

Why Religious Experience Can't Justify Religious Belief

David Kyle Johnson

Abstract: It is often claimed by theists that neither the diversity of religious experience nor natural explanations for religious experience can threaten the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief. Contrarily, I argue that, not only do they threaten such an ability, but they completely deflate the epistemic justificatory power of religious experience. Put simply, both the diversity of religious experience and natural explanations for religious experience entail that religious experience cannot justify religious belief. To establish this, I first define the supposed role of religious experiences in justifying religious belief. Then I show how the diversity of religious experience raises an inductive problem that negates religious experience's ability to justify religious belief. I then show that available natural explanations for religious experience do the same, by simply providing better explanations of religious experiences (i.e., explanations that are more adequate than religious explanations of those experiences).

“As [Paul] was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground ...” (Act 9:3-4 NASB)

In Chapter 9 of his book *Phantoms in the Brain*, entitled “God and the Limbic System,” Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran tells us the story of his patient Paul—a Goodwill store assistant manager who has been blessed (haunted?) by intense religious experiences all his life.¹ Ironically, Paul's experiences mirror, almost exactly, those of his Biblical name sake: The Apostle Paul. “I remember seeing a bright light before I fell on the ground and wondering where it came from.”² Like the Apostle, Paul's experiences completely changed his life and he went on to write, at great length, about the profundities of religious truths—“an enormous manuscript...[that] set out his views on philosophy, mysticism and religion; the nature of the trinity; the iconography of the star of David; elaborate drawings depicting spiritual themes, strange mystical symbols and maps.”³ But unlike the Apostle's, Paul's brain can be directly observed by modern science—and we know what causes his religious experiences: focal seizures in his temporal lobe. Each one coincides with a religious experience and ultimately produced in Paul what has come to be known as “temporal lobe personality.”

Similar experiences are had by individuals in every religion, yet they teach those individuals vastly different, even contradictory, things. The Apostle Paul's experience, for example, taught him that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of God, and even (arguably) that he was identical to God himself.⁴ Muhammad's religious experiences, that inspired his writing of the Qur'an, taught him the exact opposite—that Jesus was “no more than a messenger”⁵, that “[i]t is

not befitting to (the majesty of) God that He should beget a son”⁶ and that it would have been blasphemy for Jesus to have claimed to be God.⁷ Of course, similar disparities among those who have religious experiences abound. A Buddhist’s religious experience will likely teach him that there is no God, no persons and no afterlife, whereas a Christian’s will teach him that there is a God and if a person worships him properly he can get into heaven.

These facts seem to raise serious doubts about the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief, especially for the modern academic theist who is aware of them. Yet, I believe, why this is true has not yet been clearly identified. Don’t get me wrong; many have attempted to argue that these facts *do not* threaten the justificatory power of religious experience (and we will discuss such arguments shortly).⁸ But I have yet to come across an accurate articulation of why these facts entail that religious experience cannot justify religious belief. It is the goal of this essay to do so. I will argue that, at least for those aware of such facts, like the modern academic theist, the diversity of religious experience and the existence of neurological explanations for religious experience entail that religious experience cannot justify religious belief. First, I will define and identify the significance of religious experience. Then, I will argue that the diversity of religious experience establishes its unreliability, rendering its justificatory value moot. Lastly, I will argue that modern scientific explanations for religious experience do the same by presenting an alternative preferable natural explanation of religious experience. And I will even do so utilizing two epistemic theories that are prized by theistic philosophers of religion: reliabilism and virtue epistemology.

I. Defining and Using Religious Experience

Before establishing that religious experience cannot justify religious belief, it is important to define religious experience and the role theists claim it plays in justifying religious belief. Religious experiences are, we might say, encounters with “the divine” that are ultimately caused by the divine—where “the divine” is broadly defined to encompass as many religious notions as possible (e.g., The Christian God, the Hindu Brahman and the Buddhist Void). Some are professed to be visual or auditory experiences not brought about by the ordinary senses; others are simply intellectual realizations (without accompanying experiences); while still others are reactions to worldly stimuli—perhaps an ordinary stimuli (e.g., seeing God in a sunset) or a seemingly miraculous stimuli (e.g., witnessing a faith-healing). Still others are (what William James labeled as) ineffable—they cannot be accurately described. Most are likely passive (you cannot will them to occur) and transitive (they only occur for a short period of time). And while most are also noetic (they convey insights into deep truths), others may simply consist in what Jonathan Haidt calls “uplift” (something one might feel while singing a hymn at church.)⁹ It’s difficult to say more than that but, presumably, that doesn’t matter—because, supposedly, when you have a religious experience, you’ll know it.

Religious experience has played a significant role in justifying religious belief throughout the history of religion. In addition to the aforementioned role it played in the production of both Christian and Islamic Scripture, religious experiences *appear* in scripture as well: Moses, via his burning bush experience, came to believe that he should lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Mary and Joseph, via angelic announcement, learned of Jesus’ conception. The apostles, in Acts 2, after receiving the Holy Spirit, learned how to speak in different languages. Non-biblical religious experiences include the conversion of C.S. Lewis and the visions of Bernadette Soubirous.^{10 11} The political and historic significance of religious experience also can’t be

forgotten. The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity after a religious experience, and tried to take the entire Roman Empire with him by changing the official state religion to Christianity. In 2005, George Bush told Palestinian ministers a religious experience inspired him to invade Afghanistan and Iraq.¹²

The role that religious experience plays in justifying religious belief is probably most clearly made by the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, when articulating his “Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model,” Plantinga speaks of humans possessing a sixth sense, the *Sensus Divinitatis*, which is attuned to the divine. Through it, the Holy Spirit can instigate beliefs in selected believers through what amounts to a religious experience. As an example, Plantinga has spoken of looking upon a mountain vista and coming to believe that it, and the universe, was designed by God.¹³ According to Plantinga, such beliefs are “properly basic”; they are justified even though they are not based on evidence. Why? Not because the religious experience provides “evidence” for the belief in question (which it does not);¹⁴ but because it justifies theistic belief in the same way that seeing a tree can justify one’s belief that a tree exists. In fact, most defenses of religious experience’s ability to justify religious belief rely on some kind of “sense of sight” analogy.¹⁵

The ability of religious experience to justify religious belief is important because many theists (although not all) admit that evidence for God’s existence, and other religious beliefs, can be found nowhere else.¹⁶ The classic arguments for God’s existence, for example, fail. The justification provided by religious experience can also help theists who admit to having, for example, no good answer to the evidential problem of evil. Plantinga has even argued that beliefs instigated by religious experience are immune to evidential challenge.¹⁷

But let us now consider two arguments that religious experience cannot justify religious belief for the modern academic theist—an inductive argument based on religious diversity, and another derived from natural explanations for religious experience.

II. The Diversity of Religious Experience

The fact that devotees of different religions have religious experiences that lead them to contradictory conclusions seems to, on face, threaten the ability of religious experience to provide justification for religious belief. But exactly how this threat should be understood is not straight forward. David Silver¹⁸ articulates it in terms of the individual, where the justification that X is true provided by one person’s religious experiences can be nullified by the trustworthy testimony of a friend who also had a religious experience, but instead came to believe ~X. But I believe there are a few things wrong with his account.

First, it’s not clear that even trustworthy testimony can “transfer” the justification provided to someone who has a religious experience to someone else; William James, for example, would argue that the friend’s experience can only provide justification for the friend’s religious belief—not the original person’s.¹⁹ So the original person may still have more reason to believe X than ~X and thus not be in the epistemic bind Silver describes. More importantly, Silver’s individualistic account doesn’t seem to fully appreciate the threat posed by the realization that there are millions of epistemically virtuous morally upstanding people who belong to other religions that have religious experiences that teach them lessons contrary to our own. Most importantly, Silver’s argument does not show that religious experience fails to provide justification for religious belief (which is my thesis). It just shows that the evidence initially provided by a religious experience can be counteracted by contrary evidence, leaving

one in an epistemically neutral position. It's my contention, that the diversity of religious experience entails that religious experience cannot provide justification for religious belief at all.

Theistic philosophers, like Plantinga, are fond of reliabilism—the notion that beliefs are justified if they are produced by “reliable processes” (i.e., processes that usually lead to true belief). This is why Plantinga, for example, thinks that his religious experiences justify his religious belief—because they were processes instigated by the Holy Spirit, and any such process must be truth preserving. But the diversity of religious experience calls into question the reliability of religious experience itself.

To understand why, suppose there are only two religions in the world, with half the world's population belonging to each, and that the religions are mutually exclusive (only one can be true). Yet religious experiences, that tell the experiencer that their religion is true, are had by adherents of both. Since both religions can't be true, the religious experiences of at least half the world's population are leading them astray—producing false belief. Consequently, one must conclude that religious experience is not reliable; half of the time, it lies. In such a situation, one could not be justified by a religious experience to believe what it suggests is true; it is just as likely, as not, that it is leading the experiencer astray.

Of course, conditions in the real world are less favorable. There are five major world religions, only one of which can be true, and there is at least one major split in each. Without adjusting for the popularity of certain religions, religious experience lies 90% of the time. Even taking popularity into account, and assuming the best case scenario in which the most adhered to religion is true (Christianity at 33%)²⁰, and the generous assumption that religious experiences within that religion are uniform, religious experience still lies 2/3rds of the time—hardly a reliable truth preserving process. So, since the diversity of religious experience entails that religious experience is not a reliable truth preserving process, and if religious experience is not a reliable process, it cannot justify religious belief, the diversity of religious experience entails that religious experience cannot justify religious belief.

To respond, you can't merely claim that your religious experience is “stronger than theirs”—you do not have access to how strong their experience is, and they will in turn claim that theirs is stronger than yours. This lands us right back into the same problem; one can't be justified in believing one's experience is the strongest if everyone has that impression, but not everyone's can be the strongest. One might try to divide religious experience into different kinds, and claim that one kind—your kind—*is* reliable. Unfortunately, attempts to justifiably do so will either beg the question (one cannot claim to know so via one's religious experience) or undermine the epistemic authority of the religious experience being argued for. For example, if one provides additional evidence for the beliefs produced by religious experiences to show the religious experiences leads to true beliefs, then it's that evidence—not the religious experiences—that is doing the justificatory work for the beliefs in question.

Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune, defenders of Silver's thesis, point out that theists fond of Plantinga's A/C model are likely to respond to threats posed to the reliability of religious experiences by observing that “if indeed one's religious experience is reliable, then the belief is still justified.”²¹ But, although this conditional is true, it does not help one defend religious experience's ability to justify religious belief. Why? Because, as we have just seen, we have reason to think the antecedent of this conditional is false—and if it is false, we have no reason to think that religious experience can justify religious belief, and still have good reason to think that it can't. The truth of this conditional does entail that, for any given process that justifies a belief,

one need not know that process is reliable in order for it to justify the belief in question. For example, even if I don't know that my faculty of sight is reliable—after all, I might be dreaming—if it indeed is (if I am indeed awake), it is in fact reliable and can justify my belief that the world is real. But if my faculty of sight is in fact unreliable—suppose it regularly produces hallucinations—it cannot justify my belief. And pointing out “if it were reliable, it would justify belief” does not change this fact, nor make my beliefs justified.

Perhaps one might press the point further, suggesting:

Even though the diversity of religious experience provides me with evidence that religious experience is unreliable, it still might be that my religious experience is reliable—maybe mine really is instigated by the Holy Spirit—and thus, contrary to the claim of this paper, it is at least possible that religious experience can justify religious belief, despite the diversity of religious experience.

But this seems patently false. If I have good reason to think my faculty of sight is unreliable (perhaps I have good reason to believe I am living in a computer simulation), even if it turns out my sight is reliable (I am, in fact, not in a computer simulation), my doubt about the reliability of my senses erases any justification that my faculty of sight can provide. In fact, if I have good reason to doubt what my sight is telling me, I *shouldn't believe* what it tells me, even if it is telling me the truth. In the same way, even if it turns out that I just so happen to belong to the one true religion and my religious beliefs were bestowed upon me by God via a religious experience (that is thus reliable), the diversity of religious experience still gives me good reason to doubt the reliability of the religious experience, thus it cannot justify my religious belief and I shouldn't believe what it purports is true.

I suppose that if one is unaware of the reasons to question the reliability of religious experience (e.g., such as the diversity of religious experience) and it also happens that one had the kind of religious experience that is reliable (e.g., an experience caused by God)—in that very special circumstance, religious experience would likely justify religious belief. But this will not help the academic theist (or anyone reading this paper) for they cannot claim such ignorance. Thus my thesis is still intact.

The other way out of this problem is to look for overlap to defend “the unanimity thesis”:

Yes, the doctrines supported by religious experience throughout the world's religions are contradictory, but that is because people interpret their religious experiences through the lens of their culture and religious traditions. A Christian will see Jesus, a Hindu Brahman. But the “core” of all religious experience is the same: it is an encounter with an indescribable reality (often called “The Real”) which gives rise to feelings of peace and blessedness that tends to make one less selfish. So, while religious experience may be unreliable as a means to true belief about specific religious doctrines, it does reliably produce beliefs regarding these “core” elements. So, religious experience can justify those beliefs.

A common core of religious experience has been defended by Peter Byrne, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, C.D. Broad, and John Hick (just to name a few).²² Ironically, I have found even their accounts of this core are largely incompatible. For example, Hick claims that “The

Real” cannot be described or understood by human language and understanding, while Byrne says it can be described and understood by human concepts both negatively and relationally.²³ But even if we set such disagreements aside, another problem remains. To sensibly claim that such a core is common amongst those who have religious experiences, the phrases used to describe this supposed “core” are so amorphous and ambiguous that they seem to be meaningless. “A distinction-less reality gave me a feeling of peace and made me less-selfish.” This could mean so many different things that two people could have two completely different experiences, which share no core at all, yet describe them in exactly this way.

Even if one is willing to concede that all religious experiences have a common core and justify such beliefs, my thesis is only slightly weakened. It’s still the case that religious experience can’t justify most of the religious beliefs that religious adherents claim they do—beliefs specific to their particular brand of religion. But even the fullest version of my thesis can still be defended because even those defending the unanimity thesis won’t be able avoid the objection of the next section: The Problem of Natural Explanations for Religious Experience.

III. Natural Explanations for Religious Experience

We saw, in the introduction, a natural explanation for some religious experiences: focal seizures within the temporal lobe. This has actually helped identify the part of the brain responsible for the production of religious experiences. But epilepsy is not the only way one’s temporal lobe can become appropriately stimulated to produce religious experiences. Fasting, illness, meditation, stress, sleeplessness, drugs—even expectation and the right circumstances (e.g., going to church camp) will alter one’s temporal lobe and produce a religious experience. Michael Persinger has even invented a transcranial magnetic stimulator that, when applied to one’s temporal lobe, reportedly produced religious experiences in his test subjects. His device has come to be known as “The God Helmet.”

To understand my argument as to why potential natural explanations for religious experience deflate their justificatory power, let us consider the case of someone who had a religious experience while wearing the God helmet and subsequently came to believe in the existence of “The Real” based on that experience.²⁴ Would we say that belief was justified? Of course not. Why? Because in order for it to reliably convey knowledge about The Real, and be genuine, the religious experience must ultimately be caused by The Real. Yet we know it was caused by Persinger’s God Helmet. Thus it is not genuine and cannot convey justification.

Notice that it will not do to suggest the subject just so happened to have a religious experience while wearing the God Helmet by coincidence, and that the God Helmet did not play a causal role in producing the religious experience. This is clearly just an unfalsifiable ad-hoc excuse to save the religious experience’s justificatory power.

Notice also that it will not do to suggest that The Real somehow used the God Helmet to produce the religious experience, thus actually being its ultimate cause. Not only does this explanation have low scope, because it raises more questions than it answers (why would The Real facilitate experience through the God Helmet in this instance when it can do so without it in others?), but also it multiplies entities unnecessarily by invoking extra outside influences when none are needed. We need not invoke The Real to explain the experience; the God Helmet alone will do. In addition, this explanation is not conservative in that it contradicts known physical laws—like the causal closure of the physical, the Conservation of Energy and the Conservation of Momentum—by having a non-physical entity interact with the physical world. The purely

natural explanation explains more (has more scope), is more parsimonious (simpler), and more conservative – that is, it is more adequate – and thus should be preferred. But since we should conclude that The Real was not involved in the production of the experience, we should conclude that the religious experience was not genuine and thus does not justify the belief it produces.

Something similar can be said about the experiences of Paul (the goodwill store assistant manager) since it is known that they are caused by seizures in his temporal lobe and invoking God as an explanation of the seizures would, for the same reasons as above, be less parsimonious, have less scope and be less conservative. But what about religious experiences in other circumstances, when we don't have direct awareness of what is going on inside the experiencer's brain? Should we still favor the natural explanation?

Of course! Consider someone who has a religious experience of The Real while fasting, meditating, highly stressed, ill, on drugs, or depriving themselves of sleep. (For example, as an undergraduate at Southern Nazarene University, we once had a speaker in chapel who said, after not eating for two weeks, he saw Jesus walk through a wall and convey divine truths upon him.) Sure, can't directly observe their brain, but we can still ask, "What is the best explanation for the cause of their experience?" Has their physical condition altered their brain and produced the experience, or has The Real reached down from the great beyond to teach them a lesson? The latter multiplies entities beyond necessary, raises more questions than it answers, and is not conservative. The natural explanation, on the other hand, is quite simple, coheres with what we know about how the brain works (and malfunctions), and offers a robust explanation. And once again, it will not do to suggest that God somehow "used" the altered physical state to produce the experience, for the same reason it will not do to suggest that God used Paul's seizures, or The Real used the God Helmet. Clearly the natural explanation should be preferred.

And this is true even for the spontaneous religious experience that one has merely in a conducive environment, such as church camp. Although it is possible that The Real reached down from outside the physical realm to bestow upon you knowledge of its existence, it's still more likely that your own expectations and environment overstimulated your temporal lobe. The latter explanation should be preferred, and as such the religious experience in question cannot justify the beliefs it produces.

Of course, I cannot prove that the religious explanation is false, but that something can't be proven false is not reason to think it is true. That is an appeal to ignorance. In the absence of proof, the best explanation should be preferred, and clearly the natural explanation will always be the best since it will always be simpler, have wider scope, and be more conservative. And if a religious experience is produced by purely natural means, it is not a genuine religious experience and cannot justify religious belief. So, in short, since the academic theist cannot ever be justified in believing that a religious experience is genuine, religious experience can never justify their religious belief.

To reinforce my line of reasoning consider phlogiston – a substance that was once thought to account for heat by flowing in and out of objects as they became hotter and cooler. Once it was discovered that heat is merely a result of the movement of molecules, it became irrational to believe in phlogiston. Sure, I could invoke phlogiston to explain the movement of the molecules, but doing so is not simpler, is less explanatory, not conservative and the movement of the molecules can be accounted for without it. If you can explain something with less, you should.

Understanding this argument reveals why the most famous attempts to circumvent the problem of natural explanation fall short. For example, Ellwood (1999)²⁵ argues that identifying the neural correlate of a religious experience can't establish it is illusory; if it did, then identifying the parts of the brain responsible for visual sensations would force us to conclude that everything we see is illusory. But the argument I have presented does not merely identify a neural correlate of a religious experience. It identifies the cause of the experience as something else besides what *must* cause it in order for the experience to be genuine—it is a seizure, or drugs, or the environment, not God. Yes, the realization that visual sensations are correlated with activity in the visual cortex does not give one reason to think that they are illusions; but this realization does not give one reason to think that visual sensations are not ultimately caused by the objects they are reported to be of. However, if I found that the most likely ultimate explanation of a visual sensation was something besides the objects I was apparently perceiving—for example, the work of alcohol on my visual cortex is a more likely cause of my visual sensation of pink elephants—then I would conclude that my visual sensation was illusory and I would not be justified in believing in the existence of what my visual sensations were telling me was there (e.g., pink elephants). What potential natural explanations for religious experiences do is to provide a better explanation for religious experience that is not ultimately caused by the object that the experience is reportedly of.

C.D. Broad argues that the fact that altered physical states are correlated with religious experiences is not reason to think they are illusory because,

“[if]there is an aspect of the world which remains altogether outside the ken of ordinary persons... It seems very likely that some degree of mental and physical abnormality would be a necessary condition for getting sufficiently loosened from the objects of ordinary sense perception to enter into cognitive contact with this aspect of reality. Therefore the fact that those persons who claim this peculiar kind of cognition generally exhibit certain mental and physical abnormalities is rather what might be anticipated if their claims were true. One might need to be slightly "cracked" in order to have some peep-holes into the super sensible world.”²⁶

There are a few things wrong with this argument. First, as Jeff Jordan²⁷ argues, it seems quite odd to suggest that there are necessary conditions for having a religious experience. Divine presence is a divine prerogative. But in addition, as a response to the argument I have presented, Broad's critique fall short. Sure, it's possible that temporal lobe seizures open up a cognitive gateway to the great beyond, but is that explanation more adequate than the purely natural one? Of course not, for all the reasons I have cited above.

But what if there is not an immediately available natural explanation? What if you weren't fasting, meditating, or anything else that you think could alter your temporal lobe in the right way? Can you conclude that you had a genuine religious experience then? No. The fact that you can't think of a natural explanation is not reason to think that there isn't one; again, that would be an appeal to ignorance. It's more likely that your inability to think of a natural explanation is due to your ignorance, not due to the fact that there is no natural explanation. This is akin to reasoning made by medical doctors when they can't diagnose a disease. Their inability to come up with a natural explanation is not good reason to explain it with divine wrath or

demonic possession; it's much more likely the natural explanation is hidden because of their ignorance. (If *House M.D.* taught us nothing else, it was this.) Besides, undiagnosed temporal lobe seizures will always be a better (simpler, wider scoping, more conservative) hypothesis than supernatural intervention.

But what if one does not know that religious experiences have potential natural explanations? What if one is ignorant of the developments of neuroscience? Can one be justified in believing their religious experience has a supernatural origin then? Perhaps, but this is not going to help the modern academic theist justify their religious belief via religious experience. First, I doubt many actually are ignorant of such things. But even if they are, this does not allow them to justify their religious belief in this way. Why? I believe the answer lies in an epistemic theory often defended by theists: Virtue Epistemology. To see why, let us return once again to the disease analogy.

Let us suppose that an academic theist has somehow remained ignorant of the germ theory of disease. He then gets the flu but does not understand why, and does not even know that there are natural explanations for such diseases. Can he justifiably believe that the illness is caused by a demon? No, for even though he does not know there are natural explanations for such diseases, he should. By remaining ignorant of the germ theory of disease, he has neglected his epistemic duty. He is epistemically blameworthy and as a result his ability to be justified in this belief is non-existent.

In the same way, an academic theist who has remained ignorant of the natural explanations for religious experience cannot hide behind his ignorance in order to justify his belief. He should be aware of such things; at the least, it is his duty to research and learn about things relevant to his theistic belief—and this is obviously one of them. He has neglected his epistemic duty. He is thus epistemically blameworthy and his ability to be justified in this belief is non-existent.

Interestingly however, in earlier times, religious experience might have been able to justify religious belief. If natural explanations are not completely available (e.g., undiscovered), one cannot be expected to know about them and thus be derelict in one's epistemic duty. The Apostle Paul, for example, could have been justified in thinking that disease was caused by demons and that his religious experience on the road to Damascus was of supernatural origin. But if he were alive today, he could not—for he *should* know the germ theory of disease, and that his conversion experience mirrors exactly the symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy.

So perhaps the Apostle Paul could have been justified, by his religious experience, in believing that Jesus was the messiah. He didn't know about the better natural explanations for his experience, nor could he have been expected to. But an academic theist cannot be so justified, either by their own religious experience (they should be aware of the better natural explanations) or by relying on Paul's (for we know that it is much more likely that Paul was a temporal lobe epileptic). And the same holds for all religious experiences; they cannot, for the modern academic theist, justify religious belief.

Conclusion

Ramachandran, in his chapter about Paul the Goodwill store assistant manager, essentially dodges the obvious questions regarding the legitimacy of Paul's religious experience.

“But why do patients like Paul have religious experiences? ... One [possibility] is that God really does visit these people. If that is true, so be it. Who are we to question God’s infinite wisdom? Unfortunately, this can be neither proved nor ruled out on empirical grounds.”²⁸

While he is right that it can neither be proved nor disproved that God visits Paul, it would be an appeal to ignorance to suggest this is a reason to accept the hypothesis that God does. It does not mean that evidence and scientific reasoning cannot be brought to bear on the question, nor does it mean that there is not good reason to reject this possibility. And clearly, since the neurological explanations for religious experience are more adequate, they should be preferred. To not accept them is unscientific and irrational, just as it would be to think that demons cause disease. As we have seen, one could lump God on as an additional causal mechanism, where God is the cause of the neurological state, but this is unnecessary. Such states can be, and are, accounted for completely by natural mechanisms: the effects of God helmets, seizures, drugs, fasting, illness, stress and even the environment on one's brain. Lumping God onto the explanation makes it less simple, raises more questions than answers, conflicts with existing knowledge, and should thus be avoided.

Ramachandran also thinks that natural explanations for religious experience have no bearing on whether or not God exists.

“My goal as a scientist... is to discover how and why religious sentiments originate in the brain, but this has no bearing one way or the other on whether God exists or not.”²⁹

While, again, it is true that neurological explanations for religious experience do not disprove God’s existence, it is clearly false that they have no bearing on it since natural explanations for religious experiences negate their ability to provide evidence for God's existence. If one relies on religious experience to provide justification for one's belief in God, as many theists do, clearly discovering natural explanations for religious experiences has great bearing on one's justification for belief in God. In addition, if it can be effectively argued that belief in God (or religious belief in general) originally arose because of religious experience, but religious experience has a purely naturalistic cause, then significant doubt arises about God’s existence.

One might reply that such reasoning commits the genetic fallacy, but such a reply actually misunderstands that fallacy. The genetic fallacy tells us that one cannot dismiss evidence for a theory by identifying the origin of the theory. For example, I cannot dismiss the hypothesis that the structure of Benzene is circular (“ring shaped”) based on the fact that the idea came to Friedrich Kekule in a dream because the subsequent evidence that he was right is insurmountable. But the fallacy does not tell us that the origin story of a thing is irrelevant to whether or not that thing exists. I can, for example, provide good reason for not believing in El Chupacabra by pointing out that the myth started when Madelyne Tolentino confabulated the story after watching the movie “Species” in 1995.³⁰ Identifying the belief’s origin can’t be used to dismiss the “evidence” for El Chupacabra (there are other ways of doing that), but the fact that belief in El Chupacabra does not actually originate in a blood-sucking goat-killing cypto-creature is good reason to think that there is no such thing. Likewise, without good evidence for God’s existence—something that many who rely on religious experience admit—the fact that belief in

God does not originate in God, but instead in naturally caused religious experiences, would be good reason to think that there is no God.

Swinburne (1979) has defended the ability of religious experience to justify religious belief with the "principle of credulity": If a person has an experience which seems to be of X, then, unless there is some reason to think otherwise, it is rational to believe that X exists. I have not argued that this principle is false. I have shown why (when X = God), the diversity of religious experience and the existence of natural explanations for religious experience entail that there is always "some reason to think otherwise."

Notes

¹ See Ramachandran, V.S. and Blakeslee, Sandra. (1999) *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: Harper Collins.

² Ramachandran, V.S. and Blakeslee, Sandra. (1999) *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: Harper Collins, p. 180.

³ Ramachandran, V.S. and Blakeslee, Sandra. (1999) *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: Harper Collins, p. 181.

⁴ Whether Paul actually thought Jesus was God is contentious. You can find easy to read run downs of the scriptures that go both ways on this topic, in Ryan Turner's "Did Paul think Jesus was God?" (Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, at <http://carm.org/paul-think-jesus-was-god>) and "Paul did not Refer to Jesus as 'God'" (Deity of Jesus, at <http://www.deityofjesus.com/archives/476>).

⁵ Qur'an 5:75

⁶ Qur'an 19:30-35

⁷ Qur'an 5:116-117

⁸ For a nice rundown of such arguments, see Webb, Mark. (2011) "Religious Experience", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

⁹ See Haidt, Jonathan. (2012) *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon.

¹⁰ See Edwards, Bruce (Ed.) (2007) *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy, Volume 1, an Examined Life*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

¹¹ You can find Catholic Online's article on St. Bernadette Soubirous at http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php? saint_id=1757.

¹² "God told me to invade Iraq, Bush tells Palestinian ministers" BBC Press Release, June 10, 2006 (at http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/10_october/06/bush.shtml)

¹³ See Plantinga, Alvin. (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford University Press, p. 175.

¹⁴ For Plantinga, evidence must come in propositional form.

¹⁵ See, for example, Alston, William P. (1991) *Perceiving God*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

¹⁶ Richard Swinburne, for example, would argue that religious belief can be justified by evidence and argument. See Swinburne, Richard. (1979) *The Existence of God*, New York: Clarendon Press.

¹⁷ "Suppose Christian and theistic belief has a good deal of warrant for me by way of faith and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IHS); then the fact that theism is evidentially challenged doesn't give me a defeater and doesn't bring it about that my theistic belief is irrational." Plantinga, Alvin. (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford University Press, p.478.

¹⁸ See Silver, David. (2001) 'Religious experience and the facts of religious pluralism.' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49, p. 1–17.

¹⁹ See James, William. (2012) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: The Modern Library of New York (a division of Random House).

²⁰ Adherents.com "Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents", found at http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html.

²¹ See Baldwin, Erik and Thune, Michael. (2008) "The Epistemological Limits of Experience-Based Exclusive Religious Beliefs". *Religious Studies* 44, p. 445-455.

²² See Hick, John. (2004) *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. 2nd edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

²³ See Byrne, Peter. (2003) "It Is Not Reasonable to Believe That Only One Religion Is True," *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. ed. Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vanarragon. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 204.

²⁴ It should be noted that Persinger's experiment has yet to be successfully repeated and I know of no one in his experiment who describe their experience as one of "The Real". I am treating the above circumstance as a thought experiment to help clarify my argument.

²⁵ See Ellwood, Robert S. (1999) *Mysticism and Religion*, New York: Seven Bridges Press.

²⁶ Broad, C. D. (1939) "Arguments for the Existence of God." *Journal of Theological Studies* 40, p. 165.

²⁷ See Jordan, Jeff. (1994) "Religious Experience and Naturalistic Explanations." *Sophia* 33, p. 60-73.

²⁸ Ramachandaran, V.S. and Blakeslee, Sandra. (1999) *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: Harper Collins, p. 182.

²⁹ Ramachandaran, V.S. and Blakeslee, Sandra. (1999) *Phantoms in the Brain: Probing the Mysteries of the Human Mind*. New York: Harper Collins, p. 185.

³⁰ Ironically, Madelyne came to believe that she actually saw something, but as clearly shown in Radford, Benjamin. (2011) *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact, Fiction, and Folklore*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, Benjamin clearly shows, her memory of the experience was obviously a confabulation based on her experience of watching the movie "Species." The description she gave, months after the "sighting," matched directly with the "species" alien.