

Martin on Credulity

Martin on Religious Experience

A religious experience is an experience in which one senses the immediate presence of some supernatural entity.

“**S senses X**” means that S *believes* that X exists, but not that X does in fact exist.



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[Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (1990)]

Types of Religious Experience

Public Sensory Object

- (1) **Common**: a common object experienced as supernatural (e.g., experiencing a dove as an angel)
- (2) **Uncommon**: experiencing a supernatural object (e.g., Moses sees the burning bush, Joseph Smith sees Moroni)

Private Sensations

- (3) **Describable**: e.g., Peter's sack lunch, Jacob's ladder
- (4) **Indescribable**: mystical experiences

Without Sensations

- (5) **A mental seeing/experiencing** (e.g., St. Theresa)

[Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (1978)]

Peter's Sack Lunch



⁹About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹²It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” [*Acts* 10: 9-13]

Joseph Smith's Night-Time Visitor



Deriving Beliefs from REs

Traditional Argument

A religious experience warrants a corresponding belief (in whatever was experienced).

“I sensed the presence of God; therefore, God exists.”

Martin’s Argument

The above fails to distinguish how a belief is **arrived at**, and how it is **justified**. [non-rational vs rational causes of belief]

A proper justification would look like this:

- (1) Under certain conditions, C, religious beliefs of type K are likely to be true.
- (2) These conditions obtain.
- (3) My belief that God exists is of type K.
- (4) Therefore, my belief that God exists is likely to be true.

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Why believe (1)? For it to be true, we must assume:

(H1): the external cause hypothesis.

But there are competing hypotheses, such as:

(H2): the psychological hypothesis.

Which is more likely to be true?

H1 suggests the various RE would form a consistent set (but they do not), while H2 suggests a diverse set of RE (which there is).

Identifying True REs

How might we distinguish true from false REs?

St. Teresa: True REs are: (1) consistent with Scripture, (2) have a “good effect” on the subject.

(But...)

Argument from Mysticism

Argument to the Best Explanation (inductive)

- (1) All mystical experiences are basically the same.
- (2) This similarity is better explained by H1 than H2.
- (3) The most adequate version of H1 is that God causes the mystical experience.
- (4) Therefore, mystical experiences support H1.

Principles ...

Swinburne's Principle of Credulity (PC)

If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that X is present, then probably X is present

Martin's Negative Principle of Credulity (NPC)

If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that X is absent, then probably X is absent.

“seems epistemically” = S is inclined to believe what appears to S on the basis of the present sensory experience.