

*This is an old paper I wrote as a grad student, and which is now partially revised, and will be revised more.*

## **A Religious Experience Argument for the Existence of a Holy Transcendent Being**

Alexander R. Pruss

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### **1. Introduction**

Arguments from religious experience have lately been prominent in the philosophy of religion. Particularly prominent have been arguments exploiting an alleged analogy between sensory experience and religious experience.<sup>[1]</sup> Much of the discussion had focused on the question of whether religious experiences are veridical, but then Richard M. Gale asked a more fundamental question: Are they even cognitive? An experience is *cognitive* if it takes an intentional accusative, such as “red cube” in “I see a red cube,” as opposed to the cognate accusative exemplified by the use of the word “waltz” in “I am dancing a waltz” which is synonymous with “I am dancing waltzily.” Cognitive experiences are objective in the sense that they purport the existence of an object whose *esse* is not *percipi*. Likewise many people think that painings are examples of non-cognitive experiences, i.e., ones that take a cognate accusative: For them, “to feel a pain” is nothing but “to feel painfully” and the *esse* of pain is to be felt.

One purpose of this paper is to argue that Gale is right to switch the discussion from the question of veridicality to that of cognitivity, but from a direction opposite to Gale’s. While Gale was arguing *against* the argument from religious experience, I shall construct an argument that shows that *if* it is granted that some apparent religious experiences of a God are cognitive, *then* it should likewise have to be granted that there exists an entity that is holy and transcendent, which entity I shall call “a deity.” Much more than this cannot be hoped to be accomplished from any general argument based only on religious experience as such, since the reports of religious experiences are in conflict with regard to just about all other attributes.

Thus, the argument will show that once cognitivity is shown, the arguer from religious experience is home free, and so the discussion in the field should indeed focus on the question of cognitivity rather than that of veridicality. It is not the aim of this paper to argue that some religious experiences are in fact cognitive, and hence the conclusion of the paper will be a modest one.

There are two ways in which a theist might attempt to get around the question of cognitivity altogether. If like Jerome Gellman(??ref) one agrees that in the absence of a conceptual argument showing that an experience *could not* be cognitive, the subjects of the experience are counted as right if they decide on phenomenological grounds that the experience is cognitive, then of course one will not see a problem with the cognitivity of religious experience.

Alternately, one can take the extreme view that *all* experiences are cognitive. On this view, experiences like painings, orgasms, fearings, or boredoms can all be analyzed as “an experience of *x*,” where *x* is an entity whose *esse* is not *percipi*. Arguably, Socrates took this view of fear, Aristotle took this view of pleasure and pain, the Stoics saw all emotions in this way, and Heidegger saw boredom in this way. Thus, for instance, Socrates thinks fear is an experience of the terrible *qua* terrible, and there can be what one might call veridical fear, when what one fears truly is terrible, and non-veridical fear when what one fears is in fact not terrible.<sup>[2]</sup>

If these two ways fail, the theist will have to get her hands dirty with more an analysis of the specific features of religious experience, and argue that they make it rational to take at least some paradigm cases of religious experiences as cognitive. Attempting to do this by analogy with sensory experience does not appear as promising as it once did. For instance, although it is true that Gale’s arguments about the cognitivity of religious experience fail to establish that religious experience is not cognitive, they do a lot better at showing that it’s not *perceptual*, and even better at showing that it has relevant disanalogies with sensory experience. A more promising approach may well be to pursue an analogy with a much wider class of cognitive experiences than just sensory ones. The argument of this paper is structured about just such an analogy, though since the question of cognitivity is *assumed* to have a positive resolution, the analogy is obviously going to be exploited to other ends.

Cognitive experiences fall into distinct phenomenological classes. Intuitively, a hearing and a seeing are phenomenologically distinct in a way in which a seeing of a red cube and a seeing of a blue sphere are not. These classes are irreducible in the sense that a hearing can't be constructed out of seeings. The argument shall need a precise notion of an irreducible phenomenological class of cognitive experiences (IPCOCE). I shall throughout restrict myself to the cognitive experiences of *humans*. A class *E* of actually had human phenomenal experiences is an IPCOCE providing that it would be conceptually impossible that a human being on the basis of human cognitive experiences outside of *E* should know what it is like to have *any* of the experiences in *E*.

Auditory experiences form an IPCOCE. A human who has never heard a sound cannot know what it is like to hear any sound. This is a different claim from a claim that she could not *recognize* a sound where she to hear it. She might well recognize one. Someone raised in a silent environment who had read that firecrackers make very loud noises, and who suddenly came into the presence of firecrackers, might well identify the most intense of her new experiences as "very loud noises".

One might try to rescue the "recognition" criterion as follows. It would be logically possible for a human being to have a "magnetic sense" like some animals apparently do. (On Kripkean grounds, it is not obvious that this is possible, but I shall grant it for the sake of argument.) Now, if our heroine had suddenly been gifted with a magnetic sense in the presence of firecrackers, and if strong magnetic fields were activated simultaneously with the firecrackers' explosions, she would misidentify the magnetic sense as hearing. Hence, one might try to bolster up the recognition criterion by saying that someone a person knows what it is like to have some experience if and only if she could tell it apart from other logically possible experiences. However, the actual cases of "knowing what it is like to have an experience" do not satisfy this stringent criterion. I know what it is like to hear my wife's voice, but I might well misidentify a similar, though phenomenally distinct, voice as hers.

I shall take the notion of "knowing what it is like to experience something" as a primitive, to be understood by ostension as the knowledge which the person who hasn't heard anything lacks vis-à-vis sounds, though the person who has heard has it (always barring abnormalities like amnesia), or the knowledge which we all lack in connection with echolocation, though the bat might have it (if bats have minds), and the knowledge I have in regard to my wife's voice and which you would have on the basis of my description only by connecting up the terms in my description with your own past auditory experiences.

On the other hand, if Hume's missing shade of blue argument is right, then the class of all experiences of some particular shade of blue is not IPCOCE, because on the basis of knowing what it is like to see all the other shades one could know what it is like to see the missing one. But if *E* is the class of all visual experiences that involve some color that is neither white nor black nor a shade of grey, then arguably *E* is an IPCOCE.

The union of two IPCOCE is an IPCOCE, as is the class of all human experiences. However, the intersection of two IPCOCEs is not guaranteed to be an IPCOCE. For, although experiences of change-or-motion form an IPCOCE, and so do visual experiences, it is not obvious the class of visual experiences involving change-or-motion need not be an IPCOCE. Suppose someone had experienced only static visual experiences, but had experienced a full range of change in non-visual experiences. It is not obvious that he might not know what it would be like for his hitherto static visual image to change. (Some will argue even more strongly that a human being who had never experienced movement could not have *any* experiential knowledge.) This class cuts across other class-divisions: some, but not all, visual experiences are experiences of change. That the union of two IPCOCEs is an IPCOCE follows from the definition of an IPCOCE, but it is not obvious that the intersection is (a person who had had non-visual experiences of change and visual experiences of static things might know what it is like to have a visual experience of change). The class of all human experiences is an IPCOCE, of course.

Let us take it, at least for the purposes of argument, that some religious experiences are in fact cognitive experiences apparently directly of a deity, so that a deity is the intentional accusative of these experiences. The intentional accusative of a cognitive experience is said to "objectively exist" providing that what the experience purports about reality is in fact true.

I shall give an argument for the existence of a transcendently holy entity, a non-material numinous reality. Any such being will be called a "deity". The claim I am defending is a very weak one. Many if not all religions will agree that there is a deity. I am not arguing in this paper for the existence of the God of Western theism, but my argument will increase the probability of the hypothesis that the God of Western theism exists, since the God of Western theism *is* a deity, and hence the probability that the God of Western

theism exists given that there is a deity is higher than the background probability of the existence of the God of Western theism before it was known that was a deity.

## 2. The basic argument

The basic argument is as follows:

1. If  $C$  is any IPCOCE of experiences actually had by humans, then there is a member  $e$  of  $C$  such that  $e$ 's intentional accusative objectively exists. (Premiss.)
2. There is a non-empty IPCOCE,  $M$ , with the property that for every experience  $e$  in  $M$ , the proposition that the intentional accusative of  $e$  objectively exists entails that a deity exists. (Premiss.)
3. There is a member of  $M$  whose intentional accusative objectively exists. (From (1) and (2) by *modus ponens*.)
4. Let  $e$  denote any member of  $R$  whose intentional accusative objectively exists. (By existential instantiation of (3).)
5. That the intentional accusative of  $e$  objectively exists entails that a deity exists (by (2), since  $e$  is a member of  $R$ .)
6. Thus, a deity exists. (From (4) and (5) by *modus ponens*.)

Plainly, the argument is valid, and so the only question is whether premisses (1) and (2) are true. To note that there is some reason to accept (1), observe that human beings do not have experiential faculties which are in vain. It would be very surprising if it turned out there was a whole IPCOCE of experiences each of which has objective purport, since the experiences of an IPCOCE are cognitive, and yet none of which is veridical. It would be more surprising yet if none of the intentional accusatives had objective existence, despite purporting to have it (this is a stronger claim than just that they are not veridical, since an experience can have its intentional accusative objectively existing, but yet not be veridical, if the experience is not "caused in the right way"). Maybe some extreme sceptic would make such a claim, but it is not plausible. Yet, such a claim is true if (1) is false. Hence, we have good reason to take (1) to be true.

The class  $M$  can be taken to be the class of apparent direct non-sensory experiences of a transcendently holy entity *as such*. There are such phenomenal experiences. I do not here claim that they are perceptual, and so Richard M. Gale's arguments against the possibility of religious experiences being perceptual are not relevant. I do need to claim that they are *cognitive*, i.e., that they have objective purport. However, there is a presumption that a class of sensations taken to have objective purport by most of those who have them, does in fact have objective purport. It is difficult to see what other evidence one could bring in to settle the issue whether an experience has objective purport than asking the people who have it, unless one should have some conceptual argument for why a deity cannot be the apparent object of an experience.

The class  $M$  has been defined in such a way that indeed the objective existence of the intentional accusative of an experience from  $M$  entails the existence of a deity, since a deity is the object of any such experience. The class  $M$  is a large one. It includes Western theistic experiences, but also those of polytheistic religions, maybe also pantheistic experiences, and perhaps even Eastern experiences where the "transcendently holy entity" is something like a mystical "nothingness" (assuming this can qualify as an *entity* so that the experience can qualify as having objective purport).

The remaining task is to show that  $M$  is an irreducible class, an IPCOCE. To do this, one can appeal to mystics who claim that mystical experiences are ineffable since they are radically phenomenally different from other human experiences. One can also appeal to the radical difference between the intentional accusatives of experiences from  $M$  and other human experience, since the other experiences are not of beings that are transcendently holy, and argue that such a radical difference is likely to translate to a phenomenal difference since the experiences from  $M$  involve an apparent direct non-sensory experience of a transcendent sublime entity *as such*. If this is established, then (2) follows, and hence it must be admitted that indeed a deity exists.

## 3. More on premiss (1)

We need to argue that, premiss (1) is true, and that the class  $M$  of experiences of a deity is an IPCOCE. First of all, it may be postulated that there is a *presumption* that any given IPCOCE satisfies (1). If (2) could be established, then a variant of my argument would show that there is a *presumption* that there is a deity. But we should be able to do more than just this in favor of (1). The intuitions making (1)

plausible that were given above continue to apply. It would be very strange if there was a class of cognitive experiences, irreducibly distinct from all other experiences, which not only were never veridical, but which were never even *right* in the weaker sense of having their intentional accusative objective exist. One would wonder how human beings came to have such a class of experiences. Such experiencings couldn't just be distorted or recombined forms of experiencings that we naturally have, because one can in principle know what it is like to have a distorted or recombined form of an experience by virtue of knowing what it is like to have an undistorted form, and this would militate against all the experiences in a given IPCOCE being distortions or recombinations of other experiences.

To this, someone might reply with an evolutionary analogy. Maybe some class of experiences such as the class of moral feelings is an evolutionary development for the sake of the survival of the species, and it is plausible that moral experiences are phenomenologically irreducible. For this to be a counterexample to (1) it would have to be the case that (a) no moral feeling is ever *right* in the sense of reflecting an objective moral truth, and that (b) moral feelings are cognitive. All irrealist views of morality will yield (a), but only some error theorists will also accept (b). Now, the most plausible irrealist view of morality will not only involve a claim that there are no objective moral truths, but that there *could not* be any such truths. Hence, if moral feelings are a counterexample to (1), they will be an IPCOCE no member of which even *could* be right. It is dubious whether there can be such an IPCOCE, in light of the plausibility of the principle that the objects of one's cognitive experiencings *could* exist, since otherwise the experiencings would not have anything that they would be *about*. This principle is explored in greater detail elsewhere.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, in that case, cognitive feelings of a sort that *must* be wrong turn out to be motivationally quite potent. If there can be no such thing as an obligation, it is quite surprising that a cognitive feeling that something is obligatory in fact motivates. Because of this, the irrealist would do well to deny that moral feelings are cognitive, but then she has no counterexample to (1).

One might also wonder, on a conceptual level, whether a non-empty IPCOCE such that there never was any state of affairs correctly described by the experiences in that class *could* count as a class of experiences that are cognitive, i.e., have objective purport. Here, intuitions might go in both directions. Some will see it as quite a coherent *logical* possibility that, say, there might have never been any such thing as sound, because in fact it was logically possible that we all be brains in a soundless vat, though we might have had auditory experiences. Others will doubt what it is about those "auditory experiences" that would allow them to make claims about sounds, in the absence of any sounds having ever been experiences. But neither group will want to admit the described situation as an actuality. And I only need the actual truth of (1), albeit for *all* IPCOCEs.

Another possible argument against (1) is that perhaps an IPCOCE might consist of distortions of sensations that do *not* have objective purport, but that somehow take on the phenomenal character of experiences with objective purport. I could dismiss this argument by redefining an IPCOCE as a class such that one cannot know what it is like to experience a member of it on the basis of *experiences in general* (cognitive or not) outside the IPCOCE. But there is no need to take such a step. The idea that sensations might somehow get objective purport attached to them so that they would truly become cognitive experiences is implausible if we take being an experience to be phenomenologically different from being a mere non-cognitive experience. And if we don't take this view, then we could simply *define* a cognitive experience as opposed to a mere experience in such a way that an experience's objective purport is not phenomenologically detachable from it, in the way that "It is going to rain" is phenomenologically detachable from "My ankle aches" (even though it might be that the conclusion that it is going to rain might be made non-inferentially). With such a definition, the argument against (1) would lose plausibility, for once again one would wonder how it was that the mere sensation got "upgraded" to an experience, got a non-detachable objective purport.

Note that (1) is a useful anti-sceptical tool. Zeno's scepticism disappears once we note that the class of experiences of change is an IPCOCE. Berkeley's scepticism disappears as soon as we observe that the class of experiences of physical objects is an IPCOCE.

#### 4. More on premiss (2)

If (1) is granted, it only remains to argue that *M* is an IPCOCE. Here we might expect the strongest opposition. I have already discussed the claim that religious experiences are experiences in my sense of having objective purport, so the objection to be considered here is to the claim that they are irreducibly distinct from other human experiences. One strategy in doing this would be to say that the kind

of being that forms the object of by an experience from *M* is so radically different from the non-transcendent beings that one could not know what it is like to have an apparent experience of such a being without actually having an apparent experience of such a being. Note that this is a much weaker claim than a claim that one could know anything about such a being without an experience of such a being. (We could know something about sounds while deaf.)

Alternately, we might restrict *M* to high mystical experiences, those experiences of which the mystics explicitly said that someone who had not experienced them could not know what it is like to have them, even if the person had lower-level religious experiences. One can find evidence for such a class of experiences by looking at the writings of people like St. John of the Cross. Actually, St. John of the Cross's testimony is particularly relevant here, because as a spiritual director it was his job to examine people at various stages on the mystical way, and claims from him that there is a radical difference between the high mystical experience and lower level experiences have a ring of plausibility.

## 5. Conclusions

We see that once we grant religious experiences to be *cognitive* we have good reason to accept that there exists a deity, a transcendently holy being. Richard Gale's focussing of the discussion on the issue of cognitivity thus is valuable. The success of an argument from religious experience rises and falls with the question of whether the experience is cognitive or not.

Of course if one takes the radical Socratic thesis that *all* experiences are cognitive—fears being experiences of the apparently truly terrible and itches being experiences of that which apparently there is a need to scratch—then the issue of cognitivity disappears. One might indeed find the Socratic thesis plausible if one reflects on the strangeness of a consciousness which is not a consciousness *of* anything. Or one might find the Socratic thesis plausible if one finds plausible the Myth of Jones in Sellars. <sup>[4]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> ??refs

<sup>[2]</sup> ??refs to all the thinkers

<sup>[3]</sup> Alexander R. Pruss, "Śaṅkara's principle and two ontomystical arguments", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **49** (2001), 111–120.

<sup>[4]</sup> ??ref