

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

Dialogue with B. Patrick Williams

Patrick: Josh, I've got to say, I've enjoyed this essay the most by far. You present interesting material and raise interesting points. There is cohesion to your thought that is very clear, especially your theological position. Through our dialogue, I'm getting a better sense of who you are and why you think as you do. Finally, I really enjoyed the section on Spinoza. He is an able thinker with a keen mind.

I'm glad to see that you concede the subjectivity of your own view around God. Frankly, I don't see how your perspective is anything but purely subjective and even a bit narrow minded contrary to the evidence. In deciding that God doesn't exist and then operating as if He doesn't, you are systematically shielding yourself from any evidence to the contrary. In part, you do this by privileging your empirical and psychological bias, ruling anything deeper and more complex that can't be clearly explained. Sure, God may be subtler and more complex than you might like, but that doesn't mean He's illusory. Please comment.

Josh: I can concede that my position is "subjective" if you will concede that your position (as well as any other position a human might take) is "subjective" as well. I have volumes of argumentative, empirical, and speculative thinkers to back my position up as well as what I consider to be a good argument against the existence of a personal "God." And what do you have? What is the "evidence" that you refer too? Yes, you too could refer to myriad sources of argumentative and speculative thinkers, but your whole ideological position rests on an experience and an "ultimate" ground of being that is completely unverifiable or knowable

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

outside your own subjective experience. Your “faith” rests on a “revelation” of “God” that you have personally “experienced” and even though millions of people might say, “I believe in God” those same millions might also say, “I believe in free-markets,” or “I believe that America is the best country on earth,” or “black people are just inferior to whites” or “the federal government is run by Jews” or “aliens exist.” There is a fine line between corroborated experience and a mass delusion, and that fine line must be secured by reasoned analysis, empirical evidence, and a healthy debate. Sure, I can accept that millions of people believe in “God” and I cannot argue away your personal faith or experience. But you cannot claim that your experience is “real” in any type of concrete or transcendental sense outside your own subjectivity because there is no concrete evidence outside subjective experience for “God,” nor can you claim that your “revelation” revealed through the Evangelical Christian religion is the “only” way to “God” or the “only” religious experience, and here those millions who believe in “God” will find out just how different their personal conceptions are.

I will never exclude any “evidence” that I deem authentic and I have not cut myself off from contrary positions or “evidence” as you claim. Our vary dialogue is a case in point. What you seem to be forgetting is that I was an Evangelical Christian far longer than you have been and I am thoroughly familiar with the Evangelical Christian worldview. I have encountered enough empirical and argumentative evidence to conclude that not only is Evangelical Christianity personally unpalatable as a religious doctrine, it is also extremely narrow minded, exclusivist, and aggressive in its tendency to “convert” others to its doctrines. I am very much “open” to religious experience and various religious orientations, and even though I cannot admit to being an adherent to any one systematic faith, there are traditions like Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Zen that I find very appealing – as well as mystical traditions like Kabbalah

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

and Sufism. I am open to deeper, complex truths that might be un-quantifiable or hard to comprehend through our reasoning faculties, but any and all “truths” or otherwise need to have an empirically and logically founded basis in reality established through a critical and learned community of committed and open-minded researchers. Aliens might exist, but until I see some evidence and concrete arguments, I’m not going to give it much thought as I go about the business of living my life.

Patrick: You speak of Jung referring to conclusions and modes of inquiry like psychology, which can be “empirically verifiable.” What do you mean by that? Granted, I’m a layman in this, but Jung’s views have always struck me as fascinating as well as highly subjective – certainly many (the collective unconscious for one) are not even close to empirically verifiable. In fact, I think one can argue that psychology has been largely theoretical and speculative up until about the last 20 years. Sure, psychological theories by Freud and Jung have explained data, but behavioral psychologists like Ellis and cognitive psychologists like Beck have been the first to reach actual empirical conclusions. Please explain how Jung is empirical in a way that bears on your theological position?

Josh: First of all, I did not say that Jung’s psychology is empirically verifiable. What I did say was that Jung *wanted* to empirically study and verify religious experience. And I agree, Jung was highly subjective and I must admit that I reject almost all of his psychology as metaphysical babble. However, both he and Freud (and I disavow most of Freud’s theories as well) through psychoanalysis were seeking to empirically research and verify the inner recesses of the human mind to try and know (and separate) subjective perception from objective phenomenon. You are right to be critical of early psychologists for the field began as an offshoot of philosophy branching off into empirical medicine. The German doctor Wilhelm Wundt wrote

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

the first textbook *Principles of Physiological Psychology* in 1873-74, which thereby influenced many first generation of American psychologist/philosophers like Granville Stanley Hall, William James, Charles Pierce, and John Dewey who tried to separate the concepts of 1) "mind" or "consciousness" from 2) the biological "brain." Psychology in many ways was an amalgamation (especially with the birth of psychoanalysis and then depth psychology) of philosophical speculation and empirical research well up to the 1970s when the biological "brain" field really started to define psychological studies. I mentioned mostly philosophical critiques of religion and religious experience in my essay because we are having a philosophical argument and I presented arguments and counter theories to explain divergent, secular conceptions of "God." I hope this distinction is clear.

Patrick: I enjoyed reading your theological statement of belief. However, I'm curious as to what has made you conclude that God is totally unknowable? You seem to be assuming this and not establishing it. Then, you move from your assumption to conclude without offering any criteria that "all religions and religious experiences are equally valid." Do you really think so? Are child sacrifices just as valid as Buddhist meditation? Is the Jonestown cult on a par with Native American Religion?

Josh: The idea that "God" is utterly unknowable is a bedrock concept in almost every major world religious tradition, especially Judaism and Kabbalah ("God" did not even have a name in the Old Testament). I defined "God" and said that *if* a material being of that description exists then we could never know it, or at least we could not verify it conclusively. Let me phrase this in a way intimately related to your own personal religious experience. I too had that conversion experience to Evangelical Christianity that you had. I too accepted Jesus into my heart and made him my "savior." I had visions of Jesus, God, and heaven. I "felt" what I

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

considered to be “God’s” presence and I felt the “love of Christ” as you no doubt refer to. I was baptized by water and I was baptized into the Holy Spirit. The later experience was supposed to give me a “gift” and I had “felt” that perhaps my gift was prophecy, not so much as in telling the future, but in teaching others. Of course with each of these experiences I was aware of my own mental projections and I was never fully satisfied with my “spiritual” walk with Jesus, nor with many ethical and political connotations of American Christianity. I came to know myself responsible for my religious “feelings.” I found my many personal “revelations” and “intimations” to be nothing more than my active imagination and my own will to believe. It eventually all wrung completely false and I rejected the whole pretense as subjective inspiration directed by a manipulative, yet caring and devotional communal structure. And as I have come to believe now, the actually subjective essence of religious experience is not necessarily false (as it seems personally “real”), but that the *kind* of religious experience promoted by Evangelical Christianity was personally distasteful because it was uncritical, narrow-minded, exceptionalist, arrogant, intolerant, and dangerously manipulated by cynical political forces (i.e. Republican politics). If I had wanted to retain my belief in “God” I could have transferred my allegiance to another religious tradition, but after studying all the major (and many minor) religious traditions, religion in general, and many other related issues, I decided to leave religion behind for a secular world view.

When I say that all “religious experiences” are equally valid, I am talking about the subjective, life-affirming, personal experiences that are the basis of most world religious traditions. I am not talking about rituals, institutions, or dogmas. Once we cross this line, then you will find my stance much more critical. Morality exists independently of “God,” it always has and always will. Morality, simply put, is the ground rules, the “laws” of a people. It is my

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

personal opinion that morality should be democratically criticized, evaluated, and agreed upon, and that it should also be revised.

Patrick: I did an independent study with Marcus Borg on the subject of psychology and religion. In our study, we read Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* and most of James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. As I recall from conversations with Dr. Borg, both men conceded that there was something authentic in religious experience and suggested that God operates/communicates through the subconscious (James) and the collective unconscious (Jung). Of course, any personal experience is subjective to a degree, but here are two men, James and Jung, inferring based on their study of human behavior and experience that there is something *more* than the human psyche at work. How does this square with your theological position?

Josh: You are right. Both men were deeply religious (or rather deeply "spiritual" and really anti-traditionalist), not in a small part because both had deeply religious fathers and family and they both were raised in deeply religious/spiritual societies. And I would agree that there is something un-quantifiable at the core of not only human existence, but at the center of life, as it exists in its multiplicity on this planet. We as humans are only just beginning to understand the relational ecology that guides all life on this planet. I think we've come along way from the superstitious and doctrinally rigid 19th century, and I don't think we need to invoke worn spiritual or religious metaphors. Yes life is complex, and yes scientific materialism is but one way to apprehend the complex beauty of life. Yes, we do need other ways to see and understand life, religious vantage points included. But, as James would formulate in his great philosophical platitude, "Pragmatism," we must always and forever shy away from arrogantly assured, single-minded, dogmatically conceived, exceptionalist views of reality. James argued, and I agree, let

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

us have a “Pluralism” of views. Let us embrace the complexity and grandeur of life and not reduce it entirely to some metaphysical speculation or to some dogmatic creed.

Patrick: Several times, you refer to religious belief as delusion. I find this very interesting especially given that I’m well rooted in reality as near as I can determine. What most strongly causes you to see religious belief as delusion?

Josh: Good point, although it is my personal opinion that you are quite an exceptional case of the American Evangelical Christian. You are perhaps one of the most “rooted in reality” Christians that I have met, but this does not mean that we see eye to eye on what “reality” means. I would refer you to a section in a book that I just finished last year, but which remains unpublished, *Towards a Philosophy of Poetry: Essays on Culture, Subjectivity, and Ideology*. Basically I argue that the human mind through imagination (and I refer you to the section on Spinoza in this essay) creatively interacts with reality, i.e. consider children at “play.” For me this is a defining experience for all of humanity, as I would argue we never leave that state of “play” as adults. We continually invoke our imagination creatively interacting with reality all our lives. The problem comes when we take our imaginative “play” too seriously, forget that our images are self or communally created, thereby, reifying them, and thus we can become a victim of a delusion and mistake our imaginative “play” for reality – sometimes with disastrous consequences, sometimes with no negative effect at all (and here I would refer you to the story of Don Quixote, which I devote some time to in the book *Towards a Philosophy of Poetry*).

Patrick: You oversimplify about Socrates, the Buddha etc. having followers who take original teachings and turn them into “vehicles of thought control, indoctrination, and mass disillusion – always towards the end of a consolidated secular power.” Can you be more specific

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

and move away from this universal, over-generalizing language that assumes too much and states too little.

Josh: I don't think that I am over-generalizing at all. Buddha told his followers specifically, I'm not a deity and you must find your own path to Nirvana. What happens, a great part of the Buddhist tradition deifies the Buddha and turns his individualized path into a general doctrine. We could go into each specific context and more, for they all have the same outcome, but we really don't have the time in this conversation. I will simply say that I will address the specifics of my interpretation of Jesus in an upcoming chapter of our project, which I'm sure we will discuss more in depth.

Patrick: You are your most sympathetic to religion after discussing the possibility that "science can also be short sided or overly reductionist"; hence, you indicate some scholars suggest that perhaps there is a "deeper, more complicated...reality...beyond science's reach?" Then, you mention Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth*, and conclude, "it is a commendable book." I was glad to see this. Why is Smith's *Forgotten Truth* commendable? How do you understand Smith's contention that there is *more*? How does this square with your theological position?

Josh: Specifically I commend Smith's criticism of "Scientism," which I agree is a potent, yet misguided ideology. Of course this has nothing to do with "science," as "Scientism" is really a perversion of the scientific method. Scientism is overstepping the bounds of human reason and declaring our way of seeing is the *only* way of seeing the world. As you know I do not favor this type of epistemological arrogance. I respect much of Smith's project, but I disagree with many of his conclusions, especially his pessimistic and fatalistic conclusion that humans are powerless to control their "progress" and thus implying that we are at the hands of some absolutely powerful "God." Rubbish! And I find that this type of attitude really prevents a

Human Subjectivity and Conflicting Ideas of "God"

lot of people from realizing that our material-historical position in life is the doing *solely* of human beings and that if we want better, then we must create that better- there is no fate, we are in control of our own destiny!