

EXPERIENCE IN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this workshop was to explore different philosophical understandings of the term "experience" and to touch on some of their possible implications for theology.

Joseph Bracken (Xavier University, Cincinnati) opened the session by sketching some key elements of Whitehead's approach to experience. He began by noting that within the Western metaphysical tradition experience typically has been characterized as an event taking place in, or at least linked in some way to, consciousness (especially human consciousness); but for Whitehead, who conceives of all reality in terms of actual occasions and their interrelations, consciousness is not an essential attribute or condition of experience as such. Whitehead conceives experience as the taking in or appropriation by an actual occasion of the influence of other occasions on it. Thus actual occasions of every grade, even events occurring in so-called empty space, are the subjects of experience. According to this interpretation, the experience of human beings is largely unconscious: the actual occasions in the body (including those in the brain) are all unconscious subjects of experience; and even the mind, which is a dominant society of actual occasions within the brain, is sometimes unconscious (as in deep and dreamless sleep, or in a comatose state) and so is the subject not only of conscious but of unconscious experience.

Bracken suggested three ways in which this approach to experience might prove more congenial to theology than the standard modern approach. First, because its orientation is less anthropocentric, it might prove a more suitable vehicle for expressing ecological concerns insofar as these focus on the interrelatedness of all sentient being. Second, it emphasizes feeling rather than thought, and so could harmonize more readily with contemporary psychological theory. Third, it might better accommodate the viewpoints of Asian religions and of Western mystical traditions, since these tend to affirm that the encounter with God is a matter of suprarational or feeling-level awareness.

Bracken's presentation provoked a great deal of interest among the participants. Among the topics treated in the discussion were the manner in which Whitehead's view could account for the kind of experience, such as joy or suffering, that breaks into and reorients our normal experiential patterns; how it attempts to avoid either a material or a spiritual monism by maintaining, on the one hand, that both feeling and spontaneity are present in all material reality and, on the other, that spirit is constituted not by some new sort of substance but by a higher-level relation among actual occasions; and how Whitehead's position might be related to Michael Polanyi's notion of "tacit awareness."

In the second half of the session, George Schnier (Regis College in the Toronto School of Theology) gave a presentation on the problematical status of experience as a theological category. Despite the fact that "experience" as employed in contemporary theological discourse is a polyvalent term with constantly shifting usages, its meaning often is taken for granted. Schnier proposed to indicate a path toward greater conceptual clarity by differentiating some of the ways in which the category of experience functions in theological discourse.

Schnier led into this topic by pointing out that a good deal of attention has been given in recent years to the significance of prelinguistic, unthematized experience, which reveals an ontological depth of the subject that modern philosophies of experience have usually overlooked. For the most part, those philosophies have regarded experience as an ultimate category; they have given sense experience priority as the evidential norm against which any claim to acquaintance with reality must be measured; and they have tended to limit themselves to investigating the experience of the subject, narrowly considered, and not the experience of reality as a whole. What theology requires, said Schnier, is a notion of experience that is analogical, resultant, and dialogic rather than univocal, foundational, and ego assertive.

Schnier then proceeded to outline various construals or uses of experience in the field of theology. The first is a linguistic cipher signalled by a phrase such as "in my experience . . .," where the phrase functions rhetorically (e.g., by drawing attention to a particular experiential perspective that has been excluded from the conversation). In this usage, the term "experience" is essentially void of content. But theological arguments also involve appeals to experience precisely as such; Schnier distinguished five such appeals arranged on a continuum, where the experience appealed to is highly objectivized at one extreme and entirely beyond expression at the other. An appeal is "transcendental" if it looks to the conditions of the possibility of all experience as a way of grounding the intelligibility of a doctrine or theological argument. An appeal is "hermeneutical" insofar as it critiques the transcendental appeal by revealing that the general categories in which the latter is couched are not free of prejudice. An appeal is "constructive" when it lays emphasis on moments of a person's experience which are transformative, interruptive, discontinuous; here experience is conceived as a breakthrough of the transcendent, a revelation which challenges its recipients to individual and communal change. An appeal is "confessional" when the experience it takes to be revelatory is a set of events that it considers normative for an entire community. Finally, an appeal is "mystical" insofar as its criterion is the prelinguistic and radically inarticulable experience of identity with the divine. All five appeals to experience have their proper use in theology. How one judges which appeal is most appropriate in a particular situation depends largely on whether one gives interpretative priority to present experience or to the received tradition.

In response to a question about what is foundational for theology if not experience, Schnier replied that the metaphors of foundation or starting point are misleading; there is no one thing about which we have to be absolutely clear before we can start doing theology. If anything can be considered foundational, it is worship; referring to the work of Frans Jozef van Beeck, Schnier sees the impulse to witness and to theologize as arising out of the prior impulse to worship Christ as Lord. When asked to address the problem of giving adequate expression to one's transformative experience, Schnier insisted that to be a Christian is to be initiated into a context that makes such experience possible; within that context, God is recognized as a real, personal, transcendent agent to whom our fundamental attitude must be obedience, i.e., openness to hearing the revelatory divine Word.

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