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A missing element in reports of divine encounters

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Abstract: **Many people claim to have had direct perceptual awareness of God. William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Gary Gutting, and others have based their philosophical views on these reports. But using analogies from our encounters with humans whose abilities surpass our own, we realize that something essential is missing from these reports. The absence of this element renders it highly unlikely that these people have actually encountered a divine being.**

Several philosophers of religion have focused attention recently on the testimonies of people who claim to have had direct perceptual awareness of God. Most of these accounts describe the sensing of a presence that is very powerful and very loving. But there is something missing from these reports – a feature we should expect to be prominent in any real interaction between a human and a divine being – and its absence casts serious doubt on the claim that these people have actually encountered God.

How the experience is described

Much of what passes for 'religious experience' in the philosophical literature today is susceptible to the criticism that I am going to give. But in this paper I will confine my remarks to a particular kind of experience that philosophers have recently singled out: the sensing of a presence.[1]

One note before we proceed. Although several philosophers of religion refer to this same body of evidence, they differ in how they use it.[2] Richard Swinburne argues that, unless there are strong reasons to think otherwise, what people seem to perceive in these experiences probably is so.[3] Gary Gutting says Swinburne's principle is too permissive, although he agrees that these first-hand reports constitute substantial evidence for the existence of a good and powerful supernatural being. William Alston's approach is less direct. He does not treat these reports as

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evidence that there is a God, but he does argue that it is reasonable for people to rely on such experiences in forming beliefs *about* such a God, including the belief that there is one. Despite these differences, all of these authors point to the same data and claim that these facts serve as evidence for claims about God. I contend, however, that there is an important element missing from these accounts that makes them unreliable as evidence, either for God's existence or for claims about God's nature.

People who report having had such experiences say that they are aware of a presence – sometimes beside them, other times around or within them. Although they may be alone in a room, they sense someone coming to them, remaining with them for a while, then withdrawing. Some people report that they have had these visitations only once or twice, while others say they experience them frequently. Many say that the presence speaks to them, although not audibly.

Alston, Gutting, and Swinburne agree that these visitations are non-sensory perceptions. They are perceptions because the people who have them are not just imagining or thinking about this mysterious something; they experience it as actually being there, presenting itself to them just as an object of sensate experience presents itself. But these are examples of non-sensory perception because these people state that they are not seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or touching anything.

Nevertheless, the object of their perception does have distinguishable characteristics. It is most commonly described as 'good' and 'powerful'. The people who experience this presence feel that it is on their side.[4] Many people say that the presence cares about others too besides themselves, but they definitely feel that it loves and accepts *them*. In brief, the people who have these experiences sense that they are visited by an invisible person who is powerful and kindly disposed toward them. And the experience produces positive emotions. Those who are visited by this presence feel relieved of their worries and optimistic about the ultimate victory of good over evil.

All the authors I mentioned above focus primarily on the mode of presentation and discuss whether a non-sensory perception counts as reliable evidence (either that there is a God or that this God has a certain nature). But these authors fail to take into account what is happening – or rather, not happening – during the course of these visitations. What these people describe is not the kind of thing that would occur if there were truly a divine being presenting Himself to people. In terms of actual outcomes, especially changes in their beliefs and practices, the people who report these visitations seem incredibly untouched. They become euphoric; they feel loved; they even claim to be better people afterwards; but their view of the world is hardly affected by the experience.

Alston illustrates this point with a wonderfully mundane image.[5] He says that the experience of sensing God's presence is like that of coming home after a day of

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work and looking at one's house. Every evening, upon arriving home, we discover anew that our house is shingled. Of course, we already knew this, he says, but that does not make the experience any less valuable.

We should note that Alston and the others are not talking about conversion experiences. On rare occasions people claim that the sensing of God's presence has moved them from disbelief to belief, but that is not the norm. These authors are referring to the awareness of a caring presence in the lives of people who already believe.

Alston claims that there are two ways in which direct perceptual awareness of such a presence can change our network of beliefs. First, it can add to our current inventory. This happens, he says, when the experience shows us what God thinks about us individually or reveals to us something God wants us to do. This will be in harmony with our overall set of beliefs but will merely add some details about how these other beliefs relate to us personally. Second, the experience may not tell us anything new, but it may provide 'updating' for some of our current beliefs. This is the point at which Alston uses the house metaphor. 'I look at my house as I approach', he writes,

> … and it presents itself to my experience as shingled. But I already knew that it was shingled; the only possibility for a net increment is that I learn from the perception that it is still shingled. Likewise, in MP [that is, mystical perception] God may appear to me in an experience as supremely loving, but I already firmly believed that. There isn't even any significant updating to be derived here, if one can assume that changes in the divine nature are out of the question. Even so, the experience can add to my total sum of justification for believing that God is loving, even if it doesn't add to the firmness of the belief. And of course there are obvious non-cognitive advantages in experiencing God's love in addition to just believing or knowing 'at a distance' that it is there.

To sum up: Alston claims that an experience of God will either add to or update our current web of beliefs. But he fails to consider a third possibility: that an encounter with a divine being could challenge some of our current beliefs or even require us to rearrange our entire network of beliefs. And the fact that Alston does not allow for this possibility is perplexing. On his account, an appearance by a divine presence would be strangely inconsequential. He adds that:

> … it must be acknowledged that CMP [that is, Christian mystical perception] does not typically alter the major outlines of a person's faith. Ordinarily the subject already has a more or less firm Christian faith, which is left largely unchanged by mystical experience. What the experience does yield, cognitively, is: (a) information about God's particular relations to the subject; (b) additional grounds for beliefs already held, particularly the belief that God does exist; (c) additional 'insight' into facets of the scheme.

I have already mentioned (a) and (b). As for (c), he has in mind such things as gaining insight into the true meaning of the Trinity or the Incarnation, or understanding what it means to be loved personally by God. Here again, the people having the experience simply grasp concepts which are already part of their inventory of beliefs. 'I may believe on general grounds that my wife loves

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me', he says, 'but I have a much fuller sense of what this love is like if I have experienced a variety of manifestations. And so it is here'.

Of course, Alston does not expect a visit by a divine being to contradict scripture. So anyone who believes in the Christian scriptures and has direct perceptual awareness of the God who is described by the text will naturally have an experience that confirms rather than disconfirms his current set of beliefs. But Alston does not seem to realize what kinds of beliefs would be affected by such an encounter, and that is why he does not recognize what is missing from most reports of divine visitations.

Analogies from encounters with other people

Minimally, what is missing is the give-and-take that suggests that there really is another person there. In short, these descriptions reveal first of all a lack of interaction or personal encounter. When one person interacts with another, certain things characteristically happen. At the very least, there is some small degree of surprise due to the unpredictability of the other person's words or actions. For example, we may think the other person is going to say *x*, but she says *y* instead. Or perhaps, when she says *x*, we at first think she means *y*, but as the conversation continues we realize she means *z*. Such subtle surprises occur even in the most casual interactions between two separate individuals.

But more importantly, when we interact with someone who is superior to us in experience, intellect, creativity, or moral uprightness – in other words, any of the aspects in which a divine person is presumed to be superior to us – we are usually somewhat disoriented by what the other person says or does. An encounter with such an individual challenges our perspective and makes us aware of limitations in our thinking and behaviour. We do not just learn about the person with whom we are interacting; we are also introduced to better ways of viewing and responding to the situation at hand.

Suppose that you and I work for a corporation. We are unable to resolve a problem over which we have agonized for several days. We have tried every solution we can think of, with no success. Our co-workers are unable to help. Finally, we seek the advice of a manager whose sharp intellect and wide experience within the company are legendary. 'Let's ask Jamila', we say, 'she'll think of something'. We seek her advice precisely because we have exhausted all the possibilities that we can imagine and we hope that she will think of possibilities which are unknown to us. We enter into this encounter in anticipation of her telling us things we did not know and could not even guess before we spoke with her. And that is usually what happens in such cases. We ask Jamila, and she responds by asking us questions we ourselves did not think to ask. Or she picks up the phone and calls people we would not have considered calling. Or she quotes an old company

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policy that we had never heard of before. In one way or another, she says or does things which were not in our current inventory of ideas beforehand.

Jamila brings to the discussion wider experience and sharper heuristic skills than we possess. But she is just a human being. An encounter with a divine intelligence would presumably introduce us to someone whose knowledge and skills lie far outside the normal range of human capabilities. If we can see that an encounter with a manager like Jamila would challenge some of our beliefs and practices, then we ought to see that an interaction with a divine being would do so to a much greater extent.

Here is another example. Imagine someone who could easily be considered one of the towering personalities of this century – the kind of person who might receive a Nobel prize or some other comparable distinction. Suppose that we have an opportunity to meet this man. We readily concede that his mental abilities far surpass our own. He has encyclopaedic knowledge of his field, but he is especially known for his originality as a thinker. In addition to this, however, he seems to have been everywhere and done everything, although we realize this cannot be literally true. Suppose we have a lively personal encounter with this man, during which he encourages us to talk about our view of the world and he reacts frankly to the things we tell him. It is extremely unlikely that we will come away from this meeting with our beliefs unchallenged in any way. Even if he is courteous, he may have trouble getting us to see things as he sees them without appearing critical of our viewpoint.

For example, he is liable to find our hopes and worries somewhat parochial compared to his, at least, since he has been so many more places and heard the hopes and worries of so many more people than we have. Or because he is such an original thinker, he may point out that an issue which we find problematic is really not so, since it is based on some unwarranted assumptions which we have never thought to question before. We might not even be able to understand his objections at first, because they are based on ideas which lie outside our own frame of reference. Or drawing on his encyclopaedic knowledge, he may point out to us any number of possibilities which we have either overlooked or underestimated. I do not mean to suggest that this person would be a snob. But if his mind truly is far superior to ours, then it is highly unlikely that we know the same things he knows, or that we hold the same opinions he does about the things he knows. And unless he keeps silent out of politeness, this fact is bound to become evident in any honest exchange between us.

What is true of this person would be true of a divine visitor, only to a much greater extent. A divine presence would bring vast experience and the sharpest of intellects to bear on whatever problems we would present to It. It might also raise questions and recognize complications which have not occurred to us before. Unlike the Nobel prize winner, however, this would be someone who truly has been everywhere and seen everything, and not just in the figurative sense that

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I mentioned a moment ago. And this presence would be vastly more inventive than even the most original of human thinkers. Therefore, it would be highly unlikely that we would know, even approximately, the same things this intelligence knows, or that we would, even approximately, hold the same views this intelligence does about the things it knows. And this fact would become obvious in any open and honest interaction between us. An encounter with such a being would be a revelation in the truest sense. It would be nothing at all like looking at our house and discovering that it is still shingled. A slightly better metaphor would be that of talking to someone who is on the roof and is thereby able to describe our familiar terrain to us from a higher and unfamiliar vantage point.

In most reports of divine encounters, however, this element is missing. Few people say that their religious experiences have changed their minds in significant ways, especially regarding their religious beliefs. True, there are conversion experiences in which people change their outlook and commitments, but in the majority of the cases that Alston and the others talk about, this is not what happens. Instead, the divine visitations that people report tend to confirm their beliefs, as Alston describes so well with his analogy of the house. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that these people have actually encountered a divine visitor. Doubtless they have had a vivid experience of something, but whatever that 'something' is, it does not act the way a divine intelligence would act.

Why we should expect this from a loving God

An obvious objection comes to mind. The people who have these experiences say that they are overwhelmed by a sense of love and acceptance. The one thing they are sure of after the encounter is that the divine being is good and caring. What I have described, however, would be the opposite of this sensation. In fact (so the objection goes), an encounter such as I have described amounts to being intellectually smothered. A loving and accepting deity would never allow that to happen to people. God, therefore, intentionally tones down the vast cognitive distance between us and communicates what really matters: God's power and love.

But there are problems with this objection. First, a divine being may shield us from the *immensity* of the cognitive distance between us, but there would be no point in shielding us from the fact that there *is* a vast distance. In fact, it would be misleading and even deceitful to hide this fact from us. Despite having compassion toward us, any divine being who interacts with us honestly will necessarily reveal some differences in the way that He or She views our situation or frames our problems. But as Alston has noted, most modern reports of divine encounters give the opposite impression: that the beliefs and values of the people having the experiences are right, by and large. In short, there is no reason to suppose that these people have actually encountered a superior intellect.

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Second, while it might be sensible for a divine intelligence to challenge our beliefs only to the extent that we are able to bear at any moment, there is no reason to suppose that a divine intelligence would fail to challenge our beliefs at all. No amount of love for us would justify keeping us in ignorance, especially if the deity's views were truly superior to ours and could make our lives better if we adopted them. On the contrary, a powerful and caring God whose outlook on life surpasses our own would *want* to challenge us, for our own sake, and coax us to adopt more adequate ideas and practices. This, however, is not what happens in most modern reports of divine encounters. But the real problem with this objection is that it contradicts scripture – and not just the scripture of one or two religious traditions. In sacred texts from all over the world, divine encounters are routinely described as posing challenges to people's current beliefs.

In the Christian New Testament, for example, we are presented with a Saviour who rarely does what is expected. Although he is the King of Kings, he is not born in a palace but in a stable. The news of his birth, far from being announced to the king of Israel, is revealed instead to Gentiles and to poor shepherds nearby. As the child grows, he does not join the ranks of the religious or political VIPs of his day, but instead is baptized by a controversial evangelist who has no credentials.

When Christ begins his work, he behaves in ways that do not seem suited to his purpose. According to the three synoptic gospels (John disagrees here), Jesus avoids the religious and political centre of his nation until the very end of his ministry. His life is short. He confines himself to a remarkably small territory. He hand-picks emissaries who cannot be expected to systematize or even articulate his teachings adequately after he is gone. When people ask him questions, he rarely answers them but replies with questions of his own. His principles are embodied in parables, most of which he does not interpret.

Furthermore, many of his teachings are paradoxical. He tells his disciples to find their lives by losing them (Matthew 10.39; Mark 8.35; Luke 17.33). He insists that he has come not to bring peace, but a sword; yet when one of his disciples uses a sword in his defence, he disapproves (Matthew 10.34; 26.51–52). He opposes stereotypical images of righteousness by socializing with prostitutes and traitors (Matthew 9.11; Mark 2.16; Luke 15.2). According to a well-known assembly of New Testament scholars, 'Jesus' sayings and parables cut against the social and religious grain. … [They] surprise and shock: they characteristically call for a reversal of roles or frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations.'[6] Although Christians consider Jesus the personification of divine love, an encounter with him can be a bewildering experience.

The same idea is expressed in scriptures all around the world.[7] It is typical for the heroes of the world's religious narratives to be surprised by the things their gods say and do. As I have already shown, however, believers in modern times tend to have religious experiences that merely confirm their current beliefs. This discontinuity between ancient scriptures and the reports of people in this day and

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age strongly suggests that the presence people claim they have encountered today is not the God of any of these ancient scriptures. For the gods of these stories do not tell people what they already believe, nor do they act in ways that people expect.

Why this should happen, even to believers

But perhaps we are overlooking the fact that we now have scriptures available to us, and that that makes all the difference. The people who encountered the Hebrew God, for example, were indeed surprised and even shocked by the things God said and did, but now we have the scriptures (some may argue), and therefore we know God better than those earlier peoples did. After all, a superior intelligence ought to be able to convey to us whatever principles it wants us to know. And (according to this objection) that is what God has done. The Bible (or some other scripture) is the record of the principles which the divine intelligence has chosen to convey to humans. Whoever studies the scriptures and believes in them should therefore be able to interact with God without having their beliefs challenged. In fact, it would be absurd to think that a divine intelligence would reveal its mind and will in writing, then behave in ways that contradict what it said or did earlier.

My initial response to this objection is that many of the people whose religious experiences are cited by William James and the others are apparently *not* well-versed in the scriptures. In some cases, they are not even affiliated with any particular religious tradition. Nevertheless, they report that they were visited by a presence that spoke and acted as expected. Since these people are not conversant with the scriptures, we cannot claim that the reason such people are immune to surprise is that the scriptures have prepared them and told them what to expect.

But the most direct reply to this objection comes from the scriptures themselves. The heroes of these stories are usually not religious novices. Even heroes who are raised within an existing religious tradition and know its teachings well are still surprised by their deities. More to the point, those who are best acquainted with the scriptures are usually the most surprised and shocked. The Pharisees and Sadducees are the religious teachers in New Testament society, and yet they lock horns with Christ in every encounter. They do not just strongly disagree with him; they can barely even understand his perspective. He insists repeatedly that the scriptures testify of him and of his teachings (see, for just a few examples, John 5.39; Luke 16.19–31; Luke 24.25–27), but those who are schooled in the scriptures are offended by him. In the Hebrew Bible, it is not the Gentiles but God's people who are scandalized again and again by God's actions and words. Every time they think they know who God is, their beliefs harden into idolatry and they have to be jolted back into awareness of the God who is beyond 'God'.

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And so it is in scripture after scripture, all over the world. Divine beings do not merely repeat what their chosen people already believe. Their visitations make a difference; they say and do things that people – even those who are trained in the scriptures – do not expect.

Conclusion

My argument can be summarized as follows:

(1) If anyone encounters a divine being, the interaction should bear marks of a meeting with a superior intelligence: namely, their current point of view will be challenged by something God says or does.
(2) In most modern cases of putative encounters with a divine presence, this element is missing.
(3) Therefore it is highly unlikely that these people have actually made direct contact with a divine being.

We cannot conclude from this, however, that people in modern times are not making direct contact with a divine being at all. We can only conclude that they have not done so if they have come out of the experience with their beliefs and practices unchallenged in any way.

The main point of my argument is this. If we want to verify the existence of a divine being or make claims about the nature of such a being, then we are focusing on the wrong data. Alston, Gutting, Swinburne, and others consider the reports I have been talking about to be strong evidence either for the existence of God or at least (in Alston's case) for claims about God's nature. I believe I have shown that these reports do not describe the kind of thing that would happen if people were actually visited by a god. In order for a religious experience to count as evidence about the existence or nature of a divine being, it would at least have to be the kind of experience that I have described: one that challenges the person's beliefs and practices in some respects. That is what we should be looking for if we want to substantiate the claim that there is a good and powerful supernatural intelligence that makes direct contact with people.

Granted, even if such reports can be found, they will still be subject to all the criteria by which we normally infer to the best explanation. This means that, even if we do find cases of the kind of thing I have described, there may still be plausible naturalistic explanations that will make the God hypothesis unnecessary. By itself, the sense of having one's worldview challenged would not be strong enough to substantiate the claim that people have interacted with a divine being. Schizophrenics may be surprised by the things their multiple personalities say to one another, but that does not mean that the schizophrenics' minds have not created the entire dialogue. Similarly, the mere fact that a person's view of the world is challenged in a divine encounter does not prove that there is a God doing

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the challenging. Other corroborating evidence would be needed. Nevertheless, this element of challenge or surprise is a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition of any real encounter with a divine being.

Notes

1. For first-hand descriptions of the experience to which I am referring, see William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York NY: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1997), especially lecture 3; Timothy Beardsworth *A Sense of Presence* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977); and D. Hay 'Religious experience amongst a group of post-graduate students: a qualitative study', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, **18** (1979), 164–182.
2. See William P. Alston *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Gary Gutting *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); and Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991/1979), ch. 13.
3. Swinburne *Existence of God*, 254.
4. James *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 67.
5. Alston *Perceiving God*, 206–207.
6. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York NY: Polebridge Press/Macmillan Publishing, 1993), 31.
7. For some random examples from the Hebrew Bible, see Genesis 17.17; 18.10–15; 21.6; Judges 7.1–8; I Samuel 16.7; I Kings 19; and Isaiah 55.8–9; from Islam, see Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation* (New York NY: Mentor Books, 1959), x; and from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, see 11.24–25, 31.

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