

Al-Ghazali's *The Rescuer from Error*

Is Religious Belief Founded in Reason?

7.1. The Setting

Al-Ghazali was born in 1058 CE in the city of Tus in northeastern Persia (modern-day Khurasan). In his youth he received a traditional Islamic education and later studied Kalam—speculative Islamic theology—from a distinguish theologian in Nishapur. In 1091 al-Ghazali moved to Baghdad to head an influential school that had evolved to defend Sunni orthodoxy against its Shiite rival. During this period he began to intensively study philosophy, and his most important philosophical work, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahafut al-Falasifah*), dates from his time in Baghdad. Although he met with great success as a teacher, al-Ghazali soon suffered a deep spiritual crisis. Disillusioned with his work and worldly success, al-Ghazali sought a more profound spirituality in Sufi mysticism. In 1095 he dramatically renounced his prestigious teaching position, adopted Sufi practices, and traveled broadly. Eleven years later he briefly returned to teaching in the city of Nishapur but resigned once again two years afterward. He died in 1111 CE but has continued to exert a tremendous influence over philosophy in Islamic lands up to the present day.

Al-Ghazali's mature views are best understood against the backdrop of the views of his predecessors, including those of Ibn Sina—whom we met in the last chapter. Ibn Sina agreed with many traditional views. He held, for example, that only God is the cause of his own existence and that all other things must be created by God. Nonetheless, drawing on his understanding of ancient Greek philosophy, Ibn Sina also argued for more radical views. He maintained, for example, that God cannot know about the world as we experience it, that God could not have made the world different than he did, and that even now God cannot change the world in any way. In boldly drawing out many themes arguably implicit in ancient Greek philosophy, Ibn Sina

came to defend a conception of God that is far removed from the personal deity that many believers in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition accept.

In works such as *The Rescuer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*) and *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazali attempted to push back against the views of Ibn Sina and other philosophers. His most accessible work, *The Rescuer from Error* is presented as an autobiographical tale of al-Ghazali's learning, his spiritual and philosophical anxiety, and his eventual embrace of mysticism. This book has often been compared to Descartes's *Meditations* as well as to Augustine's *Confessions*. Like the former, *The Rescuer from Error* has two sides. On the one side, al-Ghazali argues that many philosophical arguments fail by the standards of philosophy itself. Ibn Sina's bold claims concerning God should be deemed unjustified even by Ibn Sina's own standards. On the other side, al-Ghazali argues that his own mature view—mysticism—provides a better route to understanding God, a route that leads to views that are consistent with more traditional theological convictions.

7.2. Three Views on Faith and Reason

A central theme of al-Ghazali's *The Rescuer from Error* is the relationship between faith and reason. It might be helpful to begin by sketching three broad views concerning the relationship between faith and reason. A first view, known as *strong rationalism*, suggests that in order for religious beliefs to be properly and rationally accepted, giving compelling independent evidence in support of them must be possible, evidence that could in principle anyone could accept.

The core idea of strong rationalism was dramatically expressed by the English mathematician W. K. Clifford (1845–79) in his widely read *The Ethics of Belief*:

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. . . . If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind . . . and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind. . . . Inquiry into the evidence of a doctrine is not to be made once for all and then taken as finally settled. It is never lawful to stifle a doubt; for either it can be honestly answered by

means of the inquiry already made, or else it proves that the inquiry was not complete.

The main idea here is that religious beliefs are acceptable only if compelling arguments can be raised in their defense, arguments that might be convincing to anyone. According to Clifford, the following are not good reasons for accepting religious beliefs: you grew up accepting those beliefs, it is a comfort to you to believe as you do, you have never really given the matter much thought.

Although strong rationalism has had its followers, many people today are perhaps more attracted to a second, less demanding view often referred to as weak rationalism. According to *weak rationalism*, the subject matter of religion is a topic that is amenable to debate. Arguments for and against religious beliefs can be offered and evaluated. Furthermore, those arguments should be used to shape our religious beliefs. So far this is all very much in keeping with strong rationalism. The two approaches part ways, however, in their expectations concerning the strength of those arguments. The weak rationalist insists that arguments in favor of religious belief needn't be convincing to everyone. We might think of the weak rationalist as being more skeptical about the strength of human reasoning in general. Reason has a role to play in the formation of our religious beliefs, but not necessarily a decisive role. After all—she might argue—we don't have absolutely compelling reasons for most of our beliefs. Why should we suppose that the situation is any different with respect to our religious beliefs?

A third view, often referred to as *fideism*, maintains that even weak rationalism assigns too strong a role to reason in the formation of religious belief. Fideists hold that religious beliefs must rest on faith rather than reason. According to fideism, religious beliefs are justified—to the extent that it makes sense to speak of them as being “justified”—not on the basis of arguments that can be marshaled for or against them, but rather on the basis of one's commitment to them. In its strongest form, fideism goes so far as to suggest that the search for rational grounds for religious beliefs is inimical to faith. One way of developing this thought is to suggest that the search for rational arguments reveals that one doesn't really have faith. If one has faith, one doesn't need arguments. And if one has compelling arguments, one can't really have faith. If I trust that you have my best interests at heart, I don't need evidence that you do. And if I have proof that you have my best interests at heart, my trust in you isn't based on faith alone.

7.3. The Quest for Certainty

Al-Ghazali begins *The Rescuer from Error* by relating that he was curious about the foundations of religious belief even as a child. He was struck in particular by differences among religious beliefs and by the fact that children often adopt the religious beliefs of their parents. His curiosity inspired him to seek certain knowledge “in which what is known is laid bare in such a way as to leave no room for doubt and is unaccompanied by the possibility of error or illusion, to the point that the mind cannot even conceive it” (61; this chapter follows the translation of Al-Ghazali’s *The Rescuer from Error* in Khalidi [2005]). In short, al-Ghazali’s initial curiosity led him to seek absolutely certain foundations for religious belief.

In examining his beliefs according to this high standard, al-Ghazali initially supposed that his immediate sensory beliefs and his beliefs about necessary truths might serve as epistemic foundations. Further reflection, however, led him to question whether sensory beliefs could be held with absolute certainty:

Where does this confidence in sensory beliefs come from? The strongest sense is vision, which looks at a shadow and sees that it is stationary, and judges that there is no motion. But then as a result of experience and observation, after an hour, it is cognizant that the shadow is indeed moving. Moreover, it finds that it did not move suddenly, all at once, but rather incrementally atom by atom, in such a way that it was never actually stationary. Likewise, vision looks at a celestial body and sees that it is small, around the size of a dinar, but then geometrical proofs indicate that it is in fact larger than the earth in size. In this and other such sensory matters, the judge of sensation makes its judgments, but the judge of reason then judges it to be false and disproves it irrefutably. (62)

Al-Ghazali’s argument is clear enough. We see a shadow. Our vision suggests that it is stationary. But an hour later it is clear that the shadow has moved substantially. We reason that the shadow must have been moving very gradually after all, initial appearances to the contrary. Likewise, looking at the sun, we might think that it is small, or at least not very big. But by reasoning, we know that the sun is extremely large. Once again initial appearances are misleading. Through such considerations, al-Ghazali calls into question the certainty of sensory beliefs. If his senses could deceive him in some cases, he

suggests, then they could deceive him in other cases as well. He draws the conclusion that the senses do not provide absolute certainty.

Arguments from sensory illusion may seem to leave nonsensory beliefs untouched. And, indeed, having cast doubt on the absolute reliability of his sensory beliefs, al-Ghazali immediately suggests that “Perhaps one can only trust the rational beliefs, which are among the first principles, such as the statements ‘Ten is greater than three,’ ‘Negation and affirmation cannot coexist in the same thing,’ and ‘The same thing cannot be both originated and eternal, or existent and nonexistent, or necessary and impossible’” (62). Soon, however, al-Ghazali offers reasons for doubting even nonsensory beliefs, beliefs that seem to be founded wholly on reason alone:

The sensory beliefs replied, “How can you be sure that your confidence in rational beliefs is not like that in the sensory beliefs? You trusted in me, but the judge of reason disproved me. Were it not for the judge of reason, you would have continued to believe me. Perhaps behind rational apprehension there is another judge who, if he were to manifest himself, would disprove the judgment of reason, just as the judge of reason manifested himself to disprove the judgments of sense perception. The fact that such an apprehension has not manifested itself does not indicate that it is impossible. (62)

Al-Ghazali’s skeptical suggestion here is that even if we cannot bring ourselves to directly doubt that, say, $2 + 2 = 4$, we can imagine that there is a higher authority to whom it is manifest that $2 + 2 = 5$, and who recognizes that we are mistaken in much the way that our reason recognizes that our sensory faculties are mistaken in judging that the sun is the size of a small coin.

Al-Ghazali reports that he was deeply troubled by his skeptical doubts for a couple of months. He recognized that there is no way to directly rebut the reasoning that led him into skepticism. As he puts it, “For they could be rebutted with a proof, and a proof can only be constructed by combining the first [principles of] knowledge. If these are not given, then it is impossible to arrange a proof” (63). Only God’s intervention, al-Ghazali tells us, was capable of curing his skeptical predicament:

Eventually, God cured me of this disease and my mind was restored to health and balance. The rational necessary beliefs were once again accepted and trusted, both securely and certainly. This did not come about by composing a proof or by an arrangement of words, but rather by a light that God

Almighty cast into my breast, which is the key to the greater part of cognizance. Whoever supposes that enlightenment depends upon explicit proofs has narrowed the expanse of God's mercy. (63)

To al-Ghazali it is important that God cured him of his skepticism not by reminding him of certain arguments or even revealing new proofs. Rather God cured him through a direct revelation that could not be doubted or called into question. The deep lesson al-Ghazali wishes to impart is that our most basic beliefs do not rest on argument or human foundations but rather must ultimately be grounded in God's revelation.

7.4. Three False Foundations

Having found a resolution to his skepticism, al-Ghazali goes on to consider alternative paths that one might follow in searching for religious foundations. Setting aside for now the way of the mystics, he identifies three classes of seekers: "(i) Theologians, who claim that they are the party of opinion and theoretical speculation; (ii) Esotericists, who claim that they are the party of instruction and are privileged to receive instruction from the infallible imam; (iii) Philosophers, who claim that they are the party of logic and demonstration" (64). Having identified these three routes, he goes on to argue that none of them are able to offer a path to true certainty.

Theologians: Interestingly, al-Ghazali implies that while theology is fine at what it does, its task is simply not the task he has in mind. Theology, according to al-Ghazali, aims to preserve religious dogma and beat back heresy by arguing from accepted principles. Al-Ghazali does not deny the importance of this task, but merely insists that it is not the task of establishing first principles or certainty. Theology simply takes religious dogma as a given starting point. Insofar as it does not seek to establish certain belief, but instead takes certain belief for granted, it is of no assistance to him in establishing firm foundations for his own religious beliefs. Note, this all amounts to the suggestion that if religious belief is to be deeply justified, or certain, it cannot rest merely on religious tradition—for religious tradition stands in need of the same sort of justification as religious belief itself.

Esotericists: The central doctrine of esotericists, according to al-Ghazali, is that knowledge of truth is not possible without a teacher, and the only teacher whose teaching cannot be doubted is an infallible teacher or imam.

The most pressing difficulty that al-Ghazali sees with this view is that it offers no good means of identifying infallible teachers. He is willing to grant that the prophet is an infallible teacher, but the esotericists provide no special means of accessing his teachings, and no way of identifying or accessing other infallible imams. There is, of course, a very general and intuitive worry here. If the foundation of religious belief is to rest on spiritual authority, how we are to identify that authority? Note, this amounts to the suggestion that if religious belief is to be deeply justified, or certain, it cannot rest merely on religious authority—for the identification of a true religious authority stands in the same need of justification as religious belief itself.

Philosophers: Many of al-Ghazali's criticisms in *The Rescuer* are directed at philosophers, and in particular at what he sees as the rationalist tradition reaching back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and continuing through the likes of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Simplifying a bit, al-Ghazali divides their teachings into three main topics: mathematics and logic, physics and metaphysics, and morality and politics. He then argues that the threat posed by the teachings of the philosophers varies considerably with respect to each of these topics. An overriding theme, however, is that religious certainty cannot be founded on rational argument alone.

Taking up his first topic, al-Ghazali insists, "The mathematical sciences pertain to the sciences of arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and none of them is relevant to religious matters, either by way of negation or affirmation. Rather, these are demonstrative matters that one cannot deny once one has understood them and become cognizant of them" (68). Considered narrowly, mathematics and logic are neither a boon nor a threat to religion. Al-Ghazali maintains that in the hands of the philosophers, however, even mathematics and logic become potentially dangerous—for people may be so impressed by philosophers' use of logic and mathematics that they may blindly follow philosophers in their irreligious beliefs as well. Or—going to the other extreme—people may be so eager to reject the impiety of the philosophers that they may foolishly deny their discoveries in logic and mathematics and in doing so undermine their own credibility. It is not hard to see plausible examples of both phenomena even today. On the one side, scientists, for example, may be afforded undue authority in religious matters about which they have no special knowledge. On the other side, religious authorities may overreach themselves in denying well-confirmed scientific results in a way that may undermine their own credibility in spiritual matters.

Turning to the second topic, al-Ghazali maintains that the greatest threat to piety from philosophers stems from their views on physics and metaphysics. In these domains, he suggests, the philosophers “are not able to fulfill the conditions on demonstrations that are set down in logic, and they therefore disagree considerably among themselves about metaphysical questions” (72). In short, in forming their views in physics, and especially in metaphysics, philosophers overreach themselves and arrive at heretical (bad) or blasphemous (worse) views. Those who follow philosophers in these areas are led to false foundations for religious beliefs. In particular, they may come to believe on the basis of philosophers’ arguments that (i) God has knowledge only of universals and not particulars; (ii) God cannot act to change the world in any way—that, for example, miracles are impossible and prayers ineffective; and (iii) the world follows necessarily from God in such a way that he could not have created the world in any way other than he did. In short, al-Ghazali thinks that if you follow the philosophers, you might end up with views as heretical as those of Ibn Sina!

With respect to the third topic, al-Ghazali maintains that in the case of ethics and politics, the philosophers have jumbled together a variety of views, including those derived from the mystics and the prophets. This again gives rise to the threat of two dangers, “one pertaining to its acceptance, and the other to its rejection.” The danger pertaining to acceptance is that by adopting the views of the philosophers, one will come to hold not only proper views, but also improper ones mixed in with them. The danger pertaining to rejection is just the converse: in rejecting the views of the philosophers, one might inadvertently reject not only improper beliefs but also proper ones mixed in with them. An overriding theme of al-Ghazali’s critique of the philosophers is that human reason is not sufficient to secure foundations for religious knowledge. Human reason—while impressive in some domains—is inadequate to the deeper mysteries of metaphysics and religion.

7.5. Is God Hidden?

Al-Ghazali’s exploration of the relationship between philosophy and belief provides an opportunity to consider a topic that has recently attracted a great deal of attention. The problem of divine hiddenness suggests a tension between traditional monotheistic conceptions of God and the apparent fact that there are many people who—through no fault of their own—do not

stand in a personal relationship to God. Traditional monotheistic religions often suggest that God is like a loving father and that humans are like his children. But what kind of father would let his children earnestly seek his help, support, and comfort in vain? How, if God cares about us, can he let so many of us be uncertain of that very fact? A wide range of replies has been offered to this apparent problem. Let's briefly consider three of them.

A first line of response would simply deny that God exists. There's no problem, for adults at least, about the hiddenness of Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, or the tooth fairy. Those figures are silent to us because they don't exist. Perhaps God is likewise silent to us because he doesn't exist. Or perhaps God is silent to us because God is not like a loving parent at all. Perhaps God is simply too abstract to care about us in the manner of a father or a mother. It was a commonplace view in the ancient world that the gods exist but that they are simply not concerned with human affairs. What gods care about most is not humans but gods! Or perhaps God is too all-encompassing and concrete to enter into a personal relationship with humans. In later chapters, we see both Spinoza and Hume entertain versions of deism according to which God is not like a person at all. If their views are right, there is no mystery as to why God does not make himself manifest even to earnest seekers.

A second line of response denies the alleged fact that many people—through no fault of their own—do not stand in a personal relationship to God. This response may be developed in two rather different ways. The first way would, in effect, deny that there is anyone who does not, or will not, stand in a personal relationship to God. With this approach, one might maintain that in fact we all experience moments in which we are in personal contact with God. The atheist is either in denial concerning her own experiences or misinterprets them. Another possibility in the same line is that while some people may have not *yet* entered into a personal relationship with God, it is just a matter of time. The atheist is like a prodigal son who will eventually be welcomed by his divine father. The second way of going would maintain that while there are people who do not stand in a personal relationship with God, they are nonetheless responsible for their own failure to “hear” God's presence. From this perspective, one might maintain that only the willfully stubborn fail to perceive God's presence, or that God's silence is punishment for our individual or collective guilt.

Finally, a third line of response argues that God's hiddenness serves some greater good. That good might be our own. Perhaps God's making his own presence more obvious would undermine our agency. As things stand, we can

seek God out. We can reason and reflect and come to our own conclusions about God's existence. Perhaps that is all for the best—that is, all for the best for *us*. Alternatively, perhaps the greater good that God's hiddenness serves is, first and foremost, his own. The contemporary philosopher Michael Rea, for example, has suggested that perhaps what we take to be divine silence is simply the most apt way for God to express his own nature. God could speak to us from the clouds or appear on public television. But to do so, God would have to express himself in a way that would be both inappropriate and disingenuous. God's silence, in Rea's view, serves a greater good—not necessarily our greater good, but rather the good of God expressing himself in a way befitting his own being. It serves God's greater good.

Further Study

- Peter Adamson, *The History of Philosophy without Any Gaps: Philosophy in Later Antiquity*. Podcast, 2011–13; available online and through iTunes. An excellent, entertaining introduction to philosophical currents in the Islamic World; includes podcasts devoted to al-Ghazali.
- Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazali." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/al-ghazali/>. Overview of al-Ghazali's life and works with an extensive bibliography.
- Muhammad Hozien, ghazali.org, updated 2021. A comprehensive website devoted to al-Ghazali, including links to texts, timelines, and maps.
- Muhammad Ali Khalidi, *Medieval Islamic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. An excellent collection of English translations of works in medieval Islamic philosophy. Includes selection from al-Ghazali's *The Rescuer from Error*.
- Michael Rea, "Divine Hiddenness, Divine Silence." In *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 6th ed., ed. Louis Pojman and Michael Rea, 266–75. Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage, 2012. A helpful, engaging introduction to the problem of divine hiddenness written for an undergraduate audience.
- J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993. Seminal contemporary presentation of the problem of divine hiddenness; written for an advanced audience.

Al-Ghazali's *The Rescuer from Error*

Is Religious Belief Founded in Experience?

In the last chapter we saw al-Ghazali reject what he considered to be three insufficient or false foundations for religious belief: tradition, authority, and reason. In this chapter we turn to his positive attempt to ground religious belief in mystical experience. Toward that end, we start by briefly recalling al-Ghazali's report of his journey into mysticism. We then explore some different ways of thinking about the nature of mystical experience. Finally we consider a contemporary attempt to defend mystical experience as a foundation for religious belief.

8.1. Al-Ghazali's Turn to Mysticism

Al-Ghazali reports that the way of mysticism is brought about “by a combination of knowledge and practice.” It is clear, however, that al-Ghazali found the knowledge part of the mystic's way far easier than the practice part. Emphasizing the difference between the theory and practice of mysticism, al-Ghazali writes,

There is a world of difference between knowing the definitions of health and satiety, their causes, and their preconditions, and actually being healthy and satiated. Likewise, there is a world of difference between being cognizant of the definition of inebriation . . . and actually being inebriated. . . . There is a similar difference between knowing the reality of asceticism, its preconditions, and its causes, and the soul's actually being in a state of asceticism and renunciation of the world. (77; this chapter follows the translation of Al-Ghazali's *The Rescuer from Error* in Khalidi [2005])

Al-Ghazali's distinction between the intellectual and practical sides of mysticism foreshadows an important feature of mysticism as a foundation of

religious belief. Mysticism is commonly accompanied by doctrine and background belief. Clearly, however, the heart of mysticism, and its claim to being a foundation for religious belief lies elsewhere. The heart of mysticism, and its claim to being a foundation for religious belief, must ultimately be located in mystical experience itself.

Like Augustine before him, al-Ghazali appears to have been hesitant to follow his religious beliefs even after having been intellectually convinced of them. In a passage reminiscent of Augustine's plea for "chastity and continence but not yet," al-Ghazali writes,

One day, I would be determined to leave Baghdad and walk out on my whole situation, and the next I would lose my determination entirely. I put one step forward then took another back. My desire to pursue the afterlife would take hold one morning, only to be dispersed by the forces of appetite by evening. The temptations of the temporal world enchained me and tugged at me to remain, while the voice of faith cried out: "Depart! Depart! You have only a short time left to live, you have a long journey ahead, and your knowledge and practice are all hypocrisy and illusion. If not now, when will you prepare for the afterlife? If you do not sever these attachments now, when will you do so?" (78)

Like many mystics, al-Ghazali presents the mystic's path as simultaneously a turn away from worldly goods and toward an ascetic life, that is, toward a life in which bodily needs are neglected or at least minimally fulfilled. Given the intense physical demands of the mystic's way, it is perhaps not surprising that al-Ghazali should have hesitated in following the mystic's path. In a later chapter, we see Nietzsche trying to tease out the appeal of practices such as those common among Jewish, Muslim, and Christian ascetics.

Al-Ghazali reports that after six months of vacillating, the decision to abandon his former way of life was made for him as he found himself no longer physically able to teach. He left behind his fame and wealth, and even his "family, children, and friends," and traveled to Syria:

Then I entered Syria and resided there for almost two years, occupying myself exclusively with isolation, solitude, spiritual exercises, and mystical devotion. I was engaged in purifying my soul, moral education, and cleansing my heart for the recollection of God Almighty, in accordance with what I had read in the books of the mystics. Each day, I would withdraw to the

Mosque of Damascus, ascend the minaret, and lock myself up there for the duration of the day. (80)

From Syria, al-Ghazali traveled to Jerusalem while following the same ascetic routine. He then made a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, eventually returning home to Baghdad.

Like many mystics, al-Ghazali maintains that mystical experience itself cannot be fully articulated. Of the mystical path and experience, he writes,

On the whole, what can one say about their way? Purity, which is its first precondition, is the complete purification of the heart from everything but God Almighty. The key to their way, which follows from this first step, just as prayer follows from sanctity, is the complete absorption of the heart in the recollection of God. The final step is complete obliteration in God. . . . The mystical state progresses from the level of visions of images and similitudes to levels about which it is difficult to give utterance. Any interpreter who has tried to articulate such a state has inevitably committed a clear error of expression, which cannot be guarded against. . . . Whoever has managed to attain that state must not say more than the following: "I do not remember what happened, so assume the best, and do not ask for a report!" (81)

There are hints here of a kind of ascent familiar from Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. Plato himself had suggested that we cannot immediately grasp the eternal, immutable form of beauty, but that we must approach it step by step. We must first contemplate beautiful physical objects, then beautiful abstract objects, and then finally beauty itself. But al-Ghazali's ascent really describes just the on-ramp to mystical experience. About the experience itself, al-Ghazali is largely silent. The mystical experience itself—the very heart of the mystical way—cannot be fully articulated. It can only be experienced.

Insofar as mystics insist that religious experience is ineffable and that it must be lived to be understood, mysticism may not seem amenable to philosophical investigation. How are we supposed to analyze what cannot even be articulated? Even if religious experience is ineffable, however, we might nonetheless pursue two related questions. First, what is the nature, or "structure," of religious experience? This question asks how we are to understand in general terms the phenomenon of religious experience, even if it is granted that the intrinsic or specific nature of the experience can only be fully understood by the person who has experienced it. Second, how might religious

experience relate to, or even support, religious belief? Many mystics take their religious experiences as confirmation of, or even foundational grounds for, religious belief. We might want to know if, or how, that might be so. Although our two questions are intimately related, we focus on the first question first, and then explore the second by considering some recent views on religious experience as a foundation for religious belief.

8.2. Three Accounts of Religious Experience

What, then, is the basic structure of religious experience? How can we understand the core nature of religious experience, even if we don't share in it directly ourselves? We can begin to get a feel for the range of responses that have been given to these questions by considering three broad views on the nature of religious experience.

A first view suggests that, at its core, religious experience is not an intellectual or cognitive experience, but an intuitive, unmediated feeling often involving a sense of oneness or dependence. We can get some sense of this view of religious belief from one of its most famous proponents, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Describing his own mystical experience, Otto writes,

The feeling of terrifying mystery (*mysterium tremendum*) may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant. . . . It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. (1923, 12–13)

What is most important for our purposes about Otto's understanding of religious experience is his suggestion that religious experience is, in his words, a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling." In Otto's view, religious experience is like a passion that overtakes one, a passion that is not a reasoned response, nor an experience of the physical senses, nor even something that admits of conceptual analysis. In Otto's view, the mystic's religious experience is first and foremost a kind of emotional experience.

Views like Otto's have received criticism that, under such accounts, religious experience would not be sufficiently cognitive to serve as a foundation

for religious belief. It has been suggested that to the extent that religious experience is ineffable, nonconceptual, and impossible to characterize, it is not the sort of thing that could ground our beliefs, dogmas, or traditions. This objection grants that the mystic might have ineffable experiences, but questions how ineffable experiences could lend justification to conceptually loaded beliefs. Perhaps the most obvious reply to this sort of objection suggests that perceptual experience itself needn't be conceptual in order to lend support to conceptual beliefs. We might think, for example, that the way something strikes us or the conviction it produces are nonconceptual elements that lend support to conceptual beliefs without themselves being conceptual.

Views like Otto's have also been accused of mischaracterizing emotions. Some philosophers, for example, have argued that emotions themselves essentially involve a robust conceptual component. This line of thought directly challenges the mystic's claim to have truly ineffable experiences. If those experiences are genuine feelings or emotions, then they must, according to this line of objection, have some conceptual content that can be cogently expressed. Perhaps the most obvious response to this kind of objection would be to argue that while some feelings and emotions are conceptually laden, not all experiences need be, and that religious experiences in particular might serve as examples of ineffable experiences.

A second view of religious experience suggests that, at its core, religious experience is a kind of perception. The contemporary philosopher William Alston, for example, has argued that we can distinguish three crucial elements common to both ordinary perceptual experience and religious experience. To begin with a mundane case, suppose I see my dog, Martha. In this case, we may distinguish between the perceiver (me), the object of the experience (Martha), and the mode of the experience (e.g., Martha's clear appearance when my glasses are on, or Martha's hazy appearance when my glasses are off). Likewise, Alston argues, with respect to religious experience, we can distinguish the religious perceiver, God as the object of that perception, and the mode of God to the perceiver. The mystic's experience may be unusual in its mode of appearance and in its being related to a supernatural object of experience. Nonetheless, Alston claims, the basic structure of religious experience is the same as the basic structure of ordinary experience.

One might object to this proposal by pointing out a rather obvious disanalogy between ordinary perceptual experience and religious experience, namely, that the former appears to be much more common than the latter. Most of us can see, hear, and touch ordinary objects every day, and

most of us are able to do this essentially whenever we want. Although there are many reports of religious experience throughout history, it seems undeniable that most people do not claim to have perceived God directly, and even those who do are likely to admit that they do not perceive God as readily as they see tables and chairs. In response, it might be noted that, although such considerations might speak to our willingness to accept the existence of veridical religious experience, they need not undermine the view that religious experience has the same structure as perceptual experience. Even if there were only one person in the world who could perceive normally, and even if she could only do so for thirty minutes a week, that would be no objection to describing her experience as having the structure of perceiver, object, and mode of presentation.

It is worth noting that the perceptual account of religious experience leaves open the possibility that purportedly religious experiences are in fact misperceptions. For if it turns out that a purported religious experience is not caused by something divine, then one might plausibly hold that it is not really a religious experience after all. The point can perhaps be made more clearly with the help of an analogy. I might report seeing Martha running down the hall toward my colleague's office, but if it turns out that my experience is caused by something else—say, a stray cat—then I will not have had a Martha perception after all, but rather a misleading cat perception. So, similarly, if I report having a perception of God, but it turns out that my experience is caused by low blood sugar levels, or a misfiring in my brain, then I should allow that I didn't really have a perception of God after all, but instead a misperception or hallucination.

A third view of religious experience might be motivated by the intuition that what is essential to a religious experience is not its causal origin, but the fact that it is taken to be a religious experience. The central idea of such a view is that an experience is a religious experience if and only if it is understood to be a religious experience by the person who has the experience. We might think that religious experience so understood is more akin to a scary experience than, say, an experience of a dog running down the hallway. An experience is a scary experience if the person who has the experience thinks it's scary, while an experience is an experience of a dog running down the hallway only if it is caused by a dog running down the hallway.

It has been argued that if religious experience is irreducibly subjective in this way, the only interesting question we can ask in connection with religious experience is why the person takes that experience to be an experience

of the divine. The contemporary philosopher Wayne Proudfoot, for example, argues that consideration of external causes is irrelevant with respect to an investigation of religious experience:

[Since] the concepts and beliefs under which the subject identifies his or her experience determine whether or not it is a religious experience, we need to explain why the subject employs those particular concepts and beliefs. We must explain why the subject was confronted with this particular set of alternative ways of understanding his experience and why he employed the one he did. What we want is a historical or cultural explanation. (1985, 223)

The thought here is that the external cause of the mystic's experience is irrelevant as far as her having a mystical experience is concerned—just as the cause of my scary experience is irrelevant as far as my having a scary experience is concerned. The only relevant question, Proudfoot suggests, is why the mystic interprets her experience as religious, and for an answer to that question we must investigate the cultural and historical beliefs that shape her interpretation of her experience.

Of course, regarding this account of religious experience one might object that the cause of the religious belief is not as wholly independent of the mystic's interpretation of her belief as Proudfoot implies. She might argue that at least part of the reason she interprets her experience as being of the divine is that it is of the divine! Furthermore, one might argue that we are not *just* interested in why someone interprets his or her belief as a religious belief, but also in whether or not it has a divine object as its cause. Either way, it might thus be objected that Proudfoot's model leaves something significant out of what is interesting and important about religious experience, namely, the purported object of the experience—that is, God.

8.3. Is Religious Experience a Good Reason for Belief?

Having considered three different analyses of the structure of religious experience, we are in a better position to see why someone might think that religious experience *by itself* could never justify one's religious beliefs. One might argue that on any of the above accounts, religious experience can only provide an objective reason for religious belief when supported by other religious beliefs. One would need to have, say, good, independent reasons

to suppose that one is actually experiencing or perceiving God. Many philosophers have concluded that mysticism lends little independent support to religious beliefs. They have often thought, in short, that religious experience per se can only be convincing to the already convinced, and thus cannot serve as a legitimate, objective source of religious justification. They have concluded that religious experience, at least by itself, cannot *justify* religious beliefs.

This fairly standard view has recently been challenged by some contemporary philosophers of religion. In order to better understand their position, it will be helpful to recall a very general and pervasive view concerning the foundations of our ordinary, nonreligious beliefs. According to *foundationalism*, all our beliefs are either basic, foundational beliefs, or nonbasic, derived beliefs. One might suppose, for example, that my belief that $2 + 2 = 4$, that there is a dog in front of me, or that the sun will rise tomorrow are either foundational beliefs or close to them. As such, they might be taken to be essentially self-evident and the basis for other, less certain, nonfoundational beliefs, beliefs such as that my checkbook is balanced and that I should put on some sunscreen. Relatively nonfoundational beliefs are assumed to derive their evidential support from more foundational beliefs.

But how do foundational beliefs get their evidential support? According to one account, our foundational beliefs are supported by certain epistemically basic practices such as mathematical deduction, sensory perception, and empirical induction. Importantly for our present concerns, while these practices might be thought to provide immediate justification for our foundational beliefs, it is not clear how they might be given wholesale, noncircular justification themselves. It seems that I may check my mathematical proofs, the reliability of my vision, or my inductive generalizations, but only if I assume that my practices of mathematical deduction, sensory perception, and empirical induction are at least generally reliable. Putting the point conversely, if, for example, the use of mathematical deduction is wholly unreliable, it is hard to see what we might use to evaluate a particular mathematical proof or discovery.

When it comes to our nonreligious beliefs, many contemporary philosophers are inclined to allow that our foundational beliefs might be wrong, but that it is not unreasonable to proceed on the assumption that they are correct. I *could* be wrong that Martha is standing in front of me—perhaps I have been drugged, perhaps I am dreaming, or perhaps I am being tricked by an evil demon. I *could* be wrong that the sun will rise tomorrow—perhaps

the future will be nothing at all like the past. These skeptical scenarios might be worrisome in the seminar room, but there is no reason to allow them to undermine our day-to-day epistemic practices (or so many philosophers have concluded). In short, when it comes to our nonreligious beliefs, many contemporary philosophers have come to accept that our epistemic foundations are fallible, but that they might nonetheless be perfectly legitimate and provide justification for our derived, nonbasic beliefs.

Some theistic philosophers have argued that once such a picture of justification is accepted, there is no reason why religious experience should not be counted as an epistemically basic practice, or why religious beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience should not count as foundational beliefs. Those who claim to have religious experiences treat the religious beliefs they form on the basis of those experiences as certain and indubitable. Such practices and beliefs have played a long and important role in belief formation. The theist can freely grant that such practices might, in fact, be unreliable and beliefs formed on the basis of them might be false. Nonetheless, she may insist that in this way religious experience differs not at all from our other “ordinary” epistemically basic practices. Parity and fairness, she suggests, require that we recognize that the mystic has just as much basis for her religious beliefs as the nontheist has for her beliefs about mathematics, ordinary objects, and the future. Like our other epistemically basic practices, she will claim that religious experience ought to be assumed reliable until proven otherwise.

Perhaps the most important line of objection to this general attempt to defend religious experience as a foundation for religious belief presses on the thought that religious experience is less universal than other purportedly basic practices. The acceptance of deduction, sensory experience, and induction appears to be common to almost every human being. Someone who went around supposing that $2 + 2 = 5$, or that the sun will not rise tomorrow, would probably be deemed crazy (or a philosopher!). In contrast, reports of direct religious experience are relatively uncommon, and perfectly reasonable people may doubt their veracity. Relatedly, most generally accepted epistemic practices are invariant across different cultures and traditions. Reliance on deduction, sensory experience, and induction is essentially the same no matter where you go. Claims of religious experience, however, vary greatly from culture to culture, from religious tradition to religious tradition. Whether such considerations are relevant to the epistemic status of religious

experience, or merely differences that don't make a difference, is, of course, a matter for debate.

Further Study

- Jerome Gellman, "Mysticism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/mysticism/>. Comprehensive overview of mysticism with an extensive bibliography.
- Muhammad Ali Khalidi, *Medieval Islamic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. An excellent collection of English translations of works in medieval Islamic philosophy. Includes selection from al-Ghazali's *The Rescuer from Error*.
- Daniel O'Brian, "The Epistemology of Perception." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/epis-per/>. A concise overview of perception and its relation to epistemology.
- Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1923.
- Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. An influential discussion of religious experience for an advanced audience.

Saints, Heretics, and Atheists

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-0-19-756385-4 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-19-756384-7 (hbk.)

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197563847.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Marquis, Canada
Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America