writing this.) But Pascal is relying on the fact that even if we cannot choose to believe, we can choose to act in a way that is likely to produce belief. In fact, this is precisely what Pascal is suggesting.

> You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions...Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe...[15]

Merely taking part in a religious practice has a tendency to produce belief over time. Incidentally, this is true of secular rituals as well. Before we participate in, for example, the civic rituals commemorating past wars, it is worth asking what beliefs such rituals embody. Are these beliefs we want to endorse?

8.3   Tacit Knowledge

Ritual does not merely embody and reinforce a community's *explicit* beliefs. It also helps to create *tacit* beliefs and dispositions. Such beliefs and dispositions are not (and perhaps cannot be) expressed in words. Ritual, in other words, is not simply another way of saying or doing things that can be said or done equally well in other ways.[16] It yields a kind of knowledge that is inseparable from the practice and can be gained only by taking part in the practice.

The general idea here – that there are matters we can know only by engaging in a practice – is a familiar one. Here is an everyday example, from Rolf Zwaan.

> Suppose I tried to explain to you how to ride your mountain bike over a log, 16 in. in diameter, that has fallen across the trail. Here is what I might say:
>
> > Make sure you are in a gear that is not too high and not too low. Make sure you have sufficient speed and that you are perpendicular to the log. Then get up out of the saddle, keep your feet still, and lift the front wheel so that it clears the log. Your large gear will hit the log and your momentum will carry you across the log. Stretch your arms before the front wheel hits the ground so that you don't flip over. Start pedaling as soon as your front wheel hits the ground.[17]

That is a useful description, but it is not enough to enable you to jump a log. ('Do not try this at home', Zwaan warns.) Practice is needed. More importantly, a person who has engaged in the practice – an expert mountain biker – will know things that do not (and perhaps cannot) feature in such a description. The expert will be able to imagine, for instance,

> the positions of his or her limbs – how the knees are arched and how the feet are positioned relative to each other. The expert will also have some sense of the amount of strength needed to lift the front wheel. The expert might have some sensation of the speed at which the trees along the trail pass by

(optical flow) and the speed at which the log approaches. Finally, the expert might 'feel' how his or her hands are curved around the handles and the pressure of the pedals on his or her soles.[18]

Such knowledge is essential for skilful practice and is obtainable only as a result of practice.

The knowledge gained from religious practices may be knowledge of this kind, 'tacit' knowledge, which is not (and perhaps cannot be) put into words. Think, for instance, of the sense of 'being oriented' that is produced by a fixed direction of daily prayer. A devout Muslim's orientation towards Mecca, towards which he or she prays five times daily, is (as one scholar notes) 'bodily knowledge', in which 'spiritual meanings are fused with kinesthetic responses'.[19] The devotee 'feels' the significance of Mecca even if he or she cannot express this significance in words. His or her knowledge about Mecca is not only tacit knowledge, it is also embodied, being (as French theorists are fond of saying) 'inscribed on the body'.

Note how I am using the word 'knowledge' here, without any implication that what is thought to be true actually *is* true. (Even an experienced mountain biker may have an incorrect memory of how much pressure to exert on the bars to lift the wheel, an error that may lead to a crash.) But the fact that knowledge is tacit raises questions about how it can be evaluated. A key question here is one to which I shall return, namely: What kind of knowledge might we expect to obtain as a result of religious practices?

It is possible that such practices function as a kind of training, 'attuning' us to aspects of the self and the environment that we might otherwise be unaware of. (This would be comparable to the tacit knowledge enjoyed by a mountain biker jumping a log.) But what about states of affairs that are *not* states of the subject himself or herself or of his or her immediate environment? Could religious practices be a reliable source of tacit knowledge about these states of affairs? If they could, then the knowledge in question could be an instance of what Pascal famously called 'reasons of the heart': felt considerations in favour of belief that cannot be articulated as propositional knowledge. I shall come back to this question in the next part of this study, when discussing 'knowledge by acquaintance'.

NOTES

1. Barsalou, 'Perceptual Symbol Systems', pp. 578–579.
2. Wilson and Foglia, 'Embodied Cognition', sect. 2.2.

  3. Noë, *Out of Our Heads*, pp. 12–13.
  4. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 15.
  5. Barsalou et al., 'Embodiment in Religious Knowledge', p. 24.
  6. Matlock, 'Fictive Motion as Cognitive Simulation', pp. 1395–1396.
  7. Cacioppo et al, 'Rudimentary Determination of Attitudes', p. 15.
  8. Kirsh, 'Problem Solving and Situated Cognition', p. 270.
  9. Clark and Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind', pp. 8, 18.
 10. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, p. 284.
 11. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, p. 44.
 12. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, p. 284.
 13. Barsalou et al., 'Embodiment in Religious Knowledge', p. 44.
 14. Wallace, 'Rituals: Sacred and Profane', p. 68.
 15. Pascal, *Pensées*, §233.
 16. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, p. 137.
 17. Zwaan, 'Embodied Cognition, Perceptual Symbols, and Situation Models', p. 81.
 18. Zwaan, 'Embodied Cognition, Perceptual Symbols, and Situation Models', p. 82.
 19. Delaney, 'The *Hajj*: Sacred and Secular', pp. 516–517.

Modes of Knowing

Introduction to Part Three

I have finally arrived at a point where we can begin to evaluate religious claims to knowledge. I shall begin this process by distinguishing what I am calling 'sources of knowledge'. Indian philosophers recognized six of these, which they called *pramāṇas*:

(a) perception (*pratyakṣa*),
(b) comparison (*upamāna*),
(c) inference (*anumāna*),
(d) postulation (*arthāpatti*),
(e) testimony (*śabda*), and
(f) 'non-cognition' (*anupalabdhi*).

If what we were interested in was sources of *knowledge in general*, this would be as good a list as any. Indeed, it is useful to have a single term, albeit a Sanskrit one, for the general phenomenon being studied.

When it comes to *religious knowledge*, however, this particular list is not so useful. What we want is a list of religious *pramāṇas*. Religious believers appeal to very particular sources of knowledge, which make use of, but are not identical to, the general cognitive faculties described on the list given above. For the purpose of this study, I have identified four of these:

(a) knowledge by way of *signs*,
(b) knowledge by *acquaintance*,
(c) knowledge by way of *discursive reason* (arguments), and
(d) knowledge that depends on *testimony* (authority).

As I shall note later, these are often combined. Knowledge by way of signs, for instance, is often thought of as a type of divine revelation. A vision can be thought of as a form of knowledge by acquaintance. It is useful, however, to consider each separately. The question we need to ask in each case is, 'Could this be a reliable source of religious knowledge?'

Knowledge by Way of Signs

Under the first heading – knowledge by way of signs – I shall speak of three types of signs. These are *indices*, *symbols*, and *icons*, categories that come from the work of philosopher C. S. Peirce. *Indices* are signs linked by some causal process with what they signify. (Smoke is an index of fire, while a weather vane is an index of wind direction.) Signs whose relation with what they signify is arbitrary and conventional are described by Peirce as *symbols*. (Language consists of symbols. There is no reason other than convention the English word 'dog' should represent a particular kind of animal. In German, for instance, the same animal is represented by '*Hund*'.) Finally, we have *icons*, which are linked to what they represent by some kind of resemblance. A road sign that depicts a bicycle would be an example of an icon.

I am using Peirce's classification because his categories can be thought to correspond to three types of religiously significant signs. There are signs that are deciphered by *divination* (which are regarded as indices), *dreams* (which need to be interpreted, as do symbols), and *visions* (which are icons or images of the reality in question). I do not want to make too much of this correspondence, which may not be exact. It is simply a helpful way of associating these three sources of knowledge.

Divination

Abstract The first source of religious knowledge is divination, the interpretation of objects and events as a way of achieving knowledge of the future or the will of the gods. Could such practices yield knowledge? This chapter argues that occasionally they could, although not, perhaps, the kind of knowledge that is claimed for them.

Keywords Tarot · astrology · omens · oracles · daemons · sympathy

The first source of religious knowledge is divination, which employs signs that correspond (loosely speaking) to Peirce's *indices*. Divination involves an 'attempt to elicit from some higher power or supernatural being the answers to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding'.[1] But it differs from other ways of achieving such knowledge insofar as it involves the interpretation of signs, both natural and manufactured. I shall examine the kinds of signs consulted by diviners shortly. For the moment, I want to note only how widespread the practice of divination is within human societies.

A modern anthropologist writes that divination is among those features found 'in every culture known to history and ethnography'.[2] But the same point had been made two millennia earlier by the Roman

philosopher and statesman Cicero. Introducing his discussion of divination, Cicero writes:

> I see there is no people so civilized and educated or so savage and so barbarous that it does not hold that signs of the future can be given and can be understood and announced in advance by certain individuals.[3]

If you think that our own civilization is an exception, remember that both astrology and the reading of tarot cards are forms of divination. Like a good philosopher, Cicero gives arguments both for and against the practice, but one of the arguments he gives in favour is that the practice is so widespread. Surely it is inconceivable that a practice that yielded no useful knowledge would be so common?

9.1   The Practice of Divination

The range of divinatory techniques is astonishing. There are omens, in the sense of natural signs, that are simply observed. These can include, for instance, sneezes (a bad omen in many cultures), the flight of birds (a popular form of divination among ancient Greeks and Romans), or the movement of spiders (a form of divination that is widespread in southern Cameroon). Within the category of observed natural signs, we might include the inspection of the entrails of sacrificed animals (once again, a popular practice within the classical world). There are also mechanical techniques of divination. These can include the casting of lots, which is widely attested in the Hebrew Bible ('The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord' [Prov. 16:33]), and 'reading' the pattern formed by pebbles thrown on the ground (a practice found, for instance, among some people in Sierra Leone). There are, finally, techniques that fall in between these two classes, such as the poison chicken oracle of the Azande people in southern Sudan. (Poison is fed to a chicken and its subsequent fate interpreted.)

Divination has often been vigorously condemned by religious authorities, particularly Christian and Muslim. But that has not stopped Christians and Muslims from engaging in it. A common technique has been opening the Bible or the Qurʾan at random and interpreting the first words upon which the eye falls. In a similar way, Muslims might open the Qurʾan at random and count the number of times the letters beginning the Arabic words 'good' and 'bad' appeared on a page.[4] Among Christians, a key may be inserted into a Bible, which is then tightly bound. The key is held while

a number of possible solutions to the problem are recited. The correct answer is the one that is being recited when the Bible falls from the key.

9.2 The Theory of Divination

How is divination supposed to work? Why do people believe in it? One factor seems to be the reluctance to attribute any event to what we would call 'chance'. Attributing an event to chance can seem a very unsatisfactory explanation, if indeed it is an explanation at all. Critics of the idea of biological evolution, for instance, criticize its reliance on 'chance' mutations, claiming that 'chance is the opposite of having a cause'.[5] The criticism is unfair, since in the right context, chance can have an explanatory role.[6] But a mere appeal to chance as an explanation would seem unsatisfactory.

Many people who employ divinatory techniques do so in order to find a reason for what would otherwise seem merely a matter of chance. They want to know, for instance, not just why the granary collapsed, but also why it fell on the particular people who were sitting under it.[7] There is, in other words, a rational quest for explanation here, even if the explanation produced is not one we can accept. More importantly, divination itself often involves processes (such as throwing pebbles) whose outcome rests on what we would call chance events. These outcomes, too, are seen as significant.

But if divinatory outcomes are not thought of as 'merely' a matter of chance, how are they thought to be produced? In many cases, the practices rest on the belief that the process is being guided by inhabitants of the occult, spirit world. These inhabitants may be ancestors (as in the case of Tallensi divination in northern Ghana) or they may be gods or *daimones* (the lesser spirits in the Greek and Roman religious world). Indeed, ancient Greek and Roman writers developed extensive theories about how divination might operate. The Stoic philosophers (along with many other thinkers) believed that there existed an occult 'sympathy' that linked the divinatory sign with what it signified.[8] In some cases, however, defenders of divination freely admit that they have no explanation of why it works, but merely insist that its outcomes have been shown to be reliable.

9.3 An Evaluation

What, then, should we make of such practices? None of the proposed mechanisms by which divination is thought to work may seem very plausible. If they do not – if we believe there are no gods or dead ancestors or occult sympathies – should we assume that divinatory rituals are

worthless? If they are worthless, how do we explain their persistence? Is it due to nothing more than human credulity and ignorance, or deceit on the part of diviners, anxious to maintain their income?

Perhaps. But, of course, it is possible that a practice sometimes 'works' even if we have no explanation for how it works or if the explanation on offer is false. Isaac Newton, for example, had no explanation of how gravitation worked, but he could still offer a precise mathematical proof that there exists such a force. So not knowing the mechanism involved is not, in itself, a reason for denying the existence of a phenomenon. We would still need evidence that divinatory practices do work. But this means we should not dismiss such practices before evidence, for or against, has been found.

In fact, there *are* possible mechanisms that even the most sceptical among us could take seriously. Much divination, for example, involves a dialogue between the diviner and the client.[9] Even those divination techniques that do not involve such a dialogue are often ambiguous in their outcome and require interpretation. It is possible that the value of divination lies in the discussion that follows or accompanies the divinatory event. This may help the client (by way of a kind of 'lateral thinking') to find a solution to a problem that seems otherwise intractable. Often such problems will have moral significance. The discussion might bring to light, for instance, a grudge that you hold towards a dead relative.[10] Even if not, perhaps, a moral failing, such an attitude may be psychologically harmful.

Even when the outcome of a divinatory process *is* entirely a matter of chance, this, too, could have positive practical outcomes. One anthropologist has argued that divinatory practices relating to hunting were effectively precise because they were random.[11] (The game being hunted could not anticipate the hunters' movements.) In a similar way, the assignment of territory by lot, assumed to be under divine guidance, might help to avoid future communal conflicts over whose portion of land was best. Sometimes, of course, the outcome may not be as random as it looks. Consciously or unconsciously, the diviner may be guiding the way in which the pebbles fall or a divining rod moves.[12] So what may be at work here is the existing knowledge of the diviner, although it may be knowledge of which he is not fully aware.

So how should we evaluate divinatory practices? If we think of religious knowledge as knowledge about how to live, as well as knowledge about a non-natural realm, then it is entirely possible that divination gives rise to religious knowledge. (Knowledge about hunting may not be religious

knowledge, but knowledge about how we should speak about those who have died may be.) It would be rash to claim that it is a *reliable* way of attaining such knowledge, in the sense of giving correct results more often than not. But it may give correct (or at least helpful) results at a greater rate than mere chance would predict. More importantly, divination may give rise to such practical knowledge even if there are no non-natural powers involved. The same may be true of some other sources of religious knowledge, such as dreams and visions. But that is my next topic.

NOTES

1. Loewe and Blacker, 'Introduction', p. 1.
2. George P. Murdock, cited in Peek, 'Introduction', p. 1.
3. Cicero, *De divinatione*, 1.2; *Cicero on Divination*, p. 45.
4. Margoliouth, 'Divination (Muslim)', p. 818.
5. Smith, 'Evolution and Evolutionism', p. 756.
6. Shanahan, 'Chance as an Explanatory Factor in Evolutionary Biology', p. 267.
7. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, pp. 22–23.
8. Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, p. 5.
9. Wilce, 'Divining *Troubles*, or *Divining* Troubles?', pp. 196–198.
10. Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*, p. 245.
11. Moore, 'Divination – A New Perspective', p. 71.
12. Fortes, 'Religious Premisses and Logical Technique in Divinatory Ritual', p. 419.

Dreams and Visions

Abstract Religions also rely heavily on dreams and visions, claiming that these, too, are sources of knowledge. Appealing to the role of unconscious cognition in human thought, this chapter argues that dreams and visions could sometimes be sources of knowledge. They should not, however, be regarded as reliable sources of knowledge, and what knowledge they yield will be only within certain restricted domains.

Keywords Dreams · oneiromancy · visions · hallucinations · revelations · unconscious cognition

The second and third means of obtaining religious knowledge by way of signs involve dreams and visions. I am classing these together, since in both cases something is 'seen', in ways that are at least analogous to physical sight.

You may think that dreams and visions should not be classed together. After all, what we 'see' in dreams is something we know is merely an image in our minds. By way of contrast, those who see visions believe that what they are observing *actually* exists, in some mind-independent manner. In many cultures, however, this distinction is not so clear. In some cases, dreams are thought to be experiences of the hidden self (the 'soul' if you like), as it leaves the body and enters the occult world, the world of the dead and of gods, spirits, and demons. In other cases, the dream is thought to have been produced by an inhabitant of that world, most commonly a

god, who has visited the sleeper. Indeed, in the ancient Greek world, there was a common practice called 'dream incubation', which involved sleeping at the sanctuary of a god, awaiting a revelatory dream.

10.1   Dreams as Revelations

Not all dreams, of course, were thought to be divine revelations even in the ancient world. One scholar of ancient Middle Eastern societies writes that they recognized three types of dreams:

[a] dreams as revelations of the deity which may or may not require interpretation;

[b] dreams which reflect…the state of mind, the spiritual and bodily 'health' of the dreamer, which are only mentioned but never recorded, and…

[c] mantic dreams in which forthcoming events are prognosticated.[1]

The last of these would place dreams in the category of means of divination. But what is worth noting is that only the second way of thinking about dreams resembles that found in our own culture.

Within the Sacred Scriptures of both Judaism and Christianity, dreams rank alongside visions and prophecy as important means of divine revelation. As one biblical writer says of the ideal, messianic age, speaking words attributed to God himself,

> it shall be after this that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your elderly will dream dreams and your young will see visions (Joel 2:28).

Revelatory dreams play an important role, not just in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), but also in the (Christian) New Testament. In the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel, for instance, 'the angel of the Lord' appears twice in a dream to Joseph, firstly to tell him that Mary (his wife-to-be) has conceived while remaining a virgin and, secondly, to warn him to leave Judaea for Galilee. The magi are also warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, who wishes to kill the new-born Jesus.

Dreams also appear as means of divine revelation in the Qur'an. Unsurprisingly, many of the references to dreams have to do with the story of Joseph (*Yūsuf*), the son of Jacob (*Yaʿqūb*), who acts as an interpreter of dreams. (These stories are also found in the biblical book of

Genesis.) But dreams are also a means of divine communication in the life of Muhammad. The Qurʾan claims, for instance, that before the battle of Badr in 624 CE, God gave Muhammad a misleading dream. It suggested that the number of Meccan opponents was relatively small, so he would not be discouraged (Qurʾan 8:43). As it was, Muhammad and his followers were not discouraged and defeated what was (in fact) a much larger body of unbelievers.

It is widely recognized that dreams require interpretation, for they do not represent their meaning in any straightforward manner. Indeed, dreams may indicate meaning by a kind of reversal: a dream of an apparently joyful tribal dance may signify, not good news, but a forthcoming death.[2] That is why I have chosen to associate dreams with Peirce's category of 'symbol', since symbols also require interpretation. To decipher a symbol, you need to know the code. I have already mentioned Joseph's role as an interpreter of dreams in the biblical tradition, but we see the same role being exercised by particular individuals in many cultures. Sometimes the role of a dream interpreter is formally assigned, but often it is not, being thought of as a gift that some individuals naturally have.

10.2   Visions as Revelations

What about visions (and 'auditions'), in which an individual apparently sees (or hears) some non-natural reality? Much prophecy relies on visions, and prophecy (as we shall see) lies at the heart of some of our major religious traditions. Islam, for instance, begins with the visionary experiences of Muhammad while praying in the cave of Hirāʾ, near Mecca. Christianity certainly has its origins in the life and teachings of Jesus. But it took its present form as the result of the work of St Paul, whose call to be an apostle began with a visionary experience of Jesus, risen from the dead. Similarly, the Bahāʾī faith can be said to have begun in October 1852 with the vision of a 'maid of heaven' (ḥūrī) that Bahāʾullāh experienced while imprisoned in Tehran.

Remarkably, such visions continue. There is, for instance, a long history within Catholic Christianity of visions of the mother of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary. A recent example involves six young people in the village of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This phenomenon began on June 24, 1981, when Mirjana Dragicevic and Ivanka Ivanković began reporting visionary experiences. The next day, four more young people began experiencing apparitions, which in the case of several visionaries are said

to continue until today. These visions are also the source of revelations, messages that the mother of Jesus is said to be conveying to humanity. The Catholic Church's attitude to this has been extremely cautious. Even when such 'private revelations' are endorsed, they are considered to be secondary to the 'public revelations' found in Sacred Scripture and the tradition of the Church. Any private revelation that contradicted those teachings would be rejected.

10.3   Explanations of Dreams and Visions

There are, of course, a host of interesting questions here. But the one question I shall pursue is whether dreams and visions can be thought of as conveying knowledge.

The answer we give to this question will depend on how we explain these experiences. If dreams and visions do come from a spirit or deity, or if they are brought about by a journey of the soul into the world of spirits and the dead, then yes, they could surely convey knowledge. Even those who believe this, however, may feel the need to be cautious about any *particular* claimed revelation. Spiritual writers often point out that dreams and visions can have natural causes or be brought about by demons. Not even believers regard all visions as trustworthy divine revelations. As we saw, even God can send a deceptive dream, as he did to Muhammad.

Many of us, however, will reject supernatural (or preternatural) explanation of dreams and visions. We want to assume that all dreams and visions have a natural cause. What kind of cause might this be? In the case of the Medjugorje apparitions, any explanation would need to take into account the fraught social and political contexts in which they occurred, which includes the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, a brutal civil war, and ethnic cleansing. But a sociological explanation takes us only so far.[3] Some attention needs to be paid to what is happening in the minds of the visionaries.

In her work on tribal societies, anthropologist Michele Stephen writes about what she calls the 'autonomous imagination'. Her idea is that humans can and do think in images, although in ways that operate mostly 'outside consciousness and beyond conscious control'.[4] Psychologists commonly suggest that much cognition, even perhaps quite sophisticated cognition, occurs below the level of conscious thought.[5] (We are all familiar with the experience of consciously puzzling over some question, abandoning the attempt, and then suddenly arriving at an answer 'out of the blue'.)

Stephen suggests that images originating in this way can emerge into consciousness in dreams and in visions. Because they have not emerged from conscious reflection, it is easy to attribute them to a source other than our own minds. This is particularly the case when our culture provides us with a number of possible sources, such as gods, spirits, or a world visited by the disembodied soul.

Those who seek natural explanations of visionary experiences might regard them as 'hallucinations'. What is a hallucination? It is, in the words of one psychologist,

> a sensory experience which occurs in the absence of external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, but has the compelling sense of reality of a true perception, is not amenable to direct and voluntary control by the experiencer, and occurs in an awake state.[6]

The definition is not perfect, for some visions can be deliberately induced and in this sense *are* under direct control.[7] But what is noteworthy is that this definition makes no reference to mental illness. In cultures in which such experiences are thought to have religious significance, they need not be regarded as pathological.[8]

10.4   Dreams, Visions, and Knowledge

What I have offered is, of course, a mere sketch of a natural explanation of dreams and visions. It requires more development, and it is up to psychologists to tell us whether it is correct. But let me assume, for the sake of the argument, that dreams and visions are not sent by God or brought about by the experiences of the disembodied soul, but have some natural cause. Does this mean that they are entirely without epistemic worth? Do they tell us nothing at all?

As in the case of divination, we should not be too quick to jump to this conclusion, especially if we think of the knowledge involved as a kind of practical knowledge, a knowing-how. Let me illustrate this with an example from the work of Michele Stephen among the Mekeo people of Papua New Guinea. Stephen had been interviewing a Mekeo 'man of sorrow' named Aisaga, a person thought to have dangerous magical powers (a 'sorcerer', if you like). He promised, one day, to show her some magical implements that were normally kept hidden. The next day he told her a dream that he had experienced that night. 'The dream', Stephen writes,

was of me asking to take his photograph so I could show it to people in Australia. I – my dream-self – told him I wanted to photograph him in traditional dress, the *ipi* (which is no more than a brief perineal band). He objected, saying that he felt awkward about being photographed like that because most people, including himself, nowadays wore clothes (shorts, ramis, and shirts). But I continued to press him, until finally he agreed, providing the photograph was taken inside the house. I said he would have to go outside because the photograph would only come out properly if taken in the sunlight. Once again he protested that he felt embarrassed to be photographed in such scanty dress, but I still insisted. Then he woke up.[9]

In Mekeo culture, dreams are not regarded as something merely 'in the mind'. The 'dream-self', as the Mekeo term is translated, is that aspect of the self that can leave the body when asleep. So from Aisaga's point of view, it really *was* Stephen appearing to him. But even if we reject this idea, what message was the dream conveying? At the time, Stephen and Aisaga did not discuss it. But Stephen later interpreted it to mean that in asking for esoteric, magical knowledge, she was, in effect, stripping Aisaga of his secrets. If she proceeded to do so, she would 'inevitably rouse his anger and shame'.[10] As it happens, Aisaga did show her the secret object, but perhaps his dream was telling him he was unwise to do so.

So what kind of knowledge is this dream revealing? It is knowledge about how much the native informant should tell the anthropologist without risking their relationship. This is not knowledge that is, in principle, otherwise inaccessible to the people concerned. They could both have reflected on what was happening and come to the same conclusion. But we are often reluctant to engage in such reflection. We may, for instance, feel committed to a course of action even though we are vaguely aware it is not the best thing to do. (Aisaga may have felt committed to show Stephen the secret object, since he had promised to do so.) In this situation, a dream may help us to reflect on an aspect of ourselves that would otherwise remain hidden.

Is this a kind of religious knowledge? Well, if religious knowledge includes knowledge about how we should act, then it could be classed as such. It is, however, a kind of knowledge that is derived from information that is accessible to the people concerned. The inferences involved may be unconscious inferences, but their starting point is something already known. This is not a new idea. Aristotle, when dealing with dreams, suggested that the mind may pick up clues from its environment and weave these together into an image of something about to occur. So while

rejecting the idea that a dream was sent by God, he could accept that it may have some 'revelatory' role.[11]

Incidentally, even if one rejects explanations of this kind, even if one believes that a dream, in itself, tells us nothing of interest about the state of the dreamer, it does not follow that dreams (or visions) are worthless. They may still have revelatory value by way of the process by which they are interpreted. Just as a skilled diviner can, in consultation with a client, draw useful interpretations from an apparently random scattering of pebbles, so a skilful dream interpreter may be able to help a client arrive at a decision or a resolution to some problem. Once again, this does not make the interpretation of dreams a *reliable* means of attaining knowledge. But in the hands of an insightful interpreter, the process may occasionally yield knowledge of the kind I have been discussing.

These reflections suggest a criterion by which we could assess claims that arise from dreams and visions. If such experiences are products of unconscious cognition – the 'autonomous imagination', if you like – then they must be woven from materials that are to hand. The same is true of any interpretation that is offered. If the alleged revelation is about matters that are entirely inaccessible to the person claiming to have this knowledge, we have reason to reject it.

There are certainly other issues that could be raised here. One problem, for instance, with such experiences is that they are not repeatable (at will) by others. We cannot chose to dream about the same subject or induce a vision relating to the same matter as has been reported to us. So how can such knowledge be tested? I shall come back to this question when discussing the testability of both mystical and prophetic experiences.

Notes

1. Oppenheim, 'The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East', p. 184.
2. Stephen, *A'aisa's Gift*, pp. 82–83.
3. Herrero, 'Medjugorje', pp. 147–148.
4. Stephen, *A'aisa's Gift*, p. 99.
5. Dijksterhuis and Nordgren, 'A Theory of Unconscious Thought', p. 96.
6. Aleman and de Haan, 'On Redefining Hallucination', p. 657.
7. Liester, 'On Redefining Hallucination', p. 659.
8. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 185.
9. Stephen, *A'aisa's Gift*, pp. 288–289.
10. Stephen, *A'aisa's Gift*, pp. 289.
11. Aristotle, *Parva naturalia* (The Short Physical Treatises), 462b–464b.

Knowledge by Acquaintance

We come now to a topic related to that of religious experience, that of knowledge by acquaintance. There are two ways of thinking about the relation between religious experience and knowledge. The first is to consider religious experience as an *indirect* source of religious knowledge. On this view, religious experience would be simply another fact about the world for which we are attempting to find an explanation. One might, for example, argue that the best available explanation of this experience is that there is some supernatural being bringing it about. But an argument of this kind would be an exercise of discursive reason, akin to an argument from the apparent design of complex organisms to the existence of a creator God. I shall discuss such arguments shortly.

What I am interested in here is something different, namely religious experience as a *direct* source of knowledge for religious claims. The idea here is *not* that we can use the experience as evidence with which to construct an argument. It is that the experience involves some kind of *immediate acquaintance* with the reality in question. The experience in question would be at least analogous to sense perception. When I see a coffee cup on the desk in front of me, my knowledge of the coffee cup is not based on any inference or argument. The cup is simply present to me. In the same way, many religious thinkers argue that the object of religious knowledge can be directly presented to a devotee. I shall call such experiences – those thought of as direct experiences of the divine or the unconditioned – *mystical experiences*. Can we make sense of the claim that there are such experiences? Should we take them seriously?

Mysticism and Knowledge

Abstract This chapter begins by examining the diversity of mystical experiences. Is there some experience that is common to all mystical traditions? It then looks at the question of the mechanism of religious experience. Are such experiences discredited if we have no account of how they might be produced?

Before I begin my discussion of mysticism, I want to remind you of a point I made earlier. Although I have divided these sources of religious knowledge into four different categories, in practice these are often combined. Visions, for instance, can be sources of mystical knowledge in which a person claims to have a direct experience of some non-natural reality. In a similar way, mystical knowledge can go hand-in-hand with acceptance of an authoritative divine revelation, such as that found in the Bible or Qur'an. It is only for the sake of analysis that I am treating each separately.

11.1   The Character of Mystical Experience

What is mystical experience and what is the knowledge it is thought to produce? I have defined mystical experience as an experience that is thought to be a direct encounter with some ultimate reality. Note that

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this definition depends on the subject's understanding of what is occurring. A vision, for example, would count as a mystical experience *only if* it is regarded by the subject as putting him or her directly in touch with the reality it presents. The object of that experience might be God, or the 'unconditioned', or the one reality (*brahman*) that underlies all things.

11.1.1   *Mystical Experience as Direct Acquaintance*

What this means is that a mystical experience, if veridical, would be an experience *of* that divine or unconditioned reality. It would 'reveal' it or make it manifest, just as ordinary vision makes manifest the object of sight. An example would be the experiences of Krishna described by writers within the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition of Hinduism (the tradition to which members of the so-called Hare Krishna movement belong). These are not regarded as 'experiences of perceiving Kṛṣṇa *as if* he were manifest in front you'; they are thought of as 'experiences of perceiving Kṛṣṇa who *is* manifest in front of you'.[1]

Muslim mystics, such as Ibn ʿArabī (1165–1240), developed a distinctive terminology to describe knowledge of this kind. They described it as knowledge by 'unveiling', 'tasting', 'opening', 'insight', and 'witnessing'. It was also, in Ibn ʿArabī's view, a source of knowledge that went beyond what was known by faith, i.e., by accepting the authority of divine revelation. The two were not, of course, in opposition. Indeed, the mystic's knowledge was a 'verification' (*taḥqīq*) of what was taught by the Qurʾan and Sunna (practice) of the Prophet.[2] But the mystic's knowledge went further.

Those religious thinkers who favour mystical experience often regard it as superior to the discursive reasoning in which philosophers engage. 'Mere' human reasoning, they will argue, gives rise to nothing more than knowledge. If you are seeking wisdom, you should turn to the direct acquaintance provided by mystical experience. This idea occurs in many different traditions. It can be found within those forms of Christianity influenced by Platonism, as well as within Hinduism and Buddhism.[3] For those who hold this view, philosophy will have, at best, a secondary role. Medieval Muslim scholar Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), for instance, recognized that there were arguments in support of religious belief. But he did not regard these as decisive. The firmest kind of religious knowledge, in his view, arose from the kind of direct apprehension found among Sufi mystics.[4]

11.1.2 Evaluations of Mysticism

I have spoken of those religious thinkers who favour mystical experience. But it is important to note that not all religious thinkers do. Twentieth-century Protestant Christian theologian Karl Barth, for instance, described mysticism as a 'blind alley' that is opposed to the Gospel.[5] As it happens, Barth also had a low opinion of philosophical reasoning when it came to matters of faith. What he relied on was the (alleged) divine revelation to which the Bible bears witness. There is, however, a problem here. Even within the Bible, we found accounts of what look suspiciously like mystical experiences. Take, for instance, St Paul's claim to have been caught up 'to the third heaven' and to have 'heard things that cannot be told' (2 Cor 12: 2–4). So it is hard to see how a Christian thinker could reject mystical claims altogether.

A more common view within religious communities is to accept the existence of mystical experiences while treating them cautiously. Mystics can be dangerous from the point of view of religious authority. A mystic's personal sense of the divine can go hand-in-hand with the acceptance of authoritative traditions, but it can also lead him or her to challenge those traditions. The Roman Catholic tradition features many prominent mystics, but there is a saying attributed to (among others) John Henry (Cardinal) Newman (1801–1890) that mysticism 'begins in mist, centres on *I*, and ends in schism'. We find a similar attitude within Muslim history. The mystical practices of Sufism are valued within Islam, but within the limits laid down by thinkers such as Imam Mālik (711–795 CE). Mālik is reported to have said that 'Sufism without Law [*sharīʿa*] is heresy, and Law without Sufism is impiety, but he who possesses the two possesses the truth'.[6]

11.2   THE DIVERSITY OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

Writers on this topic often speak of 'mystical experience' in the singular. But is there just one such experience? After all, a mystical experience will generally occur within a particular religious tradition and will be regarded as supporting that tradition's claims. But the religious traditions in question seem to make incompatible claims. On the face of it, the following propositions

(1) 'Jesus is the Son of God'
    and
(2) 'Muhammad is the last and greatest of the prophets'

cannot both be true. But Christian mystics will hold that their experience supports (1), while Muslim mystics will hold that their experience supports (2).

There are two issues to be addressed here. The first is whether all mystical experiences, *as* experiences, are alike. More precisely, is there a type of mystical experience that occurs across religious traditions? The second is whether these experiences are a reliable source of knowledge. Should mystical claims be taken seriously?

11.2.1   The Diversity Question

Let me begin with the first question: whether mystical experiences in differing traditions have anything in common. The *descriptions* of these experiences certainly appear very different. Take, for instance, the experience of seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, recorded on a scrap of paper found sewn up in his jacket after death.

> From about half past ten in the evening to about half an hour
>   after midnight.
> Fire.
> God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
> Not the God of philosophers and scholars.
> Absolute Certainty: Beyond reason. Joy. Peace.
> Forgetfulness of the world and everything but God.
> The world has not known thee, but I have known thee.
> Joy! joy! joy! Tears of joy![7]

Pascal is clear that this is an experience of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Pascal's conviction that he had encountered the (Christian and Jewish) God seems very different from the insight expressed in the concluding lines of a Zen Buddhist meditation.

> For such as, reflecting within themselves,
> Testify to the truth of Self-nature,
> To the truth that Self-nature is no-nature,
> They have really gone beyond the ken of sophistry.
> For them opens the gate of oneness of cause and effect,
> And straight runs the path of non-duality and non-trinity.
> Abiding with the not-particular which is in particulars,
> Whether going or returning, they remain for ever unmoved;
> Taking hold of the no-thought which lies in thoughts.[8]

It would seem odd to suggest that the two mystical experiences being reported here are of the same kind. Even if they are, the mystics in question seem to be drawing very different conclusions from their experience.

11.2.2   The Intrinsic Diversity Thesis

Scholars of mystical experience disagree rather vigorously about these matters. On the one hand, there are those who hold that mystical experiences across traditions lack a common core. We can call this *the intrinsic diversity thesis*. Mystical experiences, on this view, are not merely *expressed* in the language of a particular faith, but are *shaped* by the concepts drawn from that faith. Scholars who hold this view argue that our ordinary sense-perceptions also have this character: they, too, are shaped by our existing beliefs. Painter Claude Monet

> 'knew' Notre Dame [in Rouen] was a Gothic cathedral, and so 'saw' it as a Gothic cathedral as testified to by his paintings which present Notre Dame with Gothic archways. Yet close examination will reveal that certain of the archways of Notre Dame which [he] painted as Gothic are in fact Romanesque. As Coleridge reminded us: 'the mind half-sees and half-creates'.[9]

On this view, there is no pure mystical experience that underlies the apparent diversity. All mystical experiences are, if you like, 'socially constructed'. As one author puts it, 'Christians virtually never have a vision of multi-armed [Indian goddess] Kali, and Neo-Confucians never see Jesus.'[10]

11.2.3   The Common Core Thesis

On the other side of the debate, there are those who hold that there *is* a common experience (or perhaps a set of common experiences) that underlie all forms of mysticism. We can call this *the common core thesis*. On this view, this common experience is simply differently articulated in different cultural contexts. No one denies that the descriptions mystics produce do, at first sight, seem very different. But when we focus on those descriptions that are least 'tainted' by doctrinal considerations, we can see they actually resemble one another.

Those who defend this idea can also appeal to the analogy of sense perception. My German colleague and I both perceive the receptacle for holding coffee that stands on the desk in front of us. But I call it 'a cup'

and she calls it *eine Tasse*. Someone from a culture that lacks the concept of a 'cup' might describe it as, for instance, 'a uselessly small container for maize'. But if we each try to describe, in a more neutral manner, what we are observing (perhaps 'a cylindrical object, open at one end, with a handle'), we can understand that our perceptual experience has the same object.

Which thesis is correct is a difficult question, which can be decided only by way of careful cross-cultural studies. But let me make just one point. Even if it turns out that all (or practically all) mystics have a common experience, this does not entail that the object of their experience exists. At least when the object of mystical experience is thought of as distinct from the self, it is what philosophers call an 'intentional object', an object of thought. But we can *think about*, *imagine*, and even believe we are *perceiving* objects that do not exist. We can think of fictional objects like unicorns or Sherlock Holmes; we can experience visual illusions and hallucinations. (The water I appear to see on the sun-baked road in front of me does not exist.) So even if the common core thesis is correct, it may simply mean that all human beings are prone to similar religious illusions, just as we are all prone to similar visual illusions.

One might think that there is an exception to this rule, namely when the experience in question *is* an experience of the self. We find this idea within those Indian religious traditions in which the goal of the spiritual path is to experience the self (the *ātman*) as it truly is, that is to say, as identical with the underlying reality of all things (*brahman*). If what the mystic is experiencing is the self, it could be argued, then it is impossible that the object of experience does not exist. After all, what is being experienced is nothing other than the self that is doing the experiencing. I think this argument is unsound, but I shall come back to it shortly, when discussing the idea of a 'self-authenticating' experience. The point I want to make here is that we should not pass too quickly from the idea that all mystical experiences are alike to the claim that they are a reliable source of knowledge. These are quite different questions.

11.3   The Mechanism of Mystical Experiences

We normally assume that our experiences of any object will be mediated by way of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. But this seems to cast doubt on the idea that we could experience a divine or otherwise other-worldly reality. If all experience occurs by way of sense perception,

then it seems we cannot experience realities that lie beyond the senses. If we *can* experience such a reality, what kind of experience is it? What other mechanism might be responsible?

11.3.1   *Experiencing a Spiritual Entity*

Before I address that question, I should note that the idea of perceiving other-worldly realities by way of the senses is not necessarily crazy. It makes sense if the other-worldly realities in question (such as gods, spirits, and demons) are thought of as *material* entities composed, perhaps, of some very fine material substance. This has, in fact, been quite a common view, historically. There are even passages within the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that suggest God has a body.[11] Among contemporary Christians, the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons) have revived this idea. They, too, regard God as having a body.[12] Even more orthodox Christians believe this about Jesus, after his resurrection. His resurrected body may have been a 'spiritual' body, but it could (it seems) be seen and touched, at least in some circumstances. If God is (in some sense) a material being, then it makes perfect sense to speak of an experience of God. That experience could be mediated by our ordinary sensory mechanisms, operating (perhaps) in conditions that heighten their ordinary powers.

Nonetheless, this idea would seem odd to many theistic philosophers. Leaving aside the case of the resurrected body of Jesus, they would deny that God has a body. Richard Swinburne, for instance, includes this in his definition of God.[13] God is thought of as a spiritual being and a spiritual being is, by definition, neither material nor dependent upon material things for his existence. If this is the case, we could not perceive God with any of the five senses. He cannot be (literally) seen, smelt, tasted, heard, or touched. In what sense, then, could we perceive a spiritual entity?

The same question can arise within traditions in which belief in gods is less central. Within Buddhism, the goal of the spiritual path is the extinction of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion, a state known as *nirvāṇa*. This is not, as in some other Indian traditions, an experience of the self, since Buddhists hold there is no enduring self. So what is it an experience of? What does the 'awakened one' experience at such a time, particularly when it comes to the *parinirvāṇa*, which comes with the death of a body? As we have seen, Buddhist thinkers generally avoid giving a straight answer to this question. But it seems clear that whatever is experienced is not the

conditioned, material world, or at least not *as* conditioned and material.[14] So once again the question arises: how could we have experience of that which lies outside the scope of ordinary experience?

11.3.2   *Proposed Mechanisms*

Do we have an account of a mechanism that would make such experiences possible? Religious thinkers have often claimed that there is such a mechanism, that the human mind has a capacity to know immaterial entities or states of affairs. It can do so by way of a kind of direct insight, an *intellectual* intuition.

This idea is found even outside religious contexts. In fact, belief in the possibility of such an intellectual intuition is one of the doctrines that distinguishes rationalists from empiricists. (Empiricists deny the existence of such a power, holding that the only 'intuitions' we have are dependent upon sense perception.) Outside religious contexts, the object of such an intuition may be 'Platonic Forms, pure ideas, concrete universals, or self-evident truths'.[15] But within religious contexts, its object can be what devotees think of as the 'absolute', the 'unconditioned', or the 'divine'.

Theistic thinkers, particularly those influenced by Plato, sometimes go further. They suggest that what makes a direct knowledge of God possible is a certain 'connaturality' between the human mind and God.[16] The idea here is that the human mind or soul is, like God, a spiritual entity. It has functions that are at least partially autonomous of the body in which it exists. One of these functions is that of being able to grasp, by an immediate intuition, other spiritual entities. Aquinas expresses this idea by means of a traditional image of the spark and the fire.

> As the spark, being a part of the fire, leaps upwards out of the fire, so a part of the soul reaches upward out of the purely human and receives a small participation in the kind of knowledge possessed by the angels.[17]

The angels, of course, are also spiritual beings whose knowledge of God is not mediated by sense perception.

A similar view can be found within the non-theistic context of the Indian Advaita Vedānta tradition. Since the self (*ātman*) is identical with the underlying reality of things (*brahman*), there is the closest possible connection between the knower and the known. According to some Indian thinkers, this connection underlies *any* direct knowledge of things

(even that which occurs in sense perception).[18] But it is the intuitive apprehension of the oneness of knower and known that brings about liberation (*mokṣa*).

If, however, you do not accept these assumptions – if you do not believe that God is a material entity, that the soul is a spiritual entity, or that *ātman* is identical with *brahman* – then the question of the mechanism of mystical experience will remain a problem. If at least some such experiences are veridical, revealing what they purport to reveal, then there must be some means by which the mind can attain this knowledge. Christian thinkers often assert that our ability to attain direct knowledge of God is itself a divine gift, a 'supernatural' endowment that goes beyond our natural powers. That may be the case, but it merely raises the same question in a different context.

In his defence of mystical claims to knowledge, philosopher William Alston freely admits that we know nothing of the mechanism that brings it about. But he also claims that this does not count against it. 'After all', he writes,

> people were amply justified in supposing themselves to see physical objects in their environment long before anyone had any adequate idea of the mechanisms involved. No doubt, people at least realized that one sees with one's eyes and hears with one's ears long before the dawn of recorded history, but it is easy to imagine unusual cases in which even this realization is absent and one still knows that one sees trees and the like.[19]

Perhaps, although I am suspicious when philosophers base arguments on non-existent scenarios that are 'easy to imagine'. The fact of the matter is that we have always had *some* idea of the mechanism of sense perception, while we have *no* idea of the mechanism of mystical experience. As Alston rightly notes, that does not necessarily undermine mystical claims to knowledge, but it might give us a reason to doubt them.

Notes

1. Chilcott, 'Directly Perceiving Kṛṣṇa', p. 533.
2. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 168.
3. Fenton, 'Mystical Experience as a Bridge for Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion', p. 55.
4. Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ashʿarite School*, pp. 67–68.
5. Cited in Egan, 'Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticisms'. p. 402.

6. Willis, 'Religious Confraternities of the Sudan', p. 176.
7. Cited in Happold, *Mysticism*, p. 39.
8. Cited in Happold, *Mysticism*, p. 169.
9. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', p. 30.
10. Forman, 'Paramārtha and Modern Constructivists on Mysticism', p. 393. Note that Forman himself defends the common core thesis.
11. Dawes and Harding, 'Body', pp. 86–87.
12. *Doctrine and Covenants* 130: 22. Note, however, that it is only God the Father and God the Son who are thought of as having bodies.
13. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p. 7.
14. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 77.
15. Frankfurt, 'The Dependence of Mind', p. 17.
16. Maritain, 'On Knowledge by Connaturality', p. 476.
17. *Comment. in Sent.* 31.4, cited in Wiesinger, *Occult Phenomena in the Light of Theology*, p. 77. Here Aquinas discusses the knowledge enjoyed by Adam and Eve before their nature was corrupted by sin, but it resembles the knowledge claimed by mystics. On the latter, see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1a, qu. 1, art. 6 ad 3.
18. Datta, *The Six Ways of Knowing*, p. 88.
19. Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 49, 60.

Testing Mystical Claims

Abstract Examining mystical claims to knowledge, this chapter asks whether mystical experiences can be reliably reproduced. It then examines one way in which they could be debunked (by offering an entirely natural explanation) and discusses two ways in which the claims made by mystics could be tested.

Keywords Reproducibility · veridicality · naturalism · debunking explanations · testability

So much for the character of mystical experience. But what is its relation to knowledge? It purports to be a kind of direct acquaintance with its object. But is it? Does it yield the kind of knowledge that it purports to yield? How should we assess the claims made by mystics? To answer this question, we need to decide whether mystical experiences are testable.

We can break this question down into two further questions. The first is whether mystical experiences can be *reproduced* in ways that would allow others to share them. In other words, can we check whether the experience really is as the mystic describes? The second question has to do with whether this experience is *veridical*. It may appear to be an experience of some divine or unconditioned reality. But is it, really? Or is the experience illusory?

12.1   The Reproducibility of Mystical Experience

When it comes to the first of these questions, we can begin by distinguishing two types of mystical experience, depending on the degree of the subject's control over the experience. There are mystical experiences that simply come over a person in ways that seem unpredictable and uncontrollable. I shall call these *spontaneous* mystical experiences. Such experiences, it seems, could not be reproduced on demand. But if they cannot be reproduced on demand, they cannot be tested. We cannot reproduce the experience to find out whether it really is as the mystic claims.

It might be argued that this is not a fatal objection. After all, earthquakes, for example, are also unpredictable and uncontrollable, yet we can study them and offer explanations on why they occur. But the parallel is not exact. Mystical experience purports to give rise to knowledge by acquaintance. So in order to verify its claims – to check whether it really is (apparently) revealing some state of affairs – we need to be able to participate in that experience ourselves. The parallel here is not with phenomena such as earthquakes, but (once again) with sense perception. If I claim that there *seems* to be a rabbit in the field over there, how can you test my 'seems to be' claim? The only way is to look in the field for yourself.

There are, however, other kinds of mystical experience that I shall call *induced* mystical experiences. These take place (more or less) predictably in certain contexts or (more commonly) after following a particular technique (one of prayer or meditation, perhaps coupled with a certain way of life). That technique may not be one that can be *easily* reproduced. Mystics often claim that what is required is a long period of training. But it is possible, at least in principle, for others to undertake this training in order to see whether it really does result in an (apparent) vision of some divine or otherwise unconditioned reality.

12.2   Debunking Mystical Experiences

What about the second question, namely whether mystical experience is veridical, revealing that which it purports to reveal? The first point to make is that mystical experiences – at least those that purport to be experiences of some reality distinct from the self – embody a causal claim. They claim to be caused by the very reality which they appear to reveal. We consider our everyday visual experience to be *experiences of* the objects they reveal because those objects exercise a causal influence upon us. Light reflected

from an object enters the eye, falls on the retina, and so on. The experience cannot be explained without positing this causal influence. By way of analogy, to describe an experience as an experience of God implies that it cannot be explained without reference to the causal action of God. So if we can offer an entirely natural explanation, one that involves only this-worldly causes, there is no reason to consider the experience an experience of God.[1]

This observation has an important implication. How could we undercut the evidential force of an alleged experience of some divine reality? We could do so by producing an alternative explanation of that experience in which the divine reality in question plays no causal role. This need not involve the claim that there *is* no divine reality. It would involve the more defensible claim that there is no need to posit a divine cause in order to explain this particular experience. A purely natural explanation, involving, for instance, social and psychological factors, would do the job. Such explanations are often referred to as 'debunking' explanations.

Note, however, that if you are prepared to take proposed 'supernatural' explanations seriously, simply producing a possible natural explanation is not enough. To debunk a proposed supernatural explanation, you would need to show that the natural explanation was *preferable* to that offered by the believer. There are familiar criteria for doing this. For instance, an explanatory hypothesis H_1 is thought to be better than another hypothesis H_2 if it renders the fact to be explained more likely. Alternatively, H_1 may be thought to be better than H_2 if H_1 is simpler, has a higher degree of testability (could more readily be falsified), or is more consistent with what we already know. These features give us reason to accept it.

12.3   The Testing of Mystical Claims

Let me set aside, for the moment, the possibility of debunking an alleged mystical experience. Is there any other way we could test the claims that mystics make? There are, as we have seen, religious thinkers who will oppose the idea that such claims should be tested. If you hold, for instance, that mystical knowledge emerges from a kind of intuition that has a higher status than 'mere' discursive reason, then the testing of mystical claims will seem inappropriate. But as we have seen, even if there is some common core to all mystical experiences, mystics within differing traditions make very different claims to knowledge. Those claims often appear incompatible. So unless one makes a dogmatic commitment to just one set of such claims, it is hard to see how the question of testing them can be avoided.

12.3.1   Independent Tests

There are two ways in which one might test the beliefs that are said to emerge from mystical experiences. We could ask, first of all, if there is any independent evidence in their support. The procedure here is parallel to that followed in the sciences. Among scientists, it is not enough that a single experimental result (an 'experience', if you like) seems to confirm a hypothesis. Scientists will want that hypothesis to have survived independent tests – to be confirmed by other, quite different experiments – before they accept it. A hypothesis, in other words, should not be merely *ad hoc*, explaining nothing more than one class of experimental results. Rather, it should be capable of explaining a wider range of phenomena.

Note, however, that once we subject religious claims to this kind of testing, we are no longer relying on mystical experience alone. We are relying on a type of discursive reasoning. Say, for instance, that a mystic claims to have experienced union with an all-powerful and infinitely powerful deity, a Creator God who is also infinitely benevolent. (For the sake of the argument, we can set aside the question of how a mystical experience could produce such knowledge.) Then we could test the mystic's claim by means of the following reasoning. 'If there really is an all-powerful Creator God who is infinitely powerful and benevolent, then we would not expect to see gratuitous evils in the world. Are there such evils?' This is familiar territory for philosophers: that of arguments for and against the existence of God.

There is, however, a problem with this kind of testing. It is that not all religious claims seem to be independently testable in this way. In particular, some do not appear to have observable consequences. Take, for instance, the idea that there exists a wheel of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) from which humans need to be liberated, an idea common (as we have seen) to a range of Indian religious traditions. If we ask what observable consequences this belief has, against which it could be tested, we might wonder whether it has any. If, as Buddhists claim, there is no substantial self that persists throughout our lives, then there is certainly no substantial self that can survive the process of rebirth. So most people, at least, cannot expect to remember a former existence.[2] But how else could we know whether human beings really are reborn?

12.3.2   Consistency with Other Beliefs

There is, however, a second way in which we could test knowledge claims that emerge from mystical experience. This is to test them against the rest of what we know. We have a body of existing knowledge, which seems well founded. A claim that is entirely inconsistent with that body of knowledge may well be true: we may have discovered a new fact that demands the revision of our other beliefs. So finding such an inconsistency is not necessarily a fatal objection. But when we have excellent reasons to hold those other beliefs, and when the new belief does not remove the force of those reasons, we should be reluctant to accept it.

Something like this is true of our ordinary perceptual beliefs. If my senses appear to be showing me something I have reason to think cannot be true – perhaps the family cat floating unsupported outside the window of my second-storey study – I should suspect I am suffering from some kind of hallucination. The same is true of beliefs emerging from mystical experience. If they, too, are inconsistent with what we already believe we know, we have reason to doubt them.

We can illustrate this manner of testing beliefs by making use of Susan Haack's crossword puzzle analogy.[3] The relation of a belief to the experience giving rise to it would correspond to that of a word in a crossword puzzle to its clue. The relation of a newly formed belief to our existing, well-established beliefs would correspond to that of the same word to the already discovered words in its vicinity. The idea here is that even if the *mere fact* of being produced by a particular experience gives a belief some degree of epistemic status, that status also depends on its evidential relation with our other, well-founded beliefs. If those other beliefs render it highly unlikely to be true, we have reason to doubt it.

Notes

1. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 228.
2. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, pp. 143–144.
3. Haack. *Evidence and Inquiry*, pp. 81–89.

Self-Authentication

Abstract Many mystics argue that their knowledge claims require no testing, since such knowledge is 'self-authenticating'. Does this idea make sense? This chapter argues that while there could (perhaps) be self-authenticating experiences, they are not the kind of experiences to which mystics lay claim.

I have been discussing how we might test the claims made by mystics. But do mystical claims require this sort of testing? Do we need any independent evidence in their support? A claim commonly made within religious circles is that we do not, that mystical experience is in some sense 'self-authenticating'. It provides what we might call 'evidence of its own truth'. What can we make of this idea?

13.1   The Idea of a Self-Authenticating Experience

What would it mean, first of all, for an experience to be self-authenticating? Keith Yandell offers a helpful definition:

> Chandra's experience E is *self-authenticating* regarding proposition P if and only if Chandra has experience E, it is logically impossible that Chandra have

E and proposition P be false, and Chandra rests his acceptance of P on his having had E.[1]

Self-authentication, on this view, is a complex, three-place relation: it has to do with a subject (the person having the experience), an experience, and a proposition that is thought to be confirmed by it. The proposition in question describes an object or state of affairs that is apparently made manifest or revealed by way of the experience: the experience is (it seems) an *experience of* this object or state of affairs. The experience is self-authenticating if it is impossible to have the experience when the state of affairs it appears to reveal does not exist.

This is, however, a rather demanding condition. To undermine a claim to self-authentication, all we need to show is that it is *conceivable* that Chandra should have this experience when the proposition he believes as a result is false. While this is a good definition of self-authentication, in the strict sense, it may be a stronger claim than many religious people intend to make. When they say, for instance, 'Having had this experience, I cannot doubt that God exists' or 'I cannot doubt that *ātman* is *brahman*', they are not speaking about the *logical* possibility that this proposition could be false. They are speaking about the *practical* possibility – the 'psychological possibility', if you like – that they could bring themselves to deny it. There are everyday analogies for this. As one author writes,

> a man may have smelt, felt, and seen hundreds of lampreys [eels], yet his dying words, having eaten a surfeit of them, may still be – 'there's no such animal'. This is logically possible; but in a sincere, sane man with a good knowledge of the language it is empirically impossible.[2]

These are matters we could not in practice bring ourselves to deny, even though their denial is logically possible.

It is not clear, however, what such examples prove. Firstly, our practical inability to deny something is simply a statement about the *evidential force* of the experience. It does not mean that the proposition in question should be exempt from critical scrutiny. Secondly, it is a statement about the evidential force of an experience *for the subject* and not for anyone else. The evidence in question is private, not public, a point to which I shall return shortly.

13.2   Two Types of Experiences

I shall, then, continue to use Yandell's strict definition while keeping in mind that it may be stricter than many mystics intend. When asking if there could be a self-authenticating experience, it will be useful to distinguish two types of experience. The first is an experience that I shall call a *subject-state* experience. What it purports to reveal is nothing more than the state of the subject – the person who is doing the experiencing – at the time the experience occurs.

It seems that there could be subject-state experiences that are self-authenticating. The most popular example is the experience of being in pain. It seems impossible that I should feel myself to be in pain without actually being in pain. After all, the 'feeling myself to be in pain' *just is* the pain.[3] The two are identical. To be sure, there is the issue of how we should use the word 'pain'. Perhaps there are borderline cases in which I am not sure whether what I am experiencing should count as pain. (Is this an itch, or is it mildly painful?) But there are plenty of cases in which it is clear that the use of the term is appropriate. In these cases, it could be argued, my experience may be self-authenticating.

This is, however, a pretty trivial kind of self-authentication. Religiously interesting claims are not of this kind. They emerge from a different class of experiences, which I shall call *subject-object* experiences. The clearest examples are apparent experiences of an object – most commonly a supernatural being – which is thought to be distinct from the subject, the person doing the experiencing. An example would be an alleged experience of God. It is clear that this experience could be mistaken, that what one takes to be an experience of God might not be one at all.

The question is more difficult when it comes to non-dualistic religious traditions, in which what is thought to be experienced is some fact about the self. The best known such experience would be an experience of the self (*ātman*) as identical with the underlying reality of things (*brahman*). Since what the mystic is allegedly experiencing is a fact about the self, surely this experience is also self-authenticating. Are these experiences not akin to the experience of being in pain?

No, they are not. The claim about the identity of *ātman* with *brahman* is certainly a claim about the self. But it goes far beyond what can be known through simple introspection.[4] It is not merely a description of a person's own state at the present moment. It is a metaphysical statement about the oneness of all things, a statement about the underlying reality of

both the self and the world. That statement may (or may not) be true, but it cannot be said to be self-authenticating in any strict sense. It is entirely possible that one could have such an experience and the proposition be false.

13.3   PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

So it is hard to see how any mystical experience could be self-authenticating, at least in the strict sense. Even if some religious experiences were self-authenticating, a further problem would arise. For whom would they be self-authenticating? The answer is, of course, for the person having the experience. *Your* experience has no (direct) evidential force for *me*. I might consider the fact that you have such an experience as *indirect* evidence for the state of affairs you claim to have perceived. But I am not experiencing that state of affairs myself; I am not directly acquainted with its object. So even if you were having a self-authenticating experience, I would not be.

In the case of an induced mystical experience, it may be that given a certain period of training, and the employment of certain techniques, I could come to share that experience. There are certainly parallels to this in other fields. If I want to become a wine-taster, I may need to undertake some training. Only after some months will I be able to discern the subtle tastes that characterize different wines. But unlike the training required to become a wine-taster, that required to become a mystic is typically long and strenuous. I may need to engage in years of ascetic practice and/or prayer and meditation before I can attain the necessary state of mind. Few people have the opportunity to engage in such training. One is reminded of the tension between the way of life of a 'householder' (*gṛhastha*) and a 'renouncer' (*saṃnyāsa*) within Indian religious history. The responsibilities of everyday life can seem incompatible with the quest for enlightenment.

I have been arguing that a mystical experience can have (direct) evidential force only for the subject. But is this a problem? After all, it could be argued, sense perception resembles mystical experience in this respect. I have no direct access to your perceptual experience, and your perceptual experience has no (direct) evidential force for me. But we still consider perceptual experience a source of knowledge, indeed, one that is in a certain sense shared. Why does it have this status?

That is not an easy question to answer. It does seem that sense experience is shared in a way that mystical experience is not, although it is hard

to pin down just what the difference is. It may have to do with the fact that sense perception is a cognitive faculty that (practically) all people have and upon whose outputs we generally agree.[5] Even those who lack one modality, such as sight, will generally have another, such as hearing (perhaps in a more highly developed form). Not only do we use these faculties as individuals, but we use them to coordinate our activities, doing so unthinkingly and (for the most part) without difficulty. Sense perception is what enables us to live in a common world. This makes it foundational in a way that religious experience is not.

One concluding remark should be made. The idea that religious experience is self-authenticating is widespread, but by no means universal within religious traditions. Religious thinkers often note that what purports to be, for instance, an experience of God might be illusory. It might be produced by a natural cause or perhaps by a supernatural or preternatural agent who is not God (such as the devil). This is why most traditions have ways of testing these purported mystical experiences.

Often, of course, the criteria they use are criteria internal to the religious tradition in question. One such criterion is that of checking to see whether the beliefs to which this experience apparently lends support are consistent with the 'public' revelations contained in Sacred Scripture. When a believer looks beyond his or her own religious tradition, new criteria must be found, similar to those employed by a philosopher. But once you admit that an alleged religious experience needs to be tested against some criterion drawn from outside the experience itself, you have ceased to regard it as self-authenticating, at least in any strong sense of that phrase.

Notes

1. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 271.
2. Horsburgh, 'The Claims of Religious Experience', p. 194.
3. Frankfurt, 'The Dependence of Mind', p. 21.
4. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 279.
5. Piccinini, 'Epistemic Divergence and the Publicity of Scientific Methods', pp. 605–606.

Discursive Reason

What we have seen is that no matter how important mystical experience is, as a source of knowledge, it cannot stand alone. Mystical claims to knowledge require assessment. Even if we have a mystical experience ourselves, it cannot be self-authenticating. But how are we to assess it? The only route seems to be some kind of discursive reason, that is to say, an argument of one kind or another. The argument need not directly support the belief in question. That belief may still rest on the mystical experience. But the argument would give us reason to regard the mystical experience as veridical.

The idea that all religious beliefs ought to be subject to this kind of assessment is sometimes known as 'evidentialism'. The clearest examples of an evidentialist approach to religious belief are arguments in support of the existence of God. The most commonly studied arguments of this kind are Muslim and Christian, although arguments in support of the existence of God (*Īśvara*) are also found within Indian philosophy. My focus here, however, will be the arguments defended by Christian philosophers.

There are three kinds of arguments I shall outline. The first is an *a priori* argument, namely the ontological argument. It is *a priori* in the sense that it does not depend on any observable facts, but on the very idea of God (or, perhaps, the mere possibility of God's existence). The other two arguments are *a posteriori*. One of these (the cosmological argument) starts from the very existence of the universe; the other (the teleological argument) starts from the presence of apparent design in nature.

There is a vast body of literature relating to these arguments, most of which I shall ignore. What I am interested in is how far they take us. Even if they are sound arguments, do they support the kind of religious belief that their advocates display? If not, what else is going on here? What role are they actually playing?

Ontological Arguments

Abstract Perhaps the most famous argument in support of belief in the God of classical theism is the ontological argument. This is an *a priori* argument, requiring as evidence nothing more than the very idea of God. This chapter outlines both St Anselm's argument and the more recent 'modal' version put forward by Alvin Plantinga.

Keywords Faith · theology · existence · essence · modality

An ontological argument for the existence of God was first put forward in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), and it has fascinated philosophers ever since. It was rejected by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), revived by René Descartes (1596–1650), opposed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), and revived in our own time by Norman Malcolm and Alvin Plantinga. Even Bertrand Russell was briefly tempted by it when he was a student at Cambridge,[1] which is a testimony to its power.

14.1   ANSELM'S ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The simplest form of the ontological argument is taken from chapter two of Anselm's work, the *Proslogion*, which is written in the form of a prayer. This suggests that Anselm thinks of this argument as lending support to an existing faith. The act of faith comes first, the argument later.

Indeed, Anselm famously defines theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding. He does *not* define it as *intellectus quaerens fidem*: understanding seeking faith. This lends support to an overall theme of this study: the idea that religious belief is not based on, although it may be buttressed by, such arguments.

Let me turn, however, to the prayer in which Anselm sets out his ontological argument. He writes, addressing the deity:

> We believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought.... 'The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God" [Psalm 14:1; 53:1].' But when this same fool hears me say 'something than which nothing greater can be thought', he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding...And surely that than which a greater cannot be thought cannot exist only in the understanding. For if it exists only in the understanding, it can be thought to exist in reality as well, which is greater. So if that than which a greater cannot be thought exists only in the understanding, then that than which a greater *cannot* be thought is that than which a greater *can* be thought. But that is impossible. Therefore, there is no doubt that something than which a greater cannot be thought exists both in the understanding and in reality.[2]

The argument may be set out systematically in a more concise form:[3]

(1) God exists either in our minds alone, or in reality also.
(2) Something that exists in reality is greater than something which exists in the mind alone.
(3) If God existed in our minds alone, we could think of something greater, namely something that really exists [from (2)].
(4) We cannot, however, conceive of anything greater than God (by definition).

From (1) to (4), it follows that:

(5) God does not exist in the mind alone, but in reality also.

Does this seem like a sound argument? I shall mention some problems with it shortly. But if you are not convinced by St Anselm's argument, here is another, offered by Alvin Plantinga.

14.2   A Modal Ontological Argument

Plantinga's argument involves some of the insights of modal logic, which deals with the notions of necessity and possibility. (Modal logic is so called because originally it dealt with the *modes*, or *ways*, in which a proposition may be said to be true, either necessarily or contingently.)

14.2.1   *Modality and Possible Worlds*

There are various forms of possibility that may be invoked here, but the most widely used is that of *logical* possibility. Note that this is a much broader category than that of physical possibility. It may be *physically* impossible – in violation of the laws of nature – that pigs should fly. But it is not *logically* impossible. There is no contradiction in the idea of a flying pig, as there is (for example) in the idea of a square circle.

A popular way of approaching this topic is by way of the idea of *possible worlds*. A possible world is a comprehensive state of affairs that can be described in a way that is consistent, avoiding self-contradiction. The idea of possible worlds is attractive because it makes it easier to work with the difficult concept of *necessity*. A necessary truth is simply one that holds in *every* possible world.

14.2.2   *Plantinga's Argument*

Plantinga begins by defining a couple of notions. The first is that of 'maximal greatness.' A being has maximal greatness only if it has 'maximal excellence' in every possible world. What is maximal excellence? It is the property of enjoying 'omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection' in every world.[4] Plantinga then employs these notions to construct his modal ontological argument, which may be set out as follows:

(1) There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated. (There is nothing contradictory about the idea of maximal greatness.)

(2) Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every possible world (by definition).

(3) Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence in every possible world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world (by definition).

From (1) to (3), it follows that:

(4) Maximal greatness is instantiated in every possible world.

What this means will become clear if I add a couple of premises:

(5) Maximal greatness entails having the qualities of God in every possible world [from (2) and (3)].
(6) The actual world is a possible world. (What is actual must be possible.)

The conclusion follows, namely that:

(7) God exists in the actual world.

What Plantinga seems to have done here is to deduce the *existence* of God from the mere *possibility* that God exists. This is a very neat trick, and he might appear (at first sight) to have pulled it off. After all, what Plantinga asks us to concede is nothing more than the mere *possibility* of maximal greatness. Once again, the possibility being assumed here is *logical* possibility. So all an atheist needs to concede is that the idea of a maximally great being is not self-contradictory.

Why would you not make this concession? You might argue that the qualities attributed to God – omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection – could not exist within the one being. This is an important question, for if it is right, there is *no* (logically) possible world in which God exists. But given the mysteriousness of the notion of God, it is difficult to make a watertight case for the incoherence of the divine attributes. So one might be inclined to give a theist the benefit of the doubt and concede that the idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect being is not self-contradictory. There are, however, other problems with the argument, and I shall come back to them shortly.

NOTES

1. Russell, 'My Mental Development', p. 10.
2. Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion with the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, p. 100.
3. Le Poidevin, *Arguing For Atheism*, pp. 19–20.
4. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, p. 111.

Cosmological Arguments

Abstract A second form of theistic argument begins with the unremarkable observation that there exists a universe. The particular cosmological argument outlined here is a modal one, although the chapter also makes mention of the *kalām* argument, which rests on the idea that the universe had a beginning.

Keywords Universe · contingency · necessity · causality · cosmology · Big Bang

The first of the *a posteriori* arguments I shall outline is called the *cosmological argument*. In fact, just as there is more than one ontological argument, so there is more than one cosmological argument. But what they all have in common is that they take as their starting point the most general of all observable facts: the very existence of the universe (the 'cosmos').

15.1   A Cosmological Argument

To give you some idea of how such arguments work, I shall outline what is often called the 'argument from the contingency of the world':

(1) The existence of the universe is a contingent fact.
(2) All contingent facts have a cause.
(3) Nothing can be the cause of itself.

Therefore:

(4) The universe has a cause that is distinct from itself.

There is another version, recently made popular by William Lane Craig, which is very similar, except that its first two premises are:

(1) The universe began to exist.
(2) Everything that begins to exist has a cause.

Craig's version, which he calls the *kalām* argument (after the Arabic term for 'theology'), is an attractive one. It is attractive since the idea that the universe began to exist appears to find support from science, in particular the so-called Big Bang theory of modern cosmology. But let me return to the more traditional argument from contingency.

   A contingent fact is one that might not have existed, so the idea behind premise (1) is that there might have been no universe. (Leibniz once summed up this idea with the question, 'Why is there anything rather than nothing?') How do we know this? Defenders of the argument often appeal to a kind of intuition here, but they also appeal (once again) to the idea of logical possibility. It seems that the statement 'there is no universe' is not self-contradictory. If logical possibility (freedom from contradiction) is the mark of actual possibility, then this is a possible state of affairs. As for premise (2), the most that can be said in its support is that we generally take it for granted. When faced with a puzzling phenomenon, we do not normally ask, 'Does it have a cause?' We ask what its cause is. Premise (3) also seems intuitively correct: we think of a cause as distinct from its effect. So is the argument not sound?

15.2   BRINGING EXPLANATION TO AN END

I shall come back in a moment to the problems facing such an argument. Before doing so, however, there is one misunderstanding I should address. Richard Dawkins objects that arguments of this kind – arguments that attempt to explain some fact by invoking God – actually explain nothing. Why? Because, he writes, an argument of this kind 'leaves unexplained the origin of the Designer'.[1] But this is surely wrong. Many of our most successful explanations raise new puzzles and present us with new questions to be answered. After all, 'a drought may explain a poor crop, even if we

don't understand why there was a drought;…the big bang explains the background radiation, even if the big bang is itself inexplicable'.[2] So the fact that an argument invokes God without being able to explain his existence does not (in itself) undermine its explanatory power.

Dawkins's objection does, however, highlight an important question, namely what we should say about the existence of God. Does this also have an explanation? If it does, then there is something greater than God that created him, which cannot be right. One could argue that the existence of God is what philosophers call a 'brute fact', one that has no explanation. But that would undermine premise (2) of the argument from contingency: the idea that all contingent facts have a cause. So theists will generally argue that the existence of God is a *necessary* fact: it is not the case that God might not have existed. This looks like a return to the ontological argument, and there are other problems with it as well. But defenders of the argument argue that if we are not to have an infinite regress of explanations, our explanations must end somewhere. What better place to end than with a fact that could not have been other than it is?

NOTES

1. Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 141.
2. Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, p. 24.

Teleological (Design) Arguments

Abstract After discussing the traditional argument from design, this chapter outlines the so-called fine-tuning argument. This takes as its starting point the idea that the universe is apparently fine-tuned to produce life, a feature that would be less surprising if there were a God.

The third type of argument for the existence of God is the teleological argument (from the Greek *telos*, meaning a purpose, goal, or end) or 'argument from design'. An argument of this kind begins from our observation of the 'order, beauty, and complexity of things'.[1] It arrives at the conclusion that this can only be accounted for if there exists a designer. In fact, such arguments are better described as arguments *to* design or arguments *for* design, for if there is design, then by definition there must be a designer. (One can describe biological organisms as 'designed' by natural selection, but this is a metaphorical use of the term.) The question is: Are there features of the world that we are forced to regard as the work of a personal agent, that is to say, one acting intentionally?

16.1 Traditional Design Arguments

Historically, the high-point in the production of arguments of this form was reached in the eighteenth century. It was a time when many people were struck by the complexity of the natural order that was gradually being revealed by the modern sciences. The best-known example of a traditional design argument is *Natural Theology* by William Paley (1743–1805). Here is the famous opening paragraph of that work:

> In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there: I might possibly answer, that for any thing I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever…But suppose I had found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place; I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that, for any thing I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone?…For this reason, and for no other, viz. that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive…that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, *e.g.* that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day.[2]

On finding such a mechanism, what could we conclude regarding its origin? The only defensible conclusion, writes Paley, is that

> the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time, and at some place or another, an artificer or artificers, who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.[3]

Arguments of this kind suffered what appeared to be a fatal blow with the work of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), whose *Origin of Species* came out in 1859. But in our own day, they have undergone a remarkable revival. I want to outline just one form of the argument, the so-called fine-tuning argument.

16.2 The Fine-Tuning Argument

The basis of the 'fine-tuning' argument is a fact about the universe, the significance of which has been highlighted by recent developments in cosmology. It appears that the values of certain 'cosmic parameters' (to use

Neil Manson's phrase) are contingent. They could have been other than they are. But if they had been other than what they are, by even a very small margin, the universe could not have sustained life or (in a weaker form of the argument) would have been much less favourable to life. In this sense, the universe could be said to have been fine-tuned for life.

There are many cosmic parameters that are cited in this context. Robin Collins offers a list of six.[4] First, there is the *cosmological constant*, which is a measure of the force that determines both the expansion and the contraction of space. Second, there is the *strong nuclear force*, which keeps the protons and neutrons together in an atom. Third, there are various factors involved in the conversion of helium to *carbon and oxygen* within stars; the key issue here being the balance that must be struck between carbon and oxygen production. Fourth, there is the difference in mass between *neutrons and protons.* If the mass of a neutron were even fractionally higher, stars would not be able to convert hydrogen to helium. If it were fractionally lower, the universe would be composed of little more than helium. Fifth, there is a *weak force* that controls radioactive decay. If this were not within a relatively narrow range of values, the ratio of neutrons to protons produced within the first few seconds of the Big Bang would have produced a universe much less favourable to life. Sixth, there is the strength of *gravity*, which must also fall within relatively narrow limits if life as we know it is to survive. What is striking here, of course, is not merely the precise value of each constant, but their coincidence, producing a universe capable of supporting beings like ourselves.

In its simplest form, the argument claims that these values (and their coincidence) would be much *less surprising* if the universe were fine-tuned to produce life by some intelligent agent than if it were not. If these values were the result of chance, this would represent an incredible coincidence. But if these values were the result of design, they are what you might expect. (Proponents of the argument assume that chance and design are the only alternatives, but I shall leave that aside.) If the evidence we have is less surprising on the design hypothesis than on the chance hypothesis, then the evidence *favours* the design hypothesis over its rival.

That was an informal presentation of the fine-tuning argument. Let me set out its central claim more formally. The argument rests on a judgement of probability. More precisely, it rests on a judgement of comparative probability, the probability that the parameters in question have the life-supporting values they do (let's call this fact E), given the design hypothesis (D), against the probability that they have the values they have,

given the chance hypothesis (C). The claim is that the probability (or 'likelihood') of E given D is greater than the probability of E given C. Using a customary set of symbols, one can express this as follows:

$$Pr(E|D) > Pr(E|C).$$

There are two sets of probabilities to be calculated here, namely $Pr(E|D)$ and $Pr(E|C)$. There are, as we shall see, difficulties associated with both calculations.

But there is a more important feature of the argument, which is often overlooked. It is that even if we had demonstrated this central claim, we would not yet have demonstrated the *probable truth* of D. All we would have shown is that the observations in question are more *likely* on the basis of D rather than C. (This is, in other words, what is known as a 'likelihood argument'.) This would lend some support to D, but it would not (yet) have shown that D is (probably) true.

The point may be illustrated with a simple example from Elliot Sober. When you hear noise in the attic, the hypothesis that 'there are gremlins up there bowling' would certainly explain the noise.[5] If it were true, it would make the noise less surprising. But we would not normally conclude that the gremlin hypothesis *is* (probably) true. Similarly, even if we had shown that the evidence (E) is unsurprising on the basis of the hypothesis (D), we would not have shown that the hypothesis (D) is true. The observation would lend some support to the design hypothesis over its rivals. But we would not have shown that the universe is, *in fact*, the result of design.

To do that, we would need to show that the probability of D, given the evidence, is greater than that of C. This means reversing the terms within the brackets so that the resulting formula is

$$Pr(D|E) > Pr(C|E).$$

To see if this were true, we would need to take into account (among other things) the *prior probability* of D, that is to say, its probability given everything else we know. A low prior probability for the hypothesis could defeat the argument. To take Sober's example, the probability that you would hear noise in the attic (N) if there *were* gremlins (G) – $Pr(N|G)$ – is high. But the probability that there *are* gremlins in the attic – $Pr(G|N)$ – is low, since we have other reasons to believe there are no gremlins. The gremlin hypothesis fails to be a *plausible* hypothesis.

This is not, however, a fatal objection to the argument. To note that the fine-tuning argument could not, in itself, establish the probable truth of theism is not to say it is worthless. It could form part of a useful, cumulative case for belief in God.

Notes

1. Wilkerson, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 150.
2. Paley, *Natural Theology*, p. 3.
3. Paley, *Natural Theology*, p. 4.
4. Collins, *God and Design*, p. 180.
5. Sober, 'The Design Argument', p. 29.

The Role of Reason

Abstract Rather than assessing the classic theistic arguments, this chapter merely mentions the objections that can be raised to them. It then highlights the (limited) role they play within even those religious traditions that favour them and the (limited) success that even a sound argument of this kind could have.

I have outlined three kinds of arguments commonly put forward by theists in defence of belief in God. As I mentioned when introducing this section, there is a vast body of literature assessing these arguments. The criticisms that have been made are many and various, and I shall outline some of them before moving on to some more general reflections.

17.1   Objections to Theistic Arguments

The problem with Anselm's ontological argument is that it assumes that existence is a property that objects possess, so that an object that did not exist would be less perfect (less 'complete', if you like) than one that does. But this seems wrong. A fictional being, such as a unicorn, has precisely the same properties as an actual being (a real unicorn). (Kant made this point.) With regard to Plantinga's version of the argument, he himself

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admits that an atheist is under no obligation to accept the possibility of a maximally great being. So the argument will seem compelling only to someone already predisposed to accept its conclusion.

What about the cosmological argument? It looks valid, but is it sound? Do we have sufficient reason to accept its first and second premises? Firstly, is logical possibility an indication of actual possibility? (Kant thought not.) Secondly, is it true that every contingent fact (or every state of affairs that has a beginning) has a cause? At least according to one interpretation of quantum mechanics, it looks as though this assumption is false. We can also ask whether 'the universe' is a scientific object, the kind of object (distinguishable from other objects) of which it makes sense to say that it has a cause. (That last question was also raised by Kant.) Finally, no necessary fact could explain a contingent one; so if the existence of the universe is a contingent fact, it cannot be explained by positing a God who necessarily exists.[1]

Is the fine-tuning argument any better? Perhaps. But it is not clear whether the universe is as 'fine-tuned' as advocates of this argument suggest. Some form of life might have evolved even in a very different universe. More seriously, the 'fine-tuning' claim rests on the idea that we can calculate the probability that the cosmological constants have these values by chance. But can we do that? Do we know what the range of possible constants was? Finally, if the universe were not capable of producing life, we would not be here to observe it. Given that we exist, the universe must be capable of supporting life. So what is the puzzle here?

17.2   THE ROLE OF ARGUMENTS

I am not claiming these are fatal objections, for theist philosophers have responses to (practically) all of them. Atheists, in turn, are (for the most part) unconvinced by these responses. But this ongoing stalemate highlights a problem with arguments of this kind. While the arguments are generally valid (there is nothing wrong with their logic), their premises are highly contestable. There is no evidence that forces us to concede that it is (logically) possible that there could exist a maximally great being, that everything that begins to exist has a cause, that it makes sense to speak of 'a cause of the universe', or that the probability of a life-supporting universe emerging by chance is vanishingly small. These premises are not evidently false, but neither are they evidently true.

In some cases, theists will be predisposed to accept such premises because they already believe in God.[2] Since they are, for instance, accustomed to think of God as the creator 'of the heavens and the earth' (Gen 1:1), they will already have a particular conception of the universe. They will think of 'the universe' not as the totality of what exists (for the universe, in their view, does not include God), but as an object that forms part of a larger totality. Given that larger totality, it makes sense to speak of 'a cause of the universe'.[3] Atheists, however, have no reason to think of 'the universe' in this way. They may regard it, as Kant does, as merely a 'regulative idea', a kind of 'limit-concept' to which notions, such as that of 'a cause', are not applicable.

Some theist philosophers are happy to admit that these arguments are not particularly convincing. (Plantinga, for instance, offers powerful criticisms of most of them.) But they seem remarkably unconcerned by this fact. Why is this? It is because their own beliefs do not arise from arguments of this kind. Such arguments have, at best, nothing more than an apologetic purpose, establishing not the truth but the 'rational acceptability' of theism.[4]

What does it mean to say that theism is 'rationally acceptable'? It means there is no obvious inconsistency within a theist's set of beliefs. Nor are those beliefs clearly defeated by external considerations. (There might be evidence against them, but it is not obviously compelling.) Take, for instance, the problem of apparently gratuitous suffering in the world, that is to say, suffering that seems to have no purpose. Surely this shows there is no God. Perhaps it does, but theists are free to claim that such suffering may not, in fact, be gratuitous. Perhaps it cannot be avoided, given the existence of free will and the possibility that it will be abused. (This is the famous 'free-will defence'.) Even if we cannot think of a reason that would justify such evils, we are not in a position to be confident that none exists. After all, such evils may have a purpose that lies beyond our ken. (The latter view is sometimes known as 'sceptical theism'.) Such considerations allow theists to produce a reasoned *defence* of their beliefs even if they cannot produce a reasoned *justification* of them.

17.3   Complete and Incomplete Justification

Could theists produce something more than this? Could they produce a reasoned justification of their beliefs? A useful distinction here is that between *complete* and *incomplete* justification. Theists (of the Christian,

Muslim, and Jewish kind, as well as those within the Hindu tradition) not only believe in God; they also believe many things about God. They believe, for instance, that Jesus is the Son of God, that Muhammad is the last and greatest of the Prophets, or that Krishna is an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Vishnu. Philosophers sometimes refer to this larger set of beliefs as 'expanded' rather than 'restricted' theism. Could theistic arguments justify not merely restricted them, but also some form of expanded theism? This is a question about the *scope* of such arguments.

There is, however, another question to be asked. Theists not only believe in God, but do so with a high degree of confidence. Indeed, religious believers customarily claim that faith represents certain knowledge, a knowledge that excludes any possible doubt.[5] But could a certainty of this kind be justified by the kind of arguments theists put forward? This is a question about the *degree of confidence* warranted by such arguments.

17.3.1 The Scope of the Argument

Let me start with the first of these questions. Could theistic arguments, of the kind I have outlined, justify some form of *expanded* theism? It seems not. The most they could show is that a being resembling the God of classical theism exists. But they can tell us nothing more about this God, certainly not that Jesus is the Son of God, or Muhammad his prophet, or Krishna his *avatāra*.

Even this might be saying too much. Let us assume that such arguments are sound. It is still not clear whether they lend support to belief in the God of classical theism. Take, for instance, the cosmological argument. It might show that the universe has a cause. But does it show that this cause is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect? David Hume famously argued that in positing a cause, one should not posit anything more than is needed to explain the effect.[6] This principle (which resembles Ockham's razor) would suggest that we should never posit an *infinite* cause to explain a *finite* effect.[7] If this is true, then we should not posit the existence of an infinitely perfect God to explain a finite (and imperfect) world. Richard Swinburne claims that an infinite cause is a *simpler* explanation.[8] Perhaps. But it is not clear whether this consideration outweighs the force of Hume's argument.

If such arguments do *not* prove the existence of the God of classical theism, what kind of God do they tell us about? We are left with a bewildering range of possibilities. In one of Hume's works, his spokesman Philo

points this out to his theist opponent, who has been defending a teleo-logical (design) argument. Someone who accepts such an argument, Philo notes, would have reason to believe that the universe arose 'from something like design'. But beyond that

> he cannot ascertain one single circumstance, and is left afterwards to fix every point of his theology, by the utmost licence of fancy and hypothesis. The world, for aught he knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard; and was only the first rude essay of some infant Deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior Deity; and is the object of derision to his superiors: it is the product of old age and dotage in some superannuated Deity; and ever since his death, has run at at adventures, from the first impulse and active force, which it received from him.

It follows, says Philo, that 'a total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource'.[9]

17.3.2   *Degree of Confidence*

Similar considerations apply to the *degree of confidence* with which a belief is held. Swinburne, for instance, goes beyond a bare argument for the existence of God; he tries to defend a Christian form of expanded theism. He argues that it is very probable that the core elements of Jesus's teaching, as developed by the Church, are divinely revealed. He does some Bayesian calculations, based on what he admits are more or less arbitrarily chosen values, and decides that the probability in question is 0.97.[10] This is, to put it mildly, an optimistic estimate, but let me set that aside for a moment. The problem is that religious beliefs are often considered the most certain of all beliefs. They are thought to have a probability of 1. This means that a believer's degree of confidence exceeds the degree of support offered by the evidence.

If Swinburne's estimate is right, this might seem mere nit-picking. Surely a probability of 0.97 is enough. But Swinburne's estimates seem unduly optimistic. Plantinga, for instance, has argued that Swinburne's arguments lead to a conclusion that enjoys a degree of probability of only 0.35.[11] Swinburne disagrees,[12] but what if Plantinga is right? In this situation, there will be a very serious discrepancy between the degree of confidence with which religious beliefs are held and that which is warranted by the evidence.

One might argue that the situation is different with deductive arguments, such as the cosmological argument. After all, the validity of a deductive argument entails that if the premises are true, the conclusion cannot be false. So surely such an argument would give certain knowledge? Well, it would if we could be certain about the premises. But as we have seen, the premises of such arguments are contested: there is no evidence or argument that would force us to accept them. At best, we could argue that the premises in question are probably true. But this means that the conclusion can also be no more than probably true.

17.4   Reason as Master, Reason as Servant

It might seem, then, that theistic arguments do not take us very far. But to say this is to assume they are playing the *only* role in the justification of religious belief or that theirs is the *leading* role in this drama. We have already seen that this is not the case. Religious faith is more commonly based on what are thought to be self-authenticating mystical experiences or the acceptance of an alleged divine revelation (or some combination of these). Within the history of religious thought, arguments of the kind I have been discussing have always had a secondary role. As John Clayton writes, such arguments 'have been developed from a variety of motives and have been employed to a variety of ends, only one of which is to persuade someone not already so inclined to believe that god/s exist'.[13] Very often, indeed, they assume belief in the existence of God in those to whom they are addressed.

Take, for instance, Aquinas's famous 'five proofs' of the existence of God. These do not seem to have been intended to convince atheists. Even if atheism had been a viable option in late medieval Europe, those who denied the existence of God were not Aquinas's intended audience. At most, Aquinas intended such proofs to support what was known by faith. He may also have intended them to provide a common ground on which one could set about convincing Muslims of the truth of the Christian faith. This was certainly how they were later used by Roberto de Nobili in dealing with theistic thinkers of India.[14] The problem is that, torn out of such contexts, theistic arguments end up bearing more weight than they were ever designed to support. It is not surprising they collapse.

A common way of putting this is to say that arguments of this kind play only a secondary, 'ministerial' role in the religious life, an idea that we find (for instance) in the writings of Martin Luther.[15] Philosophers of

religion rarely take this into account, although at least one leading theistic philosopher, William Lane Craig, is quite open about it. He distinguishes between a 'magisterial' and a 'ministerial' use of reason. 'The magisterial use of reason' he writes,

> occurs when reason stands over and above the gospel like a magistrate and judges it on the basis of argument and evidence. The ministerial use of reason occurs when reason submits to and serves the gospel. In light of the Spirit's witness, only the ministerial use of reason is legitimate.[16]

Philosophical arguments, it seems, are not permitted to call the faith into question; their only role is to defend it.

How, then, does a Christian know that what he or she believes is true? It is not on the basis of such arguments. It is on the basis of what John Calvin called the 'internal testimony of the Holy Spirit', the voice of God in the heart of a believer assuring him or her that what is believed is divinely revealed. As Craig writes,

> although arguments and evidence may be used to support the believer's faith, they are never properly the basis of that faith....A person who knows that Christianity is true on the basis of the witness of the Spirit may also have a sound apologetic which reinforces or confirms for him the Spirit's witness, but it does not serve as the basis of his belief.[17]

Arguments for the existence of God, it seems, do nothing more than play a supporting role in a drama whose central character is faith. That faith, in turn, is directed towards what is thought to be a divine revelation, entrusted, at some point in history, to seers or prophets. It is to this idea that we must now turn.

Notes

1. Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, pp. 40–41.
2. Oppy, *Arguing about Gods*, pp. 414–415.
3. Pauri, 'The Universe as a Scientific Object', pp. 296–301.
4. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 112.
5. Bochenski, *The Logic of Religion*, p. 61.
6. Hume, 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', §105, p. 136.
7. Ockham's razor, attributed to William of Ockham (1285–1347), holds that in offering explanations, we should not posit entities without necessity.

 8. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, pp. 96–109.
 9. Hume, 'Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion', Part 8, pp. 71, 88–89.
10. Swinburne, *Revelation*, p. 353.
11. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 279.
12. Swinburne, *Revelation*, pp. 354–356.
13. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, p. 80.
14. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods*, pp. 92–93.
15. Chia, 'Protestant Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's *Faith, Reason and the University*', pp. 70, 72.
16. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, pp. 47–48.
17. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, pp. 46, 48.

Testimony (Authority)

The discussion of the role of reason within religious thought has brought us to our fourth mode of knowledge. This is knowledge by way of testimony, knowledge gained by believing something on the authority of another.

There is little doubt that testimony can be a means of knowledge. Indeed, a surprising amount of what we normally take as knowledge comes from what others have told us. Take, for instance, the formula $e=mc^2$. I believe this represents the rate at which matter can be transformed into energy. Why do I believe this? It is not through an exercise of discursive reason. (I have not reasoned my way to this conclusion or even followed the arguments put forward by Einstein.) Still less do I believe it because of a direct intellectual intuition of its truth. I believe this because I have been told it by sources I assume to be reliable.

It may be helpful to compare knowledge by testimony with the other sources of knowledge I have discussed. We can know something because of an *immediate acquaintance* with the object of our knowledge. Knowledge on the basis of sense perception is the paradigmatic instance of knowledge of this kind. Or we can know something because we have *reasoned* our way to a conclusion from some piece of evidence. That evidence could be propositional – some beliefs we have about the world – or it could be some observed fact that serves as a reliable sign of the state of affairs in question. Knowledge by *testimony*, by way of contrast, is a kind of knowledge 'at second hand'. Someone else has had the experience of being directly acquainted with the object, or has done the reasoning, and I am believing on the basis of what they tell me.

What, then, about the knowledge claimed by religious believers? In what circumstances is this knowledge on the basis of testimony? When it is knowledge of this kind, should we regard it as reliable?

Possession and Prophecy

Abstract Religions frequently claim knowledge by way of divine testimony. Such claims seem to have their roots in the experience of spirit possession. One can certainly offer natural explanations of experiences of this kind. But even given such an explanation, the experiences may have heuristic value, giving rise to insights that can later be corroborated.

Keywords Possession · prophecy · exorcism · ecstasy · glossolalia · automaticity · self-deception · debunking explanations

Knowledge by testimony is knowledge on the word of another. In the case of religion, who is that other? The immediate sources of testimonial knowledge are particular individuals, often the founders of religious traditions. They are believed either to have achieved some state of enlightenment by virtue of their own efforts (such as the Buddha) or to have been chosen by God as his messenger (such as Muhammad). Sometimes the messenger of God is thought of as an incarnation (or, in Indian traditions, *avatāra*) of God, so that when we hear the messenger, we are actually hearing God himself. (The clearest example is that of Jesus within Christian thought, but the figure of Krishna within the *Bhagavadgītā* functions in the same way.) Even when the messenger is not thought of as a God incarnate, he (or, more rarely, she) is regarded as the vehicle through whom God speaks. Muhammad, for instance, is not regarded as, in any sense, divine,

but the message he received and recited (and which was recorded in the Qurʾan) is God's very speech.

18.1   SPIRIT POSSESSION

It is this last set of ideas that I wish to focus on here, that of the individual chosen to be a messenger of God. It appears to have its origins in a phenomenon that is widespread in religious contexts, which is that of spirit possession. It is hard to overstate the importance of belief in spirit possession within the history of religions: the conviction that a supernatural being can enter an individual, for a short or longer period of time, for some purpose, good or bad.

As anthropologists have pointed out, spirit possession is not a single phenomenon, but a series of patterns of thinking and behaviour.[1] But those patterns fall into two broad categories. The first is that of *pathogenic possession*, in which an immaterial entity is thought to have entered a person in order to bring about harmful effects, whether physical (such as illness) or psychological (such as depression). The second is *executive possession*, in which an individual is 'taken over' by a spirit so that his or her identity is, for some time, displaced by that of the spirit. When this occurs, the words and actions of the person are no longer thought of as his or her own; they are those of the possessing spirit.[2] This second form of possession is often associated with altered states of consciousness during which individuals enter into trance-like states. This lends support to the belief that the words uttered or actions performed are those of the deity or spirit that inhabits him or her.

Phenomena and beliefs relating to spirit possession are attested in ancient Greek and Roman traditions, can be found in India and Japan, and are related to what is known as 'shamanism' (a term derived from the language of the Tungus people of Siberia). Such phenomena and beliefs can also be found in the Middle Eastern, Semitic traditions that gave rise to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The best known examples of *pathogenic* possession involve possession by demons. Most religious traditions have rites of exorcism for freeing individuals from possession of this kind. Possession by demons can also be a form of *executive* possession, in which the demons act and speak through the person possessed. (This form of demonic possession will be familiar from horror movies.) But there can also be benign forms of executive possession. These are cases in which a deity is thought to inhabit the body of an individual to imbue that person with particular powers or to transmit a message to others.

It is easy to see the link between the last kind of spirit possession and the idea of divine revelation. Divine revelation can occur in many ways, including visions and voices, divination, and mystical knowledge by acquaintance. But the words and actions of people thought to be possessed by the spirit of God are a common source of alleged revelations. Within biblical and Islamic traditions, a person possessed by the divine spirit in order to deliver a message is known as a prophet. The term 'prophet' comes from the Greek *prophētēs*, which has the sense of one who 'speaks for another', a spokesman, if you like. The prophets are the spokesmen of God, often conveying what are thought to be his very words.

The association of prophecy with spirit possession is evident in some of the earliest biblical writings. We see it, for instance, in the experience of Balaam, who utters an oracle about Israel after being possessed by 'the Spirit of God'. Balaam is said to 'hear the words of God and see the vision of the Almighty, falling down but having his eyes uncovered' (Num 24:4), which suggests some kind of ecstatic state. In another biblical tradition, we read of a 'company of prophets', whose prophetic experience seems to be contagious. No less a figure than Saul, the first king of Israel, was caught up in the experience: 'the Spirit of God came upon him also ... and he too stripped off his clothes, and ... prophesied ... and lay naked all that day and all that night' (1 Sam 19:23–24). Sometimes the prophetic experience seems to have been induced by music. We read, for example, of 'a band of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying' (1 Sam 10:5). When asked to prophesy, Elisha called for a musician. When the musician played, 'the hand of the Lord came upon him' and he uttered an oracle (2 Kings 3:15).

In later biblical writings, prophecy is less clearly associated with the idea of divine possession, perhaps as a result of changing conceptions of God. At this period, visions became increasingly important as a means of divine communication. In the first century CE, Philo of Alexandria distinguished between ecstatic prophecy, in which a prophet's mind is entirely taken over by the divine spirit, and what we might call 'noetic' prophecy, in which a prophet's mind actively participates.[3] But the ecstatic conception of prophecy remains influential, being found even in the later Muslim sources. The first occasion on which Muhammad receives a revelation from God involved a vision, namely that of the angel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*). But it seems that some later revelations were associated with altered states of consciousness.[4] Muhammad's behaviour on these occasions may have

resembled that of persons thought to be possessed by spirits (*jinn*), for the Qurʾan (52:29) finds it necessary to deny that Muhammad is a seer (*kāhin*) or one possessed (*majnūn*).

The idea of divine possession giving rise to prophetic speech is also found within Christianity. On the feast of Pentecost, after Jesus's death, his closest followers were 'filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues' (Acts 2:4). While these are said to be actual languages, sceptics in the crowd thought they were drunk (Acts 2:14). Such experiences re-emerged within Christian history in various revivalist movements and are common within what are called 'Pentecostal' churches today. The words uttered by individuals in this state are often thought of as supernatural communications. They are revelations of facts or insights 'which could not have been known through the efforts of the natural mind'.[5]

18.2   Explaining Prophetic Experience

These are striking phenomena, which devotees will explain by reference to the influence of gods or spirits. But could we offer a natural explanation of such experiences? It seems we could. Social anthropologists have led the way. I. M. Lewis, for instance, developed an influential theory, which held that spirit possession can be a means of gaining social status and power. In cases of what Lewis calls 'peripheral possession', it is a way in which members of marginal, disenfranchised groups make 'claims on their superiors'.[6] But possession can also be employed by 'those who contend for leadership in the central religious life of the community'.[7] In this context, it lends support to an individual's claim to be the chosen agent of the god.

Does such an explanation imply that spirit possession is faked, that those who appear to be possessed are only pretending to be so? Not necessarily. Psychologist Daniel Wegener locates possession among a wider range of experiences. These are experiences in which people lose awareness of their responsibility for the actions they are performing. Perhaps the best known instance is that of the Ouija board: those touching the pointer can be utterly convinced they are playing no part in moving it. As in the case of dreams and visions, it is easy for those involved to project the source of such experiences onto an imagined agent, especially when their culture offers a range of such agents.

It follows that while people may begin the process of becoming possessed by consciously acting out a role, the role can soon take over. During the process of acting out the role,

a kind of self-deception develops. The process of imagination becoming real intervenes to make the person experience progressively less action as willed by the self and more action as willed by the spirit. . . . The person becomes so deeply involved in performing the spiritlike behaviors and enacting the spirit role that consciousness of self is intermittently lost.[8]

An explanation of this kind, Wegener suggests, can account for the wide range of spirit possession experiences, from those in which the person retains some sense of self to those in which the sense of self is entirely lost.

Offering a natural explanation of what is traditionally regarded as a supernatural phenomenon might seem to be a 'debunking' exercise. And in a sense it is. It shows that those who attribute such experiences to a supernatural power are suffering from what Marxists would call 'false consciousness'.[9] They are attributing to some external power an experience that is, in fact, a product of the human mind. This leads them to give the messages of prophets and shamans a status they do not deserve. Not all prophetic messages are considered to be infallible, for there can be false prophets as well as genuine ones. But once a message *is* attributed to God, it will be considered to be a matter of certain knowledge, which cannot be overturned by any 'merely human' reasoning. As we shall see, this is a common view of the knowledge obtained by faith.

But natural explanations of this kind are not *necessarily* debunking. Even if prophetic experiences have a natural cause, it is possible that they give rise to actual knowledge. They may, for instance, give rise to knowledge for the same reason that dreams can do so. A person in an altered state of consciousness may have access to levels of cognition that normally remain unconscious. Even when they do not, acting out the role of a spirit-possessed person may allow for the expression of ideas that would otherwise be unacceptable, or perhaps unthinkable, since the responsibility for these utterances can be placed on the spirit. So it is at least conceivable that prophetic experiences could give rise to valuable insights.

18.3   Testing Prophetic Claims

So if we cannot dismiss the possibility that prophecy could give rise to knowledge, how can we decide which prophetic utterances are true and which are not? How can we test these claims to knowledge? The Bible has

its own answers to this question, which take the form of asking how one can discern a true prophet from a false one. One passage, for instance, reads:

> If you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' – when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken (Deut 18:21–22).

But that does not seem a useful criterion, for we would have to wait to see whether a prediction is fulfilled (and not all prophetic messages include concrete predictions). Another passage suggests that even someone who makes true predictions should not be considered a true prophet if he or she suggests abandoning the established (monotheistic) faith of Israel.

> If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams. (Deut 13: 1–3; cf. 1 John 4: 1–3)

But this is a question-begging criterion, for the established monotheistic faith of Israel was also the result of prophetic revelations. So how can we tell whether those original revelations were genuine?

The problem is exacerbated if we assume that prophetic experiences have a natural explanation. The way in which such experiences arise – a psychological mechanism in which the speaker is unaware, leading to a mistaken belief that this self-serving message is God – may not seem very promising. But in itself this should not discredit the message. Here, we can make use of a familiar distinction in the philosophy of science, between the context of discovery and that of justification. The way in which an idea arises is of little significance if it can later be shown to be true.

Here is a popular illustration of this distinction. It is the description given by chemist August Kekulé (1829–1896) to his discovery of the ring-like chemical structure in benzene. 'During my stay in Ghent', Kekulé wrote,

> I was sitting writing at my textbook but the work did not progress; my thoughts were elsewhere. I turned my chair to the fire and dozed.... the atoms were gamboling before my eyes.... My mental eye ... could now distinguish larger structures of manifold conformation: long rows, sometimes more closely fitted together all twining and twisting in snake-like motion.

> But look! What was that? One of the snakes had seized hold of its own tail, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning I awoke; and this time also I spent the rest of the night in working out the consequences of the hypothesis.[10]

So it does not matter if religious beliefs are arrived at by some non-rational means. Their claims can still be taken seriously *if* we can find evidence in their support, as Kekulé did for his hypothesis.

This brings us back to the question discussed earlier, that of the role of (discursive) reason in supporting religious claims. One might argue that what matters is not so much the prophetic experience as the arguments that can be offered in support of the claims to which it gives rise. But to say this is to shift the locus of authority, from prophecy to reason. To judge prophetic utterances by whether they can be independently shown to be true is to give reason a *magisterial* role. It means that the final authority here is that of the arguments that can be produced in support of a prophet's claims. In effect, the prophetic experience is being treated as having only *heuristic* value. It might help us to attain an insight, but it is, in itself, no evidence of its truth. The problem is that such an attitude is foreign to the view of faith found within communities that depend on prophetic revelations. Here it is the very fact that a message comes from a prophet that makes it worthy of belief. It is to that view of faith that we must now turn.

NOTES

1. Cohen, 'What is Spirit Possession?', p. 5.
2. Cohen, 'What is Spirit Possession?', p. 9.
3. Winston, 'Two Types of Mosaic Prophecy According to Philo', pp. 50, 54.
4. Sahih al-Bukhari 1.1.2.
5. Cartledge, 'Charismatic Prophecy', p. 93.
6. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 120.
7. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, p. 133.
8. Wegener, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, p. 254.
9. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 90.
10. Benfey, 'August Kekulé and the Birth of the Structural Theory of Organic Chemistry in 1858', p. 22.

Revelation and Faith

Abstract When the testimony upon which a devotee relies is thought to be that of God, the appropriate response to this divine revelation is that of faith. Even within religions, such as Buddhism, which have no divine revelation, there is an attitude equivalent to faith, which is considered a necessary condition of spiritual progress.

The idea that religions depend on faith is commonplace. Critics of religion often regard faith as a simple matter of believing something without any evidence in its support. Mark Twain went further, describing faith as 'believing what you know ain't so'. It seems, however, that no normally functioning person could believe something without *any* kind of evidence, or at least what he or she takes to be evidence. And it seems nonsensical to speak of believing what you know to be false. So faith must mean something more than this.

The faith I am interested in is first and foremost faith as a response to a divine revelation. Something analogous to it exists even in traditions (such as Buddhism) that do not rely on the idea of revelation. But religions that believe in divine revelation provide the clearest examples. So we can start with the idea of revelation, which is strikingly common in religious contexts. Many religions trace themselves back to such a revelatory event or regard their scriptures as divinely inspired. Something akin to the idea of revelation can be found even within preliterate cultures. Some

Australian aboriginal people, for instance, claim that their rock art (containing images of mythological figures) was not created by human beings, but dated from the Dreamtime.[1] But the idea is much more developed within those traditions that have Sacred Scriptures.

19.1   Forms of Divine Revelation

In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, divine revelation is commonly thought of as emerging from prophecy, although (as we have seen) it can also come by way of visions, divination, or mystical 'knowledge by acquaintance'. But revelation need not be bound up with such extraordinary experiences. While some of the writers of the Bible are regarded as prophets, whose words are the very words of God, other authors are thought of as writing in their own names under ordinary conditions. (The New Testament letters of St Paul are just that, letters, written on particular occasions to particular communities.) But even then the conditions were not quite ordinary, for believers insist that these authors wrote under divine guidance. They were 'inspired' authors, preserved from error by the Holy Spirit.

A similar, but not identical, conceptual of revelation is found within Indian traditions. The Hindu scriptures are traditionally divided into two categories: *śruti* and *smṛti*, the 'heard' and the 'remembered'. The first category was made up of the four Vedas and a number of associated texts, which are traditionally thought of as 'not coming from men' (*apauruṣeya*). Some Indian religious thinkers, particularly of the Mīmāṃsā school, have understood this to mean that the Vedas have no author at all. While it is difficult to make sense of this idea – that of a text without an author – a charitable interpretation would see it as a claim 'not about language, but about the truths conveyed through language'.[2] On this view, the truths conveyed in the Vedas (at least those that cannot be obtained in any other way[3]) are 'independent, as it were, of personality, being timeless and prior to the "creation" of personal beings with powers of expression'.[4]

This idea is reinforced by the status of Sanskrit, the language in which the Vedas are written. In Indian tradition, Sanskrit was widely regarded not only as the original language of mankind, but also as that which is 'closest to reality', having 'some kind of inherent connection with the world we live in'.[5] On this view, the connection between Sanskrit words and reality is not arbitrary in the way in which the use of the English word *cat* rather than, say, the Japanese *neko* to designate the animal is arbitrary. Rather, Sanskrit is thought of as 'an emanation of being in sound'.[6]

There are interesting parallels to these ideas within other traditions. Within Judaism, the rabbis sometimes describe the Torah as eternal, Christians believe Jesus to be the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, and within Islam, the mainstream al-Ashʿari school holds that the Qurʾan is 'uncreated'. What we see here is a tendency here to lift one's favoured means of revelation out of human history so that it does not suffer from the uncertainties and ambiguities of any 'merely' human product.

At first sight, Buddhism might seem to be an exception to the idea that religions depend on an authoritative revelation. It is true that Buddhism does not rest on a *divine* revelation, as understood within theistic traditions. But while the teachings of the Buddha are not thought of as divinely revealed, they are authoritative. From the earliest times, they have been preserved in writings that are regarded as sacred. The first gathering of monks to codify the sayings of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*) was held only a few months after his death. More importantly, while the Buddha is not thought of as a god (*deva*), neither is he thought of as simply human. As the 'awakened one' *par excellence*, the Buddha has attained a status that is neither that of a god nor that of a (mere) human.[7] I shall come back to the Buddhist equivalent of faith in a moment.

19.2 Faith as a Response to Revelation

Within traditions that do speak of divine revelation, that revelation is generally delivered through inspired individuals. But the object of religious faith is not, in the first place, those individuals; it is the deity who speaks in and through them. More precisely, we might speak of two objects of faith. The direct or immediate object of faith – whose testimony you are supposed to believe – is the inspired individual. But the indirect object of faith is God himself, who speaks through that individual. In practice, traditions that appeal to divine revelation tend to minimize the role of the human messenger so as to make the revelation as immediate as possible. To hear the words that were spoken by Muhammad on the 'occasions of revelation' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) is to hear God himself. Even more strikingly, to hear anything Jesus says is to hear God himself. A similar tendency can be found within Indian traditions. Within the *Bhagavadgīta*, for instance, Krishna first appears within the narrative as the charioteer of Arjuna. But he turns out to be an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Vishnu, so that his words are a divine revelation.

The appropriate response to a divine revelation is that of faith, which involves not merely an intellectual act (that of belief), but also a certain affective response (a love of God) and a commitment to live accordingly. (This recalls, of course, the differing functions of religious utterances, both assertive and commissive, that I discussed earlier.) Indeed, faith is often described as a willingness to believe what is revealed by God *because of* one's love for God, as the source of all truth.[8]

It should now be clear that faith as a response to a divine revelation is a kind of knowledge by way of testimony. But as knowledge by testimony, it has a peculiar feature. If I believe a source to be reliable, I can accept what it is saying even though I cannot understand the content of the utterance in question. Take, once again, the example of the formula $e=mc^2$. It could be that I have no idea what the symbols e, m, and c stand for nor do I know the meaning of the superscript *2*. Nonetheless, I believe that science textbooks are reliable sources of knowledge. Having found that a number of science textbooks assure me that what this formula expresses is true, I may believe it even though I have no idea what it means. (Perhaps it would be better to say that I *accept* it, rather than that I *believe* it, for it is not clear I could believe something I cannot understand.) Given the mysteriousness of the matters spoken of by religions, much religious belief must be of this kind.

19.3 Faith Within Buddhism

What I have been saying about faith clearly applies to theistic traditions. But Buddhism appears, at first sight, to be an exception to this rule. I have described faith as belief on the word of another, that is to say, belief on testimony. But there is at least one saying attributed to the Buddha – found in the *kālāma sutta* – that seems to discourage such belief. The Buddha is responding to a question from the inhabitants of the town of Kesaputta, who are confused by the differences among the wandering teachers they have encountered. Their question is, 'Which of these is speaking the truth?' The Buddha does not answer this question directly, but says:

> Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher'.

When you yourselves know: 'These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness', enter on and abide in them.[9]

This looks like the very antithesis of faith in a divine revelation. Followers of the Buddha are being urged, it seems, to rely on their own experience and reasoning, rather than an authoritative teaching. Indeed, one could argue that the very idea of 'divine revelation' has no role within Buddhism, within which enlightenment ('awakening') seems to have nothing to do with one's relation to the gods.

It would be wrong, however, to read this *sutta* as what its translator, Soma Thera, calls a 'charter of free inquiry'. It may be an oblique criticism of the attitude to authority found within Vedic religion.[10] But it is certainly not a rejection of religious authority or of the need for faith. Not only are the Buddha's own teachings considered authoritative, but Buddhism also encourages faith (*saddhā*) on the part of a devotee. That faith is expressed in the act of 'taking refuge' in the 'three jewels': the Buddha, the *dhamma* (the Teaching), and the *saṅgha* (the monastic community).[11] Even the *kālāma sutta* ends with the hearers taking refuge in the Buddha.[12]

One might argue that this is still a different understanding of faith from that found in theistic traditions. *Saddhā* is not a matter of believing propositions that lie entirely outside the scope of human knowledge. It is 'a trust in the truthfulness of the *dhamma* that has not yet been confirmed by one's own experience'.[13] It follows that a person who attains enlightenment no longer needs to take the truth of the *dhamma* 'on trust'. He or she knows it himself or herself. But most Buddhists believe that few, if any (in the present age), can expect to attain enlightenment. For those who have not achieved enlightenment, the truth of Buddhist teaching remains a matter of faith. It, too, depends on the testimony of others.

NOTES

1. Maddock, 'Imagery and Social Structure at Two Dalabon Rock Art Sites', p. 449.
2. Bilimoria, *Śabdapramāna*, p. 21.
3. Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedanta*, p. 3
4. Bilimoria, *Śabdapramāna*, p. 21.
5. Bronkhorst, 'Sanskrit and Reality', p. 109.
6. Reyna, *Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, p. 172.

7. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, pp. 29, 33.
8. Dawes, 'The Act of Faith', p. 71.
9. *Aṅguttara-nikāya* 3.65, tr. Soma Thera.
10. Zhiru, 'Scriptural Authority', p. 87.
11. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 34.
12. Evans, 'Doubting the *Kālāma-Sutta*, p. 105.
13. Findly, 'Ānanda's Hindrance', p. 263.

Self-Authentication, Again

Abstract Could faith be a reliable source of knowledge? There are two ways in which believers argue that it is. The first is to supply arguments in favour of the authority of their chosen prophet or set of Scriptures. A second, more common strategy is to try to 'bootstrap' the act of faith, making it the source of its own reliability. Neither strategy seems likely to be successful.

We have seen, then, that many religions base themselves on an alleged divine revelation, received by faith, which they distinguish sharply from any form of 'merely human' reasoning. This involves a sharp distinction between faith and reason, a distinction that cannot be maintained without an arbitrary assertion of religious authority.

20.1 Locke on Faith and Reason

To understand this, it will be helpful to examine the religious views of John Locke (1632–1704). Locke is, of course, a key figure in the development of modern empiricism, but also an important figure in the history of political philosophy. Locke begins his discussion of faith with the traditional distinction between faith and reason, but argues his way to the

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point where it is (in effect) abandoned. So his reasoning highlights how problematic this distinction is.

Let me begin with the traditional distinction, as set out by Locke. It has to do with the source of what is believed. 'Reason', writes Locke, as distinguished from faith,

> I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz. by sensation or reflection.

'Reason', then, represents the process by which we gain knowledge from sense perception or reflection on what is perceived. (As an empiricist, Locke rejects the idea of innate knowledge or knowledge by way of purely intellectual intuition.) What, then, is faith? Faith, writes Locke,

> is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men, we call revelation.[1]

Religious faith, on this view, involves belief on testimony, but not just on any testimony; it is belief on *divine* testimony, accepting the word of God himself.

Locke goes on to note that *if* we knew that something had been revealed to us by God, this would be an excellent reason for believing it. At least, it would be if we also had reason to believe that God was omniscient and morally perfect. (Such a being could be neither deceiving nor deceived.) If we knew with certainty that some proposition was revealed by God, we would also know with certainty that it was true, even if we could offer no other arguments in its support. If we were entirely confident that the Bible, for example, was inspired by God, we could be equally confident that whatever it says is true.

No theologian of Locke's day would have disagreed with that. He would merely have insisted that we *do* know with certainty that the Bible is the Word of God. Locke's departure from the theological tradition comes with his insistence that we need *reason* to believe that the Bible is revealed by God. (Locke is what I have called an 'evidentialist'.) We need the kind of evidence that relies on sense perception and reflection, and our confidence in what is thought to be revealed can never be greater than this

evidence warrants. Locke also insists that before we believe, we ought to ensure that we have understood this alleged revelation correctly.

What Locke fears here what he calls 'enthusiasm', a seventeenth-century term that has some of the connotations of our word 'fundamentalism'. As Locke writes, when we believe something on the basis of an assumed revelation

> we must be sure that it be a divine revelation, and that we understand it right: else we shall expose ourselves to all the extravagancy of enthusiasm, and all the error of wrong principles, if we have faith and assurance in what is not divine revelation.[2]

Locke is happy to admit that faith could take us beyond what reason tells us: it could inform us, on the authority of God, of things we could never have known otherwise. But he insists that the act through which we accept these words as a divine revelation must itself rest on reason, since we must have reason to believe that God has spoken and that we have understood what he has said.

It is easy to see that this view undercuts the very distinction from which it begins: that between faith and reason. There is still a distinction here, a distinction between those propositions for which I have *direct* evidence and those propositions for which I have only *indirect* evidence, namely the authority of the person telling me they are true. But this is no longer a distinction between faith and reason. If I believe what someone tells me only when I have reason to believe he or she is reliable, then I am believing on the basis of reason: the reasons I have for believing he or she is reliable. This means that all the beliefs to which we are entitled are believed on the basis of reason. Locke seems to accept this. He writes, for example, that while he treats faith 'as it is ordinarily placed, in contradistinction to reason', in fact, it is nothing other than 'an assent founded on the highest reason'.[3] Or, as he famously wrote, 'reason must be our last judge and guide in everything'.[4] Are you surprised this is a popular view among philosophers?

20.2   The Appeal to Self-Authentication

It is not, however, a popular view among theologians. Nor is it the dominant view of faith within the history of religious thought. What I want to look at now *is* the dominant view. The thinkers whose ideas I shall

examine are Christian thinkers. Indeed, I shall refer to it as the 'Aquinas-Calvin' view, since forms of it are found in the work of both Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. But a similar view of faith seems to be taken for granted in those other traditions that rely on the idea of a divine revelation. It assumes that faith is a matter of accepting certain beliefs on the testimony of God, an idea Locke also accepts. What makes this view different from Locke's is a further idea: the idea that this divine testimony is thought to provide its own warrant. It is, if you like, 'self-authenticating'.

20.2.1   *The Aquinas-Calvin View of Faith*

What could it mean for an act of faith to be self-authenticating? According to the Aquinas-Calvin view, religious faith is *not* based on rational insight into the truth of the matters revealed. Indeed, on the traditional Roman Catholic definition of faith, put forward at the first Vatican Council (1870), this is expressly excluded:

> The Catholic Church declares faith to be a supernatural virtue by means of which we believe those things that have been revealed by him to be true, *not on the basis of the intrinsic truth of the matter seen by the natural light of reason*, but on the authority of God himself revealing, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.[5]

We do not accept what is proposed for belief because we have grasped its truth through rational reflection. We believe it simply because God has revealed it. But do we reason our way to the conviction that God has revealed it, as Locke urges? No, we do not. We accept that God has revealed these matters on the authority of God. (I shall come back to this 'bootstrapping' move in a moment.)

What role, then, does reason play within the Aquinas-Calvin view of faith? If reason is given any role here, it is merely that of preparing the way for faith or lending support to an act of faith that has already been made.[6] Arguments for the existence of God or the fact of revelation are not the *basis* of faith. They are merely (to use a traditional Latin phrase) the *praeambula fidei*, the 'preliminaries of faith' or (better still) the 'presuppositions of faith'.[7] To use the traditional phrase, reason has only a 'ministerial' role, serving the faith. As medieval theologians regularly insisted, philosophy is nothing more than the *ancilla theologiae*, the 'handmaid of theology'.

What kind of knowledge is the act of faith thought to yield? Since it involves accepting something on the authority of God, the act of faith is thought to yield certain knowledge. What about the reasons that are produced to support the act of faith? Do they yield the same degree of certainty? Apparently not. Even Aquinas accepts that reason cannot yield decisive evidence of the fact of revelation. Such evidence, he writes, can take the form of observing some fact for oneself, such as a miracle, or hearing an argument. But 'neither of these', he continues, 'is a sufficient cause, since of those who see the same miracle, or hear the same sermon, some believe, and some do not'.[8] It follows that the act of faith requires something more, namely the grace of God at work in the heart of the believer. Faith, in other words, is a divine gift; it is not something we arrive at through our own powers.[9]

I should note that more recent Roman Catholic authors appear, at first sight, to disagree with Aquinas. They insist that rational reflection *can* lead to certainty regarding the existence of God and the fact of divine revelation. But when we look more closely, we find they are distinguishing this 'certainty' from that which accompanies the act of faith. One textbook, for instance, insists that the certainty to which reason leads is nothing more than 'moral certainty', which excludes all 'prudent doubt' and which may arise from a coming-together of arguments that individually are merely probable.[10]

20.2.2   *The Bootstrapping Problem*

You will already have noticed something odd about this traditional view of faith. The reasons that might lead one to faith are apparently less than fully convincing. But faith is thought to give rise to a certainty that precludes any possibility of doubt. Apparently, here, the believer is claiming a certainty for faith that goes beyond the confidence that reason can provide in support of its claims. So if faith *depended* on the reasons that could be offered in its support, it could not have the degree of certainty claimed.

The traditional response, as we have seen, is to insist that the certainty of faith stems from a source that is (in principle) *independent of such reasons*, namely the authority of God. A believer is certain about what he or she believes, not on account of the reasons that could be offered in its support, but because it is divinely revealed. But this merely shifts the question back one step. What happens if we ask the believer, 'OK. You're

certain of this because you believe God has revealed it. But what makes you think God has revealed it?' In these circumstances, he or she has only two possible replies.

The first is to cite the arguments that lend support to the belief that some source of knowledge embodies a divine revelation. But, of course, this immediately highlights the discrepancy between the claimed certainty of faith and the uncertainty of the reasoning that undergirds it. If taken to its logical conclusion (as it was by Locke), it would involve abandoning the claimed certainty of faith and replacing it by some greater or lesser degree of probability.

Since believers are reluctant to do this, their more common response is to 'bootstrap' their sense of certainty: to base the certainty of their belief on the very revelation in which they believe. A believer's reply would then resemble the following:

> I believe in this doctrine on the authority of God.
> How do I know that God has revealed it? On the authority of God.

This is what it means for religious faith to be self-authenticating. Of course, theologians may insist that reason lends *some* support to the act of faith. But a faith that is dependent on reasoned argument would not be, properly speaking, *religious* faith.[11] Religious faith believes certain propositions on the authority of God on the authority of God. (This is not a typographical error.) The authority of God is simultaneously that which (*id quod*) and that by virtue of which (*id quo*) one believes.[12]

The circularity of this view might seem to be a fatal objection to it. But this obvious difficulty has not escaped theologians. Followers of Aquinas offer what they see as a solution. They say it is *through one and the same act* that one believes in the proposition revealed and the fact of revelation.[13] I cannot see how this resolves the problem. Perhaps what is being claimed is that there is no discursive argument (and, therefore, no circular argument) involved in the act of faith. But as a defence this would not work, for the circularity is inherent in the nature of the claim. Whether or not believers engage in a circular *process* of argumentation, they are assuming the reliability of their alleged belief-forming mechanism, and it is the reliability of that mechanism that needs to be demonstrated.

Notes

1. Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, book 4, chap. 18, §2.
2. Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, book 4, chap. 16, §14.
3. Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, book 4, chap. 16, §14.
4. Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, book 4, chap. 19, §14.
5. Denzinger and Schönmetzer, *Enchiridon Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, §3008 (emphasis added).
6. Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1.6; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.8.
7. McGrath, 'Faith and Reason', p. 135.
8. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a 2ae, 6.1.
9. For John Calvin's expression of the this view, see his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.8.1.
10. Tanquerey, *Synopsis theologiae dogmaticae ad mentem S. Thomae Aquinatis hodiernis moribus accommodata*, pp. 97–98.
11. Dawes, 'The Act of Faith', pp. 65–66.
12. Hervé, *Manuale theologiae dogmaticae*, p. 354.
13. Hervé, *Manuale theologiae dogmaticae*, p. 350; Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Theological Virtues*, p. 74.

Conclusion

Assessing Religious Beliefs

Abstract Drawing on the results of the study, this chapter offers an answer to the question, 'Are any of these religious sources of knowledge reliable?' It discusses and rejects the idea that religious beliefs enjoy *prima facie* justification and outlines a pragmatic (rather than epistemic) defence of religious commitment.

Keywords Agnosticism · atheism · scepticism · heresy · apostasy · religious toleration · globalization · *prima facie* justification · pragmatic justification · unconscious cognition · intuition

The present study has examined the nature of religious language and thought, the aims that religions seek to serve, and the modes of knowledge on which they rely. Only now are we in a position to address the questions that have preoccupied generations of philosophers. Are any of these sources reliable? Is the 'knowledge' they purport to convey really knowledge? Are these beliefs justified beliefs?

These are not 'merely academic' questions. Religious groups of various kinds are a noisy presence in our world, and they demand we each take a stance. There is no neutrality in the world of religion. One can, of course, be an *agnostic* (a term coined only in the nineteenth century by Darwin's defender, T. H. Huxley). An agnostic does not actively deny religious claims; such a person would not say, for example, 'There is no God'. An agnostic merely holds that we do not (or perhaps cannot) know whether

religious claims are true. But agnostics are not neutral. They are, after all, declining the invitation to believe. So the question is one that faces each of us. How should we act in matters of religious belief? Is remaining or becoming a believer a rational choice?

21.1   BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

It is worth noting that for most people throughout human history, religious adherence has *not* been a matter of choice. The idea that individuals should be able to choose their own form of religious commitment, or indeed to opt out of religious commitments altogether, is a very modern idea.

For those living in tribal societies, there was little chance of opting out of the practices of the tribe. Scepticism is not unknown in such societies. But it seems to be rarely, if ever, a *radical* scepticism. It extends only to particular claims or individual practitioners. Members of a tribe may doubt, for example, particular accusations of witchcraft; they may even believe that most witch-doctors are frauds.[1] But they do not deny that witchcraft exists or that some individuals have the power to counter it. Is a more radical scepticism possible in such societies? It is hard to know. If your group was isolated from others so that you had no idea that other tribes had different worldviews, would it be possible to doubt that of your own?

In societies with some degree of literacy, more radical forms of scepticism were possible. This was certainly the case in medieval Europe. In 1491, in the English town of Newbury, a tradesman named Thomas Tailour was sentenced to public penance for having declared that

> when a man or woman dies in their body, they also dies in their soul, for as the light of a candle is put out by casting it away or in other ways quenched by blowing or shaking it, so is the soul quenched by the death of the body.[2]

Of course, openly stating such doubts was dangerous. Tailour was lucky to escape a death sentence, but was under threat of execution by burning if he ever repeated his offence. In many parts of the world, a similar situation prevails even today. A number of Muslim countries, for instance, have laws against apostasy (abandoning the faith), which in some jurisdictions is punishable by death.[3]

We can distinguish here between external conformity and inward assent, a distinction that resembles that between acceptance and belief. What was

demanded of medieval Christians was external conformity to religious practices. Members of the society had to accept the practices laid down by religious authorities. That did not prevent individuals from withholding their inner consent. By the nature of the case, it is impossible to tell how many such individuals there were, who secretly harboured doubts about the religion that they had no choice but to practice. It is only in the seventeenth century (in European societies) that open expressions of doubt became possible, with the emergence of the ideal of religious toleration (defended by, among others, John Locke).

As members of modern liberal societies, we do enjoy freedom of choice in matters religious in ways restricted only by the freedom of others. So the question of what attitude we should adopt to religious claims is a live question. It demands an answer. Indeed, the process of what is called 'globalization' means that the range of choices we have is larger than ever before. Most Western cities now have Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, as well as Christian churches. Converts to these religions are far from uncommon. This is yet another reason the philosophy of religion should not restrict itself, as it so often has, to Christian theism.

So what should we do when faced with religious claims? Should we believe these claims – or at least choose to accept them – or should we not? If we focus on the content of religious beliefs, this question seems all but impossible to answer. Religious beliefs are just too diverse to allow a single assessment. This is why the present study has had an epistemological focus. It has examined not the content of religious beliefs, but the sources of knowledge from which they are derived. Those sources of knowledge – signs, mystical experience, arguments, and divine testimony – are surprisingly few in number. Are these reliable sources of knowledge?

21.2   Religious Sources of Knowledge

What I have argued is that even the most apparently unpromising of these sources, such as dreams, visions, or divination, *could* yield true beliefs. They could do so by tapping into cognitive processes that lie below the level of conscious reflection. There are different ways of thinking about such processes. Some writers on religion draw on the speculative theories of early psychologists such as Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). My preference has been for the more cautious conclusions of modern experimental psychology. Many psychologists in this tradition accept a 'dual-process' model of cognition. There are

cognitive processes that operate 'automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control',[4] which correspond to what I have called 'unconscious cognition'. These operate alongside other processes that involve conscious effort and reflection, which I have referred to as 'discursive reason'. But however we think about unconscious cognition, there is little doubt that the mind processes data in ways of which we are unaware. At least some of the sources of knowledge upon which religions draw may be tapping into such processes.

What about the knowledge by acquaintance to which mystics lay claim? Here, too, there is no reason to reject such claims outright. Mystical insights could also represent a kind of intuitive knowledge. Within certain domains, such judgements can be surprisingly accurate, although they can also be misleading and in need of correction by more reflective forms of reasoning. Indeed, researchers insist that the feeling of confidence that often accompanies such intuitions is a poor indicator of their truth.[5]

There are several issues I have highlighted when it comes to alleged insights of this kind. The first has to do with reliability. It is one thing to say that a process may, on particular occasions, yield true beliefs and may do so at a rate greater than could be achieved by chance. I have argued that this may be the case for practices such as divination and the interpretation of dreams. But this is not the same as saying that these are *reliable* sources of knowledge in the sense of yielding true (or at least useful) beliefs more often than not. The fact that religious belief-forming practices occasionally yield true beliefs does not mean that we can safely rely on them to do so.

A second issue has to do with the scope of such knowledge claims. We can understand how the mind could process data in ways of which we are unaware. We can also understand how it can arrive at conclusions intuitively, that is to say, without conscious reflection. But what sort of knowledge might we expect to arrive at in these ways?

Empiricists assume that the data upon which the mind draws when engaging in such reasoning come from the senses. If this is the case, then it is hard to see how such reasoning could be reliable when it comes to matters that lie entirely beyond the scope of sense perception. One of the distinctive features of religion is that it often makes claims about such matters: about a hidden or 'occult' realm, a realm of gods, spirits, and demons, or a universe in which individuals are trapped in a cycle of rebirth

from which they need to be liberated. We have seen that defenders of religious knowledge claims often fall back upon the idea that the mind has a power of *intellectual* intuition, which enables access to factual matters that are inaccessible to sense perception. But this is, to say the least, a controversial idea.

A third issue has to do with the status of such knowledge. A common characteristic of religions, as we have seen, is to claim that their favoured source of knowledge is infallible or inerrant, or that knowledge arrived at in this way is 'self-authenticating'. We have seen that while there *may* be 'self-authenticating' forms of knowledge (such as my knowledge that I am in pain), they do not take us very far. It is hard to see how knowledge about God, about the cycle of rebirth, or about the identity of *ātman* and *brahman* could be in any sense self-authenticating. And even if a divine revelation would be, by definition, infallible, our judgement that it is a divine revelation certainly is not.

If this is the case, then any religious claim will require assessment: it needs to be tested. This brings us into the realm of discursive reason. If we can no longer simply take it for granted that a particular source of religious knowledge is reliable, we need to ask which sources *are* reliable, and under what conditions. If no source of religious knowledge is fully reliable (that is to say, infallible or self-authenticating), then we need to find some way to assess the particular claims that such sources make.

This brings us, however, to another problem the present study has highlighted, which has to do with how far such rational reflection can take us. I have already remarked on the fact that arguments in support of some form of religious belief are unlikely to provide a full justification of the commitment in question. They cannot lend support to the full range of claims that believers make. They might, for instance, enable a defence of *restricted*, but not of *expanded*, theism. They might, in other words, give us reason to believe that God exists, but not that Jesus is his Son, Muhammad his Prophet, or Krishna his *avatāra*. Nor can rational reflection justify the degree of confidence with which such beliefs are customarily held. At best, it would lend support to the idea that such beliefs have some degree of probability. If this is correct, then the believer has a problem. Once some previously taken-for-granted set of religious beliefs has been called into question, there are limits to the extent to which it could be rationally defended.

21.3   Prima Facie Justification

Let me come back to the question of knowledge. Philosophers have traditionally defined knowledge as 'justified true belief'. On this view, it is not enough that a belief be true. Something more is required. What this 'something more' is remains contested. There are several options here. On one view, we need to have *reasons* that indicate a belief is true. This is often referred to as an 'internalist' view of justification. On a second view, it is enough that the belief should arise from a *reliable source*. This is what philosophers call an 'externalist' view. A third option is to hold that some combination of these two conditions is required if we are to have knowledge.

My discussion so far has assumed an internalist stance. I have assumed that in order to have knowledge, we need not just true beliefs, but also evidence that indicates they are true. There are, however, philosophers who question this condition, insisting that some of our beliefs enjoy a *prima facie* justification. Often this insistence is coupled with an externalist view of justification. If a belief arises from a reliable source, they argue, it is justified 'until further notice'. Assuming that no source of knowledge is infallible, such beliefs are not incorrigible. They remain defeasible, as philosophers say: able to be defeated. But until they are defeated, their epistemic status is secure. They can be regarded as knowledge.

If applied to religious beliefs, such a claim would reverse the burden of proof. Philosophers have often assumed that in matters of religion, the burden of proof rests on the believer. The default position ought to be that of agnosticism. When it comes to belief in God, for example, the default view should be, 'It is not the case that I believe in a God'. If B represents the act of assenting to a belief, $\neg$ a negation sign, and G the proposition that God exists, this default position would be $\neg B(G)$, 'it is not the case that I believe in God'. Evidence is needed, on this view, to move beyond this position, either in the direction of 'positive' disbelief in God (atheism) – which could be expressed as $B(\neg G)$ – or in the direction of theism.[6] If, however, religious beliefs enjoy a *prima facie* justification, this burden of proof is reversed. It now lies on a non-believer rather than a believer. A person's belief in God would be justified 'until further notice'.

The problem is that it is difficult to see why religious beliefs should be granted this status. Philosophers who defend this idea often draw a parallel with sense-perceptual beliefs. (William Alston, for instance, does this, in a book revealingly entitled *Perceiving God*.) Take, once again, my belief

that there is a coffee cup on the desk in front of me. Having had the experience of appearing to see this cup, I feel justified in believing it exists until given a reason to doubt this. An 'epistemic parity' argument, as it is called, holds that the status of religious beliefs is the same. Having had some kind of religious experience giving rise to belief, I am justified in accepting what it seems to reveal until someone shows me it is false.

There are two problems with such epistemic parity arguments. Firstly, it is far from clear whether the two types of experience are sufficiently similar. We have already seen that the 'knowledge by acquaintance' to which mystics lay claim is very different from sense perception. For one thing, the mechanisms of perception are well known. For another, most human beings agree on what can be perceived by way of the senses. But the mechanisms of religious insight are deeply mysterious, and different religions notoriously make very different, and often apparently incompatible, claims.

Secondly, even if these two forms of experience were more similar than they are, the epistemic parity argument may not amount to very much. Whatever our alleged source of knowledge, there can be reasons that call its deliverances into question. The only exception would be a source of knowledge-that is infallible or self-authenticating: one that simply cannot be wrong. But I have argued that no source of religious knowledge is of this kind. Any source of knowledge gives us *some* reason to believe. But if our sources of knowledge are fallible, we should not always take their deliverances at face value.

It is true that we normally do take the deliverances of our senses at face value. As it happens, I feel no need to doubt the existence of the coffee cup. I regard this as something I know. But if people around me disagreed, I *would* have reason to doubt it. If some insisted there was no coffee cup, while others claimed it was a toy elephant or a book, I would have reason to doubt the evidence of my senses. Religious claims have this character. Not only are they the subject of intense disagreement, but they also often involve claims that seem, at first sight, very unlikely to be true, given other things we know. (Did Jesus *really* rise from the dead?) Such features seem to undermine any *prima facie* justification that religious beliefs might otherwise enjoy.

21.4   PRAGMATIC JUSTIFICATION

The justification I have been discussing up until now is *epistemic* justification: the justification of a claim to knowledge. But there is a final strategy for the believer, which is to offer a *pragmatic* justification: to argue that

even if we cannot know these propositions to be true, we have good reason to live *as if* they were true. The reasoning involved is, once again, practical reasoning, which has to do with knowledge-how rather than knowledge-that. It is reasoning about how to achieve a particular goal. I have already mentioned the most famous argument of this kind: that offered by Blaise Pascal, known as 'Pascal's wager.' But a more recent version of this line of argument has been offered by Richard Swinburne.

Swinburne's starting point here is a general distinction between two different kinds of belief. How are we best to characterize a belief *p*, he asks, where *p* is any proposition? It is, Swinburne argues, best regarded not simply as a belief that *p* is true, but as a belief that *p* is more probably true than some alternative. Sometimes the alternative may be simply not-*p*. But on other occasions, it will be *q*, *r*, or *s*. In both cases, there is a contrast-class. But the evidential considerations will be different as the contrast-class varies.

This seems right. You might, for example, ask me, 'Do you think it will rain next week?' If I replied, 'It will probably rain on Monday', what would I mean? There are two options. I may mean it is more likely than not that it will rain on Monday. If MR represents the belief that it will rain on Monday, I would be saying that $\Pr(MR) > 0.5$. But there is another option. I could be saying that it is more likely to rain on Monday than on Tuesday, or on Wednesday, or on Thursday, etc. If OR represents the probability that it will rain on any other day of the week, then I would be saying that $\Pr(MR) > \Pr(OR)$. This could be true even if the probability that it will rain on Monday is relatively small, say $\Pr(MR) = 0.2$.

This distinction is particularly important when it comes to practical rationality, that is, reasoning about how I am to act. If I want to achieve a particular goal and I am faced with more than one possible course of action, what would be the rational course of action to follow? Presumably that which appears *more likely than any other* to reach the goal. If I want to drive to a particular town, for example, and I am faced with two roads, I should follow the road I believe is more likely to get me there.

So far, so good. But Swinburne makes a further point. What if I want to reach a goal, but lack sufficient evidence about the best means of achieving it? In this situation, he argued, I may justifiably act on an *assumption* as opposed to a *belief*. Indeed, it may be reasonable (in the sense of practical rationality) to act on an assumption even if I have reason to believe that it is *not* true. As Swinburne writes,

a man in an underground cave may believe that none of the several exits lead to the surface. He may nevertheless take a certain exit, because only by taking some exit has he any chance of achieving his purpose of getting to the surface. We may say of him that although he does not believe that this exit leads to the surface, he is acting on the assumption that it does. To act on an assumption that p (or to act as if p) is to do those actions which you would do if you believed that p.[7]

It would not be reasonable for me to act in this way if I believed there was *no* chance that one of the paths led to the surface. But while there exists some chance (however small) that one of them will do so, it seems reasonable to act on the assumption that it does. The greater my desire to reach the surface, the more reasonable it would be to act on this assumption.

The parallel to religious faith should be clear. Religions, Swinburne argues, can be regarded as a means of attaining certain goals, which are spelled out in the beliefs of the religion in question. One of these is, of course, that of attaining salvation, however that is envisaged. So our choice is which of these differing religious paths to follow. But to make a reasonable choice, all we need to believe is that the claims made by religion *A* (e.g., the Christian one) are more likely to be true than those made by religions *B*, *C*, *D*, or *E*. This may be the case even if the claims made by religion *A* have a relatively low degree of probability. Swinburne refers to this as a 'weak' as opposed to a 'strong' belief.

This is an interesting defence of the (practical) rationality of making a religious commitment. It assumes, of course, that a person really does desire that which religions appear to offer. It also assumes that we have no decisive evidence that any particular religious path is a dead end. But given those modest assumptions, it looks like a pretty plausible defence. In particular, it recognizes a key aspect of religious claims to knowledge, namely that the knowledge in question is often a kind of knowing-how. It teaches us the way to achieve a particular goal, as well as making claims about the way the world is.

Note, however, that an argument of this kind is a pragmatic justification, not an epistemic one. It gives us no reason to *believe* that certain religious claims are true, that a certain religious path will lead to its goal. It gives us (at best) a reason to *accept* such claims, to act *as if* they were true. There is a danger here on which I have already reflected, the danger that acceptance will pass over into belief. But if this danger can be avoided,

a defence of this kind may be the best defence of religious commitment available. Whether it is, in the last analysis, a convincing defence is a question I must leave to you.

NOTES

1. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, p. 107.
2. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*, p. 2.
3. Fore, 'Shall Weigh Your God and You', p. 436.
4. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, pp. 20–21.
5. Kahneman and Klein, 'Conditions for Intuitive Expertise', p. 524.
6. Flew, 'The Presumption of Atheism', p. 32.
7. Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, p. 31.

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