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Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

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Abstract

In recent analytic philosophy of religion, one hotly debated topic is the veridicality of religious experience. In this paper, I briefly trace how the argument from religious experience comes into prominence in the twentieth century. This is due to the able defense of this argument by Richard Swinburne, William Alston, and Jerome Gellman among others. I explain the argument's intuitive force and why the stock objections to religious experience are not entirely convincing. I expound Swinburne's approach and his application of the Principle of Credulity to religious experience. Then I critically examine four major objections to Swinburne. I conclude that the argument from religious experiences is not likely to be conclusive but it should not be dismissed either.

The Experiential Roots of Religion

Religion is characterized by the passion that it can arouse. Why is religion capable of such enormous effects on human life? Apart from the fact that religion is about the ultimate concern of human beings, we also need to bear in mind that religion often has an *experiential* basis. God is not just a hypothesis for the religiously devoted. He is a Living Reality who permeates all their lives. Those people who experience God will echo with Job: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee."² Religious experiences sometimes convey such a heightened sense of reality that the conviction they instill transforms the lives of the experiencers. Furthermore, religious experiences are often world-transforming as well – just contemplate the immense impact of people such as Moses, St. Paul, Augustine, and so forth on Western civilization.

Although religious experience is an ancient phenomenon, the *discourse about* religious experience is relatively new. When people feel completely at ease talking about God, why do they bother to talk about *experiences* of God instead? The popularization of the discourse about religious experience more or less coincides with the turn to subjectivity in modernity. William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* greatly helps the entrenchment of the

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idea of “religious experience.” Rudolf Otto does a similar job for the idea of “numinous experience.”¹ These authors are all concerned to show that the capacity for religious experience is somehow natural to the human psyche. Their work can be seen as efforts to break away from the modern epistemological straitjacket of British empiricism or Kantian agnosticism. However, they are not always clear whether religious experience is merely a feeling or a cognitive experience. So these thinkers do not explicitly formulate any argument from religious experience, that is, the argument that the occurrence of religious experience provides grounds or justification for the existence of God. However, the argument from religious experience is now defended by sophisticated philosophers.

Some clarification of related terms and concepts is needed here. By a *religious experience* I mean an experience which the subject takes to be an experience of God or some supernatural being. Such an experience is *veridical* if what the subject took to be the object of his experience actually existed, was present, and caused him to have that experience in an appropriate way.² The claim that “S has an experience of God” does not entail “God exists.” So the undeniable fact that religious experiences have happened does not prejudice the issue of the existence of God. Before discussing the epistemological issues surrounding the argument from religious experience, let me introduce its development in the twentieth century.

The Argument from Religious Experience in the Twentieth Century

Earlier defenders of religious experience included both theologians and philosophers, for example, Farmer, Frank, Waterhouse, and Knudson.³ Some of them claimed that religious experiences provide immediate knowledge of God, and that they were *self-authenticating* because within the experience the subject directly encountered God and received God’s revelation. For example, the British theologian H. H. Farmer said:

[T]he Christian experience of God . . . in the nature of the case must be self-authenticating and able to shine in its own light independently of the abstract reflections of philosophy, for if it were not, it could hardly be a living experience of God as personal.⁴

However, philosophers tended to be critical of such claims to self-authentication. They pointed out that religious experiences were heavily shaped by the conceptual framework of the experient and that no knowledge could be inferred from mere emotional states or conviction, no matter how intense they were.⁵ They also suggested that it was hard to make sense of the notion of self-authenticating experience. Keith Yandell, himself a defender of religious experience, was highly critical of this notion.⁶ No matter whether these criticisms were cogent or not, they were influential and accounted for the rise of a form of argument from religious experience which did not rely on claims to self-authentication.⁷

Among the early defenders, C. D. Broad was perhaps the most philosophically competent. He anticipated a form of argument from religious experience that is hotly debated nowadays:

The practical postulate which we go upon everywhere else is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception is veridical. We cannot *prove* that what people agree in perceiving really exists independently of them; but we do always assume that ordinary waking sense-perception is veridical unless we can produce some positive ground for thinking that it is delusive in any given case. I think it would be inconsistent to treat the experiences of religious mystics on different principles. So far as they agree they should be provisionally accepted as veridical unless there be some positive ground for thinking that they are not.⁸

From the 1950s to the 1970s, able defenders of religious experience include A. C. Ewing, John Hick, H. D. Lewis, Elton Trueblood, John Baillie, Rem Edwards, and H. P. Owen.⁹ However, they had not drawn much attention from professional philosophers because at that time, verificationism, roughly the doctrine that only in principle verifiable sentences were cognitively meaningful, was still influential and hence even the meaningfulness of religious language was in doubt. The situation by now is very different. First of all, as Taliaferro in a recent introduction to philosophy of religion said:

Since then many philosophers have conceded that concepts of God and other components of different religions cannot be ruled out as obvious nonsense or clear cases of superstition. Important work has gone into building a case for the intelligibility of the concept of God. There is also important criticism of such work, but the debate on these matters is now more open-ended without being less rigorous.¹⁰

Second, starting from the end of 1970s, a number of analytic philosophers had produced increasingly sophisticated defense of religious experience. Richard Swinburne defended religious experience via his Principle of Credulity in *The Existence of God* which was first published in 1979.¹¹ The Principle of Credulity said that it was rational to treat our experiences (including religious experience) as innocent until proven guilty. In other words, religious experiences were treated as prima facie evidence for the existence of God until there were reasons for doubting them. This attracted quite a lot of attention in the circle of philosophy of religion. There were, of course, many critics of Swinburne, for example, William Rowe and Michael Martin, but he had also inspired the support of quite a few professional philosophers such as the philosopher of science Gary Gutting.¹² Whole books were written on religious experience which basically followed Swinburne's line of reasoning, expanding it, modifying it, and replying to objections. They included Caroline Davis's *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (1989), George Wall's *Religious Experience and Religious Belief* (1995), and Jerome Gellman's *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (1997).¹³ There were also other philosophers who worked independently

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toward a similar conclusion, for example, William Wainwright and Keith Yandell.¹⁴

One landmark of this debate is William Alston's *Perceiving God* which was published in 1991.¹⁵ In this book, Alston brought his analytical skills to the issue of religious experience and defended a doxastic practice approach to epistemology. This approach said that it was practically rational to trust our socially established doxastic practices, including the Christian Mystical Practice. His arguments were discussed in major analytic philosophy journals, for example, *Noûs* and *The Journal of Philosophy*. Both *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* and *Religious Studies*⁵ have organized symposia to discuss his book in 1994.¹⁶

The argument from religious experience seems to be alive and well, having both able defenders and detractors. It is also exciting and fascinating because it often raises questions and helps us rethink deep issues in epistemology. Let us examine this debate in some details.

The Demise of Foundationalism and Traditional Objections to the Argument from Religious Experience

Foundationalists believe that our knowledge has to be built upon the foundation of sense experiences because only they are the indubitable given free from interpretations, and are open to public confirmation. Religious experiences, if they are to be trusted, have to be vindicated on the basis of this foundation: sense experience. However, the argument from religious experience has strong intuitive force for many people. For example, Hick thinks that we are "in the last resort thrown back upon the criterion of coherence with our mass of experience and belief as a whole; there is no further criterion by which the criteriological adequacy of this mass can itself be tested. This is surely our actual situation as cognizing subjects."¹⁷ Is it not plausible to say that "it is proper for the man who reports a compelling awareness of God to *claim* to know that God exists"? At least it seems to Hick that the "onus lies upon anyone who denies that this fulfills the conditions of a proper knowledge claim to show reasons for disqualifying it."¹⁸ The allegation that religious experience as a type is unveridical amounts to the claim that *not a single instance* of the myriad religious experiences of humankind is veridical, that is to say, all these experiences are totally delusory. Is it reasonable to believe that all "God-experients" are either deceiving themselves or others? Gutting, for one, does not think so:

[R]eligion, throughout human history, has been an integral part of human life, attracting at all times the enthusiastic adherence of large numbers of good and intelligent people. To say that something that has such deep roots and that has been sustained for so long in such diverse contexts is nothing but credulity and hypocrisy is . . . extraordinary.¹⁹

Suppose we come to know the life story of a person who has dramatic experiences of God *throughout his life*. We find that person honest, sane, and

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intelligent. We also find his story corroborated by many others' stories throughout history in many cultures. Is it not rash to say that *all of them are entirely and chronically deluded*? Nevertheless, for Western philosophers steeped in the tradition of empiricism, the trustworthiness of religious experiences is hard to swallow. In the sections on religion in introductory books on philosophy, the argument from religious experience is often not even mentioned. When it is mentioned, it is usually dismissed on the basis of stock objections like the following:

1. The Logical Gap Objection: We have to distinguish the experience and the subjective conviction it produces from the objectivity (or **veridicality**) of the experience, for example, a very "real" hallucination or dream is a live possibility. The critics, such as Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre,²⁰ admit that religious experiences often produce subjective certitude in the subjects. However, it does not follow that the experience is objectively certain. In other words, there is a logical gap between the psychological data and the ontological claim of the religious experiences. To bridge the gap, we need independent certification of the religious belief. For example, Flew challenges the defenders of religious experiences to answer this basic question:

How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of religious experience, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective religious truths?²¹

2. The Theory-Ladenness Objection: The religious experiences are heavily (or even entirely) shaped by the conceptual framework of the experiencers. Hence they are not useful as evidence for ontological claims.²²
3. The Privacy Objection: According to Rem Edwards, "the foremost accusation leveled at the mystics is that mystical experiences are private, like hallucinations, illusions, and dreams, and that like these 'nonveridical' experiences, religious experience is really of no noetic significance at all."²³

However, many theists have provided reasonable responses to these objections. First, we should note that the logical gap objection to religious experiences basically conforms to the structure of the general skeptical argument.²⁴ This can be seen from Gutting's parody of Flew's question:

How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of experiences of material objects, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective truths about material objects?²⁵

The certitude/certainty distinction applies to almost all kinds of experience, including sense experience. A hallucination is exactly an unveridical sense experience which nevertheless produces subjective conviction. If the certitude/certainty distinction *in itself* threatens religious experiences, it will also threaten sense experience. So anyone who pushes this objection needs

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to show why the logical gap is not damaging in other cases. If the critics only apply the objection to religious experiences but not to other experiences, it would be extremely arbitrary. This would also confirm Alston's charge that critics of religious experiences often adopt a double standard with regard to sense experiences:

I have identified certain recurrent fallacies that underlie many of these objections – epistemic imperialism and the double standard. The objections in question are made from a naturalistic viewpoint. They involve unfavorable epistemic comparisons between mystical perception and sense perception; it is not difficult to show that they either condemn the former for features it shares with the latter (double standard) or unwarrantedly require the former to exhibit features of the latter [imperialism].²⁶

The Theory-Ladenness Objection again raises a general problem in epistemology. Even ordinary perception is theory-laden²⁷ and a similar problem plagues scientific realism. The empiricists and the positivists have searched hard for the rock-bottom “given” which is interpretation-free. In this way, it can be the neutral arbiter of different theories or interpretations. However, the development of modern philosophy and especially contemporary philosophy of science bespeak the downfall of this project. All the major philosophers of science, for example, Popper, Hanson, Kuhn, Lakatos, and Feyerabend, agree that all observations are to some extent theory-laden. For example, Nancy Cartwright writes:

We can be mistaken about even the most mundane claims about sensible properties, and once these are called into question, their defense will rest on a complicated and sophisticated network of general claims about how sensations are caused, what kinds of things can go wrong in the process, and what kinds of things can and cannot be legitimately adduced as interferences.²⁸

Some author has also suggested modern psychology confirms the idea that interpretation “is absolutely essential to there occurring a perceptual experience at all. . . . We are not passive recipients of ready-made representations of our environment; rather, stimuli from that environment must be processed by various interpretive mechanisms before they can have any significance for us.”²⁹ Now the critic requires that the interpretive elements of religious experience be independently supported before we deem the experiences reliable. However, because sense experiences also have interpretive elements, “if we were always required to provide independent evidence that the beliefs in terms of which we had unconsciously ‘interpreted’ a perceptual experience were probably true before we could take the perceptual experience to be probably veridical, we would be trapped in [skepticism].”³⁰ If the critic is to avoid the charge of double standard, he needs to explain in what way this is a special problem for religious experiences. So again the Theory-Ladenness Objection *in itself* is not decisive. Perhaps to avoid skepticism, the wiser policy is to treat the incorporated interpretations in our experiences as *prima facie* justified.³¹ Furthermore, prior religious

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frameworks need not be corrupting; they may instead help to “tune” people to perceive a reality that they would otherwise miss.³²

Let us examine the Privacy Objection, the allegation that unlike sense experience, religious experience is private and subjective. In what sense is a sense experience public? My *experience* of a chair occurs essentially in my mind – it is every bit as private as other experiences in this aspect. I cannot directly experience how you experience the chair and vice versa. There is a danger that the critics are “confusing the claim that the experience is private with the quite different claim that the object of the experience is private.”³³ What makes a sense experience public is that verbal reports of different persons can be compared. However, reports of people having religious experiences can also be compared. For example, experiences of God are present in almost all ages, all places, and all cultures. The reports to a considerable extent match. The experience also develops in a tradition. So in these aspects religious experience is also public. As Edwards emphasizes:

[T]he experience of the Holy seems to be very much *unlike* dreams and hallucinations. Extremely large numbers of people from extremely diverse cultural backgrounds claim to experience the Holy One, and there is a significant amount of transcultural agreement about what the experienced object is like. This is not the case with the objects of hallucinations – most hallucinators do not see pink elephants . . . *Pink elephant* is simply a convenient symbolic abbreviation for the immense variety of weird entities encountered by people having hallucinations.³⁴

It seems that the force of many stock objections to religious experience depends upon the traditional foundationalist framework. However, as Davis points out, although “a narrowly empiricist and foundationalist position is rarely found now outside discussions of religious experience,” the philosopher of religion comes up time and again against this outdated assumption.³⁵ The demise of foundationalism does not mean an automatic victory for the argument from religious experience. However, both defenders and critics of religious experience need to take seriously this development. They need to spell out and defend the epistemological framework they use to evaluate religious experience. Let us examine Richard Swinburne’s attempt in this direction.

Swinburne’s Defense of Religious Experience via the Principle of Credulity

Swinburne proposes a defense of religious experiences by espousing an epistemological principle that accord religious experiences with *prima facie evidential force* (hereafter PFEF). An experience has PFEF if the claims of the experience are probably true unless there are positive reasons to the contrary. The idea is that all experiences should be treated as innocent until proven guilty. Religious experiences should also be accorded PFEF then, that is, the claims of religious experiences should be trusted unless counter-evidence can be brought forward.³⁶

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This epistemological principle is called the Principle of Credulity (hereafter PC) defined as follows:

If it seems [epistemically] to me that X is present on the basis of experience, then probably X is present unless there are special considerations to the contrary.

Swinburne argues that it is a fundamental principle of rationality apart from which we cannot provide any noncircular justification of either ordinary perception or memory. Then using this principle, Swinburne formulates the following argument for the existence of God:

- A. It seems [epistemically] to me that God is present.
- B. There is no good reason to think either God is nonexistent or not present; nor any good reason to think the experience unveridical.
- C. Hence probably God is present.

The PC does not stand alone in Swinburne's epistemological approach. It has to be used together with other epistemological principles like the following:

- a. The Principle of Testimony: other things being equal, others' experiences are likely to be as they report them to be.
- b. The Principle of Simplicity: "[I]n a given field, we take as most likely to be true the simplest theory which fits best with other theories of neighbouring fields to produce the simplest set of theories of the world."
- c. The Principle of Charity: other things being equal, we suppose that other men are like ourselves.³⁷

These principles are important. If we just take the PC alone, the principle may look unduly egocentric. However, the Principle of Testimony shows that Swinburne is equally emphatic on trusting others' experiences and the social dimension of knowing. Second, Swinburne's approach has to be distinguished from an "anything goes" approach. It is recognized that man's ability to know is far from perfect: his initial epistemic seemings are fallible. The hope lies in the ability of man to sift and correct these initial data. For example, an erroneous epistemic seeming can be corrected by other epistemic seemings. However, to do this we need some rational principles to organize our data. For Swinburne, the supreme principle is the Principle of Simplicity. This principle explains what can be counter-evidence to a prima facie justified claim:

We should not believe that things are as they seem to be in cases when such a belief is in conflict with the simplest theory compatible with a vast number of data obtained by supposing in a vast number of other cases that things are as they seem to be.

So Swinburne's approach includes a way to sift the data and establish an orderly noetic structure. I will call this kind of epistemology the "credulity approach." Swinburne's argument has engendered a lot of controversy. Some critics challenge the validity of the PC, and others argue that (B) above

Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy 9 is false, that is, Swinburne has neglected some defeaters of the claims based on religious experiences. As space is limited, I can only discuss four major objections below.

The No Criteria/Uncheckability Objection

Critics allege that there is no criterion to distinguish the veridical religious experiences from the nonveridical ones. If so, it is not rational to believe that a certain religious experience is veridical. Hence it cannot be used as evidence for religious claims. Even if there are criteria from within the religious framework, we still lack objective, noncircular criteria. In contrast, when we doubt a sense experience, it can be subjected to further tests, for example, others' reports and photographs. C. B. Martin put it this way:

[T]he presence of a piece of blue paper is not to be read off from my experience as a piece of blue paper. Other things are relevant: What would a photography reveal? Can I touch it? What do others see?³⁸

Because religious experiences cannot be tested in similar ways, they are unreliable.

The defenders point out that as a matter of fact, religious experiences can be checked in principle, for example, by other experiences (religious or nonreligious) or by the Bible. The critics will surely say, "These checks already assume some religious beliefs, and hence are circular. We need some noncircular checks." This requirement, however, is not even satisfied by sense experience. Checks by others' reports depend on our hearing experience and capacity for understanding and so on. All checks are ultimately circular. This point is made trenchantly by Mavrodes:

Suppose that I do try to photograph the paper. What then? Martin asks, "What would a photograph reveal?" To discover what the photograph reveals I would ordinarily look at it. But if the presence of blue paper is not to be "read off" from my experience then the presence of a photography, and *a fortiori* what the photograph reveals, is not to be read off from my experience either. It begins to look as though I must take a photograph of the photograph, and so on . . . The same sort of thing happens if I try to determine "what others see." I send for my friend to look at the paper. . . . But his presence is not to be read off from my experience either. Perhaps I must have a third man to tell me whether the second has come and the infinite regress appears again. Interpreted in this way, Martin's thesis fails because it converts into a general requirement something that makes sense only as an occasional procedure. At most we can substitute one unchecked experience for another.³⁹

Ultimately, the veridicality of a sense experience can only be checked with respect to other sense experiences (unless we countenance an a priori proof of the veridicality of sense experience). So to hold this as a debilitating factor for religious experience *alone* is again committing the double standard fallacy. As Losin says, the critic "has simply assumed that reasons drawn from

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experiences of God cannot themselves be ‘reasons for thinking that particular experiences of God are delusive,’ that experiences of God cannot themselves provide a [fallible and provisional] means for the critique of other such experiences. I see no reason to think that this assumption is true, and good reason to think that, when suitably amended and applied to sensory experience, it is false. Nor do I see the slightest reason why we cannot use knowledge or beliefs about God not gleaned from experience of God to identify and dismiss particular experiences of God as non-veridical.⁴⁰

Despite the above responses, Michael Martin still insists that the PC should not be applied “unless one has a right to assume that perceptual conditions hold under which the entity at issue is likely to appear to an observer if the entity is present. This right may be justified on inductive grounds, by one’s background theory or in other ways.”⁴¹ He concludes that we have the right to use a principle like PC in the case of sense experience but not in the case of religious experience.

However, is it really the case that our belief in the general reliability of sense experience can be justified by inductive evidence? The story goes like this. Usually our perceptual claims can be checked to see whether they are correct or not. In this way we can keep a track record of our perceptual process and see that it is generally reliable. If we accumulate enough inductive evidence for validity of our perceptual claims in the past, we can be justified in believing that they will continue to be reliable.

Let us not mention the problem of justifying the principle of induction, that is, the future is like the past in certain sorts of respect. However, we still have to ask, “How is the checking of a belief-forming process possible?”

The most direct approach would be to compare its output beliefs with the facts that make them true or false, and determine the track record of the practice in a suitable spread of cases. Sometimes this is possible. It is possible, for example, when we are dealing with what we might call “partial” or “restricted” practices, like determining temperature on the basis of mercury thermometers. . . . In these cases we have other modes of access to the facts in question, modes which we can use to check the accuracy of the practice under examination. But we fairly quickly arrive at more inclusive practices where this technique is no longer available. If we are assessing SP [i.e. sensory practice] in general, for example, we have no independent access to the facts in question . . . , that is, no access that neither consists in nor is based on reliance on sense perception; and so we have no non-circular check on the accuracy of the deliverances of SP.⁴²

If in the end we still insist that our checks, for example, asking for others’ corroboration, provide justification for the perceptual claims, it can only be because we already accord PFEF to others’ perceptual experiences. If others’ perceptual claims are to corroborate ours, besides the assumption of the general reliability of our perceptual apparatus, we have to further assume that they possess sense organs that are in good order and a brain that is functioning properly. Otherwise it is doubtful that their perceptual claims can be used to check ours. But how can one justify all these assumptions

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apart from a basic prima facie trust in our perceptual experiences? The PC seems to be inescapable.

The second problem concerning this argument is pointed out sharply by Swinburne:

[A]n induction from past experiences to future experiences is only reliable if we correctly recall our past experiences. And what grounds have we got for supposing that we do? Clearly not inductive grounds – an inductive justification of the reliability of memory-claims would obviously be circular. Here we must rely on the principle that things are the way they seem, as a basic principle not further justifiable. . . . The principle that the rational man supposes that in the absence of special considerations in particular cases things are the way they seem to be cannot always be given inductive justification. And if it is justifiable to use it when other justifications fail in memory cases, what good argument can be given against using it in other kinds of case when other justifications fail?⁴³

So in the end to “justify” ordinary perception inductively, we have to rely on the prima facie reliability of memory. The attempt to provide noncircular justification for our memory claims is notoriously difficult. Again we seem to need the PC as a fundamental principle.

The Experience of Absence of God Objection

Another natural objection to Swinburne’s approach is: what about those who never have an experience of God? Should not these experiences of absence of God be taken as prima facie evidence against the existence of God? Michael Martin presses this objection by insisting that Swinburne should also accept a Negative Principle of Credulity (NPC) as above.⁴⁴

This objection seems to be a smart one at first sight, but it is dubious that experiences of absence and experiences of presence should be placed on the same footing with respect to the *existence* of an object or a contingent state of affairs. This is rooted in the asymmetry between positive and negative existential statements with respect to empirical verification. Let C be the claim that there is a cow and $\neg C$ its negation. For C to be true, we just need *one* alleged perception of a cow to be veridical. However, for $\neg C$ to be verified we need to examine all spatiotemporal locations and perceive no cow and all these infinite number of perceptions have to be veridical. That is why a principle of this form is utterly implausible:

If I have an experience of absence of X, then probably X does not exist.

Moreover, I suggest that in general experiences of absence are *more* defeasible than experiences of presence. First, “This is because for the positive judgment to be reliable only one causal chain needs to go from the object apparently perceived to the subject who seems to perceive it. But if the negative judgment is to be reliable, causal chains need to go from all places where the object might be to the subject who seems to perceive that the object is not present.”⁴⁵ Consider the two claims: “there seems to be a needle in the

room” and “there seems to be no needle in the room.” Which will you trust more? Second, when one reports an experience of absence, we can never be sure that this experience is not attributable to inattentiveness or inability to recognize the object in question. It is different in the case of a positive experience. It is perhaps an analytical truth that when one experiences X, one’s attention is on X. In many cases a positive experience just arouses and sustains the attention. So the factor of attention is automatically provided for by the positive experience. If this were the case, then experiences of absence would normally have weaker force than experiences of presence.

It is even more problematic to apply the NPC to experiences of absence of God because God is by nature hard to manipulate. Let us first consider an analogy in the physical realm when the object in question cannot be manipulated to some extent. Suppose a detector is used to check whether there are radiations from *one*⁴⁶ nucleus which is suspected to be radioactive. The absence of reading in that meter does not show that that nucleus is not radioactive but a reading is very good evidence for the radioactivity of that nucleus. In this case, we should distinguish the probability of having a positive reading from the reliability of that positive reading. Suppose that the half-life of that element is very long and the probability of decay very low. The probability of having a positive reading in a short time will also be very low. This would make the absence of reading even more insignificant but it does not impugn a positive reading. It is because whether the positive reading is trustworthy has to do only with the reliability of its detecting mechanism. The conclusion is that the elusiveness of the object of experience does not diminish the evidential force of the positive experience while it does render the negative experience much less forceful. This asymmetry is not ad hoc but well motivated. Consider these two statements:

- (★) If there is no counter reading, then (probably) the nucleus is not radioactive.
- (#) If there is a counter reading, then (probably) the nucleus is radioactive.

The example brings out clearly two points. First, commitment to (#) does not entail commitment to (★). Second, in cases when the object of experience or detection is *hard to manipulate*, it is rational to uphold (#) while rejecting (★).

Of course, God is not a *manipulatable* object like a table that we can experience at will. God is the perfectly free Creator and the Sovereign Subject. If God exists, it stands to reason that he has the prerogative to choose the right person and the right time to reveal to. In general, in the realm of personal encounter, positive experiences outweigh negative experiences. If this were the case, how much more would it be true of experiences of God who is perfectly free and wise! Furthermore, human freedom also accounts for the implausibility of the NPC: even if there is a

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God, there may be persons who do not want to have a relationship with God. God may respect their free choices and hence does not impose his presence on their minds.

So experiences of absence of God are not clearly evidential. The above objection is far from conclusive.

The Naturalistic Explanation Objection

Many critics think that religious beliefs formed by having religious experiences are susceptible to naturalistic explanations, psychological, sociological, and the like. The religious experiences are hence discredited. At least their evidential force, if there is any in the beginning, is then cancelled.⁴⁷

However, many suspect that there are as yet no general naturalistic explanations of religious experiences which are empirically well established and theoretically plausible. For example, the Freudian explanation of religion is a prominent example of naturalistic explanation. But nowadays Freudianism itself is in doubt.⁴⁸ Its explanation of religious belief has been carefully examined and found wanting, even by atheists.⁴⁹ Indeed, Alston comments:

[T]he most prominent theories in the field invoke causal mechanisms that themselves pose thus far insoluble problems of identification and measurement: unconscious psychological processes like repression, identification, regression, and mechanisms of defense; social influences on ideology and attitude formation. It is not surprising that theories like those of Freud, Marx, and Durkheim rest on a slender thread of evidential support and generalize irresponsibly from such evidence as they can muster. Nor do the prospects seem rosy for significant improvement.⁵⁰

Of course, this general assertion needs to be supported by more detailed discussions.⁵¹ Let us further examine two recent proposals.

Evan Fales suggests that a sociological explanation of mystical experiences can serve as defeaters of the argument from religious experience because this sociological understanding of mystical experience is superior to the theistic explanation. His explanation builds on the studies by the anthropologist I. M. Lewis on spirit possession, which claims that mysticism serves as a means of access to political and social power.⁵² However, Gellman responds by producing counterexamples to Fales' theory. In the cases of mystics like Jacob Boehme, Abraham the son of Maimonides (1186–1237), Baal Shem Tov, and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), their mystical experiences have little to do with their attainment of power. Moreover, there is the phenomenon of noninstitutionalized mysticism: mystical possession is often independent of social institutions, or the mystic is not well placed for access to power. Gellman further argues that even if Fales' theory were convincing, it would not be successful as a defeater. Suppose the mystics did manage to achieve improvements for their marginalized group by force of their mystical authority. Gellman asks, "Isn't it fitting for God to appear to people for the relief of oppression and injustice?"⁵³

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Another of the critics' favorite type of naturalistic explanation is the neurophysiological one. Some argue that the fact that mysticism can be induced by drugs provides a reductive explanation of mysticism. However, some scholars contend that it has not been really established that drugs are sufficient to produce genuine mystical experiences. The experimental evidence only suggests that it can raise the likelihood and enhance the intensity of the experiences.⁵⁴ Even if drugs are causally sufficient to produce mystical experiences, it does not follow that they are unveridical. God may have laid down some psychophysical laws to the effect that whenever certain brain states are produced, a certain perception of the divine would be produced. There is no reason why those brain states cannot be caused by taking drugs. It has been argued that as long as the whole process is set up and upheld by God, such perception of God should be counted as veridical. In any case, even if drug-induced mystical experiences are unveridical, it does not follow that non-drug-induced mystical experiences are also unveridical. What is shown is that on the experiential level, mystical experience can be faked. This is neither surprising nor uniquely true of mystical experience. Sense experiences can also be faked.

Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg's neurophysiological theory of mysticism has also caught much attention. They explain mystical states as the effect of "deafferentation" – the cutting off of neural input into various structures of the nervous system. As a result, an experience of "absolute unitary being" occurs. In similar ways, the theory proposes explanations of a continuum of mystical experiences, both theistic and nontheistic.

The theory of d'Aquili and Newberg is by no means proven at this stage. Moreover, they point out that "tracing spiritual experience to neurological behavior does not disprove its realness . . . both spiritual experiences and experiences of a more ordinary material nature are made real to the mind in the very same way – through the processing powers of the brain and the cognitive functions of the mind."⁵⁵

They also ask, "Why should the human brain, which evolved for the very pragmatic purpose of helping us survive, possess such an apparently impractical talent?"⁵⁶ They in fact tend to think their biology of transcendence is congenial to religion. The neurophysiological theory by itself does not disprove the mystical experiences just as psychophysical laws governing sense experiences would not disprove those experiences.⁵⁷

The above discussions already show that regardless of the merits of the naturalistic explanations, one prior philosophical question needs to be asked: in what ways is the availability of naturalistic explanation relevant? If we infer from the availability of naturalistic explanation of a religious experience to its unveridicality, we seem to commit the genetic fallacy. Even the fact that an experience of God has proximal natural causes seems to be compatible with its ultimate origin in God. As Wainwright says:

Suppose we are presented with a causal account of religious experience which is believed by the scientific community to be fully adequate. Are we entitled to

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infer that the experiences are not genuine perceptions of God, etc? We are entitled to draw this conclusion . . . only if we have good reason to believe that the causes which are specified in that account can, when taken alone, i.e. in the absence of [among other things] any divine activity, produce the experiences in question. Without a disproof of the existence of God and other supra-empirical agents, it is totally unclear how we could know that this was the case.⁵⁸

In fact, sense experiences can likewise be “adequately causally explained in terms of neural processes in the brain without mentioning the putatively perceived external object.”⁵⁹ As this does not in itself render sense experiences unreliable or cancel their evidential force, it is not clear why the corresponding fact will do harm to religious experiences.

The Conflicting Claims Objection

Many critics point out that every religion professes its own kind of religious experience. Given that the claims of these religious experiences are so various and mutually contradictory, they argue, we should regard all these claims with suspicion. In other words, these conflicts show that the alleged process to form religious beliefs is not reliable. Even if we grant some force to the religious experiences, different religious experiences cancel one another's force in the end.⁶⁰

The first question we should settle is that whether the existing contradictions between religious experiences make the PC inapplicable to them. It is a totally different one from the question: “if we grant some evidential force to religious experiences, will such conflicts cancel this force?” To apply the PC to some experiences is to have *initial* trust in them and, if they are defeated, to salvage as much as possible from them. It does not entail that they are all or mostly reliable. There is no contradiction in saying that we should have initial trust in conflicting experiences. (Of course, the conflicts have to be dealt with. We will come to that later.) Let me illustrate this by the Parable of the Remnants.

Suppose a nuclear holocaust occurs and the remnants are badly hurt by radiation. Mutations occur such that during their seeing the proximal stimuli produced by external objects are *always* blended with internally generated noise. The result is that the apparent size, shape, and color of a nearby object can vary for different individuals and can also vary from time to time for the same individual. The saving grace is that the noise level does not exceed the threshold which would destroy altogether the capability of object recognition. So the people can still, with difficulty, know that *certain* object is around. The result is a kind of “vision” which can roughly locate a medium-sized object nearby but all else are blurred and unstable. Notice that the erroneous perceptions are always integrated with the roughly correct identifications. Phenomenologically speaking, we cannot separate these two kinds of perceptions: the bare recognition of object versus the more detailed perception of color, shape, and size. In this case should those people accord

some evidential force to their perceptions? Suppose they do not and instead they adopt initial skepticism toward their “perceptions.” Namely, they insist that their perceptions have to be treated as “guilty until proven innocent.” Can they demonstrate the reliability of their “perceptions” by another means? Hardly! What about the availability of tests? There may not be effective tests which have consistent results. Skepticism surely results and it would rob the people of the only little information they still possess! This consequence seems to be counterintuitive. Instead it is plausible to say the PC is applicable here. By applying it, the remnants will come to trust their ability to locate medium-sized objects while not giving undue confidence to their color and shape perceptions. The PC is “charitable” enough here without being unduly uncritical. The idea here is that although the “perceptions,” described at the highest level of epistemic seeming, are grossly inconsistent, they do convey information about the reality at a lower level of description. Indeed the parable is suggestive. It shows that it is quite conceivable that even though religious experiences as a whole are not entirely accurate, they can be reasonably informative at a lower level of description. There is no a priori reason for believing that contradictions of experiences would entail their total unreliability.

Furthermore, almost all sorts of experience or doxastic practices produce conflicting beliefs sooner or later. Empirically speaking, no experience which we commonly regard as reliable is completely free from this problem. (Just think of the empiricists’ “argument from illusion.”) So why do we think that the presence of contradictions in religious experience should debar us from having initial trust, at least to some degree, in religious experience?

The above argument, however, does not license the irrationality of swallowing a grossly inconsistent set of beliefs. To have initial trust in contradictory experiences does not mean to accept them all. This, contrarily, is only the first step to ensure a proper initial base on which then, and only then, can we exercise our critical faculty rigorously. First, let us consider an alternative, the Sceptical Rule (SR), defined as follows:

When experiences or claims conflict with one another, we should reject all of them.

Should we adopt the SR instead? I do not think so. Consider the conflict of witnesses in the courts. It would be indeed stupid to reject all their accounts just because they conflict! It seems to be a rational strategy to try to reconcile their reports as much as possible. For example, a common core⁶¹ can be identified. Take another example: suppose a phenomenon occurred very briefly which led to conflicting reports – A reported seeing an aeroplane, B a spaceship, and C an air balloon. It is absurd to suggest that we should reject all their statements and think that nothing has ever happened! It is possible that one of them may actually be correct. At the very least we should accept the common content of their experiences. *Unidentified flying object*, vague though it is, is not a completely uninformative term. Moreover if the

SR were adopted, history would also be imperiled. It is well known that historical documents are liable to massive contradictions. However, we do not deduce from this phenomenon that historical enquiry is entirely pointless. The job of the historian is to utilize all these materials to reconstruct the past by harmonizing them without producing too much strain in the overall interpretation. Many historical accounts of a momentous historical event, for example, China's Cultural Revolution, are contradictory. It is difficult to determine the exact course or nature of this event but it would be preposterous to deny that the Cultural Revolution had happened. All the above examples count against the skeptical policy and show that conflict of presumptive data is not irremediable.

We can now come back to Martin's conflicting claims objection to religious experience:

Swinburne advises us when considering a new sense to assume first that by and large things are what they seem. . . . [T]his initial assumption must be quickly abandoned in the case of religious experiences. religious experiences are often conflicting, and thus things *cannot* be what they seem. We must distinguish what is veridical and what is not, and there is at present no non-question-begging theory that enables us to do this.⁶²

Suppose he is correct about the degree of conflicts of the religious experiences. Does it follow then the whole lot of religious experiences has no evidential force at all and we can just dismiss them? If my arguments are thus far correct, this conclusion is unwarranted. The conflicts of religious experience may indeed show the type-unreliability of religious experience at the highest level of description. However, a certain common core can still be extracted from the diverse religious experiences at a lower level of description. Let us elaborate the Parable of the Remnants. Consider their "perceptions" of the sun. When they look at the sun, they see some object *up there* but one sees it as round, while another as square and so on. Even worse, for an individual he sees it as square on Monday but round on Tuesday and hexagonal on Wednesday and so on. Obviously an object cannot be both round and square at the same time. So the object *cannot* be identical to what it seems at most of the times. However, by the application of the PC, the people at least can arrive at the conclusion that there is a bright object of *some* shape up there. There is no need to adopt a reductionist account of the "sun" as nothing but productions of their minds, that is, to discount their experiences of the sun as absolutely unreliable. Similarly, despite the conflicts of the religious experiences, they still point to the fact that there is another realm *up there* or *beyond*. In other words, although the religious experiences taken as a whole hardly point to a determinate supernatural reality, they still cohere in that they all point to *something beyond* the naturalistic world, that is, the Transcendent realm.

The most important contradiction remains is that concerning the *nature of the ultimate reality*. Is it personal or impersonal? I believe the "contradiction" is not as stark as it is commonly made out. For example, Davis carefully sifts

18 Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy through the data of diverse religious experiences and suggests a common core.⁶³ If this attempt can be backed up by detailed and substantial arguments, then it can plausibly be maintained that we can extract a common core from the diverse religious experiences which at least point to the fact that this spatiotemporal world is not the Ultimate. There is more to what we can see. Religious experience as a loose type at least supports this modest conclusion. It is a tricky question whether the argument from religious experience can be used to support some particularistic religious traditions. I have a fuller treatment elsewhere.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The argument from religious experience is hotly contended. There are some important critics like Richard Gale and Matthew Bagger, both of whom I cannot discuss here.⁶⁵ I just hope to highlight the crucial issues surrounding this debate, and show that there are weighty considerations for both sides. Swinburne's route of taking religious experience as *prima facie* evidence for the transcendent realm is a promising one but his approach depends crucially on the PC, the further defense of which will inevitably raise many deep epistemological issues. In the end, the epistemic assessment of religious experience will probably depend on the ability of this radically new epistemology to withstand objections. The controversy is still raging.

It is difficult to have a quick solution here because problems of circularity always loom in the background. How one deems the epistemic status of religious experience depends crucially on one's fundamental epistemic principles. As there is no consensus about fundamental epistemic principles, each side of this debate needs to defend his epistemology. However, in the process of defending one's epistemology, one needs to appeal to pretheoretic intuitions about which types of beliefs and experiences are acceptable, and with respect to religious experience and the like, our intuitions may tend to diverge. So contemporary arguments from religious experience may never be able to gain consensus, but in any case, philosophical arguments rarely achieve this. At the same time, it is not as easy as some critics think to show that religious experiences are entirely unreliable, and some forms of the argument from religious experience may well be defensible and reasonable.

Short Biography

Kai-man Kwan received his PhD from the University of Oxford. He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at the Hong Kong Baptist University. His current research interests include religious experience, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, epistemology, political philosophy, and social ethics.

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¹ James ?? and Otto ??.

² The last phrase is added to safeguard against the so-called deviant causal chains. This condition is hard to specify in details. The same problem occurs for the explication of the concept of veridical sensory perception. See Grice ?? (Ch. 3). It should also be noted that this is offered as a sufficient condition for veridicality and this may not be identical to its necessary condition.

³ Cf. Farmer??, Frank ??, Waterhouse ??, Knudson ??.

⁴ Farmer 158.

⁵ Cf. C. B. Martin ?? (Ch. 5), Flew ?? (Ch. 6).

⁶ See Yandell ?? (Ch. 8). I also eschew the claim that religious experience has to be ineffable. Literally interpreted, this claim is self-defeating and contradicted by the many accounts of religious experience produced by the mystics and the like. I take the core of truth in this claim is that God (or other objects of religious experience) is intrinsically beyond the capacity of human language to describe it *fully*. This does not entail that human concept as such is not applicable to God. See Yandell ?? (Ch. 3–5) for detailed criticisms.

⁷ Robert Oakes continues to defend some form of self-authentication. See Oakes 413–25.

⁸ Broad 197.

⁹ Ewing ??, Lewis??, Trueblood ?? (Ch. 11), Baillie ??, Edwards ?? (Ch. 13–14), Owen ??.

¹⁰ Taliaferro 3. Chapter 8 of this book also contains an elaborate defense of religious experience.

¹¹ Swinburne, *The Existence of God* ?? (Ch.13).

¹² Rowe 85–92; Martin, “The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience,” 79–93 and *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* ??; Gutting ??.

¹³ Davis ??, Wall ??; Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* ??.

¹⁴ Wainwright, *Mysticism* ??, Yandell??.

¹⁵ Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* ?? . Also see his earlier articles: “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” ??; “Perceiving God,” 655–65; and “Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God,” 433–48.

¹⁶ Perhaps another influential figure, Alvin Plantinga, ought to be mentioned as well. He started with an attack on classical foundationism in order to leave room for belief in God as a properly basic belief (Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *passim*). He then embarked on an ambitious epistemological project. In 1993, he published two books: *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*. In the first, he surveyed and criticized almost all the major epistemological approaches in vogue. In the second, he expounded his new approach to epistemology, Proper Functionalism. His third book, *Warranted Christian Belief* elaborated this approach and applied it to defend the Christian faith. His work was more epistemological in nature and strictly speaking, he had not committed to the argument from religious experience. However, he made it clear that his epistemological project was intended to be compatible with the *sensus divinitas* as a basic source of epistemic warrant. In this way, his work could be seen to be complementary to the work of other defenders of religious experience. His work had also caught the attention of analytic epistemologists. Many leading epistemologists (e.g. Keith Lehrer, Laurence Bonjour, Bas C. van Fraassen, Ernest Sosa) paid him a tribute by collaborating on a book about his proper functionalism, offering criticisms of it (see Kvanvig ??). Plantinga in turn responded vigorously to their criticisms. This project showed that the old-fashioned empiricist epistemology, which was one major obstacle to the acceptance of religious experience as a source of justification, could no longer be taken for granted.

¹⁷ Hick 205.

¹⁸ Hick 210.

¹⁹ Gutting 2–3.

²⁰ MacIntyre 72.

²¹ Flew 129.

²² Cf. Donovan ?? (Ch. 5).

²³ Edwards 318.

²⁴ Ayer ?? (Ch. 2). Also cf. Williams 14ff.

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²⁵ Gutting 147.

²⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God* 255. A list of double standards is provided on pp. 249–50.

²⁷ Cf. Papineau ??.

²⁸ Cartwright 259.

²⁹ Davis 149. As one referee points out, this claim is rather strong, and some philosophers still defend at least the possibility of an interpretation-free perception. I think it is not absolutely essential to claim the impossibility of an interpretation-free perception as far as my paper is concerned. It is enough to point out that in the case of sensory perceptions, although by and large they are theory-laden and not interpretation-free, we can still rely on their prima facie epistemic force.

³⁰ Davis 144.

³¹ Davis 153.

³² Davis 163ff.

³³ Edwards 318.

³⁴ Edwards 320–1.

³⁵ Davis 143.

³⁶ Swinburne, *The Existence of God* ?? (Ch. 13).

³⁷ Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* 13–15.

³⁸ C. B. Martin, pp. 87–8.

³⁹ Mavrodes 75–6.

⁴⁰ Losin 69. Cf. Alston, *Perceiving God* 249.

⁴¹ Martin, “The Principle of Credulity,” 85–6. Fales also raises a similar objection in “Do Mystics See God?” ??.

⁴² Alston, “Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God,” 436.

⁴³ Swinburne, *The Existence of God* 256.

⁴⁴ Martin, “The Principle of Credulity,” 82–3.

⁴⁵ Swinburne, “Does Theism Need a Theodicy?” 294.

⁴⁶ This example is artificial in the sense that practically speaking, it is very difficult to isolate one nucleus for testing. However, the example still serves to illustrate the epistemic principles involved.

⁴⁷ Cf. Mackie 183.

⁴⁸ See Eysenck ??, Webster ??

⁴⁹ See Banks ??, Grunbaum 152–92.

⁵⁰ Alston, *Perceiving God* 230.

⁵¹ See Davis ?? (Ch. 8); Yandell ?? (Ch. 6–7); and Gellman, *Experience of God* ?? (Ch. 5). Wall is entirely devoted to this issue and he utilizes concrete examples of religious experiences to point out the inadequacy of various naturalistic explanations.

⁵² Fales, “Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I: The Case of St. Teresa,” 143–63 and “Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences,” 297–313.

⁵³ Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry* ?? (Ch. 5).

⁵⁴ Davis 220, Heaney 116, Vergote 197ff.

⁵⁵ Newberg, D’Aquila, and Raue 37.

⁵⁶ Newberg, D’Aquila, and Raue 123.

⁵⁷ Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God* 99.

⁵⁸ Wainwright, “Natural Explanations and Religious Experience,” 100–1.

⁵⁹ Alston, *Perceiving God* 249–51.

⁶⁰ Cf. Flew 126–7, Martin, “The Principle of Credulity,” 87–8.

⁶¹ Indeed it is not the case that a “common core” has to be shared by *all* the eye-witness accounts. *Sometimes* it is sufficient that it is shared by the large majority of the accounts, provided that either the error of the deviant witness in that aspect can be explained or overwhelming explanatory power is attained by adopting the common core. Admittedly there are borderline cases in which we have to rely on our judgments.

⁶² Martin, *Atheism* 183–4.

⁶³ Davis 191.

⁶⁴ Kwan 152–69.

⁶⁵ Gale ??, Bagger ??. For responses to Gale, see Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God* ?? (Ch. 3); and Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* 335–42. For a response to Bagger, see Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God* ?? (Ch. 4).

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10	please provide page range for Grice, H. P.	
11	please provide city of publication for Webster, Richard	

MARKED PROOF

Please correct and return this set

Please use the proof correction marks shown below for all alterations and corrections. If you wish to return your proof by fax you should ensure that all amendments are written clearly in dark ink and are made well within the page margins.

<i>Instruction to printer</i>	<i>Textual mark</i>	<i>Marginal mark</i>
Leave unchanged	... under matter to remain	Stet
Insert in text the matter indicated in the margin	⤴	New matter followed by ⤴
Delete	⤵ through matter to be deleted	⤵
Delete and close up	⤵ through matter to be deleted	⤵
Substitute character or substitute part of one or more word(s)	/ through letter or ⤵ through word	New letter or new word
Change to italics	— under matter to be changed	ƒ
Change to capitals	≡ under matter to be changed	≡
Change to small capitals	= under matter to be changed	=
Change to bold type	~ under matter to be changed	~
Change to bold italic	≡ under matter to be changed	≡
Change to lower case	Encircle matter to be changed	⊖
Change italic to upright type	(As above)	⤴
Insert 'superior' character	/ through character or ⤴ where required	⤴ under character e.g. ⤴
Insert 'inferior' character	(As above)	⤵ over character e.g. ⤵
Insert full stop	(As above)	⦿
Insert comma	(As above)	,
Insert single quotation marks	(As above)	⤴ and/or ⤵
Insert double quotation marks	(As above)	⤴ and/or ⤵
Insert hyphen	(As above)	Ⓜ
Start new paragraph	⤴	⤴
No new paragraph	⤵	⤵
Transpose	⤴	⤴
Close up	linking ⦿ letters	⦿
Insert space between letters	⤴ between letters affected	#
Insert space between words	⤴ between words affected	#
Reduce space between letters	⤴ between letters affected	⤴
Reduce space between words	⤴ between words affected	⤴