

Scientism, Atheism, And The Admissibility Of Spiritual Experience

Post by "Don" of November 1, 2020 at 10:51 PM

Here are some thoughts:

I have no doubt that there is something people experience that can be called a "religious" or "spiritual experience."

I have no doubt that this can be felt to be profound and life-changing.

I have no doubt that one can feel overwhelming senses of awe and something that can be termed reverence in certain circumstances. I've felt it myself.

There is ample evidence that expressing "spiritual" feelings in a community setting or through individual practices can be fulfilling. This seems to be at the root of some "Religion for Atheists" movements or secular spiritual communities or even some Unitarian Universalist congregations.

However, I don't think that interpreting a religious experience as evidence of a connection with a divine entity or consciousness is the only interpretation that places value on the experience. I think specifically of research done with highly skilled meditators:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1697747/>

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/08/140813103138.htm>

<https://www.livescience.com/buddhist-monk-...tion-brain.html>

While medicine and science may have things to say about these studies, the monks involved in them see their meditation as a spiritual practice, a way to connect to their own Buddhmind. It is an expression of their religion, and furthermore this practice, it appears, brings them pleasure and well-being (daresay I mention eudaimonia).

I think you're absolutely right, @Susan Hill , that denigrating or dismissing the experience as a delusion or "merely" a "brain event" is not useful. But the event did happen in the brain as evidenced by those studies I referenced.

You mentioned:

Quote

Throughout history, people have had euphoric spiritual experiences that are often considered among the most significant and meaningful in their lives. Those experiences

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1752-scientism-atheism-and-the-admissibility-of-spiritual-experience/?postID=9712#post9712>

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.

I have no problem saying that those experiences are real and valid as experiences. But what would make them disturbing? Just to be clear: Are you saying that dismissing them or denigrating them or calling them "merely a brain event" is what leads to the person experiencing them to be disturbed? Is the person coming at this experience from a context of fear of God? If so, that's a problem that Epicurus addresses. This is the problem with near death experiences of hell. These can also be spiritual/religious experiences with negative effects:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6173534/>

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/the...rent-seeing-it/>

Additionally, I'm finding it difficult to reconcile the Epicurean definition of a god with the idea that a person could have "communication" with them unless I'm misconstruing where we're going. By definition, the gods in Epicureanism are not concerned with us, aren't motivated by gratitude or anger, and what benefit we receive "from" them is due to our own reverence and emulation of their bliss. It's not a reciprocal relationship.

Susan, you also said:

Quote

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.

Now, this I have no problem getting behind. I'm just not sure I am fully behind the wording of "connecting with the divine." I'm working through that, and it depends on how we define that phrase. But practices like say mindfulness meditation, I have no problem seeing that integrated into an Epicurean practice. I'm still reading through Sedley's translation and commentary on Epicurus's On Nature, Book 28, but at the end he writes:

Quote

"try ten thousand times Over to commit to memory what I and Metrodorus here have just said."

Epicurus stressed the need to memorize his works, to have them ready at hand (well, mind). That's a form of meditation - deep study, repetition, etc. I wouldn't even popularize it by saying "mind-hack." I do think most humans have a need to connect to something "bigger than themselves" but that doesn't need to be the divine in the sense of an outside entity or

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1752-scientism-atheism-and-the-admissibility-of-spiritual-experience/?postID=9712#post9712>

consciousness. Epicurus - and also Lucretius - showed a way to see the evanescence of life itself, in the play of atoms in the void, as something to be in awe of. To take pleasure in our very existence. To see the gods - whether "real" or "idealized" - as worthy of emulation and as being able to have a life as "worthy of the gods."

I apologize if I've misunderstood or misconstrued any of your points. I do sincerely see this as a very important topic to discuss.