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FAITH AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In this paper the author, a research student in philosophy at Birkbeck College, London, argues that a familiar line of objection to religious belief is misconceived, because it rests on an untenable empiricist assumption. Understanding always transcends immediate sense experience and often involves the discernment of values. Recognition of this fact opens the door to faith.

Some years ago I read a work, by Gabriel Marcel I think, in which the opinion was noted that the world offers grounds both for hope and for despair but never provides sufficient evidence to confirm either. This is a striking and profound observation, yet I believe the attitude it expresses is mistaken, and I wish to suggest that on the contrary hope may be justified. Let me say first of all however, that the sort of hope and despair I refer to relate to religion — one could replace the words by 'belief' and 'disbelief', respectively. The issue then is whether one may reasonably hope to have one's beliefs in God and spiritual reality verified, or at least supported, by consideration of the character of reality.

Most deserving of examination in this connection is religious experience. According to a traditional and widely held view this is concerned with rare and unusual events, hardly ever occurring but dramatic when they do. In contrast to this, religious experience may be thought of as another way of perceiving quite ordinary events. Though such a mode of perception is (perhaps) uncommon, it is neither so rare nor so dramatic as an apparition. It may be of great importance however, since, if I am correct, it is this kind of perception which aids and sustains the growth of sincere and genuine faith.

For good or ill we are all influenced by the philosophical assumptions of the society in which we live. A disadvantage is that many believers comply too readily with the demands of orthodox, secular thought. In particular, it may be taken for granted that the paradigm of knowledge is sense experience — the perception of

colours, shapes, sounds, etc. — in which the contribution of the subject is minimal. Certainly his are the organs of perception, but apart from providing and using this equipment, he plays only a small part in mediating the content of sense experience — his mind being a mere *tabula rasa*.

According to this view, knowledge is only genuine if it is either reducible to observation, or else is concerned with logical relations. Values and ideals, on the other hand, are claimed to originate in the subject, not in objective reality, for it is deemed inconceivable that there could be experience of moral qualities comparable to perception of physical objects. They are therefore taken to be expressions of sentiment and desire arising from human needs.¹

Where does this view leave religious faith? Like any other body of beliefs faith must face the test of reduction to direct experience. Religious believers claim that there exists an all powerful and all loving God, Creator and Sustainer of the natural order, who responds to the petitionary prayers of His creatures. But can these propositions be justified by reference to perceptual experience?

Various possibilities suggest themselves, but in the end they are reducible to but one. It becomes necessary to hold that God disclosed Himself at some point, or points, in the history of the world in a way that was directly observable. Thus it may be claimed, in fundamentalist fashion, that the Bible is a more or less literal record of the Divine revelation, and that it provides the empirical content of Christian belief. Faith is justified by appeal to historical testimony. A modified version of this view is that whatever revelation may have occurred in the distant past, the believer also has available to him the evidence of more recent events, e.g. miraculous apparitions and cures of illness.

The radical and agnostic empiricist's response to these appeals is familiar. With respect to the testimony of Scripture, he points to the inadequacy of the Biblical record: its apparent exaggerations, corruptions and internal inconsistencies; the conflict with evidence from independent and disinterested sources, and so on.² Claims for modern miracles he dismisses with the reply that such events lack reliable documentation, or are explicable in terms of ordinary events. When these explanations seem weak, he suggests hopefully that future developments in science may yet provide naturalistic explanations of such phenomena.

Likewise, appeal to private mystical experience is countered by the claim that since independent evidence of its supernatural origin is lacking, there is no good reason to take seriously the

suggestion that a spiritual reality is involved. Accordingly, it is claimed that unusual states of mind are better explained as expressions of imagination issuing from deep rooted emotions, desires, and even, perhaps, neuroses.

The differing views of believers and agnostics afford a possible basis for the observation with which I began: that while nothing in experience validates faith, yet there are phenomena which might be taken to suggest the existence of God and the reality of the spiritual. Thus we are left in a quandary: should we cling to a body of beliefs handed down from generation to generation, and perhaps added to by further claimed revelations; or embrace the scientific programme which seems increasingly to challenge the rationality of religious faith?

It is a measure of how great has been the influence of thoroughgoing empiricism, that believers now commonly accept the view that only a direct revelation of a supernatural Being can justify belief in His existence. Roman Catholics in particular are strongly attached to the view that the best defence against scientific materialism is appeal to the miraculous. If extraordinary phenomena, inexplicable in natural terms, but having religious connotations can be identified then, it is said, the case for religion will be unassailable. Thus one hears frequently of reports of apparitions (e.g. of the Virgin Mary), prophetic messages, miraculous cures, and so on. Of course this attitude is not confined to the Church of Rome, or even to Christianity; though it is significant that recourse to the miraculous is most often found among those whose outlook is furthest removed from the naturalistic view of the universe.

I do not wish to criticize this attitude in its entirety, for Christianity is, after all, an historical faith. It claims that at some stage in history God disclosed Himself to man in the Person of Jesus Christ; that Christ was raised from the dead, and that He later ascended into heaven. Further, it is part of the Christian tradition that His ministry was attended by many other miraculous events.

For one who is prepared to accept the Scriptural record, it alone is sufficient to establish belief. It may be questioned, however, whether assent to a body of recorded empirical claims amounts to a living faith. Moreover, viewed objectively, it may seem as if contemporary Christians depend exclusively upon the experiences and testimony of others. Yet if this be so, what of the objections advanced by the sceptical empiricist? The decision to believe appears as a choice in favour of one account of the world and his history — that of Christianity — rather than another, without reference to any personal religious experience. On this basis it may reasonably be argued that, given the explanatory power of science, its proven capacity to embrace a wide range of phenomena,

and the principle of economy (not to postulate entities beyond necessity), the rational choice is that of scientific naturalism.

What is wrong with this argument, however, is that it depends on a strictly limited view of religious experience. If such experience is confined to awareness of supernatural phenomena then the number of Christians who can justify their faith must be few indeed. Let us then look more closely at the idea of experience with which the argument began.

Those against whom this discussion is directed hold to an uncompromising version of the *tabula rasa* account of the mind, according to which mental activity is concerned only with the generation of ideas originating in natural conative attitudes and other innate dispositions. This account badly misrepresents the truth of the matter. It is now widely accepted that there is no such thing as a bare act of perception which does not subsume its objects under some description or classification. To see, or otherwise experience, a part of the world is always to see it as something, and this takes one beyond the immediately present and involves discernment and imagination. Perception is always informed by past experience, and it follows accordingly that when confronted with a section of reality, given the variance in their abilities and histories, different people see things differently. To one an earthwork, say, is a meaningless arrangement of stones; to another it is a megalith set against the background of the dawn. The first faces the same scene as the second but lacks the perceptivity to see the significance of this imposition of human order on nature, and to appreciate its aesthetic qualities.

At this point the sceptic may reply that we must distinguish between bare experience — the perception of colours and shapes etc., and the ways in which we interpret our observations. Interpretation may involve imagination and appreciation, but observation is essentially passive. This reply, however, is inadequate: all perception is enlightened, both by previous experience and by contemporary interpretation.

It is true that we may describe some experiences using the terminology of colours, sounds, etc., only, but such occasions are few: usually we bring to bear more sophisticated descriptions of our perceptions, and in so doing rely upon a whole battery of intellectual capacities ranging from imagination³ and associative thinking to value sensitivity. We are forever striving to achieve more appropriate accounts to capture better the nature of what is given in experience. Undoubtedly there is an important point to be made concerning the justification of applying one description rather than another, but there is no resolution of this general, epistemological problem outside of the attempt to form as accurate as possible

a picture of reality. Whether the issue is one of identifying shapes, or of forming an aesthetic judgment, one can only look, think, and confer with others to ascertain if our thoughts agree.

It is a naive fallacy to suppose that in the first instance something determinate is given to the mind via sensation; and consequently that reliable knowledge is only possible with respect to this. All understanding involves the work of the intellect in fashioning thoughts. In short, no area of understanding is guaranteed, but nor is any excluded, by the undeniable fact that we acquire knowledge through sense experience.

Having said this, let us approach the issue of religious experience by way of considering briefly another appreciative capacity, viz, moral sensitivity. Part of the sceptical empiricist's view is that since nothing given in experience (as he conceives of it), corresponds to moral and aesthetic judgments, these can be neither true nor false as such, but express preferences. Men claim a thing is good or beautiful if it pleases them or promises to satisfy a need. In this way morality, and any other system of values, is reduced to a set of means related to the achievement of man's prosperity.⁴

Consider, however, how this misrepresents the character of moral judgment. We ordinarily take it that an act is virtuous, or a condition morally desirable, if it provides an example of a value which is in itself good. While the satisfaction of human need is correctly considered to be important, one may appreciate that it is not the source of value by reflecting on the fact that other considerations can outweigh this requirement. Prosperity matters: not because thereby men are made healthier, or are more contented, but because it creates conditions in which they are better able to concentrate on living in ways that are worthy.

Most thoughtful people are aware of the possibility that it may be morally necessary to foresake the pursuit of well being. Yet this could not arise, if good and evil are reducible to the satisfaction of desire. Natural well being is one good among several, but to focus solely on it alone is to have a faulty vision of the source and nature of moral value.

It will be seen that we have developed a picture of perception in which two elements — the world and the subject — operate, experience being the product of their interaction. Seeing the world correctly involves more than opening one's eyes, it requires the exercise of appreciative judgment. Men can perceive material objects and can also discern in them the presence of value and disvalue⁵; and on this basis they are able to develop an understanding of the world.

If one is prepared to accept that there are recognizable moral and aesthetic qualities - and to admit this is only to allow that the world is as most take it to be - then the issue may be raised as to whether it also manifests spiritual features. In sum, if one may validate various value judgments by appeal to the nature of reality as it is experienced by attentive subjects, may one not develop a justification of religious faith in much the same way?

To establish such a case at least two requirements need to be met. Firstly, we must give some account of the 'objects' of this kind of religious experience; and secondly, explain why there is not general and widespread agreement. In discussing both issues I shall be brief, since my aim is not to present a fully developed theory but to prompt further thought on an important topic.

When, in our earlier example, the two men viewed the stone circle and one experienced art dramatically juxtaposed with nature he saw things as they were, for he saw something of the aesthetic qualities of the object. Similarly, one may discover values in a painting, or reflect on a man's character and thereby recognize his virtues.⁶ It is possible, however, to remain blind to these aspects. Then the megalith remains a mound of stones; the painting a pattern of colours; the man merely an individual who behaves in a certain way. What this reveals is that in general value experiences do not involve special objects, but are rather responses to features of familiar items.

Thus we may suppose that some kinds of religious experience have the spiritual properties of ordinary, public objects or events. Further, continuing the parallel with other realms of value, these latter are likely to include actions and their products. It is possible to see in nature something of the dependency of the created on the sustaining activity of a Creator: but this is to appreciate the spiritual quality of an action, viz, the exercise of God's will.⁷

More familiar, however, are experiences of human spirituality: one discerns in the lives of some men and women values of a kind that can best be described as religious, in so far as they transcend ordinary, moral virtues. Justice, integrity, courage and so on, belong to the ethical realm; but patience, understanding, love and selflessness, especially in the face of adversity, go beyond what is required for morality to a way of living that draws its sustenance from God's grace. It is first and foremost in observing others, therefore, that one detects the spiritual and the activity of God.

As regards the second challenge: that there is not general or common agreement on these matters, two points may be made. Firstly, it is the shared experience of mankind that the harder it is to discern truth, the greater is the degree of ignorance and disagree-

ment. A multitude of reasons may be given to explain men's inability to discover the nature of reality. Some lack the necessary intellectual and appreciative capacities; others have not received an appropriate education, or have gone without advice and encouragement; still others have their vision clouded by desire, or are too pre-occupied with other things to focus their attention properly. Indeed, ignorance is too familiar, and too common a feature of life to be used in an argument against the claim that men can recognize spiritual values. Besides, very many people do feel something of the spiritual character of the natural order, and are equally, if not more, responsive to such qualities when they encounter them in others.

A second difficulty appears to arise on account of the enormous variety of the forms of religious experience. In view of this undoubted fact, does not the support which faith might otherwise hope to derive from religious experience largely cancel out?

Certainly it is a fact that those of different religious cultures tend to interpret their experiences in terms familiar to them, and this may result in apparent conflict between believers. As before, however, this objection may be shown to be less telling than it at first appears.

Throughout we have been concerned with experience of the spiritual qualities of familiar objects, not with miraculous episodes, and this does not imply any particular theology. Rather it indicates the possibility that each of us can develop a higher self, more responsive to the need to embody spiritual values in our lives and to assist others to do likewise. This is consistent with a variety of beliefs. Moreover, when a conflict does arise, which is not simply one of interpretation, there is usually scope for further attention to, and reflection upon, the item in question, in the hope that by effort and goodwill disagreement may be resolved.

Reviewing the line of argument developed here, the question suggests itself: how may we come to enjoy this sort of experience? Once again the parallel with the appreciation of other values is worth pursuing. When one meets a man who is blind to the fact that a certain course of action would be vicious and unjust, one can only proceed by asking him to consider further the character of what he proposes. The aim is that he should see its true nature as something evil and to be eschewed.

In these efforts therefore, one is trying to lead him into the position of one who is morally perceptive, i.e., he should see things as would the truly virtuous man. Quite generally, however, if one wishes to acquire a skill that another possesses, the best way to go about it is to listen to what he says, and to watch how

he acts. In short, the surest guide to true vision and right conduct is example. If our goal is the discovery of truth then we would do well to follow those who clearly embody it in their lives (recall St Paul's reminder that behaviour is a measure of spirituality),⁸ and most can discern such virtue even when they believe themselves to be unable to emulate it.

Hence it is appropriate that in pursuing spiritual truth we should reflect upon the lives and teachings of the great Christian seers;⁹ but above all else we must study the words and example of Jesus Christ. Currently much scholarship is being addressed to Christological issues but, whatever this research produces it is clear beyond all doubt that Jesus calls us to a way of life in which one's vision is focused on spiritual values; whereby in seeing the natural order one sees throughout it the activity of God.

What I have been concerned to argue is that one familiar line of objection to the rationality of faith rests on a widespread assumption about the nature and scope of experience which is itself open to challenge. Further, once one appreciates that in understanding reality a variety of faculties are employed, and that these include sober, reflective, value perception, as well as scientific and logical analysis, one may claim with confidence that one's faith is justified both by the historical record and by contemporary religious experience.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 It will be apparent that the view outlined here is that developed by the British Empiricists, and that the particular version of it under attack is Humean in origin. See David Hume, *Enquiries (Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning The Principles of Morals)*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902). The fact/value distinction as we have it today owes much of its inspiration to the sceptical empiricism of Hume and his followers. For a brief discussion of Hume's thought see: A.J. Ayer, *Hume*, (Oxford: OUP, 1980), especially Ch.5.
- 2 An interesting and popular attempt to present the content of historical Christianity in the light of these challenges is contained in D. Cupitt and P. Armstrong, *Who was Jesus?*, BBC, 1977).
- 3 On the relevance of imagination to discerning religious truth see: M. Warnock, "Imagination - Aesthetic and Religious", *Theology*, 1980, 83, (November).

- 4 For recent challenges to the attempt to mark a fact/value distinction along the lines indicated here see: D. Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and The Meaning of Life", *Proceedings of The British Academy*, 1976, 62, and H. Putnam, *Reason Truth and History*, (CUP, 1982), Chs 6 & 9.
- 5 On this view of ethics see: F. Dunlop, "The Objectivity of Values", *Downside Review* 1981, 99, (No.335, April).
- 6 A stimulating discussion of the moral and aesthetic dimensions of perception is to be found in I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1970.
- 7 Hopkins gives voice to this type of religious experience in his poetry. See, for example, "Pied Beauty":
 "All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him."
 G.M. Hopkins, *The Major Poems*, Dent, 1979.
- 8 Ephesians 4:23-24.
- 9 I discuss how one may develop sensitivity to spiritual values through the study of great Christian art in "Religious Art and Religious Education", *British Journal of Religious Education*, 1982, 4(2), 64-68.
