

RICHARDS SWINBURNE'S CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: AN ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

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Abstract. The so-called 'argument from religious experience' plays a prominent role in today's analytical philosophy of religion. It is also of considerable importance to Richard Swinburne's apologetic project. However, rather than joining the polyphonic debate around this argument, the present paper examines the fundamental concept of religious experience. The upshot is that Swinburne neither develops a convincing concept of experience nor explains what makes a religious experience *religious*. The first section examines some problems resulting mainly from terminology, specifically Swinburne's use of appear-words as success-verbs. While these problems might be resolved by a recurrence to the observer, the second and third part of our paper present problems not so easily resolved: namely, that Swinburne's concept of experience as conscious mental events is too broad and inaccurate for its role in the argument given (Section 2); and that Swinburne does not even attempt to figure out which features of an experience, when present, turn an experience *simpliciter* into a distinctly religious experience (Section 3). Section 4, in conclusion, outlines possible reasons for this unusual and remarkable inaccuracy in conceptualisation.

“The term “experience” (taken as either a noun or a verb)
is notoriously slippery.”

Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*

The so-called *argument from religious experience* plays a prominent role in today's analytically coined philosophy of religion.¹ Therefore, it

¹ Many thanks to Winfried Löffler, Oliver Wiertz and Thomas M. Schmidt for valuable hints and discussions. – A German version of this paper was published in: Heinrich, E. / Schönecker, D. (Hrsg.), *Wirklichkeit und Wahrnehmung des Heiligen, Schönen, Guten – Neue Beiträge zur Realismusdebatte* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2011), pp. 125-146.

is not surprising that this argument is also of considerable importance to Richard Swinburne's almost canonical work *The Existence of God*;² as a matter of fact, he says so explicitly, writing that the argument is 'of most importance for the purpose of this book [i.e. to *The Existence of God*]' (p. 296).³ It is of central importance because once it is shown that the probability of theism given evidence other than religious experience is not very low,⁴ the 'testimony of many witnesses to experiences apparently of God suffices to make many of those experiences probably veridical'; thus the evidence of religious experience is a 'crucial piece of evidence' (p. 341).

Even so, there seem to be great discrepancies between the two (or three) editions of *The Existence of God*. While in the first edition (1979) Swinburne requires only that the probability of the existence of God given the classical arguments of natural theology should not be very low in order for the whole argument of religious experience to succeed, in the second edition (2004) he seems to believe not only that the probability *should not* be very low, but that it *should* be relatively high (something around 0.5).⁵ This is not the place to trace the development of Swinburne's work, however. For this essay, it is sufficient to assess the work only to the extent that we can point out that the argument from religious experience is of central importance to Swinburne's overall argumentation.

Thus, the general purpose of our paper is *not* an analysis of this argument; neither its concrete implementation nor its specific role in the cumulative overall argument is of interest to us. Rather, our aim is to provide an analysis of the very *concept* that is indispensable to and that is indeed the kernel of the argument from religious experience, to wit,

² The 'argument from religious experience' also plays a role, albeit only a minor one, in the likewise eminent work of Alvin Plantinga, especially in his *Warranted Christian Belief*. Its demoted importance in Plantinga's work is expected, however, since it is the quintessence of Reformed Epistemology and the core of Plantinga's concept of 'warrant' that belief in God does not need any arguments and also does not need any argument based on experience in particular). Furthermore, Plantinga's *properly basic beliefs* about God are formed independently from religious experience.

³ Page numbers in brackets refer to Richard Swinburne's *The Existence of God*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ Swinburne discusses the arguments in this order: The Cosmological Argument, Teleological Arguments, Arguments from Consciousness and Morality, The Argument for Providence, The Problem of Evil, Arguments from History and Miracles – and then The Argument from Religious Experience.

⁵ We are confining our analysis to the edition of 2004. See also Löffler 2011.

the concept of *religious experience*. The reason is simple: Whatever the merits of the argument from religious experience are or could be, one would think that it can only work if it is based on a clear cut concept of religious experience; after all, that is what the argument is about. It is therefore of major concern for Swinburne's argumentation that he provide a convincing concept of 'religious experience'. Furthermore, it is remarkable that despite its significance for Swinburne's argumentation, until now there has been no detailed analysis of Swinburne's concept of religious experience; discussion has revolved entirely around evaluations of the argument itself. Thus, an analysis of Swinburne's concept of religious experience is, as far as we can tell, a desideratum.⁶

After some preliminary remarks, Swinburne begins his chapter on the argument from religious experience with a section on 'The nature of religious experience' (pp. 293-298); the next section is about 'Five kinds of religious experience' (pp. 298-303). After a little more than two and a half pages, Swinburne writes: 'So much for what an "experience" is and the ways in which we can describe it; but what constitutes a "religious experience"?' (p. 295). Thus there are two basic questions: What is an experience, and what is a religious experience?

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Swinburne provides an unsatisfactory answer to both of these questions. Roughly speaking, we see three problems with Swinburne's concept of religious experience: (1) The first has to do with a distinction between what Swinburne calls 'internal' and 'external' descriptions of one's experiences and, based on this, a distinction between the 'epistemic' and 'comparative' use of so-called 'appear words'; this first, mainly terminological problem, although it takes some time to describe, can rather easily be resolved. The second and third problems are much more important and severe: Swinburne does not really explain what makes an experience an experience (2); because of this, but not only because this, he fails, thirdly (3), to explain what makes a religious experience *religious*. We will structure our analysis in this order.

⁶ Franks Davis only mentions Swinburne's *concept* of religious experience marginally (1989: 22 f.), though Swinburne plays a major role to her work. She also nearly completely misses the particularities and problems we discuss here. Kwan, in his work *The Argument from Religious Experience* (2009), gives an overview of the current debate on the argument of religious experience. He, too, concentrates in his reproduction of Swinburne's variant of the argument on the argument itself and says little on Swinburne's concept of religious experience.

I. THE FIRST PROBLEM: 'INTERNAL' AND 'EXTERNAL' DESCRIPTIONS OF ONE'S EXPERIENCES

On the face of it, Swinburne's analysis has the following structure: He starts with a very broad definition of 'experience' as 'a conscious mental event' (p. 293). He then distinguishes between an external and an internal description of an experience: the former, if true, entails that the object that is experienced really exists, whereas the latter, internal description, if true, does not entail this. Swinburne's claim then is that 'all arguments from religious experience must be phrased as arguments from experience given internal descriptions' (p. 294). The vocabulary of such an internal description, Swinburne argues next, consists in terms such as 'appear' or 'seem' as well as in perception verbs such as 'look', 'feel', or 'taste'. All these terms, says Swinburne (following Chisholm), can have an 'epistemic' as well as a 'comparative' use; consequently, one expects an internal description of a religious experience to include an epistemic or comparative use of the language. In what follows, we will discuss Swinburne's model in more detail.⁷

According to Swinburne, religious experience is defined 'as an experience that seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God' (p. 295).⁸ Obviously, this definition makes use of a rather obscure terminology, thus needing further explanation – for what does it mean that a religious experience is an experience that 'seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God'? To clarify this definition, we first have to turn to Swinburne's distinction between internal and external descriptions. Later we will see that this is where a problem for the definition arises.

In the following passage, Swinburne introduces his understanding of the distinction between internal and external descriptions:

An experience 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

⁷ It is remarkable that Swinburne only spends two pages of his analysis on the nature of experience and perception. Already at this stage, we may note critically that a cumulative argumentation, whose success depends substantially on the argument from religious experience, probably would have made it worth spending more than two pages on analysing the nature of experience and perception.

⁸ This quote has been shortened to fit our preliminary purposes; we will return to the complete definition later.

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. (pp. 293 f.)

It is obvious that, with his talk of 'external description', Swinburne refers to the basic idea of realism in the philosophy of perception; namely, that one can only perceive (or experience) what is really there; thus (to reproduce an example by Swinburne), one cannot and does not hear a coach outside the window if there is no coach outside the window. In other words, Swinburne obviously believes that within an external description 'perceiving' is a success verb, i.e. a verb describing an act of perception (such as smelling, seeing, etc.), which implies that what one perceives is really there in order to be perceivable. This idea (which goes back to Gilbert Ryle) – that perception verbs are success verbs – is essentially a semantic idea. It states that appear words are used in such a way that they imply the existence of the object that is claimed to be perceived. Whoever claims to have heard a coach outside the window also claims that there is a coach outside the window. Should it turn out that there is no coach outside the window, then this person will no longer claim – or is no longer allowed to claim – that she has heard a coach outside the window; in fact, she has not heard a coach (maybe she hasn't heard anything or heard something else). Exactly in this sense, Swinburne writes that 'if I really do hear the coach outside the window, then it *follows* that there is a coach outside the window' (p. 294, emphasis added), whereas an internal description 'does *not entail* the existence of anything external' (p. 294, emphasis added). We will see later that, indeed, this kind of perceptual realism is one of Swinburne's crucial assumptions,⁹ and that it is, among other things, the very assumption that leads to a misleading presentation.

⁹ Considering the burden of proof, which religious perception has to take for the real existence of its object according to Swinburne's theory, it is of no surprise that he makes use of such a realistic concept.

Swinburne distinguishes explicitly between an experience and the way that experience is *described*; after all, it is not an external or internal experience, but an external or internal *description* of that experience that shall play the role of a premiss in an argument from religious experience. According to Swinburne,

(1) I hear a coach outside the window.

is an *external* description, whereas

(2) I have an auditory sensation that seems to come from a coach outside the window.

is an *internal* description. Again, on the assumption that ‘hearing’ is a success-verb, (1) can only be true if there is a coach outside the window that is making the sounds that I hear. On the other hand, (2) can be true even if there is no coach outside the window; I might very well have an auditory sensation that seems to come from a coach outside the window though there is no coach outside the window. Thus, (2) is true simply if I do have an auditory sensation that seems to come from a coach outside the window; for (2) to be true, I just need to report my experience correctly (and thus must not lie, for instance). Hence the truth conditions for (1) are more stringent than those for (2). For example, if a woman says she has an auditory sensation that seems to her to come from a coach outside the window, all I need to assume in order to believe that claim is that this person is truthful. Assuming perceptual realism, one can question whether she *really* heard a coach outside the window without having to question whether she *believes* that she hears such a coach; one does not have to doubt her truthfulness in order to doubt the existence of the coach.¹⁰

Swinburne does not make such painstaking terminological clarifications as we do here, but these clarifications are well suited to his more general remarks on perception. The following quote, consisting of such general remarks, amounts to Swinburne’s endorsement of perceptual realism:

It seems to me, for reasons that others have given at length, that the causal theory of perception is correct – that S perceives x [...] if and only

¹⁰ But if one denies perceptual realism (and the theory of success verbs), one can doubt the existence of the coach outside the window without also doubting that somebody is hearing such a coach (and not only has an auditory experience, which seems to come from a coach outside the window).

if an experience of its seeming (epistemically) to S that x is present is caused by x's being present. 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. (p. 296)

The causal theory of perception that Swinburne adopts in this passage concerns more than the mere description of an experience; for this is a theory about *how* real objects bring about perceptions, to wit, causally. This causal aspect of the theory has severe problems of its own. We will not confront them here.

Pertaining to the description of experience and in order to elicit the difficulties in Swinburne's account that arise from such descriptions, we first have to look at a distinction that Swinburne himself, following Chisholm, calls 'crucial' (p. 294): the distinction 'between the epistemic and the comparative uses of such verbs as 'seems', 'appears', 'looks' etc.' (pp. 294 f.). As already pointed out in the beginning, it is important to understand that this distinction is a distinction *within* or *for* internal descriptions. People give internal descriptions of their experiences, and they do so by means of terms like 'appear' or 'seem' as well as by perception-verbs such as 'look', 'feel', or 'taste'. Of all these terms – Chisholm calls them 'appear words' – there can be an epistemic and a comparative use; but in any event, they are used in *internal* descriptions.

Now according to Swinburne's account, internal descriptions are internal because they describe only *the experience itself* without implying anything about the possible existence of the object that might have caused the experience; and there is no such implication, one would think, because a person that describes an experience internally expresses some *doubt* about the possible existence of that object. For example, if I have an experience and describe it with (2), then I might claim that I have an auditory sensation that *seems* to come from a coach outside the window, but it just seems that way; maybe there is a coach, maybe not. According to Swinburne, in sentences like (2), the term 'seem' is used epistemically: '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' (p. 295). When uttering (2), I do not claim that there is in fact a coach outside the window. I only claim to have an auditory experience that seems to come from a coach outside the window. However, when using the term 'seem' epistemically like in (2), I want to express my inclination to believe that this auditory experience *probably* has its cause

in a coach outside the window. I am *uncertain* of its cause; for if I were certain, I would simply give an external description and utter (1). But since I am only '*inclined to believe*' (p. 295, emphasis added) that there is a coach outside the window, since I have only an '*inclination*' (p. 295) to this belief, I will describe my experience with (2).

It remains unclear precisely *how much* I am inclined to this belief in a coach outside in order to utter (2), or how probable I must think it that there is a coach outside the window. Indeed, Swinburne says nothing about it. But I must find it more likely that there is a coach outside the window than not; but again, I must not be completely convinced of it, for otherwise my description would not be internal but external (or should be so), and I would use description (1). On the other hand, if I find it unlikely that there is a coach outside the window, or even if I'm quite positive that there is none, I'll describe my experience internally by making a comparative use of 'seem', saying maybe (2), but meaning something like this:

- (3) I hear something that sounds like a coach would normally sound outside the window.

By (3), I am not saying that there is no coach outside the window. However, I must have serious doubts, believing that somehow it is rather unlikely that there really is a coach. If I did find it somewhat likely, or in other words if I were inclined to believe that there is a coach, then I would probably utter (2). On Swinburne's account, it is crucial to internal descriptions that they express a more or less strong doubt about the external object that might be perceived; this 'more or less' can further be differentiated and expressed by the epistemic and comparative use of those terms.

From this background-theory arises a serious problem for Swinburne's definition of 'religious experience'. According to Swinburne, an experience that seems to a subject epistemically to be an experience of God must be an experience described internally; for only experiences described internally involve epistemic uses of appear words. This fits well with Swinburne's early claim that 'all arguments from religious experience must be phrased as arguments from experiences given internal descriptions' (p. 294). An experience that seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God is an experience out of which, as already seen in the example of the coach above, arises an *inclination to believe* that God exists or is somehow present. Any description of

such an experience will be an internal description. Someone who makes a religious experience will describe it for instance like this:

(4) I have a visual sensation that seems to come from God.

Such a person does not (strongly) believe that her sensation does, as a matter of fact, come from God; if she did, she would have no reason to utter a sentence like (4) but rather would describe her experience externally. This has a strange consequence: if someone, for instance, sees God (say in a burning bush) and 'on the basis of his present sensory experience' (p. 295) forms the (strong) belief that she is in the presence of God, then, by Swinburne's definition, this is *not* a religious experience, which means further that it is not an experience that may serve as a premise in the 'argument from religious experience'. According to Swinburne, a religious experience is (as already quoted) defined 'as an experience that just seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God' (p. 295) such that the subject to some extent below certainty is just *inclined* to believe that God exists as the object of experience. So, according to Swinburne, people with true faith who believe to have a religious experience in fact cannot have a religious experience, since Swinburne includes the requirement of doubt into his definition of a religious experience. That seems odd to say the least and indeed too odd to be true and to be intended or even accepted by Swinburne.¹¹

This consequence seems so absurd that we should look for another interpretation. In defence of Swinburne, one might come up with the following reply: Swinburne appeals to Chisholm's distinction between the epistemic and the comparative use of appear words. Now Swinburne writes, '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' (p. 295, emphasis added). Unfortunately, by emphasising the *inclination* to believe as part of an epistemic use of appear words,¹² Swinburne gives the impression that in an internal description using appear words epistemically, some subject S expresses some doubt about the object allegedly perceived; Swinburne gives the impression that S, who describes her experience, will not have a firm belief in any

¹¹ On a conference at the university of Frankfurt (October 2009), Swinburne conceded that some of his definitions in this area might be a little 'sloppy'.

¹² In the crucial passage (p. 295) Swinburne talks about such an 'inclination' five times.

event. But this impression, so the general defence, is misleading and unintended. Indeed, a quick look at Chisholm's original text and theory shows that using an appear word does not rule out a strong belief at all. Says Chisholm:

If I say that the ship 'appears to be moving' [...] then it may be inferred that I believe, *or* that I am inclined to believe, that the ship is moving. When appear words are used in this way, then such locutions as 'x appears to S to be so-and-so' and 'x appears so-and-so to S' may be taken to imply that the subject believes, *or* is inclined to believe, that x is so-and-so.¹³

Thus, whereas Swinburne just writes that S has an *inclination* to believe something, e.g. that the ship is moving, Chisholm writes (twice) that S believes *or* is inclined to believe such a thing. So we should read Swinburne while having in mind Chisholm's thoughts. If someone makes an epistemic use of appear words in a sentence such as, for instance,

(5) God appears to be talking to me.

she is not necessarily expressing any doubt about what she believes; she might very well and strongly believe that God is talking to her. According to Chisholm, she could just as well have said

(5*) Apparently – or evidently – God is talking to me.

So the defence of Swinburne concludes with the following observation: it is a misinterpretation of Swinburne to assume that internal descriptions of experiences (including internal descriptions of religious experiences) making epistemic use of appear words express doubt.

Unfortunately for Swinburne's position, this defence is futile. To Chisholm the epistemic use of an appear word is by no means an indication of some doubt on part of the subject. To use, for example, 'appear' epistemically is just another way to express one's perceptual belief. If S claims that it appears to her that the ship is moving (to pick up Chisholm's example) she could just as well claim that she sees that the ship is moving (and hence that she believes that the ship is moving). In his chapter on the uses of appear words, Chisholm begins with a definition of 'perceive' in the propositional sense. In this definition he points out that a person who makes an epistemic use of an appear word can easily fulfil the conditions of actually perceiving the object that the

¹³ Cp. Chisholm 1957: ch. 4, 43-53 (p. 43, emphasis added).

person refers to – all that is required is that the person merely uses the appear word to describe her perception.

Assume that Swinburne's account of internal descriptions is along the lines of Chisholm's own account. Then Swinburne faces another difficulty. The reason why Swinburne introduces a distinction between external and internal descriptions in the first place is that he wants to avoid a blatant *petitio principii* in the argument from religious experience. Such an argument would run as follows:

1. Joe sees Poseidon standing by the window.
2. Whenever a person sees x, x really exists.

Therefore, Poseidon really exists (and is standing by the window).

The problem with this, says Swinburne, is 'that there is going to be considerable doubt about the truth of the [first] premiss' (p. 294). The first premise can only be true if Poseidon really exists; for Poseidon's existence is the requirement that makes it possible for Joe to really *see* Poseidon standing by the window. What is to be proved (Poseidon's existence), is already presupposed in the first premise (whereas the truth of the second premise does not depend on the success-character of the term 'seeing', but on the 'principle of credulity'). To avoid this problem, Swinburne suggests to use only internal descriptions because these descriptions, again, do '*not* entail the existence of anything external' (p. 294, emphasis added); rather, they report only an experience and they report it epistemically.

So on Swinburne's own account Joe does not, properly speaking, believe at all that Poseidon is standing by the window (and, therefore, exists); he just has an *inclination* to believe so. If, on the other hand, one assumes (generously and against what Swinburne says) that Swinburne's account of internal and external is not different from Chisholm's original account, then Swinburne is unable to avoid a circularity he pointed out himself, a circularity that led him to avoid external descriptions of experience for an argument from religious experience in the first place.

To sum up shortly, Swinburne is confronted with the following dilemma: either the perception verbs that are used to describe religious experiences are used *externally*, which means using them as achievement verbs – but then it follows that the argument from religious experience is circular. Or, as Swinburne suggests, perception verbs used to describe religious experiences are used as *epistemically internal* descriptions – but

then the person who uses them cannot believe as strong as one would suppose someone to believe who has a religious experience.

These problems are not least generated, we believe, by the fact that Swinburne does not discriminate between the first and third-person-perspective. We already hinted to Swinburne's emphasis of the fact that in an argument from religious experience descriptions are involved, i.e. internal descriptions (as opposed to external descriptions). But *whose* descriptions are these? Given the way Swinburne introduces internal and external descriptions, it is strongly suggested that the subject that makes the experience describes this experience herself. In any event, in the examples that Swinburne provides it is the subject *herself* that speaks: 'If *I* really do hear the coach outside the window', or: 'Yet, if *I* describe my experience as ...', or: '*I* talked to God last night', or: '*I* saw Poseidon standing by the window' (all p. 294, there are more examples). Now if we as philosophers of religion take such a first-person-description as the premiss of an argument from religious experience, we are faced with the problem that we either beg the question by having to take perception verbs as achievement verbs in the context of an external description, or we run into the problem of only being able to acknowledge those experiences with dubitable objects as 'religious experiences'. But why make things so complicated? Of course, unless we make religious experiences of our own, we will have to start with what someone reports and describes. What Joe reports is that he saw Poseidon standing by the window. But then all we have to do is to change to the third-person-perspective. Thus, taking into consideration Swinburne's goal of *prima facie* justification,¹⁴ the above argument from religious experience would get the following form:

1. Joe has an experience that he describes as seeing Poseidon standing by the window.
2. Whenever a person has an experience that he or she describes as seeing some external *x*, then he or she is *prima facie* justified in believing that *x* really exists.

Therefore, Joe is *prima facie* justified in believing that Poseidon really exists.

¹⁴ It is a different matter that this kind of *prima facie* justification does not help much within the apologetic debate. At least, a clearer formulation of the argument shows more precisely where the difficulties lie – e.g. in the missing persuasiveness of experiences had by only a few to those not having had the same experiences.

This concludes the discussion of the first problem.¹⁵ Now let us turn to more serious problems such as the second. The question is: 'What makes an experience an experience?'

¹⁵ The most simple solution to Swinburne's problems would probably be to give up the theory of success verbs; but this is not what we want to discuss here. We think that there are cases in which there are good reasons to say that someone *hears* something that does not exist. Such cases, if they exist, prove that 'hearing' is not a success verb and, *a fortiori*, that 'perceiving' is no success verb. Think about what it really means to state that a verb like 'hearing' (to take it as an example) is a success verb. It means: The speakers of a certain (english-speaking) language community which make use of the verb 'hearing', use it *de facto* as a success verb; it should not be used differently; this is an implicit rule within the community and the speakers accept that rule or would accept it, after having become clear about it. The theory that hearing is a success verb is, in fact, not (part of) an attempt to give a definition of that verb which neglects common speech. However, it is also possible to show that even philosophers who take perception verbs to be success verbs do not always comply to using them according to their theory. Richard Schantz, for example, writes in an essay on the plasticity of perception (2000: 66), where he is discussing the phenomenon of phoneme restoration: 'In these cases, a person hears a recording of a word, from which a phoneme was removed and replaced by a click-sound. Though she knows about the manipulation, she *hears* the whole word.' It is remarkable that Schantz writes that the subject hears a recording of the word which is missing a phoneme and that the subject, even if she knows about the phonemic gap, '*hears*' the whole word. How could that be possible if 'hearing' was a success verb? If 'hearing' would be a success verb, one could only hear what is in fact present in form of an acoustic signal. Suppose, the word uttered is 'EiseCLICKbahn'. The subject could not hear 'Eisenbahn', since the word 'Eisenbahn' would not have been uttered and one cannot hear what has not been uttered. Since we (and also Schantz), in fact say (and want to continue saying) that the subject hears 'Eisenbahn', 'hearing' cannot be an success verb. In conversation, Schantz objected to our argument as follows: If somebody sees a table whose surface is mostly covered by a tablecloth, we still say that the person sees the (whole) table, though she does not see it completely. However, this analogy is flawed, since in the example of the table, the table is present as a whole and is only partly perceived. In contrast, the acoustic sequence of the word 'Eisenbahn' is *not* present; therefore, it is not as if the word was completely there but only partially (since covered by a CLICK) perceived. The word is not there (is not uttered, does not exist) and, therefore, could not be heard if 'hearing' was a success verb. But we say that the subject hears it. Therefore, 'hearing' is no success verb. But why is it then, that Schantz says that the subject 'hears' the whole word, even if the word has not been uttered? And why is it, that we are used to speak that way and do not want to change our way of speaking? The reason may be that the verb 'hearing' refers to what is subjectively given to the perceiving subject, something that does not change, regardless whether what causes it exists or not. But then should we not also say that even hallucinating people *hear* something that is not there? The reason why we do not want to say that a hallucinating person 'hears' something could be that we assume the cognitive apparatus of hallucinating people to be deficient, which is not the case for the subject in Schantz's example.

II. THE SECOND PROBLEM: WHAT MAKES AN EXPERIENCE AN EXPERIENCE?

As already noted, Swinburne begins with a very broad definition of 'experience': 'An experience is a conscious mental event' (p. 293). Later upon moving to the concept of *religious* experience, Swinburne appears to identify the act of experiencing God with being *aware* of God. Says Swinburne: 'What is it for the subject to be right, in fact to *experience* God, *that is*, to be *aware* of God, and in a very general sense to perceive God ... ' (p. 296, emphasis added); then again, Swinburne identifies perception with awareness: "'Perceive" is the general verb for awareness of something apart from oneself' (p. 296).

To begin with a minor note, the latter definition is certainly misleading: That 'experience' is the experience 'of some particular external thing *apart from the subject*' (p. 292, emphasis added) and, accordingly, that 'perceive' is the 'general verb for awareness of something *apart from oneself*' cannot be taken literally; for there is, of course, *inner* perception too, e.g. when it comes to pain, where we perceive something that is not 'apart from the subject'. Of course, Swinburne is aware of this problem, so that one should ask why he presents this rather strict definition of perception. The answer could be that Swinburne wants religious experience (or religious perception, if veridical) not to be a kind of perception of inner objects or states, but a kind of perception of God.¹⁶ However, it would surely have made more sense to distinguish between inner and outer perception; this would have allowed Swinburne to point out more clearly what makes a perception, inner or outer, a perception at all.

To claim that experience is a conscious mental event is certainly true; but recognising this is unenlightening because this very same predicate – to be a conscious mental event – applies, of course, to quite different things such as thinking, perceiving, feeling, memorising, introspection, and maybe some more. All these are mental events, but not experiences. Our concern is simple but crucial: Swinburne provides no account *whatsoever* of what makes a conscious mental event an experience. Although he offers a necessary condition for something to be an experience (a conscious mental event), this condition is obviously not sufficient. To have *thoughts* about God is a conscious mental event too; if we are to distinguish

¹⁶ Cp. footnote 2 on p. 295, where Swinburne explicitly speaks of religious or quasi-religious experiences (e.g., in Buddhist tradition), which are not experiences 'of anything external' and which he wants to exclude.

thoughts about God from *experiencing* God, we need to know more than just that the latter is a conscious mental event. The experience of God must be understood as a source of knowledge about God that is different from possible other sources such as *a priori* knowledge, logical arguments, or thinking in general. This is not only a narrow-minded remark on a minor definitional mistake that could easily be corrected. The weight of the 'argument from religious experience' essentially comes from the fact that the basis of this argument (i.e., religious experience) differs significantly from the basis of other arguments that Swinburne treats in previous chapters of his work.

On the one hand, one might think that what Swinburne has in mind when it comes to a religious experience is something like a religious perception, i.e. a perception that involves sensations or common sensory experiences. Thus his first major example of an experience is clearly about perception, the subject's '*hearing* the coach outside the window' (p. 294, emphasis added). On the other hand, an early example of a religious experience – 'I became conscious of a timeless reality beyond myself' (p. 294) – is an experience not clearly, or in any event, not necessarily based on common perception. Later on, Swinburne notes that this example belongs to one of five kinds of religious experience; and that this kind of religious experience is characterised by the fact that the experience is one 'the subject does *not* have by having sensations' (p. 300, emphasis added), which means that she has it without having sense impressions.¹⁷ With this kind of religious experience, it is ruled out that religious experiences are experiences as conscious mental events necessarily involving sensations; for here is an experience that a subject can have without any sensations (Swinburne refers primarily to 'mystical' experiences, p. 300). Swinburne claims that such an awareness is a kind of *experience*, but we learn nothing of what *makes* it an experience; we should not think of common experiences or perceptions here – but of what else? What distinguishes a religious experience of the fifth kind from the thoughts of Anselm, inventing and writing down the ontological argument, or from the experience of someone considering and reading it?

¹⁷ In this context (pp. 298 ff.), Swinburne also speaks of 'visual sensations' (p. 299) and 'auditory sensations' (p. 299), so he is obviously thinking of impressions mediated by our senses, which means (most prominently) impressions of our eyes or ears, or, shortly: sense-impressions.

Finally, the possibility of having an experience without sensations leads to a further problem concerning the concept of internal descriptions. Swinburne defines 'religious experience', as we already quoted, as 'an experience that seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God (either of him just being there, or of his saying or bringing about something) or of some other supernatural thing' (p. 295). On the other hand, the epistemic use of appear words is defined as follows: '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*' (p. 295, emphasis added). From this it follows, that any religious experience, since it always *seems* (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God, is an experience that brings about a belief, or in any event, an inclination to form or have a belief, 'on the basis of present sensory experience'.

At the same time, Swinburne identifies the experience of God with the perception of God. Here 'perception', however, is defined in a way that does not entail that someone who perceives something does so 'on the basis of present sensory experience'; "Perceive", says Swinburne, 'is the general verb for awareness of something apart from oneself, which may be mediated by any of the ordinary senses [...] or by none of these' (p. 296, emphasis added). But if religious experience, that is, religious perception, may occur without the mediation of the senses, then these occurrences cannot be instances to be described with an epistemic use of 'seeming'; for such an experience is an experience that makes the subject inclined to believe something 'on the basis of his present sensory experience', which obviously is not available if there is no mediation by the senses.

So either Swinburne gives up his broad understanding of 'perception' (that allows him to include non-sensory experiences), or he ought to alter his understanding of the epistemic use of appear words allowing an epistemic use that is not based on sensory experience. As already mentioned, the fifth type of religious experience is introduced as one 'that the subject does *not* have by having sensations' (p. 300). That is compatible with the wide use of 'perception' but it conflicts with the use of 'seeming' as part of what a religious experience is in the first place.

In summary, it is our opinion that Swinburne's definition of experience is grained too coarsely, neither allowing him to describe religious experiences as religious experiences nor allowing him to distinguish them from other mental events that are also about religious objects. In order to

avoid leaving common speech (as well as philosophical tradition) too far aside, whoever is dealing with experience and perception on a theoretical basis should take the feature of *givenness* into account. Especially when something is given to somebody not on the basis of sense experience (by one of our five or more senses), it seems reasonable to think of religious experience in terms of *religious emotions*. It is therefore worth noting that Swinburne has nothing to say on emotions – even when he speaks of a kind of religious experience that a ‘subject does not have by having sensations’. The basic problem we discussed so far – that Swinburne cannot explain what an experience is – will become even more problematic when we now turn to the third problem. For Swinburne also fails to explain what a *religious* experience is.

III. THE THIRD PROBLEM:

WHAT MAKES AN EXPERIENCE A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

By definition, a religious experience is ‘an experience that seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God or of some other supernatural being’. But what exactly does this mean?

Let us take a quick look at Swinburne’s *classification* of religious experience: there are five kinds of religious experience, Swinburne says (pp. 298-303); two of them are public, three are private. In the first kind of religious experiences, *ordinary* public objects such as a night sky are understood as supernatural objects.¹⁸ In the second kind, *unusual* public objects – such as a man looking and talking like Jesus in the comparative sense after crucifixion – are taken to be religious objects, taken, for instance, to *be* Jesus. Here, it is important to note that Swinburne states that nonbelievers (non-religious people) will have the *same* sense-impressions as believers – otherwise it would not be a public experience – but rather *no* religious experience at all: in his own words: ‘A sceptic might have the *same visual sensations* (described comparatively) and yet not have the religious experience’ (p. 299). In the third kind of religious experience (which is the first kind of *private* religious experience), the experience of God is based upon ordinary sensations, or at least sensation that can be described in common terminology (one hears or sees God). Contrarily, in the fourth kind of religious experience there are

¹⁸ ‘Thus someone may look at the night sky, and suddenly, “see it as” God’s handiwork.’ (p. 299)

experiences accompanied by ordinary-sensations but not describable in 'normal vocabulary' (p. 300). We have already mentioned the fifth kind of religious experience: it is a religious experience that is characterised by *not* having sense impressions while nevertheless having an experience of God.

Having introduced these five kinds of religious experience, Swinburne himself then raises the following question: 'What was it about your experience that made it seem to you that you were having an experience of God?' (p. 301). Clearly, the question drives at the object of the experience ('What was it about your experience that made it seem to you that you were having an experience of *God*?') and not at the way of referring to God (the question is not: 'What was it about your experience that made it seem to you that you were having an *experience* of God?'). In any event, it is neither clear nor even discussed what makes an experience an experience of *God*, and this is because for the first four kinds of religious experience, Swinburne gives what he calls a 'partial answer' (p. 301). The subject that has the experience has 'such-and-such auditory or visual or other describable sensations' (p. 301). However, with regard to the religious experiences of kind one, two and three, this answer is only partial, because according to Swinburne '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' (p. 301, emphasis added). For instance, where a believer sees the night sky as God's handiwork, someone else just sees the night sky; where believers in the cathedral of Naples see the liquefaction of a sample of Saint Januarius' blood, non-believers just see some fluid.

Now if sensations of this sort as part of a religious experience are *not* what make an experience an experience of God, then what is it? By calling the answer partial, Swinburne suggests that sensations are necessary, but not sufficient. Since Swinburne says nothing about the other part of a possible full answer, the sufficient conditions for a religious experience, it remains mysterious what makes a religious experience an experience of God. It seems natural to argue that whatever makes such an experience an experience of *God* is based on the experiencing subject's *awareness* of the existence of God. As stated elsewhere, Swinburne identifies these two things ('What is it of the subject to be right, in fact (*experience* God, *that is*, to be *aware* of God, and in a very general sense to perceive God ... ', p. 296, emphasis added). But 'to be aware of God' is not a sufficiently

distinctive feature of religious experiences. Mere *thinking* about God already means that the thinker is aware of (the existence of) God.

A subject might be aware of God in another way than by thinking, perhaps somehow related to sense impressions or analogous to perception. In reply to this idea one has to take into account that such sensory content might be present in a strict sense (referring to sense impressions; cp. the kinds of religious experiences 1-4), but that such content would *not* be religious *in itself*, since other subjects could have exactly the same sense impressions ('might have had the same visual sensations') too. Yet if sense impressions are not the distinctive features of religious experiences, then it remains obscure what indeed are the distinctive features of one's experience that makes a religious experience religious. Emotional components of experience – think of Schleiermacher's famous 'feeling of absolute dependence' – could perhaps be entertained here as a possible distinctive feature; however, they just seem not to be important to Swinburne.

Let us briefly consider one example. If it is possible that a sceptic and Jesus' disciples 'had the same visual sensations (described comparatively)' (p. 299) regarding the risen Jesus, then what makes the experience of the disciples a religious experience cannot simply be those visual sensations. Swinburne himself speaks of 'the religious experience of *taking* the man to be the risen Jesus' (p. 299, emphasis added); but *taking* something to be so-and-so is different from *experiencing* something as so-and-so. To take something as so-and-so is to *interpret* something as so-and-so, but an interpretation of one's experience is not the experience itself. In defending the 'principle of credulity', Swinburne discusses Chisholm's proposal to restrict the application of the principle to what Chisholm calls 'sensible' characteristics and relations, by which he means the 'proper objects of sense' (such as blue, soft, cold, etc.) and the 'common sensibles' (such as being the same, right, left, etc.).¹⁹ So only an experience of sensible characteristics would be a real experience; anything else is an interpretation of such experiences whereby one infers that something is the case. For example, one experiences that something is blue; one interprets that something is a blue-dwarf-star. To use one of Swinburne's examples: Babylonian astronomers interpret their experiences of movements in the sky as holes in the firmament; Greek astronomers interpret them as the movements of physical bodies.

¹⁹ Cp. Swinburne p. 307.

Swinburne replies that one can perceive complex objects (one's wife, a Victorian table, a blue-dwarf-star, etc.) without being able to back up the perceptual beliefs (e.g.: There walks my wife!) by beliefs about sensible characteristics.

Transferring this well-known problem to the current discussion, is there a sensory content of perception free from interpretation? As for the discussion about the perception of God, it is obvious what problems for the concept of such a perception arise. Early on in his book, Swinburne defines God as 'a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who necessarily is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things' (p. 7). Later on, he claims that God 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' (pp. 306 f.). But these properties – person, power, knowledge, and so on – are clearly not perceivable by strength of our senses. Rather, we *interpret* certain sensory impressions to be caused by a powerful, free, knowing, etc. person. In any event, Swinburne either needs to argue that 'Godness' is perceivable like one of the sensible characteristics – like blue or soft – or that it is analogous to complex properties like tea-smelling or blue-dwarf-stars. Either way seems to be a dead-end.

IV. SUMMARY AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

In summary, it should have become clear that the attempt to construct an 'argument from religious experience' already failed at the beginning due to an insufficient definition of the term 'religious experience'. The first difficulty, we noted, is mainly terminological; that those experiences accompanied by an inclination to believe and described externally are, by Swinburne's own *definition*, not religious experiences. This difficulty could be resolved by either explicitly referring to the experiencing subject's perspective or giving up the theory of success-verbs.

The other problems are more serious. They show that Swinburne has neither a clear and adequate concept of experience, nor can he point out the characteristic features of *religious* experiences. It is remarkable that a follower of analytical philosophy of religion, a philosophy which generally stresses the importance of precise terminology (as Swinburne

himself does), allows for such inaccuracy²⁰ in his terminology. Furthermore, there has even been a long substantive debate on the argument in which the problems we noted have never been discussed.

A reason might be that Swinburne (in contrast to Alston) seems not to be very interested in a precise phenomenology of religious experiences. In particular, there is no precise exegesis (for example) of biblical reports of experiences of God. The story of the burning bush, the narrative of Emmaus or the Easter narratives all describe rather sensitive experiences that surely are not grasped in their full complexity when – analogous to Swinburne's example – merely understood as a 'perception of objects'.

Another reason can probably be found in a conflict of goals: On the one hand, the persuasiveness of sense perception should be transferred to religious perception; but that means leaving out from the concept of religious experience everything that looks like a religious *interpretation* of usual or unusual events or like a religious *emotion* coming along with such experiences. On the other hand, the experiences mentioned here (which Swinburne never describes precisely) are rare, unusual or even non-sensory experiences that are precisely not analogous to ordinary sense-perceptions. Furthermore, they are expected to carry the burden of proof for a conclusion that has heavy implications for whoever accepts it. While the persuasiveness of reports of sense-experiences is, in principle, based on the possibility to verify the reported observation for oneself – sometimes after necessary preparations or training, as in the cases of Galileo and observations by telescope – this can hardly be done for religious experiences.

How far Swinburne extends the concept of experience becomes apparent in his reply to a critique which states that religious experience could be caused by something other than the religious object that the witnesses report to have experienced. To this common critique (mentioned already in the New Testament, Acts 2:13: 'They [the disciples] are filled with new wine' or as projection-theory in the classical critique of religion), Swinburne replies by pointing out that God is the cause of all thoughts and events and, therefore, that every experience, especially every religious experience, is caused by God.²¹ If that is true, the claim 'I have an experience which is caused by God' cannot be false. But the

²⁰ On a side note, Swinburne's excessive use of mathematical probability theory is rather pretending precision than demonstrating it; cp. also Nickel 2011.

²¹ Cp. Swinburne, p. 320.

question *if* it is true at all, should be answered by referring to religious experiences; it follows that such an argument would be immune to all critique.

Besides, there has never been *de facto* a sceptic who has been convinced by reports of religious experiences (consider, for example, doubting Thomas). Much less convincing would even be an argument based on those reports, as Swinburne has to offer. If we are to avoid suggesting that the collapse of the whole argumentation is due to the argument itself, then the group of doubters would have to be disqualified as being irrational and deluded. Both alternatives seem to be neither rational nor Christian.

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