

EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND THE PRINCIPLE OF CREDULITY: A REPLY TO ROWE

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The Principle of Credulity—i.e. that if I have an experience apparently of *X* then in the absence of good reasons to think the experience non-veridical I have evidence that *X* exists—is an essential premise in many formulations of the argument from religious experience. I defend this use of the principle against objections offered by William Rowe. I argue that experiences of God are checkable, and in ways (epistemically) significantly similar to the ways sensory experiences are checkable, and that treating sensory experiences as Rowe suggests we treat experiences of God demands wholesale scepticism with regard to the senses.

Recently William Rowe¹ has argued that some otherwise plausible versions of the argument from religious experience—e.g. those of C. D. Broad² and Richard Swinburne³—fail because an essential premise of those versions of the argument is false. The premise Rowe doubts has been called (by Swinburne) “The Principle of Credulity,” and Rowe casts it as

(a) When subjects have an experience they take to be of *x*, it is rational to conclude that they really do experience *x* unless we have positive reasons to think their experience delusive. (91)

(a), Rowe argues, is not quite right; and when it is properly recast (as I shall do shortly) it turns out that its substitute no longer provides the arguer from religious experience with the support she needs. In what follows I shall examine and reject Rowe’s arguments for these claims. I shall do so by (i) calling attention to some features of Rowe’s treatment of the epistemology of experience of God, (ii) arguing that these features are, for reasons to be offered, unacceptable, and (iii) concluding that Rowe has not provided good reasons for rejecting arguments from religious experience which employ the Principle of Credulity.

The role of (a) in the argument from religious experience is this. First, it is undoubtedly true that

(b) experiences occur which seem to their subjects to be of God.

This claim, along with (a) and the further claim that



(c) there are no good reasons for thinking that all or most experiences which seem to their subjects to be of God are delusive (i.e. non-veridical, where S 's experience E of object O is veridical if and only if (i) O exists, (ii) S is (in E) aware of O , and (iii) O is part of the cause of E),

entails

(d) it is rational to believe that at least some experiences which seem to their subjects to be of God really are experiences of God.

And if (d) is true, then so is

(e) it is rational to believe that God exists. (87)

Rowe is prepared to grant the truth of (b). He concedes that we do not at present have good independent grounds for thinking that God does not exist, that He is not present in at least some religious experiences, or that He is not part of the cause of at least some religious experiences. Nor do we have good grounds for thinking that all experiences of God occur under conditions which are likely to result in delusory experiences (88-89). His complaint is with (a), which he thinks should be recast as

(a') When subjects have an experience which they take to be of x , *and we know how to discover positive reasons for thinking their experiences delusive, if such reasons do exist*, then it is rational to conclude that they really do experience x unless we have some positive reason to think their experiences are delusive. (91)

The *underlined* clause, Rowe argues, expresses a qualification omitted by Broad and Swinburne, one which is not met by experience of God. Hence, while (a') does express an important "basic principle of rationality," it does not apply to experiences of God. So the argument fails.

It is worth asking what we gain by replacing (a) with (a'). The former, after all, is simply the claim that (intentional or outer-directed, not necessarily sensory) experience should be treated as epistemically "innocent until proved guilty"; that unless it can be shown that an experience of X is not veridical we ought to suppose that it is—and so that X exists. There are, I suppose, two kinds of reasons why we might be unable to show that a particular experience was not veridical. Obviously if the experience is veridical we will be unable to show that it is not. On the other hand, we might just have no idea how to go about showing that the experience in question, or the kind of experience of which it is an instance, is non-veridical. In this case the experience might well *be* non-veridical, even though no one could find this out or show it to be true. This kind of epistemic predicament is logically possible. And the rationale behind replacing

(a) with (a') is that any kind of experience which lands us in a predicament like this is uncheckable and so epistemically worthless. If experience of *X* is to provide good evidence for the claim that *X* exists it must be possible to *tell* that particular experiences of *X* are non-veridical if they *are* non-veridical.

All this seems, with some qualifications, true enough. But why think that experience of God lands us in a predicament like this? Rowe suggests that there is a problem

concern[ing] the finding of positive reasons for rejecting a particular experience or type of experience as probably delusive Since we don't know what circumstances make for delusive religious experiences, and we don't know what the conditions are in which, if satisfied, one would have the experience of God if there is a God to be experienced, we cannot really go about the process of determining whether there are or are not positive reasons for thinking religious experiences delusive (91).

Rowe seems to have the following argument in mind here:

(f) It is not possible to specify conditions such that, were they satisfied, a subject would have a delusory (non-veridical) experience of God

and

(g) it is not possible to specify conditions such that, were they satisfied, a subject would have a veridical experience of God;

hence

(h) it is not possible to know or have good reason to believe that particular experiences of God are veridical or non-veridical, or that experience of God *qua* kind of experience is veridical or non-veridical.

Now (f) and (g) must be carefully qualified if they are to avoid obvious falsehood.⁴ Rowe offers in support of (f) and (g) the claims that "we don't know what *bodily and mental conditions* are likely to lead to delusory experiences of God . . . [nor] do we know what the conditions are such that *if we satisfy them* we will have an experience of God" (90, emphasis added). In other words, the sorts of conditions with which (f) and (g) are concerned include, but are probably not exhausted by, the bodily/mental/environmental condition of the subject, including her attitudes, beliefs and behavior.

I shall return to (f) shortly. It is worth pointing out that many theists would concede the truth of (g), at least if what is called for is a set of such conditions which is (causally or logically) sufficient for the occurrence of a veridical experience of God. (Some have even argued that any experience of God for which

such a set of conditions can or could be specified cannot, for that reason alone, be a veridical experience of God. I believe this is mistaken, but that it is no part of my argument.

Suppose it is true that we know of no set of conditions that is in the relevant sense sufficient for the occurrence of a veridical experience of God. What follows? This is, after all, exactly what we should expect if theism is true. As George Mavrodes has observed, “There is no experience of [God] that occurs apart from His initiative and purpose; . . . every experience of God is a revelation.⁵ Yet it might be supposed that a lack of such knowledge calls into question the possibility of distinguishing veridical from non-veridical experiences of God. Thus Rowe:

Most existing objects are such that there are conditions which, if satisfied by the subjects, the experience [of the objects] will follow. This is an important point we often rely on in judging whether a particular perceptual experience is veridical or delusory If we know that several subjects satisfy the conditions but do not have the experience, this will be grounds for taking a particular subject’s putative experience . . . as being delusive rather than veridical. *God, however, is not such an object.* God may choose to reveal himself to *A* but not reveal himself to *B* under similar conditions. This means that the failure of a number of subjects to have an experience of God under conditions similar to those in which *A* had an experience need not count against *A*’s experience being veridical. (90, emphasis added)

Here is an obvious difference between experience of “most existing objects” and experience of God. It is an epistemically significant difference—there is one means of *checking* sensory experiences that is not (or at least not obviously) available for checking experiences of God. Whether this epistemically significant difference makes a difference, or the difference Rowe takes it to make, is another matter.

The objects of sensory experience (which I assume are material objects) are public and predictable. They are accessible to more than one sensory modality and to various perceivers at various times. They endure through time and do not pop out of existence or change their properties without being caused to do so. They have no prerogatives; whether and when they are experienced is in no way up to them. (Many living things—e.g. animals—have some such prerogatives, as anyone who has tried to photograph them knows.) It is the publicity and predictability of their objects that makes it possible for us to distinguish veridical from non-veridical sensory experiences. As for experience of God (the argument goes), its object is neither public nor predictable in the relevant sense; hence (it concludes) it is impossible to distinguish veridical from non-veridical experiences of God. This may be Rowe’s reasoning in inferring (h) from (f) and

(g); the argument is not new.⁶ But the inference is legitimate only if it can be shown that there are no *other* means by which veridical experiences of God are distinguishable from their non-veridical counterparts. Are there other such means?

As reasonably competent perceivers we are all familiar with conditions which make for non-veridical sensory experiences. We learn of others by experience—learning from our perceptual errors and those of others. Some of these conditions concern the state of our minds and/or bodies at the time of our experience. Earlier I suggested that in arguing for (f) Rowe claims that “the problem [presumably with denying (f)] is that we do not know what *bodily and mental conditions* are likely to lead to delusory experiences of God.” I suspect we are not totally in the dark even here, but suppose we grant this claim for the moment. What follows? If Rowe’s claim is true, then probably we lack this knowledge simply because we do not know what bodily and mental conditions are likely to lead to *any* experience of God, veridical or not. This (as Rowe notes) is no reason to suppose that veridical experiences of God do not or cannot occur; nor does it make it impossible to distinguish veridical from non-veridical experiences of God.

What exactly does (f) demand? Means or criteria by which to identify non-veridical experiences of God, criteria which if satisfied give some “positive reason” for thinking that some particular experience of God to which they apply is probably non-veridical. I suppose we have criteria which perform this function in cases of sensory experiences; and we may even appeal to them at times to sort out veridical perceptions from hallucinations, illusions and other forms of misperception. What these criteria are is not, I think, entirely clear. And if what is demanded is a set of such criteria which will suffice with respect to each particular sensory experience to place it clearly and finally into one or another perceptual or epistemic category, or that we be able to do this with most of our sensory experiences at a given time, I suspect very strongly that none of us can satisfy that demand. Yet we all get along well enough without such a set. Should we suppose that sensory experience, or the practice of taking sensory experiences to provide good evidence for claims about “the objects of the senses,” or our ability to distinguish in many cases between a veridical sensory experience and an illusion or hallucination, is called into epistemic question if such an (in principle) universally applicable set of such criteria is not available? Or if we cannot specify such a set? Clearly not. But then why should we so suppose when dealing with experience of God? Rowe’s suggestion seems to be that we have no idea how to identify non-veridical experiences of God, but that we have some idea how to identify non-veridical sensory experiences. Is that true?

Well, how *do* we identify non-veridical sensory experiences? In most cases, I think, we do so by appealing to *other* sensory experiences, the assumed veridicality of which, together with other things we know about the object(s) of those

experienced and/or the conditions under which the experiences occur, entails or renders likely the non-veridicality of the particular sensory experience(s) in question. These other sensory experiences can be my own or those of other perceivers. For instance, if two experiences occur where the veridicality of one (perhaps in conjunction with other pieces of knowledge) entails the non-veridicality of the other, then at least one of the experiences must be non-veridical. *Which* experience should be rejected as non-veridical and which taken to be veridical depends on a number of complex considerations which I cannot go into here. But there are two important points to note. First, identifying and dismissing a particular sensory experience as non-veridical often (if not always) involves assuming that another sensory experience is veridical. Why? Because without such an assumption—which need not be groundless or arbitrary—it is hard to see how we might recognize what it is about the first experience that makes it non-veridical. For example, it seems on the basis of one experience that there is a crouching brown bear on the distant hillside, but as another experience (from a different angle or closer up) makes clear, it is just an oddly-shaped stump. Or maybe it seems in one experience that the cup on the desk is orange, but another (in different light) tells me it is really red. Or again, in one experience I might seem to be aware of a bottle on the table, but another allows me to see that “the bottle on the table” is really a hologram, that I was not, as I seemed to be, seeing a bottle on the table. In each of these cases some sensory experience or other is taken to be veridical, and it is on this basis that they can be dismissed as non-veridical. This sort of assumption underlies many of the criteria by means of which we distinguish between veridical and non-veridical sensory experiences. I see no reason to think that *every* means at our disposal requires this assumption; but that we often do make it seems clear enough.

The second thing to notice is this. It is logically possible that *all* our sensory experience be non-veridical, and that we be unable to discover this unfortunate fact. None of us is “compelled by logic” to assume that some sensory experiences or other are veridical. Of course the number of successful predictions and interactions with our surroundings provides what some would take to be strong evidence for thinking that what is logically possible is not true; but these successes clearly do not entail that any particular sensory experience is veridical.

I belabor these points for a simple reason. As Rowe indicates, we do have some idea how to identify non-veridical sensory experiences. Doing this often involves assuming that some sensory experience or other is veridical, and arguing that the veridicality of *that* experience shows that *another* experience is not veridical. There is no proof independent of appeal to (sensory) experience that this assumption is true. The relevance of these points to the argument from religious experience is this.

Suppose that by assuming that some experience of God or other is veridical

we can identify and dismiss other experiences of God as non-veridical. This assumption, like its counterpart for sensory experience, need not be groundless or arbitrary. Of course none of us is any more “compelled by logic” to make this assumption than to make the other. It is logically possible that no veridical experiences of God occur and that we be unable to discover this unfortunate fact. This is possible even if God exists, and even if we know that He exists.

I am suggesting it is open to the theist to claim that the kind of reasoning we typically engage in in checking particular sensory experiences can perform a similar function in cases of experience of God. We can assume, if only provisionally, “for the sake of the argument,” that some experience of God or other is probably veridical; on this basis other experiences of God can be identified and dismissed as non-veridical.

It is not hard to anticipate objections to this suggestion. One, which I shall dismiss summarily, is this. It is unreasonable to assume, even provisionally, that any particular experience of God is probably veridical unless we have (independent) reasons to think that the experiential kind of which it is an instance is generally reliable. But we do not have such reasons; hence it is unreasonable to assume that any particular experience of God is probably veridical. But of course we do not have similarly independent reasons for thinking that the experiential kind of which particular *sensory* experiences are instances is generally reliable; our conviction that it is reliable is—and, surely, can only be—got by working “upward” from particular sensory experiences, weeding out those we have “positive reason” to think are non-veridical. This is, I take it, the point of the Principle of Credulity. To offer this objection is, in effect, to reject the Principle of Credulity altogether, to treat experiences of God as epistemically “guilty until proved innocent.” Short of the sort of proofs Rowe has concede we do not have, it is hard to see what might justify this treatment.

Another possible objection is this: to have “positive reasons” for thinking my experience of seeing the cup on my desk is non-veridical I do not have to appeal to other experiences of the cup, much less other experiences of seeing the cup. I can appeal to experiences of other objects, or to experiences of the cup via other sensory modalities, or to the experiences of other suitably placed perceivers. On the other hand, to have “positive reasons” of this sort for dismissing an experience of God as non-veridical I must rely on other experiences of God. Does this not make a difference?

Yes, it does. But this difference is hardly surprising. After all, there are lots of objects of visual experience to experience of which we might appeal to check the reliability of our sight. There is only one God. So it seems quite unfair to demand that we appeal to experiences of other things to check particular experiences of God.

Further, experiences are grouped as *visual* (or as *aural*, or as *haptic*) according

to their modality. This fact, together with the fact that many objects of these kinds of experiences are accessible to more than one sensory modality, makes it possible for us to use “cross-modal” checking procedures on these experiences. There may be different modalities by which God is experienced (I do not know); but I have written as if experiences were to be grouped as being of God on the basis of their (apparent) *object*, not according to their modality (as we might group “cup-experiences” on the basis of their apparent object, irrespective of their modality). This being so, there seems to me to be no reason whatever for expecting that appeal to “cross-modal” checking procedures of the sort that are available for sensory experiences has a place in checking experiences of God. It does not follow from this, of course, that they cannot be checked.

On a more positive note, the suggestion that we proceed in cases of experiences of God as we do in cases of sensory experience has its roots in some of the theistic mystical tradition. Some mystics, for example, seem interested in finding ways to distinguish “genuine” (veridical) from “counterfeit” religious experiences. The writings of St. Teresa of Avila evidence a concern on Teresa’s part to find marks or criteria which would enable her to know of a given “locution” whether it was from God or from the devil. And while Teresa’s locutions are not experiences of God (and are not necessarily products of such experiences), the sorts of criteria she suggests are still relevant to our concerns.

William Wainwright⁷ has briefly discussed criteria like Teresa’s, including

- (1) The consequences of the experience must be good for the mystic. The experience must lead to, produce or reinforce a new life marked by such virtues as wisdom, charity and humility.
- (2) One must consider the effect which the experience has on others.
- (3) The depth, profundity, and the “sweetness” (Jonathan Edwards) or what the mystic says on the basis of his experience count in favor of the genuineness [i.e. veridicality] of his experience.
- (4) We must examine what the mystic says on the basis of his experience and see whether it agrees or disagrees with orthodox talk.
- (5) It will be helpful to determine whether the experience resembles [in religiously significant ways] other mystical experiences regarded as paradigmatic by the religious community.
- (6) We must also consider the pronouncements of authority. (pp. 86-87)

Wainwright suggests further that

these criteria are similar to the tests which we employ in ordinary perceptual cases to determine whether an apparent perception of an object is a genuine [i.e. veridical] perception of it; that is, they are similar to the tests which take things into account like the position of

the observer and the condition of his sensory equipment (88),
and that

such criteria have been used [in the Christian (particularly the Catholic) community] to distinguish the experiences which genuinely involve a perception of God from those which do not.(86)

Adequate discussion of the role and status of Wainwright's six criteria is a large task, but I think the following general remark is in order.⁸ Each of Wainwright's (1)-(6) can be employed as he suggests they have been employed only if we are willing to endorse these two claims:

(i) Orthodox theology and ethics are true,

and

(j) Genuine or veridical experience of God will conflict with neither orthodox theology nor ethics.

And accepting (i) and (j) is tantamount to granting the veridicality of *some* experiences of God (those enshrined in orthodox writings and/or tradition). Other experiences of God can be identified and dismissed as non-veridical because they conflict with either the doctrines assumed to be true or the experiences assumed to be veridical.

Criteria like Wainwright's (1)-(6), then, will be of some use *within* a religious tradition (as he claims), but they are of much less use on an *intertraditional* basis. Wainwright suggests in several places (pp. 83, 85, 86) that (1)-(6) are "independent," though he does not make it clear *of what* they are allegedly independent. They are, I suppose, or at any rate can be, independent of particular experiences of God whose veridicality is in question. But if this is to be understood more strongly, as "independent of commitment to the truth of religious, theological or moral claims central to the traditions in which the experiences being evaluated occur," Wainwright's suggestion is pretty clearly false. What one tradition regards as "good consequences for the mystic," or as "depth, profundity and 'sweetness'," or as "the pronouncements of authority" may be quite different from what another tradition regards as such. As Ninian Smart⁹ put it,

"By their fruits ye shall know them," or more particularly, "By my fruits shall I know Him." But it should be noted that [these] judgements are very complex. For fruits are clearly evaluated by reference to certain ideals and values (such as serenity and zeal) which derive their centrality from the shape of the religious tradition in question. The Buddhist may evaluate fruits rather differently from a Christian, a Muslim from a Hindu. This does not make the appeal [to fruits] quite circular, for two

reasons: first, a religion needs to show that it at least has the power to produce the fruits that it values; and second, the fruits tie in with moral insights which men may have independently of commitment to a particular tradition.

And there may be, in addition to the “moral insights which men may have independently of commitment to a particular tradition,” other ways to evaluate and assess the religious, theological and moral claims which underlie applications of Wainwright’s criteria. So it may still be possible to develop criteria which—unlike Wainwright’s—can be applied on an intertraditional basis. But there is no guarantee they will much resemble (1)-(6).

Even such intertraditionally-applicable criteria may, like their sensory-experience counterparts, require that we assume, if only provisionally, “for the sake of the argument,” that some experience or other is veridical. Again it needs to be stressed that such an assumption need not be groundless or arbitrary. Which particular experience(s) of God should be assumed to be veridical, for example, is open to argument. In this experience of God is no different from sensory experience.

As with sensory experience, the assumption that a particular experience of God is veridical is neither inscrutable nor unoverturnable. We may, despite our best efforts, come to have reasons for believing ourselves mistaken in dismissing *E1* because it conflicted with *E2*. That we can make mistakes like this does not mean that we cannot go about identifying particular experiences of God as non-veridical by comparing them to *other* such experiences. We cannot expect a proof of the veridicality of *any* experience (whether of God or of tables and chairs) unless we are willing to treat such experiences as epistemically “innocent until proved guilty.” A presumption of epistemic guilt, or the assumption that experiences (whether of God or of material objects) should be assumed to be non-veridical until proven otherwise, or that particular instances of a given experiential kind cannot reasonably be assumed to be veridical without proof that the kind of which they are instances is generally reliable, leads only to skepticism. Skepticism of this sort with respect to sensory experience is thought by many to be unreasonable. The argument with which this essay began purports to show that such (as it were wholesale) skepticism with respect to experience of God is also unreasonable. If it follows from the arguments I have given that the success of the argument from religious *experience* depends in part on the availability of *non-experiential* reasons for particular religious beliefs, this seems to me not the least bit surprising. Experience is often helpful in, but by itself hardly ever decisive for, assessing scientific theories. So too, it seems, with experiences of God and theologies.

Much more can be, and needs to be, said on these matters.¹⁰ Even so, it seems

to me that Rowe's claim that "we don't know how to discover positive reasons for thinking that religious experiences are delusive, if such reasons do exist," is false, and that his argument against using the Principle of Credulity when considering experiences of God should be rejected. In the end it strikes me that Rowe has simply assumed that reasons drawn from experiences of God cannot themselves be "reasons for thinking that particular experiences of God are delusive," that experiences of God cannot themselves provide a (fallible and provisional) means for the critique of other such experiences. I see no reason to think that this assumption is true, and good reason to think that, when suitably amended and applied to sensory experience, it is false. Nor do I see the slightest reason why we cannot use knowledge or beliefs about God not gleaned from experience of God to identify and dismiss particular experiences of God as non-veridical. We proceed in something like this way when sensory experiences are at issue; it is Swinburne's suggestion that we proceed in similar ways with experience of God. There are epistemically interesting differences between sensory experience and experience of God, but they do not lie in the presence or absence, or even in the character, of criteria for identifying and dismissing instances of each as non-veridical.

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NOTES

1. William L. Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982): 85-92. Further references appear as page numbers in the text.

2. C. D. Broad, "Arguments for the Existence of God," in *Religion, Psychology and Psychological Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 190-201.

3. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 244-76.

4. Suppose, for example, that the following are true:

(A) God has some particular property (*P*, say),

(B) God causes subject *S* to have experience *E* in which it seems to *S* that God is *P*,

(C) On the basis of *E* *S* believes that God is *P*,

and

(D) There is no good reason to think that God is not *P*, and *S* knows this.

If (A)-(D), or something like them, are true, then *E* is a veridical experience of God, and (further) an experience which *can* provide *S* with good evidence for the belief that God is *P*. On the other hand, if (A) or (B) is false, then *E* is not a veridical experience of God, though it does not follow from this fact alone that *S* is unreasonable in believing that God is *P* on the basis of *E*. Stating conditions for veridicality of experiences of God seems, contra (f) and (g), quite easy.

(It might be objected at this point that the only reasons we could have for (A) and (B) depend

on, or involve appeal to, experience of God, and that since it is the *epistemic* worth of experience of God that is in question, to appeal to knowledge of (A) or (B) in replying to Rowe is begging the question. But I see no reason to think that the only reasons one could have for (A) and (B) depend in this way on experience of God. I fail, then, to see how this reply begs any interesting questions.)

5. George Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 53.

6. See, for example, C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), chapter 5, Peter Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience* (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 51-3.

7. William J. Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Status and Moral Implication* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), pp. 83-88. Further references appear as page numbers in the text.

8. Wainwright distinguishes between “independent tests for determining whether the object of [experience of God] is real” and “independent tests for determining whether an experience of [God] is a genuine perception of [Him]” (86). (1)-(6) are tests of the latter sort. They are not intended to enable us to answer the question “does the (apparent) object of this experience of God exist?” (1)-(6) are presumptive tests for the genuineness or veridicality of particular experiences of God.

9. Ninian Smart, *The Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 117.

10. I have examined these issues—with special attention to the “structural” similarities and differences between sensory experience and experience of God and to the obvious fact that God is described very differently by adherents of different theistic traditions—in considerably more detail in my doctoral dissertation, “The Epistemology of Experience of God and the Argument from Religious Experience.”