

Scientism, Atheism, And The Admissibility Of Spiritual Experience

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SCIENTISM, ATHEISM, AND THE ADMISSIBILITY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

I started this essay with the intention of outlining the differences between Science and Scientism, but I realized I could not possibly do a better job than this short article by Thomas Bernett on the American Association for the Advancement of Science website, entitled “What is Scientism?”

Please take a moment to read it, as it so clearly outlines the problems of trying to apply the scientific method and mindset to every realm of human experience:

<https://www.aaas.org/programs/dialo.../what-scientism>

Two quick excerpts:

“Observations themselves are partly shaped by theory (“theory-laden”). What counts as an observation, how to construct an experiment, and what data you think your instruments are collecting—all require an interpretive theoretical framework. This realization... undermines the positivist claim that science rests entirely on facts, and is thus an indisputable foundation for knowledge.”

Key to our discussion is what counts as an observation.

Further, “It is one thing to celebrate science for its achievements and remarkable ability to explain a wide variety of phenomena in the natural world. But to claim there is nothing knowable outside the scope of science would be similar to a successful fisherman saying that whatever he can’t catch in his nets does not exist. Once you accept that science is the only source of human knowledge, you have adopted a philosophical position (scientism) that cannot be verified, or falsified, by science itself. It is, in a word, unscientific.”

Topics that science has trouble approaching include morality, rational intuition, and the contents of other people’s minds, including spiritual experience. It is not the case that our failure to find a way to make a repeatable-on-demand experiment for an experience of the divine, means that any such experience is delusional. It is not a matter that every observation is either scientific OR religious nonsense. Science is just not the best tool for learning about divinity because the scientist cannot make God jump on cue. Instead, we can only work with experiential perceptions, even if not everyone can have these experiences.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1752-scientism-atheism-and-the-admissibility-of-spiritual-experience/?postID=9706#post9706>

Luckily, these experiences are not rare, with for example, between a third and half of the population of the UK having had what they would describe as a religious experience of one kind or another.

From a paper given by Professor Paul Badham, director of the Religious Experience Research Centre

(<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/research/human...arch-centre-/>):

“A variety of surveys over the past thirty years showed that between 31% and 49% of British people claimed to have had direct personal awareness of ‘a power or presence different from every day life’. Interestingly however, some of the most recent surveys claim much higher figures. For example, in 2001 Dr. David Hay found that as many as 76% of the population now claim an awareness of a transcendent reality.”

According to Pews Research (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017...-not-religious/>), 54% of US adults describe themselves as religious and 75% as spiritual. Worldwide, more than 8 in 10 identify with a religious group. Among the religiously unaffiliated, many still profess belief in a God or higher power.

There is much to be said about the “core” elements of a spiritual or religious experience that could elucidate a minimalist theology like Epicurianism posits. But first we would have to agree not to dismiss every spiritual perception people have out of hand.

In “Philodemus: On Methods of Inference” by Phillip and Estelle DeLacy, Epicureanism is said to have used “inconceivability” as a method of inference:

“An inference from signs is valid if it is inconceivable that the sign exists when the thing signified does not.... Inconceivability is an empirical criterion, based on past experience; hence, inference from particular signs may be empirically derived.” (pg. 14)

This may be how Epicurus derived his belief that our innate Prolepsis for the divine proves the existence of gods. It could be argued that since the majority of people throughout history have had an “anticipation”, or else an experience of the divine, then it is inconceivable that there should be nothing in the universe that fits that description.

Another argument for treating spiritual experiences seriously is called the “Argument from Religious Experience”. It says that if sensory experiences are excellent grounds for beliefs about the world, then why not religious experiences, as they are also sensory experiences?

According to DeWitt, Epicurus believed that there was a “sense” that perceives the divine:

pg. 255: “So far as vision is concerned, Epicurus denied that the gods were visible to the physical eye, though he did think them visible to the mind when operating as a supersensory organ of vision.”

However, he did limit the amount of knowledge we can confirm from this sense as only hinting

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at the nature of the gods. Its other function was to awaken the Prolepsis of the gods' perfect happiness and incorruptibility.

DeWitt further writes that it is this Prolepsis that is the prime evidence for the existence of the gods. This is also consistent with the problem of religious diversity - keeping only to the core of the experience.

There are important differences between ordinary sense-experience and religious experience, like clarity, and amount of information, but that is not enough to disqualify all spiritual experience, everywhere, through all time.

This is why Epicurean Theology is intentionally minimalistic. Its "religion" consists only in piously imagining blissful, virtuous beings with no identifiable wants or motives. Religious rituals may be enjoyed, but do not reflect anything real in the Epicurean belief system other than the gods being worthy of reverence and emulation.

It would be of great value to review the literature as to the nature of the core/ innate features of the spiritual experience around the world and to see how that may relate to the anticipation/prolepsis of the divine.

But in the meantime, religious folk should be cut some slack. After all, a large percentage of them have had a personal experience of the divine that was so impactful that they looked to religion to try and make sense of it. They did that because the answers from science describing it as a "brain event" or delusion are decidedly unsatisfying. They hope to not only understand what they experienced, but to repeat it. Science does not offer any guidance on how to do this since it inherently devalues these experiences. Religion at least attempts to offer a way of connecting to the divine.

Interestingly, it is not true that most scientists are atheists, as revealed by the first worldwide survey of religion and science:

<https://phys.org/news/2015-12-w...0Ecklund%20said>.

"The study's results challenge longstanding assumptions about the science-faith interface. While it is commonly assumed that most scientists are atheists, the global perspective resulting from the study shows that this is simply not the case.

"More than half of scientists in India, Italy, Taiwan and Turkey self-identify as religious," Ecklund said. "And it's striking that approximately twice as many 'convinced atheists' exist in the general population of Hong Kong, for example, (55 percent) compared with the scientific community in this region (26 percent)."

There are even scientists that are vocal about the limitations of their methods, such as Marcelo Gleiser:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/atheis...physicist-says/>

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“Atheism Is Inconsistent with the Scientific Method, Prizewinning Physicist Says:

In conversation, the 2019 Templeton Prize winner does not pull punches on the limits of science, the value of humility and the irrationality of nonbelief.”

Approached from a different perspective, we might ask if Epicurus’ theology (or perhaps some other theology) can bring us the greatest pleasure. Isn’t that the ultimate Epicurean test? Or would your average person know greater pleasure as an atheist?

This is actually not a difficult question. Spirituality will never be replaced by science, because the reliance on scientific facts simply does not have the same emotional appeal. Spirituality feeds a deep-seated human need. People return to it again and again, despite difficulties, because it provides pleasures that science cannot. Ask anyone with a spiritual bent if they would get more enjoyment from an activity that made them feel more connected to God, or from reading a scientific paper. Facts don’t cut it. Experience does.

Ask those same people how they would feel if someone actually managed to convince them that there is nothing remotely resembling God or a higher consciousness in the universe. I think you would find you have a lot of very depressed people on your hands, myself included.

Recently posted in the forum, was the comment: “We have some loose observations about people in predominantly atheist countries – that they are less anxious. Do all of them understand physics or do they just trust the physicists?.”

A quick google search show that the science says otherwise:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/streams-of-con...-american-mind/>

“Can Atheists Be Happy? And Other Answers from Scientific American MIND:

Time and again, studies have shown that people who have a religious faith are more likely to be healthy and happy than those who lack one. Religious people may even live longer. Go to church and you could outlive your atheist friends by a good seven years, as we report in this issue.”

Throughout history, people have had euphoric spiritual experiences that are often considered among the most significant and meaningful in their lives. Those experiences demand to be integrated into some sort of explanation that does not dismiss their reality or validity, or else those powerful feelings become deeply disturbing.

Books like “Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis, edited by Stanislav Grof, address the issue of what happens when experiences like these occur to an individual who has no references to process the information. They may succumb to messages telling them that they are crazy and cannot trust their fundamental perceptions, even when those perceptions say that what they experienced was MORE real than everyday experience – a common report.

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For example, they may read that a spiritual experience is simply caused by a “brain event”, psychodynamic tensions (Freud), or even economic forces (Marx), but this does not address the claim of the experiencer. It is simply looking for another explanation for something that is deemed to be unreal. To say that there is a brain state associated with an experience does not mean that the experience was not real, or else all sensory experiences would also be delusional, since everything is accompanied by a brain state.

Specifically, it has been argued that if stimulating a certain part of the brain induces a religious experience, then it proves that those experiences are not real. But you can also stimulate the brain to induce the smell of something burning. That does not mean that if you ever smell something burning, you are experiencing an illusion, or having a stroke.

Epicurus shows that our feelings are to be our guide to what is good. Spiritual experience is ecstatic, blissful, intensely pleasurable, and ineffable, but in the absence of a belief system that validates them, they are made unintelligible, or worse, condemned as illness or delusion. This is highly inimical to not only pleasure, but to the mental health of the individual trying to integrate the event.

Of course, we know some of these experiences ARE delusional and harmful, depending on how they are interpreted, but it does not follow that there is nothing real about any of them. This is why the minimalist approach of Epicurus is so helpful. He acknowledges that some perceptions of the divine are real and valuable, but is extremely wary of extrapolating anything to a plethora of ideas or convictions about what the gods want. Instead, he appeals to a belief system based on the common core of human theological instinct, and nothing else.

As Joshua recently and astutely pointed out: “A large measure of our project then, must be to mark that boundary. If the study of the divine starts to lead where the philosophy cannot and should not go, we have to say as much.”

Or from Elayne: “If they spent their time worrying about punishments from supernatural gods,... that would be an unwise decision for their pleasure.”

It need not be a huge problem to determine where the line should be drawn in how much we can make theological doctrine, because the final litmus test is, once again, pleasure. We know that fear of the gods is painful, so we have no doctrine that makes us fearful. We know beautiful gods are more pleasing than ugly ones, so why not let them be beautiful? We know that many people derive great pleasure from worship services – so why not let them worship? And finally, we know that people get tormented by trying to influence the gods or appease them, therefore we do not teach that the gods require anything from us.

In Godfrey’s words: “Epicurus didn’t do away with the gods but felt that he had reasoned out their nature. Since his reasoning began with the conception of the gods current in his time, and he saw value in religion, he felt no need to re-imagine the common worship, although he did reinvent the mental content.”

People long for some way of connecting with the divine. If there are practices that offer this type of pleasure without harm, like some mild forms of meditation, or spiritual reading, or singing songs, or celebrating holy-days, why look down our noses at that? Perhaps it involves a little bit of the “idealism” approach, using a “mind-hack” to gain pleasure, but there is nothing inherently dangerous about that.

In summary, I would say look closely to see if your own theology, or its absence, best serves your pleasure. If it does, enjoy! But if your pleasure lies in rejecting the divine altogether, at least don't forbid the very great and meaningful pleasure it gives to others.