CHAPTER
F I V E

Does Religious Experience Justify Religious Belief?

In this exchange, William Alston argues that religious or mystical experiences can provide *prima facie* rational support for the beliefs about God that are based on them. This support can, however, be overridden by other considerations, as when the believer is given a reason to think that the religious beliefs based on an experience are false or that the experience is for some other reason untrustworthy. Evan Fales disagrees, arguing that if religious experiences are to justify religious belief, such experiences must be cross-checked and thereby shown to be genuinely from God. He argues, however, that most religious experiences cannot be appropriately cross-checked and that the ones which can – namely, experiences yielding prophetic beliefs – almost inevitably fail any attempt to authenticate them. Fales concludes that religious experience does not in fact justify religious belief.

Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief

William P. Alston

1 Background

To answer the title question, the first job is to get straight about what *religious experience* is. In the widest sense, the term can be applied to any experiences one has in

connection with one's religious life, including a sense of guilt or release, joys, longings, a sense of gratitude, etc. But here we are more specifically concerned with experiences taken by their possessor to be an awareness of God. As a way of focusing on this distinctive kind of "religious experience," I have called it *perception of God*.[1]

Two comments on this terminology. First, I use "perception" in a "phenomenological" sense. I will call anything a "perception of X" (a tree, God, or whatever) provided that is what it seems to the subject to be, provided the subject takes it to be a *presentation* of X to the subject's experience. It is then a further question whether X is really present to the subject, whether the subject *really* perceives X (in a stronger sense of "perceive"). When the supposed object of the perception is God, I will speak of *mystical perception*. Second, "God" may be used in a wider or narrower way. In the Judeo-Christian tradition and in Islam we think of God as a supreme personal being; but in Buddhism the object of worship is often taken to be some sort of impersonal reality. To maximize coverage, I will let "God" range over any *supreme reality*, however construed.

What kinds of beliefs about God might possibly be supported by religious experience? It is difficult to draw sharp boundaries here, but for purposes of this discussion I will restrict myself to beliefs about what God is doing vis-à-vis the subject – comforting, guiding, strengthening, communicating a message – and about divine characteristics one might conceivably experience God as having – being powerful, loving, merciful. Let's call these *M-beliefs* ("M" for "manifestation").

It will make the topic more concrete to consider a particular case of mystical perception. Here is one taken from William James.

> [A]ll at once I . . . felt the presence of God – I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it – as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. . . . I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in humility and poverty, leaving him, The Almighty God, to judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted . . . I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization . . . But the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.[2]

This report is typical in several respects.

(1) The awareness of God is *experiential*, as contrasted with *thinking* of God or *reasoning* about him. It seems to involve a *presentation* of God.

1 William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

2 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), pp. 67–8.

(2) The experience is *direct*. One seems to be *immediately* aware of God rather than through being aware of something else. It is like seeing another human being in front of you, rather than like seeing that person on television. But there are more indirect experiences of God.

> There was a mysterious presence in nature . . . which was my greatest delight, especially when as happened from time to time, *nature became lit up from inside* with something that came from beyond itself.[3]

(3) The experience is a *non-sensory* presentation of God. But there are also experiences of God with sensory content.

> I awoke and looking out of my window saw what I took to be a luminous star which gradually came nearer, and appeared as a soft slightly blurred white light. I was seized with violent trembling, but had no fear. I knew that what I felt was great awe. This was followed by a sense of overwhelming love coming to me, and going out from me, then of great compassion from this Outer Presence.[4]

(4) It is a *focal* experience, one in which the awareness of God is so intense as to blot out everything else. But there are also milder experiences that persist over long periods of time as a background to everyday experience.

> God surrounds me like the physical atmosphere. He is closer to me than my own breath. In him literally I live and move and have my being.[5]

This discussion will be limited to *direct*, *non-sensory*, *focal* experiences, since they give rise to the strongest claims to be genuinely aware of God.

2 The Case for Experiential Support

The reporter of our first case (a French-speaking Swiss whom I will call "Bonnet") obviously supposes that he has learned something about God from his experience. In particular he supposes that he has perceived God to be loving and powerful, and perceived him to be telling him, Bonnet, to do his will from day to day. And since the perception was completely convincing to him, he has no more inclination to doubt it than he would have to doubt the veracity of a normal visual perception of an oak tree. But, of course, this confidence of his does not guarantee that the experience is, in fact, veridical. Even with sense perception one can be deceived. At dusk one can suppose that what one sees in the distance is a car when actually it is a cow. With both sense perception and mystical perception contradictions between reports prevent us from taking all of them to be veridical. Think of the divergent reports that witnesses give of automobile accidents. As for mystical perception, some people think

3 Timothy Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977), p. 19.
4 Ibid., p. 30.
5 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 71.

they perceive God telling them to murder as many Communists, postal workers, or schoolteachers as possible, while other people perceive God as supremely loving. They can't all be right. Hence in both areas we need some way of separating the sheep from the goats.

But though neither mystical experience nor sense experience is infallible, there are solid reasons for taking beliefs formed on the basis of either kind of experience to be, as we might say, *prima facie* rationally acceptable, rationally acceptable in the absence of sufficient reasons to the contrary (*overriders*). (Swinburne calls this "The Principle of Credulity."[6]) In other words, being formed on the basis of experience gives a belief an *initial credibility*, a *presumption* of truth. It is innocent until proved guilty. It is rationally acceptable (justified, warranted) so long as no one has sufficient reasons for taking it to be false (*rebutters*) or for taking the particular situation to be such that the experience does not have its usual force (*underminers*). Thus overriders come in two versions; rebutters and underminers. For a simple example concerning sense perception, suppose I think I see an elephant in my front yard. My belief that there is an elephant there would be justified unless there are strong reasons for thinking that there is no elephant in the area (rebutter) or that my vision is not working properly (underminer).

The main reason for accepting the Principle of Credulity is that it is the only alternative to complete skepticism about experience. Consider how we would show sense perception to be a generally reliable source of belief if we did *not* accord every perceptual belief an initial credibility. A survey of the most promising attempts to construct such an argument reveals that any otherwise strong candidate suffers from "epistemic circularity."[7] This consists of relying on the belief source whose credentials we seek to establish to provide us with premises for that establishment. Arguments for the reliability of sense perception that are not disqualified on other grounds (and many that are) depend on premises for which our only basis is sense perception. As a simple example, consider the popular line of thought that sense perception proves itself by its fruits, particularly by the way in which it puts us in a position to predict and thereby to control to some extent the course of events. It provides us with data on the basis of which we establish law-like generalizations, which we can then use as the basis for prediction and control. In this way we learn that milk sours more slowly when cold than when warm. This puts us in a position to predict that a refrigerated bottle of milk will last longer than an unrefrigerated one, and we can use this knowledge to control the condition of our milk. This is the humblest of examples, and the predictive power is greatly increased in scope and precision as we move further into the higher reaches of science; but the general point is the same. If sense perception weren't usually giving us the straight story about what is happening around us, how could we have so much success in anticipating the future course of events?

That sounds right. But how do we know that we are often successful in prediction? By induction from particular cases of success, obviously. But how do we know that we are successful in particular cases? By using our senses to determine

6 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

7 See William P. Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

whether what was predicted actually occurred. It is not as if an angel tells us this, or as if rational intuition does the job. But then the argument is tainted with epistemic circularity. We have to rely on sense perception for some of our crucial premises. The argument establishes the reliability of sense perception only if sense perception is in fact reliable. And that leaves us wondering whether that condition is satisfied.

If, on the other hand, we begin by assuming that perceptual beliefs are justifiably taken as true in the absence of sufficient overriders, we can use our empirical knowledge to support the claim that sense perception is reliable. For there will be many perceptual reports that we have no sufficient reasons *against*, and these can be used with impunity to pile up empirical evidence for the reliability of sense perception.

But when the Principle of Credulity is applied to mystical perception, it will support the attribution of a significant degree of reliability only if there are no strong reasons for denying rational acceptability to all or most religious beliefs based on mystical experience. But many such reasons have been suggested. Most of these are based on dissimilarities – real or alleged – between sense perception and mystical perception. I will critically examine several of them in the next few sections.

3 Some Obvious Differences between Sense Experience and Mystical Experience

(1) Sense experience is a common possession of mankind, while mystical experience is not. To be sure, several recent surveys have shown that many more people than is commonly supposed, even in our "secular" society, take themselves to have been directly aware of the presence of God. And the incidence in many other cultures is much higher. But still, by no means all people enjoy mystical experience, whereas no human being is totally without sense experience. And most of us have a rich variety of the latter.

(2) Sense experience is continuously and unavoidably present during all our waking hours, while for most of those who are not wholly bereft of mystical experience, it is, at best, enjoyed only rarely. It is a very unusual person who, like Brother Lawrence of *The Practice of the Presence of God* fame, is blessed with a constant experiential awareness of God.

(3) Sense experience, especially visual experience, is vivid and richly detailed, while mystical experience is meager and obscure. Though Bonnet's experience of God was deeply meaningful to him, and though he took it to show him something about God, still it could not begin to compare in richness and complexity of detail with a single glance out my study window at my front yard, crammed as that latter experience is with details of trees, flowers, passing cars in the street, neighbors' houses, etc.

Obvious differences like these make it difficult for some people to believe that mystical perception involves a genuine experience of objective reality. But on careful reflection we can see that this reaction lacks any basis worthy of the name.

We can usefully treat differences (1) and (2) together: (1) degree of dispersal in the general population and (2) frequency in the life of a given subject. Both have to do with the proportion of some relevant totality. So what does the extent of distribution in the population or the frequency within one subject have to do with the question of whether the experience contains important information? Why suppose that what happens only rarely cannot have cognitive value? We wouldn't dream of applying this principle to scientific or philosophical insight. That comes only rarely, and only to few people, but it is not denigrated for that reason. Would any reasonable person suggest that the kind of insight that led Einstein to the development of his Special and General Theory of Relativity is inferior in cognitive value to everyday visual awareness of one's surroundings, on the grounds that the latter is more widely shared and occurs more frequently? We can safely neglect frequency as an index to informational content.

As for (3), richness and detail of content, I can't see that it fares any better. Within sense perception there are large differences of this sort between sense modalities. Vision is miles ahead of the others in that regard, with touch and hearing placing a rather distant second, followed at a more considerable distance by taste and smell. One glance at a scene before me gives a much greater variety of information that one sniff or one taste. And the latter are severely restricted as to the kinds of information they provide. One glance at a scene can tell me that I am looking across a verdant valley at a green hillside on which are beautiful meadows, forests, barns, white farmhouses, and cows. How much more I learn from this than from a sniff that informs me that there is hot tar nearby or from a taste that tells me that the substance tasted has an acrid and rather smoky flavor.[8] Yet this is no reason for denying that taste and smell can involve veridical perception of external realities and give us genuine information about them, albeit not as much. We cannot sensibly hold that less information is no information at all. That would be like maintaining that a simple folk melody, since it is much less complex than the Bach B Minor Mass, is not really music, or that since a crude map I draw for you of the route to my house gives much less geographical information than the Rand-McNally Atlas, it gives no information at all.

4 Attempted Naturalistic Explanations of Mystical Experience

A more serious argument for a general dismissal of epistemological claims for mystical perception is based on the general principle that one perceives an object X in having a certain experience only if X is among the causes of that experience, and only if X plays one causal role rather than others in the production of that experience. With vision, for example, one sees a dog only if light reflected from the dog produces the retinal stimulation that sets off the neural chain reaction that eventually leads to the excitations in the brain that are responsible for the visual experi-

8 These comparisons are asserted for the human case. With dogs, for example, smell provides a much greater richness of content.

ence in question. We get analogous stories for other modes of sense perception. Extrapolating this line of thought to mystical experience, such an experience can be a perception of God only if God plays a certain kind of causal role in the production of that experience. But it has frequently been claimed that mystical experience can be fully explained (its causes can be fully set out) in terms of processes within the natural world, without mentioning God at all. But if so, God does not figure anywhere among its causes and therefore has no claim to be perceived in a mystical experience. And if Bonnet was not perceiving God, as he supposed, then presumably the experience has nothing to tell him about God, at least directly.

Even if mystical experience can be adequately explained in terms of purely this-worldly factors (and I will have more to say about this below), it would be much too fast to conclude that God does not figure among the causes of mystical experience. Consider the point that though sense experience can be adequately explained by what goes on in the brain, we all take it that objects outside the brain are perceived in those experiences. How can this be? Obviously, it is because though brain processes are the *direct* cause of sensory experience, those processes themselves have causes, which in turn have causes . . . and if we trace that causal chain back far enough, we come to the external objects that are perceived. Analogously, even if the direct causes of mystical experience are all within nature, it is still possible that God figures further back in the causal chain that leads to that experience. And, indeed, that is the case, according to theism and theistic religions, which hold that God is responsible for the existence and functioning of the world of nature.

But, it may be contended, even if that were the case, it would not follow that God figures in the causal chain in such a way as to be the object of perception. Going back to visual perception, many items figure in the causal chain leading to visual experience – neural transmission to the brain from the eye, retinal excitation, light reflected from an object striking the retina, etc. Most of this is not visually perceived. So to figure as a perceived object, it is not enough that an item figure in some way among the causes of the experience. It must figure in a certain way, one that enables it to be perceived. And why should we suppose that God figures in *that* way in the causal chain leading to mystical experience?

When we think hard about this issue, we come to a startling result. Going back to sense perception, notice first that the way a perceived object figures in the causal chain differs for different sense modalities. In vision it is something like *reflecting or generating light that then reaches the retina without additional reflection*; for audition it is something like *generating or reflecting sound waves that strike the eardrum*; and so on. For mystical perception it will be something different, the exact nature of which is obscure to us. Further, note that the causal contribution required for objecthood in each case is something we can learn only from experience, including the experience involved in that case and similar cases. We must have a number of cases of genuine perception of X in that modality before we are in a position to discover inductively what kind of causal contribution is required for being perceived in that modality. There is no a priori way of determining this. But notice where this leaves us. Since we are in no position to say what kind of causal contribution is required for objecthood until we have some genuine cases of perception to work from, we can't even embark on the project of specifying the necessary causal contribution until we

recognize that there are authentic cases of perception in that modality. Hence one who denies that people ever perceive God in mystical experience has no basis for any supposition as to how God would have to be involved in causing mystical experience for God to be genuinely perceived in such an experience. Hence the critic could have no basis for arguing that God does not satisfy the requirement. She could, of course, point out that the advocate of divine perception has no idea of what is required either. But that still doesn't give her an *objection* to her opponent's position.

So we are left with the conclusion that even if there is an adequate naturalistic account of the proximate causes of mystical experience, that does not rule out the possibility that God plays a role in eliciting such experience that renders him perceived therein. But there are also reasons for questioning the claim that there is any such account. If we consider the most prominent candidates (and this is not a popular research field for social and behavioral scientists), we must judge them to be highly speculative and, at best, sketchily supported by the evidence. Mystical experience poses severe problems for empirical research. In addition to the difficulties in determining when we have a case thereof, it is something that cannot be induced at the will of the researcher and so is not amenable to experiment. Attempts to get around this by substituting drug-induced analogues are of little value, since it is an open question whether findings concerning the latter can be extrapolated to spontaneous cases. Since the states are usually short-lived, the researcher must rely on autobiographical reports; we can't expect a researcher to hang around a person on the off chance that he might happen to have a mystical experience. Hence the data are subject to all the well-known problems that attach to first-person reports. Moreover, the most prominent theories in the field invoke causal mechanisms that themselves pose unsolved problems of identification and measurement: unconscious psychological processes like repression and mechanisms of defense, social influences on ideology and on belief and attitude formation. It is not surprising that theories like those of Freud, Marx, and Durkheim rest on a slender thread of evidential support and generalize irresponsibly from such evidence as they can muster.

5 Can Reports of Mystical Perception Be Checked?

It is not infrequently claimed by philosophers that the impossibility of effective public (intersubjective) tests of the accuracy of beliefs about God formed on the basis of mystical experience prevents that experience from being an awareness of any objective reality. Here are a couple of representative formulations.

> But why can't we have an argument based upon religious experiences for the existence of the apparent object of a given religious experience and its bearing the right sort of causal relation to the experience? There can be such an argument only if religious experiences count as cognitive. But they can count as cognitive only if they are subject to similar tests to those which sense experiences are.[9]

9 Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 302. This quotation is set in an elaborate discussion that involves a list of 11 tests of the veridicality of sensory experiences.

> But whereas questions about the existence of people can be answered by straightforward observational and other tests, not even those who claim to have enjoyed personal encounters with God would admit such tests to be appropriate here.[10]

The first thing to be said in reply is that there *are* tests for the accuracy of particular reports of mystical perception. Contemplative religious communities that, so to say, specialize in the perception of God, have compiled systematic manuals of such tests; and many of them are used more informally by the laity. These include such things as (1) conformity with what would be expected on the basis of doctrines concerning the nature of God, (2) "fruits" of the experience as a stable inner peace and growth in spirituality, (3) a content of the experience that the person would not have developed on their own. The satisfaction of such conditions counts in favor of the veridicality of the experience, and their absence counts against it. Obviously these tests do not conclusively establish veridicality or the reverse, but that does not render them without value. Tests of the accuracy of sense perceptions don't always settle the matter definitively either.

It is certainly true that sense-perceptual reports can be checked in ways that mystical-perceptual reports cannot. Let's look for a moment at some of these ways. The most obvious ones involve the experiences of other persons. Suppose I claim to have seen a Russian plane flying over my house at a certain time. If we can find other people who were in the area at that time and looking up into the sky, we can determine whether they saw a Russian plane overhead. To be sure, if one or a few such people failed to notice a Russian plane, that would not decisively disconfirm my report. Perhaps they were inattentive, blinded by the sun, or preoccupied with other matters. But if a large number of people were in the area, were not especially preoccupied, were disposed to look up to determine the source of any loud noise, and none of them saw any such plane, my report would have been decisively disconfirmed. The general principle involved here is that if a visible object were present at a certain place and time, then any competent observer who was at that place and time and was looking in the right direction would (at least most probably) have seen it. If a large number of such observers did not see any such thing, we must conclude that the object wasn't there at that time. If, on the other hand, all or most such observers take themselves to have seen it, that confirms the original report. Thus sense-perceptual reports are often subject to a decisive test on the basis of the perceptions of other persons.

There are other kinds of public tests as well. The credentials of the reporter could be examined. Is his visual apparatus in order? Does he know how to distinguish a Russian plane from other kinds? Was he in a drugged or intoxicated condition? Did he have his wits about him at the time? And so on. To change the example, suppose the report is that baking soda is sprinkled over my serving of rice. In addition to taste tests by others, the substance can be subjected to chemical analysis.

There is nothing comparable to this with mystical perception. God is always present everywhere, if present anywhere, and so the whereabouts of a subject has no bearing. If a mystical report were to be given a test by other observers in the sense-perceptual way, we would have to say that S really perceived God at time *t* only if

10 Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), pp. 138–9.

every competent subject perceives God all the time. But no one would take this to be an appropriate test. "Why should we expect God to be perceivable by everyone all the time even if he is present everywhere all the time?" one might ask. To put the point more generally, there is no set of conditions such that if God is present to me at time *t*, then any other person satisfying those conditions would also perceive God at *t*. To be sure, we can say something about what is conducive to perceiving God. One must be sufficiently "receptive," sufficiently "spiritually attuned." It is only if one who possesses those characteristics fails to perceive God that this counts against the original report. But how can we tell whether a given subject qualifies? Again, something can be said. Those who address such matters typically lay down such characteristics as the possession of certain virtues (humility, compassion) and a loving, obedient attitude toward God as productive of openness to the presence of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8, KJV). But there are two reasons why we still lack the kind of test we have for sense-perceptual reports. First, we are far from having reliable intersubjective tests for humility and a loving attitude toward God. And second, it can't seriously be claimed that any set of conditions we can list is such that one will perceive God *if and only if* those conditions are satisfied. The situation with respect to mystical perception is much more obscure and mysterious, much less tight than this. And so we are still a long way from being able to carry out the kind of *other observers* tests we have for sense perception. As for the other kinds of tests I mentioned above, what I have just said implies that we have no effective *state of observer* test to rely on here. And obviously nothing like chemical analysis is relevant.

But what epistemic relevance does this difference have? Why should we suppose that it prevents mystical reports from enjoying prima facie justification? Those who take this line make an unjustifiable assumption that reports of perception of God are properly treated by the same standards as reports of sense perception, so that if the former cannot be tested in the same way as the latter, they cannot provide a cognitive access to objective reality. But this assumption is no more than a kind of epistemic *imperialism*, subjecting the outputs of one belief-forming practice to the requirements of another. It can easily be seen that not all our standard belief-forming practices work like sense perception. Consider introspection. If I report feeling excited, there are no conditions under which my report is correct *if and only if* someone who satisfies those conditions also feels excited. Introspective reports can be publicly checked to a certain extent, but not in that way. Again, the fact that we can't use perceptual checks on mathematical reports has no tendency to show that rational intuition cannot yield objective truths. Different belief-forming practices work differently.

Thinkers like Gale and Flew will undoubtedly respond to this last example by saying that the availability of tests like those for sense perception are at least required for the epistemic efficacy of *experiential* sources of belief. But that no more goes beyond a mere prejudice than the more unqualified claim for belief sources generally. What basis do we have for the claim that the features of sense perception constitute *necessary* conditions for any effective experiential cognitive access to objective reality? I take it as uncontroversial that sense perception is *a* way of acquiring reliable beliefs of certain sorts about the world. Sense perception satisfies sufficient conditions for epistemic efficacy. But why suppose that this is the only set of sufficient conditions?

Experience amply attests that, in cognitive as well as in other matters, sharply different maneuvers can achieve a certain goal. Excellent dishes can be prepared by meticulously following well-tested recipes or, with experienced cooks, by inspired improvisation. Mathematical problems can be solved, in some cases, by following established algorithms, or, in some cases, by flashes of intuition. The picture of an ancient civilization can be built up from archeological remains or from extant documents or from some combination thereof. And so it goes. It would be the reverse of surprising if the purchase on objective reality attained by sense perception were only one of many experiential ways of achieving such a result. And the fact that the aspects of reality that mystical perception claims to put us in contact with are very different from those that are explored by sense perception reinforces the rejection of the idea that only what conforms to the latter can reveal anything about reality.

Do Mystics See God?

Evan Fales

> *And [the Lord] said, Thou canst not see my face* [panim]*: for there shall no man see my face and live*
>
> – Exod. 33:20

> *And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face* [panim] *to face, and my life is preserved*
>
> – Gen. 32:30

> *There's more than one way to skin a cat.*

1 A Cautionary Tale

Theistic philosophers have perennially cited mystical experiences – experiences of God – as evidence for God's existence and for other truths about God. In recent years, the attractiveness of this line of thought has been reflected in its use by a significant number of philosophers.[11] But both philosophers and mystics agree that not all mys-

11 e.g., Alston, *Perceiving God*; William Wainwright, *Mysticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981); Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Swinburne, *Existence of God*, rev. edn; Jerome I. Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univerity of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Steven Payne, *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussions of Mystical Experience*, Synthese Historical Library (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990); and Carolyn Franks-Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

tical experiences can be relied upon; many are the stuff of delusion.[12] So they have somehow to be checked out, their bona fides revealed. But can they be? I will be arguing that (a) they must indeed be cross-checked to serve as good evidence; and that (b) they can't be – or not nearly well enough to permit pressing them into service as serious support for theism. The need for cross-checking, necessary in any case, is made acute by two facts: the extreme variability of mystical experiences and the doctrines they are recruited to support, and the fact that, especially in the face of this variability, mystical experiences are much more effectively explained naturalistically. Furthermore, our ability adequately to cross-check mystical experiences (hereafter, MEs), in a way that would reveal the hand of God, is crippled by the fact that theists offer no hypothesis concerning the causal mechanism by means of which God shows himself to mystics.

Let's begin with my third epigraph. This insightful, if grisly, bit of folk wisdom tells much of our story. Permit me to spell out the dolorous tale. I am greeted by the sight of poor Sylvester, a heap of flayed flesh upon the lawn. I set out to reconstruct the crime. With but the denuded corpse as evidence, the possibilities are multiple. So I must locate other clues. A bloodied knife nearby might have secrets to reveal: suppose the hemoglobin tests out feline. Even better, perhaps I can find an eyewitness or two, discovering through further investigation that they are both sober and honest. I might find fingerprints on the knife. And so on.

In all this, I rely upon my senses to convey evidence of the deed. How is this managed? Why, through some causal sequence, a continuation of some of those sequences that converged upon the destruction of poor Sylvester, and that then diverged from there. Light waves bearing news of cat skin and flesh make their way from the *corpus delicti* to my "sensory surfaces," there to be processed in those still and possibly forever mysterious ways into cat-corpse-consciousness. Mysterious or not, what we do know is that cat and conscious episode are related as (partial) cause to (partial) effect. But for there being some suitable causal link between cat and experience, that experience, no matter its intrinsic characteristics, is not a perception of that cat.[13]

But if the intrinsic content of my experience can be caused in multiple ways (the presence of an actual cat-corpse being but one of these), then how shall I ascertain

12 Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, mystical beliefs are surely not self-certifying, no matter how much certainty mystical experience may generate in the mystic. On this point most philosophers – and mystics themselves – are agreed. The reason why testing is needed is, as I shall show, that mystical claims, when they are about an extra-subjective reality, aren't of the right *sort* to be self-certifying. It doesn't help the mystic's case, of course, if her mystical beliefs are contradicted by those of another mystic who displays equal certitude.

13 There are direct realists who deny that "*S* perceives *C*" entails any causal claim about *C*. That is not something that someone who rejects the direct realist's theory of perception need be concerned to deny. Nor, for present purposes, need I deny the view that, when I really do perceive a cat, I do so "directly," that is, not "in virtue of" perceiving something else more directly. So I shall here concede both these points. It suffices for my present purpose that we do not allow, where *C* is an "external" entity or state of affairs, that *S* perceives *C* unless *C* in *fact* plays a causal role in the production of *S*'s experience. I should say more: for external *C*, it is a metaphysical necessity that *C* be so involved in the production of *S*'s experience. The notion of externality can be sufficiently captured by saying that *C* is external to *S*'s experience just in case *C*'s existence doesn't entail the existence of *S*.

that my senses do not deceive? The short answer to this importunate and persistent problem, the problem of perception, is: I must cross-check. But we cannot explore the substance of this remark without making two antecedent observations. First, no amount of cross-checking can produce evidence that will satisfy the radical skeptic. I can decide to pinch myself to check that I'm not just dreaming of cats; but of course I might just be dreaming that I've pinched myself. Second, because of this, and because our project is to examine whether putative experiences of God must be cross-checked to carry evidential weight, not to respond to radical skepticism, we shall have to frame our discussion with some care. One could, of course, accept a counsel of despair: neither ordinary sense experience nor mystical experience can form the basis of justified beliefs about external matters. In that event, mystical theistic beliefs are in no worse shape, epistemically speaking, than ordinary perceptual beliefs. But that would be because neither set of beliefs could be in any worse shape, so far as justification goes. That sort of "pox on both your houses" skepticism is, however, not a very interesting position from the perspective of traditional debates about the warrant for theism. The interesting question is: If we suppose ordinary perceptual beliefs (and we may throw in scientific theory for good measure) to be warrantable by appeal to sense experience, then why shouldn't theistic beliefs be similarly warrantable by appeal to perceptual experience, whether sensory or mystical?

Here, in a nutshell, is what I shall argue. The problem of perception derives largely from the general truth that any effect – hence a perceptual experience – can be caused in more ways than one. Our strategy for removing this ambiguity is cross-checking. Ultimately, cross-checking involves just collecting more data, which are subject to the same ambiguity. Our implicit reasoning is that the total amount of ambiguity can nevertheless be progressively reduced in this way. The means by which science draws a bead on postulated "unobservable" entities (like electrons) is not in principle or in practice different in kind; it is just more systematic and careful than the humdrum of everyday perceptual judgments. In everyday contexts, cross-checking is informal, and it is so automatic, continuous, and pervasive that, except under duress (e.g., as we try to catch out a magician), it is scarcely noticed. I propose to show how cross-checking works; to argue that it is a mandatory feature of any recruitment of perceptual experience to epistemic ends; and that, therefore, it is a requirement that must be met in theistic appeals to mystical experience as evidence for theism. Finally, I shall argue that this requirement has not, and probably cannot, be met. So, I shall conclude, mystical experience provides hardly any useful support for theism.

2 Cross-Checking Explained

So, what is cross-checking? Why is it needed? And how does it work? Let "cross-checking" denote all those procedures and strategies we use to settle questions about the causes of something. These include, in particular, (1) using Mill's methods to pick out causally relevant antecedent conditions; (2) exploiting the fact that events have multiple effects, to "triangulate" the event in question, on the principle that qualitatively different causes will have *some* differences in their (potential)

effects;[14] and (3) confirming the existence of causal mechanisms allegedly connecting a cause to its effects (when it is not a proximate cause). These strategies depend upon putting forward hypotheses and testing them by means of diagnostic experiments. I shall discuss mainly tests of type (3), but invoke strategy (2) when considering prophetic revelations as a test of MEs.

There are various ways in which cross-checking principles can be formally stated. One way to approach type-3 cross-checks is to consider the problem posed by Duhem's thesis. We have a hypothesis *H* (e.g., that the cat was skinned with a knife), on the basis of which we can, with the assistance of auxiliary hypothesis *A*, infer some observable effect E_0. In general, the occurrence of E_0 should confirm *H*, and its nonoccurrence disconfirm *H*. How that goes depends upon how strongly *H & A* probabilifies E_0 (or its negation), and how strongly it or its negation is probabilified by competing hypotheses-cum-auxiliaries.

But, as we know, even when E_0 fails to materialize and *H & A* is thereby disconfirmed, the opprobrium need not fall on *H*: the falsehood of *A* may be to blame. Here is where type-3 cross-checking comes in. It comes in two varieties. First, we can run further tests on *H*, pitting it against its rivals either in repeat performances of the first experiment or, often more tellingly, in different experiments which call upon different auxiliaries and predict different observations. Second, we can check *A*, now employing *it* as a hypothesis to be tested.[15] Thus, a defender of *H* in the face of *not*-E_0 might insist that the relevant auxiliary is not *A*, but *A**, where *H & A** entails *not*-E_0. Now *A* and *A** are competitors, and we can require an independent "crucial experiment"[16] in which they make conflicting predictions, E_1 and E_1*. But of course, those predictions cannot be made without invoking further auxiliaries – call them A_1 and A_1*. Clearly, if the experimental outcome is E_1, the defender of *A** (and hence *H*) can protect *A** by insisting upon modifying his A_1*. And then we can play another round. Can this testing game go on forever, or will the regress eventually run the quarry (the truth-value of *H*) to ground? One way to capture the radical skeptic's intuition is by arguing that the cycle of modifications to save the appearances can go on forever. (This is one form of the so-called underdetermination of theory by data.) The other side of the coin is that this way of formulating the problem of skepticism helps us see what sorts of minimal assumptions might head off an infinite regress, thereby making the evidential issue an interesting one. And this is just what we need to see when the observations in question are the mystic's experiences, and the hypothesis is theism.

I do not regard it as a settled question whether adjustment of auxiliaries in the face of recalcitrant data can go on forever. But even if after-the-fact revising can proceed indefinitely, there is a strong intuition that a system of beliefs which must constantly be revised as new evidence comes in loses plausibility in relation to one

14 See Evan Fales, *Causation and Universals* (London: Routledge, 1990), ch. 8.

15 In practice, *A* will be a long conjunction of hypotheses which describe the antecedent conditions and the laws governing the causal mechanisms upon which the making of any measurement or observation depends. In the case of perception, *H* will articulate the causal pathways which mediate the transmission of sensory information. The component hypotheses of *A* will typically be independently (of each other) testable. For simplicity, I shall treat *A* as if it were a single hypothesis.

16 That is, one that does not make use of *H*.

that does not. Let us make this anti-skeptical assumption. Evidence, in the face of which a hypothesis can be rescued only by revision of auxiliary assumptions, works to the disadvantage of that hypothesis – though perhaps not decisively so – in comparison with competitors which accommodate that evidence without revisions.[17]

An obvious objection to all this will be that, plausible as it may be as a rational reconstruction of scientific reasoning, it does not at all capture the process by which we acquire warranted perceptual beliefs. Perceptual knowledge seems much more direct than this, even to those who concede the obvious fact that it is causally mediated. So I now want to argue that this is an illusion, that in fact warrant accrues to perceptual beliefs only insofar as, rationally reconstructed, their acquisition, too, requires inference to the best explanation.

3 The Pervasive Need for Cross-Checking

What, then, is it about cross-checking that establishes its essential and fundamental place as an epistemic method, even in the case of sense perception? This standing is a consequence of the fact that we are physical beings, situated within a spatiotemporal world in an environment with which we communicate via physical – that is, causal – processes. But the centrality of cross-checking is still more fundamental than this. It is demanded for knowledge of *any* causal process, in which causes are known *via* their effects. In particular, it is demanded in connection with any claim to have perceptual access to an extra-mental reality. It would be demanded, for example, if we were bodiless minds claiming perceptual contact with disembodied demons, evil or benign, with angels, or with a god. That is because the contact is perceptual, and because of the principle

P: If *S* perceives (has a perceptual experience of) *X*, then *X* is a suitable cause of *S*'s experience.

First, three comments about P; and then, more on the connection between (P) and cross-checking:

1 When I say that *X* is *a* cause of *S*'s experience, I mean just that it plays a role as one of the causal antecedents of *S*'s experience.
2 Strictly speaking, it is events or states of affairs that are causes. If *X* is a particular, then it is not *X per se*, but *X*'s having some property or undergoing some change which constitutes the cause in question.
3 When I say that this is a *suitable* cause of *S*'s experience, I mean that it must cause the experience in the right sort of way for the experience to count as per-

17 Our goal is to vindicate the inverse-probability reasoning we use to infer causes from their effects as the best explanations of those effects. If we employ Bayes' theorem (or some qualitative analogue) for this purpose, we shall also need to assume some rough way to assign credences to competing hypotheses, antecedently to considering any of the empirical data. Let us assume this can be done. For present purposes, these anti-skeptical assumptions are enough to be getting on with.

ception *of X*. Obviously, not all of the causal conditions of my now perceiving this pen are conditions I now perceive (those conditions include my eyes and brain working properly, the pen being illuminated, and even God, if God caused the pen to exist and sustains me in existence). We cannot say *in general* what criteria distinguish the "right" sort of causal ancestry from the wrong sorts; but cross-checking has everything to do with how we justifiably identify the right items in particular cases.

Knowing what we are perceiving is a matter of knowing what is causing our experience in the right sort of way. But that is a matter of narrowing down the candidate causes of an experience so that – ideally – just one cause, situated in the right way, can explain our data. It is precisely here that cross-checking plays the crucial role, by enabling us to eliminate possible causes and to form a sufficiently precise conception of our environment and the causal processes that occur in it to "zero in" on the (or a) "suitable" cause.[18]

William Alston misses the mark when he insists that a demand for similar cross-checking of the claims of mystics amounts to a kind of epistemic imperialism.[19] He insists that each epistemic practice, including mystical practice, gets to dictate its own standards and cross-checking criteria. But, as we shall see, those invoked by mystics are characteristically vacuous. Obviously, the sorts of evidence relevant to checking a perceptual claim will depend upon its modality and content. But determining what makes something *count* as evidence and justification is dictated by the causal structure of perception and cannot be commandeered by epistemic practices, so-called.

Many philosophers will reject this conception of perception and perceptual knowledge. They do so partly for dialectical reasons – that is, because they believe that the road so paved leads straight to skeptical perdition. They do so, further, for broadly phenomenological reasons – that is, because we do not ordinarily make perceptual knowledge claims on the basis of anything more than having the right sort of experience. We don't indulge in any cross-checking or inference in judging, for example, that there is someone in the seat next to us.

But these objections are, in the present context, misdirected. The phenomenological objection ignores what we might call "subliminal information processing," both past and occurrent, and the vital role that cross-checking plays in this processing.[20] What sort of perceptual seemings a given environment can produce in one is a function not only of recent sensory stimulation, but of much else: of attention and motivational factors, of past experience and concepts thereby acquired, of expectations for which an inductive rationale could be supplied if required (but which ordinarily

18 There is often more than one. Even though I could not, ordinarily, be said to observe an image on my retina, I could be said, when watching a presidential press conference, alternatively to see either the TV or George W. Bush. An elementary particle physicist could rightly say both that she is observing tracks in a bubble chamber and that she is observing electrons.

19 See Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 209–22.

20 It also ignores the difference between our just perceptually *taking* there to be someone in the adjoining seat, perhaps in part because of the operation of hard-wired belief-forming mechanisms that operate "automatically," and our being *justified* in that belief.

does not – and need not – enter into perceptual engagement with the world). We can look and just "see" that the refrigerator in the kitchen is white, in part because we have acquired an understanding of what refrigerators are and what they look like, readily expect such items to appear in kitchens, and know that white things look a certain way under the apparent conditions of illumination. An ability to "just see" directly that this refrigerator is white is a hard-won skill. Learning endows us with unconscious cognitive mechanisms that operate to apply concepts in forming a percept as if on the basis of various inductions.

Moreover, past learning and also the present cognitive processing incorporate cross-checking in fundamental ways. What our cognitive systems have learned is how "automatically" to make judgments that, were we rationally to reconstruct them, would involve *causal* reasoning to the best explanation for the multitude of sensory inputs with which we are provided. For example, the supposition that light travels in more or less straight lines, together with the hypotheses that there is a bulky, stationary, solid white object before us, and that we are in motion in a certain way relative to it, can help explain the sequence of our visual/tactile inputs. But any such reasoning (or unconscious surrogate for it) must invoke, implicitly, cross-checking. It is as if, for example, the various visual and tactile inputs serve to corroborate the judgment that there is a refrigerator, by eliminating alternative possibilities.

This kind of implicit cross-checking is absolutely pervasive; it comes to permeate all our perceptual "takings" as we mature and piece together our world.[21] This feature of sense-perceptual processes explains a fundamental phenomenological feature of perceptual judgments: namely, how we can directly take ourselves to be *en rapport* with our physical surroundings, even though no single bit of sensory information could form an adequate basis for such a judgment (or even, I would add, for the formation of the *concepts* required to envision a three-dimensional space inhabited by physical continuants). It explains how it is that we do this without seeming to engage in any processes of inference from representations – of inference from effects to causes. That is why direct realist theories of perception can seem so plausible, even though in a *causal* sense, we are obviously *not* in direct contact with our physical surroundings.

4 Skepticism Bracketed

I have dwelt upon this point because I take it to be crucial to an assessment of the epistemic status of mystical experience, interpreted as perceptual contact with supernatural realities. But it also permits a response to the objection that conceding perception to involve an "indirect" (causal) contact with extra-mental reality, and perceptual judgment to require reasoning from effects to causes (or surrogates for that), gives the skeptic all he needs to undermine claims to have knowledge or justification.

21 In young infants these cognitive processes are observably in the process of formation.

Alston is particularly forceful and insightful in making this case with respect to sense perception (but of course it applies to mystical perception equally).[22] He argues that any attempt to justify a perceptual practice must fail on grounds of either unsoundness or circularity. Though Alston's argument is complex, we have seen why this result is to be expected and, consequently, can specify the way in which I believe the issue concerning mystical perception ought to be framed.

So as not to beg any questions, I shall adopt Alston's view that there are distinguishable belief-forming practices, including different perceptual practices.[23] Two such practices take as their inputs sense perception and mystical perception. If the possibility of mystical evidence for God is not automatically to be ruled out, we must find some way of deflecting skeptical objections as they apply to perceptual judgments generally. Seeing how this goes for sense perception will enable us to generalize to other perceptual practices, for the relevant similarities between them are more important than the differences. Alston, in spite of his insistence that each perceptual practice is beholden only to its own epistemic standards, recognizes this when he invokes, for all perceptual practices, what amounts to a kind of Principle of Credulity.[24] Alston takes it that, provided a perceptual practice meets certain conditions,[25] perceptual judgments formed in the normal ways provided for in that practice are prima facie justified. (They are only prima facie justified: every such practice must include what Alston calls an "overrider" system, and so a judgment can be overridden. Indeed, Alston's overrider systems reflect the importance of cross-checking, without properly recognizing its fundamentality.)

Any appeal to prima facie warrant – warrant occurring in the absence of even implicit or preconscious processes that could be rationally reconstructed in terms of inductive inference and cross-checking – is just the *wrong* way to bracket (radical) skepticism and frame our question. It is wrong because it short-circuits precisely the crucial justificatory procedures (or at least a crucial stage in their application), thereby begging, or at least certainly obscuring the bearing of, critical questions that the mystical theist must confront. They include the question whether cross-checking procedures must be, but are not, appropriately "built into," and cannot retrospectively be applied to, mystical experiences and the judgments they deliver. I shall argue that they are not, and that this flaw is fatal to mystical justifications of theism.

Cross-checking and cross-checkability must be integral parts of any perceptual epistemic practice because what a perceiver takes to be present on the basis of her experiences might not be what is in fact causally responsible for those experiences.

22 See Alston, *Perceiving God*, ch. 3, and *idem, Reliability of Sense Perception*.

23 For details, see Alston, *Perceiving God*, ch. 4.

24. The term, and the principle itself, are due to Swinburne, though the idea can be traced back at least to Reid.

25 These conditions include being socially established, incorporating an overrider system, and being free of massive contradiction from within and from beliefs generated by other doxastic practices (see Alston, *Perceiving God*, ch. 4).

Cross-checking "pins down" stages of the causal process, thereby eliminating alternative hypotheses as to how the input is produced.[26]

What goes for sense perception goes for mystical experience as well. Theists who invoke such experiences as evidence may help themselves to the same inductive principles that our sensory practices evidently presuppose – in particular, those that vindicate cross-checking. However, if, granting those principles, mystical experiences fail to supply significant evidence for theism, an appeal to them will be of little help to theists.

I have been insisting that what we need to frame the debate productively is *not* some principle of credulity, but more general and fundamental inductive principles that will not short-circuit the issues. But even if I were to *grant* some form of credulity principle,[27] it would avail the theist little. For the warrant it confers is only prima facie warrant, and, as it happens, there are good reasons to question that warrant in the mystical case. Since that is so, cross-checking can't be avoided, and its demands are made acute in proportion to the cogency of the cognitive challenges that mystical practices (MPs) confront.

5 Christian Mysticism: Challenges and Checks

There are a number of such challenges, in the form of alternative explanations for mystical experiences (MEs). One of these, which I shall not pursue, comes from within many MPs. It is the possibility that an ME is demonically caused.[28] There are also naturalistic explanations. Here I shall mention two which complement one another and are jointly strong enough to outdistance any theistic explanation.[29] Fortunately (and *pace* Alston[30]), patterns of mystical encounter are so predictable and overtly manifested, in religious traditions ranging from Pentecostal worship to the ritual seances of Dinka and Tungus shamans, that it has been possible for anthro-

26 The trouble with this story is, as we saw, twofold. First, the only means we have for "pinning down" the facts about a given causal process are perceptual means; and if there is a skeptical question to be raised about the *original* process – the one generating the perceptual experience upon which a perceptual judgment is based – then entirely similar doubts will apply to the perceptual processes upon which cross-checking procedures depend. Second, our problem arises in the first place – and hence in the second place – because effects underdetermine their causes. (This is just a special case – undoubtedly the most central case – of the problem that theory is underdetermined by data: any given data can be explained by any number of incompatible theories.) It is to evade the skeptic here that we invoke the anti-skeptical principles.

27 Whether it be that adopted by Swinburne, *Existence of God*, Alston, *Perceiving God*, or Gellman, *Experience of God*.

28 I shall also largely ignore the major challenge which derives from the enormous variety and conflicting content of MEs worldwide. That is a severe problem in its own right.

29 So I argue with respect to Lewis's theory in Fales, "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experience, Part I: The Case of St. Teresa," and "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experience, Part II: The Challenge to Theism," *Religious Studies*, 32 (1996), pp. 143–63 and 297–313 respectively. This can now be supplemented with the neurophysiological findings.

30 Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 240–1.

pologists and psychologists to study the phenomenon in great detail in its natural settings.[31]

The first naturalistic explanation is due to the anthropologist I. M. Lewis, and derives from worldwide comparative studies which reveal certain general patterns among MPs.[32] In brief, Lewis shows that, at least where mystics "go public" and appeal to their experiences in the social arena, mysticism serves mundane interests either of the mystic him or herself, or of some group with which he or she identifies. Lewis discerns two types of mystics: socially marginalized mystics whose mysticism is a weapon in the struggle to achieve social justice for themselves and their group, and upwardly mobile mystics who use their mystical experiences as credentials to legitimate their claim on positions of social leadership. Lewis shows how the *descriptions* that mystics give of their experiences and the *behaviors* they exhibit prior to, during, and after mystical episodes serve these social ends in quite precise and predictable ways.

One of the great strengths of Lewis's theory is that it cuts across the entire spectrum of MPs, providing a unity of explanation that the theist cannot hope to match.[33] Lewis's theory has, however, a significant lacuna. It says little about how the occurrence of favorable social circumstances gets translated into the incidence of mystical phenomenology. Moreover, Lewis gives no very adequate explanation for the apparent frequency of MEs which remain private. Many people, it seems, have occasional mystical experiences, but almost never disclose them.

But it looks now as if these gaps can be closed by the second naturalistic approach, which has begun to indicate the details of the neurophysiological mechanisms by means of which mystical experience is mediated. Such experiences, it turns out, are associated with micro-seizures of the temporal lobes of the brain. When these seizures are severe, they result in temporal lobe epilepsy. But mild seizures, which can even be artificially induced during brain surgery, can result in powerful mystical experiences.[34] A substantial portion of the general population has a disposition to such mild seizures, and there is some circumstantial evidence that they can be provoked by techniques traditionally used to induce mystical trance states.[35]

A theist may wish to reply here that God may well have a hand in these mechanisms, indeed employ them as his means for appearing to his worshippers.[36] But this is implausible on a number of counts. For one thing, it is extraordinarily hard to

31 I have the report (private communication) of a Christian mystic trained in neurophysiology who has been able to record her own brain waves, and those of a colleague, during trance, who confirms the temporal lobe finding (see below). For a more detailed summary of the evidence and references, see Fales, "Scientific Explanations," Parts I and II, and *idem*, "Can Science Explain Mysticism?" *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), pp. 213–27.

32 I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1989).

33 See Fales, "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experience, Part II."

34 The literature is substantial and growing. For a good bibliography, see Susan Blackmore, *Dying to Live: Near-Death Experiences* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), especially the citations for ch. 10.

35 See William Sargant, *The Mind Possessed: A Physiology of Possession, Mysticism, and Faith Healing* (Philadelphia: J. E. Lippincott, 1974).

36 Alston has suggested this possibility on a number of occasions – e.g., in "Psychoanalytic Theory and Theistic Belief," in John Hick (ed.), *Faith and the Philosophers* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1964), and in *Perceiving God*, pp. 230–3.

explain why God would appear through the figure of Jesus to a Christian, as Allah to a Muslim, Brahman to a Hindu, the god Flesh to a Dinka, and as a variety of *loa* spirits to voodoo practitioners. And if a purely naturalistic explanation can be given for the nontheistic experiences, then why not also for the theistic ones?[37]

There are other problems. Suppose we take a naturalistic explanation of MEs and tack on the hypothesis that God is involved in some way. This is a God-of-the-gaps strategy. Given the lacunae in our understanding of even simple physical processes – to say nothing of the neurophysiology of the brain – this strategy is one a theist can deploy with some ease.

Indeed, it incurs the danger of being too easy. A theist could invoke divine intervention to explain why the radiator of my car cracked overnight. Our natural explanation is full of holes: we may not know exactly how cold the engine got last night, nor exactly how strong the walls of the radiator were at the rupture point, nor how to apply the known laws of nature to such a complex system. So, in principle, all the theist need do is find some gap in the posited causal etiology, and tack on the hypothesis that here the finger of God helped the process along – no doubt, to punish my sins.

Why do we (most of us!) not credit such an "explanation"? First, of course, because a long history of experience teaches us that such gaps are often eventually filled by natural causes. But second, because the theistic explanation comes too cheaply: there are no constraints on when, how, and where God is likely to act, no attendant procedures for cross-checking or ferreting out the precise mode and locus of divine intervention, no positive suggestions about how the theistic account of theophysical interaction might be investigated, fleshed out, ramified – and virtually no concomitant predictive power. This theoretical poverty cripples cross-checking for divine influence.

Still, the presence of naturalistic competitors makes it imperative that we examine what sorts of cross-checking MP admits, and how successful such cross-checks have been. We run here into a number of obvious difficulties. Most prominent among them is the fact that mystical experiences are not public.[38] Moreover, the sorts of checks typically invoked, by Christian mystics at least, are either epistemically irrelevant or question begging, absent quite strong auxiliary assumptions.

37 This argument is fleshed out in Fales, "Scientific Explanations of Mysticism, Part II." It is, moreover, very unclear just how, in principle, God would be able to communicate with human beings. If this is to occur via divine influence upon a person's brain states, and those states are macroscopic physical states, then any divine intervention will involve local violations of the highly confirmed laws of conservation of momentum and energy. If, one the other hand, we suppose that God intervenes at the quantum level, acting as a kind of "hidden variable" in determining the outcomes of indeterministic processes, as Nancey Murphy has recently proposed, then we can avoid the violation of physical laws, but only at the price of making in principle unknowable (since hidden by quantum uncertainties) the presence of divine intervention. On these issues see the articles by Murphy and Tracy in Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, and Arthur R. Peacocke (eds), *Chaos and Complexity: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1995).

38 There are occasional reports of *sense*-perceptual supernatural apparitions witnessed by many – e.g., at Fatima and Zeitoun. Also, some mystics do report perceiving God via several sensory modalities – e.g., vision, hearing, and smell. I cannot pursue these matters here; and in any case, many theists – e.g., Alston and Wainwright – de-emphasize this sort of experience.

It is not that mystics are unconcerned about the veridicality of MEs. On the contrary, they often display a lively concern with this and offer multiple tests. But let us look at some of these tests, using Teresa of Avila as a guide. Teresa exhibits a strong interest in the question of how veridical experiences are to be distinguished from those produced by what she calls "melancholy" and by Satan. (This interest is hardly surprising, given the regularity with which the Inquisition accused mystics – especially women – of nefarious motives, fraud, or demonic possession.) Teresa's list of tests includes: (1) the fruits of an experience – both in the actions and personality of the mystic and as producing an inner peace rather than a troubled state of mind, (2) the vividness of the memory of the experience, (3) conformity to Scripture, and (4) validation by the mystic's confessor.

It is not hard to see how these criteria might be designed to secure for the mystic immunity from Inquisitional prosecution, but not easy to see what epistemic force they could have.[39] Test 3 looks straightforwardly question begging, inasmuch as the authority of Scripture rests largely on the supposed authority of the revelations upon which it is based.[40] Tests 1, 2, and 4 have no epistemic force except on the assumption that only God, and neither Satan's best deceptive efforts nor natural causes, can produce experiences that are memorable, convincing to confessors, or have good fruits. But what independent evidence is there for that? What cross-checks for these claims can theists supply? On this, Teresa is silent.

The final – and in principle the best – hope for cross-checking MEs lies with successful prophecy. Perhaps a theistic account *does* after all yield checkable predictions in a way that bears directly upon the evidential force of MEs. For, often enough, one of the fruits of a mystical encounter with God has been the revelation of a prophecy. Not only that, but prophecy has figured as a central component of Christian mystical practice (CMP) and many other MPs, and of the apologetical strategies associated with them. This is because prophecies permit, when certain conditions are satisfied, type-2 cross-checks of a fairly powerful and peculiarly direct sort. When the *content* of a ME contains some message, putatively from God or some supernatural source assumed to be in the know, concerning future events, the claim of genuineness can in principle be checked; ordinarily, the prophesied events will be of such a sort that it is within the purview of ordinary sense perception to determine their occurrence or nonoccurrence.

Yet, Alston tries to downplay the prophetic dimensions of MP.[41] Why? After all, the plain fact is that prophecy is a major and central feature of the MPs of many reli-

39 Indeed, most such tests aim at social acceptance within the religious community. These, and all the other tests of which I know, are such that passing them is largely under the control of the mystic or of her religious community. Thus, unlike proper cross-checks, they do not risk invalidation of the tested hypothesis by an uncooperative tester-independent world.

40 It is all too likely that the content of Teresa's experiences, as she describes them, is conditioned by her (and her superiors') prior acceptance of Scripture. And she gives no independent evidence that Scripture is authoritative. That authority could be independently confirmed by miracles and successful prophecy, however. Concerning the latter, see below.

41 See Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 222–5. Alston is there concerned with the general predictive power of CMP and does not mention religious prophecy specifically at all. On p. 291, he mentions in passing fulfillment of prophecy as a test, not of MEs, but of divine inspiration not associated with MEs. Yet on p. 298, he expresses skepticism concerning the record of Christian miracles generally.

gious traditions; moreover, putatively successful prophecy is regularly appealed to precisely by way of confirming the genuineness of the prophet, the veridicality of his or her ecstatic visions, and the uniquely truth-connected status of the tradition that claims him or her as its own. Ecstatics who develop prophetic practice into a vocation are familiar figures in religious traditions – witness the oracle at Delphi, the Hebrew prophets, John on Patmos, and Jesus of Nazareth. Nor is this an aspect only of ancient MPs, long since superseded (within Jewish and Christian MPs). Far from it, as anyone who considers the claims of contemporary televangelists can confirm.

Prophecy, therefore, is a feature intrinsic to CMP, a feature by means of which the truth-claims produced by that practice can be quite directly checked. However, no such check will be very informative unless certain conditions are satisfied. Briefly, these include:

1 The prophecy must be of some event not intrinsically likely (not, e.g., "wars and rumors of wars" – Mark 24:6).
2 The prophecy must not be self-fulfilling, or of events the prophet or his or her followers can themselves bring about.
3 The prophecy must demonstrably have been made prior to the events which count as its fulfillment.
4 The prophecy must be sufficiently specific and unambiguous to preclude *ex post facto* reinterpretation to fit any of a wide range of possible "fulfillments."
5 The fulfillment of the prophecy must be verified independently of the say-so of the prophet or his or her partisans or tradition.[42]

Here we have, at last, a cross-check which really *does* offer a test of mystical experience. The reasoning is straightforward: given 1–5, only the mystic's having received a message from a superhumanly prescient being (or, improbably, wild luck) can explain his or her prophetic success. (There are, to be sure, some added complications: for example, we must be careful to avoid the Jean Dixon fallacy. A clever prophet can issue hundreds of risky prophecies, in the hope of scoring a few memorable "hits," calculating that the "misses" will be forgotten. Our reasoning to the best explanation must take into account the prophet's entire track record.)

Now, just what is the record of Jewish and Christian MPs on this score? Rather than pursue this question at length, let me observe that I know of no recorded prophecy, either within the Jewish/Christian canon or outside it, that clearly satisfies

42 It might be protested that this last condition reflects an improperly imperialistic imposition on CMP of criteria indigenous to SP. But to excuse CMP from this requirement on such grounds is to abandon good sense. First, the fulfilling events are typically ones which would be observed by ordinary sense perception; and second, as Hume correctly observed, the temptation to prevarication is too great here to rely upon the say-so of those whose interests are directly at stake. We have ample demonstration of the perennial creative reconstruction of the historical record by those who have a religious agenda; and the New Testament is certainly no exception.

criteria 1–5. (There are, however, a number of demonstrably *false* prophecies. Of these, perhaps the most decisive and poignant occurs at Matt. 16:27.[43])

Conclusion: Like any perceptual practice, CMP requires an elaborate system of cross-checks and cross-checking procedures. But, because of its theoretical poverty with respect to the causes of mystical experiences, no such system has been, or is likely to be, forthcoming. With respect to the one relatively strong cross-checking strategy that CMP has available (and has purported to use), its record is one of failure. Until these defects are remedied, mystical experience cannot hope to provide significant evidential support for theism.

Reply to Fales

Fales has two main reasons for denying that mystical experience provides support for theism. (1) It can do so only if it (sometimes) constitutes a genuine perception of God, and this is possible only if it can be successfully "cross-checked," which itself is not possible (so far as we can tell). (2) Mystical experience can be adequately explained naturalistically, which cuts the ground out from any supposition that it is a genuine perception of God. I shall devote most of my remarks to (1).

It is not clear from Fales's exposition just what cross-checking (CC) is and how it works. He introduces it by saying that it denotes "all those procedures and strategies we use to settle questions about the causes of something." If "we" is given the widest possible extension so as to include, *inter alia*, me, this can't be his position. For I hold that in the perceptual case, one is justified in supposing that *S* sees *X*, provided that *S* has an experience that involves an (at least apparent) visual presentation of *X*, and there are no sufficient overriders for the claim that *S* does perceive *X*. And since, as Fales and I both hold, one sees *X* only if *X* causally contributes to the production of the visual experience in question *in the right sort of way*, this would be a way of detecting a certain causal relation. But Fales opposes this approach to the matter, in his discussion of the Principle of Credulity (PC), and *contrasts* that with a CC approach. Thus he must be presupposing some more restricted conception of CC. But his presentation contains no specification of just what that might be. He does mention three types of CC, but with no suggestion that they exhaust the genus. Lacking any alternative, I will take them as an indication of the sorts of procedures of which Fales approves, and glean whatever general conception of CC I can from that.

Fales claims that one has adequately justified a claim to have perceived *X* only if one has successfully "cross-checked" that claim, and that this cannot be done with

43 Others occur at Josh. 4:7, Ezek. 26:14–21, and Isa. 60:1–62:12, esp. 62:8. Augustin Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology*, 6th edn, tr. Leonora York Smith (Westminster, Vt.: Celtic Cross Books, 1978), ch. 21, reports with considerable embarrassment the false prophetic utterances of a number of mystics canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. As regards Matt. 16:27, see parallels at Mark 8:38–9:1 and Luke 9:26–7. John, writing later, discreetly omits this prophecy; see John 6 and 12:25, which in other respects parallel the Synoptic pericopes. It is clear that the parousia and final judgment are intended: cf. Matt. 25:31f and Rev. 20:11–21.

claims to have perceived God in mystical experience (ME). It's not clear whether he takes the stronger position that some kind of CC condition is required for its being the case that *S* perceives *X*. He does argue that the "subliminal information processing" that gives rise to conscious perceptual experience always involves CC, which would imply that all veridical perception (and nonveridical as well!) involves CC. But what he claims not to be available for ME, though it is for sense experience (SE), is fully conscious and deliberate deployment of CC. And he could hardly suppose that one genuinely perceives X only where such procedures have in fact been carried out. But exploiting the hint given by his statement that "cross-checking and cross-checkability must be integral parts of any perceptual epistemic practice," we may take it that he holds that S genuinely perceives X only if that could be validated by a successful CC procedure.

Being unable to tell exactly what it takes for something to count as CC, I am hardly in a maximally favorable position to criticize this position. But we need merely to appeal to Fales's apparent stipulation that CC covers only ways of determining what is causally related to what in order to call into question his supposition that "cross-checking plays the crucial role" in zeroing in on the contribution a cause has to make to an experience in order to be what is perceived in that experience. For the most that CC can do here is to determine what factors causally influenced the occurrence of a certain perceptual experience. But, as both Fales and I note, there are many causal contributors to an SE, most of which are not perceived in having that experience. Hence, if we take a casual route to determining what, if anything, is genuinely perceived in a certain experience, it is crucial to determine what kind of contribution a cause has to make to earn that status. But since CC is limited to procedures for detecting causal relationships, it will, at most, serve to identify the various causal contributors to an experience; it will do nothing to pick out that contributor among those that one is perceiving in having that experience. Thus Fales is quite wrong in saying that "cross-checking has everything to do with how we justifiably identify the right items in particular cases." As for that task, Fales has not provided a viable alternative to the use of PC to identify some cases of genuine object perception, so as to give us a basis for determining, for a given modality, what kind of causal contribution to the experience qualifies a cause for the status of what is perceived therein.

This throws us back to my position that PC is more fundamental to the epistemology of perception than CC. Even if we could use the latter without reliance on the former to determine the causal antecedents of an experience (and I will shortly argue that even this is not possible), it would not enable us to pick out what is perceived in that experience, and hence pick out what it is about which the experience provides us with usable information. In opposition to my position, Fales suggests that PC is useless for providing us with initial cases of genuine object perception because it provides only prima facie justification for perceptual beliefs, and this may be overridden.[44] But the mere possibility of being overridden should not frighten us. So long

44 I will not have time to go into the way Fales ignores the very important distinction between whether a given object, X, is genuinely perceived by S, and whether one or another perceptual belief S thereby forms about X is justified.

as a prima facie justification is not in fact overridden, it will count as unqualified justification.

There is another respect in which PC counts as more fundamental epistemologically than CC. As I have argued before,[45] we cannot show the general reliability of all of our most basic belief-forming practices without running into "epistemic circularity," taking some of our premises from the very practice for the reliability of which we are arguing. We must assume the reliability of some such practices in order to get started on any inquiry whatever. Even if by making such an assumption for one practice – for example, sense perception – we could then proceed to establish the reliability of the others, we would still have taken sense perception to be reliable without a noncircular argument for this. And, in any event, this procedure is not viable. How would we establish the reliability of induction or rational intuition just on the basis of particular pieces of perceptual information? Thus we are left with no real alternative to taking "on faith" the reliability of our basic, socially established belief-forming practices. This is my version of the more individually slanted PC which, in my essay, I was using for the sake of concision. Since the use of CC clearly depends on assuming the reliability of sense perception, and since its investigation of causal relations involves using observation to determine whether something occurs that would occur if a certain causal relation obtains, it cannot be carried out without considerable reliance on PC (or a social practice version thereof). Hence this is a more general way in which PC is epistemologically more fundamental than CC.

Fales takes note of this line of argument and my use of it to argue for the prima facie justifiability of beliefs based on mystical experience, but his discussion distorts the matter in two ways. First, he supposes that my epistemic circularity argument is a skeptical argument. But it need not be taken that way. I use it not to support skepticism, or even to exhibit a reason for skepticism, but rather to point out a basic feature of the human cognitive condition. Second, thinking of the matter in connection with skepticism, he seeks to ignore it by simply setting radical skeptical doubts aside. But what he calls "the interesting question" is one that results from an arbitrary partiality to sense perception in the setting aside of skepticism. It consists of taking perceptual beliefs to be warrantable by appeal to SE, but declining to make a like concession to beliefs based on ME. If this is to escape the charge of arbitrariness, an adequate reason will have to be given for the double standard. Fales's reason seems to be that sense-perceptual beliefs can be "cross-checked," while beliefs based on mystical experience cannot. But, on his own showing, the use of CC involves reliance on the deliverances of SE. And when he finds mystics seeking to validate the deliverances of ME by appealing to other such deliverances, he accuses them of "begging the question." In contrast to this blatantly ungrounded double standard, PC (or my social practice version thereof) takes the output of all firmly socially established "doxastic" (belief-forming) practices to be thereby prima facie justified, with the final verdict on them awaiting further investigation into whether they are disqualified by one or another "overrider."

Even if Fales were to accept all that, he would still have another card to play: namely, the claim that prima facie justification is always overridden for mystical

45 Alston, *Reliability of Sense Perception.*

beliefs, but not for sense-perceptual beliefs. I have considered various alleged overriders for ME in my essay and in much more detail elsewhere.[46]

One alleged overrider that Fales discusses in some detail is that ME can be better explained naturalistically. In my essay I cast some doubt on the thesis that even a complete naturalistic account of the proximate causes of ME would be incompatible with God's causing the experience in a way that would qualify him as an object of the experience. But this issue arises only if it is plausible to suppose that there is, or could be, such a complete naturalistic explanation. On this point I must plead guilty to handling the problem in much too sketchy a fashion in my essay and even in my earlier book on the subject.[47] In particular, in neither place do I discuss recent attempts. Although I don't have the space here to remedy this lack properly, I will say this. The suggestions which Fales draws from the work of I. M. Lewis and from studies of micro-seizures of the temporal lobes of the brain seem to me to have little promise of making a major contribution to the dreamed-of complete naturalistic explanation. The most obvious lacuna is this. Before studies of particular sorts of alleged MEs can provide substantial promise of a general naturalistic explanation, much more preliminary taxonomy is required. How do we draw boundaries around the territory being investigated? What does it take for a particular experience to be an ME? What are the species of this genus? Studies in the field all bear marks of neglecting these crucial conceptual issues. I. M. Lewis, whom Fales cites,[48] concentrates on "possession cults," which can hardly be taken as encompassing all the experiences that are taken by their subjects to be direct experiences of an object of worship or an alleged ultimate reality. I am dubious about the prospects of justifying Fales's claim that Lewis's theory "cuts across the entire spectrum of MPs." In any event, it is far from being justified at present. As for evidence that micro-seizures of the temporal lobes of the brain "can be provoked by techniques traditionally used to induce mystical trance states," the apparent fact that putative direct experiences of God are by no means limited to "trance states" raises serious questions as to how general this explanation is.

Reply to Alston

Between Alston's position and mine there are three main areas of dispute. The first concerns the nature of perceptual warrant – specifically, the employment of a Principle of Credulity and the significance of cross-checks. Second, we disagree about whether there are checks that significantly confirm theistic mystical experiences (MEs). Third, Alston stoutly maintains that serious difficulties hobble scientific investigation and naturalistic explanation of MEs. Let me take these in order.

I have argued that cross-checking is fundamental to establishing the veridicality of perception, whereas Alston mentions checking mainly to argue that MP needn't in

46 Alston, *Perceiving God*.

47 Ibid.

48 For move detail, see Fales, "Scientific Explanations," Parts I and II.

this regard approach the standards of sense perception. I have argued that a Principle of Credulity (PC) obscures the essential sources of warrant and should be dispensed with (but that cross-checks are indispensable even given the PC, because of independent doubts concerning MEs).

Alston argues that it is an *empirical* question what causal processes connect an object X to the perceiver's consciousness in the right way to count as a perceiving of X. Determining that for a perceptual modality, he claims, presupposes that we can identify *bona fide* examples of veridical perception in that modality. Otherwise, we won't even know what sorts of causal processes cross-checking is to identify.[49] This suggests a difficulty in my claims for cross-checking that Alston doesn't himself raise; for if he's right, then, arguably, cross-checking *presupposes* the PC.

For we may surmise that Alston would invoke the PC to underwrite the credentials of the perceptual episodes which are to serve as standard cases of veridical perception. The PC would thus be more fundamental than cross-checking. But (a) the principle is too weak for this purpose, and (b) it is unneeded. It is too weak because a prima facie warrant doesn't tell us which experiences in a given modality are veridical – only cross-checking may reveal some overriders – and does not even entail that *most* of them are. It is also unneeded, though the reasons are unavoidably complex and cannot be spelled out here.[50]

I do not in any case think it would be hard to judge, given a knowledge of precisely what causal role(s) God plays in the production of MEs, whether to count them as cases of perceiving God. The necessary conditions include (1) that the experience seem to the perceiver to be one of God's being present, (2) that it would not have occurred were it not for some divine influence upon the perceptual capacities of the perceiver, and (3) that this influence be such as to convey correct information to the perceiver concerning some of God's properties – that is, some of God's properties must cause it to be the case that the perceiver's perceptual processes are so stimulated as to make it seem to him or her that God has those very properties. These three conditions may not be jointly sufficient, but I am content, for the purposes of the present dispute, to accept them as being so. The trouble is that theists have characteristically said nothing *at all* (that is independently testable) about how God acts here.

49 So Alston argues that the atheist would have no basis for specifying where God must enter the causal etiology of an ME in order for it to qualify as a perception of him – and hence no basis for denying that God plays the requisite role. But the shoe is on the other foot. Let the theist who takes certain MEs as veridical use them to formulate criteria for how God must enter the picture. Then we can consider how to design tests to determine, in any given case, whether he does so. Theists have done nothing of this kind.

50 The solution requires an a priori component, a conceptual component grounded in immediate experience, and the empirical evidence germane to understanding how particular sense modalities function. The a priori component includes two principles: namely, (1) that qualitatively different causes differ somewhere in the sorts of effects they produce, and (2) that the sort of object intended in an act of perceptual awareness is an object such that it, or objects of the same sort, have figured as the sole element common to the causal chains culminating in a certain reference class of perceptual experiences, and to no others. The conceptual component includes the principles of causal inference, which are grounded in our perceptual acquaintance with causal relations – and, in particular, our comprehension of the way in which causes can combine to produce an effect and which an event can causally contribute to multiple effects. Details are spelled out in Fales, *Causation and Universals*, chs 1, 8, and 12. I should emphasize that Alston does not lay claim to the argument to which I am responding.

A fourth condition that is plausible would require that the causal process employ some mechanism (in the brain?) whose natural function, the function it evolved to serve, is to detect God. Is there such a perceptual center that detects God? If so, how would we discover it? As we saw, there is a candidate for such a "God module," as it has been dubbed: the temporal lobes of the brain. However, (a) there is no hint that God figures in the production of micro-seizures; and (b) the content of the experiences generated by micro-seizures is clearly conditioned by social/cultural factors. Thus, even *if* God were somehow to contribute to the production of mystical experiences, it would hardly be possible to characterize the divine causal role as being of such a kind that perceiving God was the "normal" or naturally evolved function of the "God module." In short, the extreme variety of content of MEs rules out *in principle* a divine causal role in virtue of which an ME could be characterized in these terms as a perception of God.

I have argued, secondly, that such cross-checks as have been performed on MEs do not confirm them. Those cross-checking procedures that are internal to mystical practices are (with one exception) not of a sort that *could* genuinely confirm MEs, because they either have no apparent evidential bearing at all, or because they can be brought to bear only by making ancillary theological assumptions that are themselves not subject to independent tests, or because they confirm at least equally well some naturalistic hypothesis. The exception – prophecy – has a striking, and telling, record of failure. Nor are there cross-checking procedures external to mystical practice that support it. Indeed, until theists formulate serious, testable hypotheses concerning the manner in which God provides theophanies, there is not much that can be done along these lines.

Although Alston recognizes that the use of various procedures I have included under the heading of cross-checking is desirable, he seems not to think it is as essential for MEs as it is for more ordinary experience-based claims. Thus he minimizes the demand *within* mystical practices for criteria that discriminate the genuine from the bogus, and suggests that weaker controls are all right because the elusive nature of the object of MEs (God) precludes stronger checking. But that is like saying that, where the nature of a crime makes it hard to establish guilt, we should just lower the standards of evidence required for conviction. On the contrary: we should just admit ignorance. Alston calls the demand for independent cross-checks imperialism. I call it common sense.

A third focus of disagreement is Alston's insistence that MEs can't be controlled, or predicted; nor are there causal mechanisms accessible; thus they resist adequate scientific investigation. He is mistaken on all three counts, though certainly *some* MEs are more elusive than others. The literature on these matters – ethnographic, sociological, psychological, and neurophysiological – has moved well beyond the work of the figures whom Alston cites, who wrote nearly a century ago. Interested readers are invited to familiarize themselves with this literature and draw their own conclusions.