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BOOK REVIEWS

The Epistemology of Religious Experience, by **Keith Yandell**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. viii + 371. \$55 (cloth).

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In this book, Yandell joins the growing ranks of contemporary philosophers, most notably Swinburne, Wainwright, Gutting and Alston, who defend the cognitivity of religious experience by appeal to an *a priori* principle of evidence or *prima facie* experiential justification that is supposed to hold for both sense and religious experience. But, strange to say, their views are completely neglected in this book. This is unfortunate because there are numerous places where their writings would have helped to motivate, enrich, and probe the discussion. For example, the total omission of Alston's doxastic practice based defense of cognitivity results in Yandell's attacking a strawman version of this approach (on 205-212) based on a crude, redneck practice (of the sort practiced by Dolly Parton, we are told) in which there are no defeaters or overrides.¹ Alston and Wainwright go to great pains to show that there are sophisticated extant versions of these practices within the great mystical traditions that are worthy candidates for being reliable objective practices. By ignoring their work he places himself outside of the main loop of the on-going discussion. This will result in his book not receiving the attention it deserves.

The organization of the book leaves much to be desired. After an Introduction, in which he summarizes the book and justifies his subjection of religious claims to the court of rational adjudication, and a chapter on "Religious experience, 'East' and 'West'" that botanizes the major types of religious experiences in a Zaehner-like manner, he presents his argument for the cognitivity of theistic type religious experiences based on certain principles of evidence. The next seven chapters engage in a rear-guard defense of this conclusion against various objections. He then returns in Chapters 10-12 to his Chapter 2 argument for cognitivity, developing the very same argument, only now with more detail and in a dialectical manner that grows out of C. D. Broad's argument for cognitivity based on agreement among mystics and C. B. Martin's objection that there are no tests for the veridicality of their experiences. This is followed by two more chapters of rear-guard action. This mode of organization creates much repetition and burdens the reader with having to thumb back and forth between Chapters 2 and 10-12. He would have done better had he presented his argument for cognitivity up-front in a

continuous manner after an historical lead-in through the work of his fellow contemporary defenders of cognitivism, rather than Broad and Martin, whose work is of only of historical interest at best, and then went on to the rear-guard defense. This review will follow this preferred order.

Yandell is seeking a conceptually true principle of evidence that will render religious experiences of seeming to experience God evidence for God's existence and his being as he appeared to be in the experience. For such a principle to be acceptable, it must be restricted to experiential seemings that (1) are intentional and (2) allow for the possibility of their veridicality being challenged or defeated. After careful scrutiny, Yandell's account of each of these restrictions will be found wanting, and an attempt will then be made to supply a more adequate account, the upshot of which will be that religious experiences are not cognitive.

(1) An intentional experience has what Yandell calls a subject-consciousness-object structure (*sco*) in which the seeming or phenomenological object can exist even when the subject does not. "An item *A* is an *object* relative to person *S* if and only if *S* does not exist, by itself or conjoined to a set of truths, does not entail *A* does not exist" (34). The *sco* experience contrasts with the subject-content experience (*sc*) in that the latter takes a cognate accusative that indicates an aspect of the experience, "*S* feels painfully (or pains)" being the conspicuous adverbial (or cognate accusative) analysis of "*S* feels a pain."

Yandell's next task is to show that religious experiences have the needed *sco* structure. Yandell contends that theistic religious experiences, such as a numinous experience of a majestic, living, holy being of immense power, have this structure. "Such an experience will seem to its subject to be an experience of God; its accurate phenomenological description will require the use of the term 'God' (or some referential equivalent)" (16-7). This account fails to take note of the fact that "It phenomenologically seems to *S* that ____" is opaque in that the principle of substitutivity of coreferential expressions or sentences with the same truth-value does not hold *salva veritate*. Assuming that God is identical with St. Anselm's favorite object, it is possible that it phenomenologically seem to *S* that *S* is experiencing God but not phenomenologically seem to *S* that *S* is experiencing St. Anselm's favorite object. The same counter-example can be given to the claim that "Every description of a religious experience can be transformed into a phenomenological description by the simple device of making a description of how things are into a description of how things seemed to be"² (17). This shortcoming in Yandell's account is easily corrected.

There are far more serious problems, however, with Yandell's analysis of intentionality. Counter-examples can be given to both its necessity and sufficiency. Touching and seeing myself fail to satisfy this analysis, since their object cannot exist unless I exist, yet plainly they are intentional, being of

the same *sco* structure as the admittedly intentional experience of touching or seeing someone else. Plainly, the possibility of the object existing when the subject does not should not be a necessary condition. Dancing the waltz, on the other hand, shows the non-necessity of the analysis, since it admits of a cognate accusative or adverbial analysis into waltzing or dancing waltzily even though the waltz (understood either nominalistically as waltzings or platonically as a type of dance) exists independently of both the dancer and the experience of dancing. This shows that, in general, an experience can have an *sc* structure even when it has an object that can exist independently of the subject.

Not only is Yandell's analysis of the *sco* structure or intentionality flawed, the manner in which he determines compliant instances is equally disturbing; for he ultimately leaves it up to the experient, including the religious experienter, to determine whether her experience is of the *sco* structure. He assures us that "as seems patent from the reports their subject offer, they [religious experiences] are subject-consciousness-object in structure and seem to be of a mind-independent object" (262).

The problem with this taking-their-word-for-it approach is that it opens the door to a mad dog fideism in which whatever someone believes is unchallengeable. There would be no basis for challenging the existentialist who takes a mood of boredom to be of an objective Nothing or a Reichian who takes an orgasm to have cosmic significance. It is a very difficult issue to determine when an experience, in general, is of the *sco* sort. In some cases, but not all, there is an ordinary verb or adverb corresponding to a cognate accusative. Whereas we have the linguistic resources to convert "She played golf" into "She golfed," we do not for "She played tennis"; but, plainly, the latter also takes a cognate accusative. Furthermore, there is considerable controversy about how to classify certain experiences. Moore took sensing to have an objective accusative, Ducasse only a cognate accusative. The Sellarsian linguistic nominalist, if I may oversimplify, takes "She said that snow is white" as "She spoke snow-is-white-ly (or snow-is-white-ed)," the realist as a dyadic relation between the speaker and an abstract proposition. The structure of religious experiences also is subject to philosophical controversy. By taking the religious experienter's word for it, Yandell begs the question against his anti-cognitivist opponent. Furthermore, since, as will be seen, Yandell rejects the universal claim of mystics that their experience is ineffable, why should he take their word for their experience having an *sco* structure. After, discussing Yandell's restriction (2), some suggestions will be made as to how to understand the *sco* structure and thereby resolve this controversy.

(2) What sort of challenges to its veridicality must a *sco* type experience *E* be subject to for *E* to count as evidence for the proposition, *p*, that *E*'s

apparent object exists and is as it appeared to be in *E*? Yandell provides a valuable service by laying out for us a wide variety of such veridicality tests or checks of varying strength. The weakest sort would be that the subject of *E* “has no positive reason to suppose that some countervailing factor obtains” (48). Among these countervailing factors in the case of religious experience can be an ontological disproof of God’s existence, an inductive argument from evil, or a social scientific argument to show that such experiences are in general unreliable or that the subject would seem to experience God even if he didn’t exist. A stronger version requires the possibility of having experiences that challenge or defeat the veridicality of *E*, with the strongest version requiring that the challenging experiences be of the very same type as *E*.

Before proceeding further, a minor unclarity in the account must be resolved. Yandell claims to be unearthing a principle of evidence, but what he says about what happens to *E*’s evidential status when *E*’s veridicality faces a successful challenge, a “countervailing factor” in his words, suggests that it is a principle for being *warranted* or *justified* in believing *p*, which is stronger than just having evidence for believing *p*. Yandell claims at numerous places, with only one exception, that *E* loses its evidential status when its veridicality is successfully challenged. “A *countervailing factor* is any consideration that would cancel out the evidence” that *E* supplies for *p*. (48). This can’t be right, since it has the consequence that it makes sense to speak of *E* as *prima facie* evidence for a belief, a qualification that applies only to being a warrant or justification for a belief. Yandell gets it right on only one occasion when he says that “*Having evidence that X exists* is compatible with *being unreasonable in believing that X exists*, for it is compatible with having stronger experiential (or total) evidence that *X* does not exist than one has that *X* exists” (234). To be sure, we would not be willing to say that *E* is evidence for *p* when we have conclusive or very strong evidence for not-*p*, but that is because we would be violating a Gricean conversational implicature requiring us to be as informative as we can be, since saying that *E* is evidence for *p* pragmatically implies that there is a yet to be decisively defeated reason for believing *p*. Yandell must either take his principle to be a principle of warrant for belief or give up his repeated claim that *E* ceases to be evidence when successfully challenged.

While Yandell claims that the weakest challengers suffice for the cognitivism of *E* (48), he must realize that his anti-cognitivist opponent would not agree; for he subsequently argues that *E* is subject to stronger challengers, even the strongest requiring that they involve experiences of the very same type as *E*. Herein his argument takes an analogical turn. His opponent grants that sense experience is cognitive, but these stronger challengers are the very ones that apply to sense experience, thereby enabling *E* type experience analogically to ride the coattails of the latter to cognitive respectability.

Yandell admits that there are significant disanalogies between the two kind of experiences. Only sense experience is subject to caused-in-the-right-way (261) and prediction-falsification tests (264). Furthermore, numinous type religious experience

lacks publicity and multiple modalities. Unless there are tests that have a function for numinous experience similar to the epistemological service these features provide for sensory experience, this dissimilarity will be of negative relevance to numinous experience as evidence. (265)

In spite of these dissimilarities, the analogy is sufficiently tight because both admit of an agreement test that also allows for experiential challenges based on the same type of experience—the strongest challenger.

I believe that Yandell does not realize just how profound the disanalogies are between the two, so profound that they challenge the alleged *sco* structure of religious experience and thus the applicability of his principle of evidence to them. Whereas the sensory tests based on agreement, prediction, and being caused-in-the-right-way allow for a distinction to be made between perceptions of numerically one and the same object as opposed to qualitatively similar objects, the religious experience test based on agreement-disagreement does not. The reason, which I spell out in detail in the writings mentioned in footnote 1, is that there is a common space-time receptacle that houses the sense perceivers and their objects and explains how one and the same object can be the common object of the perceptions of different observers at one and the same time and the same observer at successive time by being the common cause of these experiences in virtue of being causally linked with each of them in the right way; but there is no analogue to this in the case of religious experience, no analogue to the spatio-temporal receptacle that performs this same service for religious experiences. It is this big disanalogy that precludes the latter from having the required *sco* structure, since there is no ground within religious experiences to draw the needed numerical-qualitative distinction. Thus it turns out that (1)'s restriction of the principle of evidence to *sco* type experiences depends upon (2)'s restriction to types of experiences for which there are tests for determining when two or more experiences of that type are of one and the same or only qualitatively similar objects.

That this cannot be done ultimately undermines Yandell's courageous attempt to show that religious type experiences can challenge the veridicality of religious experiences. "A numinous (uncanny, majestic, powerful, and awesome) being need not be holy (not at least in a sense that includes being righteous or good)" (248). This allows for there to be God-like and demonic-like numinous beings and experiences. The latter experiences are disconfirmatory of the veridicality of the former, assuming God to be essentially good, in virtue of the principle of "Collegial Disconfirmation," which states that

“if one finds a being O^* that is very like O but that lacks some property essential to O , and it is unlikely that both O and O^* exist, then one has evidence that O does not grace us by its presence” (247). Demonic numinous experiences are supposed to disconfirm the veridicality of theistic numinous experiences in virtue of this principle. But Yandell gives us no reason for thinking that it is unlikely that a good and bad numinous being coexist. He writes as if he never read the part of the *Bible* that deals with the Devil.

There is another way in which demonic numinous experiences could be seen to be disconfirmatory of theistic ones that does not appeal to the principle of Collegial Disconfirmation. Yandell describes cases in which what appears to be an instance of the latter turn out to be of the former kind. The apparent numinous object of the experience, which at first appeared to be benevolent, turns out to be malevolent, thereby disconfirming the veridicality of the former experience by showing that one had been initially duped by this demon (247-8). One problem with these examples is that they beg the question by assuming that the later numinous experiences are cognitive, but, for the reasons just given, this is most dubious. Another concern is how it is to be determined that it is numerically one and the same numinous being throughout the experience. Is it not just as reasonable (or unreasonable) to say that both the earlier and later numinous experiences were veridical, because they were of numerically distinct numinous beings? There is no non-arbitrary answer to this question, since, whereas there are sensory criteria for determining whether you saw the same woman or twins on successive occasions, there are no analogous numinous criteria for determining this with respect to successive numinous experiences. And since anything goes, nothing goes.

The rear-guard defense occupies the major portion of the book, some nine chapters, and, for the most part, it fares much better than does his above argument for the cognitivism of religious experiences. The most radical sort of challenges to his cognitivism thesis are ontological disproofs of God's existence. His response is a rehash of the recent literature, except for a very interesting criticism of the divine simplicity doctrine (336-42). The challenge presented by social scientific explanations of religious experiences is deftly met, as is the extreme conceptual relativism of Steven Katz. The claim that religious experience is self-authenticating is totally demolished, though it is not made clear why this is a challenge to his brand of cognitivism. Maybe it is because a type of experience that cannot be unveridical cannot serve as evidence for the existence of its apparent accusative. The challenge that is given the most attention is the claim that religious experiences are ineffable and therefore not capable of serving as evidence, since, according to Yandell, “experience is evidence only under some description” (9).

His rear-guard action falters badly, however, when he attempts to neutralize the challenge of religious diversity consisting in the fact that the claims based respectively upon theistic and monistic religious experiences are inconsistent, the former recognizing and the latter denying any type of numerical distinctions or diversity. Whereas Yandell's contemporary cognitivists make lame attempts at ecumenicalism, he charges the monistic mystic with having "nothing to say in the first place" (313). The reason for this harsh charge is that the monistic mystical experience is described in contradictory terms, and "what cannot be expressed without contradiction...[is] necessarily false" (312).

While Yandell's I'm-no-Mister-Nice-Guy approach is most refreshing, it nevertheless is atrocious. It flies in the face of the patent fact that the descriptions given by monistic mystics of their experiences, although syntactically contradictory, are understood, even by the members of the straight community of non-mystics, although they are unable to give a non-contradictory unpacking of them. There is no doubt that there is a special mystical way of using language that we have yet to explain. To dismiss mystical claims as uninformative on the ground that they are contradictory in terms of the standards or canons of ordinary fact-stating discourse, which is what Yandell in fact does in Chapter 13, is to judge them by alien standards. I don't have any explanation of how mystics manage to communicate through the use of **seemingly** contradictory utterances, but it is not unreasonable to expect a book that costs \$55 to at least make some start towards finding an explanation, and certainly not to engage in know-nothing dismissiveness.

NOTES

1. In fairness to Yandell, it should be pointed out that Alston's sure-to-become-a-classic *Perceiving God* appeared in 1991, probably too late for consideration in his book; but the articles out of which the book grew, commencing in 1964, appeared early enough. I should temper my adulation for Alston with the qualification that I do not think his approach works. For my reasons why see Chapter 8 of my *On the Nature and Existence of God*, along with my articles "Why Alston's Mystical Doxastic Practice Is Subjective" and "The Overall Argument of Alston's *Perceiving God*," forthcoming respectively in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* and *Religious Studies*, along with responses from Alston. Also to be consulted is my "Swinburne's Argument from Religious Experience," forthcoming in *Reason and the Christian Religion*, edited by Alan Padgett, from Oxford University Press.

2. Failure to recognize opaqueness occurs elsewhere, for example, in the claim that "*X* exists necessarily if and only if *X exists* is a necessary truth" (90). This *de re-de dicto* confusion faces the same counter-example, if we assume that God necessarily exists. While it is true that God necessarily exists, it is false that it is necessarily true that St. Anselm's favorite object exists.