

## THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF WILLIAM JAMES

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### Abstract

James's interest in religion was in personal terms. The meaning and importance of his religious writings both a psychologist and philosopher can properly be understood only in the who has attained international light of his belief that the most fruitful reputation as America's most original approach to religion is an empirical thinker. He aroused a public interest in one. His pragmatic justification for philosophy in general, and religious belief has often been pragmatism in particular. James challenged, on both ontological and rejected intellectualizing and moral grounds. Critics argue that theorizing about religion in favor of an James's accounts of religious truth empirical approach and his task and its justification are perniciously became that of articulating the way in subjective. Nevertheless, once James's which experience may justify religious conceptions of religious truth and beliefs. He was a pluralist in love with justification are understood in their variety and with his own religious full measure of depth, this charge can experience.

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be seen as misplaced. In this article, I explore James's philosophy of religion in a way that enables his views to be understood and critiqued.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to define the nature of religious experience, we should first establish what religion is and what is experience. The word *religion* does not stand for any single principle or entity, and religion has many characters which may in turn be equally important. Philosophers have various views on '*religion*', for example, Karl Marx (1818-1883), describes religion as an ideological weapon of the ruling class which has a function that is harmful. John Dewey (1859-1952) finds that religion has a valuable function in life. Therefore, any singular abstract conception is misleading.

Instead of being seduced into the theorizing fallacy of seeking a definition as the key to the nature of religion, one should inquire into its various meanings in human experience. Hence, religion has its external aspects, worship, sacrifice, theology, ceremonies, and ecclesiastical organizations. It is also, in a more personal way, the inner dispositions "which form the center of his interest, his conscience, his helplessness, and his incompleteness" (James, 1958, p.28). Nevertheless, one might argue that religion is not religion but a

psychological manifestation, according to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud sees religion as a form of wish-fulfillment, and the dogmas of religion are illusions derived from deep and persistent wishes.

## James's Concept of Religion

James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, generally considers religion only in its personal aspect, believing that this is more fundamental than theological: "Churches, when once established, live at second hand upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mohammed, but all the originators of religious sects have been in this case; so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete" (James, 1958, p.30).

The meaning of religion, as one should generally understand it throughout James's writings, is described in the *Varieties* in the following practical terms: "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*. Since the relation may be

either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow” (James, 1958, p.31).

### **General Concept of Experience**

Let us examine the term “experience”. Everyone has had experiences of one sort or another. How then do we know what experience is and its derivation? Is there anything behind it and causing it to be as it is? Common sense tells us that we are in the universe and the experience of the universe is within. James in his *Psychology* made it clear that our minds are directly aware of reality. They do not handle offprint of something out there. Objects are mainly perceived as independently of our thoughts. These various notions do not hang together. For instance, how the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York City might look like after they were destroyed can be a mental construct of a previous recollection.

Primitive experience is entirely free from any general idea of the dependence of objects upon the knowing of them, there are certain accepted cases in which an experience is definitely recognized as *my experience*, which is regarded as deriving existence from a *for-me* relation (Perry, 1904, p.43). This is a very different idea from that of the

functioning of the sense-organs. That I see and hear and taste is a commonplace of all experience, and I may study what I see without effecting any discontinuity in my practical or scientific world of things. But to believe that what I see is constituted by my seeing of it, is to define a new realm, an anomalous science, and possibly a new philosophical method. Such a belief must arise very early in connection with illusory experiences.

### **James’s Concept of Experience**

Experience, in James’s view, is all that which exists is experience and experience is all that exists. There is no *general* stuff of which experience at large is made. There are as many stuffs as there are ‘natures’ in the things experienced. Experience is only a collective name for all these sensible natures. There appears no universal element of which all things are made. Before experience can be experienced, it must be attended to. James says :

“My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind – without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground – intelligible perspective, in a world” (James, 1890, p.407).

All our life is a mass of habits – practical, emotional, and intellectual –

systematically organized for our weal or woe, and bearing us irresistibly toward our destiny, whatever it may be. A new habit is formed in three stages. First there must be need or desire. Then one needs information: methods of learning how to maintain the habit. One might read books, attend classes, and consciously explore ways how others have developed the desired habit. The last state is simple repetition; consciously doing exercise or actually reading and speaking until the acts become usual and habitual (Wulff,1997,p.484). For intellect there are two levels of knowing: Knowing through direct experience and knowing through abstract reasoning. James calls the first level “knowledge of acquaintance.” It is sensory, intuitive, poetic, and emotional. “I know the color blue when I see it, and the flavor of time when I feel it pass...but about the inner nature of these facts or what makes them what they are, I can say nothing at all” The higher level of knowledge James calls “Knowledge-about.” It is intellectual, focused, and relational; it can develop abstractions; it is objective and unemotional. “When we know about it, we can do more than merely have it; we think over its relations, to subject it to a form of treatment and operate upon it with our thought. Through feelings we become acquainted with things but only with or thoughts do we know about them” (James,1890, p.221).

### **James’s Concept of Religious Experience**

Religious experience to which men find themselves related in their religious acts and feelings may be any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not. Religious experience, according to James, refers to man’s total reaction upon life that there must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate as religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream. Where a religion regards the world as tragic, the tragedy must be understood as purging; religious sadness, wherever it exists, that is, it must possess a purgatorial note (James, 1958, p.31).

The nature of religious experience is mystical encounter. James suggests that ‘mysticism’ can be construed in ways that accounted as much for Buddhist and transcendentalist experience as for Christian phenomena, even though Buddhists and transcendentalists do not positively assume a God in the sense of a superhuman person (James,1958,p.31). When persons encounter mysticism or divinity, they transact with some objects that order the world in a way that protects all ideal interests. A religious experience (sometimes it is difficult to distinguish neatly between “subject” and “object”) is an experience

of first things in the way of being and power which overarches and envelops other things so completely that what relates to them is the first and last word in the way of truth (James, 1958, p.34).

### **James's Concept of Mysticism**

In defining 'mystic', James proposes that the following 4 essential characteristics should be involved: (James, 1958, p.319)

1. *Ineffability.* The subjects of mystical experiences say that such an experience defines expression, that no adequate report of the contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.
2. *Noetic Quality.* Those who have mystical experiences claim that they have gotten or received deeply significant and important insights during the experiences. Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after time.

3. *Transiency.* Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.
4. *Passivity of the Subject.* Although a person can prepare himself for and help bring about mystical experiences, when the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.

Furthermore, he indicates that "the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own" (James, 1958, p.425).

Mysticism contributes to knowledge by greatly enlarging man's field of consciousness, thereby opening up new areas of knowledge and putting "rational" knowledge into truer perspective.

James perceives mysticism in two ways: (James, 1958, p.427)

1. Mysticism as a distinctive state of consciousness.
2. Mysticism as revelation of truths in a special manner.

Mystical states of consciousness are distinguished from ordinary consciousness, as they elude articulation during and after their occurrence. They are qualitatively cognitive because they include objects of consciousness. Unlike ordinary consciousness, mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Those who encounter them will experience a surrender of themselves to someone higher. Therefore, Mystical states of consciousness stand at the root and center of personal religious experience.

In this article, I present both arguments for and criticisms directed against James's nature of religious experience which center on the experience of mysticism.

### **Defenses of the Nature of Religious Experience**

If we look at the historical past, James's mystical consciousness is supported by important historical precedents like the Romantic moment, followers of the Yogic *Samadhi* tradition in India, and Buddhists seeking *Dhyana* cultivated "consciousness of illumination", just as the Sufis did among the Moslems in their spiritual exercises. Mystics justify their claims to religious knowledge by virtue of their achievement through revelation or illumination. They claim that their deliverances carry the one requisite mark which makes them incorrigible.

James cites people cannot assume that mystical claims are indubitable simply because they cannot point to any existing method for settling disputes about them. James's science of religions provides ways to settle disputes about mystical claims that mystics have no way to settle themselves. James's aim is to appreciate the mystical states of consciousness that generated these claims as well as to inspect religious conduct informed by them. I argue that the messages of mystical experiences, though profoundly significant for those directly involved, have no necessary binding effect on others in the sense that they must accept them uncritically. As James mentioned, there is an evidence from the point of view of psychological mechanism that the classical mysticism and the lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level (James, 1958, p.426). My point is that whatever comes must be shifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense. Its value must be ascertained by empirical methods, so long as we are not mystics ourselves.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, whatever the non-mystical majority may believe, they should not deny the mystic's right to follow his insights. As James states if the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, the majority have no

right to order him to live in another way (James, 1958, p. 427).

Mystical states might result in the most energetic inspiration, but on the mystics own grounds, this could be reckoned an advantage only in case the inspiration were a true one. If the inspiration were erroneous, the energy would be all the more mistaken and misbegotten. My argument is that the truth of the mystic's beliefs are verified in the same general way in which all truths are verified. Of course, these are on the basis of their origination in experience and in terms of the fruitful relations which they establish with reality in terms of human conduct. Mystical beliefs are also liable to be erroneous just as they come from the outer world of sense. Therefore, I argue for mysticism that derives from the inner sense.

### **Criticisms of the Nature of Religious Experience**

James asserts that mystics claim to know something intuitively. He was criticized for saying that mystics know intuitively by since their deliverances are intuitive and therefore not open to dispute. They are declarations based on evidence, but privileged evidence, evidence shared by the mystic and God alone. Therefore, mystics base their opinions on their own witness and on the authority of their own books reporting revelations. Levinson (1981) also argues against James in this point

that mystics do not mean that they have merely inferred what they claim to know from other things that they know. Nor are they simply claiming to have a hunch about something. They are claiming to know something indubitably that cannot possibly be inferred from other things they knew (Levinson, 1981, p. 216).

As James characterizes mystics this way, mysticism is indirect competition with scientific inquiry as a way of thinking. Although inquiry and mysticism share a claim to cognitivity, they are at odds in almost every other respect when the fact of a mystical experience is used to justify a doctrine of criticism. My objection is that mystical states are not states in which reasoning takes the leading role, but these determine attitudes and open regions of experience not accessible to ordinary modes of thought. They signal something about the meaning of experience that is not discovered in any other way. When mysticism is taken as intellectually authoritative, it becomes a hindrance to persuasive order. Mystics are honest in their own mystical experiences, even when these declarations are based on their privilege evidence. This process of persuasion is suited only to people who actively seek opinions in an ordered way and help themselves to decide what to believe.

Levinson (1981) accuses James that he is struck by the references practically into experiences of deliverance investigated by

contemporary mystical literature. The question is whether this revelation is a cultural derivative of natural supernaturalism or some independent warrant for it. Many Romantics, for example, Wordsworth places the “illuminated moment” at the center of their imagination. They seek visions that efface personal consciousness and render it cosmic and bestowed a selfless perspective from which they can view the world of impersonal worth (Levinson, 1981,p.168).

My opinion is that mysticism is not a marginal religious phenomenon as in James’s views. Reports of illumination dotted both religious and secular histories. The most rudimentary sort of illumination occurs whenever some deepen sense of the significance of something sweeps over one. Certain experiences and trance states are more complex forms of the same phenomenon. In each of these instances, religious person’s rational, it is suspended as they find themselves being transported from some sort of disturbance to a sense of mental ease, peace, and rest. I believe that the mystics who deliver their illuminations assert that their claims are indubitable.

Nevertheless, James was attacked for his statement that the mystic cannot participate in religious investigation and there is no procedure to overcome the doubts of people who dispute his declarations. No reasons could change his mind about men, gods, and the world. If others accepted the mystic’s

claims on mystical grounds, they did so not from force of persuasion but from some sort of purportedly divine coercion that they felt as mystics. Therefore, whether mystical experience lead to presumptive truths or not, the mystic presents no infallible credential.

In response to this claim, there are beliefs that the thoughts of mystics are true and justified in some sense. An individual is warranted to claim that he is in pain once he believes he is, because his feelings of pain are things to which he has privileged access. Thus, mystics are justified in making their own claims. As James asserts rationalists could throw a mystic into a prison or a madhouse, but they “cannot change his mind” (James, 1958, p.423).

I believe that our own rational beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Just as investigators rely on perceptions for their claims, so mystics rely on face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist. The only motive for investigation is to overturn doubt and settle belief.

Levinson (1978) argues that if the illumination of mystical experience brings real and living doubt to an end for someone, he simply has no motive for further investigation, no demand for a change of mind. The mystic simply asserts that his claims are not governed by the logic of inquiry. His experiences result in confession, not profession.



Indeed, because the mystic's beliefs are confessional, he cannot help believing what he does, and so he is invulnerable to criticism. Mystical states might extinguish the burning doubts of particular individuals, but that does not add to the veracity of the mystical claims. In fact, if mystical claims are confessional, they are not warranted at all. Reason warrant beliefs, but reason plays no role in confession. Reason plays a role only in cases in which people do not confess but have to decide what to believe (Levinson, 1978,p.212-4).

My argument is that mystical states open up the possibility of other orders of truth distant from those accessible by ordinary means. Mystical experiences may represent just such a form of human consciousness. Usually our minds are an enormously complex stew of thoughts, feelings, sensations, wants, pains, drives, daydreams and consciousness itself more or less aware of it all. To understand mystical consciousness in itself, the obvious thing would be to clear away as much of this internal detritus and noise as possible. It turns out that mystics seem to be doing precisely.

I propose that the mystical experience's claims must not be accepted uncritically. My point is that mystical experiences be subjected to the same tests applied to rational beliefs. Our own rational beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for. Our

senses have assured us of certain states of fact. But mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them.

Nevertheless, the religious experiences offered to mankind through mystical phenomena require selection and subordination just as the experiences which come in the ordinary world. Possibilities of error and deception occur in dealing with mystical experiences just as they do with the more ordinary ones. But in testing the validity of mystical data, one must not impose upon them the same requirements imposed upon knowledge coming from "rational" sources. To do so would automatically eliminate all mystical experiences from the very start because they are so different from the experiences found in man's normal range of consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

James denies the word "religion" to any single principle or essence. The name is a collective word for a huge number of different experiences, and the proper job of investigating religion must be to consider very specific examples of all the different manifestations of human experiences. For him, all questions of value have to meet the text of experience. And by experience he does not mean something with a capital E. He means experiences, the active consequences,

which occur in the lives of particular individuals.

Religious experience is identified as having a transcendent meaning within experience that causal investigations can only identify in terms of proximate origin. In this case, mystical experience is often cited as a human experience that suggests the validity of language and concepts protected within religious traditions. Among specifically religious practices, some forms of prayer have been investigated as producing a unique experiential awareness of the world that is both meaningful and productive of personal contentment. The availability of a religious language has been shown to facilitate the report of religious experience, and for some theorists, to be necessary for the experience to occur. Others have provided data and argument to show that both religious persons and not religiously committed persons may have similar experiences which they simply differentially interpret. The widest variety of religious experiences are documented to be common in modern cultures for human beings.

Religious ideas do not exist for us to contemplate or argue about abstractly. They exist for us to use. They are, in effect, to use the favorite

metaphor of many later pragmatists, tools which we use to achieve our human purposes. If they work for us, they are good (just like tools); if they serve no purpose, they are without value or truth for us, and anything which has no connection with the practical experiences of our action is irrelevant. This view of religion enables James to endorse religious experience as essential, for it provides us with practical benefits in a way that no other form of experience can.

I propose that in the nature of religious experience, must become a critical and inductive science of religions. On such grounds, it may hope some day to gain acceptance even by non-religious people, just as the facts of optics are acknowledged by those who are born blind. But just as optics would not exist were it not for the experiences of seeing individuals, in the same way the science of religions is based on the evidence afforded by religious persons; and it will never be in a position to decide whether in the end these experiences themselves are illusory. This last question of the objective and absolute significance of religious phenomena will be impossible to solve scientifically, and it will always be for the individual either to leave it open to settle it by an act of personal experience.

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