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The autonomy of religious experience

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1.

In this paper I want to make a start at defending the idea that the experience of God, or, as I shall say, the *perception*[1] of God plays an epistemic role with respect to beliefs about God importantly analogous to that played by sense perception with respect to beliefs about the physical world. To be sure, what it takes for an important analogy depends on just what epistemic role sense perception does play, and that is a matter of considerable controversy. Nevertheless, it is admitted on (almost) all hands that sense perception does provide us with knowledge (justified belief) about perceived things, happenings, and situations in the physical environment of the perceiver, and that this perceptual knowledge is essential to our having any further knowledge about the physical world. My idea is that, likewise, one's perceptions of God can furnish one with knowledge (justified belief) about what God is doing vis-a-vis the person at that moment (sustaining her in being, filling her with love or peace, strengthening her, communicating a certain message, or just being present). Call beliefs of this sort M-beliefs ("M" for "manifestation"). And, likewise, this perceptual knowledge of God is essential to any other knowledge of God we may acquire.

This paper constitutes only a small part of the elaboration and defence of this idea. One segment I will not get into concerns the way in which perceptual knowledge fits into the total picture, either with respect to our knowledge of the physical world or with respect to our knowledge of God. Hence I will not try to identify the other contributions to knowledge in either sphere, nor will I go into the ways in which perceptual knowledge supports, and/or is supported by, other sorts of knowledge. Instead, I will concentrate on defending a very modest claim concerning the epistemic status of our perception of God. Think of the matter in this way. With respect both to sense perception and the perception of God, the fact that X

appears to one in a certain way, P, provides one with a prima facie justification for supposing that X is P. The fact that this object looks blue to me gives me prima facie justification for supposing that it is blue, and the fact that God appears, experientially, to be sustaining me in being gives me prima facie justification for supposing that God is sustaining me in being. (To say that I am *prima facie* justified in believing that p is to say that I am (unqualifiedly) justified in believing it provided there are no sufficiently strong indications to the contrary. Prima facie justification is justification that can be "overriden" by sufficient indications to the contrary.) To be sure, it is not necessary that X actually appear to one in order for one to be perceptually justified in believing that X is P. Even if I am hallucinating a blue object, I could be prima facie perceptually justified in supposing that the object in front of me is blue, provided the hallucination is realistic enough. All that is necessary for a prima facie justified perceptual belief that X is P is an experience of the sort that one would normally take to involve X's appearing as P to one. Hence the general thesis of perceptual justification I espouse is the following.

1. If one believes that X is P, on the basis of an experience of the sort that one would normally take to involve X's appearing to one as P, that belief is prima facie justified.[2]

In application to perception of God this becomes:

2. If one believes that God is P (e.g., loving) on the basis of an experience that one would normally take to involve God's appearing to one as P, that belief is prima facie justified.

Before proceeding with my defence of this thesis, I had better say a word about what I am including under the rubric "perception of God." I want to include any experiences that the subject takes, or would take if the question arose, to be an *intuitive*, experiential awareness of God, as contrasted with just thinking about God, directing some propositional attitude or other to Him.[3] Let me spell this out by taking a particular example of such an experience and pointing to its salient features.

> ...all at once I experienced a feeling of being raised above myself, I felt the presence of God, ...as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether... I then sat down on a stone, unable to stand any longer, and my eyes overflowed with tears. I thanked God that in the course of my life he taught me to know him ...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 be judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously...

> I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communion 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 with 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.[4]

This experience is typical of those I shall be thinking of in several respects. First, the author takes God to be directly presenting Himself to him as such-and-such, in this case as a permeating goodness and power. He takes this to be generically similar to the way in which physical objects present themselves to our awareness in sense perception. Hence he speaks of himself as "perceiving" God. Second, this differs from sense perception in that the experience is not sensory in character; it does not involve an awareness of sensory qualities like color, shape, or sound. Third, there is conversation with God as well as a more passive awareness of His presence. This involves God presenting Himself as saying so-and-so as well as being so-and-so. Fourth, the author takes himself to have learned something from the perception, what God is like and what God's will for him is. Finally, the experience was intense, focal, and of short duration. Actually, I am also interested in non-focal, background, and long lasting experiences of God, and I especially want to avoid the impression that what I am calling the "perception of God" is restricted to rare, unusual persons. In a recent book by two sociologists[5] a survey is reported that indicates that almost half the members of a wide variety of Christian churches are "sure" that they have had a "feeling that they were somehow in the presence of God," and that another 28% report that they "think" that this is true.[6] Thus three fourths of this sample took themselves to have been experientially aware of God at some time. I am not dealing merely with a fringe group. Let me also say that, although I do not wish to discount "mediated" experiences of God, in which God is perceived through the sense perception of something in the physical environment (another person speaking, beauties of nature, and so on), I will be thinking primarily of cases in which the experience of God is non-sensory in character, in which the subject is (so she thinks) aware of the presence and/or activity of God without detecting this by any of the five senses. My chief reason for this focus is that since God is not physical in nature, non-sensory experiences have the strongest title to being called *direct* perceptions of God.[7]

In defending my thesis I will be endeavoring to effect a fundamental

shift in our way of viewing the issue. This will involve moving from the assessment of claims to the perception of God from within the sphere of sense perception, employing criteria and standards appropriate to that domain, to the recognition that such claims are made within a distinct, relatively autonomous domain, with its own proper criteria and standards that differ significantly from those appropriate to sense perception. I shall approach this task by considering some familiar objections to my thesis, diagnosing them as based on the employment of criteria appropriate to sense perception, and then giving reasons for supposing that quite different criteria are appropriate. I shall not aspire, within the bounds of this paper, to consider all the most prominent objections to my thesis, but only those that furnish the most effective platform for the shift in question.

2.

A reason frequently given for rejecting my thesis is that claims to have perceived God cannot be confirmed by the kinds of checks and tests that are available for claims to have perceived physical objects and that are successfully passed by many such claims.[8] Suppose I report seeing a morel (a particularly delicious wild mushroom) at a certain spot in the forest. There are various ways in which it can be determined whether I really did see a morel at that spot. A number of other observers can take a good look at that spot at (approximately) that time and report whether they saw a morel. If it is clear that there is something there that looks like a morel, further tests, including microscopic examination of pieces of the object, can be made to determine whether the object really is a morel, rather than some other kind of wild fungus. If none of these tests are available, and the matter is of practical importance, tests can be administered to me to determine such things as (a) whether I have the capacity to distinguish morels from other organisms (and other things one might see in a forest), (b) whether my visual apparatus is in good working condition, (c) how careful an observer I am, and (d) whether my emotional condition was such as to be conducive to accurate observation. On the basis of such tests as these, a given perceptual belief report can be confirmed or disconfirmed.

But with alleged perceptions of God none of this available. In the interests of time I will confine my remarks to the first test, involving reports of other observers. Here the crucial point is not that not all persons report experiences of the presence of God. Not all persons report having seen morels, but that doesn't disconfirm reports of morel sightings. The point is, rather, that for sense perception, but not for divine perception, we

can specify conditions under which the experience of one subject is *relevant* to the confirmation or disconfirmation of the perceptual report of another subject. If one does (doesn't) see a morel in some other place, or at the same place in some other year, that has no bearing on whether my report was accurate. It is only visual perception of that spot at (approximately) that time that is relevant. For sense perception we are able to discriminate what perceptions have what bearing on the credibility of the report with which we started. We can't always do this in as simple a fashion as the "same time same place" formula. If the alleged perceptual object is, unlike a morel, something that moves around a lot, like human beings or things regularly transported by human beings or other agents, then the recipes will be more complicated. If I report seeing a certain kind of plane over my house at a given time, then what perceptions of others are relevant here will depend on the direction in which the plane was moving at what speed and toward what destination. Where we have to take into account the modifications undergone by an object over a considerable period of time, as we do with a seventeenth-century traveller's report of a Cambodian temple, the recipes are still more complicated. But whatever the complexity, we have a considerable capacity to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant experiences of others in the critical examination of sense perceptual reports.

There is nothing comparable to this in the perception of God. God is always present everywhere, if present anywhere, and so the whereabouts of a subject has no bearing. If a particular report were to be assessed on the sense perceptual model then we would have to say that S really perceived Got at t only if everyone is perceiving God all the time. But no religious experiencer would recognize this to be a relevant test. "Why should we expect God to be perceivable by everyone all the time, even if He is present everywhere all the time?", he might ask. To be sure, in what I said above I seriously oversimplified the sense perceptual test. Another observer at the right time and place will not provide confirmation or disconfirmation if his sensory apparatus is not in proper working order or if he is too distracted by other matters. And so it might be suggested that other persons' experiences or lack thereof count toward the assessment of my putative perception of God only if the other person is sufficiently "receptive" to the presence of God, is "spiritually attuned," and the like. But with sense perception we have tests of the condition of the sensory apparatus and of the mental and emotional condition of the subject that are independent of whether the person reported seeing a morel in that spot at that time. How about the religious case? Well, it's not that we have no tests of spiritual receptivity, of which more below. But no alleged perceiver of God would take the veracity of her claims to be determined by

whether everyone who passes the tests for spiritual receptivity is always aware of God. If that were the appropriate criterion then either practically no one would pass the tests for sufficient spiritual receptivity or no claims to perceive God would be confirmed; since practically no one supposes him/herself to be always aware of God. If I continue to insist that I saw a morel in the face of massive disconfirmation by observers at that time and place who pass the standard tests for competence, then I would be branded as irrational by community standards. But nothing analogous can be said for religious communities. The reports are not held subject to community consensus *in that way*. There are no clear cut conditions such that we are prepared to admit that God exists if and only if a person who satisfies those conditions perceives God whenever God is present, i.e., continuously.

Thus we are simply unable to go about testing a particular report of perception of God in the ways we can test reports of sense perception. What bearing does this have on the epistemic status of such reports? Different answers have been proferred to this question. In a much discussed essay, "A Religious Way of Knowing," later included in his book *Religious Belief*, C. B. Martin notoriously maintained that the points I have been making imply that putative perceptual claims about God cannot be regarded as making a genuine claim about an objective reality, but must instead be assimilated to reports of the subject's immediate state of consciousness. This public verificationism does relieve the religious person of making untestable objective claims, but by the same token it leaves him in the frustrating position of being unable to say or think what he set out to say or think. A more modest position would be that the absence of effective checks by other observers leaves the reporter with no epistemic justification for his report. So long as there is no possibility of validating his claims before a public tribunal they are without warrant. We are left only with his own predilection for one particular interpretation of his experience.

This is a powerfully tempting position. Our conviction that sense perception puts us in effective cognitive contact with a surrounding world is intimately tied up with the fact that when we compare our perceptual beliefs with those of relevant others, they exhibit a massive commonality. And if we could have no such interpersonal confirmation how could we distinguish veridical perception from dreams and fancies?

Nevertheless, I am going to resist the temptation. I believe that this argument rests on an unjustified, and unjustifiable, assumption, viz., that reports of perception of God are properly treated in the same way as reports of perception of the physical environment, so that if the former cannot be validated in the same way as the latter they have no claim to

rational acceptance as objective claims. This assumption might be put as follows: the formation of perceptual beliefs about God takes place in the same "doxastic practice" (practice of belief formation, hereinafter just "practice") as the formation of perceptual beliefs about the physical environment (call this latter practice SP) and hence is subject to assessment in terms of the same criteria.

Let me work up to a challenge of this assumption by considering a less controversial case of a difference in doxastic practice. Suppose I were to make an analogous critique of introspective reports, e.g., that I now feel excited. Here too the report cannot be assessed on the basis of whether other people experience the same thing under the same conditions. Even if they don't that has no tendency to show that I didn't feel excited. But this will not lead most of us to deny that such beliefs can be justified. We would simply point out that we should not expect beliefs about one's own conscious states to be subject to the same sorts of tests as beliefs about ships and sealing wax. More indirect tests of a public sort can be given to determine the subject's mastery of mentalistic language and his general reliability as a reporter. But as for particular reports, assuming general competence, there is no appeal beyond his word. The attempt to discredit introspective reports by showing that they cannot be checked up on in the same way as perceptual reports of the physical environment fails just because the former belongs to a different experiential belief forming practice, one with a different sort of input, different input-output functions, a different conceptual scheme, a different subject matter, and different criteria of justification.

This example is designed to suggest the possibility that the formation of perceptual beliefs about God also belongs to a distinctively different doxastic practice. If so, it will be just as inappropriate to subject experiential beliefs about God to the tests of sense perception as it is to subject introspective beliefs to such tests; and the inability to do so will have no more epistemic significance than the inability to use perceptual checks on mathematical statements, or mathematical checks on perceptual reports. But how can we defend the view that a distinct doxastic practice is involved here? Isn't this just a defensive maneuver that is resorted to whenever one is in fatal difficulties. If one fails a test one simply cries "inappropriate!"

A proper discussion of this issue would be based on a general theory of doxastic practices, something I have no time for here.[9] Instead I will just briefly enumerate some ways in which the formation of perceptual beliefs about God is distinct from other doxastic practices. First, a phenomenological study of reports of experiences of God reveals that distinctive sorts of experiential input are involved, intermixed often with familiar sensory

material.[10] Second, a distinctive conceptual scheme is employed for the formation of the beliefs that are the output of the practice. In saying this, I do not wish to deny the widely accepted thesis that the concepts we apply to God are derived from those we use to talk about creatures, but still the derivation yields something distinctively different. But third, and most directly relevant to the epistemic issues, we get a system of checks and tests different from those appropriate for sense perception. Once that point is made we must recognize that there is not one unique practice of forming beliefs about God, much less a unique practice of forming beliefs about what we might call, more generically, "Absolute Reality" or "objects of religious worship." On the contrary, whereas there seems to be, for all practical purposes, a single sense perceptual belief forming practice, mankind is divided up into a number of distinct and apparently incompatible practices of forming beliefs on the basis of one's experience of God (the Ultimate), with somewhat different conceptual schemes and quite different checks and tests. (The degree of commonality of experiential input is a matter of controversy.) This fact itself poses problems for my thesis, but I'm afraid they lie outside the boundaries of this lecture. If we consider a particular religious community, construing the community widely enough to embrace many differences on points of detail, we will find tests of various sorts recognized. For example, in what I will call "mainline Christianity" there is widespread agreement on, and use of, the following tests.

1. Whether the content of the report is in consonance with the picture of the nature, purposes, and doings of God that has been built up in that community.
2. Whether the subject exhibits over time a progress in becoming the kind of person that, according to the tradition of that community, God wants us to be.

No doubt, there are difficulties in the application of these tests, especially the second, but they are by no means useless. If I were to report that God told me to kill all the phenomenologists I can find, practically all Christians would, by applying the first test, rule that out as a genuine communication from God. Let's call the doxastic practice I have been describing CP. As a mnemonic guide think of "Christian practice" or "Christian perception."

Since the formation of M-beliefs within the Christian community belongs to a doxastic practice distinct from SP there is, as we might say, a kind of epistemic "chauvinism" involved in imposing the tests appropriate to SP on the beliefs formed in CP. Judging CP outputs on the basis of SP

tests is no more appropriate than it would be to evaluate introspective, memory, or mathematical beliefs by the same tests. The objection I have been considering is guilty of the same kind of chauvinism as, to take some historically prominent examples, Plato's and Descartes' low assessment of SP as lacking the precision, stability, and certainty of mathematics, and Hume's low assessment of inductive reasoning as lacking the conclusiveness of deductive reasoning.

3.

This is all very well as sociology, you may reply, but why suppose that the fact that a belief passes (fails) *these* tests is any indication of its truth (falsity) or its rationality (irrationality). Anyone can arbitrarily set up some tests and *say* that they are germane to a determination of truth or justification. Why should we take these seriously?

A full discussion of this would require a thorough evaluation of the entire doxastic practice in question; and we will not be able to do that in this paper. For the moment I want to answer the charge of arbitrariness. To do this I will double back and look at SP again, asking why we should take *its* checks and tests seriously, why we should regard *them* as something other than as arbitrary, as having some real bearing on questions of truth and justification. Why should we suppose that the fact that other people do (do not) have similar perceptions under certain specified conditions tends to show that my report is (is not) correct?

Clearly the answer is that we have learned from observation that certain outcomes are indicative of the truth of a given report and others indicative of its falsity. We have learned from experience that a morel is the sort of thing that sits there patiently subjecting itself to the scrutiny of any investigator who satisfies the appropriate conditions; and we have learned from experience what conditions are the appropriate ones. We have learned from experience how salt looks and tastes under various conditions. In other words, our system of tests is based on what we have learned about regularities in the behavior of perceivable objects, including their interactions with our perceptual and cognitive apparatus. It is because we have learned all this that we can be assured that if 50 other observers go to the spot and don't see a morel, when the proper conditions are satisfied, then no morel is there. We have learned from experience the conditions under which a morel would be seen by a qualified observer if it is there.

I want to underline the point that we have learned this from experience, i.e., from within the very doxastic practice of which these tests are an integral part. We don't know a priori what conditions must be satisfied in

order that someone else's sensory experience could confirm or disconfirm mine, nor was all this revealed to us by an angel. So far as a priori considerations are concerned, it might be that a morel, if it really exists, would be perceivable at the same time by everyone whatever the location. It is what we have learned from sense perception, and reasoning therefrom, that informs us to the contrary.

To generalize this point, the tests that are relevant to a given doxastic practice are determined by the nature of the subject matter dealt with therein. And where we are dealing with a practice that constitutes our fundamental access to a subject matter, as we are in the case of sense perception, we learn the salient facts about the subject matter from that practice itself. The practice supplies both the tester and the testee; it grades its own examinations. This means that there is a certain circularity involved in supporting the choice of tests for a given practice. One has to use the practice, including the tests in question, in showing that these tests are the right ones to use. Choosing tests is an "inside" job. And this circularity attaches as fully to universal practices that are taken, in practice, to be unproblematic, as it does to controversial practices like CP.

These considerations reinforce the earlier point that the tests of a particular practice like SP cannot be *assumed* to be applicable to other practices, even to other practices of the same general sort (e.g., experiential). Since the applicability of these tests within SP depends on what SP has taught us about *its* subject matter, there is no reason to think that they will also be applicable to a different practice that deals with a quite different subject matter. Indeed we should expect that different doxastic practices[11] will make us of different sorts of checks for the beliefs they generate. Each practice generates a certain picture of its subject matter, a picture that dictates certain sorts of checks as the relevant ones; and since these pictures will generally differ significantly, so will the system of tests. To bring this home let's look at how this works out in CP. Here too a general picture of the subject matter, viz., God and our relations thereto, has been built up over the millenia. Just as with sense perception, individual experiential reports that conflict with this general picture will be summarily dismissed. In SP if one claimed to see objects that have been released in still air rising instead of falling, we will not accept that as an accurate report just because it conflicts with firmly established elements in the picture of the physical world we have built up on the basis of empirical data. Similarly if one reports that he experienced God as indifferent to the fate of mankind (or that God told him that this is His attitude), this report will be thrown out on the same kinds or grounds. And in both cases reports that are consonant with what we have learned about the subject matter thereby get their epistemic status upgraded. The second of the tests

of CP mentioned above, the spiritual development of the subject, has a similar basis. Within CP one learns that God is primarily concerned, as far as we are concerned, with our salvation and sanctification, with our being fit for eternal loving communion with Him and with each other. Hence it is reasonable to suppose that insofar as a person is in genuine interaction with God that person will, sooner or later, display the effects of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit within herself. Needless to say, this test is highly defeasible. One can be genuinely experiencing the presence of God, even over a long period of time, while contrary forces are interfering with any substantial spiritual development. Seed may fall on barren ground or be choked by weeds. But so all empirical checks and tests are defeasible to various degrees. Even if all ten observers reported seeing a morel they could have been victims of mass delusion; chemical tests may be misleading because of faulty equipment or defective underlying theory. And so on. Nevertheless, the picture of the subject matter built up within the practice indicates that these tests are of some value in discriminating genuine from spurious perceptions of God.

In the same way we can see the basis within CP for not regarding SP tests as appropriate. Those tests, we have seen, are relevant to SP just because we are able to discern detailed regularities in the operation of the physical world. But we are not in that position with respect to God. Even if we have some knowledge of the basic character and purposes of God, that does not provide us with usable recipes for the way God operates in various kinds of situations; and, in particular, it provides us with no detailed regularities in the appearance of God to our experience (even though we have some idea as to what conditions are conducive to an awareness of God). And it is not just that we haven't discovered any such dependable regularities. It is part of the picture of the subject matter in CP, and other religious systems of belief, that this kind of grasp is in principle unavailable to us. The reason given for this differs in different theologies, but there is a strong consensus on the theme of the radical transcendence of God, the infinite divine-creature distance, which results in our inability to attain the kind of detailed understanding of divine operations that we can achieve of physical operations. Hence the background picture of the situation built up within CP is such as to imply that we should not expect to be able to use the SP tests, even if God objectively exists and even if we are in cognitive contact with Him experientially.

The point that the standard tests within a practice are based on the account of the subject matter that is developed within that practice is crucial to the paradigm shift I am endeavoring to carry out. Once this point is fully appreciated it should break the hold exercised on us by our most deeply rooted and most widely shared practices like SP. Because we have

been so thoroughly immersed in this practice since long before the age of reflection, since it is second nature to us (and no doubt contains many elements of first nature as well), we naturally fall into thinking that any objective experiential claims must be subject to *its* tests, and must successfully pass them, if they are to be intellectually respectable. However, once we realize that the relevance of these tests to sense perceptual beliefs is not an a priori truth but rather is based on empirical results obtained within SP, we can be open to the possibility that the same structure is to be found in other experiential doxastic practices, a possibility I have been claiming is realized in religious experiential practices. The tests that have been built up within CP have the same *sort* of justification as the tests of SP, viz., being based on the picture of the subject matter built up within that practice. Thus the charge of arbitrariness lacks force. One who levels this charge will be thinking that since CP, e.g., cannot show on the basis of outputs of other practices that passing its tests is a reliable indication of truth, there is no reason to accept them as having a crucial bearing on justification. But once we see that SP can support the relevance of its tests only by using *its* outputs, we see that this charge rests on a double standard, requiring of a certain practice (CP) something that cannot be satisfied by the practices to which one is attached and with which one is unfavorably comparing CP. Whereas chauvinism involves the use of too narrow a single standard, the charge of arbitrariness involves the use of an arbitrary double standard. Interestingly enough, both these epistemic sins are exhibited, at different levels, by the same criticism of CP.

4.

Now I will point out, much more briefly, some other ways in which chauvinism and the double standard are displayed in unfavorable comparisons of CP with SP. Underlying much of this discussion is the pervasive presence of what I call "epistemic circularity," the use of the outputs of a practice to support its claims to be reliable or to be a source of justified belief.

An example to which I will devote a bit more space than the others has to do with explanation. It is often supposed, with some considerable plausibility, that a mode of experience can lay claim to be an experience of an objective reality only if that objective reality figures importantly in an adequate explanation of that experience. Normal visual experience can justifiably be taken to be an experience of items in the field of vision only because we can't understand why the visual experience occurs as it does without taking into account the causal influence of those items (in this

case, their reflection of light that then strikes the retina, and ...). But, so the charge goes, the experience involved in alleged experiences of God can be adequately understood in terms of purely natural causes: psychological, sociological, or whatever. God need never be mentioned in order to mount an adequate explanation. Nous n'avons pas besoin de cette hypothese. Hence, we are debarred from taking these experiences to be experiences of God.

If I were discussing this issue for its own sake I would challenge the claim that we do have purely naturalistic explanations of "religious experience" of the sort people generally have in mind, e.g., the one put forward by Freud. But since my purpose here is to illustrate chauvinism and the double standard, I will cede this point, since it is only then that those evil forces can be unmasked. In any event, it is highly plausible that all conscious experience is causally determined by neuro-physiological goings on in the brain, in which case putative experience of God will certainly have an adequate proximate causal explanation in terms of neuro-physiology. But, as the general principle just cited implies, this is equally true of sensory experience. Now clearly one who levels the objection under discussion supposes that this fact (that the proximate causes of sensory experience are all inside the head) is quite compatible with the perceived external objects figuring further back along the line among the causes of the experience. They will be remote, even though not proximate, causes and so will enter into what we might term an ideally complete causal explanation. But something analogous is obviously possible in the religious situation. God could figure further back among the causes of religious experience, even if all its proximate causes are in the natural world. Indeed, this is affirmed in CP, according to which God figures ultimately among the causes of everything whatever. Hence the fact that the proximate causes of religious experience are all natural has no tendency to show that it does not constitute an experience of God. To suppose otherwise is to apply a much more stringent standard to religious than to sensory experience, requiring of the former, but not of the latter, that its cognitive object figure among its proximate causes. The *double standard* again.

"Still," my critic may urge, "you have only broached a possibility. We have no reason to think that God really is among the remote causes of the experiences in question. Whereas we have ample reason to suppose that a tree in my field of vision is among the remote causes of my current visual experience." But what reasons we have depends on what we are prepared to count as such. The critic is presumably claiming that SP and other "secular" doxastic practices do not provide sufficient evidence for the causal claim in question, e.g., by a causal argument for the existence of

God, beginning with premises concerning things or changes in the natural world. This may or may not be true. But even if true it misses the point that the practitioner of CP may have reasons generated by that practice for supposing God to be involved in a full causal explanation of putative experiences of God. And if the critic complains that this is circular, we can, once more, point out that he is involved in exactly the same circle. If he is to argue effectively that perceived objects figure among the causes of the sensory experience involved in the perception, he has no alternative to relying on empirical evidence acquired by taking various perceptual experiences to be veridical cognitions. Thus if he withholds this privilege of epistemically circular reasoning from CP, while granting it to SP, he is once more guilty of an arbitrary *double standard.* And if he, equally arbitrarily, simply assumes that any causal explanation can be supported only by SP and what is based on that, he is guilty of epistemic *chauvinism* in imposing the standards of one practice on another practice with quite different cognitive resources.

Now for a few briefer illustrations of our two cardinal sins. Chauvinism is clearly exhibited by our inveterate tendency to suppose that CP is discredited by some of its obvious differences from SP, briefly pointed out in footnote 10. SP is a pervasive and inescapable feature of our lives. Sense experience is insistent, omnipresent, vivid, and richly detailed. We use it as a source of information during all our waking hours, and it is normally completely convincing. Moreover it is universally engaged in by all normal human beings. CP, by contrast, is by no means universally shared; and even for most of its devotees its practice is relatively infrequent. Moreover, its deliverances are, by comparison, meager, obscure, and uncertain. These striking differences encourage many to dismiss the supposition that CP puts us into genuine cognitive contact with an aspect of reality.

Nevertheless, on reflection we can see that this is all arbitrary chauvinism again. CP is being dismissed for failing to exhibit the distinctive features of the more deeply rooted and more familiar practice, features we have no real reason to suppose to be necessary conditions of the reliability of any experiential practice. Why should we suppose that a cognitive access enjoyed only by a part of the population is less likely to be reliable than one that is universally distributed? Why should we suppose that a source that yields less detailed and less fully understood beliefs is more suspect than a richer source? A priori it would seem just as likely that some aspects of reality are accessible only to persons that satisfy certain conditions not satisfied by all human beings as that some aspects are equally accessible to all. A priori it would seem just as likely that some aspects of reality are humanly graspable only in a fragmentary

and opaque manner as that some aspects are graspable in a more nearly complete and pellucid fashion. Why view the one sort of cognitive claim with more suspicion than the other? As with any other arbitrary partiality, no justification can be found for taking the salient features of the one practice as necessary for any acceptable experiential practice.

The double standard is evident in a number of familiar objections to the likes of CP. Consider the following. "In order to be rationally justified in supposing that anyone really does perceive God we would have to have sufficient reason to suppose that (1) God does exist and (2) God is, at least sometimes, related to human beings in such a way as to be perceivable by them. But we have no such reasons."

Now what is this objector prepared to take as a genuine reason for either of these suppositions? Whatever the details of the matter it is clear that he is restricting reasons to what can be ascertained without using the resources of CP, e.g., metaphysical arguments for and against the existence of God. But why this restriction? He will presumably, or rather certainly, not proceed in this fashion with respect to SP. Here the phenomenon of epistemic circularity is one more crucial. If we consider the analogous questions with respect to SP, (1A) whether the physical world exists, and (2A) whether it is related to human beings in such a way as to be perceivable by them, it is clear that we have no chance of finding a sufficient basis for a positive answer to those questions without making use of what we learn from SP. After all, the conditions of veridical sense perception have to do with states of affairs and causal interactions in the physical world, matters to which we have no cognitive access that is not based on sense perception. In like fashion, if there is a divine reality why suppose that we can ascertain that it is real or can ascertain the conditions under which it can be veridically perceived, without relying on information we get from perceptions of it? (And if we allow this source of information we will presumably have reasons aplenty.) Since the critic is requiring *external* validation of these assumptions in the one case but not in the other, without having any justification for this differential treatment, he is once more guilty of arbitrarily imposing a double standard.

Exactly the same point can be made with respect to the charge that we have no reason to suppose that the perceptual belief forming practice typical of CP is a reliable one. Again the crucial question is as to where we are allowed to garner reasons. In the case of SP we, once again, are unable to provide any case for the reliability of sense perception without making use of what we learn from SP. How else could we determine that what we learn from our senses is generally the case (at least approximately)? The only otherwise effective arguments we have for its reliability are infected with epistemic circularity. But if epistemically circular arguments are

allowed for the reliability of CP, we will have ample reasons for an attribution of reliability there as well. Among the things people suppose themselves to have learned from CP is that God will enable people to experience His presence and activity from time to time in a veridical way. That is, by relying on what one learns from the practice of CP, one can show that it is a reliable belief-forming practice. If, on the other hand, epistemically circular arguments are not countenanced, there can be no significant basis for a reliability claim in either case. Thus on neither horn of this dilemma can CP be unfavorably compared to SP with respect to grounds for a reliability attribution. And if one allows epistemically circular arguments for SP but not for CP (which is what is presumably behind the objection under discussion), the objector is once more guilty of arbitrarily employing a double standard.

As a final example, consider the following common objection to my thesis. "One doesn't really *experience* God; one is aware of some intense subjective feelings of elation, rapture, or whatever, which one *interprets* as due to the presence of God. God comes into the picture as the interpretation of the experience rather than as what is experienced."

But why should we suppose that the theistic conceptual shaping of one's experience prevents one from being aware of God, as well as being aware, in a different way, of the experience? Conceptual sets and readinesses are heavily involved in sense perception as well, but that doesn't prevent people from being visually aware of trees and buildings, as well as being aware of their own visual experiences. I wouldn't be experiencing my environment in the way I do if I weren't prepared to apply concepts like *house, tree,* and *person* to what I see. But that doesn't prevent what visually appears to me from being a tree. Similarly, the fact that S's experience would not be just what it is unless she were prepared to use Christian concepts to articulate it does not imply that what appears to her in that experience is not God. The objector is taking the conceptual shaping of experience to be incompatible with genuinely experiencing an object in CP but not in SP, without justifying the differential treatment by pointing out suitable differences between the two practices. Thus, once more he is arbitrarily employing a double standard.

5.

The epistemological paradigm I have been presupposing features an irreducible plurality of doxastic practices with different inputs, input-output functions, and criteria and standards. There is no one overarching criterion of knowledge or justification, whether rationalistic or empiricis-

tic, such as many philosophers have sought. Furthermore, when we are dealing with doxastic practices, the reliability of which cannot be effectively assessed by independent standards, as SP does by common consent and as CP arguably does, we find ourselves unable to provide any effective support for claims to the reliability of the practice that is not epistemically circular, that does not depend on using the outputs of that practice to provide the support. This being the case, I see no reasonable alternative to taking any such practice that is socially established and a going concern to be *prima facie* acceptable, to be taken as innocent until proven guilty. This will apply both to universal "secular" practices like SP and the formation of beliefs on the basis of memory, introspection, and reasoning of various sorts, as well as to religious doxastic practices like CP.[12]

But does that mean that I am advocating an uncritical acceptance of any doxastic practice that is a going concern? Is "This language game is played" the last word on the subject? No. That is not my position. Don't forget that the dictum just laid down was only that every doxastic practice that is socially established is thereby *prima facie* acceptable. The extreme Wittgensteinianism just alluded to, although one of the positions that lies in the direction of the shift I am advocating, is not the only one. The route branches, and I take a different turn. I do not accept Wittgenstein's verificationist proscription of any attempt to make a critical evaluation of doxastic practices. Nor do I accept the dictum that each practice carries its own *concepts* of truth, reality, and knowledge. So far as I can see, we do have the practice-neutral concepts of truth, reality, and so on that are required for an external evaluation. Having made that explicit I can complete the shift into *my* new paradigm.[13] This paradigm, unlike full strength Wittgensteinianism, is not designed to protect any and all established doxastic practices against any criticism, a result that people like D. Z. Phillips achieve only at the price of robbing the beliefs of religion, e.g., of claims to objective truth. On the contrary, though I have given reason for supposing that any established practice is thereby prima facie acceptable, that initial presumption can be strengthened or weakened by further considerations. Even though the usual naturalistic attacks on CP are, I believe, vitiated by the defects I have pointed to in this lecture, it could still turn out that CP, or other established doxastic practices, could be shown to be unworthy of rational acceptance. And, on the other side, the practice might display features that earn it a higher epistemic rating.

But even though the possibility of such outcomes should not be ruled out a priori, I do not want to hold out extravagant hopes. A full appreciation of the way in which we persistently fall into epistemic circularity when we try to support or attack basic doxastic practices will carry with it the realization of the paucity of our resources for the comparative epis-

temic evaluation of established doxastic practices. Nevertheless I believe that something can be done. I shall conclude with a brief indication of some of the unchauvinistic considerations that strengthen or weaken a practice's claim to rational acceptance.

1. A practice is disqualified by persistent and irremediable inconsistency in its output. Consistency is a practice-neutral requirement just because its violation frustrates the most basic cognitive aim: to believe what is true and not to believe what is false. Massive internal inconsistency guarantees that a large proportion of one's beliefs are false. But note that I am taking only a "persistent and irremediable" inconsistency to be disqualifying. Some degree of inconsistency pops up in all practices, and it is undoubtedly healthy that it should. Since it is often not crystal clear which side of a contradiction is true, it is well that different practitioners should be free to explore different sides.

2. A massive and persistent inconsistency between the outputs of two different practices is a good reason for disqualifying at least one of them. Note that this is restricted to "persistent" inconsistency. If one of the practices can be modified in such a way as to avoid the inconsistency without disfiguring it beyond recognition, i.e., without losing its distinctive value, this is the course to take. This principle, of course, does not tell us which of the contenders to eliminate when radical surgery is necessary. My suggestion is that it would be most reasonable to give preference to the more firmly established contender. What does that involve? Such things as (a) being more widely accepted, (b) having a more definite structure, (c) being more important in our lives, (d) having more of an innate basis, (e) being more difficult to abstain from, and (f) its principles seeming more obviously true.

3. A practice's claim to acceptance is strengthened by significant "self support" and weakened by the absence of such. Of course, *self-support* for basic practices is going to exhibit epistemic circularity. Nevertheless, some epistemically circular support is not without significance. To see that, consider first a trivial sort of self-support in which each output of the practice is used twice, once as testee and once as a tester. A crystal ball gazer looks into the ball and asserts that p. Was this output true? Yes, because, as the crystal ball assures us, it is the case that p. As this example illustrates, this kind of self-support is perfectly trivial, since any internally consistent doxastic practice, no matter how disreputable, can score high on reliability if each output is used to show that it itself is correct. By contrast, consider the point that reliance on perceptual beliefs and reasoning therefrom has enabled us (a) to achieve considerable success in prediction and control and, to add another point, (b) to establish facts about the operation of sense perception that show both that it is a reliable source of

belief and why it is reliable. These results are by no means trivial. It is by no means the case that every doxastic practice can exhibit comparable results; crystal ball gazing cannot, for example. It is quite conceivable that these results should not have been attained in SP. Since SP supports itself in ways it conceivably might not, and in ways other practices do not, its *prima facie* claims to acceptance are thereby strengthened.

In applying this third principle we must be careful not take up another chauvinistic stance, that of supposing that any practice, or any experiential practice, can be significantly self-supported only in the SP way, by its success at prediction and control and the like. The point here is that, just as with checks and tests, what counts as appropriate self-support depends on what the practice has revealed about its subject matter. Since SP has revealed the physical world to exhibit regularities that make prediction possible, this is the kind of self-support it could be expected to provide if it is in effective cognitive contact with that reality. But since CP reveals its subject matter as quite different in this respect we should not expect the same kind of self-support even if its claims are justified. Here the appropriate self-support would rather be provided by the fact, if it is a fact, that prolonged interaction with God, of the right sort, should lead to spiritual development.

These last remarks have constituted only a brief sketch of the sorts of considerations that seem to me appropriate to the comparative epistemic evaluation of doxastic practices. Their detailed implementation is a much more exended task. In this lecture I have primarily sought to exhibit the considerations that require a shift from the evaluation of claims to perception of God from within the SP practice, to the assessment of distinct doxastic practices of forming beliefs about God on the basis of the experience of God.

6.

Where does this leave us? I have not, I fear, given any positive support for my central thesis that the perception of God provides prima facie justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God,[14] though I have hinted at the kind of *self-support* that might be available. Still less have I supported the claim that this kind of perception provides an essential part of the grounds for, e.g., the system of Christian belief. Nor have I grappled with the problems that stem from the multiplicity of conflicting religious experiential doxastic practices.[15] What I do take myself to have accomplished is a shift in our way of viewing the issues. The formation of beliefs about the activity of God in one's own life, on the basis of a perception of such

activity, and using the Christian conceptual and doctrinal scheme to articulate that experience, is a distinct basic doxastic practice in its own right. As such it is not properly evaluated on the basis of standards distinctive of quite different practices. Then how can it be evaluated? First of all, once we fully appreciate the point touched on this paper, that when we try to establish the reliability of basic doxastic practices we inevitably wind up using the outputs of the practice to do so, and hence fall into epistemic circularity, we are driven to the idea that any such practice is *prima facie* acceptable just by virtue of being a going concern. For since the claims of no such practice can be externally established, and since we can hardly reject them all, the only reasonable course would seem to be to take any such practice as innocent until proven guilty. Any further issues would concern the ways in which this initial presumption can be strengthened or weakened. I fear I have no time to go into all that here. I must content myself with having shown that the usual attempts to discredit CP from a naturalistic perspective fail, and leave further issues to your consideration.

Notes

1. I use this term because I think of experience of God as displaying generically the same structure as the sense perception of physical objects.
2. One may doubt that I could form a perceptual belief about X if I don't perceive X at all. Since I am unable to go into questions of perceptual reference in this paper, let me just rule that the perceptual judgment "X is P" is to be construed as "I am perceiving a Q that is P," where "Q" is a description that uniquely picks out X. There is no problem about my ability to form this latter judgment, even where I am not perceiving any Q.
3. Strictly speaking this criterion demarcates the class of putative perceptions of God, candidates for this status. Here as elsewhere, one can be mistaken in supposing that one is really perceiving x, enjoying a veridical perception of x.
4. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1902), Modern Library Reprint, pp. 67–68.
5. Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).
6. p. 130.
7. Let me emphasize that I do not by any means suppose that the main significance of the perception of God lies in its provision of epistemic justification for beliefs, any more than the main significance of human interpersonal perception lies in its epistemic role. In both case the main value of the experience is found in the way it is crucial for interpersonal relations and for leading a truly fulfilling life.
8. I discuss this objection less fully than here in "Religious Experience and Religious belief," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wol-

terstorff (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); "Perceiving God," *Journal of Philosophy* 83. 11 (November 1986).

9. For a fairly full treatment see my "A "Doxastic Practice" Approach to Epistemology," in *Epistemology: The State of the Arts*, ed. Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer (Westview Press, 1990).
10. To be sure there are enormous differences between the perception of God and sense perception. Sense perception is pervasively present in our every waking hour; it is insistent and completely convincing; its objects are presented with clarity and in very considerable detail; it is universally engaged in by all normal human beings. By contrast, experience of God is intermittent, meager in detail, not universally distributed, and its deliverances are often doubted. And some might take these differences to show that what I have called 'CP' is not a "genuine" doxastic practice. But I fail to see the force of that contention. These differences do clearly have an important bearing on the extent and certainty of our experiential access to God; but they have no tendency to show that there are not doxastic practices exhibiting generically the same structure as SP in which putative experience of God plays a role parallel to that played by putative experience of physical objects in SP.
11. Of the sorts we are dealing with here. An adequate general account would reveal sorts of practices to which the account given here is not wholly adequate.
12. For a more extended presentation of the points made in this section, see my "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach to Epistemology."
13. This paradigm could be viewed as a purified Wittgensteinianism, purified of such elements as those just mentioned. But it is no doubt closer in spirit to the epistemology of Thomas Reid. See my essay, "Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (1985).
14. I have, of course, argued that it is unreasonable to require the kind of external positive support that many thinkers demand.
15. For some recent thoughts on this problem see my "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 5. 4 (October 1988).