Rel. Stud. **34**, pp. 317–323. Printed in the United Kingdom © 1998 Cambridge University Press

The Possibility of Theistic Experience

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Abstract. In a recent issue of *Religious Studies* Kevin Corcoran has criticized my arguments for the impossibility of theistic experience (i.e. an experience which is phenomenologically of God). Building on, and amending, criticisms already levelled against my views by Nelson Pike (in the latter's *Mystic Union*), Corcoran argues that my views are based on an account of what it is for an experience to be 'phenomenologically of' an individual (or kind of thing) which leads to 'wildly implausible' results. I here try to show that Corcoran's criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of my views.

In a recent issue of *Religious Studies* Kevin Corcoran has criticized my arguments for the impossibility of theistic experience.[1] I believe his criticisms are based on a misunderstanding of my views.

Some background is necessary. By 'theistic experience' I mean an experience which is phenomenologically of God, i.e. an experience which, if veridical, would have to constitute an accurate perception of God and nothing else instead.[2] In 'Theistic Experience and the Doctrine of Unanimity'[3] I argue that such experience is impossible. My argument can be put, in highly summarized form, as follows. To say that an experience is 'phenomenologically of' something (e.g. an individual N, or a kind of thing K, or something with property F) is to say that if that experience is veridical it would have to constitute an accurate perception of N (or a K, or something F) and could not constitute an accurate perception of something else instead. Now let us suppose that 'God' is a proper name. (I also consider the possibility that 'God' is a definite description, and argue that, there too, no experience could be phenomenologically of God. However, we can ignore this dimension of my argument here.) Then for an experience to be phenomenologically of God – for it to be a theistic experience – it would have

[1] Kevin Corcoran. 'Is Theistic Experience Phenomenologically Possible?' *Religious Studies* **32** (1996), 449–461.

[2] I here assume that mystical experiences are like sense experiences in certain respects. They have phenomenological content (though not necessarily the sorts of content, visual or tactile, etc., associated with the five physical senses); they have objects; and they are said to be possibly veridical or possibly hallucinatory – in short, they are thought to constitute possible 'perceptions', or perception-like experiences, of something (e.g. God). Consequently, I am also assuming that some of the conceptual apparatus which has its home in discussions of ordinary sense perception is applicable to alleged experiences of God.

[3] J. William Forgie, 'Theistic Experience and the Doctrine of Unanimity', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **15** (1984), 13–30, (hereafter Forgie (1984)).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412598004466 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be phenomenologically of a specific individual, the one picked out by the name 'God'. But no experience could be phenomenologically of an individual. For any individual, N, which an experience is thought to be phenomenologically of, there is another possible individual, Q, such that an accurate perception of Q would be experientially or phenomenologically indistinguishable from one of N. Thus the content of the experience does not guarantee that, if veridical, the experience constitutes an accurate perception of N and not Q. (For example, even if I am accurately perceiving Tim Tibbetts, my experience is not phenomenologically of Tim, since my experience could have constituted an accurate perception of his identical twin Tom who looks exactly the same.) In the case of God:

> Given any experience which is alleged to be phenomenologically of God, it seems intuitively that there is a possible world in which the causal laws pertaining to the relations between possible objects of 'perception' and 'perceivers' of those objects are such that some individual, not identical to God, is capable of appearing in just the way displayed in the experience in question. If so, then nothing in the content of the experience will render it phenomenologically of God as opposed to another possible individual.[4]

Essentially similar arguments could be used to show that no experience can be phenomenologically of a kind of thing, e.g. a tiger or a coffee maker.[5] Even if I am accurately perceiving a coffee maker my visual experience is not phenomenologically of a coffee maker since my experience could have constituted an accurate perception of something else instead which looks exactly the same (e.g. a hologram or a cardboard dummy).

Corcoran's criticisms take up from some earlier criticisms of my views made by Nelson Pike. In his *Mystical Union*,[6] Pike argues vigorously for the possibility of theistic experience. He maintains that I am operating with an inadequate picture of what is to count as the 'phenomenological content' of perceptual experience generally. In particular, according to Pike, I systematically exclude from the phenomenological content of an experience what he calls the 'identification element' of consciousness (p. 139) – 'the element of consciousness expressed when I say [of the object of my experience], "it's Tim Tibbetts" or "it's a tiger"' (p. 138). As Pike puts it, on my view in no case 'does the phenomenological content of a sense-perception include the perceiver's awareness of the identity of the object perceived' (p. 139). Pike goes on to argue that once we allow the presence of identification elements in phenomenological content it will be possible for experiences to be phenomenologically of individuals; in particular, it will be possible to regard certain mystical experiences as being phenomenologically of God.

[4] Forgie (1984), p. 18.

[5] Provided the 'kind' isn't specified solely in terms of appearances, e.g. something which appears the way a tiger, or a coffeemaker, does.

[6] Nelson Pike, *Mystic Union: An Essay in the Phenomenology of Mysticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

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In a reply to Pike[7] I argue that including an identification element – in particular an identification element of the form 'this experience is of individual N' – in the content of an experience will do nothing to open up the possibility that that experience is phenomenologically of the particular individual N. I argue that Pike mistakenly assumes that an experience's containing the identification element expressed by 'it's N' necessarily involves, or perhaps is just the same thing as, that experience's being phenomenologically of N. Pike's identification elements are (or at bottom, turn out to be) spontaneous or immediate (mental) acts of recognition or identification that are coterminous with the representational elements (e.g. the visual or auditory elements or their analogues in mystical experience) making up the experience in question. Even if we regard the identification element expressed by 'it's N' as part of the phenomenological content of an experience – by declaring, for example, that anything present to consciousness at the moment of the experience shall be considered part of the content of that experience – it will not follow that that experience is phenomenologically of N. (Similarly an experience will not be phenomenologically of a *kind* of thing X simply because its content includes the identification element 'it's an X'.) We are dealing with two different dimensions of an experience: whether or not an experience is immediately taken to be of N – which determines whether the identification element expressed by 'it's N' is or is not part of the phenomenological content of the experience; and whether, if veridical, the experience has to constitute a perception of N and not something else – which determines whether the experience is or is not phenomenologically of N. Suppose your sense faculties are working perfectly, you accurately and veridically perceive Q (e.g. Tom Tibbetts), and yet you misidentify it, with whatever degree of spontaneity or immediacy, as N (e.g. Tim Tibbetts). This is a perfectly familiar phenomenon. That you immediately identify the object of perception as N shows that the content of the experience contains Pike's identification element. But that the experience might nevertheless constitute a veridical perception of Q shows that it is not phenomenologically of N. So Pike's insistence that identification elements be included in phenomenological content will do nothing to show that an experience could be phenomenologically of an individual, whether Tim Tibbetts, God, or anyone else.

Corcoran enters the discussion at this point. He says that he agrees with me that including identification elements of the form 'it's an X' in the content of an experience will be compatible with that experience's not being phenomenologically of an X.[8] However, his reasons for his stated agreement seem quite different in kind from my own:

[7] J. William Forgie. 'Pike's Mystic Union and the Possibility of Theistic Experience', *Religious Studies* **30** (1994), 231–242.

[8] Corcoran focuses on the issue of whether an experience can be phenomenologically of a kind of thing (a tiger or a coffee-maker) and so is concerned with identification elements of the form 'it's an X'. But

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I think Forgie is right about this. One can imagine, for example, a person actually perceiving a coffee maker, phenomenologically registering the object as a coffee maker, and immediately identifying the phenomenological object as a bird. Consider person S, some of whose cognitive equipment is malfunctioning such that the part responsible for spontaneously identifying certain objects of which she is phenomenologically aware misfires on occasion. I take it that under such cognitively sub par conditions S might have a veridical experience, actually perceive a coffee maker, register the object phenomenologically as a coffee maker, and spontaneously (mis)identify the phenomenological object as, say, a bird. Perhaps if S were asked to describe the properties of the object of which she is phenomenologically aware, simultaneous with her experience, she would describe all those properties she and others normally associate with a coffee maker. Nevertheless, on this occasion, and we might imagine on others too, when she is phenomenologically aware of a coffee maker a cognitive glitch causes her to identify the object as a 'bird'.

Here we have a case in which the identification element expressed in the locution 'it's a bird', which is coterminous with the experience, nevertheless fails to correspond to the *phenomenological* object, i.e. a coffee maker. (p. 456)

Corcoran appears to imagine a case where someone spontaneously identifies the object – the 'phenomenological object' – of her experience as an X when in fact *that phenomenological object* is instead a Y, as though the experience really is phenomenologically of a Y and the experient, because of some 'cognitive glitch', mistakenly identifies it as being phenomenologically of an X.[9] Thus even though the identification element expressed by 'it's an X' is part of the content of the experience it does not follow that the experience is phenomenologically of an X.

This is *not* the sort of case I had in mind when I objected to Pike. I am not concerned with an alleged gap between how one identifies the 'phenomenological object' of his experience and what that phenomenological object really is – at least if that means a gap between what I take the experience to be phenomenologically of and what it really is phenomenologically of. I am concerned, instead, with a gap between how the experient spontaneously identifies what Corcoran calls the 'actual object' of the experience (i.e. what the experience, if veridical, is a perception of) and what the experience is phenomenologically of. In short, I am concerned with an 'identification element' aimed at identifying the actual object, not the phenomenological object, of an experience.

Because he thinks it is *this* kind of case that makes Pike's claim fail, Corcoran believes that Pike can be rescued once we introduce restrictions which will preclude these cognitive 'glitches' and thus restrict our focus to

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I have already indicated that my arguments against the possibility of an experience's being phenomenologically of an individual can also be used against the possibility of an experience's being phenomenologically of a kind of thing. In what follows I will frequently express claims or arguments in one idiom, assuming that appropriately similar claims and arguments could be made in the other.

[9] I take the idea that the phenomenological object of an experience is a Y to mean that the experience is phenomenologically of a Y. This understanding was confirmed by Corcoran in correspondence.

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cases in which the experient's cognitive equipment is functioning normally. He maintains that once we do that my objection to Pike will now seem 'wildly implausible':

> Let's begin by requiring that one's conceptual endowment be adequate to the perceptual task and that all of one's cognitive equipment be functioning properly such that whatever the phenomenological object of an experience (e.g. a kind of thing, say, a coffee maker or an individual, say, Tim Tibbetts), one's coterminous identification of that object corresponds. Given these conceptual and cognitive constraints on experience the following claim of Forgie's becomes wildly implausible:
>
> > Even though the identification element expressed by 'it's an X' might be part of the phenomenological content, the experience might not be phenomenologically of X.
>
> I say 'wildly implausible' because this suggests that the phenomenological object of a veridical experience can be other than the way it appears. But how can a phenomenological object of a veridical experience, say, a coffee maker, correctly identified, be other than it appears? (p. 458)

What is going on here? Assume, as Corcoran does, that the cases I am discussing are ones involving one's misidentification of the phenomenological object of his experience. To prevent my being able to cite such cases, introduce constraints aimed at eliminating those misidentifications. Assume, as Corcoran also appears to do, that the misidentifications could be due only to abnormal cognitive glitches. Then the constraints we introduce will be designed only to eliminate those glitches, and hence to ensure that we restrict ourselves only to cognitively normal, i.e. glitch free, experients. Corcoran believes that it will now be guaranteed that if the spontaneous identification element 'it's an X', taken to be an identification of the *phenomenological* object, is part of the phenomenological content of an experience, then the phenomenological object of the experience is indeed X. In such a case the ground of my objection against Pike will collapse: I will no longer be able to claim that the identification element 'it's an X' might be part of the phenomenological content of the experience (from which it will follow that the phenomenological object *is* X) and yet that the experience still might not be phenomenologically of X (i.e. that the phenomenological object might *not* be X). Such a claim will, Corcoran maintains, suggest that the phenomenological object could be other than what, given the grounds provided by the identification element, it surely appears to be. Corcoran makes it clear that he thinks such a position would be non-sensical.

This criticism fails for at least two reasons. First, Corcoran's constraints are designed to remove possible gaps between the phenomenological object of an experience and what the experient spontaneously takes that phenomenological object to be. If he is successful it will not be possible for the identification element 'it's an X' – a spontaneous identification of the phenomenological object of the experience – to be part of the phenomeno-

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logical content of an experience without that experience being phenomenologically of X. But, as I have stressed, the gap I have in mind, which underlies my reply to Pike, and which is the subject of my remark that Corcoran has just quoted, is one between what the phenomenological object is and what the experient spontaneously takes the *actual* object to be. This gap is not closed by Corcoran's constraints. Pike argues for the possibility of an experience's being phenomenologically of God by insisting that 'identification elements' – i.e., spontaneous identifications of the actual objects of experiences – are part of the phenomenological content of an experience. This argument is not rescued by Corcoran's constraints. Even given those constraints it will still be true, not wildly implausible, to say that a Pike-type identification element 'it's an X' could be part of the content of an experience and yet the experience not be phenomenologically of X.

Second, Corcoran's criticism fails even if the remark of mine which he quotes, and which he calls 'wildly implausible', were concerned with (and even if Pike and I had all along been concerned with) spontaneous identifications of *phenomenological* objects. Suppose someone with normal (i.e. glitch-free) cognitive capacities spontaneously identifies the phenomenological object of his visual experience as Tim Tibbetts, or as a coffee maker. Since this spontaneous identification is present to consciousness along with the more representational elements of the experience, we will say that the identification element is part of the phenomenological content of the experience. Still, the experience need not, if veridical, constitute a perception of Tim Tibbetts or of a coffee maker. And so, given my understanding of what it is for an experience to be phenomenologically of an individual or of a kind of thing, we should conclude that the experience is not phenomenologically of Tim Tibbetts or of a coffee maker. Including in the phenomenological content of an experience the identification element 'it's an X' or 'it's N', whether that be construed as an attempted identification of the actual object or of the phenomenological object of the experience, will not guarantee that the experience is phenomenologically of X or of an N.

So I do not believe Corcoran's criticisms succeed in rescuing Pike's attempt to show that experiences can be phenomenologically of individuals (or kinds of things) and, ultimately, phenomenologically of God. Of course, my objections to Corcoran are based on my view that for an experience to be phenomenologically of N or an X it would have to, if veridical, constitute a perception of N (or an X) instead of something else that could appear just the same. If an experience could constitute a veridical perception of something other than N then it is not phenomenologically of N. This view, which he calls 'Forgie's thesis', is Corcoran's ultimate target. It is this 'thesis' which underlies my claim that the spontaneous identification 'it's an X' (an identification aimed either at the actual object or the phenomenological object of an experience) could be included in the phenomenological content

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of an experience and yet the experience still not be phenomenologically of X. Now, as we have seen, Corcoran thinks this last claim is wildly implausible and so he thinks Forgie's thesis, which leads to it, should be rejected.

In place of Forgie's thesis Corcoran offers his own alternative account of when an experience is phenomenologically of an individual or kind of thing. He believes his alternative account not only avoids the problems he finds in my 'thesis' but also allows for the possibility that an experience be phenomenologically of an individual (or a kind of thing), even phenomenologically of God.

It is not my aim here to comment in any detail on Corcoran's alternative account. However, the following general point needs to be made. What has here been called Forgie's 'thesis' is best understood as stating a criterion which attempts to capture what is *meant* when someone says that an experience is *phenomenologically* of this or that. More specifically, it attempts to capture what philosophers like W. T. Stace and Ninian Smart[10] have in mind when they maintain, in opposition, e.g. to R. C. Zaehner,[11] that claims by mystics that this or that experience is an experience *of God* are never warranted merely by the phenomenological content of the experience in question (i.e. are not phenomenologically of God), but are instead 'interpretations' which reflect the reliance on extra-experiential background beliefs.[12] There is no doubt that someone could offer another account of what is meant by the claim that an experience is phenomenologically of such and such. There is also no doubt that on some such alternative account, experiences could be phenomenologically of individuals (or kinds of things), and in particular phenomenologically of God. On such an alternative account theistic experience would thus be possible. Perhaps Corcoran's alternative thesis does just this. But even supposing theistic experience *is* possible on his account, he would need to show that that account better captures the notion that is at the centre of the disputes between Smart and Stace on one side and Zaehner and others on the other.

Of course, that is not Corcoran's aim in the paper I have been discussing. His aim, instead, is to show that my account is inadequate by demonstrating that it leads to unacceptable results. It has been the burden of the present paper to try to show that that aim has not been achieved.

[10] Stace's views are stated at various places in the following works: *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960; and *The Teachings of the Mystics*. New York: New American Library, 1960. Smart's views can be found in 'Interpretation and Mystical Experience', *Religious Studies* **1** (1965), 75–87.

[11] R. C. Zaehner. *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

[12] For fuller development of this motivation, see Forgie (1984). I assume that Stace and Smart are concerned not with the veridicality of the experience, but with its object. The issue is not whether the experience is veridical or hallucinatory; rather it is whether the experience, no matter whether veridical or hallucinatory, is a perception, or hallucination, *of God*.

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