



Interrogating Hick's View of Religious Pluralism: A Perspective from Yoga Philosophy

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Abstract

A philosopher whose name has become almost synonymous with religious pluralism is John Hick. He justifies his position by borrowing insights and concepts from Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein. We argue that Kantian and Wittgensteinian frameworks are inadequate to explain and defend religious pluralism of the kind he advocates. We critically analyze the concepts of religious experience and religious language and then proceed to discuss Yoga school of Indian philosophy as a limiting case against his enterprise.

Keywords: Religious Experience, Religious Pluralism, Religious Language, Ultimate Reality, Samadhi, Niruddha, Citta

Introduction

Religious Pluralism is commonly seen as the view that holds that there are as many ways of pursuing liberation or self-realization as the number of religions. It argues that no religion has an exclusive or superior path to self-realization. One such view is advocated by John Hick, "There is one thing that virtually all of Hick's partisans and critics alike agree upon: no one has produced a more intellectually sophisticated and provocative apologetic for the pluralist paradigm" (Eddy, 2018, p. 127). He articulates and defends his position largely within what may be termed the Kantian and the

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Wittgensteinian frameworks. Hick argues that there is only one Absolute Reality in the noumenal realm that underlies and makes possible varieties of religious experiences in the phenomenal realm. We argue that such a stance needs to be examined further. We also allege ~~alleges~~ that Hick confuses religious interpretation with religious experience, and so his concept of 'experiencing-as', which he borrows from Wittgenstein, is inadequate to justify religious pluralism. Contrary to Hick's view that all experiences are grounded in sense experience and linguistic interpretation, we show that spiritual pursuit in Yoga philosophy aims to transcend all forms of linguistic and cognitive functions. Accordingly, the article has been divided into two sections: the first deals with the critical analysis of Hick's ideas and the second, an intervention from Yoga's perspectives.

Before we proceed to engage with the issues, we would like to make a couple of clarifications: (i) In a restricted sense, Yoga is not a religion, and so using Yoga to problematize Hick's view of religious pluralism may be objectionable. However, we take the liberty to juxtapose Hick's views with Yoga because Hick's philosophy of religion includes even non-theistic systems of thought which deal with Absolute Reality and Self-Realization. Yoga deals with both. (ii) In the present work, we have used the terms "religious experience" (with reference to Hick) and "spiritual experience" (with reference to Yoga) as though they are inter-changeable. This is certainly futile in that there are obvious differences between this pair of concepts. However, the concepts are being used in their most generic senses for the most part. Whenever the context of discussion requires proper distinction or definition, we have tried to do the needful in order to keep away possible confusion.

Hick's View of Religious Pluralism:

Hick's idea of religious pluralism may be characterized by oft-quoted phrases such as "All religions lead to the same God", or "Different religions are like different rivers flowing into the same ocean." In his own expression, "The lamps are different, but the Light is the same" (Nicholson, 1978, p. 166). He holds that different religions with different, or even conflicting, beliefs and practices are essentially different ways of responding to the same Absolute, or what he prefers to call "the Real". The Real has been defined by him

as that which cannot be known or experienced directly but that which makes experience possible and which, at the same time, also is the basis of all "great traditions" of the world. All major religious traditions of the world provide us with ways to advance our experience from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. This advancement is called by him the transformation of human existence known to different religious traditions as nirvana, salvation, moksa, etc. Against the backdrop of diverse, including even contradictory at times, claims of various religions, he himself asks: "How are these various forms of religious awareness formed?" (Hick, 1985, p. 41). It is here that he appeals to the insightful works of Kant and Wittgenstein, and so in what follows, we will try to locate and discuss his views within the frameworks of these two thinkers.

Kantian Framework

Kant is known for his revolutionary idea that knowledge does not conform to reality but that reality conforms to our forms of perception, such as space and time. Things-in-themselves (reality) are unknown and unknowable as they belong to the noumenal realm. One can only know what is given to oneself through the senses. However, experience is made possible through the application of categories. One structures our experience of the world by applying categories. Thus, we can talk about the phenomenal world as having a structure or as being regulated by laws of nature and also about events or things as having specific structures. In other words, applying categories to experience serves the purpose of uniting our experience under some laws. To sum up, in a metaphorical expression, our mind does not mirror reality; rather, reality mirrors our mind.

Acknowledging the epistemic contribution of Kant, Hick writes, "The central fact, of which the epistemology of religion also has to take account, is that our environment is not reflected in our consciousness in a simple and straightforward way, just as it is, independently of our perceiving it" (Hick, 1985, p. 40). He assumes that there is a reality – the Real – that underlies our experience of the world, and echoing Kant, he holds that the Real cannot be experienced by us in much the same way things-in-themselves cannot be experienced. He also maintains that the Real conforms to our specific forms of religious experience in much the same way

reality conforms to our forms of perception. And because of “the different sets of religious concepts and structures of religious meaning that operate within the different religious traditions of the world”, (Hick, 1985, p. 41) therefore, the consciousness of the Real by various religious traditions is different. Despite differences in religious experiences, he holds that the religious experiences of the Real by all the religious groups are authentic, unique and necessary. Accordingly, he justifies and defends his version of religious pluralism.

Religious categories are like different bottles of different sizes and colours filled with crystal clear water (the Real): crystal clear water which is not visible to the naked eye and takes the colours and shapes of the bottles (forms); the same water is in all the bottles. Hick maintains that a particular Deity or the Absolute as general concepts get schematized or concretized in empirical time and history, and when this concretization takes place, it is diversified into as many different cultures and civilizations of the earth. He stresses that “we always perceive the transcendent through the lens of a particular religious culture with its distinctive set of concepts, myths, historical exemplars and devotional or meditational techniques” (Hick, 1989, p. 8).

For Hick, the phenomenal experience of any sort results from the contact between our senses and the noumenal entities, the things-in-themselves. He assumes that the presence of the divine Reality is responsible for all experiences, including religious experiences. “We do not, however, in actual religious experience, encounter either Deity in general or the Absolute in general, but always in specific forms. In Kantian language, each general concept is schematised, or made concrete” (Hick, 1989, p. 41).

In saying this, he rules out the possibility of any direct, unmediated experiences of the Ultimate itself and instead maintains that all forms of religious experience are mediated and conditioned through categories of various religious traditions in keeping with the historical and cultural situations. Though he is aware of religious (mystic) experiences of the Eastern traditions like Advaita Vedanta or Buddhism, which claim to have direct unitive experience of the Real, the fact that their experiences are narrated or reported differently shows that they are not direct but mediated experiences

and “that which is being directly experienced is not the Real *an sich* but the Real manifested respectively as Sunyata, as Brahman, as God” (Hick, 1989, p. 294) in keeping with their respective traditions. David Cheetham observes, “Hick now thinks that none of the different religions' claims are in fact claims about the (noumenal) Real in itself but about the Real's various phenomenological manifestations” (Cheetham & Hick, 2016, p. 140).

The different ways of experiencing the Real within different religious traditions is the reason why different religions respond to the Real differently. Each religious experience makes us respond uniquely in a given context in keeping with our dispositional state of mind. In other words, the ‘one divine noumenon’ is experienced in the phenomenal realm either as divine personae within theistic traditions as Allah, Krishna, Jesus Christ, etc., or divine impersonae within non-theistic traditions as Brahman, the Tao, nirvana, sunyata, etc. Accordingly, he insists that they are not rival or competing gods but are rather different ways in which the Real has been concretized in history and are being responded to by different peoples (Hick, 1985, p. 42, p.100).

According to Hick, our ordinary experience of nature/environment/world is ordered and our religious experience depends on our ordinary experience. If this is the case, then how is it possible that, unlike ordinary experiences, our religious experiences do not conform to our cognitive categories and provide us with diverse or conflicting experiences? To such a query, Hick maintains that ‘religious experience occurs at a much higher level of meaning, presupposing and going beyond physical meaning and involving much more complex and variable modes of dispositional response’ (Hick, 1985, p. 41). He adds that “there are different concrete ways of being human and of participating in history, and within these different ways the presence of the divine Reality is experienced in characteristically different ways” (Hick, 1985, p. 41). We will discuss this point in more detail when we analyze his views in relation to the Wittgensteinian framework.

Wittgensteinian Framework

Hick finds Wittgenstein's notion of ‘seeing-as’ very illuminating. He extrapolates this idea to coin the term ‘experiencing-as’. Our

experience of the world or reality is never direct or pure but always mediated or interpreted in relation to the language game of the faith community concerned. Hick stresses that our experience of the world is always characterized by ‘experiencing-as’; and so, to have experience of this or that as x or y is to say that each variable of experience is presented to us as having a certain recognizable pattern/character which in turn defines the meaning/significance of that experience. However, the awareness of a thing as having this or that recognizable character/significance is directly related to a specific dispositional state of experience and language, that specific human activity that defines the meanings of things and experiences. In other words, it is the religious language that identifies a certain set of human experiences as religious and accordingly gives the religious character of our experiences. No religious experience, therefore, is uninterpreted. The systems of language vis-à-vis culture in the light of which we assign significance/meaning to religious experience vary from one religious group to another. For this reason, different religious groups interpret their experience of the Real differently, although the Real is the basis of all kinds of religious experience.

Since religious experience is basically of the form ‘experiencing-as’ and since it is a matter of interpretation based on the religious language of a particular faith community, the religious experience cannot be universal and objective but particular and subjective in keeping with the diverse linguistic communities. He stresses that this plurality of religious experiences is due to the language game or culture of each community, the manner in which a linguistic community operates with different sets of religious concepts. Each human group has its own system of concepts, or superstructure that defines and negotiates with its environment. For instance, given a specific concept of a god of a particular human group, a person’s action belonging to that group will acquire certain religious value or meaning; while one person will see a snake as divine, a person from another faith community may see the same as the embodiment of evil; the former will worship the snake while the latter will attack the snake. In other words, the peculiar ways in which a person understands her action or relation to an object are determined by the religious language – doctrines, norms, and values – of that faith community.

He develops his philosophy of religious language using the notion of a situation. He formulates the notion of the situation as follows: "A situation, for X, consists of a set of objects which are unified in X's attention and which have as a whole a practical dispositional meaning for X which is more than the sum of the meaning of its constituent objects" (Hick, 1985, p. 20). To experience a thing, 'say a pen in my hand', is to be in a dispositional state to behave in relation to it in ways that define the use of the pen in that situation.

According to Hick, any experience can be classified into two types or levels. The first may be explained in relation to the above example of the pen. It concerns our dispositional state with respect to a situation which enables us to 'behave in ways appropriate to the perceived meaning of the situation' (Hick, 1985, p. 24). Interpretation at this level comes to us naturally or habitually, the result of a gradual process of negotiating with our environment in terms of the set of linguistic concepts. However, he adds that religious experience, say, experiencing Jesus as the Messiah by his disciples, occurs at yet another level. At this higher situational level, we can transcend the sheer physical or natural meaning of things and their relationships. Here, we normally talk about the significance or meaning of our experience. He identifies three such higher-order experiences, namely, (1) Ethical, (2) Aesthetic, and (3) Religious (Hick, 1985, p. 21). The dispositional state prompts us to appropriately respond to each situation depending on its moral or, aesthetic or religious significance. This second type or the second order interpretation is usually understood as meta-narrative, theoretical, or metaphysical. At this level, we accept controlling themes or dogmas to regulate and order our experience of things. Put differently, the experience of a given situation acquires meaning in the context of a meta-narrative. Unlike laws of nature to order our experiences objectively, the grand narratives of religions make a religious experience ambiguous. Hick emphasizes that the ambiguity of religious experience is what defines religious meaning (Hick, 1985, p. 25).

Although Hick maintains that experience can be viewed from two levels, he opines that our religious experience of the Real is necessarily dependent on and limited by our ordinary experience on the one hand and on the other, by our language or culture. Accordingly, he rules out the possibility of any experience beyond

the linguistic and cognitive frameworks. In other words, only to the extent we have religious language and sense experience can one have religious experience. He writes,

(E)ven the most advanced form of mystical experience, as an experience undergone by an embodied consciousness whose mind/brain has been conditioned by a particular religious tradition, must be affected by that tradition, and accordingly takes these different forms. In other words, the Real is experience not an sich, but in terms of the various non-personal images or concepts that have been generated at the interface between the Real and different patterns of human consciousness (Hick, 1985, p. 43-44).

In saying this, he denies the possibility of a direct unmediated religious experience, as noted above. This position goes against the very doctrine and pursuit of Yoga philosophy itself, a system of belief we use in the present work to interrogate Hick's version of religious pluralism.

Analysis

Is there only one Absolute Reality?

One can raise a set of questions: Could it be the case that because of the very nature of the Real as infinite, which imposes different and fleeting sensations on us that we perceive the Real differently, contrary to what Hick says? (Note that this does not exclude creative interpretations of our ordinary experiences in religious languages, as maintained by Hick). Or is it the case that in the noumenal world, there are multiple realities, as opposed to the idea of one Absolute Real, that cause different groups of people to experience the world differently? If the Real belongs to the noumenal realm and there is no way to access the realm directly, how can we be sure that the Real is one even? It can be many. If one posits that different religious experiences are because of the presence of different divine realities like Yahweh or Allah or Krishna or Brahman, how do we ever refute such an assumption? Hick provides neither arguments to counter these questions nor solutions to the questions raised. For assuming that there is only one Ultimate Reality, quite a few have charged him as having a "homogenizing agenda" (Eddy, 2018, p.127). He simply

assumes that there is only one absolute Real. To assume that different religions are ways of responding to the same Absolute is unjustified because all that we experience in this phenomenal world is diversity and multiplicity, and there is no way we can 'peep' into the noumenal world and check if different experiences correspond to the same reality.

Which is prior – religious experience or religious language?

It appears that for Hick, religious language is like a bucket to collect religious experience and that water can be experienced only in the bucket. The size and type of a bucket are defined by the religious community in question. The question that may be raised is this: What prompted us to make a bucket in the first place? It is not implausible to argue to the contrary that because we have water (religious experience) in the first place,, we see the need to make a bucket (religious language). Experience of a certain sort, which is difficult to comprehend through our cognitive faculties and natural linguistic categories, perhaps, may have prompted a person or a community to develop a religious language.

It is quite possible that, as Hick would insist, certain religious experience is made possible by the availability of religious language. For instance, meditation or performing certain religious rituals/activities according to a specific religious language may lead one to experience certain religious experiences like a mystical vision or a deep sense of peace. Those experiences are best explained in the available religious language of the faith community concerned. In normal situations, we also talk of certain experiences like chanting verses or sprinkling of holy water as religious experiences, and these experiences embody meanings and significances that will not make sense in our ordinary language. However, logically, it is difficult to reduce all kinds of religious experience to religious language (interpretation).

Let us illustrate the above point with the help of some concrete historical examples. If we look at the stories of the founders of some world religions like Judaism or Buddhism, both Abraham and Buddha had some initial extraordinary encounters. Abraham encountered YHWH (Yahweh) at Harran, an ancient city of Mesopotamia, while Buddha got his enlightenment under a banyan

tree at Bodh-Gaya. Their spiritual encounters could not fit into the religious languages of their communities, and so they had to create their own religious languages vis-à-vis grand narratives to start their new religions. Besides, it is not unusual to hear that the religious experiences of some individuals are indescribable or incomprehensible within human cognitive functions. Some such experiences may result, at times, in the religious conversion of an individual as well. They normally describe their experiences as 'indescribable' or 'ineffable' and yet life-changing. It may be noted that such a person may not be familiar with the religious language of the faith community she chooses to embrace after undergoing that life-transforming spiritual experience. Some such experience includes a conversion from atheism to theism as well. All these strongly suggest that it is not necessary to have religious language to have religious experience.

What about the ambiguous nature of religious language/ experience?

Hick maintains that it is because of the higher level of interpretation that results in the ambiguous nature of the religious language. Perhaps he is right, though it is equally possible that, on the contrary, the ambiguous nature of religious language is due to the nature of religious experience. One might argue that because our ordinary language is too limited to express those profound experiences, we use symbolic-metaphoric-imagery expressions in language to describe and express our experiences. Because of the use of these non-literal words, religious language is ambiguous.

However, what concerns us more is the failure of Hick to maintain a distinction between religious experience and religious language explicitly. For instance, being inspired by Wittgenstein's famous examples of "duck-rabbit" perception, he says, "that which is religiously interpreted and experienced is in itself ambiguous" (Hick, 1989, p. 24). Offering his own example, he says that Jesus can be experienced in different ways, either as the Messiah or a prophet or a rabbi, etc., "[t]his ambiguity is characteristic of religious meaning" (Hick, 1989, p. 25). In this way, he emphasizes the nature of religious experience as ambiguous.

Experience may be pleasant or unpleasant, intense or mild, etc. Irrespective of what we experience, either known or unknown in a

given situation, we can have experience in so far as our senses are functional. One may not know what she is eating, and yet she will experience some taste, and the taste may be pleasant or unpleasant. It is not necessary to know or to have language in order to have a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience. It is only at the level of expression that we find our words to be ambiguous. Put differently, ambiguity is essentially a linguistic category and not an experiential quality. In the meantime, perception may be erroneous or doubtful. But this feature has to be differentiated from the ambiguous nature of language. The ways to resolve linguistic ambiguity and erroneous or doubtful perceptions are also different.

Of course, he does not claim anywhere that religious language and religious experience are one and the same. Rather, it may be said that for Hick, religious experience has a wider connotation. It may be broadly interpreted as modes of experience that include forms of awareness. An awareness of the world may go beyond direct sense-object contact to the meaning/significance of an experience. Meaning, in turn, would determine the nature of our response to our 'direct' or 'physical' experience. However, there is a characteristic and obvious difference between experience and response.

Some religious experiences may be such that it makes no sense at all to express it in language: To express it is to misinterpret it. Such an experience, when expressed in languages, would be referred to as ineffable or mystical, both of which are characteristics of any religious language. This is because, perhaps, religious experiences, at least some, are beyond the function of our linguistic and cognitive faculty. We want to highlight the distinction between religious experience and religious interpretation by referring to Yoga philosophy which holds that the higher forms of experience are not determinate (perception), that is, they are devoid of linguistic and cognitive functions and that this kind of extra-ordinary perception is the foundation of all kinds/ways of knowing (*pramanas*).

Is it possible to have a unique transcendental spiritual experience?

Hick is of the view that only those aspects of reality which have relevance for our biological survival affect our senses. We interpret our senses as 'this' or 'that' object and experience. From this

conscious experience of our environment, we learn to behave or respond appropriately, thereby giving ourselves its 'meaning'.

This all-important dimension of meaning, which begins at the physical level as the habitability of the material world, continues at the personal or social level of awareness as the moral significance of the situations of our life, and at the religious level as a consciousness of the ultimate meaning of each situation and of our situation as a whole in relation to the divine Reality (Hick, 1989, p. 40).

Thus, in articulating this point, he also seems to be suggesting that there exists an essential relation between physical experience and religious experience. Ordinary experience of the material world is the source and beginning of religious meaning/experience, though there is no causal or necessary relation between ordinary meaning and religious meaning. Put differently, we can experience the world without religious meaning, but without ordinary experience, we cannot have religious experience/meaning. The reason is that the concept of 'experiencing-as' is applicable "to all our conscious experience of the environment, including the religious ways of experiencing it" (Hick, 1989, p. 27). Accordingly, he goes on to reject even the notion of 'conscious personality persisting after the death of the physical organism' (Hick, 1989, p. 131).

He argues that to recapitulate, we have religious experience only through nature or phenomena and that there is no way we can experience the Real or things-in-themselves except through the phenomenal world. He remarks, "In Kantian language, the phenomenal world is the noumenal world, as humanly perceived" (Hick, 1989, p. 105). One can observe the identity statement here. This view is philosophically a very difficult position to maintain if one subjects it to a severe test. If the identity is insisted, then the Real is no more than the phenomenal world. In some religious language, it could mean that the Creator is the same as the created. However, many religious systems maintain the difference between the created and the Creator or between the world of human existence and the world of divine existence. Besides, it is quite doubtful if this identity of the two worlds can be done without seriously altering or distorting the Kantian concept of noumena: By virtue of the identity of worlds, noumenal entities become known and knowable since the phenomenal world is knowable. An equally challenging aspect

would be to defend his Real, the one Absolute Real, since what we experience in this phenomenal world is characterized by multiplicity.

Is religious experience only a matter of religious interpretation?

Hick seems to have assumed that religions and religious languages are a creation of humankind, that religions are primarily a matter of human response to our environment in order to make sense of our human existence for survival reasons, that human need for purpose and significance of life, beyond physical needs, resulted in the creation of religious languages. If indeed his view is correct, then he may be right in holding that religion and religious experience are linguistic activities involving complex interpretations of the world, and if religious experience is, as a matter of fact, no more than a matter of interpretation of the world for survival purposes, then his version of religious pluralism appears persuasive. Every individual and every religious group has a right to interpret the world to suit one's needs and interests. However, a question remains: Is it really the case that religion ultimately is about interpreting the world? Is it also the case that the pursuit of 'self-realization' or ultimate realization is necessarily a matter of 'experiencing-as'? Here is where we find his view to be inadequate and unconvincingly simplistic. He does not consider the possibility of a spiritual pursuit beyond the interpretive function of language. There are religious traditions, for instance, that look beyond the linguistic and cognitive functions of the human mind. In what follows, we will consider the spiritual pursuit in Yoga as a counter-example to make our case.

Spiritual Experience from the Perspective of Yoga Philosophy

Harold Netland, one of the leading critics of Hick, observes that

...insofar as Hick's theory of religious pluralism is intended to be a comprehensive theory about the nature of various religious traditions, its adequacy will be a function of (1) the accuracy with which it reflects, and the ease with which it accommodates, the data from different religions... (Netland, 1991, p. 221).

We argue that not only Hick's position would be unable to accommodate the basic tenets of Yoga but that it is inconsistent with the ultimate pursuit of Yoga itself.

If we can find one suitable verse from the text (Yoga Sutra) that can sum up Yoga philosophy, it could be this: “cessation of mental modifications” (*cittavrttinirodha*) (Bharati, 1986, Verse 1.2). Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that almost the whole of the text involves discourses related to the mind. But why is it so? According to Yoga, the ultimate spiritual experience or pure consciousness is not possible without totally eliminating the very possibility of mental function. Therefore, the first and foremost task of Yoga philosophy is to know the mind clearly and to control the functions of the mind so that Consciousness can be known as a distinct reality. It implies that the ultimate spiritual experience is independent of the activity or function of the mind. Mind is a complex term which is consisted of threefold faculty namely intellect, ego, and deliberative principle (*anhtaḥkarnam trividham*) (Virupakshananda, 1995, Verse 33). This is in sharp contrast to the view of Hick, who limits spiritual experience to the functions of the mind. However, before we interrogate his views by way of a critical juxtaposition with the Yoga system, we will first highlight the basic concepts of Yoga which are relevant for the present purpose.

Yoga Metaphysics and the Nature of Experience

It may be noted that the Yoga system is directly founded on the metaphysics of Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya’s dualism makes a distinction between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* or between spiritual and material realities (substances). While *Prakṛti* is ever dynamic because of the constant interaction of its three constituents (*guṇas*), namely, *sattoa*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, *Puruṣa* is static and unchanging (*aparināmini bhoktr*). *Prakṛti* is the principle of evolution and is characterized by four existential levels, namely, (i) gross (*pancamahābhūtas*), (ii) subtle (*tanmātras*), (iii) mental (*antaḥkaran*), and (iv) noumenal (*avyakta prakṛti*). However, the experience of the material world in any form cannot be identified with or interpreted as a spiritual experience in that it involves the function of the mind. *Mokṣa*, or the ultimate realization of *Puruṣa* or Consciousness is distinct from the mind and its activities. Sāṃkhya says *Puruṣa* never ever gets bound, and so it never gets free. It is *Prakṛti* that gets bound and becomes free and transmigrates,

तस्मान्न बध्यतेऽद्धा न मुच्यते नापि संसरति कञ्चित्।

संसरति बध्यते मुच्यते च नानाश्रया प्रकृतिः ॥ 62 ॥

Translation: "Verily no spirit is bound, or is emancipated, or migrates; it is Nature alone which has many receptacles, that is bound, or is released, or migrates" (Jha, 1896, p. 106).

The above quote makes it clear that the ultimate spiritual pursuit is neither about a blissful life free of all sufferings nor about the interpretation of our experience of the material world using religious language. Although the spiritual pursuit in Yoga at some stages involves the functions of the mind to clear confusion, within and without, nonetheless, the activities of the mind cannot be termed as pure spiritual experience in its strictest sense.

Nature of Experience in Yoga

If an experience that involves mental activities and functions cannot be considered a spiritual experience, then what is a spiritual experience? It is difficult to provide a readily available answer to this question. However, we will try to throw some light on this question indirectly by way of explaining what experience is according to Yoga and proceed further to explain why an experience involving the mind cannot be a spiritual experience. According to Yoga, the three components that make experience possible are (i) apprehender (*grahitṛ*), (ii) the object that is to be apprehended (*grāhyeṣu*), and (iii) the instrument of apprehension (*grahaṇa*) (Bharati, 1986, Verse 1.41). Apprehender is the Consciousness (*Puruṣa*), apprehended is the world of objects (*Prakṛti*) and the mind is the instrument of apprehension. It may be noted that the mind is not a separate substance but a subtle element of *Prakṛti*.

Perception can be explained as a process that involves the following relations: the Self comes in contact with the mind, the mind comes in contact with the sense-organs, and the sense-organs with the objects. Understanding the function of the mind is significant for understanding perception. It has a unique nature of reflection, and it takes the form of the object it reflects. Being a subtle evolute of *Prakṛti*, it too is constituted by *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. It reflects an object according to its state; for example, if the mind is dominated by *tamas* or *rajas*, the mind would not be able to reflect the object as it is. Only in the *sattva*-dominated state the object is clearly reflected

in the mind. The *sāttvika* mind is like a clear crystal; it takes the form of whatever is reflected on it. In such a state, all three – the knower, the known, and the means of knowledge – are reflected in their pure forms. In this crystal-like state of mind, right cognition takes place.

When one's modifications (*vṛttis*) have subsided, his (mind's) stability on and coalescence with the apprehender (*grahitṛ*), the process and instrumentation of apprehension (*grahaṇa*), and the objects of apprehension (*grāhya*), like pure crystal (which takes on the reflection and color of proximate objects), is called *samāpatti* (Bharati, 1986, Verse 1.41).

Even though erroneous mental modification is curbed at this state of *sattvika* mind, the 'pure perception' of objects is not considered a spiritual experience or spiritual realization. The reason is that the mind is still active as an instrument of perception; it still reflects. The ultimate pursuit in Yoga is beyond the mind itself.

Transcendental Experience and Beyond

The level of spiritual pursuit beyond the possibility of any erroneous mental modifications is *samādhi*. It is broadly categorized into two, viz., (i) *samprajñāta* (*samādhi* of wisdom) and (ii) *asamprajñāta* (acognitive *samādhi*). *Samprajñāta samādhi* is of four types: (a) *vitarka* (gross thought), (b) *vicāra* (subtle thought), (c) *ānanda* (ecstasy) and (d) *asmitā* (I-am-ness). In *vitarka* and *vicāra samādhi*, an object is known in their pure form or nature, while in *ānanda samādhi*, the mind is known in its pure form; and finally, in *asmitā samādhi*, the clear reflection of the Knower is known.

The perception involving *vitarka samādhi* of *samprajñāta* can be classified into two categories, namely, (i) *pratyakṣa* (pure perception) and (ii) *parā-pratyakṣa* (transcendental perception) (Bharati, 1986, p. 392). *Pratyakṣa* that rules out residues of *viparaya* (wrong cognition) is *sā-vitarka*. At this level of perception, the three different aspects of an object are perceived: *śabda* (designated word to the object), *artha* (the object itself), and *jñāna* (the resultant knowledge). For a person whose mind is stable perceives these three as comingled in *sāvitarka samādhi*. It is like an aesthetic experience; the spectator is aware of the distinction between an actor and a character, but during the experience, she transcends the distinctions. It is not a child-like experience who is not aware of the distinction.

In *parā-pratyakṣa*, the object is experienced in its absolute purity by transcending memory, inference, or verbal knowledge. As such, the possibility of confusion due to imaginary cognitions and linguistic conceptions (*vikalpa*) that may arise due to memory of word and meaning is also removed. It is the direct experience of an object in the present moment in its pure form. It is *nir-vitarka*. At this level, the mind acquires the form of the object in such a way (as if) it has no form of its own. In this state, the awareness of 'I' disappears, and the 'I know X awareness' is replaced only/simply by 'awareness' of the object alone without its name and its qualities. The mind abandons its own nature as the instrument of apprehension. It may be noted that the clear demarcation between these two stages is based on *vikalpa* (verbal constructions). Loosely, we can label these two perceptions respectively as determinate perception and indeterminate perception as well. The same levels are applicable to *vicāra samādhi*, perception of the subtle objects.

The nature of the experience may be analyzed further for clarity and depth. The perception related to the first three levels of *samprajñāta samādhi* is *Prakṛti*-oriented while the last is *Puruṣa*-oriented. From this perspective, perception at the level of *asmitā samādhi* may be termed a spiritual experience. But the spiritual experience in Yoga does not stop at *asmitā samādhi*, which is a pure reflection of Consciousness. It goes beyond the mind to the level of *asamprajñāta samādhi*; it is a state of Consciousness or the state wherein the Consciousness realizes itself.

The Ultimate Spiritual Experience?

We have already mentioned that the realization of Consciousness is possible only after clearing the confusion in the mind and that it is beyond the mind itself. However, this statement may give rise to a number of questions. If the function of the mind is completely curbed, does it make sense to talk about any experience at all, including spiritual experience? In other words, if the "I-ness" of the mind is removed, does it make sense to talk about experience whatsoever? What is the nature of spiritual experience in Yoga like? In the first place, what causes the mind to mistake itself for the Knower? To get insights into the above questions, we need to understand the nature and function of the mind.

The mind is a subtle element that reflects any element that comes into contact with it. It is of the nature of the mind to get colored by whatever it comes into proximity with. “Being associated with the witness (*Puruṣa*) and the witnessed (objects), the mind is affected by everything it perceives” (Dhiman, 2022, Verse 4.23). The mind functions in keeping with the interplay of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. When the mind is in a state such that it is dominated by *tamas* and *rajas*, the mind is not stable at all, as it is full of creative modifications (*vr̥ttis*). Here, the mind is agitated, stupefied, and distracted. Just as a mirror that is dirty will not be able to reflect objects clearly, in the same way, the active mind is unable to focus and reveal the Self. In contrast, when the mind is dominated by *sattva*, it has a single focus (one-pointed) and is stable; at this state (*eka-gāra*), the *vr̥ttis* are weak, and so it is able to reflect the objects as they are. The state that totally eliminates the possibility of any mental construction is *niruddha*. In this state, the mind is like a burnt seed that loses its power of reproduction.

The mistaken identity of the mind (I-ness) is due to reflection of Consciousness in the mind. It causes the mind to mistakenly see itself as the Self, as though the mind is a conscious entity (*cetantā*). However, the Self appears limited and changing due to the superimposition of the mind on the Self. When the mind attains the level of *niruddha*, it makes it possible for the Self to realize itself; the Consciousness appears in its true nature (*तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम्।*). In this state beyond the mind, Consciousness shines by its own light, with no obstruction and no defect (Prasād, 1988, p. 300). Since the conditions necessary for experience do not apply at this stage of *asamprajñāta samādhi*, technically, it makes no sense to talk about spiritual experience at this level of consciousness. At the most, we can call it spiritual realization or Self_realization (actualization).

A Brief Juxtaposition of Hick’s View and Yoga Philosophy

Some important viewpoints of Hick and Yoga have been contrasted below to understand their points of departure:

(i) For Hick, religious experience is within the cognitive function of the mind in that every religious experience must make sense or be meaningful; it is the activity of the mind seeking understanding of the self and the world involving linguistic interpretation. In contrast,

for Yoga, the mind is the artificial light that obstructs the natural light from manifesting itself. Just like stars, which are not visible at night in metro cities because of lights generated by electricity, so also Consciousness is not revealed because of the mental modifications of our sense experience. Therefore, the light of mind has to be switched off in order for the pure Consciousness to reveal itself. Hick would argue for the impossibility of perception (seeing) without artificial light; for him, the world would become absolutely dark and meaningless without the light from electricity. But for a Yogi, the perception of the world through our senses and the mind gives us only perspectives and keeps us from having a real perception. Simply put, ordinary perception is a colored or perspectival perception, no matter how we interpret or define it. Only pure/transcendental perception, which is devoid of erroneous mental modification, can be termed as right perception; it enables us to experience the objects as they are, in their pure nature, without perspectives or distortions. However, Hick would object to the possibility of such a perception saying that any experience must be in the form of 'experiencing-as'.

(ii) For both Hick and Yoga, although the presence of the Divine (Consciousness/the Real) is necessary for an experience to be possible, it is not possible to have a direct experience of the Divine. The difference is that while for Hick, the Divine is experienced indirectly (mediated) through our cognitive faculty via the functions of the senses and linguistic interpretation, according to Yoga, the Divine reveals itself only when the functions of the senses and the mind are controlled. In other words, for Hick, the experience of the Divine is an activity of the mind involving a choice, while according to Yoga, the Divine is not something that is experienced but that which makes experience possible and is an independent reality, distinct and separate from *Prakṛti*.

(iii) Hick's idea of religious experience is primarily a matter of response to our ordinary experience of the world. Religious language helps one to see a particular experience in relation to reality (the Real). It enables us to 'see' the whole-part relation of the world of objects. It gives meaning and value to our ordinary experience. In short, the nature of religious experience is determinate though ambiguous. In contrast, it may be maintained that Yoga is interested

in experience per se without any need to make sense of the experience, without naming or valuation (*nirodha*). But to have an indeterminate perception (*nirvikalpa*) is not the end of Yoga. It seeks to eliminate experience itself at the highest level of spiritual realization. With the total cessation of the function of the mind in the *nirodha* state, the world (*Prakṛti*) is no longer accessible for experience. There is a radical existential transition from the *samprajñāta* (cognitive *samādhi*) level to that of the *asamprajñāta* (acognitive *samādhi*). It is at this state of existence that the Consciousness is established in its own nature (*svabhāva*): “The spiritual self (*Purusa*) is established in his own self-nature (*sva-rupa*) and is therefore called pure, one alone in isolation (*kevala*), and free or liberated (*mukta*)” (Bharati, 1986, p. 429).

(iv) It appears as though Hick and Yoga have a common belief or assumption - the reality of one Absolute Self in the meta-physical realm distinct from the world of senses. While for Hick, the Real is just an assumption that is impossible to realize or experience, Yoga makes a significantly radical departure - the Self is realizable. According to the former, religious experience is essentially a mode of awareness of the world due to religious interpretation of our experience, but for the latter, spiritual experience goes beyond the linguistic function of the mind. It follows from the above that (i) the religious pluralism of Hick is because of the linguistic nature of our experience, which varies from one religious group to another, and (ii) religious pluralism is a form of mental modification, according to Yoga, which must be removed for the possibility of spiritual experience. If Yoga is right and we can find a way to overcome the barrier of linguistic obstruction, the religious pluralism of Hick becomes indefensible.

Conclusion

The central attempt of our work is to show that Hick’s version of religious pluralism is problematic. It is not to repudiate religious pluralism in general. Towards this end, we have highlighted the functions of mind and language in our discourse to examine the nature of spiritual/religious experience. The reason for this approach is that, among others, Hick takes language as the basis of his religious pluralism, but we have attempted to show that his notion of religious experience appears to be nothing more than a

function of linguistic interpretation, and so it is limited to account for some types of spiritual experiences which come prior to religious language or are beyond language itself. Since Yoga is one system that talks about experience beyond the function of language, we have used it to interrogate Hick's version of religious pluralism. Besides, the concept of experience, including spiritual experience, is profoundly deep and diverse in Yoga philosophy that we have exploited it to throw some insights into the nature of experience itself.

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