Doth Mine Eyes Deceive Me?
Elora Walmisley

Introduction
A greater part of the evidence put forth for the existence of God comes from personal experiences. Take the Quran for example; the entire book is thought to be a revelation from Allah to the prophet Mohammad. However, the question of whether or not a personal experience of God can be given as evidence of his existence must be called into play. With the help of scientific scepticism I will attempt to show that personal experiences are not a valid form of evidence for the existence of God. I will discuss how human perception is flawed; taking into account phenomena such as hallucinations and sleep paralysis. I will also discuss possible alternatives to the oft mentioned “after death” experience.

Gods
God and Gods have been defined as many different things, by different cultures and religions throughout the ages. For the purposes of this essay I will be defining God as a powerful and sentient being that watches over its people, and has the ability to interfere with their lives. This definition includes gods such as the Christian God, Allah and also situations of multiple deities, such as the Greek Gods. However, this definition does not include non-sentient or non-interfering spirits or Hinduism. It is taught in Hinduism that gods will not interfere with the karmic cycle and hence the lives of the followers of that religion.

Scientific Scepticism
Scientific scepticism is a branch of scepticism that is concerned with the amount of evidence that relates to a claim. For example; there is little evidence that the Loch Ness Monster exists. According to scientific scepticism it would therefore be unreasonable to believe that this creature exists. I have chosen scientific scepticism for this essay because philosophical scepticism leads to Descartes conclusion that the only certain piece of knowledge is that ‘I’ exist; that the consciousness of the individual exists. As philosophical scepticism states that a claim cannot be accepted unless it is 100% proven, it does not allow for any knowledge other than Descartes conclusion, and it therefore an unreasonable branch of scepticism to apply to the context of this essay.

A Personal Experience
What does it mean, for someone to “personally experience” God? Personal is an adjective describing ownership of something by a particular person, it is related to the individual. To personally experience a God is to encounter it alone, without witness. Experience is a broad term; in this case I will assume that an ‘experience’ of god includes situations such as visitations in a dream or visions, where the individual actually claims to have seen God or claims that he has spoken to them. For the sake of the literary flow of the essay I will be referring to God as a singular entity.

Arguments and Amendments
Many people claim to have experienced a God in one form or other, the argument they make for their claim can be broken down into two premises and a conclusion:

Premise One: I have experienced God
Premise Two: All things that I have experienced exist
Conclusion: God exists
The above argument appears to be valid; if both the premises are true then the conclusion follows logically from them. Any attack on this argument must be made by discrediting the premises. I will now give evidence that premise one is potentially false.

The first premise of the above argument states that “I have experienced God” However, how can the individual making this claim be sure that they are correct in assuming that what they experienced was actually God? Most religions claim that God can appear to his followers, for example Exodus 3 from the Christian bible; God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush and commands him to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. There are many different and popular religions circulating in today’s society, most of which have conflicting deities. Each of these religions claims that the God worshipped in their religion is the one and only God, and are eager to back up this assumption their personal experiences and the personal experiences of others. It is obvious then that not all of these people can be correct in assuming that they have experienced the God of their religion, as this would lead to numerous contradictions, or numerous gods. There are also other entities mentioned in religions, such as the devil, that could be deceiving the individual into believing they are God.

Also, there is no independent ‘check’ for the individual to test their belief that what they have experienced is indeed God. The experience is private, occurs in the mind and is subjective to the individual. This means that there is no way of proving beyond reasonable doubt that anyone has ever experienced God. This throws a lot of doubt onto premise one, as it is unverifiable. However as the premise, whilst unlikely, is not able to be disproved, an attack on premise two is required to show that the argument is not sound.

Premise two states that “all things I experience exist” however, this does not account for situations such as hallucinations and sleep paralysis. Hallucinations are sensations that appear real but are created by the mind. Bearing in mind that hallucinations can affect senses that are not visual, but rather have effects on all five, they can produce convincing illusions that would be easily mistaken for a real experience. Sleep paralysis is a phenomenon often experienced just before a person falls asleep or just after they have awoken. It consists of an involuntary inability to move, and is often accompanied by vivid hallucinations. One of the common hallucinations created by sleep paralysis is the feeling that there is someone else in the room, and can be accompanied by auditory and visual hallucinations. Like the hallucinations above, this phenomenon produces convincing illusions that could easily be misinterpreted as real events by the person experiencing this phenomenon.

The presence of hallucinations, under sleep paralysis, or without, effectively disproves premise two in the aforementioned wording. Because it is impossible to state ‘all things I experience exist’ when these two phenomena produce experiences that are clearly not present in the world outside the mind of the person under their influence. This would then suggest that the simplified argument stated above is not sound. However, there is a common amendment to the argument concerning after death experiences:

Premise One: I have experienced God after death
Premise Two: As I was “dead” I could not have been affected by phenomena such as hallucinations
Premise Three: What I have experienced, that is not a product of hallucinations or other mind states, exists
Conclusion: Therefore God exists
This is another common argument relating personal experience to God that is employed in many religious sectors, because it is assumed that once someone is ‘dead’ they can no longer be subject to phenomena like hallucinations or sleep paralysis as the body has ceased to function. However, this amendment also has a flawed second premise:

Dimethyltryptamine\(^3\) is a particularly strong psychedelic. Whilst it is more commonly known as a hallucinogenic drug, it is also found naturally in the pineal gland of the human brain. In this form Dimethyltryptamide is associated with the process of dreaming, but can also be released at other times, causing hallucinations to the individual it is released in. On death there is a large release of Dimethyltryptamide into the rest of the brain from the pineal gland, which due to the fact that it takes time for the brain to shut down after death, has provided evidence that ‘after death’ experiences are nothing more than a product of this chemical reaction.

However, there is still much debate about the accuracy of this evidence at this point in time, though the view is becoming more widely accepted. It seems that before premise two can be discounted entirely, more conclusive evidence concerning Dimethyltryptamine release needs to be put forward. If premise two is discounted from new evidence it would seem that the above argument is then not sound and after death experiences cannot be used as conclusive evidence for the existence of God.

**Conclusion**

Considering the evidence I have put forward in this essay, I conclude that the everyday experience of God is more likely the result of sleep paralysis or hallucinations than actual experience of the supernatural. This means that personal experiences of God should not be counted as evidence for its existence without more physical evidence for the claim. The issue however, remains in the after death experience, and hinges on whether or not premise two is as flawed as science seems to be discovering it to be. If it is discovered that premise two is false, then it would seem that no personal experience of God is conclusive or convincing evidence for its existence. Though if the attempts to disprove premise two are incorrect, then the possibility of an after death experience of God being plausible evidence for his existence remains.

**Footnotes**

1. Theodore Schick, Jr. and Lewis Vaughn, 2002

**Bibliography**


Sleep Paralysis (Sanford University) accessed 23rd September, 2013

http://www.stanford.edu/~dement/paralysis.html