

# The Existence of God

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## The Argument from Religious Experience

If there is a God, one might well expect him not merely to concern himself with the progress of the human race by providing opportunities for humans to do worthwhile things, or providing a revelation at a particular moment in history, or to concern himself with particular individuals by fulfilling their prayers; but also perhaps to show himself to and speak individually to at any rate some of the people whom he has made and who are capable of thinking about God and worshipping him. Certainly one would not expect too evident and public manifestations, for the reason that I gave in Chapter 11. If God's existence and intentions became items of evident common knowledge, then our freedom to choose between good and evil would be vastly curtailed. However, one might expect certain private and occasional manifestations by God to some people, although perhaps not to everyone, again for the reason that I gave in Chapter 11. The argument from religious experience claims that this has often occurred; many have experienced God (or some supernatural thing connected with God) and hence know and can tell us of his existence.

### **The Nature of Religious Experience**

Let us begin by investigating the premiss. What are the 'religious experiences' whose occurrence is supposed to be evidence for the existence of God? An experience is a conscious mental event. It may be described in such a way as to entail the existence of some particular external thing apart from the subject, beyond the stream of his

consciousness, normally the thing of which it is an experience; or it may be described in such a way as to carry no such entailment. Thus 'hearing the coach outside the window' is not unnaturally described as an experience; but if I have such an experience, if I really do hear the coach outside the window, then it follows that there is a coach outside the window. Yet, if I describe my experience as 'having an auditory sensation that seemed to come from a coach outside the window', my description does not entail the existence of anything external of which the experience was purportedly an experience (or anything else external). The former kind of description I will call an external description; the latter an internal description. Now when people talk about religious experiences, they often give external descriptions of them. Such external descriptions may be fairly precise—'I talked to God last night', or 'I saw Poseidon standing by the window', or, rather more vaguely, 'I became conscious of a timeless reality beyond myself'. The trouble with taking any external description as the premiss of an argument from religious experience is that there is going to be considerable doubt about the truth of the premiss; but, once you accept the premiss, you are quite obviously most, if not all, of the way to your conclusion. If you accept that Joe talked to God last night, then, of course, there is a God—it hardly needs an argument to show it. If you accept that Joe became conscious of a timeless reality beyond himself, then, admittedly, that does not demonstrate the existence of God, but you are quite a lot of the way towards such a demonstration. So, it seems natural to say that, if they are to be useful, all arguments from religious experience must be phrased as arguments from experiences given internal descriptions. There are various ways of giving internal descriptions of one's experiences, but in the case of most experiences, including those that the subject believes to be of something outside himself, a normal way is to describe how things 'appear' or 'seem' to the subject—one may say 'the room seemed to be going round and round', or 'the carpet appeared to be blue', or 'he appeared to be moving away from me'. Or, in giving such descriptions, one may use verbs that describe how things seem to the subject, the use of which is confined to reporting the deliverances of particular modalities of sense, verbs like 'looks' or 'feels' or 'tastes'—I may say 'It looked as if the coach was moving away from me' or 'it felt smooth' or 'it tasted of pineapple'.

There is a crucial distinction due to Chisholm between the epistemic and the comparative uses of such verbs as 'seems', 'appears',

'looks', etc.<sup>1</sup> To use such words in their epistemic use is to describe what the subject is inclined to believe on the basis of his present sensory experience. If I say 'the ship appears to be moving', I am saying that I am inclined to believe that the ship is moving, and that it is my present sensory experience that leads me to have this inclination to belief. If I am using 'looks' in this way when I say 'the penny looks elliptical', I am saying that I am inclined to believe that it is elliptical, and that my inclination to belief arises from my present visual experience. By contrast, to use 'looks', etc., in the comparative use is to compare the way an object looks with the way other objects normally look. In this use 'the penny looks elliptical' means 'the penny looks the way elliptical things normally look'. The speaker is not saying and does not imply that he is inclined to believe that the penny is elliptical; he may know very well that it is not. Again, in the comparative use, 'from here it looks red' means 'from here it looks the way red things normally look'. When I describe an experience in terms of the way things seem (epistemically) to the subject, I shall say that I describe it epistemically. A full internal description of a subject's experiences would seem to involve both kinds of internal description. When I look at a penny on the table from an angle, it usually looks (in the comparative sense) elliptical, and (in the epistemic sense) circular—and my experience is of it looking to me in both of these ways.

So much for what an 'experience' is and the ways in which we can describe it. But what constitutes a 'religious experience'? The concept of a 'religious experience' in ordinary use has as fuzzy a border as the concept of a religion, and, in order to talk about arguments in this field, we need to make it moderately precise. For our present purposes it will be useful to define it as an experience that seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God (either of his just being there, or of his saying or bringing about something) or of some other supernatural thing.<sup>2</sup> The thing may be a person,

<sup>1</sup> R. M. Chisholm, *Perceiving* (Cornell University Press, 1957), ch. 4. Chisholm attempted to distinguish a third ('non-comparative') use of such verbs, but there is some doubt about whether there is such a use, and I am concerned only with the epistemic and comparative uses.

<sup>2</sup> This definition rules out a lot of what has often been called 'religious experience'. For example, much 'religious experience' does not purport to be an experience of anything external. While many experiences in the religious traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are what Ninian Smart, following Otto, calls 'numinous', many deep experiences called 'religious' in the Buddhist tradition are not. (Smart defines a numinous experience as 'an experience of a dynamic external presence'. See his article on 'History of Mysticism'

such as Mary or Poseidon; or Heaven, or a 'timeless reality beyond oneself', or something equally mysterious and difficult to describe. For most of the discussion I shall be concerned with experiences that seem to be simply of the presence of God and not with his seeming to tell the subject something specific or to do something specific. But where it is relevant I shall contrast experiences of God with experiences of other supernatural beings. I will come to discuss more specific experiences at the end of the chapter.

The crucial feature of the definition to which I draw attention is that what makes an experience religious is the way it seems to the subject. This definition captures those experiences that are of most importance for the purpose of this book. They are supposed to wear their religious origin on their face. What is it for the subject to be right, in fact to experience God, that is, to be aware of God, and so in a very general sense to perceive God (believing that he is so doing)? (I talk of such awareness of God as a perception without implying that the awareness is necessarily mediated via the normal senses. 'Perceive' is the general verb for awareness of something apart from oneself, which may be mediated by any of the ordinary senses—for example, it may be a matter of seeing or hearing or tasting—or by none of these.) It seems to me, for reasons that others have given at length, that the causal theory of perception is correct—that *S* perceives *x* (believing that he is so doing)<sup>3</sup> if and only if an experience of its seeming (epistemically) to *S* that *x* is present is caused by *x*'s being present.<sup>4</sup> So *S* has an experience of God if and only if its seeming to him that God is present is in fact caused by God being present.

in P. Edwards (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Collier-MacMillan, 1967). R. M. Gimello ('Mysticism and Meditation' in S. T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Sheldon Press, 1978)), claims (p. 193) that 'it is certain that Buddhists do not ontologize the contents of their mystical experiences, nor people the cosmos with mystical entities, since their very purpose in having them is to "discern" their illusoriness'. Peter Moore ('Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique' in Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*) also emphasizes the variety of 'mystical claims', that they include both 'subjective' and 'existential' claims. Only religious experiences of the kind that my definition picks out have apparent evidential value in pointing towards the existence of God, and that is why I am concerned with them alone.

<sup>3</sup> There is a use of 'perceive' and other verbs of perception (e.g. 'see', 'hear') in which a subject may be said to perceive something that he does not believe that he is perceiving, e.g. I may be said to have perceived John without realizing that it was John whom I was perceiving. I am not concerned with perception of this kind, but only with perception of things that the subject believes that he is perceiving.

<sup>4</sup> The best presentation of the theory known to me is that by P. F. Strawson in his 'Causation in Perception' in his *Freedom and Resentment* (Methuen, 1974). However,

Before going on to describe the different kinds of religious experience, I need to make two further preliminary points. First, I need to distinguish between public and private perceptions. An object  $x$  may be such as to cause all persons rightly positioned with certain sense organs and certain concepts who pay a certain degree of attention to have the experience of it seeming to them that  $x$  is present.<sup>5</sup> In that case we shall say that the perception of  $x$  is a public perception. Almost all our perceptions—for example, my seeing a material object such as a desk—are in this sense public perceptions. For a desk is such as to cause all persons close to it (without any material objects between it and them) whose eyes are pointing at it, who are attentive, and who have normal vision and the concept of a desk, to have the experience of its seeming to them that there is a desk there. But there may be objects  $o$  that cause certain persons to have the experience of its seeming to them that  $o$  is present without their having that effect on all other attentive persons who occupy similar positions and have similar sense organs and concepts. This could be just because the causal chains that bring about perceptions of  $o$  are not at all deterministic—for example, the laws of optics might be such that there was no guarantee that a suitably equipped observer would always see what was there. Or it could be because  $o$  is a person who can choose whom to cause to have the experience of its seeming to them that  $o$  is there.  $o$  may be a normally invisible person with the power of letting you, but not me, see him. If  $S$  has the experience of its seeming to him that  $o$  is there, but, either because of  $o$ 's choice or for some other reason, not every other attentive person rightly positioned and equipped would necessarily have the experience, then  $S$  has, I shall say, a private perception of  $o$ . If religious experiences are of anything—that is, are perceptions—they are normally

having given the conditions stated above, he argues that they are still insufficient, although necessary, for perception. He claims (pp. 79–80) that there are further restrictions for different senses, e.g. that 'one can only see what is within one's arc of vision' or 'however loud the report of the cannon, if it is far enough away, it will be out of earshot'. But such restrictions seem only to be correct if we suppose that the meaning of such expressions as 'within one's arc of vision' is defined by them. If there is an independent criterion of (e.g.) 'arc of vision'—say a geometrical one—then the stated restriction seems in no way obviously a necessary truth. There is nothing incoherent in supposing that some people can see round corners. I suggest, therefore, that my analysis gives sufficient, as well as necessary, conditions for perception.

<sup>5</sup> Of course what will constitute being 'rightly positioned' and what sense organs and concepts are needed will vary with the sense and the kind of object, and are matters for empirical inquiry; and so too is the degree of attention that is needed.

private perceptions. When one person has a religious experience, his neighbour equally attentive and equally well equipped with sense organs and concepts normally does not. The religious person's explanation of this is that God or gods give such experiences to those to whom they choose to give them, not to all and sundry.

Secondly, I call attention to a relation between experiences. One often perceives one thing in perceiving something else. In seeing a man dressed in such-and-such a way, I may see John Smith. In seeing the print of such-and-such a shape in the sand, I may see the footprint of a bear. In seeing an especially bright star in the sky, I may see Venus near to the earth. In these cases my very same visual or other sensations (described comparatively) that bring about my perceiving the first thing also bring about my perceiving the second thing. In perceiving the second thing one does not see anything extra in the sense of a new item that had escaped one's notice before; rather one perceives the first thing as the second thing. In these cases one person may perceive both things, and another person perceive only the first thing and yet both have the same visual sensations. This relation that holds between perceptions may also hold between experiences described epistemically. In seeming (epistemically) to see the man dressed in such-and-such a way, I may seem to see John Smith. In such cases the same sensations (described comparatively) that bring about the first experience also bring about the second. Two people may both have the same visual or other sensations (described comparatively) (for example, a bright spot in the middle of their visual fields) and through having those sensations one may have a certain experience described epistemically (for example, seeming to see a lighthouse in the distance) and the other may not. Or, of course, the same visual or other sensations may give rise to totally different experiences (described epistemically) in different people.

### **Five Kinds of Religious Experience**

With these points in mind it will be useful to classify the different kinds of religious experience. In due course I shall make similar points about all of them, but it is worthwhile at this stage pointing out the diversity of experiences that fall under our definition. First, we have experiences that seem (epistemically) to the subject to be experiences of God or something else supernatural, but where she

seems to perceive the supernatural object in perceiving a perfectly ordinary non-religious object. Thus someone may look at the night sky, and suddenly 'see it as' God's handiwork, something that God is bringing about (in the way in which someone may see a vapour trail in the sky as the trail of an aeroplane). She has, it may be said, an experience of contingency. Secondly, there are the experiences that people have in perceiving very unusual public objects. (The occurrence of the unusual object may or may not constitute a violation of a natural law.) The experiences had by those who witnessed 'the Resurrection appearances of Jesus', or the 'appearance of Mary' at Fatima, or (as far as the great light that shone round about him, according to Acts 22: 9) St Paul's experience on the road to Damascus are in this category, if the accounts of these events are in any minimal way reliable. Take the appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples as described in Luke 24: 36–49. A man looking and talking like Jesus who had been crucified three days earlier suddenly turned up among them and ate some fish (looking and talking like Jesus in the comparative sense—that is, looking and talking the way that Jesus used to look and talk). Yet, in perceiving this public event, the disciples had the religious experience of taking the man to be the risen Jesus Christ. Their religious experience was that he looked like Jesus in the epistemic sense, and so they believed him to be. A sceptic might have had the same visual sensations (described comparatively) and yet not had the religious experience.

The other three classes of religious experiences are ones that do not involve taking public phenomena religiously. In them the divine is apprehended via something private to the subject. In the third place we have cases where the subject has a religious experience in having certain sensations private to himself, sensations of a kind describable by the normal vocabulary used for describing the sensations that result from the use of our five senses. In his dream described in Matthew 1: 20–1. Joseph dreamed that he saw an angel who said to him certain things. Here there were no public phenomena, but Joseph had certain private sensations that he might have been able to describe by means of normal sensory vocabulary—for example, he had the visual sensation like the sensation that he would have had if he had been looking at a man dressed in white, and the auditory sensations that he would have had if someone had been saying such-and-such to him. (He might have been able to tell us the actual words that the angel seemed to be saying to him.) What made the dream a



religious experience was that, in having the sensations, *and* after he had woken up, it seemed to Joseph that an angel was talking to him—that is, he took the man-in-the-dream to be a real angel and not a mere angel-in-a-dream, and the words-in-the-dream to be words uttered by the angel. (What the biblical author meant by saying that it was a dream is presumably that the experience was one had while the subject was by normal public criteria asleep, and that the experience was not of a public phenomenon but that, at the time, though not afterwards, it seemed to Joseph that it was of a public phenomenon.)

Fourthly, we have the case where the subject has a religious experience in having certain sensations private to himself, yet these are not of a kind describable by normal vocabulary. The subject has some sensation analogous to sensations of normal kinds—for example, visual or auditory sensations, but only analogous—such that, if his experience was of a public phenomenon, we might say that it was the experience of a sixth sense.<sup>6</sup> Presumably mystics and others who find it difficult if not impossible to describe their religious experiences, and yet feel that there is something to be described if only they had the words to do the describing, are having experiences of this kind. Fifthly and finally we have religious experiences that the subject does not have by having sensations. It seems to the subject, perhaps very strongly, that he is aware of God or of a timeless reality or some such thing, and yet not because he is having certain sensations; it just so seems to him, but not through his having sensations—just as it may seem to me strongly that my hand behind my back is facing upward rather than downward, yet not because of any sensations. Many mystics who claim to experience God via ‘nothingness’ or ‘darkness’ may be making the point that their experience of God is not mediated via any sensations. More ordinary cases, however, also fall into this category. Someone may be convinced that God is telling him to do such-and-such (for example, follow such-and-such a vocation), and yet there are no auditory or other sensations occurring.

If the subject is asked ‘What was it about your experience that made it seem to you that you were having an experience of God?’ in

<sup>6</sup> For ways of distinguishing between senses and so grounds for saying that we have a new sense, see H. P. Grice, ‘Some Remarks about the Senses’, in his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

the case of experiences of the third and fourth kinds (as with experiences of the first two kinds), there is a partial answer, though in the case of experiences of the fourth kind we may lack the vocabulary to give it. In the case of experiences of the third kind, the partial answer will be 'because of such-and-such auditory or visual or other describable sensations that I had'. The answer will be partial because the mere fact that one was having such-and-such sensations does not make the experience seem to be of God; someone else could have those sensations without thereby having a religious experience. In the case of experiences of the fourth kind, the answer to the question will be 'because of the very unusual and virtually indescribable sensations that I had'. But in the case of experiences of the fifth kind, the answer to 'What was it about your experience that made it seem to you that you were having an experience of God?', will be 'It just did. There were no visual, auditory, or any other sensations that made it seem thus to me.'

So much for my classification of religious experiences. It is, I believe, both exclusive and exhaustive. For clearly an experience that seems to be of God may or may not be mediated by something sensory (that is, there may or may not be an answer to the question 'What was it about your experience that made it seem to you that you were having an experience of God?'). If it is mediated by something, the something may be public or private. If it is private, it may or may not be describable by normal sensory vocabulary. If it is public, it may be a common, well-known phenomenon; or something very odd, the occurrence of which may be disputed. However, even though the classification is exclusive and exhaustive, it may sometimes be by no means obvious, even to the subject, into which class a given experience falls. For example, suppose I am alone and seem to see and talk to a figure dressed in white, which I take to be an angel. The correct classification of the experience depends on what others would have experienced if they had been there—this I may not know or have any means of finding out. If others also would have seen a figure dressed in white, then the experience is of the second kind; if not, it is of the third kind.

There is no doubt at all that millions of human beings down the centuries have had religious experiences of one or more of the above kinds. Indeed, that statement rather underplays the situation. For many people life is one vast religious experience. Many people view almost all the events of their life not merely under their ordinary

description but as God's handiwork. For many people, that is, very many of the public phenomena of life are viewed religiously and so constitute religious experiences of the first type. What is seen by one person as simply a wet day is seen by another as God's reminding us of his bounty in constantly providing us with food by means of his watering plants. What is seen by one person as merely a severe illness is seen by another as God's punishing him for the sins of his youth. That God is at work is no inference for these people but what seems (epistemically) to be happening.

John Hick has called our attention to this phenomenon in various of his works but especially in *Faith and Knowledge*. He observes that:

The Old Testament prophets, for example, experienced their historical situation as one in which they were living under the sovereign claim of God, and in which the appropriate way for them to act was as God's agents; whereas to most of their contemporaries, who were 'experiencing as' in a different way, the situation did not have this religious significance. The prophets' interpretation of Hebrew history, as this is embodied in the Old Testament, shows that they were 'experiencing as' in a characteristic and consistent way. Where a secular historian would see at work various economic, social, and geographical factors bringing about the rise and fall of cities and empires, the prophets saw behind all this the hand of God raising up and casting down and gradually fulfilling a purpose. When, for example, the Chaldeans were at the gates of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah experienced this event, not simply as a foreign political threat but also as God's judgment upon Israel. . . . It is important to appreciate that this was not an interpretation in the sense of a theory imposed retrospectively upon remembered facts. It was the way in which the prophet actually experienced and participated in these events at the time.<sup>7</sup>

As well as such experiences of the first kind, very many people, both those who are much of the time religious believers and those who are not, have had many religious experiences of the other kinds.<sup>8</sup>

The question must now be faced as to the evidential value of all this. Is the fact that all these religious experiences have oc-

<sup>7</sup> J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (2nd edn., MacMillan, 1967), 142–3.

<sup>8</sup> For some modern 'religious experiences' (although ones of subjects almost entirely from an English Protestant background) see, for example, the volume summarizing a thousand reports of such experiences, provided in response to a public appeal—T. Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (The Religious Experience Research Unit, Manchester College, Oxford, 1977). Some are religious experiences on my criterion and some are not. The author is inclined to draw a conclusion from these experiences that is disputable in the light of some of the arguments put forward in this chapter.

curred evidence for the existence of God (or some other supernatural reality)?

### The Principle of Credulity

In discussing religious experience philosophers have sometimes made the claim that an experience is evidence for nothing beyond itself, and that therefore religious experience has no evidential value. That remark reflects a philosophical attitude that those philosophers would not adopt when discussing experiences of any other kind. Quite obviously having the experience of it seeming (epistemically) to you that there is a table there (that is, your seeming to see a table) is good evidence for supposing that there is a table there. Having the experience of its seeming (epistemically) to you that I am here giving a lecture (that is, your seeming to hear me give a lecture) is good evidence for supposing that I am here lecturing. So generally, contrary to the original philosophical claim, I suggest that it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that  $x$  is present (and has some characteristic), then probably  $x$  is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so. And similarly I suggest that (in the absence of special considerations) apparent memory is to be trusted. If it seems to a subject that in the past he perceived something or did something, then (in the absence of special considerations) probably he did. How things seem to be (in contingent respects),<sup>9</sup> that is how we seem to perceive them, experience them, or remember them are good grounds for a belief about how things are or were. The more forceful the experience, the stronger the memory, the more probable it is that what we seem to perceive or remember is true—other things being equal. Memory, of course, is less forceful than present experience, and sometimes so weak as only to make it a bit probable that we seem to remember is true. This principle, which I shall call the Principle of Credulity, and the conclusion drawn from it seem to me correct. It seems to me, and I hope to my readers, intuitively right in most ordinary cases, such as those to which I have

<sup>9</sup> For a more thorough account of the Principle of Credulity and an explanation of why the phrase ‘in contingent respects’ is required, see my *Epistemic Justification* (Clarendon Press, 2001), 141–50.

just been referring, to take the way things seem to be as the way they are. From this it would follow that, in the absence of special considerations, all religious experiences ought to be taken by their subjects as genuine, and hence as substantial grounds for belief in the existence of their apparent object—God, or Mary, or Ultimate Reality, or Poseidon.<sup>10</sup>

Note that the principle is so phrased that how things seem positively to be is evidence of how they are, but how things seem *not* to be is not such evidence. If it seems to me that there is present a table in the room, or statue in the garden, then probably there is. But if it seems to me that there is no table in the room, then that is only reason for supposing that there is not, if there are good grounds for supposing that I have looked everywhere in the room and (having eyes in working order, being able to recognize a table when I see one, etc.) would have seen one if there was one there. An atheist's claim to have had an experience of its seeming to him that there is no God could be evidence that there was no God only if similar restrictions were satisfied. But, given that my rejection in Chapter 11 of 'the argument from hiddenness' is correct, there are no good grounds for supposing that, if there is a God, necessarily the atheist would have experienced him.

I shall now argue that attempts to restrict the principle in ways designed to rule out its application to religious experience are unsuccessful. I shall consider two such attempts to argue that, while its appearing to me that there are before me tables, chairs, houses, etc. is good grounds for supposing that there are (that is, its seeming to me that I am seeing them is good grounds for supposing that I am), its appearing to me that the world before me is being sustained by God,

<sup>10</sup> C. D. Broad argues in this way for the *prima facie* justification of claims of religious experience in 'Arguments for the Existence of God' in his *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953). Many philosophers have made the obvious point that no experience entails the existence of its purported object, but they seem to ignore the question whether it is *prima facie* evidence for it. Those who do discuss this question usually conclude that it is not *prima facie* evidence. For example, T. Penelhum in *Religion and Rationality* (Random House, 1971) claims (p. 168) that 'an argument beginning with the occurrence, as psychological fact, of a given experience or set of experiences and ending with the ascription of them to a divine cause is either a poor explanatory hypothesis or a circular argument'. Such writers do not seem to me to be aware of the sceptical bog in which failure to accept the Principle of Credulity for other experiences will land them. And, if it is all right to use it for other experiences, they need a good argument to show that it is not all right to use it for religious experiences.

or that there are present angels or Ultimate Reality, is not good grounds for supposing that things are thus.

The first argument is that our supposing that the way things seem is the way they are is not a fundamental principle of rationality, but itself requires inductive justification, and that that inductive justification is available in the ordinary cases but not in the religious cases.<sup>11</sup> More particularly, a philosopher may claim that the fact that it appears that *x* is present is good grounds for supposing that *x* is present only if we have evidence that, when in the past it appeared that *x* was present, it proved so to be; or at any rate the assumption that *x* is present has proved a successful assumption from which to work. Hence, the philosopher might argue, it is all right to take what looks like a table as a table, because our past experience has shown that such appearances are not misleading; but he might go on to question whether we had the kind of inductive evidence that was necessary to justify taking religious experiences seriously.

One difficulty with this view is that it is ordinarily supposed that people are justified in taking what looks like a table to be one even if they do not at the same time recall their past experiences with tables, and even if they cannot immediately do so. So the principle would have to say that our justification for taking what looked like a table to be one was that we could remember such past experiences if we tried hard enough. It will not do to say that our merely having had the past experiences suffices to justify our present inference, whether or not we can remember those experiences. For, if a claim is to be justified inductively, we must in some sense 'have' the evidence of past performance in order to be justified in making the inference. But then, an induction from past experiences to future experiences is justified only if we recall our past experiences correctly. And what grounds have we got for supposing that we do? Clearly not inductive grounds—an inductive justification of the reliability of memory claims would obviously be circular. Here clearly we must rely on the principle that things are the way they seem, as a basic principle not further justifiable; that we seem to have had such-and-such experiences is in itself good grounds for believing that we had. If you require that other people also shall have had the experience of it

<sup>11</sup> 'In order to infer the divine from an apparition we should have to have experience of a connection between them in the way in which we do have experience of the connection between smoke and fires' (A. MacIntyre, 'Visions', in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (SCM Press, 1955), 257).

seeming to them that there was a table present before you are justified in trusting the deliverances of your own sense on this matter, then what is your justification for believing that other people have had such experience? Clearly (as well as assuming that other people probably tell you the truth) you again rely on the principle that things are as they seem to be (that other people seem to you to have said that they had these experiences gives you justification for believing that they did say this). The principle that the rational person supposes that, in the absence of special considerations in particular cases, things are the way they seem to be or to have been can be given inductive justification on the basis of past experiences only if these latter are held to be trustworthy solely on the basis of the Principle of Credulity itself. The Principle of Credulity is a fundamental principle of rationality. And, while the degree of probability that experience or apparent memory confers on what is apparently experienced or remembered varies with the strength of the experience or memory, clearly, unless most experiences and the stronger memories count (in the absence of counter-considerations) as probably true, we would have very little of the ordinary knowledge of the world that we think we have. Unless we allow this principle to have considerable force, we quickly find ourselves in a sceptical bog, in which we know hardly anything.

Another difficulty with the view of the first argument is that its suggested principle clearly needs modification to deal with cases where the subject has no past experience of  $x$ 's but does have experience of properties in terms of which  $x$  is defined. Thus a centaur is defined as a being with the head, trunk, and arms of a human, and the body and legs of a horse. A subject has seen humans and horses, but not centaurs before. It then appears to him that a centaur is present. Is that good reason to suppose that it is? Surely yes. So the principle behind the first argument had better be modified to read: the fact that it appears that  $x$  is present is good grounds for supposing that  $x$  is present only if we have evidence that when in the past it has appeared that  $x$  or any properties by which  $x$  is defined is present they have proved so to be, or at any rate the assumptions that they were present proved successful assumptions from which to work. But then the argument is quite inadequate to rule out taking religious experiences seriously. For 'God', like 'centaur', is defined in terms of properties of which most of us have had experience. He is defined as a 'person' without a 'body' who is unlimited in his 'power',

'knowledge', and 'freedom', and in terms of other similar properties, of all of which we have had mundane experience. Someone might well, through visual, auditory, tactual, etc. experience of recognizing persons of various degrees of power, knowledge, and freedom be able to recognize when he was in the presence of a person of unlimited power, knowledge, and freedom. Indeed, it is plausible to suppose that someone might be able to recognize extreme degrees of these qualities, even if he could not so easily recognize lesser degrees straight off without inductive justification. So, once the inevitable modification is made to the first argument, whatever its merits, it has no force against the claims of religious experience.

The second attempt to restrict the application of the Principle of Credulity allows that the principle holds for 'sensible' characteristics and relations (without needing inductive justification) but denies that (in the absence of inductive justification) it holds in any other cases. One writer who has thus restricted the principle is Chisholm. He claims that, whenever we take something to have a certain sensible characteristic (in my terminology 'property') or relation, we have adequate evidence for the claim that it does have this characteristic (or relation); but that, whenever we take something to have some non-sensible characteristic (or relation), that is not in itself adequate evidence to suppose that it does. And what are these 'sensible' characteristics and relations? Chisholm writes:

The characteristics include being blue, red, green, or yellow; being hard, soft, rough, smooth, heavy, light, hot, or cold; and that of sounding, or making-a-noise. The relations include: being the same, or different with respect to any of the characteristics in question; being more like one object than another with respect to any of the characteristics, or with respect to hue, saturation, and brightness, or with respect to loudness, pitch, and timbre. The class of characteristics and relations also includes the 'common sensibles'—that is, 'movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude'—as well as what is intended by such terms as 'above', 'below', 'right', 'left', 'near', 'far', 'next', 'before', 'after', 'simultaneous', and 'to last', or 'to endure'. In short, the characteristics and relations in question are co-extensive with what Aristotelians have traditionally referred to as the 'proper objects of sense' and the 'common sensibles' and what Reid described as the objects of 'original' perception.<sup>12</sup>

So, according to Chisholm, if something seems (epistemically) to *S* to be brown or square or solid, that is good grounds for believing that it

<sup>12</sup> Chisholm, *Perceiving*, 83.



is. But if something seems to be a table, or a Victorian table, or a ship, or a Russian ship, that is in itself not good grounds for believing that it is. You can have good grounds for believing that something is a table only in terms of it looking brown, square, and solid and in terms of things that look like that having appeared (in the past) to be used for writing on (the notion of 'writing' perhaps being spelt out in terms of 'sensible' characteristics).

Let us say that, if its seeming that an object (or characteristic)  $x$  is present is grounds for supposing that it is without need for further justification, then you have a *real experience* of  $x$ . But, if this does not hold, then its seeming that an object  $x$  is present is an *interpretation* of your experience that stands in need of justification. If you have a real experience of  $x$  and if in fact  $x$  causes your experience, then you *really perceive*  $x$ ; if you conclude that  $x$  is present without really experiencing  $x$ , then (even if your conclusion is correct and justifiable) you merely *infer*  $x$ . Attempts to draw such lines as Chisholm draws between real experience and interpretation, real perception and mere inference, are, of course, as old as the empiricist tradition in philosophy. It is admitted by most of those who draw a line of this kind that even real experience may mislead. You may have a real experience of  $x$ , and therefore be justified in supposing that  $x$  is present, that  $x$  causes your experience, and so that you perceive  $x$ , when in fact  $x$  is not present at all. In that case you have a delusion, hallucination, or illusion of  $x$ , or are merely dreaming that  $x$  is present, or some such thing. However, such cases are, on this view, to be distinguished from cases where, although it seems that an object  $x$  is present, and you take it so to be when it is not, your mistake is one of misinterpretation of experience—a mistake that you would have been justified in making only if you had other grounds for believing the object  $x$  to be present.

That there is such a line to be drawn is a common and seldom argued assumption in many discussions of religious experience. Once the line is drawn, the consequences are evident. For the line always leaves the typical objects of religious experience as matters of interpretation rather than as true objects of real experience. It follows that, even if it seems to you strongly that you are talking to God or gazing at Ultimate Reality, this fact is no reason in itself for supposing that you are. You are having an experience that is properly to be described in a much more mundane way—for example, as the experience of hearing certain noises—which you *interpret* as the voice of God, but

which you have no good reason for so doing unless further evidence is available.

However, no such line as the one that Chisholm attempts to draw can be drawn between real experience and interpretation. For clearly we are justified in holding many perceptual beliefs about objects having non-sensible characteristics that cannot be backed up in terms of beliefs about objects having 'sensible' characteristics. Few would doubt that I am justified in believing that a certain woman whom I see at the other side of a room is my wife. Yet, if asked what it is about the woman I take to be my wife that makes me believe that she is my wife, I would be utterly unable to give a satisfactory answer. I could give only a very vague description of the Chisholmian 'sensible' characteristics by which I recognize her, a description that would fit tens of thousands of other women whom I would not for one moment mistake for my wife. That one can recognize does not entail that one can describe; nor does it even entail that (even if one cannot describe them) one knows what the features are by which one recognizes. I may be justified in claiming that you are tired or angry, just by looking at your face, and yet not know what it is about your face that makes you look tired or angry. Again, I can recognize my wife's voice over the telephone, although I certainly cannot say what it is about the noises that come through the telephone receiver that are especially characteristic of her voice. For senses such as smell and taste most of us have no vocabulary for describing sensible characteristics, other than in terms of the objects that cause them (for example, as 'the taste of tea' or 'the smell of roses'). Asked about the liquid we are drinking 'What is it about it that makes it taste like tea?', we would be stuck for an answer. But that fact casts no doubt on our justification for believing that we are drinking a cup of tea. The fact that it tastes like tea is good reason in itself for supposing that it is—whether or not we can say in more primitive terms what it is about it that makes it taste like tea.

Humans differ in the kinds of objects and properties that they learn to pick out. Sometimes they can pick out and even describe the 'sensible characteristics' of those objects and sometimes they cannot; and, even if they can, the recognition of objects of some kind and their more sophisticated properties may be a more natural process than the description of their sensible characteristics. There is no reason of principle why we should not grow so adept at spotting Russian ships, or Victorian tables, or blue-dwarf stars, or elliptical

galaxies that we can recognize them straight off, without being able to say what it is in the way of Chisholmian sensible characteristics about what we see that makes us identify them as we do.

So this second argument against the original Principle of Credulity fails, and the principle stands. If it seems (epistemically) to *S* that *x* is present, that is good reason for *S* to believe that *x* is present, in the absence of special considerations—whatever *x* may be. And it is good reason too for anyone else to believe that *x* is present. For, if *e* is evidence for *h*, this is a relation that holds quite independently of who knows about *e*. However, how things seem to *S* is clearly something of which *S* knows without inference, whereas others need *S*'s testimony about how things seem to him in order to learn of his experiences. Our justification for relying on *S*'s testimony about his experiences is an issue to which I shall come later in the chapter.

From all this it follows that, if it seems to me that I have a glimpse of Heaven, or a vision of God, that is grounds for me and others to suppose that I do. And, more generally, the occurrence of religious experiences is *prima facie* reason for all to believe in that of which the reported experience was purportedly an experience.

### **Special Considerations that Limit the Principle of Credulity**

It is time to list the special considerations that operate in particular cases and give to the subject or to others grounds for holding that, although his experience was that it seemed to him that *x* was present (and so he is inclined to believe that *x* was present), really *x* was not present. They are considerations that, when added to the report of the experience, prevent it from making it probable that *x* was present. Put symbolically, with *e* as 'it seems to *S* that *x* is present', *h* as '*x* is present', and *k* as irrelevant background knowledge, they are considerations *c* such that although  $P(h|e \& k) > 1/2$ ,  $P(h|e \& k \& c) \leq 1/2$ . If it seems to *S* that *x* is present, *S* is inclined to claim, at any rate to himself, that he perceives *x*. I shall describe what I am doing as listing the considerations that defeat the perceptual claim that *S* is inclined to make to himself. Having listed these considerations, we can then see whether they will normally be able to show that religious experiences are not to be taken at their face value.

There are basically four kinds of special consideration that defeat perceptual claims. The first two show that the apparent perception