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RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND RATIONAL APPRAISAL

I

Appeal to experience for rational justification of religious belief is probably as old as the question whether religious belief has any rational support. The issues relevant to such appeal range widely, and I will have to be content to deal with only a few of them.

In order to have some specific religious beliefs before us, thus avoiding vacuous generality, let me note two claims for which experiential appeal is frequent. Of course there are various concepts of both deity and nirvana. I will deal with one of each, hoping that what I say in this regard will apply, mutatis mutandis, to others. Meaning by ‘God’ a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, creator and providence, the claim God exists has often been evidenced, at least in intent, by appeal to numinous or dualistic mystical experience. Meaning by ‘Nirvana’ a state in which one feels great bliss, achieves escape from the cycle of rebirth, and gains a certain insight into reality which is available in no other way, the claim nirvana exists has often been evidenced, at least in intent, by appeal to monistic mystical experience. Indeed, persons have claimed to have encountered God, and others to have attained nirvana, in such a manner that further inquiry into the existence and properties of God, or into the existence and cognitive finality of nirvana, were altogether unnecessary. Of course a problem arises when one discovers that the nirvana-insight is to the effect that ‘all is one’ and ‘Atman is Brahman’ and ‘that art thou’, so that there is in reality no Creator-creature distinction to be made. The same problem can be seen by facing in the opposite direction, so to say, and noting that since God is creator, ‘High and holy and lifted up’, and man a creature who is ‘dust and ashes’, the creator-creature distinction is irrevocably final and any creature who says he is God is not only profoundly mistaken, but a blasphemer as well. No one can consistently worship with Isaiah in the temple and then meditate with Sankara in the grove. Either, as a first step toward consistency, one personalises Brahman or depersonalises God, and so begins to transform one

1 I wish to thank my colleagues, Claudia Card and Jon Moline, for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for their Grant No. F-72-529 under which this paper was written.

tradition into another, or one rejects at least one tradition. Eclecticism in this context is inconsistent, and if consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, better a small mind than none at all.

Not to belabour the obvious, even if we knew that there was some experience or other which gave the final truth about matters religious, we would need to know which of the many claimants to the title of finality rightfully owns it. Plenty of experiences, at least according to their subject's sincere reports, wear the incorrigible label; nonetheless, these experiences yield incompatible 'truths'. So even if we appeal to experience, to which experience shall we appeal?

Continuing to sort out problems that must sooner or later be faced in a rational appraisal of religious belief, how much can experience tell us? Aquinas suggests that for any world God creates, it is possible that he should have created a better one.\(^1\) Perhaps we can put this point as follows: there is no world \(W\) such that God creates \(W\) entails God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent, since for any world \(W\), \(W\) exists and was created by a nearly omnipotent and/or nearly omnibenevolent being is logically consistent. While it is hard to prove that Aquinas is right, his view seems to me quite plausible. At least, recent discussion of the concept of a 'best possible world' seems to me to suggest that it is Aquinas, not Leibniz, who is right on this score.\(^2\) If he is, then even if I knew every property whatever that our world possesses except the (ex hypothesi) property of being created by an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being, I could not learn by inference that it was created by such a being, thereby knowing that such an omnicompetent being exists. And if that is correct, it seems most unlikely that any experience I have will by itself tell me that this being exists. Put in other terms, experiencing God, who is omnipotent would be one thing, experiencing God's omnipotence quite another. Analogous questions surely arise about how an experience, no matter how striking, could by itself tell me that all the ordinary distinctions—between one person and another, and one thing and another, and between persons and things, and so on—belong only to maya (the realm of illusion) whereas 'really' all is one.

This question raises another. If one takes even a cursory look at, say, Christian doctrine, one must surely be impressed by the variety of kinds of claims it involves. God exists is, say, a religious-metaphysical claim; at least it is a claim relevant to, and crucial in, various metaphysical as well as religious conceptual schemes. God loves us is perhaps a more purely theological claim, not generally a claim thought open to deductive or inductive proof or evidenced by observing the course of nature and history, but rather regarded as revealed by God in divine word and deed (say) in the Exodus and on the Cross. Jesus lived on earth is surely an historical claim, to be decided in the

\(^1\) Summa Theologica, I, Q 25, A6.

same way that Napoleon lives is decided. If it is false, Jesus is perfect God and perfect man is also false, but that Jesus is the God-man is not capable of being established by sheer historical research. Men are made in the image of God is an important anthropological claim, Men ought to act in imitation of God an important ethical assertion, and God will judge all men an important element in Christian eschatology. However one wishes to group these claims, and on whatever reasonable criterion one makes such a grouping, the procedures relevant to appraising members of one group will differ somewhat from those relevant to appraising members of another. How far is appeal to experience relevant to such appraisals? How much can numinous experience tell us about these varied sorts of claims? Again, analogous questions arise with respect to nirvanic experiences and the cluster of claims about Brahman and Atman and maya and rebirth and so on which, purportedly, nirvana experiences not only give rise to, but evidentially support. For here too there are claims about man and his destiny, about morality, and about an ultimate, unchanging reality.

Obviously, one could continue raising questions of this general sort for some time. I wish, however, to use the questions raised thus far as a conceptual context from which to view certain claims concerning religious experience as evidence for religious belief. The questions raised above have pointed up the multiplicity of experiences which are sometimes said to give incorrigible grounds for specific (and mutually incompatible) religious beliefs; the apparently ‘beyond-all-experiential-support’ character of some religious beliefs; and the variety of types of claims essential to religious conceptual systems. Keeping these matters in mind, it is time to turn to the concept of religious experience.

II

The concept ‘experience’ is about as clear as a hairshirt is comfortable. Eating an apple, feeling obligated to keep a promise, falling in love, reflecting on the ontological argument, adding two plus two, appreciating the Mona Lisa, being in pain, and (at least apparently) sensing the presence of God are all experiences. The rationalists Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza were all, in one sense, devotees of experience. Seeing that a proposition is clearly and distinctly true was an experience they prized highly. The empiricists Locke, Berkeley, and Hume—at least according to the rather inaccurate traditional picture—prized such experiences as seeing the tree in the quad more highly than did the rationalists. Waiving the fact that there is probably no useful way of distinguishing between ‘empiricist’ and ‘rationalist’ on which one gets the traditional Continental-Anglophile divide as result, seeing a necessary truth seems unshakably an experience. What is debatable is how much knowledge such experiences yield.

Plainly, then, the generic concept ‘experience’ will not be of much help in
reflections concerning religious experience and rational appraisal. Suppose, then, we try, not the concept 'experience', but the concept 'someone having an experience of some thing', defined (roughly, after Mavrodes) as follows: Someone S has experience of something O if and only if: (1) E is of something; the experiencing is one thing, the experienced is something else; (2) O exists independently of E (or any other experience); (3) O is experienced entails O exists; (4) S experiences O entails O affects S; (5) S experiences O entails S makes some judgment concerning O; (6) S and O are distinct beings. My seeing my pen, for example, fits the pattern. I exist independently of my pen (satisfying (6)). I see my pen only if it exists to be seen (satisfying (3)). But my pen retains its hold on existence even when no one sees it (satisfying (2)). The seeing in question fits a subject-consciousness-(real) object as well as a subject-consciousness-(intentional) object model (satisfying (1)). It affects me, being at one end of a causal chain involving light waves and a medium and so on with me (or my eyes) at the other end (satisfying (4)). And while I seldom make explicit judgments about my pen, my seeing it at least places me in position to say various things about it (roughly satisfying (5)).

Being in pain does not seem to meet these conditions; more importantly for our purposes, experience of God apparently does, whereas attaining nirvana—at least if we take 'loss of self' descriptions of nirvana attainment quite at face value—perhaps does not. Notoriously the claims that I must (a) be affected by, and (b) be at least able to) make judgments concerning, what I experience, are disputable, though I am inclined to grant the appropriateness of (4) and (5) which enshrine these claims. In any case, let us take the above analysis as a working model for someone’s having an experience of something.

If we accept the model, then it seems clear that many persons have had numinous experiences which if veridical fit this model—experiences which are sincerely reported as encounters with an awe-inspiring, worship-worthy deity—and some have taken these experiences to be, by themselves, sufficient evidence that God exists.

It seems likely that we require a different model for nirvana experience. To begin with, two sorts, or perhaps stages, of nirvana must be distinguished. One we may call final nirvana, and concerning those who attain it Sankara says

'The finality of their lordly power does not imply their return to the life of man. ... It is a settled matter that those who through perfect knowledge have dispelled all mental darkness and are devoted to the eternally perfect Nirvana do not return [to the cycle of rebirth]'.
The other we may call *penultimate* nirvana. The former, at least if we take 'nonself' descriptions seriously, is not strictly an experience, being cessation of individuality. The latter is an experience in which, if such experiences are veridical, the subject learns that he is one with 'ultimate reality' and will escape the cycle of birth, old age, death, rebirth. In sum, he 'learns' that monism is true.\(^1\) So while it is not the case that some mind-independent object is experienced in penultimate nirvana, such experiences are apparently such that (1) there is a subject/experience distinction, (2) there is an experience/something-learned-in-the-experience distinction, (3) there is a subject/something-learned-in-the-experience distinction. Such experience is apparently not to be understood on a *someone-experiencing-something* model, but on what we may call a *someone-intuiting-some-claim* model (a model defined by (1) through (3) immediately above). There are of course various ways of filling in the outline this latter model provides.\(^2\) Further, it is sometimes suggested that one may later learn what was only implicit in his penultimate nirvanic experience.\(^3\) But I shall not deal with these matters here, though I think what I shall say about nirvanic experience in which one 'learns' that monism is true will apply, mutatis mutandis, to other versions which hold that nirvanic attainment is cognitive, or purports to provide knowledge of more than the subjective states of the subject. Many persons, I think, sincerely report experiences which, if veridical, fit this model of nirvanic experience, and they take such experiences as evidence that nirvana exists.

I conclude this section by making the obvious points that if God does not exist, no numinous experience is veridical, and that if monism is false, nirvana does not exist. Of course persons will, so to say, be numinously affected or have a sense of bliss and fulfilment. But the distinctive religious claims which are supposedly well supported will then in fact be false.

III

It is sometimes contended that numinous or nirvanic experiences are *self-authenticating* in the sense that one who has a numinous experience thereby incorrigibly knows that God exists or anyone who attains nirvana incorrigibly knows that monism is true. No further weighing of evidence is necessary or even appropriate. Fools wonder, but experiencers know with legitimate, absolute certainty.

No doubt experiences occur which confirm their subjects in unsurpassable psychological tenacity of belief—in God, monism, the truth of every word the guru speaks, the triumph of communism, therightness of capitalism, or

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\(^3\) Suzuki, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
that they are Napoleon. Psychological certainty of this closed sort is simply compulsory belief, and Ralph believes C compulsively but C is false and Ralph believes C compulsively and C has been conclusively refuted by every philosopher since Socrates are perfectly consistent sentences. A self-authenticating experience, by contrast, provides cognitive certainty; S's experience E is self-authenticating with respect to C entails, I suppose, both S knows C and (thereby) C is true. Are there any religiously relevant self-authenticating experiences? (Being in pain is perhaps as plausible a candidate for self-authenticity as we have, but even if it is a successful candidate I cannot see that it has much relevance to authenticating religious belief. Also, relevant values of C are contingent.

Well, what exactly does this property being self-authenticating amount to? Perhaps this: S's experience E is self-authenticating with respect to claim C if and only if it is logically or causally impossible that S have E but not know that C is true. This definition has the virtue of making it clear that such an experience (if any occur) authenticates something to someone. Some philosophers and religious believers have apparently countenanced subject-less experiences. So far as I can see 'subject-less experience' is a contradictory locution (though no doubt one could use it as shorthand for some consistent doctrine). But, waiving this, no experience which was literally subject-less ('belonged to no one') could be (in the above, or I should think in any other plausible, sense) self-authenticating. In this sense of 'self-authentication' then, if a self-authenticating experience E authenticates claim C to E's subject S (since E's subject thereby knows C), then C is true.

Will numinous or nirvanic experience be self-authenticating in this sense? So far as I can see Ralph experiences God, but does not know it is God he is experiencing is logically consistent. John Baillie, for example, has contended that all men whatever experience God.¹ If so, (as Baillie realises) a good many do not know that they have done this. Theologians (including Baillie) have held that in recognizing a moral obligation, one also experiences God, and that in sensing the fragility of one's contingent existence men (if dimly) are aware of a noncontingent Being.² Again, if so, they have not gone beyond a dimness compatible with holding that God does not exist to be experienced.

Even when we turn to full-fledged and very striking numinous experiences—which everyone grants have occurred—such thinkers as Feuerbach and Freud have held them to have had causes among which a divine being is not included.³ Whether right or wrong, their views are not logically inconsistent. Yet their views entail (or include) the thesis that Men have had numinous experience but did not thereby know that God exists. (For no experience can self-authenticate a false claim, and it is logically possible that numinous experience occurs but God not exist.)

The same point holds, mutatis mutandis for those, like Madhva, who have

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granted that persons have had (what they describe as) nirvanic experiences but denied that monism is true.\(^1\) So much for the 'logical impossibility' portion of the definition of self-authenticating experience.

The locution 'causally impossible' is notoriously problematic, but perhaps we can define it sufficiently for present purposes as follows: That \(x\) occur is causally impossible if and only if there is a law \(L\) (of some natural or social science) such that \(x\)'s occurrence would falsify \(L\). Then if \(S\)'s numinous experience \(E\) is self-authenticating with respect to God exists, it will be causally impossible that \(S\) has \(E\) but not know that God exists. And if that is causally impossible, since \(S\) knows \(P\) entails \(P\) is true, it is also causally impossible that \(S\) has \(E\) and 'God exists' not be true.

But of course there is in fact no known causal law relating the state of affairs expressed by \(S\) has \(E\) (no matter what experience \(E\) is) and the state of affairs expressed by 'God exists' is true in the required manner. The most that could be claimed (perhaps by an unreconstructed Freudian) is that the states expressed by, say, \(S\) has numinous experience \(E\) and \(S\) believes that God exists are related by causal law. That is implausible, but even if true would not affect the criticism. If the required connection held, it would hold between \(S\)'s experience and God's existence, not between \(S\)'s experience and \(S\)'s belief. The state of affairs of God's existence is no antecedent or consequent of any known causal law. (This is, I take it, nothing against that state of affairs.)

It may be objected that I am ignoring what is crucial about self-authenticating experiences, namely that such an experience authenticates only for (or to) its subject. But I have not ignored this at all. \(S\)'s experience \(E\) is self-authenticating (to \(S\); who else?) with respect to \(C\) if and only if (a) \(S\) has \(E\) but \(C\) is false is inconsistent, or (b) \(S\) has \(E\) leads by law to \(C\) is true. With respect to numinous experiences and experiences and God exists, neither (a) nor (b) is known to be satisfied. So (as far as we know) no subject is self-authenticated to, at least with regard to contingent claims.

The question is not, of course, whether an omnicompetent God can make himself known to man whenever he wishes. Of course, he can if he is omnipotent. The question concerns whether any such revelation is, or can be, self-authenticating. An experience can be if there is some coherent and relevant sense of 'self-authenticating experience'; we shall know this can occur if we discover that sense. An experience is, in this sense, self-authenticating if it corresponds to this concept (if any). That, not whether God can make Himself known, is what we are investigating.

Turning momentarily to nirvanic experience, surely no such experience could be self-authenticating along causal lines. For what one putatively learns in such experiences is that monism is true. Monism is true, whatever else it involves, presumably entails knowledge of causal connections (as of all relations) is only knowledge of maya. Causal relations, strictly, and from a

\(^1\) Moore and Radhakrishnan, A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy (Princeton, 1957), chapter 15.
sub specie aeternitatis view, do not hold. So none hold which yield self-
authentication.

Alternatively, perhaps $S$'s experience $E$ is self-authenticating with respect to $C$ if and only if it is logically or causally impossible that $S$ have $E$ and not believe $C$. But of course an experience could be self-authenticating in this sense without it being either the case that $C$ was true or that $E$ provides any evidence whatever for $C$.

The two previous senses of ‘self-authenticating experience’, and a third sense shortly to follow, should be distinguished from a very different cognitive role which is often (I think quite legitimately) ascribed to religious experiences. Some persons have had experiences which enabled them to both see a new ‘depth’ to life and to integrate into intelligible patterns knowledge and experiences which had hitherto lain for them in conceptual disarray. Alfred North Whitehead refers to this role of religious experience when he remarks that ‘rational religion appeals to the direct intuitions of special occasions [e.g., numinous or nirvanic experiences], and to the elucidatory power of its concepts for all occasions’.\(^1\) Numinous experiences do elicit in some persons already acquainted with theism a ‘theistic Gestalt’ which enables them to ‘make sense’ of the world in a way hitherto beyond their ability. It is this integrating capacity which constitutes much at least of the cognitive power of religious experiences and their conceptual settings. To what degree a particular integration is itself rationally cogent is a crucial question to raise in each particular ‘integrative instance’, and some of what may appropriately go into attempts to answer such questions will occupy us in the concluding sections of this paper.

It may be suggested that what we need is $S$'s experience $E$ is self-authenticating with respect to $C$ if and only if $E$, by itself, provides sufficient evidence for $C$. I think we can briefly see that no experience is, even in this less ambitious sense, self-authenticating. Let us say that $S$'s experience $E$ meets the relevance conditions with respect to claim $C$ if and only if (1) $S$ takes $E$ to be of an $O$ which is $\emptyset$; (2) if $O$ is $\emptyset$, then $C$ is true; (3) $S$ takes $E$ to be evidence for $C$. A numinous experience is evidence that God exists if its subject takes himself to be experiencing a numinous being, if there is a numinous being entails God exists (I shall remark on this matter in a moment), and if the subject takes his experience to be evidence that God is. I suggest that:

\[(E1) \quad \text{If } S \text{ has an experience } E \text{ which meets the relevance conditions with respect to claim } C, \text{ then unless } S \text{ has counter-evidence to } C \text{ or evidence that there is a correct explanation of } E \text{ on which } E \text{ is not evidence for } C, \text{ } E \text{ gives } S \text{ prima facie evidence for } C.\]

\(^1\) A. N. Whitehead, Religion in the Making (London, 1926; Cleveland, 1960), p. 31, Meridian Books Ed.
So numinous experience (given that, roughly, being numinous entails being God) provides prima facie evidence that God exists, given that there is no evidence (of at least equal strength) that God does not exist and that no correct known explanation of numinous experience shows that it cannot be evidence that God exists.

I suggest further that:

(E2) If \( S \) has good reason to believe that there is no evidence against \( C \), and that there is no correct explanation of \( E \) on which \( E \) is not evidence for \( C \), and if \( E \) provides \( S \) prima facie evidence for \( C \), then \( S \) has good evidence for \( C \).

But I think it is plain that one cannot simply ‘read off’ from any experience (however striking) which gives prima facie evidence for a claim \( C \), that there is no evidence against \( C \) nor any correct explanation of \( E \) on which \( E \) is not evidence for \( C \) after all. So no experience, by itself, provides sufficient evidence for a claim. Though my example is taken from a numinous context, this last point holds at least as clearly for nirvanic experience as for numinous.

At least four qualificatory and explanatory remarks are in order. First, I have in mind only claims about (roughly) the existence of entities and properties besides the subject and his properties and the experience and its ‘phenomenological’ properties. Second, by ‘an explanation on which \( E \) is not evidence for \( C \)” (an ‘evidence-cancelling explanation’ for short), I understand the following: an explanation \( A \) is evidence-cancelling with respect to experience \( E \) and claim \( C \) if and only if: (1) \( A \) is true entails neither \( C \) is true nor \( C \) is false; (2) \( A \) is true plus \( E \) occurs together neither entail nor make probable \( C \) is true; (3) if \( A \) is false and so is every other explanation which like \( A \) satisfies (1) and (2), then \( E \) occurs entails or makes probable \( C \) is true. Thus that Ralph (apparently, anyway) sees pink rats does not provide evidence for pink rats exist if it is true that Ralph has delirium tremens. If one can show that (a) taking peyote produces numinous experiences, (b) Ralph took peyote, then Ralph’s numinous experience can be explained without reference to God. If so, then his experience is not evidence that God exists. Perhaps, nonetheless, Ralph experienced God; the point is that so far we’ve no reason for saying that he did.

Third, as noted briefly above, while I’ve concentrated on numinous experience, the same argument applies to nirvanic experience. For (a) perhaps there is a refutation of monism, and (b) perhaps there is an evidence—cancelling explanation of nirvanic experience. Whether (a) or (b) is satisfied cannot, I suggest, be simply read off nirvanic experience.

Fourth, I used the term ‘phenomenological property’ a few lines back, and since I will use it again below (Section IV) I had best explain what I mean by it. A very natural definition of ‘phenomenological property’, I think, is the following:
A virtue of this line is that a subject's knowledge of the phenomenological properties of his experience is guaranteed by the sheer occurrence of the experience. Further, knowing that God exists or knowing that monism is true are not, on any traditional use of the present locution, phenomenological features of experiences. The problem with this definition, it seems to me, is that it is so hard to think of any properties that are, in this sense, phenomenological. Perhaps being in pain is; perhaps not. But examples seem hard to come by. So I suggest instead the following rough characterisation:

\[ \text{A} \text{ is a phenomenological property of } S\text{'s experience } E \text{ if and only if } S \text{ has } E \text{ entails } S \text{ knows } E \text{ has } A. \]

The implausibility (or at least limited denotation) of the first definition of 'phenomenological property' reflects still further on the notion that very much can be 'self-authenticated' by an experience.

A rough characterisation of 'theoretic (non-phenomenological) property' is: \( \text{A} \text{ is a theoretical property of } S\text{'s experience } E \text{ if and only if } S \text{ knows } E \text{ has } A \text{ entails there is a conceptual system } F \text{ such that } S \text{ knows } F \text{ is true.} \) Clearly, being an experience of God and being an experience in which one learns that monism is true are theoretical properties in this sense.

One other matter requires brief attention. As perusal of Otto's Das Heilige makes clear, lots of things are taken to be numinous besides God. But if we restrict ourselves (as I have throughout been implicitly doing) to what we might call 'maximally numinous experiences'—i.e., experiences in which one senses the presence of a Being unique in kind, overwhelmingly alive and potent and majestic, and so on through Otto's characterisation of experiences central to theistic religion—then the inference from there is a numinous being to God exists is less problematic. Of course at least one problem remains.

Suppose that the occurrence of religious experience provides at least prima facie evidence that God exists. We still must ask exactly what claim is thereby somewhat supported. The descriptions of God given by different subjects of numinous experience are by no means identical, as perusal of Otto's work makes lucidly clear. How does one settle on a particular view of the divine nature? To take but one example, Christian thinkers have formulated a view of progressive revelation in which God is said to reveal something concerning himself and then later something more, in accord with the needs and capacities of the members of Old, and then New, Israel, and with the concept of God that Christ presented. This criterion (and any other with similar purpose) involves, of course, appeal to something
other than sheer experience. And the criterion itself will require justification. I am by no means willing to say that such problems are insoluble. I contend only that sheer ‘appeal to numinous experience’ does not solve them. That will require, among other things, evaluation of the conceptual systems which provide content and support for such criteria. Analogous remarks apply to nirvanic experience and its interpretation. I turn now to the question as to what such evaluation may involve.

I offer the following tentative axioms of experiential evidence.

(A1) No experience is self-authenticating (for any experience E, subject S who is not insane or irrational or imperceptive, and claim C, it is false that E provides S incorrigible evidence for C).

(A2) No experience is self-interpreting (for any experience E, subject S, and claim C, it is logically and causally possible that S take E to be good evidence for C whereas in fact E is not good evidence for C).

As indicated above, I think that if there are any exceptions to (A1), they are not relevant to the appraisal of numinous or nirvanic experience. (A1) and (A2) put, in slightly different language and from a slightly different perspective, conclusions argued for in the preceding section.

(A3) For any experience E, there is a single correct complete interpretation of E and any interpretation incompatible with it is false.

(A4) No experience can have incompatible phenomenological properties, or incompatible theoretical properties, or phenomenological properties that are incompatible with its theoretical properties (or conversely).

A partial correct interpretation of an experience E is a true claim C such that C states part of the cognitive significance of E (what E ‘tells us’, so to say). A complete, correct interpretation of E, then, will milk the information-potential of E dry. (A3), or something much like it, seems to me rather clearly true, though I realise that those captured by a ‘language game’ metaphor into taking reality to be a wax nose twistable into whatever configurations one can concoct will disagree. But the differences I allude to here are plainly too deep for treatment in passing. The interest of (A4) can perhaps be made clear by considering the claims that nirvanic experience reveals that every subject-object (whether subject-real object or subject-intentional object, or ‘object of thought’) distinction is illusory and that (in some sense) ‘all is one’. But unless the evidencing experience has both subject (who learns ‘final truth’) and (intentional) object (the truth learned), how is it possible that one learns the truth of monism from it?

And if it is subject intentional-object it too is illusory, and so cannot yield
knowledge after all. Even if one thinks that this dilemma does not do justice to the claims made for nirvana—and at least it is clear that more discussion is required before we could tell—answering the dilemma will increase our understanding of what attaining nirvana is taken to be and show. If the dilemma is final, (A4) is violated and no nirvanic evidence is forthcoming.

(A5) The logical and causal possibility that one is wrong in taking an experience to be good evidence for a claim is not by itself good evidence, in any particular case, that one is mistaken in taking an experience to be evidence for a claim.

(A6) If one appropriately takes an experience to be evidence for a claim C, then unless he also has reason to think the experience non-veridical, he has (prima facie, and so some) evidence for C.1

(A7) If one appropriately takes an experience to be evidence for a claim C, then unless there is reason to think the experience non-veridical, there is good evidence for C.

(A5) is intended to eliminate cheap scepticism. Unlike many (but not all) other experiences, numinous experience is not repeatable at will, and a final nirvana experience is not (ex hypothesi) repeatable at all. But various persons have had experiences which they took to be numinous, or nirvanic, and veridical, and a fair amount of discussion has taken place concerning whether counter-evidence or evidence-cancelling explanations are available. So one might in fact apply (A6) or the stronger (A7) to these cases, getting epistemic results. Indeed, I did so briefly above in connection with (E1) and (E2).

(A8) If A and B are different but equally plausible explanations of experience E, and if (1) E justifies (provides good evidence for) claim C if A is true, but (2) E does not justify C if B is true, then E does not justify C.

Suppose that (A) God revealed Himself to Ralph and (B) Ralph projected his father image provide, with some appropriate conceptual festooning, incompatible and distributively sufficient explanations of Ralph’s numinous experiences, and that (A) and (B) are equiplausible. Since Ralph’s experience is evidence for God’s existence only if (A) is more plausible than (B), which it (ex hypothesi) is not, it is not evidence for (C) God exists. Of course claims about equiplausibility are both debatable and unlikely to be decided by sheer appeal to the content of an experience.

(A9) If the meaning of a referential word ‘W’ is necessarily connected with a conceptual framework F, then experience E justifies W exists only if E justifies F is true.

1 Where S appropriately takes E to be evidence for C only if E meets the relevance conditions with respect to C (cf. p. 180 above).
A numinous experience, for example, justifies God exists only if $E$ justifies the basic conceptual (or some conceptual) setting in which 'God' is referential and God exists an essential tenet. A conceptual scheme, I take it, is (roughly) a set of propositions relevant to explaining or interpreting a range of data, solving (or dissolving) a set of problems, or articulating a view of what there is. A conceptual scheme $F$ is true if and only if every proposition $P$ such that $P$ is essential to $F$ is true. A conceptual system or framework $F$ is false if there is some proposition $P$ such that $P$ is both essential to $F$ and false.

These axioms, or some much like them, seem to me to be both acceptable and relevant to rational appraisal of experience, religious or otherwise. Obviously, they are neither sufficient by themselves nor as lucid as is desirable. They provide at most no more than a tentative beginning.

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Turning to other axioms of appraisal not so closely tied to experiential evidence, I suggest (again tentatively and as no more than a bare beginning) that the following, or something much like them, are appropriate tools for subjecting conceptual systems to rational evaluation.

(S1) If a conceptual system contains as an essential element a (one or more membered) set of propositions which is logically inconsistent, it is false.

(S2) If a conceptual system $F$ is such that it can be shown that (a) $F$ is true and (b) $F$ is known to be true, are incompatible, then this fact provides a good (though perhaps not conclusive) reason for supposing that $F$ is false.

I take (S1) to be clear and obviously appropriate. Kant used (S2) as part of an argument against materialism. It seems to me a potentially powerful mode of criticism. Perhaps negative theology can be refuted along these lines, though it is certainly criticisable along other lines as well.

(S3) If a conceptual system $F$ is such that it can be shown that (a) $F$ is true, and (b) $F$'s truth-conditions exist, are incompatible, then $F$ is false.

The truth-conditions of a proposition are simply those things which must exist if the proposition is to be true. Plato apparently used (S3) against certain philosophers who denied the existence of Forms. Perhaps Brahman is quality-less can be refuted along these lines.

(S4) If the only rationale for offering a system $F$ is that supposedly $F$ provides a solution for a particular problem, and given $F$ the problem remains, there is no reason to accept $F$. 
Notoriously, Berkeley chastised Locke’s causal theory of perception by appeal to (S4), and the multitudinous appeals to God’s activity to explain what cannot otherwise be accounted for at a given stage of scientific theorising are undercut by appeal to (S4).

It seems clear that:

(S5) If $C$ is an essential element in $F$, and $C$ is contradicted by well-established data $D$, then $F$ is (probably) false.

_Thunder is caused by Thor’s hammer_, God created the world in 144 sixty-minute hours (six calendar days), and God created the world in 4,004 B.C. provide values for ‘C’, which conflict with data gleaned from such sources as common sense observation and laboratory research.

More interesting than (S5) is an axiom which naturally comes to mind in considering attempts to escape appeal to (S5):

(S6) A system $F$ which incorporates ad hoc hypothesis $H$ in order to escape counter-evidence is less plausible than $F'$ which is otherwise in rational parity with $F$ but contains no ad hoc hypotheses.

Conceptual systems are ‘systematic’ in the sense that their defining propositions are mutually relevant to a (one or more membered) set of problems, or an explanation of phenomena, or a (total or partial) view of the world. The defining propositions need not be logically independent (no subset of propositions entails any others), since in such contexts loss of elegance may be overbalanced by the greater clarity logical redundancy sometimes provides. A hypothesis $H$ is ad hoc with respect to $F$ if its only role in $F$ is rebutting some otherwise damning objection. _God allowed the Devil to create fossils in order to tempt us is ad hoc_, I should think, with respect to traditional Judaic or Christian theism. The necessity of ad hoc adjustment is usually symptomatic of conceptual disease, but I think in addition it is itself a defect.

And, it seems right that:

(S7) A system $F$ which cannot explain or assimilate phenomena that lie within its relevance range is false or incomplete.

By the ‘relevance range’ of a conceptual system I mean the range of data (empirical or other) for which the system provides interpretive context and from which counter-evidence, if any, may be discovered. Of course there will be disputes about ‘how much’ explanation of its relevant phenomena a particular system should provide. The degree to which a theist must be able to explain evil, or articulate a theodicy, is a case in point. And, generally, appeal to these and other axioms will involve an evaluative skill for which there are no formulated rules. But that is, I take it, inevitable.
While the $A$-axioms and $S$-axioms are relevant to appraising appeals to religious experience and religious conceptual systems, they are (so far as I can see) not restricted to such contexts. If applicable at all, they are generally applicable, appropriate for appraising appeals to non-religious experiences and non-religious conceptual schemes. Given the notorious difficulties of deciding other than arbitrarily what is and what is not 'religious', and the apparent failure of attempts to show that 'religious language games' occupy their unique conceptual orbits from which non-religious viewpoints are necessarily excluded, I take this universality to be a virtue rather than a vice.

Given the range of territory this paper traverses, a concluding disclaimer is surely apropos. It is patent that the concepts of evidence, explanation, rational plausibility, being reasonable to accept, being confirmed by experience, and so on, require much more discussion than I have provided. The above at best constitutes a prolegomenon to rational appraisal of religious experience and belief.

In any case, I have argued that religious experience is not (in any of the senses discussed) self-authenticating, that appeal to religious experience as evidence for religious belief is relevant but not decisive, and that there are axioms for appraising appeals to experience and competing conceptual schemes. I will be grateful if this much is correct. Then the gruelling task of detailed rational appraisal, of applying and adding axioms, can proceed. At least, so far as appraisal goes, this is where I am, and both published arguments and private remarks suggest to me that I am not alone.