

Keith E. Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. viii and 371 pages. \$00.00.

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Consider the following simple argument:

1. Someone had what seemed to be an experience of God.
2. If someone has what seems to be an experience of God, then there is evidence that God exists.
3. So, there is evidence that God exists.

Yandell aims to qualify and defend this argument (33). By the time the qualifying is done, however, we have this:

(PN*) For any subject *S* and experience *E*, if *S*'s having *E* is a matter of its (phenomenologically) seeming to *S* that *S* experiences a numinous being *N*, then if *S* nonculpably has no reason to think that (i) *S* would seem to experience *N* whether or not there is an *N* that *S* experiences, or (ii) if *E* is nonveridical, *S* could not discover that it was, or (iii) if *E* is of a type *T* of experience such that every member of *T* is nonveridical, *S* could not discover this fact, then *E* provides evidence that there is an *N*, provided that (iv) *N exists* [sic] falls within the scope of both collegial and lateral disconfirmation....

- (1) If persons have numinous experiences under conditions that satisfy all of the conditions specified in (PN*)...then there is experiential evidence that God exists.
- (2) Persons do have numinous experiences under conditions that satisfy all of the conditions specified in (PN*)....
- (3) So, there is experiential evidence that God exists. (274)

Yandell shifts from "religious experience" to "numinous experience"--a seeming awareness of "a majestic, living, holy being of immense power" that is distinct from the subject (16)--since he is mainly concerned with evidence for a monotheistic God and other types of religious experience (nirvanic, kelvalic, moksha and nature mystical--see chapter 1) are less plausibly regarded as evidence for monotheism due to their radically different intrinsic structure (subject-aspect as opposed to subject-consciousness-object) and their radically different phenomenological content. Yandell rightly rejects the idea that there is one single object of all religious experience (18-24), as well as the idea that there is a single type of religious experience that is conceptualized according to the religious tradition to which one belongs (183-93). The better part of two or three chapters is given to motivating PN* and criticizing alternatives. More on that shortly.

Yandell's defense of his argument includes replies to variations on objections like these: we can't rationally assess religious claims, and even if we could we shouldn't try (1-11), religious experience is ineffable, so it lacks evidential value (61-115), social science can explain why a person holds religious beliefs--without reference to any reasons she has for them--and so it undermines whatever evidential support religious experience might have otherwise had (119-59), religious experience is so much the product of religious concepts and beliefs that it cannot be evidence for religious belief (193-205), religious experiences from non-monotheistic traditions, e.g. Jainism, Buddhism and some versions of Hinduism, undermine the evidential value of numinous

experience (279-321), and the evidential value of numinous experience is defeated by the fact that monotheism is internally inconsistent and incompatible with evil and human freedom (322-361). Save for his cursory treatment of the last objection, Yandell's responses are on the whole interesting, true and even occasionally witty--a rare treat in a jungle of Yandelese!

I have space for only a triad of related critical comments. First, this book has no footnotes, and for good reason. It rarely makes explicit reference to anybody's work, and when it does, insufficient bibliographic information is given. While some of the ideas discussed are so deeply imbedded in western culture and academe that explicit reference to spokespersons would be otiose, others clearly are not. As an instance of the latter, and as an example of how scholarly laxity can be very liberating, read closely Yandell's gross caricature of Alston's views (205-12). Here you find Dolly Parton quoted: "I pray every day, throughout the day...I ask God to be there every day and lead me. I always talk to God, and I always believe He will answer me. And He does. God has never spoken to me in a voice...but He answers me with a feeling inside." What's the point Yandell wishes to make? "If one follows what some have called *doxastic practice philosophy of religion*," he writes, "such feelings are evidence that God exists" (206). Yandell never argues that this is the case, and he never considers the place of overrides in doxastic practices, a central feature of Alston's account. (See *Perceiving God*, Cornell University Press, 1991, pages 159-60 and 189-91, or just about any of the host of articles Alston published on religious experience in the '80's, each of which Yandell was privy to.)

Secondly, Yandell curiously insists on an idiosyncratic epistemic principle that becomes condition (iv) in PN*. I can best get at it by way of its first appearance in his main objection to Alston. Summarized, the objection is this:

If no experience could count as evidence against a belief, then none can count for it either. Within pietistic practice, no experience can count as evidence against God's existence. So, within pietistic practice, no experience can provide evidence in favor of God's existence. (208)

Of course, a pietistic practitioner might hold that certain experiences of mass suffering would be evidence against the existence of God, and she might say that "seeing" internal inconsistencies would also be evidence against the existence of God, as would seeing inconsistency with other of her deeply held commitments. But these facts are irrelevant, says Yandell, since

Y. [A] *kind* of experience can be evidence for the existence of something only if an experience of that *kind* can be evidence against its existence.... (210, my emphasis),

and none of the things I mentioned are pietistic religious experience. Question: is Y true? Yandell notes "exceptions" (243-44), although he never mentions them while lampooning Alston. But instead of fixing Y accordingly, he simply insists that there is "wide agreement" on it, again without the slightest documentation. For my part, however, I have never seen or heard any philosopher ever assert Y in speech or print. And there is good reason not to. One problem, as Yandell notes, is that "the notion of a *kind* of experience is not lucid" (236), and even if that worry is shoved under the carpet (see 240-49), there is no reason to believe that Y is true. Why must *the very same kind of experience* that constitutes evidence that p is true possibly be evidence that p is false?

Even though that unique kind of experience I now have as evidence that I exist could not possibly be evidence for anyone that I do not exist, so what? Does it matter that the truth of *I exist* is a necessary condition for my having any experience at all? If so, why? Obviously, an experience can make it highly likely that a person's belief is true without meeting the condition laid down by Y. So what are its credentials? Yandell is aware of these exceptions and questions and this point; he just looks away.

Third, supposing that Y *is* true, how can *numinous experience* be evidence *against* the existence of God? Yandell insists that numinous experience is a kind of religious experience distinct from other kinds (chapter 1), so it is a bit mystifying to find him seriously countenancing the suggestion that the relevant kind is *religious* experience and that non-numinous religious experiences can be evidence that God does not exist (237). His considered view, however, is that numinous experience itself can count as evidence that God does not exist. You might ask: How can a seeming awareness of "a majestic, living, holy being of immense power" that is distinct from oneself (16) be evidence against the existence of a being that is majestic, living, holy and possessed of immense power? Well, you could have an experience as of a majestic, living holy being of immense power *failing* to be holy. "That's not possible!," you exclaim. Yandell's reply: "A numinous (uncanny, majestic, powerful, and awesome) being need not be holy (not at least in a sense that includes being righteous or good)" (248). "Well, if *that* is what you mean by 'numinous being'," you retort, "then whenever I watch Michael Jordan play a good game I have a numinous experience!" (I wanted to illustrate the point with my numinous spouse--really--but she wouldn't let me.) The moral is this. If the idea of a numinous experience is gutted of moral content, then pietistic religious experience likewise gutted can be evidence against *God exists* and numinous experience is just as good evidence for *God exists* as it is for *Satan exists*. Yandell should give up Y and avoid the embarrassment on page 248; his case is much more solid without the tortures it brings.

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