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Conceptual enquiry and the experience of ‘the transcendent’:

John Hick’s contribution to the dialogue

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Abstract

John Hick (1922–2012) was an influential analytical philosopher of religion and liberal Christian philosophical theologian who taught in Britain and the United States. His work on religious epistemology, the theology of religions and, to some extent, eschatology has close links with his understanding of the philosophy of religious experience. This paper offers a detailed analysis and critical evaluation of these significant elements of Hick’s philosophical and theological thought, focusing in particular on his theory of religious knowledge and the role played by religious concepts within religious experience, and the relevance of these reflections for his pluralistic account of the variety of religions and his criterion of religious truth. Hick’s response to the challenges of contemporary neuroscience and the philosophy of mind is also reviewed. The paper reflects on the relevance of these views to accounts of an experience of transcendent reality collected through the empirical psychology of religion.

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Religious experience, religious epistemology, religious concepts, John Hick, pluralism, neuroscience, the transcendent.

Introduction

John Hick (1922–2012) was a British analytical philosopher of religion and revisionist Christian theologian who taught at Cornell University, Princeton Seminary and Claremont Graduate University in the USA, and Cambridge and Birmingham Universities in the UK. Hick's philosophical and theological views provide a theoretical framework that is exceedingly sympathetic to the findings of empirical studies of religious experience.

Theory of religious knowing

Hick's philosophical stance was basically empiricist (Hewitt, 1991, pp. 52, 206) in that he emphasized the evidence of human experience; but Hick extended this beyond knowledge claims grounded in sense experience to wider forms of experience. He refers to his own, relatively rare, religious experiences (Hick, 1999, p. 113; 2002, p. 223; 2010, p. 49), and comments positively on the data from the Religious Experience Research Unit founded by Alister Hardy (1999, pp. 112–113; 2006, pp. 28–30, 32, 141–142; 2010, ch. 5). For Hick, therefore, it is not only 'the great primary religious figures' for whom belief in God is 'not an explanatory hypothesis . . . but a perceptual belief . . . [not] an inferred entity but an experienced personal presence' (1970, p. 116).

Hick presents a much fuller understanding of religious experience than many of his academic peers, and one that takes a particular form. From his doctoral thesis onwards,² Hick presented the idea of religious faith 'as the interpretative element within religious experience, arising from an act of cognitive choice' (1974, p. v). His account characteristically draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's identification of the role of 'seeing as' in interpreting a puzzle picture: for example, seeing Jastrow's duck-rabbit as either a duck or a rabbit (Wittgenstein, 1968, pp. 193–214). Hick developed Wittgenstein's conceptualization into the broader category of 'experiencing as', and extended it to the case of recognizing something (even a fork) on the basis of concepts. He argued that 'all conscious experiencing

² Rewritten and published as *Faith and knowledge* in 1957 and considerably revised in 1966.

involves recognitions which go beyond what is given to the senses', a view that led him to the claim that 'ordinary secular perceiving shares a common epistemological character with religious experiencing' (Hick, 1974, p. 142; 1985, ch. 2; 2010, p. 65). This interpretative element within religious experience is the means by which theists experience 'life as divinely created and ourselves as living in the unseen presence of God' (1983, p. 47).

Two features of Wittgenstein's original account are of particular significance in Hick's religious epistemology

Interpretation, meaning and religion

Wittgenstein had suggested that this 'special sort of seeing', the 'dawning' or 'flashing' of an aspect on us, was one in which we 'see it as we *interpret* it'. It could be regarded as 'a case of both seeing and thinking . . . an amalgam of the two' – 'half visual experience, half thought' (Wittgenstein, 1968, pp. 193–197). Hick insists that this interpretation is not a separate inference that is applied to the experience, 'a theory imposed retrospectively upon remembered facts', but the way in which they are actually experienced at the time (Hick, 1974, p. 143). Thus we 'recognize' (say) this bird as a kestrel rather than inferring the presence of a kestrel as the 'best explanation' of the experience we have had (cf. Hay, 1987, p. 190).

In a similar way, religious experiences³ are 'modifications of consciousness structured by religious concepts', in which *the religious interpretation is already part of the experience*. Hick therefore rejects the notion that there is some common raw experience that is interpreted differently according to culturally-bound ways (1999, pp. 110–111), sharing with Steven Katz both the epistemological assumption that all experience is mediated through a conceptual framework that is brought to this experience, and the consequent

³ Hick designates them all 'mystical' experiences (1999, p. 110; cf. 2008, p. 15). However, he also identifies a narrower category of mystical experience, understood as 'internal' experiences that are 'independent of the physical environment' and which occupy the opposite end of the spectrum from 'prophetic' religious experiences (Hick, 1993c, pp. 20–21, cf. 24).

rejection of any 'naively conceived distinction between experience and interpretation' (Katz, 1978, p. 29; cf. Bagger, 1991).

Hick's proposal, therefore, is that 'a pre-conscious interpretative activity enters into the formation of the conscious experience, so that it may be true both that mystics of different traditions are encountering the same reality and yet also that their actual conscious experiences are characteristically different' (Hick, 1997, p. 611). This sounds warning bells for any claims to a 'perennial philosophy' embodying the 'essence of religion', or a "common core" or "ultimate sameness" to all religious experience, irrespective of creed, race or society' (Robert Runcie, quoted in Francis, 2013, p. 8). Hick insists that people are not 'aware of deity in general or of the absolute in general', but undergo a true diversity of religious experience 'depending upon the set of religious concepts in terms of which it is constructed' (Hick, 1997, p. 612; cf. 1989, pp. 3–5). However, Hick's meta-account of how the plurality of religions witnesses to one unknowable transcendent reality might appear to accommodate a functionally equivalent claim, albeit at a different level of analysis (see below).

This 'perceptual', rather than 'theoretical', interpretation allows our 'interpreted awareness' of our environment to have what Hick calls 'practical meaning' for us – that is, 'meaning that makes a difference to the way . . . we act and react in the world', through the dispositional states evoked in us by identifying a situation in a particular way (2000, pp. 269–271; cf. 1985, pp. 20–24; 1993c, p. 17; 1999, ch. 6; 2008, p. 20). Hick further believes that all the major religious traditions evince what he later came to call a 'cosmic optimism', that in the end all shall be well (Hick, 1999, pp. 51–73; 2000, pp. 274–286; 2010, ch. 15). Both elements provide a good fit with the phenomenology of religious experience (cf. Hardy, 1979, ch. 4; Hay, 1987, pp. 150, 157–159; Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990, pp. 36–40).

Freedom, experience and faith

Wittgenstein also argued that 'seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will', although he toyed with the idea that someone may lack this capacity and therefore evidence 'aspect-blindness' (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 213). Building on Wittgenstein, Hick posits 'successively higher-level recognitions' – of physical patterns, and of aesthetic, moral and finally religious significance – each of which presupposes but transcends the previous one (1973, pp. 45–47). These different levels allow different degrees of freedom in our interpretation of experience. This is at a minimum in sensory experience, increases through the levels of interpersonal, aesthetic and moral experiences, and is at its greatest in religious (or atheistic) interpretations (1974, p. 128; 1989, pp. 160–162): 'the more value laden the meaning the greater our cognitive freedom in relation to it' (2000, p. 272). Hence individuals are said to adopt 'the religious mode of apperception' by an 'act of will' or a 'state of willingness or consent' (1973, p. 143).

Great religious leaders, however, were subject to such powerful religious experiences that their freedom of belief was in practice very limited: 'they could no more help believing in the reality of God than in the reality of the material world' (1970, p. 112). But Hick distinguishes between the situation in which someone allows themselves freely to come to religious awareness, and the situation in which they later enjoy that awareness – at which stage it may be that the person '*cannot help* believing in the reality of God' (1970, p. 114). Consequently, religious awareness is coercive ('to one who has it in the highest degree'), but not coerced (even though humans have an 'innate tendency to interpret [their] experience religiously', this can 'readily be resisted or suppressed') (1966, pp. 246–248).

Behind all conscious experience there lies a phase of unconscious interpretive activity and it is here that, in the case of religious experience, the free response to ambiguity occurs. In the conscious experience the ambiguity has been resolved in a distinctively religious (or, in the contrary case, in a distinctively naturalistic) way, and the resulting experience itself may have any degree of intensity and of compelling quality. (1989, p. 170 n. 9)

It is hard to get a handle on this account of freely resisting something that is 'unconscious'. In any case, a voluntarist account of faith seems to fall foul of a valid criticism of all claims to a freedom of belief, that it follows from both the phenomenology and the logic of believing that we cannot directly will what we believe, although we are free to engage in trying to understand certain arguments, or to seek out certain sorts of evidence that may *indirectly* change our beliefs (Astley, 2012, pp. 85–86). Perhaps we should therefore interpret Hick as claiming only that people have an *indirect* control over their religious experiences (Astley, 1994, pp. 203–204); presumably, in this case, by freely opening themselves up to the initial religious interpretation.

But how can that initial interpretation be an unconscious state? Theoretical debates in psychology might be germane here; as would evidence about how far subjects feel themselves to be free to resist or to go along with any religious experiences (experiences-interpreted-as-religious) that they may have. It is perhaps relevant that empirical studies report many cases where religious experience is 'quite unsought' (Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990, p. 52; cf. Hardy, 1979, p. 77).

Hay (1987, p. 190), while claiming that 'most people's religious experience turns up spontaneously', agrees that people do not come to religious experience 'entirely naïve, because, whether believers or not, they belong to a culture with a long religious history' (cf. Hick, 2006, p. 34). Nevertheless, empirical studies also provide examples of phenomenologically similar 'spiritual experiences' that do not seem to draw on religious concepts (e.g. Hardy, 1979, pp. 110, 113; Hay, 1987, p. 156). (Hick's account is mainly cast as an analysis of explicitly religious experiences.)

Pluralistic theology of religions

Hick's personal experience of the spirituality, morality and worship of people of other faiths moved him beyond an unreflective Christian exclusivism or 'particularism' that argues that

only one belief-system is true, and even away from the sort of Christian 'inclusivism' that acknowledges the salvific effect and truth claims of other faiths but for which Christianity remains pre-eminently and even uniquely significant. In Hick's view, both positions fail to do justice to the distinctive religious lives of non-Christians (Hick, 1985, ch. 3; 1993a, ch. 8; Hick in Okholm & Phillips, 1996, pp. 126–127). He therefore came to believe that the only satisfactory standpoint was the pluralistic view that religious beliefs and practices, although they obviously differ, deserve equal respect as ways of salvation and accounts of divine truth. His claim that this view is widely, although normally implicitly, held outside the academy is open to empirical test (cf. Hick, 1993c, p. 141; 1995, p. 125).

According to Hick, each religion is a mixture of good and bad, marred by human failings but equally capable as the others to lead people to their fulfilment in a spiritual dying to self and an experience of transcendence. This perspective is not only consonant with, but actually led him to (1995, p. 16) the notions that each of the major world faiths arises from a different human response to the one 'limitlessly greater transcendent Reality', and that participation by faith 'in one of the actual streams of religious experience . . . is to participate in it as an experience of transcendent Reality' (Hick, 1985, p. 37). Hick offers the analogy of religions as 'human maps of the infinite divine reality made in different projections' (different conceptual systems). While all of these maps distort this reality, 'all may be equally useful in guiding our journey through life' (Hick, 2008, p. 12).

This pluralistic hypothesis is a form of soteriological relativism, in which all religions are seen as essentially salvific (Hick, 1983, pp. 86–87; 1989, ch. 17). Patently, this involves: (a) interpreting salvation very broadly, so as to include the hunger for and realization of enlightenment, liberation, and other spiritual ideal states – which is how Hick interprets it, writing of 'salvation/liberation' (Hick, 1995, pp. 18, 106–108); and (b) interpreting salvation as, in part, concrete and observable, 'if we mean by salvation the actual salvific change in women and men' (Hick, 1995, p.19, cf. 17).

Soteriological relativism claims that different people are saved in different ways from different things in different contexts, through the differing sources, ways and consequences

of salvation represented by the major world religions – and, indeed, by some more secular worldviews (as described at 1995, pp. 79–81; 1999, pp. 175, 178–179; 2006, pp. 28, 50; 2010, pp. 75–76).

Debates about religious experience often centre on issues of unity and diversity. Hick treats religious experience as a particular reception of and reaction to ‘the fifth dimension of the universe’, to which ‘the fifth dimension of our nature, the transcendent within us’ (our spiritual nature) answers and ‘inclines us to respond’ (Hick, 1999, pp. 2, 8–9, 167, 247, 253–254). This one transcendent other, which in the end Hick preferred simply to label ‘the Real’, is active rather than passive in its relationship to the variety of human experiencers;⁴ with the various religions each constituting ‘a mix of culturally conditioned responses to a higher reality and the universal impingement of the Real’ (Cheetham, 2009, p. 307).

Critical realism and Kantianism

This soteriological relativism is complemented by a cognitive relativism of revelation/religious experience and theological truth, developed in the context of a critical religious realism from which Hick can assert that ‘the different world religions have each served as God’s means of revelation to . . . a different stream of human life’ (1980, p. 52).

Unlike more radical philosophers of religion, Hick maintains a philosophically realist view of God that affirms that descriptions of God refer to an ultimate reality that actually exists outside human consciousness and language. Like most theologians, however, Hick resists the temptation of treating all descriptive language about God as making literal claims. By regarding such language as mainly comprising metaphorical, mythological or poetic figures of speech, he avoids the anthropomorphism of portraying the divine as a human

⁴ Hick suggested that telepathy may be a ‘partial analogy’ for the impact of the divine (1993c, p. 26). Cheetham correctly notes, however, that ‘activity’ (like any other category) cannot literally or analogically be applied to the noumenal Real, about which Hick really ‘does not want to say anything concrete’ (Cheetham, 2009, p. 307; see Hick, 1993c, p. 177 and the next section).

person possessing human attributes that are to be understood wholly literally.⁵ Such accounts are normally associated with a 'naïve realism' about the divine, in which God is understood to be directly perceived or revealed. By contrast, the *critical* realism that Hick adopts (1993b, pp. 5–7) involves the epistemological claim that we do not know things (even physical things) directly, but only through some medium of perception and thought. Our human consciousness is an interpretative filter, so that our knowledge is conditional on human categories of understanding and human language; and this general rule extends to any experience and knowledge of God (Hick, 1989, pp. 133, 172–175, 240–249).

An intrinsic and unavoidable element of relativism thus underlies all human perception and knowledge, the truths of which are 'relative to' our human perspective(s). This position is a commonplace in epistemology, including most religious epistemology. But Hick goes further by adopting a revised version of Kantianism. Immanuel Kant radically distinguished what he characterized as an essentially unknowable 'noumenal' reality from the 'phenomenal' reality that we experience and know: what something is 'in itself', from 'how it appears to us' when filtered through our conceptual apparatus.⁶ But Hick applies Kant's distinction (as Kant did not) beyond our experience of the world, to embrace religious experience (1989, chs 14–16), insisting that the noumenal reality that is the object (or subject) of such experience – the transcendent, the Ultimate or the Real – is not describable or knowable, because it is (in Hick's term) 'transcategorical'. It transcends our categories of understanding and description and is therefore beyond human comprehension.

⁵ Hick correctly interprets analogy as 'a stretched literality' (in Hewitt, 1991, p. 26). Myth is not understood in the study of religion as an untruth, but essentially as a narrative form of metaphor, a dynamic expanded metaphor or 'moving picture of the sacred', to adopt Ninian Smart's succinct phrase (cf. Hick, 1993a, p. 105; 1995, p. 101).

⁶ This Kantian view of the mind as playing an active role in imposing organizing forms and categories on data, so as to enable and create perception and knowledge, is in accord with many 'interactionist', 'constructivist' or 'schematized' theories and perspectives in individual and social psychology. Unusually for a philosopher, Hick argues that Kant's recognition of 'the mind's own positive contribution to the character of its perceived environment' has been comprehensively confirmed by 'modern work in cognitive and social psychology and in the sociology of knowledge' (Hick, 1989, p. 240).

Descriptive religious language simply doesn't work at this level; it cannot even have an analogical application to the Real-as-it-is-in-itself (1993c, p. 177). All we can know and speak of is the Real/God-*as-it-appears-towards-us*, in the variety of phenomenal conceptions and apprehensions ('manifestations, "faces", forms, expressions', 1993c, p. 158) to which religious believers lay claim. Hence 'in Kantian language, the noumenal Real is humanly experienced as a range of divine phenomena' (Hick, 1997, p. 612).

This idea of a transcendent mystery as the ultimate object of religious experience permits us to sit more lightly to accounts of this entity that are reported within the empirical literature. While Hick allows that religious metaphor can 'picture' God and is often 'fairly close to analogy' (1993a, pp. 42, 100 n. 2), and even that there are literal truths about (e.g.) the goodness of the heavenly Parent of Christianity (1995, p. 61), these descriptions can only be true of the phenomenal – but not of the transcendent – object of religious experience.

Hick's account allowed him to view the different 'names' of God of the different theistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, etc.) as representing different personal expressions or roles ('personae') of God – 'the one God differently described' (Badham, 1990, p. 12). But he also came to take seriously the impersonal notions of ultimate reality found in Advaita Hinduism, Buddhism, and elsewhere, incorporating these into his account as 'impersonae' of what he increasingly named 'the Real'. Behind all these personal and impersonal, phenomenal understandings lies the mysterious, transcategorical, ineffable Real – 'the transcendent'.

Doctrines that seem incompatible at the phenomenal level are in this way capable of being united at the noumenal level. This is the closest that Hick allows himself to the 'common core' or 'perennialist' position that religious (or mystical) experiences have a common core that is cross-culturally universal, which is a view that Hick rejects (cf. Bush, 2012). 'The ultimate reality of which the religious speak, and which we refer to as God, is being differently conceived, and therefore *differently experienced*, and therefore differently

responded to in historical forms of life within the different religions' (Hick, 2008, p. 10, my italics).

Hick claims that religious language has a further, non-descriptive function. Like Ian Ramsey before him, he acknowledges that religious language fulfils an evocative role. Ramsey thought of this in terms of evoking religious experience: 'discernment' and 'disclosure' in his terminology (Ramsey, 1957, ch. II). Hick understands it as the evocation of spiritual attitudes. In his later work, Hick construed the central beliefs of religious traditions (e.g. the Christian doctrine of incarnation, reinterpreted in Hick, 1993a), and even theological developments like theodicy and eschatology (cf. 1989, pp. 359–360; Cheetham, 2003, p. 139), as essentially mythological or metaphorical/poetic. He argued that their truthfulness resided in 'the practical truthfulness which consist in guiding us aright', through their tendency to evoke in the hearer/reader 'an appropriate dispositional attitude to the story's referent'. Understood in this way, different religious beliefs cannot conflict in the manner of rival factual claims; rather, 'different mythologies may each be valid as ways of evoking, within the life of a particular faith community, human self-transcendence in relation to the Real' (Hick, 1989, p. 375; 1995, pp. 101–102).

I agree that ordinary believers often use religious language in an instrumental, non-cognitive manner, to express and evoke religious attitudes and experiences; rather than employing it solely in the cognitive, fact-asserting role of providing representations of the divine. This claim may find some support from empirical studies (see Christie, 2012, pp. 170–176; cf. Astley & Francis, 2013, pp. 50–52, 195–197).

Criterion of religious truth

Hick argues that it is rational for people to trust their own religious experiences, if these are 'sufficiently vivid' and unless they have a valid reason to doubt them (1974, p. 210; 2010, p. 57; cf. Wesley, 1974). But those who have no such 'first-hand knowledge', however slight, may remain agnostic about the religious experience of others (Goulder and Hick, 1983, p. 44; Hick, 1999, p. 167; 2008, p. 29; cf. Ketchum, 1991). Such observers should, however,

apply rational criteria to those who make knowledge claims based on religious experience, so as to assess whether they are entitled to do so. These claimants are to be judged by whether they are 'fully sane, sober and rational persons', which includes evaluating whether their claims are 'consistent with our other knowledge' based on 'the rest of our experience' (Hick, 2008, p. 28).

But Hick's key criterion for distinguishing 'between veridical and delusory religious experiences' (1999, p. 163) is their effects in human life. 'The salvation/liberation which it is the function of religion to facilitate is a human transformation [that] . . . consists, as one of its aspects, in moral goodness' (1989, p. 309) or in a more spiritual character (1995, p. 77). In this world, the 'soteriological power' of religions is something that can be measured only by these 'human fruits' (1995, p. 111).

This position partly depends on Hick's claim that 'saving truth' is not comparable to other forms of truth, especially the truth of empirically-based theories; and his insistence that *a religion's* truthfulness consists in the salvific transformation of self-centredness to God/transcendent/Reality-centredness: 'its power to bring people to the ultimate reality we call God, and thereby . . . produce in them the kind of fruit' esteemed by the religions (Hick in Okholm & Phillips, 1996, p. 87). These fruits, Hick argues, are manifested in someone's spiritual, moral, or even political change.

Essentially, this is a test that may be used by anyone who undergoes a religious experience, so as to authenticate their own experience (2006, pp. 42–43). And many accounts of religious or spiritual experience do seem to bear witness to some associated changed sense of spiritual meaningfulness in life, or the development of more loving attitudes and behaviour towards other people (cf. Hardy, 1979, pp. 98–103; Fenwick & Fenwick, 1996, p. 4; Fox, 2014; cf. Web, 1995).⁷

⁷ In one survey, around three quarters of those who had a religious experience felt that it had altered their 'outlook on life', although only 10% said that it had encouraged more moral behaviour (Hay, 1987, p. 157).

But can *observers* use this criterion in the same way? Many would not only say that we may 'know people by their fruits' (Matthew 7:17, 20), but also that we may judge *their claims that they believe something* by the same fruits, at least where the beliefs are such that they may properly be expected to be expressed in appropriate behaviours. Hick argues both that the religions are forms of 'cosmic optimism' and embody the 'impact' of the Real on people, and that 'it is a basic principle of life that we trust and act on our experience' (1999, pp. 52, 165, 167). So a person who maintains that he has had an experience of, and now believes in, a trustworthy God of love, but then behaves in a distrustful manner or unlovingly towards others, may expect to have his claim that this is what he believes challenged (Hick, 1983, pp. 61–66; cf. 1974, pp. 247–250).

However, can we go even this far? If I always keep myself a safe distance from any flame you may rationally doubt that I really believe that fire will not burn me. I may, however, truly believe that I can trust A or that I should never do X, even though my dispositions to behave overtly in ways appropriate to these beliefs are rendered ineffective by some other factor, be it moral, psychological or even cognitive (e.g. another belief). There are just too many influences that affect the behavioural outcome, and therefore contaminate the inference from behaviour to belief. More significantly, we can never get beyond the claim that 'X's behaviour is *consistent with* their believing that *p*', as a person's behaviour cannot confirm whether or not *p* is true – that is, whether or not X's religious experience is veridical.

If my experience is of a certain kind, and sufficiently intense, it is likely to change my beliefs and my behaviour; but this does not *prove* that it is a genuine experience, even though I am rationally entitled to accept it as such. Hick's position therefore leaves room for agnosticism as well as mystery in religious knowing, and he explicitly acknowledges theological error and 'imaginative projection' (1997, p. 610) in addition to the possibility of delusory religious experiences (2008, pp. 27–28).

Challenges from science and the philosophy of mind

In his final publications, Hick continued to place religious experience firmly at the centre of his philosophy and theology, but he also began to address some of the criticisms raised against religious experience by scientific evidence: particularly in the 2004 edition of *The fifth dimension*, *The new frontier of religion and science* (2006) and his more popular text, *Between faith and doubt* (2010).

Hick recognized that the default position for most scientists is a naturalistic or physicalist ontology that denies reality to mental or spiritual entities and causes. Although this view might seem to many to follow from the non-controversial *methodological* naturalism that is rightly regarded as a defining feature of the practice of science, it is in fact an independent metaphysical theory that is no part of science (cf. Astley, 2015).

Despite Hick's success in providing a coherent account of a resurrected afterlife in his so-called 'replica theory', and his development of an ambitious eschatology that posited an essentially re-incarnational account of 'many lives in many worlds' (1976, chs 15, 20; 2006, ch. 18; 2010, ch. 14), 'Hick has always been a dualist himself' (Badham, 2009, p. 236; but cf. Cheetham, 2003, p. 83) and latterly described his own position as 'non-Cartesian dualism' (Hick, 2006, p. 111). In fact, a significant element in his speculative eschatology is a temporary period of bodiless existence after death (and between rebirths) where we exist in a mind-dependent world. His account of this is similar to the notion postulated by H. H. Price of our surviving in a dream-world built by our desires out of the memories of our previous life (Price, 1965; cf. Hick, 1976, ch. 14). Such a hypothesis would allow for possible telepathic contact with others in a similar state, and with people who are still alive (Hick, 1993c, p. 195), and could therefore offer a plausible explanatory framework for 'deathbed visions' and hallucinations of the dead, and possibly even 'near-death experiences' (cf. Fenwick & Fenwick, 1996, 2008; Fox, 2003).

Like most other dualists, Hick accepts the compelling evidence of a strong correlation between brain states and mental states, but rejects the philosophical claims that the two sets of states are either identical (the mind-brain identity theory) or that the latter is an

epiphenomenon, aspect or emergent property of the former – and therefore possesses no causal powers of its own or any possibility of independent existence (1976, ch. 6). Hick assesses the evidence from neuroscience that allegedly supports such metaphysical theories, and declares it inconclusive (2006, part II; 2010, chs 7 and 8). He also studied and gave considerable credence to ESP over a long period, and regarded such phenomena as strengthening the case against these naturalistic theories of the mind (1976, pp. 121–126, ch. 7; 1985, pp. 127–132; 1999, pp. 248–249; 2006, pp. 79–80, 88; cf. 2010, pp. 147–149).

With respect to both religious experience and ESP, the second-order procedure of positing the best explanation of an experience may on occasion appear to trump a person's first-order reliance on their interpretative perception. Basil Mitchell argues, however, that the choice between (a) God as an uncertain, inferred, explanatory hypothesis, and (b) God as an experienced reality of which we can be certain, is not an exclusive one. The situation is analogous to the case where a sailor's claim to see a lighthouse through a storm can only be judged in the light of other reports, the calculations of map positions, and so on. We cannot decide about the 'objectivity' of the sailor's seeming to see the lighthouse simply on his report alone, but only on 'some overall appraisal of the situation'. Yet this does not make the lighthouse 'merely an inferred entity and not an experienced reality'. It is rather that direct experience often needs the support of indirect reasoning in order to justify a claim to knowledge by observation (Mitchell, 1973, p. 113; cf. Donovan, 1979, ch. 5; Franks Davis, 1989, p. 144, ch. VI). Mitchell therefore argues that 'claims to direct awareness of God . . . are what they purport to be, cases of direct awareness', but 'the claim that this is what they are relies upon there being a theory or conceptual scheme in terms of which the claim can be adequately defended' (Mitchell, 1973, p. 115; cf. Hick, 2008, pp. 28–29).

Consequently, the claims that people make about having had an experience of God, or a veridical psi perception, still need the support of a coherent framework of defensible beliefs into which this perception can be fitted. In the first case, such a worldview must include a coherent, plausible theology; but, as in both cases, it also requires the sort of criticisms of alternative, naturalistic explanations of the grounding experience that Hick and

others have attempted to provide (e.g. Fenwick & Fenwick, 1996, ch. 14; Fox, 2003, ch. 4; 2014, ch.4). In this area, the conceptual enquiries of philosophers and theologians provide an essential complement to psychological surveys of people's experience.

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