

Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*,
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This comprehensive book covers the latest discovery of the psychological as well as neurological variety of states of consciousness that relate to spiritual experiences, they also use a well-rounded survey of around 500 subjects in the United States. By using cutting-edge psychology and neuroscience on these mental states the book interprets that they can provide continuity and developing the classical project of the 1902 classic work of William James: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The famous Gifford lectures given in Scotland became a complete classical study of religious experience, but James' life was unfortunately cut short all too early for him to carry on the continuation of this ground-breaking work.

The authors of the book interpret their work as a conscious continuation of James' project, aiming for an update of what they take to be a project of psychology. They believe that this project can account for James' intimation for a "science of religion", but they do not want to consider their project as prejudice by negative (and vastly unscientific) suspicions of religion such as those of Freudian psychoanalysis on the one hand, neither they want to be caught up in an overly positive view of these experiences in the light of symbols such as Jungian archetypes.

The authors think that the foundation of their interpretation has to give room to a science of religious experience that is experimental and phenomenologically sensitive, it is obviously subjective in character due to the experiential dimension of those who undergo spiritual experiences. However the case, the experiences shared are evidential reports that have been unfairly

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ostracised from scientific inquiry. The authors should be correctly praised for attacking that taboo.

Their approach also aims to be philosophically sensible from the platform provided by pragmatist philosophy, *i.e.*, by a philosophical approach that explains that the ultimate meaning of cognition or a belief is given in the set of consequences that can be derived from it in terms of action. Our authors also aim for a metaphysically agnostic account that is scientifically oriented. In their understanding the scientific dimension of their study is a combination of the last data allowed by neuroscience, psychology as an observational science and the medical sciences.

The division of the book is in three parts, we are summarising the first one, but it will be sensible to put it in context to help us see the project: Part I emphasises in taking over the quest provoked by William James and his unique perspective on spiritual experience. They shift the language of “religious experience” given in James to the more generic one of “spiritual experience” that not necessarily presupposes membership to a particular religious community. They try to recover inasmuch as it is possible the value of James’ classical study, with this they aim to recover the different aspects of experience that were considered in that study.

This material leads to Part II, in which the different types of experience are classified not exhaustively. The classification includes the numinous, revelatory, synchronicity experience, feelings of unity and oneness (mystical experience), aesthetic (awe and wonder) and paranormal (of the known and the unknown).

In Part III they carry an interpretation and integration that values the reality of religious and spiritual experience endorsed by its transformational character in the lives of those who live them, the ever so more growing sense of value and authenticity that vindicates them against a positivistic background, their transformative potential, their ability to be harnessed for having a positive impact in a person and their communitarian life and finally the relation to consciousness that is rendered by them.

Part I, as stated above, provides a study of human nature as per the study of William James’ conception of experience. Of course, the work reflected in the *Varieties* should not be considered as an isolated conception of experience. The authors unfortunately seem to study the material of the *Varieties* in an isolated way -they almost exclusively focus on the *Varieties*, but we must remember that James’ account includes the value of a conception of experience involved in his other works related to pragmatism, the principles of psy-

chology and last but not least, his radical empiricism. Let us consider them before moving back to the study of Yaden and Newberg.

For James, the tradition of empiricist psychology that goes from Locke to Herbart treats experience as a succession of units (“ideas”) that are discrete, independent, and substantive, this is not the kind of empiricism that James avows for. By his remarkable and seminal work on the *Principles of Psychology* (PP1 and PP2), James transformed empiricist psychology into a truly empirical science. James defended that the requirement to make psychology a true science involves a recognition of the biased view of experience previous psychology holds. The imposition of a discrete nature to experience is, indeed, an atomisation of experience that James (very much like his friend and colleague, Charles Sanders Peirce) does not take for granted. The view of experience that James was prepared to accept respected the continuous stream and flow of experience as it is presented.

The view of James is quite opposed to the discrete conception of a scattered experience of atoms of individual experience. In his chapter “The Stream of Thought,” (PP1) James avows the fluidity and continuity of experience and consequently of perception. James criticises the Humean view of sensations as units of image and sensation. What is true for the psychology of perception is also true for the theory of knowledge that dominated modern philosophy and its view of consciousness. James’s proposal in the *Principles of Psychology* is to ground psychology in experimental methods, but this proved quite limited insofar as there are some philosophical misconceptions that can bias our interpretation of experimental conditions. This is why it was necessary for James to propose a more radical theory of experience: his radical empiricism.

James explains to us that rationalism emphasises universals and makes wholes prior to parts in logic and in being, while empiricism stresses the part and treats the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction. For James, these views have generated an unjustified dichotomy: we must either trust reason alone or trust the sense data. Classical empiricism, however, imposes some preconceptions to experience that in fact impede it from being radical enough, this will have an important consequence for the understanding of religious experience. James tells us: “To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced” (ERE: 22).

We have good evidence to see that the richness of James’ conception of experience is an open and dynamic one, when it comes down to his pragmatism the great example that comes to mind is his “Will to Believe”, an important document that defends the right to believe in a momentous circumstance and defends religious belief as connected to religious experience and pragma-

tism. Now, when we want to understand what is the consequence of such conception for an account of religious experience, one can note that James's view avoids the reductionism that has affected other conceptions of religious experience. James himself tells us in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* that we must look at the fruits and not so much at the roots of religious experiences, in a pragmatist fashion, what James is claiming is the transformative value of religious experience as its claim for the right to be believed.

Yaden and Newberg exercise a good personal itinerary that justifies their interest in the James of the *Varieties*, they explain that contemporary psychological research has an emphasis in a cause-effect explanatory model that somehow refreshes James' opinion that religious experience should be assessed by their fruits and not by their roots.

When it comes to psychology and the study of the experiences of the subjects that have shared their spiritual experiences the effects in the observable experimental displays of neurology actually vindicate that there is more to the consciousness and mental states of people that what comes to the surface, and the authors tell us that under no circumstances we should hide that causes unknown to us are producing effects that are surprising and unusual. In other words, the psychometric self-report and the scales of effects can show us that there are prevalent experiences that go beyond what we know, and that the spiritual origin of the triggers that are reflected in the brain speak about unique experiences that we should not dismiss.

In addition, when they speak about the types of spiritual experience, they realise that there are patterns that are very important for their proper scientific identification. This patterns cast some characteristics such as their spontaneous character, the personality types that have the experiences, the genetics of the experiences and the genetics of the people who have the experiences, the brain processes, the religious rituals that prompt experiences, they psychopharmacology that can be associated to the experiences taking place, the religiosity of the people who live the experiences, the context and circumstances of the experiences, the situations that are in the limit of life and death and the border of trauma experiences, the rites of passages of the cultures in which persons live important transitions of their lives, the practices and the neurological stimuli that can play a part.

All these elements are assessed by Yaden and Newberg as considerations for a scientific application of James and Peirce's pragmatic principles: they can be originated by differing and strange circumstances, but their positive impact in a life as opposed to pathological outcomes speaks of deep levels of conscious transformation, especially when a moral transformation is achieved. This vindicates the value of the experience regardless the oddity of the situations in

which they were lived. A critical point that is important to offer here is that sometimes Yaden and Newberg tend to interpret the nature of spiritual experience as discrete individual experience. A good dose of radical empiricism could have a more Jamesian and pragmatist tone, as well as help reclaiming the value of the community, cultural and historical aspects of experience.

The work of Yaden and Newberg is truly remarkable and appreciated, this work surely will mark a milestone of a renewed and unbiased study of spiritual experience. However, I am not so sure as they are that they are following the path of James and fully recovering the “science of religion” that James envisioned. It seems to me that the view of religious experience defended by James builds up in more than observational data of experiential reports: in order to understand “the fruits” of genuine spiritual experience as transformative one has to understand the meaning of lived spiritual experience and in that regard, the study of spiritual experience goes hand in hand with the academic study of spirituality.

References to James’ works

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