Begin the discussion by showing two videos on the classroom screen: “The Argument from Religious Experience 1” and “The Argument from Religious Experience 2.” Both are in the course folder for PHIL 3316. They are (as of 2015) also available on YouTube.


1. Many people have religious experiences—where religious experience is understood as “a loving, but unclear, awareness of some object which irresistibly seems to the experiencer as something transcending the self, something transcending all the normal objects of experience, something which cannot be pictured or conceptualized, but of the reality of which doubt is impossible—at least during the experience” (9).

2. “[T]he best explanation of [these religious experiences] is the existence of God” (9). Therefore,

3. God exists (from 1 and 2, inference to the best explanation,\(^1\) or abduction).

Copleston thinks the *objective* explanation of the phenomenon is best. There is also a *subjective* explanation, in terms of delusion and hallucination. “[W]hen you get what one might call the pure type, say St. Francis of Assisi, when you get an experience that results in an overflow of dynamic and creative love, the best explanation of that it seems to me is the actual existence of an objective cause of the experience” (10).

Russell tries to refute this argument by logical analogy. “I don’t see that from what mystics tell us you can get any argument for God which is not equally an argument for Satan” (11). In reply, Copleston bites the bullet: “I have no wish in passing to deny the existence of Satan. But I do think that people have claimed to have experienced Satan in the precise way in which mystics claim to have experienced God” (11). It’s puzzling why Russell thinks this is a problem for theists, most of whom are quite willing, even eager, to admit that Satan exists. Mention Jeffrey Burton Russell’s five-volume biography of the devil.

II. Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113-21. Here is my reconstruction of Swinburne’s argument:

\(^1\) “The idea is that when we have a best explanation of some phenomenon, we are entitled to repose confidence in it simply on that account. Sometimes thought to be the lynchpin [sic] of scientific method, the principle is not easy to formulate and has come under attack, notably since our best current explanation of something may be only the best of a bad lot. There exist cases in which the best explanation is still not all that convincing, so other desiderata than pure explanatory success seem to play a role.” Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.
1. “[W]e ought to believe that things are as they seem to be (in the epistemic sense) unless and until we have evidence that we are mistaken” (115).

2. “[I]t has seemed (in the epistemic sense) to millions and millions of humans that at any rate once or twice in their lives they have been aware of God and his guidance” (114). Therefore,

3. Those people who have experienced God ought to believe that God exists, unless they have evidence that they are mistaken (from 1 and 2).

4. In at least some cases, there is no evidence that the person in question is mistaken. Therefore,

5. In at least some cases, the person in question ought to believe that God exists (from 3 and 4).

Swinburne supports the principle of credulity as follows: “If you say the contrary—never trust appearances until it is proved that they are reliable—you will never have any beliefs at all. For what would show that appearances are reliable, except more appearances?” (115). Rejecting the principle of credulity lands one in a skeptical bog. Swinburne is saying that experiences are innocent until proven guilty, i.e., that there is a presumption in favor of the veridicality (truth) of experience. What about those (such as C. D. Broad) who have had no religious experiences? Swinburne replies: “If some people do not have these experiences, that suggests that they are blind to religious realities—just as someone’s inability to see colours does not show that the many of us who claim to see them are mistaken, only that he is colour blind” (115). The principle of testimony says that “those who do not have an experience of a certain type ought to believe any others when they say that they do—again, in the absence of evidence of deceit or delusion” (116). There are three kinds of evidence that one’s experiences are merely apparent (i.e., not real):

- “[W]e may have evidence that the apparent perception was made under conditions for which we have positive evidence that perceptions are unreliable” (116). **Examples:** reading a page of a book at 100 yards; perceiving things while under the influence of drugs such as LSD.

- “[W]e may have evidence in the particular case that things are not as they seem to be” (117). **Examples:** seeing a man carrying his head under his arm; having “strong positive evidence that there is no God” (117).

- “[T]here may be evidence that the apparent experience was not caused—whether directly or indirectly—by the object purportedly experienced” (118). **Example:** seeing John alone in an arcade and then learning that his twin brother was there.

Swinburne’s conclusion: “I suggest that the overwhelming testimony of so many millions of

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2 Swinburne calls this “the principle of credulity.” (“Credere” is Latin for “believe.”) He says it is “a basic principle of rationality.”
people to occasional experiences of God must, in the absence of counter-evidence of the kind analysed, be taken as tipping the balance of evidence decisively in favour of the existence of God” (120).

III. C. D. Broad, “Arguments for the Existence of God. II,” The Journal of Theological Studies 40 (April 1939): 156-67. In Part I of this two-part essay, Broad discussed what he calls “the more ‘metaphysical’ arguments for the existence of God” (156), viz., the Ontological Argument and the Cosmological Argument. He now discusses what he calls “empirical” arguments, viz., the Teleological Argument, the Moral Argument, and the Argument from Religious Experience. He devotes almost all of Part II to the Argument from Religious Experience. “I shall . . . confine myself in this article to specifically religious experience and the argument for the existence of God which has been based on it” (156). Note that he treats this as an argument, not merely as the basis for reasoning one’s way to a conclusion. In other words, it’s about persuading others to believe in God.

- **Biography.** Charlie Dunbar (C. D.) Broad (1887-1971) was educated at Cambridge University. He taught there (Trinity College) from 1933 to 1953. He was Knightsbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy (Five Types of Ethical Theory [1930]), but worked in philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion (including psychical research) as well.

- **Musical analogy.** Broad says that the Argument from Religious Experience is unusual (compared to the other “empirical” arguments) in that “some people seem to be almost wholly devoid of any specifically religious experience; and among those who have it the differences of kind and degree are enormous” (157). Consider the following comparisons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Capacity for religious experience”</th>
<th>“An ear for music”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persons who have no recognizable religious experience at all</td>
<td>Tone-deaf persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary followers of a religion</td>
<td>Men who have some taste for music but can neither appreciate the more difficult kinds nor compose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly religious men and saints</td>
<td>Persons with an exceptionally fine ear for music who may yet be unable to compose it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founders of religions</td>
<td>Great musical composers, such as Bach and Beethoven</td>
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- **Three “closely interconnected” problems raised by religious experience (157-8).**
  a. **Psychological (how to analyze it).** How is it like and unlike other experiences?
  b. **Etiological (what causes it).** We can ask about its origin or cause (genesis) in the human race as well as in individual humans.
c. **Epistemological (whether it is veridical).** “Are the claims to knowledge or well-founded belief about the nature of reality, which are an integral part of the experience, *true or probable?”* (158; italics in original).

- **Why the third (epistemological) problem creates a disanalogy (158).** Veridicality. We do not ask whether musical experience is true or conduces to truth.

- **Persons without religious experience (such as Broad himself) are not (epistemically) superior.** “[A]ny theories about religious experience constructed by persons who have little or none of their own should be regarded with grave suspicion. (For that reason it would be unwise to attach very much weight to anything that the present writer may say on this subject.)” (159). Note that Broad doesn’t say that the religiously inexperienced should be disregarded.

- **Experience versus interpretation (159).** There appears to be “a common nucleus” (159) in reports of religious experience, but also “very great differences of detail” (159). One’s tradition not only influences one’s interpretation; it influences the experience itself. “A Roman Catholic mystic may have visions of the Virgin and the saints, whilst a Protestant mystic pretty certainly will not” (160). Double process of causation: the experiences determine one’s beliefs, which in turn shape one’s experiences. But that’s also true of sense-perception (160), so, unless we want to cast doubt on sense-perception, we should view the circle as virtuous rather than vicious.

- **Alternative theories (hypotheses) concerning religious experience.** Objective (external-cause) and subjective (psychological). To illustrate the alternatives, consider “three partly analogous cases” (161):
  a. **Microscope.** “[W]e believe that the agreement among trained microscopists really does correspond to facts which untrained persons cannot perceive” (161).
  b. **Drunk.** “[W]e believe that this agreement among drunkards is merely a uniform hallucination” (161).
  c. **Blind.** “It would not be unreasonable for the blind [people] to believe that probably the seeing ones are also able to perceive other aspects of reality which they are describing correctly when they make their unintelligible statements containing colour-names” (161).

  Which analogy is best? Is the agreement between religious mystics more like the microscope case, the drunk case, or the blind case? After careful consideration, Broad suggests that it’s the third. He says the analogical argument “deserves a certain amount of respect” (163).

- **The principle of credulity (Swinburne’s name; note that Broad anticipated Swinburne, or perhaps Swinburne followed Broad without crediting him).** Broad sums up his discussion as follows: “When there is a nucleus of agreement between the experiences
of men in different places, times, and traditions, and when they all tend to put much the same kind of interpretation on the cognitive content of these experiences, it is reasonable to ascribe this agreement to their all being in contact with a certain objective reality unless there be some positive reason to think otherwise. The practical postulate which we go upon everywhere else is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception if veridical” (163; italics in original).

• **Two “positive ground[s] for holding that [religious experiences] are delusive” (164).**

  a. **Neuropathy and bodily weakness.** “It is alleged that founders of religions and saints have nearly always had certain neuropathic symptoms or certain bodily weaknesses, and that these would be likely to produce delusions” (164). Broad gives four reasons for thinking this a weak argument.

  b. **Sexual emotion.** “It is said that such experience always originates from and remains mixed with certain other factors, e.g. sexual emotion, which are such that experiences and beliefs that arise from them are very likely to be delusive” (165). Broad says this argument is riddled with confusions.

• **The genetic fallacy (166).** “Persons who use this argument might admit that it does not definitely prove that religious beliefs are false and groundless. False beliefs and irrational fears in our remote ancestors might conceivably be the origin of true beliefs and an appropriate feeling of awe and reverence in ourselves” (166; italics in original). Broad admits, however, that the argument “has considerable plausibility. But it is worth while to remember that modern science has almost as humble an ancestry as contemporary religion” (166). Touché!

• **Conclusion (167).** “On the whole . . . , I do not think that what we know of the conditions under which religious beliefs and emotions have arisen in the life of the individual and the race makes it reasonable to think that they are specially likely to be delusive or misdirected” (167; italics in original). Broad navigates the shoals of dogmatism and skepticism: “The claim of any particular religion or sect to have complete or final truth on these subjects [dogmatism] seems to me to be too ridiculous to be worth a moment’s consideration. But the opposite extreme of holding that the whole religious experience of mankind is a gigantic system of pure delusion [skepticism] seems to me to be almost (though not quite) as far-fetched” (167). It sounds as though Broad is leaning toward skepticism. Compare Broad’s intellectual honesty and civility with Richard Dawkins’s dogmatism and abusiveness.