

Does religious experience provide a sound argument for the existence of God? Some philosophers “suggest that we could have reason to believe in God on the basis of direct experience” (Davies 120). However, I argue that, based on several people’s accounts of their religious experience, this is not the case. For the purpose of this essay, we will be defining religious experience as “an awareness of God which is experiential” (qtd. in Davies 121). We will also divide religious experience into three basic categories; instances involving only one individual, experiences that happen collectively to more than one person, as well as out of body experiences. Within these types of experiences, we will look at whether or not they provide sound evidence for the existence of God or if there is possibly some other explanation. While religious experience makes a good argument for the existence of a reality beyond what we define as the material world, it does not prove the existence of God.

When looking at religious experience involving only a single individual, there is the challenge of verifying whether the experience actually happened or not. There are questions of whether the person is of sound mind when they experience the divine and there are also problems that arise when certain experiences seem to contradict one another across various religions. For the purpose of this paper, we will assume that these individual accounts are true, at least, for the person experiencing them, whether or not they can be verified, as well as that the experience does not contradict other experiences from other religions. The first experienced we will examine happened to a man named Daniel Sherman, whose wife had become pregnant even though they were “well into [their] late forties” (Sherman). He states that it happened when he was “sitting in [the] waiting room at the doctor’s office while [his] wife had a checkup” (Sherman). The couple were thinking about abortion due to their age and the likelihood that their baby would have medical complications. He stated that, as he was waiting, he heard a “distinct voice [that he knew was] the voice of God” say “it’s okay, it’s healthy, it’s a girl” (Sherman). He was overcome with emotion, saying that he began crying, went into the exam room and told his wife what had happened immediately. Months later, his wife gave birth to a “healthy baby girl” (Sherman). It is that final piece of information that seems to provide the most proof of Daniel’s story’s validity. Another such experience is that of a friend of mine back in Canada. For the purpose of confidentiality, I will use the name Claire in

relation to her. I conducted an interview with Claire last month as part of a research project for another class. She is currently working on a memoir that closely follows her relationship with religion and spirituality. Claire described one such instance of her religious experience as follows;

I was carrying this ball and chain, and I knew it represented my depression. I saw Jesus, and he was just so so beautiful, and he comes in on this massive white horse with a golden mane... Jesus leans down and reaches for [the ball and chain], hands it to the horse and it just bucked it, right out into the universe and it just shattered...into millions of pieces. I completely felt like, it's over, the depression's finally over... After all those years I was finally free. [Jesus] saved me from myself that day. (personal interview, 2019)

Although these experiences are incredibly compelling, they could both be explained away by a materialist viewpoint. William James “spoke to the relation between religion and medicine” in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* noting that “religion and neurology were linked, if only because all experience involves the mechanisms of one's biology. There is no experience without some chemical activity somewhere” (Taylor 41). In both Daniel and Claire's accounts of their religious experience, either one could be explained away with this theory. There is no way of truly knowing that these experiences were not the result of the brain's own creation and chemistry. While they may be very real for those experiencing them, that does not necessarily mean that these experiences are happening outside of their own mind. With this type of single, individual experience, the materialist viewpoint is compelling. It essentially casts doubt on the idea that God could exist, because the individual's experience could simply be caused by the specific chemistry of the brain. The materialist viewpoint may not be the best possible explanation for understanding experiences that are religious in nature, but it does seem to be a better explanation. If nothing else, individual religious experience provides possible evidence of a soul or mind that is separate from that of the brain, but this does not give proof of God's existence. However, when an experience involves more than one person, it seems more likely to be something other than a single brain firing in a specific way.

When a religious experience happens to a collection of people, it is difficult to explain it away with the brain in a vat theory. Yes, there could be some interconnection between those vats, but the problem becomes much more complicated when a group of people experience the same extraordinary phenomenon. The idea that a single brain could react in an unusual way, creating a religious experience is somewhat believable, but multiple brains having the same experience is slightly less probable. There is a case of three children from a small village in Portugal, who claim to

have had sightings of an angel and of the Virgin Mary. They children said that Mary told them she would return on the same day each month and over 70,000 people gathered to be included in the experience (Williams).

One could see the immense multitude turn towards the sun, which appeared free from clouds and at its zenith... at that moment a great shout went up and one could hear the spectators nearest at hand shouting: 'A miracle! A miracle!' Before the astonished eyes of the crowd... the sun trembled, made sudden incredible movements outside all cosmic laws – the sun 'danced' according to the typical expression of the people ... '[after the event] people then began to ask each other what they had seen. The great majority admitted to having seen the trembling and dancing of the sun; others affirmed that they saw the face of the Blessed Virgin; others, again, swore that the sun whirled on itself like a giant Catherine wheel and that it lowered itself to the earth as if to burn it with its rays. Some said they saw it change colours successively. (Williams)

Since this account involves so many people, it is difficult to explain it away as a misfiring of the brain. That said, it does not necessarily prove that God –or in this case, the Virgin Mary– exists. Clearly, for the majority of those involved, they believe they have experienced the divine. It is possible that they, in fact, did experience a higher reality. But, perhaps there are some other factors at play that they were not aware of. A plant, for example, may have caused them all to hallucinate. There is also the possibility that their experience could simply be how they interpreted some other type of celestial event, like an eclipse, based on their cultural background and beliefs. Their collective experience could be potential proof of something we do not yet understand or have knowledge of, whether part of the material world (a hallucinogenic plant or eclipse) or something spiritual (God or some type of higher reality). Again, while a collective religious experience makes a good argument for the existence of an 'unknown' reality, it does not prove the existence of God, or in this case, the Virgin Mary.

By looking further into the possibility that an unknown reality exists, whether religious or not, there are many accounts of out of body experiences. Out of body experiences are not easily disproved, coming from a materialist standpoint, mainly because they seem to defy natural law. In researching out of body experiences, I came across the case of a man known as Todd B. He detailed one of his many out of body experiences as follows:

I felt the vibrations and successfully rolled out [of my body], did my usual floating around, saw myself in bed and walked into [my] bathroom. I looked in the mirror to see what I would look like. It is very hard to describe. I looked like myself (but it was dark) but I was comprised of what looked like sparks of electricity or vortexes? Very hard to describe. It was energy, a refined energy (my Astral Body) that kind of sparked with constant movement. I could have stared at my hand the whole time but.... [I wanted] to go [to] space and traverse the universe. With that thought I was shot up into space at unbelievable speed...I flew around amazing swirling galaxies, planets, stars... I [couldn't] get enough of it... [I was] absolutely blown away by the clarity, colors and beauty.” (B.)

Todd's experience of leaving his body shows that there is a possibility we are made of something more than the just physical body. His experience seems to go against what we define as the laws of nature. This does not necessarily prove the existence of God, but it does show potential evidence of a reality we are not yet aware of. However, from a materialist viewpoint, out of body experience is very similar to lucid dreaming and could potentially be explained away as something similar. In out of body experiences, the experiencee is aware that they have left their physical body; in lucid dreams, the experiencee is aware that they are dreaming and they are often able to control the dream, leaving the physical body sleeping, while their mind travels elsewhere. For example, I often lucid dream and I'm able to leave my body behind and travel anywhere at will. That said, I am fully aware that this is only happening inside my head. I am not physically leaving my body behind and travelling to other places. It only happens because I can imagine it. I could, for instance, lucid dream that I am meeting God, sitting on another planet and having a conversation about the existence of the universe. That does not mean I am actually on another planet, talking with God. That does not mean God exists. But, there is something to say about the mind being much more powerful than we give it credit. Is it possible that an out of body experience only happens within the mind? The problem here is when people report experiencing things that they could not possibly know without leaving their body. Take, for instance, the case of William noted below;

I was in intensive care for two days after [a] 7 hour surgery for a collapsed lung...[Later, the nurses] got me up to take a walk down to the end of the room... As I began walking down the isle I left my body and flew up to the back corner of the room behind me and from there watched the nurses walk me down the isle. The experience was amazing... My older brother

had been in the room visiting me. He was sitting in a chair by my bed and was watching the nurses walk me down the aisle. From up in the corner of the room, I watched my brother reach behind him and remove his wallet. He was looking for something in his wallet...[M]y back was to him so there was no way I could have known he was looking through his wallet for something. But since my mind was up in the corner of the room behind him... I could see everything going on in the room. As I watched, the nurses and I had reached the end of the room. As we turned to start the walk back, my mind for no reason I can think of, in a rush, flew back to my body again and I was now looking back towards my brother... When I got back to my bed and was situated, I told the experience to my brother... [I] told him that I watched from behind him as he went through his wallet for something. Since he knew there was no way I could have seen him doing that while the nurses were walking me away from him, he realized what I told him was true... In that moment I felt [that I was] aware of the divine and there was a whole [existence] outside of my physical body... I am convinced that I have a soul separate from my body. (William)

This type of out of body experience provides a good argument for something outside of the material world. Since William was able to see his brother looking through his wallet even though his physical body was turned away from the situation shows possible evidence for the mind existing separate from the brain. When looking at examples like this, it seems possible that there is some other part of us that can exist beyond the physical body. Though, if we look at this from a materialist viewpoint, there is also legitimacy to the idea that we do not understand the level of functioning that our brain is capable of achieving. It is possible that our brain could be projecting somehow or that we have more senses than sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. But it is also conceivable that the way we define reality is not fully accurate.

Essentially, it is possible that these instances of religious experience provide evidence for a reality we do not yet know about, but they do not give us solid evidence that God exists. There are great arguments for religious experience proving God's existence, but I believe that, at this point, we are incapable of truly proving anything. We do not yet know enough about the nature of existence. Perhaps we should open up to the idea that the material world is not all that exists? Perhaps we need to redefine what we deem to be 'reality'? Perhaps the mind could exist outside of the brain? While these may not be the best explanations, they do hold some potential. Overall, religious experience

makes a good argument for the existence of something unknown and outside of the material world, but, ultimately, it does not prove the existence of God.

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