

Self-Evident Spiritual Experience and Empirical Psychology

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Since the turn of the millennium, Western psychology has widened its scope: Although self-evident experiences like love, hate, empathy, or wisdom are not instantly replicable, cannot be easily communicated, and are prone to deception, such phenomena have gradually been accepted as legitimate objects of empirical study. Concurrently, psychology has abandoned its simplified, merely Western point of view and increasingly attends to cultural diversity. The present paper focuses on religious or spiritual experiences, which until now have been largely excluded from psychological studies. First, in an attempt to link theological consideration and psychological methodology, suggestions are developed which could enable future researchers to apply Popper's critical rationalism to the study of reports of self-evident religious or spiritual experiences. These suggestions are based on criteria of falsifiability which are derived from theological literature. Secondly, these suggestions are supported by the Indian point of view on self-evident spiritual experiences. In this respect, Western scientific methodology is expected to benefit from Eastern philosophy of science. These aspects will be discussed in the next paper.

Keywords: Western psychology, Self-evident experiences, Spiritual experiences.

1. *Self-Evident Experience*

The most impressive and intense part of this experience was the white light of absolute purity and cleanness. It was like a glowing and sparkling flame of incandescent whiteness and beauty, but not really a flame — more like a gleaming white - hot ingot, yet much bigger and vaster than a mere ingot. The associated feelings were those of absolute awe, reverence, and sacredness. Just before this experience I had the feeling of going deep within myself to the self stripped bare of all pretense and falseness. It was the point where a man could stand firm with absolute integrity — something more important than mere physical life. The white light experience was of supreme importance — absolutely self-validating and something worth staking your life on and putting your trust in. The white light itself was so penetrating and intense that it was not possible to look directly at it. It was not in the room with me, but we were both somewhere else-and my body was left far behind (Pahnke & Richards, 1966, p. 180, quoting a participant of the "Good Friday Experiment").

The present methodological paper focuses on the epistemology of self-evident experience as an object of empirical research in psychology. Such experience is characterized by (1) a strong emotional quality, (2) its subjectivity in the sense that it cannot be easily communicated to others, (3) its lack of (instant) replicability, and (4) its lasting effect on the individual and his or her personality.

A multiplicity of self-evident experiences has been reported in the field of spirituality and religion: The visions of God encountered by mystics of various cultures either spontaneously or as a result of prayer or meditation may serve as an example (e.g., Beardsworth, 1977; Wiebe, 1997). Near-Death Experiences (NDE) and Out-of-Body Experiences (OBE), sometimes encountered by people who, after having been reported to be clinically dead, have regained consciousness, are mostly highly spiritual or religious by their nature (e.g., Wiebe, 1997; Zaleski, 1987); the "subject" of these experiences rather is the immaterial spirit than