

On the Possibility of an Immediate of Experience of God

Ross L. Stein

As human, we experience the world around us. A sunset, an ocean breeze on our face, the perfumed scent of our mate; these stimuli and more are apprehended by our senses and ground our experiences of a world that begins where our skin ends. As human, we also experience a rich inner life. Unlike sense perception, these experiences find their origins in our memories, thoughts, and ideas. These are the noetic substrates for reflection and analysis which ultimately lead to understanding and knowledge.

And we experience the holy. We find evidence of religious experience, in all its varied forms, across all cultures and deep into our ancestral past. Religious experience is an ubiquitous feature of human existence. But how are we to explain these experiences? Religious experience raises profound questions: How are we to define experience? In religious experience, what is it that is being experienced? Is there an object of experience or is religious experience purely subjective? If we allow an object of religious experience, how is it that we are able to apprehend this Other? And finally, assuming a stance of theistic belief: Can humans have an immediate experience of God?

I believe that this last question is of particular importance; its answer will impact on at least three theological projects: (1) mode of encounter between God and our proto-human ancestors, (2) religious pluralism and the status of truth claims of universal revelation, and (3) objective vs. subjective explanations of religious experience.

In this essay, I will make the case that an immediate experience of God is possible. I begin with a brief overview of the philosophy of experience. Here, we will first see that the widely held position that immediate, uninterrupted experience is impossible has its roots in a Kantian epistemology. This Kantian view is opposed by other philosophies; including, process thought, existential phenomenology, and many strands of both ancient and contemporary Indian philosophy, which all have at their cores the concept of immediate, prereflective experience. Using elements of these latter systems of thought,

together with certain contemporary philosophies of consciousness, I then make and support the argument that the *immediate experience of God is a fundamental feature of reality*. I conclude this paper with a view of immediate experience of God that allows a positive response to the three theological projects.

Philosophy of Experience

Experience is an elusive concept and we must be careful in its definition. For how we define experience will dictate the language that we will be allowed to use when we describe the encounter of humans with God. A simple and familiar definition of experience is “an event that one lives through”; one may also want to add “and of which one is conscious” (Peterson et al. 1998, 19). However, we seldom stop here and almost always burden our definition of experience with epistemic baggage. In our modern, Western philosophical tradition, experience is found intimately associated with knowledge, as is made clear in the opening sentence of the definition given in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*:

experience. Philosophical empiricism, as against philosophical rationalism, holds that all our knowledge, or at any rate what Hume would call “matters of fact and real existence”, must be based upon, and vindicated by reference to, experience. (Flew 1979, 116)

As suggested here, there is a tendency that can be traced to the British empiricists, to view experience as contributory to epistemology; experience connects “a knowing subject with a knowable object”. (Schrag 1969, 7).

Kantian Epistemology and Categorically Conditioned Experience These early intuitions were systematized by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant starts from the simple premise that all knowledge must begin with experience. I can know that there is a tree outside my window only by first having sensual experience of it, through sight or touch, for example. But he then tells us that it would be a fallacy to believe that knowledge arises *out of* experience. Here his thinking departs from that of the British empiricists, for unlike Locke, Kant does not believe our knowledge of this tree is simply the tree’s imprint on the *tabula rasa* of our mind, but rather knowledge comes from

interpreted experience by categories of thought that exist in our mind. It is here, with Kant, that experience takes on its epistemic character:

All experience does indeed contain, in addition to the intuition of the senses through which something is given, a *concept* of an object as thereby given or appearing. Concepts of objects in general thus underlie all empirical knowledge as it's *a priori* conditions. The objective validity of the categories as *a priori* concepts rests, therefore, on the fact that it is only through them that experience becomes possible. They relate of necessity and *a priori* to the objects of experience, since only by means of them can any object be thought. (Kant [1787] 1996, 45)

Kant's "Copernicium revolution" in philosophy leads directly to a strand of contemporary thought that tells us that "uninterrupted [unmediated] experience in religion is a wishful project" (Dermot 1981, 21). This is expressed forcefully by Steven Katz:

There are NO pure, unmediated experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. . . . This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regard to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which the mystics have intercourse, e.g., God, Being, nirvana, etc. (Katz 1978, 26. Italics and emphasis are his.)

Similar sentiments can be found in the work of many others (Dermot 1981, Chapter 1; Frank-Davis 1989, Sections II and VI; Hick 1999, Chapter 12; Proudfoot 1985).

There are, of course, other ways to think about experience that place less emphasis on subjective interpretation and in which " . . . experience is liberated from its servitude to representational thought" (Schrag 1969, 127). I will comment on three: process thought, certain strands of existentialism and phenomenology, and Indian epistemology. As we will see these philosophies are more congenial to the possibility of an immediate encounter with God.

Process Philosophy In process thought, the basic unit of reality is not substance, but rather the "actual occasion" or "occasion of experience". For an occasion of experience to emerge into existence, it draws on or "prehends" all other occasions. Experience

shapes the very process of becoming that is enjoyed by all actual entities. Thus, experience is immediate and uninterrupted and is “the individualized basis for a complex of reality” (Whitehead 1929, 113). This is the great divide between process philosophy and Kantian epistemology; as Whitehead quipped: “For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world” (Whitehead 1929, 88).

An element of process thought that is critical for the present argument (see below) is the relationship between experience and consciousness. All actual entities, and not just conscious beings, enjoy experience. In Whitehead’s words: “Consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness” (Whitehead 1929, 53). And humans, as conscious beings, experience infinitely more than ever will rise to the level of our awareness. Our being, at a pre-reflective, immediate level, enjoys all of these occasions of experience; all of which shape the trajectory of our life (Cobb and Griffin 1976, 17).

Existential Phenomenology A particularly lucid description of an existential account of experience can be found in Calvin Schrag’s *Experience and Being* (1969). Like Whitehead, Schrag wants us to abandon Kant’s view of experience in which experience is “subordinated to an epistemological role.” (248) Instead, we must come to embrace an existential view of experience:

What is not recognized by Kant is that experience - by virtue of its sentient, volitional, and noetic intentionality and its gestaltist structure - is able to see, feel, will, and comprehend the world. (248)

A key concept for Schrag is experience as a dynamic field rather than an atomized series of occurrences in which the world is viewed as external to the experience with entities somehow presented to the self. It is in the dynamic field of experience that we have our being.

The phenomenal field of experience is presented not as a substantive entity, defined by fixed and invariant qualities, but rather as a process of becoming in which variable figures appear against indeterminate and changing backgrounds. (23)

Here, the experiencer is a participant within the world, rather than an entity set against it. Schrag's "dynamic field of experience" owes much to the Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "return to the immediate data of consciousness" and the "phenomenal field" (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1999, 52-63).

The process of experience is distinct from the act of reflection on the process. Within the field, then, experience contains elements of both the prereflective-nonthematic and the reflective-thematic (Schrag 1969, 41-48). The prereflective-nonthematic is an "existential cross-section of the experienced world . . . [in which] the configurative complex is undisturbed by reflective discrimination of textures of figures and types of backgrounds; discriminating determinations are latent" (46-47). The prereflective-nonthematic can be identified with the immediate. Immediate experience is existential in character (35-41); to experience world is to experience being: "That which comes to presence in the first flush of experience is the phenomenal complex of being-in-the-world." (252)

Indian Epistemology While Indian philosophy is extremely broad in scope and thus not easily categorized, Radhakrishnan has pointed out that it is characterized by certain unifying features that capture its particular spirit and differentiate it from Western philosophy (Radhakrishnan 1957, xxiii). One such feature is an epistemology that places great emphasis on intuition or immediate apprehension (*pratyaksa*). For example, in the Nyaya philosophical tradition, the most important means of arriving at correct knowledge (*pramana-sastra*) is through *pratyaksa* (Radhakrishnan 1957, 356). Consider the following two sutra and their commentary by Gautama:

3. Perception (*pratyaksa*), inference, comparison, and verbal testimony - these are the means of right knowledge (*pramana-sastra*).

Among the four kinds of cognition, *pratyaksa* is the most important; . . . when a man has once perceived the thing directly, his desires are at rest, and he does not seek for any other kind of knowledge.

4. *Pratyaksa* is that knowledge which arises from contact of a sense with its object and which is determinate, unnamable, and unerring.

The Nyaya Sutra, Book I, Chapter I
(Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 359)

We see that one does not merely *know* the truth; one *realizes* it or has a direct and immediate experience of it.

In contrasting the Western and Indian philosophy traditions, Balbir Singh points to epistemic method as a primary distinguishing feature:

What accounts for the peculiar nature [of Indian philosophy] is the view that, given the limitations of human intellect, it is not possible to attain *knowledge* of ultimate reality. Hence, the emphasis on the need for exploration of other appropriate avenues, especially the emphasis on a direct and immediate apprehension of the real ever abiding in its own existence and essence (*dharma*). (Singh 1987, 2)

We again see *pratyaksa* as the definitive mode of apprehension and knowledge.

Towards a Philosophical Rationale for the Experience of God

In the previous section, I briefly contrasted a traditional Kantian philosophy of experience with strands of thought that seek to release experience from its servitude to knowledge. In the former system of thought, “experience must wait upon the constituting activity of a transcendental ego, which has at its command ready-made categories with which to organize the fragments received from the sensory manifold” (Schrag 1969, 8). The goal of the latter systems is to abandon an atomized view of experience for a vitalistic view where experience is no longer seen as something that happens to us but rather something we live through. These systems have in common an existential view in which experience is embedded in reality and is the necessary precursor to consciousness.

In this section, I will use these philosophies of experience together with certain contemporary theories of consciousness in an attempt to support the notion of an immediate experience of God. We will see that these concepts of consciousness align themselves with the panexperientialism of process thought all of which find deep and ancient underpinnings in the philosophy of India. I will finally make the case that *immediate experience of God is a fundamental feature of reality*; a reality whose structure

is triune, comprising being, experience, and consciousness, and ‘resides’ in a panentheistic God.

Philosophy of Consciousness - Experience as Fundamental

Conduct a simple thought experiment. Close your eyes and imagine an itch; one of those itches that you get in the middle of your back that you can’t quite reach, perhaps triggered by a loose hair falling down the back of your shirt. Note how the itch first enters your consciousness; a vague perception, barely noticeable, barely above the “background noise”. But as the seconds pass, the ‘quality’ of the itch changes from a slight annoyance to a mild discomfort. More time passes as your attempts to scratch the itch fail. Unscratched, your itch draws you into a mental state of deeper and deeper frustration. Finally, relief; the itch is scratched. Frustration is replaced by sensual satisfaction.

This thought experiment illustrates what David Chalmers refers to as the “easy” and “hard” problems of consciousness (Chalmers in Shear 1998, 9-10). The easy problems are those that look solvable by the standard methods of cognitive science and neurophysiology. Here, phenomenon will be explained in terms of computational or neural mechanisms and ultimately in terms of biochemistry, chemistry, and physics. The easy problems of consciousness include explaining the ability of a conscious being to react to environmental stimuli, integrate information, report mental states, access internal states, focus attention, control behavior, and differentiate wakefulness from sleep. In our thought experiment we can see many instances of these sorts of phenomenon.

But what of the “itch” itself? How do we account for the *experience* of “itch”? This is the hard problem of consciousness.

The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of experience. When we think and perceive, there is a whirl of information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect . . . there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism. . . . Why is it that when our cognitive systems engage in visual and auditory information-processing, we have visual or auditory experience? . . . Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life? . . . Why doesn’t all information-processing go on ‘in the dark’, free of any inner feel? (Chalmers in Shear 1998, 11 - 13)

Indeed, why *aren't* we simply zombies, beings who accurately perform the functions of life but with no associated inner experience? As we go through our day, our lives are rich with experience; the smell of coffee, the warm touch of a loved one, the mind-expanding dissonance of Coltrane. How is it that the neuronal activity that goes on in our brain when we perceive and act in the world gives rise to experiences with definite phenomenal properties? When a fallen hair triggers skin receptors, it should be enough for my brain to first register this event and then cause me to find a means to stop the neuronal stimuli before my skin becomes irritated. This would be sufficient for a zombie. Why do *I* have an *experience*? But if I do experience, why an "itch"? Why not the experience of "tickle" or "pain" or "green" or "shame"? Why do certain neuronal stimulations produce only specific experiences and not others? These questions all resist simple solution.

To be sure, not everyone sees experience as a problem to be solved (Kim 1998, 177-180). Some argue that while experience may exist, it has no place in the pursuit of a science of cognition. At the extreme of this position are those, such as Daniel Dennett, that claim that experience simply doesn't exist; what we call experience is simply the operation of the functions of brain: "Subtract [brain functions] away, and nothing is left beyond a weird conviction in some people that there is some ineffable residue of 'qualitative content' bereft of all powers to move us, delight us, remind us of anything." (Dennett in Shear 1998, 35) Other individuals maintain that experiences do exist but are merely theoretical constructs and believe that the idea of experience will be discredited when neuroscience reaches the stage where it can explain human behavior without recourse to an inner mental life.

But are these functionalist explanations sufficient to adequately account for experience? Chalmers thinks not and maintains that a new theory of consciousness must be developed in which experience is taken as a fundamental feature of the world, alongside mass, charge, and space-time. In beginning to describe this new theory, he tells us that "where there is a fundamental property [i.e., experience], there are fundamental laws". A nonreductive theory of experience "will add new principles to the furniture of the basic laws of nature." Chalmers outlines three principles of this theory (Chalmers in Shear 1998, 22-28):

The principle of structural coherence. There is a fundamental coherence between the structure of consciousness and the structure of awareness. Here awareness is taken as a purely functional notion and is said to be intimately linked to consciousness and experience. Any information that is consciously experienced will also be cognitively represented.

The principle of organizational invariance. Any two systems with the same fine-grained functional organization will have qualitatively identical experiences. What matters for the emergence of experience is not the specific physical makeup of a system, but rather the pattern of causal interactions between its components.

The double-aspect theory of information. Where there is information, there are information states embedded in an information space. Information has two basic aspects: a physical aspect (eg., a defined neural pattern of synapse firings) and a phenomenal aspect (eg, the smell of a rose). This allows the emergence of experience from the physical. Experience arises by virtue of its status as one aspect of information, where the other aspect is found embodied in physical processing.

Taken together, and to their natural limits, these principles have interesting ramifications. In humans, there exists complex information processing which gives rise to complex awareness and complex experience. But how about the less complex?

A mouse has a simpler information-processing structure than a human, and has correspondingly simpler experience; perhaps a thermostat, a maximally simple information processing structure, might have maximally simple experience. Indeed, if experience is truly a fundamental property, it would be surprising for it to arise only every now and then. (Chalmers in Shear 1998, 27)

This is clearly an incredible claim, but one that shouldn't be discarded out of hand. A productive way to think about this hypothesis comes from Gregg Rosenberg. He asks us to consider Chalmers' claim as an analogy problem of the following sort: " 'X is to a thermostat as experience is to a human mind', where X must have a solution in nature, but we do not know what that solution is. It is an existential claim whose instantiation is something that we cannot be acquainted with, and hence should not pretend to understand deeply." (Rosenberg in Shear 1998, 299)

In fact, Rosenberg claims that Chalmers has not gone far enough; that we need a view of nature that somehow “gets under physics”.

We must do more than simply supplement our physical understanding of the world by postulating some other, qualitative mental properties. Instead, to understand experience, we will have to treat human cognition as a special context which is manifesting a phenomenon far more general and basic than cognition . . . the ‘qualitative field’. . . . We must tease apart the problem of experience from its cognitive entanglements and learn to see in it the more general problem of finding the basis in nature for qualitative content. The problem I have posed is to find a place in nature for qualitative fields. The position I am defending is that such fields must have a basis more fundamental and ubiquitous than cognition. (Rosenberg in Shear 1998, 289)

Essentially, Rosenberg is advocating panpsychism, the view that all matter, or all of nature, has a psychical aspect.

While the idea of panpsychism has few supports among contemporary philosophers, David Ray Griffin offers an interesting analysis of the mind-body problem (Griffin 2000, 137-178) that I believe leads us to reconsider the metaphysical validity of some form of panpsychism. Griffin claims that the mind-body problem is the central problem for modern philosophy and, to solve it, we must explain the relationship between our conscious experience and our bodies. We will see that Griffin’s solution to this problem offers a possible mechanism for our immediate experience of God.

Briefly, Griffin states that given the assumption that some form of realism (in contrast to idealism) must be true, we are left with three alternative explanations for the mind-body problem: some version of dualism, some version of materialism, and some version of panpsychism (Griffin 2000, 166). First, Griffin rejects dualism chiefly on the grounds that an adequate explanation has never been offered for how mind and body, if they are of different substances, can interact. Next, he then goes on to reject materialism on the grounds that it contradicts three “hard-core common sense beliefs”: (1) we have conscious experience, (2) these experiences are not wholly determined by our bodies but involve an element of self-determining freedom, and (3) this partially free experience exerts efficacy upon our bodily behavior, giving us responsibility for our actions

(Griffin 2000, 137). Thus, the only alternative left to us to explain the mind-body problem is panpsychism or, more specifically, panexperientialism.

Process Philosophy and Panexperientialism

Panexperientialism describes a view of reality that emerges from three basic tenets of process philosophy. First, process thought claims that the fundamental ontologic category is not static, extended substance, but rather is *process*. It is crucial to understand what is meant here. Process thought does not simply maintain that things that are real are constantly in flux, as Heraclitus insinuated when he said that one cannot step into the same river twice. Rather, process thought puts forth the extraordinary claim: “To be actual is to be a process” (Cobb and Griffin 1976, 14). The basic unit of reality is the “actual occasion” which has both spatial and temporal extension. Process philosophers justify such a claim on the existential grounds that we can only truly understand the units comprising the physical world by analogy with our own experience which we know from within. Our inner experiences have temporal character, not spatial. Griffin explains how this supposition essentially solves the body-mind problem:

The apparent difference in kind between our experience, or our ‘mind’, and the entities comprising our bodies is an illusion, resulting from the fact that we know them in two different ways: We know our minds from within, by identity, whereas in sensory perception of our bodies we know them from without. Once we realize this, there is no reason to assume them really to be different in kind. (Griffin 2000, 169).

Being of the same kind, body and mind can now communicate.

The second tenet of process thought that provides underpinnings for panexperientialism is that *all* actualities have experience. This is a difficult concept to understand since we ordinarily attribute experience only to conscious beings. In process thought, however, experience is enjoyed by all actual entities, or “occasions of experience”. That all entities enjoy experience results from their temporal nature. Whitehead explains that each actual occasion is conceived as an act of experience that arises out of data; each entity is a “drop of experience” (Whitehead 1929, 18). Thus, every actual entity, whether that entity be God or an atom, has experience. Note a key qualitative difference: only high-level

individuals (eg, God and humans) have *conscious* experience; low-level individuals (eg, atoms and molecules and plants) do not.

Finally, actualities at one level can give rise to higher-level actualities (Griffin 2000, 101). This concept is based on the idea that an actual entity, during its formation, prehends or absorbs some aspect of all other actual entities and, as this entity dissolves away, it is likewise absorbed by entities that are then forming. We recognize here a holist philosophy in which an entity is capable of being of greater complexity than allowed by the sum of that entity's parts (Griffin 2000, 175-6). This is what ultimately allows the emergence of mind out of the complex organization of the cells of the brain.

We see then, that panexperientialism solves the mind-body problem by allowing a form of perception that is not limited to sensory perception. Sensory perception is a high-level property, derived from a more fundamental, nonsensory perception, which Whitehead and Griffin call "physical prehension", a feature that is shared by all actual entities (Griffin 2000, 102). Thus, mind and brain interact by prehending each other's experiences.

Significantly, these ideas also allow for a direct and immediate experience of God, even though God is not a possible object of our senses: we directlyprehend God, just as our brain prehends our minds. We each have within us the ability to apprehend a reality that includes God at a preconscious and prereflective level (Cobb and Griffin 1976, 31-32).

Indian Philosophy and the Immediate Experience of the Absolute

In the previous two sections, we explored the idea that experience is a fundamental property of reality; that experience exists at all levels of material complexity; that experience is constitutive of being itself. Immediate, uninterpreted experience of God becomes a possibility. As we saw earlier, notions of the primacy of experience find deep roots in Indian philosophical traditions. Indeed, the reality of the immediate experience of an Absolute was anticipated by the Upanishadic literature of India by many centuries (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 37-100).

The Upanishads, meaning "to sit near", were written as early as the eighth century B.C.E. by forest sages or *rishis* (seers). These works are the concluding portions of even more

ancient Vedas and are the basis for the Vedanta philosophy which can now almost be identified with the modern Hindu religion (Torwesten 1985). Hymns to gods and goddesses found in the Vedas are replaced in the Upanishads by a search for some underlying reality. Ultimately, the Upanishads speak of a single Absolute, *Brahman*, of whom all the Vedic gods are manifestations. The Upanishads belong to the *sruti* or revealed literature of sages and great teachers who spoke from deep, inner experience. These are writings of spiritual illumination rather than systematic reflection. And their aim is practical rather than speculative. Hans Torwesten, tells us of the writers of the Upanishads:

It was not the intention of the *rishis* (seer) to construct an impressive intellectual palace to be admired from without, but within which no one could live; for them the search for truth was a genuine existential adventure. (Torwesten 1985,17)

Here, we will be primarily concerned with how the Upanishads and their interpreters explain knowledge, consciousness and experience. In the Mundaka Upanishad we find two kinds of knowledge: higher (*para*) and lower (*apara*).

4. [Angiras said:] “There are two knowledges to be known - as indeed the knowers of *Brahman* are wont to say: a higher (*para*) and a lower (*apara*).
5. Of these, the lower is the *Rg Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda* . . .

Now, the higher is that whereby that Imperishable is apprehended . . .

6. That which is invisible, ungraspable, without family, without caste -
Without sight or hearing is It, without hand or foot,
Eternal, all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle;
That is the Imperishable, which the wise perceive as the
source of being.

(Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 51)

This Upanishad goes on to explain that one is able to apprehend, to experience, *Brahman* only through higher knowledge.

In the Mandukya Upanishad, named after the sage-teacher Mandukya, four states of consciousness are considered: waking, dreaming, profound sleep, and the fourth state (*turiya*). Referring to fourth state, this Upanishad tell us:

6. This is the Lord of all. This is the all-knowing, this is the inner controller. This is the source of all, for this is the origin and the end of being.
7. Not inwardly cognitive, not outwardly cognitive, not both-wise cognitive, not a cognition-mass, not cognitive, not non-cognitive, unseen, with which there can be no dealing, ungraspable, having no distinctive mark, non-thinkable, that cannot be designated, the essence of the assurance of which is the state of being one with the Self, the cessation of development, tranquil, benign, without a second (*adavita*) - this is the fourth. He is the Self. He should be discerned.

(Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 55)

In the fourth state of consciousness, one is able to enter the Self (*Atman*), experience the Absolute, and, finally, see that Self is the Absolute; *Atman* is *Brahman*.

In response to the heterodox revolts of Buddhism and Jainism, the six classical systems of Indian philosophy, or *darsana*, developed (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 349-355). These six *darsana* sought to replace dogmatism and poetry with criticism and analysis and are: Nyaya, Vaisesika, Samkha, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa, and Vedanta. They are all Brahmanical systems, since they accept the authority of the ancient Vedas. Significantly for the present discussion, in all the six classical *darsanas*, reason is subordinated to experience. Experience of the Absolute is apprehended through the super-consciousness which transcends the self-consciousness of human being which in turn is above the mere consciousness possessed by animals. In all these systems, true insight is gained by direct and immediate experience of the Absolute.

The contemporary Indian mystic-philosopher Sri Aurobindo (Arabinda Ghose, 1872-1950) insisted that all ultimate truth must be achieved through intuitive experience. Reason and science are limited and cannot achieve the ultimate vision which transcends the physical and the mental. Truth of spirit can only be achieved by the direct insight provided by mystical experience.

The complete use of pure reason brings us finally from physical to metaphysical knowledge. But the concepts of metaphysical knowledge do not in themselves fully satisfy the demand of our integral being. . . . Every concept is incomplete for us, and to a part of our nature almost unreal, until it becomes an experience. . . . We arrive at the conception and at the knowledge of a divine existence by exceeding the evidence of the senses and piercing beyond the walls of the physical mind. (from *The Life Divine*, Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 579-580).

Another Indian philosopher of the 20th century is Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). A basic belief of his was that religion should not be a creed or code but rather an insight into reality; the direct apprehension of God (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 611). Speaking of this direct experience, he tells us:

The experience itself is sufficient and complete. It does not come in a fragmentary or truncated form demanding completion by something else. It does not look beyond itself for meaning or validity. It does not appeal to external standards of logic or metaphysics. It is its own cause and explanation. It is sovereign in its own rights and carries its own credentials. It is self-established (*svatahsiddha*), self-evidencing (*svasam-vedya*), self-luminous (*svayamprakasa*). It is pure comprehension, entire significance, complete validity. (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 618)

Radhakrishnan does warn us not to confuse the immediate with the interpreted:

Our past experience supplies the materials to which the new insight adds fresh meaning. When we are told that the souls have felt in their lives the redeeming power of Krishna or Buddha, Jesus or Mohammad, we must distinguish the immediate experience, which might be infallible, and the interpretation which is mixed up with it. (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 618)

Thus, in our attempts to reflect on our immediate experiences of the Absolute and to convey to others their meaning and impact, we, by necessity, interpret them in the language and tradition in which we are trained. This in no way diminishes the reality or authenticity of the original experience, which is direct and immediate.

Hypothesis for the Structure of Reality

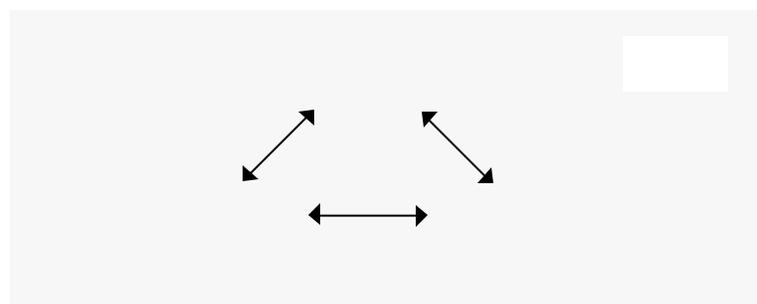
In the previous sections, a picture emerged in which God is seen as immanent in the world. Process thought rejects concepts of a distant, unengaged God in favor of a God that experiences and shapes every actual occasion of the universe. Indian philosophical tradition teaches that the Self is intimately associated with the Absolute. This is expressed in the most ancient of the Upanishads, where it is proclaimed: *‘Tat tvam asi’*, That art thou (Chandogya Upanishad, VI.ix.4; Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 69). These thoughts are the substance of a panentheistic concept of God in which we and all that is have our existence as a ‘part’ of God’s being.

It has been argued that panentheism is not only consistent with humanity’s experience of God but is what ultimately *allows* for the experience of God (Borg 1997, 32-54; Peacocke 1993, 157-160). Panentheistic views of God’s immanence is not only found in process and Indian theologies but also affirmed in the religious traditions of the world, including Christianity. For example in the verse below, the author of Acts has Paul, in Paul’s address to the Athenians, quote the 6th-century B.C.E. philosopher-poet Epimenides to describe the human quest for God:

They would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him -
though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and
move and have our being’

Acts 17:27-28

A panentheistic view of God allows for the metaphysics that I’ve illustrated in the scheme below.



**Panentheistic Structure of Reality Incorporating
BEING/EXPERIENCE/CONSCIOUSNESS**

Here, we find a panentheistic God who in some sense incorporates, but is not in any sense limited to, all that we apprehend as physical and non-physical reality. The structure of this reality that exists in and is part of God is the triune structure **BEING/EXPERIENCE/CONSCIOUSNESS**. Note the relations: **BEING** allows for sentient **CONSCIOUSNESS** which in turn gives rise to the rich **EXPERIENCE** of life; yet **BEING** also allows directly for **EXPERIENCE** by all actual entities which, when sufficiently complex, gives rise to **CONSCIOUSNESS**. Thus, **BEING** is the ground of both universal, direct **EXPERIENCE** and the **CONSCIOUSNESS** of sentience. The nature of the interplay between **CONSCIOUSNESS** and **EXPERIENCE** is ultimately dependent upon cognitive complexity.

How are we to judge the merit of this admittedly speculative hypothesis? Indeed, how do we judge the value of metaphysics in general? This is has been a central question of philosophy since the time of Kant. At the begin of the 20th-century, an assault on metaphysics was launched by the logical positivists who said that metaphysical propositions are devoid of meaning:

[We must reject] the metaphysical thesis that philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense. . . . We shall maintain that no statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance; from which it must follow that the labors of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense. (Ayer [1946] 1952, 33-34)

While positivism's attack on metaphysics ultimately failed, I believe that many of the sentiments underlying positivism must still be taken quite seriously. We have been witness to the success of science and have seen how the method of verification that is practiced by science is capable of revealing truth about physical reality. Thus, viewed broadly, positivism provides needed warning not to conflate mere poetic speculation with reasoned philosophical inquiry.

So, again I ask: How are to judge the merit of the metaphysical picture that I painted? I believe Whitehead points us in the right direction when we tells us that speculative

philosophy is “the endeavor to frame a coherent, logically necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted” and must be “productive of important knowledge” (Whitehead 1929, 3). Thus, there is a utilitarian criterion that must be met: Do the metaphysical propositions under consideration form an explanatory framework for addressing fundamental and significant problems?

I believe that the metaphysical system I briefly outlined above meets this criterion. Specifically, it allows us to fruitfully address three key critical and intertwined problems confronting contemporary theology: (1) the mode of encounter between God and our proto-human ancestors, (2) religious pluralism and the status of truth claims of universal revelation, and (3) objective vs. subjective explanations of religious experience.

God and Primal Humanity How and when did our proto-human ancestors have their first encounter with God? The model I propose states that reality is entirely engulfed within God and that **BEING/EXPERIENCE/CONSCIOUSNESS** is shared by both us and by God. Thus, all of reality experiences God at every moment. Proto-humanity became *conscious* of this experience only after first attaining a certain level of cognitive complexity. Other have expressed similar ideas:

We can think of our ancient forbears coming to self-consciousness in a world that was already a world of grace. . . . Whenever there was the first, perhaps childlike self-awareness, then this can be seen as the beginning of human experience of a world of grace. (Edwards 1999,71-72).

Religious Pluralism From the early religious intuitions of our most primitive ancestors developed all the great religions of the world, including Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam All of these traditions speak of a salvation that comes from a turn from self-centeredness to God-centeredness.

[Salvation] is the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in divine Reality. And in each case [of the great religions] the good news is that this limitlessly better possibility is actually available and can be entered upon, or begin to be entered upon, here and now. Each tradition sets forth the way to attain this great good: faithfulness to the Torah, discipleship to Jesus, obedient living out of the Qur’anic way of life, the Eightfold Path of the Buddhist

dharma, or the three great Hindu *margas* of mystical insight, activity in the world, and self-giving devotion to God. (Hick 1993, 136)

Thus, the truth claims of unfamiliar and foreign religious traditions must not be dismissed, but rather must be taken seriously. All, in their own way, reflect the voice of God.

Religious Experience Is there an object of religious experience? While religious experience clearly contains a subjective dimension comprising psychological and epistemic elements, I believe that the ground of this experience is object: religious experience is ultimately experience of God. The reality in which we abide possesses a structure that allows immediate and uninterpreted access to God. Our apprehensions of the Absolute will finally rise to the level of conscious reflection where they are processed, shaped, and communicated in ways that are particular to each one of us.

Summary - The Immediate Experience of God as Fundamental

Is immediate, prereflective experience possible? When a newborn, cradled in its mother's arms, gazes up at its mother and smiles, can any of us really doubt the reality of the child's experience, though the child lacks language and cognitive reflective abilities. When a loving couple embrace, can we doubt that the warmth and caring that is exchanged is not first experienced at a purely prereflective level. These are immediate experiences and they are real.

Is immediate, prereflective experience of God possible? There is no question that humanity possesses a religious impulse that goes to the very heart of what it is to be human. But what is it that motivates our belief in a realm of reality beyond that available to sense perception? I believe that the answer to this must lie in our experience of God; an immediate experience of God that is a fundamental property of reality.

There was a first experience, a first moment of realization of the Absolute. We can imagine one of our proto-human ancestors sitting at dusk on a vast African plain gazing out at another evening's sunset, when the sensation overcomes him and informs him that he is not alone; that there is an ultimate Reality of incredible beauty and power that

somehow both transcends but yet is part of his world: proto-humanity has had its first religious experience; immediate, prereflective, uninterpreted. Real.

REFERENCES

- Ayer, Alfred Jules. [1946] 1952. *Language, Truth, and Logic*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Borg, Marcus. 1997. *The God We Never Knew - Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. and Griffin, David Ray. 1976. *Process Theology - An Introductory Exposition*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Cottingham, John. 1996. *Western Philosophy - An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Edwards, Denis. 1999. *The God of Evolution - A Trinitarian Theology*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Flew, Anthony. 1979. *A Dictionary of Philosophy*. Revised Second Edition. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Franks-Davis, Caroline. 1989. *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Griffin, David Ray. 2000. *Religion and Scientific Naturalism - Overcoming the Conflicts*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hick, John. 1993. *The Metaphor of God Incarnate - Christology in a Pluralistic Age*. Louisville, KY: Westminster.
- Hick, John. 1999. *The Fifth Dimension - An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*. Oxford: Oneworld Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1787. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cited in: Cottingham, 1996.
- Katz, Steven T., ed. 1978. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. London: Sheldon Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon. 1998. *Philosophy of Mind*. Boulder: Westview Press.

- Lane, Dermont A. 1981. *The Experience of God - An Invitation to Do Theology*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. [1945] 1999. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated from the French by Colin Smith. New York: Routledge.
- Peacocke, Arthur. 1993. *Theology for a Scientific Age*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Peterson, Michael; Hasker William; Reichenbach, Bruce; and Basinger, David. 1998. *Reason & Religious Belief - An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Proudford, Wayne. 1985. *Religious Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli and Moore, Charles A. 1957. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schrag, Calvin O. 1969. *Experience and Being*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Shear, Jonathan, editor. 1998. *Explaining Consciousness - The 'Hard' Problem*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Singh, Balbir. 1987. *Indian Metaphysics*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Torwesten, Hans. 1985. *Vedanta - Heart of Hinduism*. New York: Grove Press.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1929. *Process and Reality*. Corrected Edition, 1978. Griffin, D.R. and Sherburne, D.W., Editors. New York: The Free Press.