

ENCOUNTERING EVIL: THE EVIL-GOD CHALLENGE FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

ASHA LANCASTER-THOMAS¹
UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Abstract. It is often thought that religious experiences provide support for the cumulative case for the existence of the God of classical monotheism. In this paper, I formulate an Evil-god challenge that invites classical monotheists to explain why, based on evidence from religious experience, the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god (Good-god) is significantly more reasonable than the belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, evil god (Evil-god). I demonstrate that religious experiences substantiate the existence of Evil-god more so than they do the existence of Good-god, and, consequently, that the traditional argument from religious experience fails: it should not be included in the cumulative case for the existence of Good-god.

I. INTRODUCTION

The argument from religious experience purports to derive the existence of God from the existence of perceived experiences of God. The strong version of the argument claims that religious experiences *prove* the existence of God, whereas the weak version claims that religious experiences *provide evidence* for God's existence and, hence, justify belief in God. Traditional objections to the argument from religious experience tend to focus on discrediting the validity of accounts of experiences of this type, claiming instead that they can be explained away naturalistically. What I develop in this paper is radically different from traditional objections. I formulate a parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of an evil god and challenge theists to explain why their argument from religious experience for a good god is significantly more reasonable². To do this, I intend to demonstrate that the traditional argument from religious experience is weaker than the parallel argument I develop.^{3,4}

Although religious experiences are frequently used to strengthen the case for an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god, I suspect that they are rarely, if ever, employed to strengthen the case for an omnipotent, omniscient, *omnimalevolent* god. Naturally this is because few, if any, argue in earnest that an evil god actually exists. Richard Swinburne, however, implies that there is no argument from religious experience for the existence of an evil god because there are no religious experiences that support the existence of such a being:

Religious experiences in non-Christian traditions are experiences apparently of beings who are supposed to have similar properties to those of God, or experiences apparently of lesser beings, or experiences

1 The author thanks Yujin Nagasawa for his helpful feedback on this paper.

2 This kind of approach — that takes evidence typically employed by theists and uses it to argue against theism by providing similarly reasonable arguments for alternative theisms — has been gaining traction recently. See for example, Raphael Lataster, *The Case Against Theism: Why the Evidence Disproves God's Existence* (Springer, 2018); Raphael Lataster, "The Problem of Alternative Monotheisms: Another Serious Challenge to Theism", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 1 (2018).

3 This strategy takes inspiration from Stephen Law, "The Evil-god Challenge", *Religious Studies* 46, no. 3 (2010), who uses the framework of the problem of evil to challenge theists to explain why — if the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis are broadly similar in reasonableness — they accept the latter yet deny the former.

4 Note that this 'Evil-god challenge' is only aimed at classical monotheistic accounts of God that profess the existence of a single, omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent deity.

apparently of states of affairs, but hardly experiences apparently of any person or state whose existence is incompatible with that of God. If there were vastly many experiences apparently of an omnipotent Devil, then that sort of evidence would exist; but there are not such experiences.⁵

I intend to directly oppose this line of thinking and formulate an argument that employs religious experiences to evidence an evil god. Of course, this challenge is not intended to assert that an evil god really exists. Rather, it aims to demonstrate that if evidence for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god is weaker than evidence for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent god, then there is no good reason to believe in a fully good god over a fully evil god when considering religious experience alone⁶. Consider Swinburne's assertion below regarding the burden of proof for religious experiences:

[I]n the case of religious experiences, as in the case of all other experiences, the onus is on the sceptic to give reason for not believing what seems to be the case. The only way to defeat the claims of religious experience will be to show that the *strong* balance of evidence is that there is no God. In the absence of that strong balance, religious experience provides significant further evidence that there is a God.⁷

My Evil-god challenge from religious experience boomerangs this statement and places the onus squarely on the theist to provide a good reason for not believing in an evil god, based on evidence from religious experience that will be subsequently provided. I begin by elucidating the concept of religious experience and explaining the traditional argument from religious experience for the existence of a good god. Next, I formulate a parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of an evil god. Finally, I address some of the main objections that could be made against my Evil-god challenge.

For purposes of clarity, from here on the proper noun 'Good-god' refers to an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent god such as the God of classical monotheism; 'Evil-god' denotes an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent being; and the lower case 'god' refers to an omnipotent, omniscient being that has no specified moral character. The Evil-god hypothesis refers to the postulate of the existence of Evil-god, and the Good-god hypothesis refers to the postulate of the existence of Good-god.

II. WHAT ARE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES?

The term 'religious experience' has been used to describe various phenomena over the years, therefore it will be helpful to define the term, categorise the concept, and provide examples of each type before proceeding to the challenge itself.

William James proposed several necessary conditions that an experience must meet to be considered religious. According to James, the experience must be transient (temporary), ineffable (impossible to describe in words), noetic (of epistemic value), and passive (uncontrollable).⁸ It is particularly difficult to categorise experiences of a religious nature because, as noted by Caroline Franks Davis, "there are so many religious traditions and so many types of experience within those traditions."⁹ In this paper, I utilise Davis's helpful classification system, which organises religious experiences into six categories: interpretive, quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical.

5 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Clarendon Press, 1979), 318.

6 Note that I am endorsing a *strong* Evil-god challenge here. Strong Evil-god challenges are distinguished from *weak* Evil-god challenges in that they claim that the Evil-god hypothesis (and therefore the parallel Good-god hypothesis) is absurd, incoherent, or inconsistent and should not be taken seriously (see Asha Lancaster-Thomas, "The Evil-god challenge part I: History and recent developments", *Philosophy Compass* 13 (2018) for a detailed explanation of types of Evil-god challenge).

7 Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (OUP, 1996), 118.

8 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Longmans Green and co, 1902).

9 Caroline F. Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (OUP, 1989).

Interpretive

Interpretive religious experiences are experiences “in which a remarkable or beneficial event with no specifically religious characteristics is attributed to a divine source by a person with prior religious beliefs.”¹⁰ Swinburne offers the following example:

I pray for my friend to get better from cancer and he does. Since we do not normally know in any detail the exact state of his body when he had cancer, nor do we know in any detail the natural laws which govern the development of cancer, we cannot say whether the recovery occurs because of natural laws or not. The pious believer believes that God intervened, and the hard-headed atheist believes that only natural laws were at work.¹¹

Although Davis includes the condition that interpretive religious experiences always involve prior religious belief in her definition, it could be argued that one who has an unusual experience may not have already formed a religious belief but rather develop one as a direct result of the event. In general, interpretive religious experiences are less persuasive than other types of religious experience, since they are usually based on previously established religious views.¹²

Quasi-sensory

Quasi-sensory religious experiences are occurrences “in which the primary element is a physical sensation or whose alleged percept is of a type normally apprehended by one of the five sense modalities.”¹³ Quasi-sensory experiences can be auditory (for example, hearing voices), visual (for example, seeing visions or hallucinations), tactile (for example, feeling pain or being touched), or, perhaps less commonly, olfactory and gustatory (smelling and tasting respectively).

In the mid-1800s, a French child named Bernadette was reported to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary that requested that she dig for a spring of water and establish a religious site at that spot. Reportedly, Bernadette subsequently witnessed water spout from the ground. Although quasi-sensory religious experiences can be direct, like the previous example, they can also be indirect — like seeing the image of the Virgin Mary in a piece of toast.

Revelatory

Revelatory religious experiences “comprise what their subjects may call sudden convictions, inspiration, revelation, enlightenment, ‘the mystical vision,’ and flashes of insight.”¹⁴

The biblical tale of Paul’s encounter with Good-god on the road to Damascus is an account of a supernatural being having such an effect on a subject. Paul’s experience, which resulted in his conversion to Christianity, is explained in the following passage from the New Testament: “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ The full account, believed by some to be a first-hand narrative from Paul himself, explains how a divine voice revealed to him a new way of thinking, which resulted in his conversion to Christianity.

Regenerative

Regenerative religious experiences “tend to renew the subject’s faith and improve his spiritual, moral, physical, or psychological well-being.”¹⁶ This category of religious experience is broad, and experiences of this type are usually accompanied by a religious activity such as praying or meditating. An individual undergoing a

10 Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 26.

11 Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, 118.

12 Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*.

13 Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 36–37.

14 *Ibid.*, 40.

15 Galatians 1:11-16, NIV.

16 Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 45.

regenerative religious experience feels that the presence of a supernatural power has precipitated in them a physical, moral, or cognitive change.

Among other rituals, baptism can induce this type of response. Consider the following testimonies, taken from a study of spirit baptism in the Pentecostal church: “when it happened, I felt totally different on the inside. It was just like something woke up inside me that had been asleep” and “It’s just you had this energy, this, ‘You know, I can take on the world now. God’s on my side, and I can take on the world, and I can win.’”¹⁷ Both sources reference a positive change in well-being that was brought about by the rite in which they participated.

Numinous

A numinous religious experience can be defined as “the feeling that mortal flesh is somehow despicable in the face of eternal majesty.”¹⁸ Feelings of awe, wonder, dread, terror, insignificance of the self, and fascination, among others, comprise numinous religious experiences. Rudolph Otto, who originally defined this type of experience, describes it as follows:

It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of — whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.¹⁹

Accounts of numinous religious experiences appear in the Bible:

Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD. The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.²⁰

Religious experiences of this type frequently occur as a result of observing natural phenomena. Consider the following report:

When we were travelling to Oregon for my grandmother’s funeral I saw a rainbow that was so unbelievably close it was as if it came right through the car. Physically I felt frightened at first and then enormously elated. I felt very much that it was a sign or a symbol of something. I’m still kind of coming to terms with it.²¹

In this first-hand account, the reporter describes the feelings of terror, elation, and majesty indicative of the numinous experience.

Mystical

Mystical religious experiences can be defined as

experiences with the following characteristics: (i) the sense of having apprehended an ultimate reality; (ii) the sense of freedom from the limitations of time, space, and the individual ego; (iii) a sense of ‘oneness’; and (iv) bliss or serenity.²²

Practices such as prayer and meditation can evoke this type of experience. An individual describing her experience of transcendental meditation recounts, “I should say I’ve had a going into one’s self, but at the same time seeming to split off from my own personality... It was almost like falling into an abyss. You lost

17 W. P. Williamson and Ralph Hood, “Spirit Baptism: A Phenomenological Study of Religious Experience”, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14 (2011).

18 Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 49–50.

19 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (OUP, 1958), 12–13.

20 Ezekiel 10: 4-5, NIV.

21 Robert Wuthnow, “Peak Experiences: Some Empirical Tests”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 18, no. 3 (1978), 62–63.

22 Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 55.

all sense of body or time.”²³ Personal experiences during which individuals feel at one with their god during worship also fall into this category, as illustrated by the following account of a teenager visiting a place of worship: “In adolescence after receiving instruction for confirmation, one day in Church I prayed for Christ to come into my life. A sense of relief, the peace of God, something fantastic.”²⁴

It should be noted that these classes are not mutually exclusive. In fact, many religious experiences do not fall neatly into just one category. This is evidenced by Paul’s religious conversion, which could be classified as quasi-sensory, revelatory, and mystical. Now that I have outlined a classification system, let us proceed to examine how religious experiences can be used to postulate the existence of Good-god.

III. THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In its strongest form, the argument from religious experience infers the existence of Good-god from first-hand, second-hand, or even third-hand experiences of Good-god. Although few theists give credence to this version by arguing that the existence of Good-god can be irrefutably proven through religious experiences alone, many²⁵ contend that religious experiences add credibility to the hypothesis that Good-god exists and should therefore be used as part of the cumulative case for the Good-god hypothesis.

Two of the main objections sceptics direct toward individuals who either witness or hear a accounts of religious experiences are i) that those who have religious experiences should not believe that they come about as a direct result of a god and ii) that those who are told of these religious experiences should not believe the testimony they hear. Swinburne offers two basic principles to oppose these objections: the principle of credulity (PoC) and the principle of testimony (PoT).

According to the PoC, “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.”²⁶ In other words, if I experience the presence of a supernatural being, x , then I should believe that x is present *unless* there are relevant factors that contradict belief that such a state of affairs obtains.

The PoT maintains that, “(in the absence of special considerations) the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them.”²⁷ According to this principle, one should trust the allegations of others who have had religious experiences, unless they are known to tell falsehoods, remember events incorrectly, or are prone to aggrandisement. If these two principles are taken to be true then religious experiences should not be discredited or ignored, and although they cannot irrefutably prove the existence of Good-god (or some other supernatural being) they can certainly support the case for such an entity.

Let us now construct a parallel argument from religious experience for the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent deity: Evil-god.

IV. THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE FOR EVIL-GOD

To put the Evil-god challenge from religious experience into effect, I assume, along with Swinburne, the PoC, according to which religious experiences should *prima facie* be taken to be true, and the PoT, according to which we should take for granted that those who have had such experiences are telling the truth, unless compelling evidence to the contrary is provided. Although both principles are contentious, I will employ them for the sake of constructing my parallel argument. I also assume along with the theist

23 David Hay, “Religious Experience Amongst a Group of Post-Graduate Students: A Qualitative Study”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, no. 18 (1979), 171.

24 Hay, “Religious Experience”.

25 See William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1991), Robert D. Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Religious Experience”, in *The Rationality of Theism*; Kai-Man Kwan, “The Argument from Religious Experience”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*; and Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

26 Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 304.

27 Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 322.

that religious experiences are cognitive events that genuinely occur and that are causally related to some supernatural being²⁸.

There are two approaches that the Evil-god hypothesiser can adopt to formulate an argument from religious experience. The first is to utilise distinct examples to claim that people have had direct religious experiences of Evil-god. The second is to argue that religious experiences evoked to support Good-god can equally be evoked to support Evil-god. I will employ the first approach in the section that follows. The second approach will be employed in the objections section of this paper, in which I explain why religious experiences that prima facie offer evidence of Good-god are actually compatible with the existence of Evil-god. Table 1 illustrates the combined aims of the approaches to demonstrate that the Evil-god hypothesis is, overall, more compatible with religious experience than the Good-god hypothesis.

	Existence of Evil-god	Existence of Good-god
Experience of Evil-god	Compatible	Incompatible
Experience of Good-god	Compatible	Compatible

Table 1: Compatibility of experiences of Evil-god and experiences of Good-god

Let us now consider religious experiences that can be used to strengthen the argument for the existence of Evil-god. For the purpose of clarity, I will separate these examples into the same categories defined earlier: interpretive, quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical. The examples can be further classified into two distinct types. The first type comprises ‘bad’ religious experiences of a supernatural being (henceforth BREs), which result in negative consequences for the agent having the experience (for example, being possessed by a demon). The second type comprises ‘good’ religious experiences of a supernatural being (GREs), which result in positive consequences for the agent having the experience (for example, bargaining one’s soul with an evil force in exchange for material gains). For each category, I will provide at least one first-hand account alongside general examples. Most of the testimonies included were taken from Merete Jakobsen’s 1999 study on negative religious experiences, where participants shared personal encounters with evil.²⁹

Interpretive

People frequently interpret unfortunate or negative events in their lives as signs from the supernatural world. Some theists subscribe to the view that misfortune is a result of a flawed moral character or punishment for previous sins. If one contracts a disease, for example, some religious denominations believe that the affliction is a punishment from Good-god. This belief may stem from the huge array of biblical passages, particularly in the Old Testament, that indicate Good-god’s vengeful nature. Consider the following:

If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name — the LORD your God — the LORD will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses.³⁰

This is just one of many passages in the Bible where it is either implied or directly stated that Good-god inflicts plagues, diseases, or afflictions on individuals, due to their past actions or even the actions of their ancestors.³¹ It does not seem to be a stretch to equate negative life events like this to BREs caused by an evil being, and arguably these events are more compatible with Evil-god than Good-god. The blatant truth that terrible experiences often happen to good people could be said to infer the existence of Evil-

28 One attraction of the Evil-god challenge is that it grants the underlying metaphysical premises of its Good-god parallel before arriving at a strikingly different conclusion: Yujin Nagasawa, *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (OUP, 2017).

29 Merete Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”.

30 Deuteronomy 28:58-59, NIV.

31 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to the Holy Scriptures* (The Deseret News, 1915).

god more so than Good-god (this point will be discussed at further length in the objections section of this paper).

There are plenty of examples of individuals' successes being attributed to deals made with an evil supernatural being, namely the devil. The following examples are GREs because the subject is positively affected by the experience. Robert Johnson, a 20th century musician, was said to have met the devil at a crossroads and bargained with his soul in exchange for mastery of the blues guitar. St. Theophilus of Adana, a sixth century cleric, was widely believed to have sold his soul to the devil for career advancement. It is said that he rose to bishophood as a result of the pact. Nicolò Paganini was accused of selling his soul to the devil in exchange for the musical genius he inherited. Witnesses even claimed to have seen the devil next to the Italian violinist as he performed his works in front of large crowds. Although these recorded GREs are not attributed to Evil-god in name, they could certainly be interpreted as experiential evidence for the existence of an evil supernatural being.

Quasi-sensory

Direct sensory encounters with evil are more common than one might think.³² There is a plethora of biblical accounts of sensory experiences of the devil. In the book of Genesis, the devil is seen in the form of a serpent by Eve. As noted by Wright, there was "a virtual explosion of demonic activity"³³ in the New Testament. In Matthew 4:8, for example, the devil shows Jesus a vision of the kingdoms of the world to bribe the son of Good-god to worship him.

The existence of Jesus as Good-god incarnate is one of the main tenets of Christianity and the most significant example of Good-god revealing itself to the world, frequently in the form of miracles performed by Christ. Antithetically, in many belief systems, the antichrist is an incarnation of the devil and the literal form of evil.³⁴ McGinn explains that "the antichrist must recapitulate evil, just as Christ recapitulates all good."³⁵ Although the antichrist is mentioned many times in the Bible, the following is a particularly vivid visual description:

Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived.³⁶

This reported quasi-sensory BRE depicts an entity that is the epitome of evil showing itself to the world. Since age and remoteness are enemies of verifiability, however, and because many theists believe that the Bible should be read symbolically rather than literally, let us consider some more recently alleged cases of malevolent entities directly interacting with humans.

Numerous individuals in contemporary society have endured direct sensory experiences of evil beings. One witness recounts seeing "a luminous, grinning, grimacing gargoyle-like face" that tried to cover her in "a blanket of evil."³⁷ Another describes her encounter with the devil in detail: "a brownish-black demon with close-set beady black eyes, pointed ears and a forked tail. In his right hand he carried a 3 pronged fork: in his left hand he carried a long pair of pincers. He was surrounded by rat-like devils."³⁸

Existing relics and images of evil supernatural beings can be referred to as evidence for indirect quasi-sensory religious experiences. Although there are relatively few known examples of images of the

32 Jakobsen, "Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil".

33 Archie Wright, "Evil Spirits in Second Temple Judaism: The Watcher Tradition as a Background to the Demonic Pericopes in the Gospels," *Henoah* 28 (2006), 141.

34 Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*, (Harper, 1994).

35 McGinn, *Antichrist*, 59.

36 Revelation 13:11–14, NIV.

37 Jakobsen, "Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil", 11.

38 *Ibid.*, 22.

devil on profane objects, the likeness of the devil on a Budapest bathroom tile that would not wash off and the recent viral internet photograph that captures a ‘demon’ on a road in Arizona seem to fit the bill.

Revelatory

The phrase ‘the devil made me do it’ is now commonly used as a tongue in cheek excuse for bad behaviour. Throughout history, however, the belief in direct possession of a human being by an evil being such as a demon or devil is prominent within a range of religions — including some branches of classical monotheism. When an individual is bewitched by an evil force, he or she endures the sudden change of outlook that is illustrative of a revelatory experience. As well as the numerous stories of New Testament characters possessed by the devil or a demon, there are many accounts in recent history of people possessed by evil forces. Possibly the most famous account is that of Roland Doe (a pseudonym), who the Catholic Church claimed was a victim of demon possession. The case was used as the basis for the book and, later, popular horror film, *The Exorcist*.

Visionary killers belong to a class of serial killer who believe they are compelled to commit murder by supernatural entities. Perhaps the most infamous case is David Berkowitz — also known as the Son of Sam — who killed thirteen people in the 1970s after hearing the devil, through the guise of a dog, commanding him to kill. As disturbing is the case of Dennis Rader, also known by his alias, The BTK (Bind, Torture, Kill), who avowed that a demon prompted him to murder ten people over the course of sixteen years. In 2009, Texan mother Otty Sanchez acted on a satanic voice that ordered her to eat her new-born baby.

Detailed personal accounts of interactions with evil also offer evidence of revelatory BREs. One testifier describes being plagued by evil forces within her: “I realised that I had the forces of evil within me and that I was being tormented by the devil...I started to weep for all the demands I had made on my husband all our married life...I could not allow him to be himself.”³⁹ The change of mindset apparent in this account is indicative of a revelatory BRE.

Regenerative

Although GREs like deals with the devil can result in improvements to a subject’s moral and spiritual condition, Davis’s definition of a regenerative religious experience seems to assume god’s moral nature, since she specifies that the result of said experience must be positive. To avoid begging the question, I suggest an amendment to the definition of this category. Rather than necessarily improving it, this type of religious experience can also be a catalyst for negative change in spiritual, moral, physical, or psychological wellbeing; in other words, it can be degenerative (a BRE) or regenerative (a GRE). The following testimony describes a churchgoer’s BRE:

My body was like a black pit, as big as a bucket, wide open for anything to enter! Appalled, I held my arms tightly across myself to close up this awful hole. What did I shut out? From that moment, and for the next two years, I had no interest in my church going. I seemed to be completely cast out from a feeling of nearness to God – and what was worse I did not want to be near.⁴⁰

Another participant reports, “I felt that I had been possessed by a dark and terrible force, which was bent on destroying me.”⁴¹ These testimonies are clear examples of evil encounters that took a negative psychological or spiritual toll on the agent suffering the experience.

Numinous

Schopenhauer observes that “[t]his world could not have been the work of an all-loving being, but that of a devil, who had brought creatures into existence in order to delight in the sight of their sufferings.”⁴²

39 Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”, 13.

40 Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”, 18.

41 Ibid., 29.

42 Cited in, Rüdiger Safranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1990).

Although speaking figuratively here, Schopenhauer was highlighting the overwhelming and awful feeling of the presence of evil acting in the world — a feeling that many of us have experienced. The following testimony describes, in detail, an evil numinous encounter such as this:

A year and a half ago I was asleep in the night, and woke very suddenly and felt quite alert. I felt surrounded and threatened by the most terrifying and powerful presence of Evil. It seemed to be localised within the room. It seemed almost physical and in a curious way it ‘crackled’, though not audibly. It was also extremely ‘black’ and I felt overwhelmed with terror. I stayed rigid in my bed for several minutes, wondering how to combat this blackness. I felt it was a manifestation directed very personally at me, by a Power of Darkness. I was overwhelmed by despair and a desire to go out and kill myself by jumping in the Thames nearby, but I knew that I must withstand this.⁴³

The ‘Power of Darkness’ referenced in this BRE was a manifestation so strong that it prompted the recounter to consider ending his own life.

Mystical

This category of religious experience is broad and, like the numinous experience, defined by the response of the subject undergoing the religious experience rather than the intrinsic nature of the incident. Those who participate in evil deeds, for example the visionary killers referenced earlier, may feel that they are part of a oneness with the evil that was the impetus for their actions. Similarly, individuals who suffer demonic possession sense that they are fully embodied by the evil that possesses them. The feeling of experiencing an ultimate reality of evil is recounted in the following testimony:

I was out one night in Sussex, near ..., and when I came to a ruined building, I felt the presence of something evil, which made me feel extremely uncomfortable and frightened... On no other occasion in my life have I had such an overpowering feeling of the presence of evil which invoked such fear in myself.⁴⁴

When experiencing BRE’s of this nature, individuals often feel that they are in the presence of absolute evil, as is illustrated in the following account:

In the October of the autumn ’51 I went through the most terrible darkness. Of all the darkness and desolation I had suffered this was the ultimate. There are many, many dark nights of the soul in mystical experience, but this was the blackest of them all. I thought I was in the hands of great evil and, being by nature innately religious, I went to my bedroom to pray. There was no God to pray to, so I said ‘If I am in the hands of great evil, please take me out of this.’⁴⁵

The experiences detailed above can be used as evidence to postulate the existence of Evil-god in the same way that Good-god hypothesisers use religious experiences to surmise the existence of Good-god. Note that there are examples of GREs and BREs in my parallel argument from religious experience; it seems that BREs and GREs alike can be interpreted as acts of Evil-god. If, based on religious experience alone, the Evil-god hypothesis seems at least as reasonable as the Good-god hypothesis, then this establishes that there is no compelling reason to believe in the latter over the former; the Good-god hypothesis is as equally implausible as the Evil-god hypothesis⁴⁶. Now let us consider several objections that could potentially tip the balance of reasonableness toward the Good-god hypothesis.

43 Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”, 10.

44 Hay, “Religious Experience”, 172.

45 Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”, 12.

46 Of course, there may be other, non-alethic reasons why one might accept the Good-god hypothesis over the Evil-god hypothesis. Anastasia Scrutton, for example, argues that it is better for one’s well-being to believe in Good-god: Anastasia P. Scrutton, “Why Not Believe in an Evil God? Pragmatic Encroachment and Some Implications for Philosophy of Religion”, *Religious Studies* 52, no. 3 (2016), and Perry Hendricks suggests that some theists might consider their ‘seeming’ that Good-god exists or traditional doxastic practices good enough reason to accept the Good-god hypothesis: Perry Hendricks, “Sceptical Theism and the Evil-god Challenge”, *Religious Studies* 54, no. 4 (2018).

V. OBJECTIONS

I will now address four objections to the argument from religious experience for Evil-god. The first three objections are untenable because they undermine the argument from religious experience for the existence of Good-god to the same extent to which they undermine the argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god. The final objection applies only to the argument from religious experience for the existence of Evil-god, but I will attempt to undermine the objection in a way that shows the Evil-god hypothesis to be stronger than its Good-god counterpart.

Objection 1: There are naturalistic explanations for religious experiences.

The main objection to the traditional argument from religious experience is that there is a difference between the subjective phenomena of a religious experience and the true objective reality of the world.⁴⁷ Objectors claim that advocates of the veracity of religious experiences make a flawed logical leap from subjective qualia to objective reality, and the existence of the experience is not sufficient to establish ontological proof of a supernatural being. Specifically, it is argued that the perceived objects of the experience are imagined, therefore no religious experience can be truly validated. For example, scientists claim there is now a fairly solid naturalistic explanation for near-death experiences during which subjects believe they have experienced the afterlife. This challenge, which developed alongside cognitive and neurological advances, is reductionist — claiming that religious experiences can be reduced to more basic experiences than experience of the supernatural, and naturalistic — maintaining that all religious phenomena can ultimately be explained by natural phenomena.

This objection is a knife that cuts both ways because it applies to the traditional argument from religious experience for Good-god and the argument from religious experience for Evil-god alike; overall, it helps neither hypothesis gain ground. Although some Good-god hypothesisers may be tempted to claim that religious experiences of an evil supernatural entity are only explainable by psychosis, whereas experiences of a benevolent one stem directly from a real being⁴⁸, there is no compelling reason to treat these two types of experience differently. Since the aim of the Evil-god hypothesis is to undermine the Good-god hypothesis — not to establish the existence of Evil-god — the Evil-god hypothesiser does not mind objections like this that threaten the argument from religious experience for Good-god equally⁴⁹.

Objection 2: Experiences of evil are encounters with the devil

The Good-god hypothesiser could protest that if religious experiences are viewed holistically they suggest the existence of a good deity (Good-god) and an evil one (Evil-god), as experiences of both entities are common. From this, it could be argued that the argument from religious experience for Evil-god is not a threat for theists who believe in both Good-god and an evil supernatural force. After all, many denominations of Christianity maintain a theistic dualism that affirms the existence of both Good-god and the devil, although this belief has diminished substantially in recent years^{50, 51}.

To respond to this challenge, we need only include theistic dualism in the Evil-god hypothesis by speculating the existence of a lesser, benevolent god (or perhaps a fallen demon) that co-exists with Evil-god but has proclivities toward good rather than evil. This could suffice to explain the existence of religious experiences of Good-god in a world where Evil-god dominates⁵².

47 Antony Flew, *God and philosophy* (Prometheus Books, 2005).

48 Alister C. Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Clarendon Press; OUP, 1979).

49 Note that this objection would be effective against *weak* Evil-god challenges, which claim that the Evil-God hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis are both reasonable and justifiable positions to hold.

50 See Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (Farrar, 1995); Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”.

51 An anonymous reviewer points out that experiences of evil could cause one to believe in spiritual beings, which, in turn, could potentially lead to a strengthening of — or even full conversion to — belief in Good-god.

52 Bear in mind that I make no claims about the *levels* of power each of these hypothesised beings have. I only claim that whatever traditional theistic dualism is adopted by the Good-god hypothesiser can be mirrored by the Evil-god hypothesiser.

The Good-god hypothesiser might then counterargue by asking why Evil-god would allow a benevolent deity to exist in the first place. A similar problem is apparent in traditional theistic dualism. Hebblethwaite explains, “I find grave incoherence in the idea that Good-god might be thought to be sustaining a created universe containing fallen irredeemable, non-human spirits and allowing them to interfere with the human world.”⁵³

Two common theistic explanations for why Good-god allows the devil to persist are i) because it can bring about greater good, “deeming it to be more befitting His power and goodness to bring good out of evil than to prevent the evil from coming into existence”⁵⁴, and ii) Good-god’s goodness will ultimately defeat evil. Similarly, the Evil-god hypothesiser can maintain that the supreme Evil-god allows a lesser benevolent deity to exist i) to bring about greater evil (creating false hope that Good-god exists, for example, is one greater evil that Evil-god realises through distributing GREs) and ii) goodness will eventually be defeated by Evil-god’s evil. The theistic dualist seems to be stuck in a quandary whereby they must either allow the consistency of dualism in both the Evil-god hypothesis and the Good-god hypothesis or deny both. Again the objection is nullified because it is applicable to both hypotheses.

Objection 3: Bad religious experiences are not dispersed universally.

One common challenge to the traditional argument from religious experience is the question of why Good-god would choose to reveal itself to some people and not to others. Surely if a god was all-loving that god would disperse GREs universally. The same objection can be mirrored to the argument from religious experience for Evil-god. If a god was omnimalevolent surely that god would want to inflict as many BREs as possible.

To respond, I argue that the Evil-god hypothesis is compatible with the dispersion of BREs and GREs. Since Evil-god would enjoy maximizing evil, it could be argued that injustice is an evil that Evil-god would appreciate. Evil-god would create injustice by providing GREs and BREs to undeserving individuals⁵⁵. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Evil-god might administer experiences of Good-god because it enjoys instilling the false belief that Good-god exists. In fact, the Evil-god hypothesis provides a more satisfactory explanation for dispersion of religious experience than the Good-god hypothesis does since it can explain why Evil-god would disperse religious experiences unfairly, while the Good-god hypothesis cannot satisfactorily explain why an omnibenevolent being would inflict BREs on good people or refrain from giving good people GREs. With respect to this issue, the Evil-god hypothesis seems more plausible than the Good-god hypothesis.

Objection 4: Too many experiences of Good-god exist.

It is not just one or two cases of religious experience of Good-god that have been chronicled through history, but an abundance. Even if we can explain why there are *some* religious experiences of Good-god, it could be argued that the number of these experiences vastly outweighs the number of experiences of Evil-god; when comparing the numbers, we seem to find the Evil-god hypothesis lacking.

I have three responses to this objection. Firstly, it is extremely difficult to make a clear-cut comparison between the actual number of religious experiences of a benevolent supernatural being and those of a malevolent one. Studies have shown that alleged cases of demonic possession are rife in a large proportion of societies.⁵⁶ Jakobsen notes that many informants who sent in accounts of evil encounters did not

53 Cited in Graham Dow, “Case for the Existence of Demons”, *Churchman* 94 (1980).

54 Augustine and Marcus Dods, *The city of God* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 73.

55 Good-god hypothesisers might respond that there are persuasive reasons why Good-god *would* distribute religious experiences unjustly. They may, for example, make use of traditional theodicies or evoke the theory of Divine Silence. In response, I would suggest that these explanations can also be mirrored by the Evil-god hypothesis (see Law, “The Evil-god Challenge”) for a thorough explanation of ‘reverse theodicies’ defending Evil-god in the face of ‘the problem of good’).

56 See Erika Bourguignon, “Spirit Possession Belief and Social Structure”, in *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Ideas and Actions*; Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”.

broadcast the experiences because they did not want to scare loved ones, to be thought crazy, or to be disbelieved, as explained by the following statement:

Try to express your belief in the approachable and utterly accessible spiritual being, you have come to know, and immediately you are aware that you are considered a crank by some, a servant of the non-existent devil by others, and a source of embarrassment to your family. So what does one do? In most cases the answer would appear to be, maintain strict silence about one's private revelations for fear of being considered a fool, or worse. I wonder just how many people alive today are doing just that.⁵⁷

There is certainly a stigma associated with evil encounters, and many who experience them conclude that “staying silent is the safest approach.”⁵⁸ It is not surprising to learn that individuals who encounter evil nowadays do not come forward to disclose their experiences. Urbain Grandier was burned at the stake for his alleged deal with the devil, the Salem witch trials turned out very badly for those suspected of dark arts, and the Albigenian Crusade is just one of many savage persecutions of those suspected to be dealing with evil forces. Contrastingly, within denominations such as Catholicism, recipients of miracles or religious experiences of Good-god are venerated, offered fame and positive praise, and even proffered sainthood. Historically, those who have had demonic religious experiences have not enjoyed the same benefits or rewards. Even today individuals are executed for being suspected of dabbling in the dark arts in certain places. In Saudi Arabia, for example, witchcraft is punishable by death. Even in countries that do not impose illegal status on practices like this, victims of evil encounters can face extremely negative consequences. If an individual proclaims communication with an evil supernatural being, they would likely be committed to an institution for psychiatric treatment or at least socially shunned. Even if religious experiences of Evil-god were ubiquitous, we would expect subjects to avoid divulging the incidents to escape the persecution they would likely face. Jakobsen states that many people who have had evil encounters have kept completely mum about their experiences because “it is much more satisfying to share with others the encounters with a loving God or beautiful mystical experiences in nature than it is to narrate a gruesome, horrifying, and deeply disturbing encounter with the devil.”⁵⁹

But perhaps this is not a fair explanation of why reported experiences of Good-god outweigh reported experiences of Evil-god. An anonymous reviewer suggests that positive near-death experiences outweigh negative ones 2-1. Another reviewer points out that, historically, many people have avoided reporting experiences of Good-god for fear of persecution as well (for example, Jews in the fifteenth century and other maltreated minority religious groups throughout history). Ultimately, it is simply extremely difficult to know whether there have been more experiences of Good-god than of Evil-god.

Let us grant the Good-god hypothesiser this imbalance and accept that the number of religious experiences perceived to be caused by Good-god *does* outweigh those perceived to be caused by Evil-god. My second response offers another explanation of why those perceptions might exist by suggesting that the natural psychological tendencies of humans induce positive interpretations of experiences that postulate a benevolent cause if the alternative is a malevolent cause. Even if we do allow that there is an imbalance between perceived religious experiences of Good-god and Evil-god, wishful thinking and confirmation bias play a huge part in interpreting religious experiences. Wishful thinking is a cognitive bias that occurs when an individual's beliefs are influenced by their desires, and much evidence points to the pervasiveness of this bias.⁶⁰ Consequently, it could be argued that subjects of religious experiences would much rather believe that these experiences were caused by a benevolent force than a malevolent one, since the former is more desirable than the latter. For example, if an individual experiences a BRE, he or she would be more likely to believe that either i) it was a punishment for bad behaviour imposed by a benevolent god or ii) it will eventually lead to a reward, rather than to believe that iii) it was result of an evil god

57 Jakobsen, “Negative Religious Experiences: Encounters with Evil”, 3.

58 Ibid., 4.

59 Ibid., 6.

60 See Elisha Babad and Yosi Katz, “Wishful thinking — Against all odds”, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 21 (1991); Ralph Baergen, “The influence of cognition upon perception: the empirical story”, *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, no. 71 (1993).

inflicting harm on them for sadistic purposes. Imagine that a child receives an unpleasant and severe punishment from a teacher but is not told the reason for her punishment. It would be more desirable for the child to imagine that i) she is being punished for bad behaviour that she can prevent in the future or ii) she will be rewarded for her suffering later in life, than to believe that her teacher is a sadist who will continue to inflict gratuitous suffering on her without good reason.

Confirmation bias is the propensity for individuals to interpret information in a manner that confirms their pre-established beliefs, particularly those that are deep-rooted.⁶¹ This psychological phenomenon comes into play when Good-god hypothesisers (who vastly outnumber Evil-god hypothesisers) interpret their religious experiences to conform to their belief system. Wishful thinking combined with confirmation bias establishes that people tend to interpret experiences optimistically and in a way that conforms to their previously held beliefs: more likely than not, their belief in the Good-god hypothesis.

But, again, perhaps wishful thinking and confirmation bias do not offer a full and compelling reason to accept that Good-god experiences are not as prominent as they seem. My third response aims to establish that experiences of Good-god can be compatible with the existence of Evil-god. There are three explanations for this compatibility. First, as considered earlier, it could be supposed that when bringing about religious experiences Evil-god gives some people experiences of an imaginary benevolent god because it would enjoy instilling people with experiences based on falsehood, particularly those that give false hope. Second, as earlier mentioned, Evil-god might enjoy unjustly dispersing experiences of Good-god to those who are undeserving. The third reason, presented by Law, claims that dispersing contradictory religious experiences to different locations would inevitably create great suffering:

This malignant being may not want us to know of his existence. In fact, it may help him maximize evil if he deceives us about his true character... Taking on a 'good' guise, he might appear in one corner of the world, revealing himself in religious experiences and performing miracles in response to prayers, and perhaps also giving instructions regarding what his followers should believe. He might then do the same in another part of the globe, with the exception that the instructions he leaves regarding what should be believed contradict what he has said elsewhere... Our evil being could then stand back and watch the inevitable conflict develop between communities to whom he has now misleadingly revealed himself, each utterly convinced by their own stock of miracles and religious experiences that the one true all-good god is on their side. Here we have a recipe for ceaseless conflict, violence and suffering.⁶²

What makes less sense is why religious experiences of Evil-god would occur if Good-god exists. Why would an omnibenevolent god distribute BREs to good people or GREs to bad people? This suggests that the Evil-god hypothesis can offer a better explanation for the dispersion of religious experiences than the Good-god hypothesis can. If the Evil-god hypothesis can adequately explain why many people have religious experiences of Good-god, but the Good-god hypothesis cannot adequately explain why many people have religious experiences of Evil-god, this strengthens the former and weakens the latter and tips the reasonableness scale toward the Evil-god hypothesis.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to demonstrate that — if we grant Swinburne's contentions that happenings of this type should be believed by those who experience them and that we should trust the testimony of those who have experienced them — religious experiences offer stronger evidence for the existence of an evil god than they do a good god. I have agreed that there appear to be more experiences of Good-god than of Evil-god, but I have explained why this appearance is compatible with the existence of Evil-god. I have also proposed reasons for why some types of religious experience are *more compatible* with the existence of Evil-god than Good-god, which tips the balance of reasonableness toward the Evil-god hypothesis. Consequently, unless Good-god hypothesisers can meet the Evil-god challenge by demonstrating why

61 Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises", *Review of General Psychology* 2 (1998).

62 Law, "The Evil-god Challenge".

religious experiences provide a significantly stronger case for Good-god than Evil-god, the argument from religious experience should not be included in the cumulative case for the existence of Good-god.

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