

The varieties of religious experience and summa theologica essay example

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



William James delivered a series of talks at Edinburgh College in 1901 and 1902, known as the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion. The publisher Longmans, Green & Co. compiled the lectures and published them, later in 1902. In general, the book is about what James viewed as the nature of religion and the fact that academia had not, up to that point in time, considered religion as a serious subject for research and study. This book, along with the work of Carl Jung, turned the eye of psychological and sociological researches to the purpose and expression of the religious impulse.

One of the central dichotomies in James' series of lectures concerned the opposition between existential judgment and the proposition of value. What James termed existential judgment means the care that science takes to analyze the source of an object. It is possible to examine an object's source, or origin, without considering the current value that the object has in contemporary society; in fact, doubts that one has about the sources of an object should not, James argues, color one's perceptions of that object's worth. The example he cites is the Society of Friends (the Quaker faith). Founded by George Fox, the Quakers were the predominant religion in the colony of Pennsylvania, and there are still active Quaker congregations in the United States today, focused on the promotion of peace. However, there are those who reject Quaker principles because there is anecdotal proof that George Fox suffered from schizophrenia. Those thinkers argue that it would be impossible for a schizophrenic to found a valid religion. James refers to this line of thinking as "medical materialism" and argues that the Quaker faith can have validity even though its founder may or may not have

suffered from a serious physical malady. He then moves on to discuss the Spanish painter El Greco, who had astigmatism – a disorder that affects vision. One might expect a valid critique of El Greco’s visual representation of scenes on the basis of astigmatism – but no such critique has ever surfaced. James attributes the fact that some object to Fox as a religious founder because of his schizophrenia while leaving El Greco untouched because of their biases against religion.

Another dichotomy that James tackles in the series of lectures is the gap between symbols of reality and reality itself. This differentiation marked a major turning point in the interpretation of the world, opening a door that would be kicked wide open by Roland Barthes and his army of structuralists, suggesting that there can be no universal source of truth, because everyone is confined by his or her semiotic nexus when interpreting the world. If you consider the word “ hamburger,” for example, the word and the actual idea are two different things (if you want proof of this, go to a Denny’s or IHOP and order a burger, and then compare what is brought to you to the picture in the menu – there will be significant differences). Similarly, the scientific notion of the word “ reality” misses out on the unseen wealth of objects and experiences that require the viewer to look at through the lens of faith. The example that James gives is the reaction of salivation that happens when we smell, or even contemplate (in some cases) upcoming food. There was no physical stimulus that touched the mouth – however, the idea (and, in some cases, the olfactory input) caused a reaction. Just because you don’t see or

taste a pumpkin pie, the implication goes, doesn't mean you can't have the physical symptoms of wanting one.

Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* is not a series of academic lectures; instead, it is designed for novices to the Christian faith and presents the reasoning behind the vast majority of the ideas in Christian theology. The book is divided into three parts: the first concerns the nature and existence of God, as well as the creation of the Earth, and the nature of humanity and angels. The second part is all about morality, with the first half of the second part looking more generally at the ideas behind morality, and the second half getting more specific, discussing particular areas of morality. The third part is all about Christ, including beliefs about his place in the Trinity and his work on the planet. This part also addresses the sacraments and the end times. Within each section, Aquinas proposes a series of questions. Each question is followed by a list of objections to Aquinas' answer to that question; then, Aquinas adds his own answer, finally replying to each of the objections he had listed. Aquinas did not write this book solely using his own thoughts; instead, he cites such thinkers as Aristotle, Peter Lombard, Augustine of Hippo, and Rabbi Moses Maimonides. Some of *Summa Theologica*'s most enduring points is the notion that theology is the science that is the most difficult to prove, because of the sublime nature that occupies much of its scope. The separation between an object (or person)'s existence and essence opened the door to much of the speculation about the effects of conditioning on the personality that still bedevil sociologists today. Also, Aquinas suggests that whatever one says about God must be metaphorical,

because it is impossible to describe God in the same language, on a literal level, that one uses to describe humanity.