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## Book Review: Religious Experience, Justification, And History

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*Religious Experience, Justification and History* by Matthew C. Bagger. Cambridge University Press 1999. Pp. ix and 238. \$65.00.

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In recent decades, two types of defense have emerged for a positive epistemic valuation of alleged experiences of God. One, championed by William Alston, is the "doxastic practice approach," and the other, advanced by a number of philosophers, including myself, may be called the "argument from perception." The argument from perception trades on a purported epistemic similarity between experiences of God and sense-perceptual experiences, begging for a positive assessment of the former, as for the latter.

In this book, Matthew C. Bagger hopes to counter the new "apologists" (p.2) by presenting an ambitiously comprehensive philosophical position about experience and justification that will show both approaches to be mistaken. Extensively argued and sensitive to a broad spectrum of philosophical issues, Bagger presents the most comprehensive response to date to the epistemic defenses of experiences of God. Although I appreciated Bagger's discussion at a number of points, I find myself largely unmoved by Bagger's main contentions.

Here is my outline of Bagger's main argument:

(1) Bagger writes that, "We experience what we infer to be the best explanation of an event. This inference usually does not work consciously...." (p. 47), and "Experience includes an embedded claim about the best explanation of an event...." (p. 47), and "The logic of experience implicitly requires a commitment to an explanation. Experience includes inferences to the best explanation" (p. 58).

If I understand him correctly, Bagger wishes to claim a pragmatic implication from an assertion of a proposition of the form:

(1st) I experienced an *F*.

to a commitment to something like:

(2nd) I had an experiential episode the best explanation of which is that it was *of an F*.

(2) Bagger adopts a version of a pragmatist view of justification (Chapter 3). Justification is conventional, contextual, and social, and consists in providing reasons when challenged. There are no eternal, absolute standards or rules for justification. What counts as justification is relative to cultural conventions, which vary from culture to culture and within a culture from time to time. As Bagger puts it, "We cannot enumerate any formal criteria of justified belief.... Any candidate for justification must conform to an ideal of human epistemic flourishing. Ideals of human flourishing, however, bear the distinctive marks of time and place, era and culture" (p. 86). The "apologists" sin when they formulate *a priori* epistemic principles of justification, such as that perceptual beliefs enjoy a certain

degree of initial credibility.

(3) To justify a claim about what has transpired is to propose the best explanation of what has transpired. "To justify a belief", writes Bagger, "one must offer good explanatory reasons, reasons that, when viewed against the background of all one does not currently doubt, contribute to the best overall explanatory account of the phenomena in question." (p. 83) Therefore, to justify my claim that I experienced God, I have to be prepared to advance *its being of God* as the best explanation for my experiential episode.

(4) Therefore, to justify my claim of having experienced God, my implied explanation must be acceptable to current social conventions about "best explanation."

(5) Nowadays, however, in Western, scientific society, no explanation that invokes supernatural causality can meet with social approval. To Bagger, a crucial feature of "modern life" is that "institutions of inquiry" are "completely independent of religious commitment" (p. 218). Thus, the modern inquirer "rejects any presupposition to inquiry not based on the natural evidence available to him and assumes everything ultimately explicable in terms of a unified casual structure" (p. 218). Bagger compares the invocation of God to explain mystical experiences to the invocation of miracles to explain natural phenomena: "The intransigence of certain well-attested anomalies no longer leads to supernatural explanations, but rather to future insight into natural processes" (p. 223). To Bagger, then, it is a *conceptual* mistake to appeal to supernatural explanation in Bagger's culture.

(6) Therefore, in Western, scientific society no one can justify a claim to have experienced God.

Claim (1) cannot be right as it stands. Consider that I might report on the same experiential event in quite different ways. For example, in reporting on the same episode, I might say both that

(A) I saw the table made by my late uncle in 1945.

And

(B) I saw the only piece of furniture in the family storeroom.

Bagger would have me committed to something like both of the following:

(A.1) I had a visual experience the best explanation of which is that it was *of the table made by my late uncle in 1945*.

and

(B.1) I had a visual experience the best explanation of which is that it was *of the only piece of furniture in the family storeroom*.

However, two different explanations could not be "the" best explanation of the same event. So, while (A) and (B) could both be true, (A.1) and (B.1) could not. I am afraid that the logic of "the best explanation" is out of synch with the logic of "experience," contrary to Bagger's first claim.

The double “best explanation” problem would dissolve were we to choose:

(A.2) I had a visual experience the best explanation of which is that it was *of something X*; and (by the way) X was a table made by my late uncle in 1945.

And

(B.2) I had a visual experience the best explanation of which is that it was *of something X*; and (by the way) X was the only piece of furniture in the storeroom.

This however, would make a mockery of the “best explanation” thesis.

The idea that an experiential claim always involves an implicit judgment about a best explanation is doubtful, in any case. A child who does not possess the concept of “the best explanation” or even of “explanation” seems to make perfectly respectable experiential claims (“I see mommy! I see mommy!”). Furthermore, there is nothing conceptually absurd in declaring, “I know it defies all explanation, but I am absolutely positive I saw an F!”

My counter-suggestion is that we are endowed with conditioning mechanisms that often determine what we think we experience, not because we believe, consciously or unconsciously, that this is “the best explanation,” but because this identification is simply triggered in us by our past and present experience. If we are not moved to examine our judgments, we simply stay with the prompting of our conditioning. This is basic to our epistemic life and the grounds for the position of the argument from perception that we start with what *seems* to us to be given perceptually. Sometimes, to be sure, we make considered judgments about what we think we have experienced. In such cases, we may be expected to provide a reason for so thinking that may (or may not) appeal to the best explanation.

Alternatively, we make our identifications of what we think we experience, sometimes, at least, within practices in forms of life. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, “This is simply what we do.” I identify an experience as *of God*, then, not because I think that is the best explanation of what happened to me, but because I participate in a practice in which I (am to) take it that I have experienced God. That, of course, is just about Alston’s position about the social doxastic practice of taking certain events as experiences of God.

I will not be examining Bagger’s conventionalist epistemology here, as enunciated in (2). I do want to say, though, that it does not accomplish what Bagger would hope for it. In the name of claim (2), Bagger berates the “apologists” for taking an old-fashioned, non-conventionalist approach to epistemology, because thinking of epistemology as having to battle skepticism, rather than as reflecting current conventions. This leads them (us) to formulate abstract “principles” of justification, rather than bothering to *look* at what counts as justification on the ground.

Bagger’s complaint sticks to Swinburne’s original statement of the argument from perception. This is because Swinburne defended the principle

of the presumed truth of perceptually formed beliefs because its rejection would invite skepticism about perception. However, such principles need not be defended on anti-skeptical grounds. For example, I have proposed such a principle (which I have since revised) on the grounds that its utilization reflects our epistemic behavior.<sup>1</sup> I wrote that my principle was “a principle of rationality widely recognized as governing our everyday rational discourse connecting experience to reality. As such its rationality is independent of its being shown to be so by philosophical argumentation.” So I see no reason why my proposal, whether correct or not, should be rejected because of conventionalism alone.

Specifically, Bagger rejects the idea that any experience, by itself, generates initial credibility, and that “We have no reason to grant *prima facie* justification to any belief” (p. 128). Principles advanced by the theistic “apologists” do just that, for beliefs formed from perceptual experience. By Bagger’s lights, however, the question should not be whether we have reason to do so, but whether current fashions of explanation and justification allow it to be so. While I no longer believe perceptual beliefs are decisive in the absence of counter-considerations, it does seem clear that in our epistemic lives perceptual beliefs have at least *some* credibility to start with. Whether the initial credibility of perceptual beliefs applies well to mystical perception, is of course a good question, one that should be examined on the merits of the case.

In the name of claim (3), Bagger has objected to the “protective intentions” of the argument from perception, as “privileging one possible explanation” of alleged mystical experiences of God, namely the theistic one (p. 134). Referring to a version of it I once set forth, he writes that the “Oxford strategy” is “baldly protective and illegitimate” (p. 134; “Oxford strategy” because originating with Richard Swinburne, of Oxford). Bagger says this, I suppose, because the argument from perception begins with a *prima facie* case for the genuineness of God-perceptions, and only then proceeds to counter-arguments. However, the argument from perception does not illicitly favor the theistic understanding of God-perceptions. Starting with a *prima facie* case for the genuineness of God-perceptions, serves only as a way of ordering the discussion, and lacks intrinsic epistemological significance. At the end of the day, the justification for thinking God-perceptions evidentially worthy will depend on the total relevant evidence, for and against. The order in which we place the evidence before us matters not at all. As long as the defender of the argument from perception is open to counter-arguments, therefore, no protective coating covers the manner of argumentation.

The point of opening with the case in favor of the validity of theistic experiences is more historical than epistemological. Since before Swinburne philosophers had little to say in favor of mystical experiences of God having any evidential value, and often thought of them as mere “subjective” states, it is worthwhile to start by declaring that such experiences indeed carry *some* initial evidential value. The argument from perception, therefore, should be absolved of the charge of protective intentions.

With regard to claim (5), Bagger ignores the massive numbers of traditional religious believers in modern societies like the United States, in which he writes. For these devotees supernatural explanation is alive and

well. Bagger also ignores the mass culture of “unchurched spirituality,” much of which also recognizes supernatural causation. There is no denying a prominent, pervasive cultural phenomenon of people happily using supernatural explanation along with recognition of scientific modes of inquiry. It is far from true that scientific inquiry has supplanted supernatural explanation in Western societies.

Bagger, of course, is right that many people in Western culture exclude supernatural explanation in the name of modern modes of inquiry. Apparently, two subcultures live together in modern societies, one that thinks in terms of supernatural explanation, and one that does not. The latter subculture might be more prominent than the former in prestigious academic circles and have greater access to centers of power in Western countries. It hardly follows that this reflects, in numbers and cultural significance, a dominant convention concerning “good explanation” in modern Western societies.

Suppose, though, Bagger were able to show the dominance of an exclusively scientific understanding of what makes for a good explanation. Then the religious and spiritual cultures would be no more than an “under-culture” to those guided exclusively by scientific modes of inquiry. Even then, I would find unacceptable Bagger’s rejection of supernatural explanation in the name of a conventionalist defense of contemporary modes of inquiry. Here is why. On Bagger’s conventionalist position, shifts in “good explanation” are not based on epistemic criteria, but are *zeitgeist* swings. New explanatory paradigms catch people’s interest and set off a shift that carries a culture to a different way of thinking. Alternatively, changing values push forward new or dormant ways of explaining. Shifts in paradigms of explanation are fluid and dynamic, complex and winding.

Since this is so, I find unacceptable an *a priori* rejection of supernatural explanation because of contemporary modes of inquiry. Nothing in the conventionalist story could possibly generate an *a priori prohibition* purely in the name of a dominant current fashion in explanation. To invoke dominant current vogues of good explanation as a roadblock to the advancing of alternatives contradicts the natural way in which ideas of good explanation arise, challenge, and flourish. To reject alternatives solely because they are not the dominant mode of explanation would be to unjustly wield conventionalism as a protective strategy of a most conservative kind. If this is what Bagger is up to, I find an inner inconsistency, if not incoherence, in his conventionalist argument against supernatural explanation.

Instead of vetoing it the way he does, Bagger should have addressed supernatural explanation directly, considering its potential or lack of it for “epistemic flourishing.” He should have examined the writings of theistic philosophers who have labored to square divine activity with a modern scientific understanding of the world. One way to argue against supernatural explanation would have been to show that these theistic attempts fail, or must fail. This Bagger does not do.

At one point, Bagger says that Alston wishes to convince the non-theist of the propriety of engaging in a mystical doxastic practice that recognizes valid experiences of God. So the argument might be that Alston could never succeed in this, since such a practice commits one to supernatural

explanation which, for the non-theist, is forbidden. In reply, Alston is not inviting the non-theist to participate in a theistic doxastic practice. All the non-theist need do is recognize that some of his cultural comrades countenance supernatural, along with natural, explanation, and that they also believe, perhaps, that this does not damage scientific flourishing in any appreciable way. A non-theist might resist this alternative approach, but unless she goes into a protective strategy, that resistance, as explained above, cannot be simply in the name of a conventionalist conception of justification and explanation.

In addition to his main argument, Bagger devotes an entire chapter (Chapter 4) to the debate about so-called "Pure Conscious Events," allegedly contentless conscious episodes. Bagger is against PCEs because they presume to be experiences without concepts, a possibility that defies Bagger's edict that experience "includes" best explanation. To have an experience is to apply a (conceptual) explanation to an event you endure. Bagger makes three objections of his own to PCEs: (1) If contentless, there would be no way for a subject to remember a PCE, (2) The subject's conceptual-linguistic framework may continue to operate at an unconscious level in an alleged PCE, robbing it of its supposed lack of conceptualization, and (3) If a PCE occurred, it could offer no knowledge of any mystical reality (pp. 102-103).

I think (2) is an important objection. A possible answer to (1) might be that subjects could know they had PCEs because a PCE is an event of conscious awareness. It should be possible for a mystic who endures a PCE to recall immediately afterward the very awareness that was present in the PCE, even though that awareness was not an object of consciousness at the time of the PCE. The mystic, recalling the PCE awareness, could note that the awareness had been of a "pure" type. A possible reply to (3) would be that to be of epistemological significance, a PCE need not, strictly speaking, be *of* anything. Instead, an experience can grant an *insight*, without supervening on acquaintance of any reality. A person could undergo a PCE, which then granted acquaintance of states of affairs by a direct insight. The PCE plus the insight would constitute a complex mystical experience that afforded awareness of a state of affairs not otherwise accessible. I do not pretend to have an epistemology of "insights," but exist they do, and they cannot be dismissed as easily as would follow from Bagger's position.

Bagger's book has several valuable features. It opens with an important exposition of William James on experience, and has a very good chapter on Teresa of Avila. Also, Bagger's chapter against the possibility of a PCE is the clearest I have encountered in the literature. For these the book deserves high praise.

At times, the book has a jarring, highly polemical tone against the "apologists." The book-cover features a painting by T.H. Matteson entitled, "The Trial of George Jacobs for Witchcraft." Bagger may have intended to equate the defenders of genuine experiences of God with witch hunters. As it turns out, the cover may have a bit of an ambiguous import.

Bagger writes that a central thesis of his book is that "philosophers can no longer continue to write about mysticism without detailed study and documentation of specific mystics and traditions" (p. 93). Replace "can no longer continue" with "cannot" and this is a thesis I fully endorse.

## NOTES

1. See Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1997), and *Mystical Experience of God, a Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Ashgate Publishers, 2001).

*Value and the Good Life* by Thomas L. Carson. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 328.

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This book is divided into three parts. In the first, Carson subjects several theories of value to critical examination and tries to show that many arguments for or against them rest on answers to metaethical questions. The second part is devoted to discussion of these metaethical questions and concludes with a defense of a preference-satisfaction conception of non-instrumental value. In the third part, Carson argues that the most plausible preference-satisfaction theory is, if a deity of a certain sort exists, a divine-preference theory.

The first part of the book consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 reconstructs and criticizes the arguments in Mill's *Utilitarianism* and Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* for hedonistic theories of value. Chapter 2 discusses several familiar objections to hedonistic theories of value. Carson takes these objections to show that many rational and well-informed people have preferences inconsistent with hedonism. He argues that proponents of hedonism must hold that such preferences are incorrect and so are committed to endorsing axiological realism. Chapter 3 is devoted to preference-satisfaction theories of value. Carson argues that the most plausible versions of such theories hold that what is non-instrumentally good is determined by the preferences we would have if we were rational. He goes on to defend such theories against a variety of objections, including particularly interesting objections by Richard Kraut, Richard Brandt and Charles Taylor. Chapter 4 argues that Nietzsche's *übermensch* ideal constitutes a distinctive theory of value. Carson tries to show that Nietzsche's theory of the will to power would, if true, strongly support this theory of value, but he concludes that Nietzsche has not adequately explained or defended his theory of the will to power. Chapter 5 criticizes Aristotle's theory of the good life, and it also argues against the Aristotelian theories of value proposed by Peter Geach and Thomas Hurka. A brief interlude following Chapter 5, whose purpose is to motivate the move to the next part of the book, reminds readers that arguments previously examined, for example, the defense of hedonism based on the claim that conflicting rational preferences are mistaken, rest on metaethical positions such as axiological realism that have yet to be scrutinized.

There are just two chapters in the second part of the book. Chapter 6 focuses on the concept of non-instrumental value. Carson defends pragmatic criteria for choice of a concept of value according to which it is a con-