

## THE APPEAL TO EXPERIENCE

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SOMEWHERE IN THIS century the term “experience” begins to appear with regularity in the titles of articles and books in Christian theology and makes its way into proposals for methodological and doctrinal developments. Similarly, in the common parlance of the Christian faithful, and especially of students of theology, a similar appeal to “my experience,” or the experience of a particular group, has become theological common sense. When one asks about what sort of appeal it is, whether it is philosophically coherent, and whether it is appropriate to the task of Christian theology, such questions are often greeted with surprise. What could be more obvious than the appeal to experience, its inevitability, or even its momentous appropriateness at this point in the history of Christianity and its theology?

All theology, it would be agreed, should be “experiential” in a manner analogous to the way in which it ought all to be “scriptural,” “philosophical” and “logical,” and in a way in which it cannot all be Roman Catholic, or Anglican, or perspectival in a great variety of ways. In claiming that one’s theology is “experiential,” however, one has not yet said very much. What is the form of appeal to experience? How is the use of experience in the theological argument related to the content of the experience? How is the appeal to experience related to other elements of theological construction?

This essay offers a sketch of this appeal to experience in three parts: the first section will ask about the rhetorical use of the appeal, and its function as an appeal to authority; a second section will propose four basic characteristics of experience as a general philosophic category, and consider the oddity of two common usages; the final section will propose a continuum of possible uses of the appeal to experience within theological arguments.

In the course of the remarks in each section there will be few direct references to recent authors since my purpose here is not to analyze particular usages but to provide a conceptual map. My conclusions result as much from listening to students as from analyzing theological texts. Those familiar with David H. Kelsey’s *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*<sup>1</sup> might notice a resemblance of this essay to the sort

<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974.

of exercise he engaged in concerning the appeal to Scripture in Christian theology. Just as his typology is illuminating beyond the specific authors he discusses, so my proposal is intended to be broad and heuristic. As the sentence "Scripture is authoritative for Christian theology" is the invocation of a self-involving rule that commits the speaker to *function* in a particular way, so the appeal to experience is a similar invocation. But not every appeal to experience is an appeal to the same construal of experience, nor does it function in the same role in the argument structure. This essay is an initial exploration of these differences, not with attention to the exact placement of experience in any particular argument, but with attention to types of possible use.

#### RHETORICAL APPEAL TO EXPERIENCE

By comparison to many philosophical analyses of experience, it seems easy yet illuminating to explore first the rhetorical use of phrases such as "in my experience . . ." or "personally speaking . . ." In a minimalist fashion, they are used as a linguistic cipher before the speaker states an opinion or inserts something confirming or new, differing or even contradictory, into a conversation. The appeal to oneself might carry the weight of an assurance of authenticity, the promise of self-manifestation, or an assertion of the right to speak. It is meant to give force or credibility to a particular stage in an argument. Moreover, it often implicitly questions the authenticity, force, or credibility of one's conversation partners and their opinions, though with the appearance of not actually doing so. The cipher invokes a supposed common ground, experience, within which differing opinions will be placed, and may, perhaps, be reconciled. It adds no content to what follows, but does more than the obvious, which would be to remind the listener that the opinions being expressed belong to the speaker. It is important to note that in the rhetorical appeal to experience, the noun "experience" does not *refer* to anything, neither an object nor a "state" of the subject. The same result might be achieved by changing the tone of voice, or by a gesture or change of posture. The nuance of meaning must be determined from the context, and such usage is never "exact" since its function as rhetorical depends upon many inexact factors.

Prefacing what is about to be said as "mine," an emphasis I will call "perspectival," seems to imply that it is not merely that of a group, or of people in general, but rather is uniquely my own; or, the need to call attention to the opinion as mine might be precisely as a member of a specific group which stands in opposition to another group, or any other group at all. It can also be an extremely brief way in which to remind the listener or reader that the sentence to follow is the result

of serious, perhaps prolonged, consideration by the individual or the group. It is somewhat like the preface "I believe that . . ." or more emphatically "I'd stake my life (reputation) on it" or "I would be untrue to myself if I were not to say that . . ." or "as a concerned member of such-and-such a group, I must point out that . . ." The rhetorical appeal is thus in no sense trivial, though it may range from emphasis without content to well-considered urgency precisely because of who the subject of the experiencing is and what has been experienced.

Two general observations can be made to locate this use of experience and differentiate it from other rhetorical uses. First, the usual historical reference is to the Enlightenment origins of this appeal and its dependence upon such notions as: (1) a Cartesian, Hobbesian, or Kantian self; (2) the autonomy of reason in face of the heteronomous vehicles of authority which were seen to be in opposition to free inquiry; and (3) the rationalist and empiricist programme of deriving all judgments from individual observation or, as it comes to be called, experience. The presupposition of a self-regulating human rationality dependent upon interior and exterior senses common to us all, which can detect errors in knowledge through a sort of self-policing exercise, is not the discovery of the Enlightenment, of course. It was well known to the ancients and the medievals, but took a quite particular turn in the 17th century. The construal of experience as individual, oppositional, and in some sense self-authenticating is essential to the origin and maintenance of a notion that all opinions have a "right" to be heard. Thus, though an opinion is different from that of one's interlocutor, it has a right to be heard, perhaps even a priority over other opinions.

Second, the by now familiar trio of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud are then invoked as principal expositors of a suspiciousness about this "autonomous" and "pure" reason, such that though opinions are indeed to be heard they are to be suspected of carrying more freight than appears to be the case. An unqualified appeal to experience is thus seen as naive unless the social, psychological, and philosophical determinants of experience are exposed. Any such appeal must include a retrieval of the inevitable presence of interpretation and tradition in even the simplest of appeals to "my" experience. A further moment of this analysis and critique is prefigured in Hegel and carried out in two quite different philosophical investigations by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, for example. They dismantle the metaphor of the subject as "inside" and the world as "outside," leave the modern preoccupation with the subject, and rejoin the premodern philosophical study of the forms of mediation, of language, symbols, and culture in general, as

the proper topic for the investigation of just what experience is and is not. In a manner parallel to the critique of the subject's states of consciousness by psychoanalysis for example, criticism of the moment of mediation—of language use, social structures, the embodiment of power, and so forth—must also be carried out.

A contemporary rhetorical use of phrases referring to "my experience" must, therefore, acknowledge this critique and go beyond the maintenance of enlightened subjectivity. The appeal as a form of "locating" what is to be said adverts to the knowledge, implicit or explicit, of the existence of "worlds of discourse" which are variously overlapping or incommensurate. The individual might be thought of as proposing what is about to be said in a tentative way, acknowledging that it consists of only one possible articulation, and possibly one that the conversation partners may find only partially intelligible or even wholly obscure, beyond the obvious sense of the words being uttered. Such a usage seems to be the moment of second naivete, in which the confident utterance of self-assertion, chastened by a hermeneutic of personal and cultural suspicion, gives way to a second articulation of meaning which of necessity is prefaced by a relativizing "in my experience," meaning "in my experience as one perspective among many . . ." One might actually withhold one's opinion, for purposes of education or politeness, in some circumstances because of precisely this sort of self-awareness.

Whether modern or postmodern, it is the oddity of making the appeal at all that I wish to take note of. Where else would an opinion come from except from "my experience," whether it is a result of direct learning or appropriation on the word of another? Much like the phrase "personal experience," one might ask: what other kind is there? Have you ever expressed your "impersonal experience" when giving an opinion? The use of the rhetorical cipher derives from the need to give some sort of emphasis to what follows it, to cause a particular kind of attention to be paid to both the speaker and the opinion. At least two sorts of emphasis appear to be intended.

As to the first sort of emphasis, whether it is naive, self-suspicious, or self-effacing, the appeal to experience is a variation on the appeal to authority, a rhetorical style and a feature of argumentation which has a venerable role in Christian theology.<sup>2</sup> As with any appeal to authority, so too the appeal to experience is a *counterappeal*, whether acknowledged as such or not. It is essentially a claim for the dominance

<sup>2</sup> It could be fascinating to read the *sed contra* of the *quaestio*, as used by Aquinas for example, as prefaced by the phrase "however, in my experience . . ."

of one opinion over another, for the right of the opinion to be heard and possibly to be determinative of thought, speech, or action, not on the basis of the content of the opinion or the logic used to construct the argument, but because of the genesis and possession of the opinion by a particular person or group. If the opinion were thought to stand on its own account, the rhetorical appeal to experience would be unnecessary. However, to employ the rhetorical appeal need not be taken as a clue to the weakness of the opinion it prefaces. The nature of its strength or value, that is, the warrant for its authority, is another kind of emphasis given by the appeal to experience.

Second, then, the cipher "in my experience . . ." can be taken as making the claim that what is about to be said is not ideological, but is the articulation of the actual form of life of an individual or a group. The claim is that what is about to be said is not merely an abstract concept or theory, a mere repetition of past opinions, but is the articulation of the actual operative principles or convictions of the individual or group. As such it can be in the mode of an appeal which calls into question the interlocutor's opinion or the received opinion, and asserts by contrast the truth (or at least what the speaker claims should prevail); moreover, it is presumed there is a right, if not a necessity, that it be heard and considered, more because of its function as actual operative content than for any other reason. The activity of "making myself heard" through articulation of "my experience" may be analyzed psychologically, socially, and philosophically in terms of identity formation or conflicts of power which require self-assertion, regardless of the content of the opinion. Questions are raised when the emphasis on a "right to be heard" is taken to mean that the position has authority *on the basis* of its being the articulation of actual operations.

The two forms of emphasis should not be confused. A careful distinction is needed between "experience" as a term to name the authentic articulation of how I happen to function as a human person, and the appeal to that opinion qua "experience" as the warrant for its acceptance as a norm or model (not to be confused with truth, licitness, or value), in a word, as a warrant for the "authority" of my opinion over a particular form of life, even over a particular community.<sup>3</sup> There is a moment of passage between these two uses which depends upon judgments of reality and value. To assert my opinion as part of the dialectic of an argument is one thing, to presume the assertion is the

<sup>3</sup> I am aware that I am presupposing that "truth" has or is an "authority," in contradistinction to other possible determinates such as power, numerical majority, historical precedent, temporal age, and so on.

conclusion of the argument is another. The rhetorical ciphers are also evidence of the sense of being misunderstood which is expressed in similar phrases, such as "now look here . . ." or "now listen to me . . ." It articulates the sense that one's having been heard is a form of not being heard. One's opinion has a right to be heard, or more precisely to be heard and understood, on the grounds of its own principles of construction. It carries a sophisticated, even if intuitive, awareness that opinions in their differing are the articulation of differing principles, and that more is at stake than simple self-assertion. However, the appeal to experience can inaugurate a foreclosure on the necessary dialectic of opinions rather than initiate it. When the appeal is actually a demand for "my experience" to be dominant, to overcome and displace the other opinions of the conversation, then the appeal to experience degenerates to an appeal to authority in the pejorative sense, resulting in an antinomy of opinions at best, an unmoving opposition at worst.

The rhetorical appeal to experience is thus both a maintenance of the Enlightenment desire to set aside the tutelage of any group or text so as to exercise reason in full freedom of inquiry, and also an instance of the displacement of authority from the dominant community to the individual or to particularized groups within the community. As the history of philosophical, psychological, and social criticism subsequent to the Enlightenment confirms, this form of an appeal to experience must itself be subjected to critique and is never literally a disinterested appeal. That is not to say it is purposefully ignorant let alone ill willed. Rather, it points out that an appeal to experience as the authorization of the status of a given opinion is dependent upon a theory of rationality, of human nature, of the relation of the individual to society and history, and of language and all other forms of mediation. The rhetorical appeal to experience, once examined, leads us to a nest of philosophic problems.

Thus, if the rhetorical appeal to experience is to be useful, particularly in Christian theology, it will benefit from two kinds of philosophical analysis, one which will consider the chief characteristics of experience and another which will consider its role in arguments. The latter will investigate the appeal to experience as the moment in an argument which invites analysis and appreciation of the inherently dialectical character of the occurrence. The appeal to experience is a negative moment which alerts us, not to the obvious, i.e. the fact that the speaker is speaking, but to the unexpressed, i.e. the fact that the speaker is absent, is not represented by the other conversation partner's self-articulation. The occurrence of the rhetorical appeal, while it

indeed calls attention to the content of what follows, seems to raise issues rather than settle them, and a foremost issue is why the appeal itself is needed at the moment of its occurrence in the argument.

As to the former analysis, it must be remembered that as a rhetorical cipher the phrase "in my experience . . ." offers no content and need not be construed as a description of states of the self. Rather, it serves as a preparatory remark before the statement of content, giving an indirect clue to a state of affairs in the community of believers, the realm of public discourse, or in the academy. What is masked in the rhetorical appeal is the fact that, like any such appeal to authority, one is simultaneously appealing to a tradition and its multiple origins and connections. The appeal to "my experience" is of particular interest, then, because its linguistic form appears to be the opposite of what it actually is, an appeal to a particular tradition of experience and authority, and its being anchored in a particular self likewise belies its dependence on others and its intent to be determinative of others.

I turn first to a statement of some general characteristics of experience as a philosophical category, and then to a proposal about a range of uses for the notion within a theological argument.

#### EXPERIENCE AS A PHILOSOPHIC CATEGORY

A thorough philosophical investigation of the notion "experience" and its use in arguments would require a lengthy digression into the history of the rise to prominence of this notion in the 17th and 18th centuries, though it obviously had been present previously in Western philosophy in some guise or other. The philosophers and psychologists of the last three centuries have developed many schemata within which to define "experience" as a particular moment and relate it to the other activities essential to the full range of human knowledge. Rather than repeat the usual history of that succession of theories, I will articulate four general rules governing the notion "experience" which emerge despite differing epistemologies and psychologies.

#### *Experience Is a Construct*

Whether one examines the most rudimentary occurrence of experience as interior or exterior awareness, in relatively isolated instances or in large collections of "my life experience," one discovers a construction, dependent upon a variety of operations and elements; it is composed of what is past, projective of the future, elusively in the present; it is shaped by a complex of physiological, psychological, and linguistic activities; and, as a result, it is multilayered in its potential for sense, reference, and meaning. By the time some moment of the interrelation

of self and other is actually adverted to reflectively and appealed to as "experience," it has undergone a process of construction which a phenomenology can deconstruct only by stopping the flow of consciousness so as to dissect the living. Experience is therefore investigated through some form of mediation, whether through memory or imagination, through thought by means of conceptualization or judgment, through language by means of articulation, or through symbolic representation of some kind.

Thus certain phrases become problematic: experience as the given, experience as immediate, experience as incorrigible, experience as consisting of discrete moments. At the very point at which I am able actually to appeal to experience, I have achieved a level of awareness in which I implicitly know that I am appealing to something which I have constructed, which is therefore revisable, and subject to a request for justification of some kind. Thus experience is neither given, nor unmediated, nor incorrigible, nor atomistic: it is constructed.

### *Experience Is Intentional*

An appeal to experience always includes, implicitly or explicitly, a prepositional phrase following it, beginning with "of" or "about" or "with" or a similar connective, which will convey the intentional (in the sense of the "tending towards") character of experience. Hegel discusses it in terms of the interpenetration and mutual dependence of self and other, and Heidegger unfolds the great variety of relations to things and to others which human "being-in-the-world" implies, exploring the movement into the "there" of the "being-there." Wittgenstein's intensive analysis of various language uses not only criticizes the positivist limitation of language to empirical reference, but also encourages an expansion of our understanding of intentionality in its plurality of forms. The forms of appeal which are problematic in relation to this general rule of intentionality are those which presume that experience is self-contained or private. Such construals of experience remain enthralled by the invention of that particular kind of subjectivity called "modern"; they tend to forget the social, mediated, and linguistic character of consciousness.

Thus certain usages become problematic when they employ the term "experience" in place of "feeling" or "intuition" in the sense of an unthematic or vague state of consciousness. Such a substitution can be accompanied by a claim to the uniqueness of such "experience," to its superiority as unarticulated, or perhaps to its immunity to requirements for authentication or justification as to its use in an argument. Most sophisticated theories of knowledge make careful distinctions between these two moments of knowing, and assign them relative



merit and use based upon the teleology of the whole range of ways of knowing.

### *Experience Is Derivative*

This is a corollary of the constructed and intentional character of experience. When I preface a remark with the phrase "in my experience," I am in part saying "according to what I have received." Rudimentarily, I am appealing to what has shaped my consciousness from both beyond myself and through the structuring operations of consciousness itself, those which are natural and those which are learned. I am also saying "as I have been taught," not referring simply to formal schooling or education, but to family customs, and to my socialization in a variety of groups. I indirectly admit to membership in those groups which have formed my person, given me my language, shaped attitudes and capacities for feeling, and habituated me with notions, concepts, rules, and attitudes.

Thus a phrase like "personal experience" is problematic when it is used to claim uniqueness or irreducibility, or exemption from critique. There is a sense in which no experience is strictly "mine." In fact, were I not to live in a common and agreed upon world of experiencing, communication and interaction would be impossible. As Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology*, self-consciousness comes about through the discovery of the "we," and the full development into Spirit depends upon language and culture. As Heidegger puts it, we live most consistently in the "they," in modes of alienation, and authenticity is only a modified form in which everydayness is taken up. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, meaning is found through the investigation of use, and language use has its foothold in a form of living.

### *Experience Is Dialectical*

This also is a corollary of the constructed and intentional character of experience. We employ the term "dialectical" here, but we could just as accurately characterize experience at this point as dynamic, self-altering, self-displacing, or inventive. As inherently unstable, experience is never perfectly balanced between "self" and "other," never simply "of the present" but always coming from the past and projecting the future, never simply "mine" but also "theirs," and never merely "a position" or "an opinion" but also "a counterposition" and "an opposing opinion." Most philosophers and psychologists have proposed some form of teleology for human consciousness, either one which is imposed upon it or one it has by nature. Thus each moment is a nest of relations "on the move," a configuration or gestalt which adds its necessary but not sufficient conditions to the ever-complexifying self-and-other awareness. We easily consider consciousness to be developmental, his-

torical, and relative to circumstances, somewhat in contradiction of phrases like "in my experience" or "personally speaking." So "in my experience" may connote: "I refuse to move." Thus certain phrases become problematic, such as "you can't possibly understand my experience" or "no one will ever persuade me that . . ." When experience is collapsed into the subject itself *simpliciter*, the appeal has obviated itself.

These four characteristics—constructed, intentional, derivative, and dialectical—are applicable to the common sense uses of the word "experience" which one finds in a dictionary definition: "experience" as the conscious apprehension of inner or outer reality through senses and mind; as active participation in specific events and the knowledge gained by such participation; as the undergoing of life and the accumulation of knowledge thereby; as experimentation, testing, or trial.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers and psychologists interested in epistemology or cognitive structure produce theories which map out the multiple activities between the unconscious and the mystical, giving the word "experience" a technical role as referring to a specific human operation in a series of operations. Since these activities occur as a whole, anticipating one another or being built upon one another, experience can be said to participate in those characteristics which belong to the whole. In the case of its use in theological works, experience is often used as a nontechnical comprehensive term covering the whole range of cognitive and emotional operations without being too precise or limiting. In other cases, the term is used in a predetermined, technical sense.

The four general rules concerning experience lead me to question two phrases which are common in theological arguments and range between common sense and technical uses. First, the phrase "common human experience" is sometimes used to imply a foundation of human operations common to all human beings, either as to content or structure. Such a rarified abstraction would be asymptotically approaching emptiness in its efforts to be as common as possible, or would function more as a prescription as to how we ought to speak about human beings from other cultures or religions *as if* they were ourselves. That there are family resemblances among human beings, analogous descriptions of human activities, can hardly be denied. That there is literally a "common experience" would presume either a single subjective substrate, which is contradictory, or a singularity of history, culture, and language, which is counterfactual. The best sense one can make of such a phrase as "common human experience" is to treat it as

<sup>4</sup> This list is a synthesis of the lists of definitions found in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1937) and *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1976).

a cipher for "experience." Human beings experience; in that they are all alike. Beyond that, irreducible diversity enters in as the constructive, intentional, derivative, and dialectical character of experience is grasped in the concrete. Another use of the phrase could be as part of a prescriptive theory of the transcendental conditions of all human experience, a notion which may indeed be needed by some theologians to make their arguments work, but one which is more ideal and prescriptive than empirical and descriptive.

A second phrase to be reconsidered is "religious experience." It can be used to imply that there are specific sorts of human operation which are "religious" or that there are specific foci of the intentionality that can be called "religious." If the phrase means the experience of the various elements which make up the actual functioning of a specific religion, then such experience is only different from other experience in having particular modes of construction, intention, derivation, and dialectic. The phrase can then be seen to be as ordinary as "teaching experience," "dish-washing experience," "fund-raising experience." The word "experience" is used to signify acquaintance with, expertise in, certain states of affairs and human interaction with them commonly called religion (and more properly named with a specific adjective, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, etc). If it is taken to mean human operation with a particular quality, namely "religiousness," then the phrase "religious experience" would be like the phrases "frightening experience," "comforting experience," or "confusing experience." In both of these cases, as acquaintance with a state of affairs or as a quality of experience, the phrase "religious experience" is subjected to investigation by many sciences and disciplines, and is often reduced to other more elemental forms of experience. Isolating its nonreducible character would presumably depend upon discovering, beyond the obvious use of generally accepted religious terms, its peculiar interpretive, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, or even mystical characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

As early as the 16th century but particularly since the 19th century, the growing need to preserve a domain for religious belief in face of its ineffectualness occasioned the development of a theory about historic religions and human nature, in which the phrase "religious experience" has come to mean a peculiar kind of human operation which, in the various developments of the theory, exhibits a unique form of construction, intention, derivation, and dialectic. Thus, what was denied as possible for the human mind by Kant and made a constituent of all

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for example, Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) chap. 2; Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1990).

consciousness by Hegel, was made foundational yet inaccessible by Schleiermacher. The moment of religiousness is prior to experience yet inseparable from it. As Rahner will describe it a century later, it is the unthematic transcendental condition which is inseparable from categorical experience and known through a careful process of philosophical reflection. In determining what religiosity is, Rahner adopts Kant's demand for critical justification of it, Hegel's placement of it within an optimistic teleological anthropology, and Schleiermacher's preconceptual status for it. Thus there is actually no religious experience, *per se*, to point to, but only a religious dimension of all experience. What we are after seems better served by the phrase "the religious dimension of all experience."

Adjectival or adverbial additions to "experience" can be indicative of deeply rooted cultural imperatives and forms of functioning that human beings might be said to be struggling with. They do not necessarily "refer" to anything as such, but do alert us to a state of affairs within which a regaining of certain ways of speaking, thinking, and functioning are essential for the health of humanity, or specifically for the health of the Church. I suggest this is the case with the phrases "religious experience" and "common human experience," which are in themselves troublesome expressions. While they may appear to do valuable service in certain theological contexts, they can also be symptomatic of the situation which Michael Buckley's analysis of the origins of modern atheism discloses.<sup>6</sup>

#### APPEAL TO EXPERIENCE IN THEOLOGY

Beyond the rhetorical use of an appeal to experience, and keeping in mind the four general rules I have suggested about the notion itself, I would propose a continuum of broad possibilities for the meaning and use of the notion "experience" when it constitutes a major element in the work of a theologian. The range of possibilities, of course, admits of a succession of slight variations and I will only highlight certain significant moments of change from one type to another. The two ends of the continuum, which might well join one another from opposite directions, are an objectification of experience in a theological anthropology at one end, and a radical loss of the self in the transcendent Other, beyond articulation and identity, at the other end. While these extremes seem easy to locate, the nodes which mark transition between are not necessarily so obvious. I will attempt to describe three other types of appeal and what they entail. Essential to each stage or

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1987).

moment will be noting the role which the transcendent and the community (or tradition) play in the construal of experience.

### *The Appeal Transcendental*

When experience enters a theological argument in the form of an appeal to an anthropology, it functions as an extreme of the objectification of experience. In effect, experience is a term for philosophy, or some such theory about the common elements or structures of actual human life, often of cognition and volition taken as the essential operations which constitute human activity. The appeal is not to any actual descriptions of experience, but to the "conditions of possibility" of all experience, of the structuring elements which make experience human. For theological arguments it is crucial whether this appeal presumes there is a transcendent dimension to all experience or not. On the one hand, if it presumes such an horizon, then the argument can proceed apologetically, requiring the interlocutor to admit self-contradiction if she does not admit of the intelligibility of a given doctrine of an historical religion's self-description. The doctrine, derived from the transcendental conditions of all experience, could only be denied if the transcendental conditions are denied. This would involve the contradiction of denying what one is using for the denial. On the other hand, if the appeal transcendental excludes the possibility of a transcendent dimension to all experience, then the appeal would proceed in the argument to "explain away" anything distinctively religious or theological that cannot be adequately explained by other sciences or disciplines. In both cases, through the appeal to experience before experience (that is, to the transcendental conditions of all experience known only through a special process of reflective thinking), the argument can proceed to the necessity of particular doctrinal content, either by a logical unfolding or reduction.

As to the community, the appeal transcendental with a transcendent dimension potentially appeals to all possible human beings, living or otherwise. "Experience" and the "community" coincide, so that appeal to experience is appeal to the community and in effect its tradition, i.e. its inherent structures. If there is no transcendent dimension by necessity, then the appeal to the community is to provide negative instances, as it were. What everyone has is an experience of the absence of God. In either case there is no need for an appeal to a specific community or to specific forms of experience. One might conclude that an appeal transcendental which does not include a transcendent dimension inherent in its community (i.e. in human nature) ultimately obviates strictly theological argument.

*The Appeal Hermeneutical*

What I am calling the appeal hermeneutical is an appeal to experience marked by modes of suspicion. If the appeal transcendental consists in asserting a universal and self-establishing conception of the conditions of human life, then the appeal hermeneutical questions the very possibility of such an assertion by making explicit in the appeal the perspectival, limited, and even alienating characteristics of experience. Every appeal has a companion caution expressed with it, which questions what is appealed to, articulated in description, assertion, or some other linguistic form. Unlike the appeal transcendental which is foundational, the appeal hermeneutic emphasizes the dialectical character and function of any appeal. Unlike the appeal transcendental whose inner principles would not require movement on the continuum, the appeal hermeneutical admits of two obvious moves. Experience so invoked could be expected to resolve itself either into the appeal transcendental by way of correction of the presumed normative structure identical with human nature, or into the appeal constructive. What is invited is, so to speak, an unpacking of the story provided in the account of experience so as to discover its ideological features, with the possibility that the experience is corrigible by adoption of "the normative" conceived as either universal or particularistic. For an argument to remain in the appeal hermeneutical would seem to me to invite a form of skepticism to prevail in one's theoretical constructions. Every possible position would be subjected to scrutiny, based upon altering construals of reality in "experience" and accompanied by a persistent hesitation ever to settle upon any construal as normative. In such a usage no evidence ever suffices to authorize any experience as normative, and the appearance of movement in an argument, from construal to construal without rest, must, I think, give away to some other form of appeal.

The transcendent and communal dimensions of experience share in the unstable and skeptical character of this appeal. If the transcendent is an ingredient at all, it is likely to be inaccessible or at least subject to the same scrutiny as any other element or dimension of experience. It would admit of a variety of embodiments, none of them normative, as the procedure of suspicion requires. As for the community, it is multiple in its manifestations but limited in its viability. As the procedures of suspicion are carried out, adherence to any particular community or tradition is made increasingly difficult, and would ultimately produce a situation in which the appeal to experience would be a form of refined, philosophical skepticism contrasted to "common life"

or the possibilities of change through the acceptance of a normative narrative.

### *The Appeal Constructive*

In the appeal constructive, experience is invoked as the moment of transformation, being a construal of experience as possessing neither the inevitability of a transcendental condition of human nature, nor simply a relativity consequent upon its being representative of a community of persons, things, ideas, language, habits and similar formative historical and social influences. As such it enters into a theological argument without imposing a universal structure independent of the particularities of the religion's community and its beliefs, or without depriving itself of normativity through a presupposed relativity of all experience as mere convention or incommensurate subjectivities. The appeal constructive is a dual appeal to possibility and necessity. It is possible through experience to change one's life, and to accomplish change it is necessary for experience to interact with already operative determinants. What is appealed to as experience must be capable of bearing necessity in itself, and yet be a "possibility," neither simply structurally inevitable nor radically disparate from the context into which it is brought. Experience is, then, not unqualifiedly the "source" of theological construction, nor is it incapable of being normative as in the appeal hermeneutical. It can be known and articulated, as the appeal immediate or mystical will not readily admit, and it does not collapse into a theory of human nature in order to establish its normativity.

I would envision the appeal to proceed, not necessarily explicitly each time it is invoked, but implicitly involving the following stages or moments. Experience as a form of encounter is recognized for its characteristics as constructed, intentional, derivative, and dialectical. As such it enters an argument not as foundational but as interruptive. It enters as a moment of discontinuity into a larger, already established context. It is interruptive since, if it were simply continuous with what is already operative, it would not need to be adverted to precisely as "experience." It might well be considered *disruptive*, and as such takes its place in an argument (or in life) as a challenge to be learnt from or refused. Thus, the insertion invites consideration, discussion, revision, change. As the element of experience becomes incorporated into the argument (and ultimately into the form of life the argument might be proposing or redescribing), it becomes subsumed so that it need no longer be appealed to precisely as "experience." It has become, so to speak, part of the structuring environment which will be

the context for the next incursion of "experience" which will invite consideration. Experience passes into habit, an appeal to what challenges passes into an appeal to the tradition.

In this form of appeal, in Christianity, the role of the transcendent is congruent with the interruptive, critical, and determining role that experience plays in theological construction, mirroring its role in Christian life. As such, the transcendent enters into the established and performs the tasks of experience in a transcendent way, interrupting, questioning, and norming in an absolute way. If intervention by the transcendent is denied as a possibility (which seems to me self-contradictory in this sort of appeal to experience), then the whole point of attentiveness to experience is undercut. In this form of appeal, it is not human nature in general, the needs of a particular part of humanity, but the agency of the transcendent which is "experience."

As to the role of the community and of tradition, it has a dual face. On the one side it functions as the medium within which the transcendent can appear, and on the other side it remains opaque, if not resistant, to this revelatory agency. If one emphasizes the *content* of new and startling experience which requires special attention, one mitigates the "startling" character in favor of an interpretation which inserts it into the established tradition and community, at worst in a reductive fashion. If one emphasizes the *interruptive character* of experience, one moderates the organic and continuous nature of experience in favor of radical change, at worst in a schismatic or schizoid fashion. Christianity, it seems to me, profits from an appeal constructive which maintains a balance between these two forms of communal presence and tradition.

### *The Appeal Confessional*

The appeal confessional agrees with the appeal constructive in its use of experience as normative, taking on a contemporary urgency when it addresses the difficulties which the appeal hermeneutic causes by engendering a kind of relativism or skepticism. This appeal could be an outright appeal to authority, with or without a mention of "experience." It might consist in simply "telling the story," recounting the experience, in the hope that the mere hearing of it will inaugurate the moment of transformation and reconstruction. The appeal to experience is an appeal to "the way things are" or at least "the way things should be." In the life of the Church, the liturgical use of the Bible, for example, might be thought of as an appeal confessional, and some forms of preaching consist of the simple rendering of an account of experience.



As such, this appeal might be called "naive," though we should distinguish between a favorable and a pejorative usage. It is naive on account of its convictions, not necessarily unaware of criticism, but setting it aside, perhaps avoiding it, even possibly repudiating some forms of it which endanger the integrity of the experience. This appeal can be called naive with a pejorative intent, if one has the conviction that no human experience can have ultimate significance, perhaps as the appeal hermeneutical, when absolutized, would require. Just as the appeals constructive, hermeneutical, and transcendental seem apt for some situations yet not for others, so the appeal confessional can be appropriate or counterproductive. Particularly when it would foreclose upon forms of suspicion, the appeal turns authoritarian and is often given the epithet "fideistic" or "fundamentalist." If it moves to become an appeal immediate or mystical, of course, in changing ground it gains credibility. One might even consider the appeal confessional to follow upon some sort of appeal mystical, as the highly dissonant experience of the transcendent is mediated through a metaphor or narrative.

As to the transcendent and the community, the appeal confessional maintains a close connection between these two and the experience itself, presuming the transcendent to be mediated to the community by the experience itself, and the community to be established, as it were, by the experience. This obviously lends considerable weight to the appeal to experience, but unlike the appeal transcendental which does a similar thing in generalities, the appeal confessional "speaks" for the community and the transcendent in particularities. Denial of the transcendent altogether would seem unlikely in the appeal confessional, since it would degenerate into a kind of hypocrisy to have an almost apodictic (absolute) assertion of experience without a firm assertion of the transcendent (as absolute) which the experience conveys. Such seems to have been the unsuccessful attempt of those kinds of "death of God" theology which wished to marry denial of a transcendent God with personal piety devoted to Jesus in all His particularity. Similarly, the community and tradition are vital to this form of appeal, since they are its principal audience and source; the presumption is that a particular account of experience can be normative for the community as a whole and that the recounting of the experience is not oppressive for the group but preservative.

This appeal, like the appeal hermeneutical, could deflect theology from its constructive work by rendering it into mere translation or rephrasing of the account of experience, as given in the Bible for example, just as the hermeneutical appeal become skeptical would discourage the normativity of any text, of any experience.

*The Appeal Immediate or Mystical*

In this form of appeal to experience, the ultimate collapse of the subject into that which is experienced causes the appeal to be paradoxically an indescribable one, yet one which requires articulation if it is to be used for the good of the community in various forms of theological construction. Radical self-transcendence into that which is beyond the self does not admit of mediation, though one might move back into a former mode of appeal and attempt a description of the state of self and its object, with the help of the imagination. Or, one might provide a symbolic, especially artistic, representation of the experience with or without words, with the caution that the actual experience was the occasion or instrumental cause of the expression, but remains unmediated. Experience ceases to be experience, in the sense of what is constructed, intentional, derivative, and dialectical. There is a similarity to the appeal transcendental, inasmuch as what is appealed to is the experience before experience. If the radically subjective is rendered objective as transcendental structures, so here the radically subjective is left as it is. Concerning the two important relations to the transcendent and to the community, this mode of experience posits a coincidence of the human with the transcendent, and that can be either an empty nothingness or a divine fullness. It may be presented as momentary and utterly gratuitous or as a universal, foundational structure of human life itself, or of a given religion. While in some forms of the experience itself the community is finally utterly absent, in the moment of being alone with the Alone, there are obviously other forms of mysticism which occur in the midst of the everyday and through attention to very determinate manifestations of the transcendent. Just as there are nuances within each of the previous moments on the continuum of options, so here also there are variations of the degree to which the individual is withdrawn from all limitations of the human, and hence of community or tradition in any sense.

In one sense there is no manner in which to "test" such experiences because of their uniqueness to the subject, and so they carry an apodictic weight in an argument. Even so, there is a complex tradition within each historic religion precisely about the testing of such experiences, according to the norms of the particular religion, particularly its notions of both the community and the transcendent. Thus two significant difficulties arise when such an appeal mystical is made without grounding within a given religion's community of faith. If it is an appeal to a generic form of absorption into the transcendent, then it admits of any and all particularities indifferently and loses its usefulness precisely as an appeal to experience. Similarly, as an appeal orig-

inating outside of any particular religious tradition and community, it would, because of its rootlessness, lack real effectiveness as critical and potentially transformative.

Thus another form of the appeal mystical is the appeal immediate, the simple assertion or expression of opinions by sheer force of the subject, with the claim that because the appeal is made it is to be taken as authoritative or true or requiring respect. The one who makes the appeal mystical has utter confidence in the experience beyond experience, of what is "because it is so," whereas the one who makes the appeal immediate has utter confidence because "I say so." Both appear to be without community, since in the former case the subject collapses into the transcendent beyond all awareness, and in the latter case the transcendent, and all else, collapses into the subject producing what is technically called solipsism. Perhaps at its best, the appeal immediate is the appeal rhetorical in its polyvalent forms.

#### CONCLUSION

These remarks are the result of observing the notion of experience at work in a variety of texts, pedagogical situations, and moments of church life. My continuum admittedly hovers between being a description of and a proposal for constructive theology, since it proposes a dialectic of positions beyond merely identifying them. Before concluding I will offer a brief indication of the evidence for my analysis, with one important caution. As is the case in Kelsey's work on the use of Scripture, showing the presence of a particular usage in an author is not to suggest that that form of appeal to experience is the only one the author uses or the situation requires. Deciding when to use which form of appeal is a further issue. A simple mention of authors is inadequate, but for heuristic purposes let me suggest that the moments of the continuum can be located in the following typical forms. The appeal transcendental can be found in various types of transcendental Thomism, though an author such as Rahner need not be construed as employing an unqualified appeal as Kant did, but rather an ad hoc transcendental proposal. Perspectival theologians employ various sorts of the hermeneutical, and much of the modern philosophy of religion uses the skeptical form of this appeal. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are an excellent example of this. Barth's discussion of the place of experience in theology in the *Church Dogmatics* 1.1, or in his work on Anselm, offers one instance of a theoretical exposition of the appeal constructive, and some contemporary narrative theology attempts to employ that form of appeal. Various forms of homiletic and devotional literature use the appeal confessional, and certain forms of evangelism and its popular literature give instance of

the appeal naive. The appeal mystical has a very influential exposition by Schleiermacher in his *Speeches*, and is found with varying effect in texts ranging from classical mystical texts to New Age writings. Inasmuch as the appeals mystical and transcendental join one another in closing the circle of possibilities, it would not be incorrect to observe passages in Rahner, for example, where the two intersect.

In conclusion I would suggest that the appeal to experience seems to be an instance of itself: it is itself evidence of a particular kind of experience and of a particular context for theological work within church life and culture at large. As such it is a Janus figure, poised between worlds of discourse and construction. As its doors open to offer those employing it a reconsideration of previous agenda and principles, it returns the contemporary theologian to many past problems and issues which have intricate and well-established histories. As the doors open upon the future, then the ladder by which they have reached the position can be thrown away, as Wittgenstein suggested in another context, so that the work of Christian theology can go forward. There is the potential for a certain bewitchment by "experience" as an element of theological construction which, like Scripture and philosophy, can become disproportionately preoccupying and autocratic. It is equally important to note that the theologian who neglects the appeal to experience does so at great peril. My attempt here at an analysis and clarification has functioned equally as a critique of inadequate and inconsistent uses of experience in Christian theology and as an appreciation of its vital function. The fabric of theological work and of church life profits from a harmonious blend of the three elements of philosophy, Scripture, and experience. A change in relation among these three signals a change in ecclesiastical, cultural, and institutional climates.