

# Mysticism and Perceptual Awareness of God

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## Introduction

Many people, especially in industrial societies in these pluralistic and scientific times, suppose that we can know (reasonably believe) that God exists and what God is like only if we have sufficient reasons for that, reasons that are drawn from what we know about the world in other spheres of our experience and thought. The classical arguments for the existence of God, such as the cosmological argument and the argument from design, (see chapters 5–6), are designed to provide such reasons. This approach to the matter treats God, in effect, as a theoretical “posit,” invoked to explain various features of the world. It is thought that since God is not observable by the five senses, we will have sufficient reason to believe in God’s existence and nature only if this is required for an adequate explanation of what we can sensorily observe. But this way of thinking of the matter is foreign to the religious commitments of most people in most societies throughout human history. The overwhelming preponderant attitude has been that God (or whatever is taken as ultimate reality) makes himself known by impinging on our lives in various ways. God is as much an experienced part of what confronts us in the world as mountains, oceans, buildings, and other people, though, no doubt, in a very different way. If God has been *present* to one’s experience, there is no need to postulate him as a part of an explanatory theory in order to be assured of his existence, any more than I have any such need with respect to my wife.

This essay will be an exposition and defense of that approach – of the thesis that for many people God is known through their experiential awareness of God. After exploring the variety in such experience, I will consider reasons for affirming and denying that such experience is what it seems to be, viz., a veridical experience of an objectively existing deity.

## Some Basic Terms

The first order of business is to examine and clarify the terms in my title. And, perversely enough, I will begin with the last word of that title, “God.” The great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – recognize only one object of worship, in the strict sense, and this being is thought of as personal, as an agent who acts on the basis of knowledge, purposes, evaluations, and so on. Orthodox Christianity thinks of God as one God in “three persons,” but it does not take that to amount to polytheism. But most religions in human history have been polytheistic, recognizing many personal objects of worship, even though some are of higher status than others. Buddhism exists in many forms, some of which recognize no personal deity at all. Popular Hinduism is also polytheistic, and the more philosophical and mystical varieties of Hinduism consider personal objects of worship to be mere manifestations of a completely unified and undifferentiated ultimate reality that is, indeed, the only true reality. And so it goes. We might use the term “ultimate reality” as a maximally generic term for an object of religious worship. And a completely inclusive treatment of perceptual awareness of religious objects of worship would have to consider all the ways in which ultimate reality is construed. But such a treatment would far outrun the space available for this essay. To avoid that fate, and for the sake of greater concreteness, I will limit myself here to God, as a unique personal object of worship. The choice is further motivated by the fact that this volume is designed as a guide to philosophy of religion as it has developed in Western thought, where the focus has been on monotheistic religion, and more specifically on the Judeo-Christian form.

Now for “mysticism.” Although the term is used in popular speech for a wide variety of experiences that are unusual and completely absorbing, scholars tend to restrict it to experiences in which all distinctions are transcended in an undifferentiated unity. Here there is no possibility of even distinguishing the experience, or the subject of the experience, from the object experienced. I will term this “extreme mystical experience.” Here are two formulations from widely different traditions. “As pure water poured into pure water remains the same, thus, O Gautama, is the Self of a thinker who knows. Water in water, fire in fire, ether in ether, no one can distinguish them: likewise a man whose mind has entered into the Self” (*The Upanishads*, Max Müller, 1884, vol. 2, p. 334). “What he sees . . . is not seen, not distinguished, not represented as a thing apart. The man who obtains the vision becomes, as it were, another being. He ceases to be himself, retains nothing of himself. Absorbed in the beyond he is one with it, like a center coincident with another center” (Plotinus, 1964, 6, p. 9).

I will use “mystical experience” (hereinafter “ME”) in a much more inclusive sense to range over any experience that is taken by the subject to be an experience of God, either at the moment of the experience or in retrospect. It is this last clause that enables me to include extreme ME as one type, perhaps the highest

type, of my general category. Even if one who has an extreme ME is not aware during the experience of any distinction between oneself and what one is aware of, that distinction can be, and usually is, made after the fact. But it also includes many other less extreme types, as I will illustrate abundantly in the next section.

As for "perceptual awareness of God," rather than present a preliminary presentation of that idea, I will develop the thesis that (many) experiences of God constitute a kind of *perception*, as I proceed with the subject.

### Features of Mystical Experience

As an initial basis for an exploration of the varieties of ME consider the following examples.

- (1) ... all 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. (James, 1902, pp. 67-8)
- (2) Now it fares in like manner with the soul who is in rest and quiet before God: for she sucks in a manner insensibly the delights of *His presence*, without any discourse ... She sees her spouse *present* with so sweet a view that reasonings would be to her unprofitable and superfluous ... Nor does the soul in this repose stand in need of the *memory*, for she has her lover *present*. Nor has she need of imagination, for why should we represent in an exterior or interior image Him whose *presence* we are possessed of? (St Frances de Sales, *Treatise of the Love of God*. Quoted in Poulain, 1950, 75-6)
- (3) That which the Servitor saw had no form, neither any manner of being; yet he had of it a joy such as he might have known in the seeing of the shapes and substances of all joyful things. His heart was hungry, yet satisfied, his soul was

full of contentment and joy: his prayers and hopes were all fulfilled. And the Friar could do naught but contemplate this Shining Brightness; and he altogether forgot himself and all other things. Was it day or night? He knew not. It was, as it were, a manifestation of the sweetness of Eternal Life in the sensations of silence and of rest. (Henry Suso, *Life*. Quoted in Underhill, 1955, p. 187)

These cases are typical of many others, but also differ from still others, in the following respects.

*They are experiential*, as contrasted with thinking of God or reasoning about God. Like sense experience, it seems to involve a *presentation* of the object. This feature is the main basis for construing mystical experience as a kind of perception - "mystical perception" (hereinafter "MP"). The most fundamental fact about sense perception (hereinafter "SP"), with respect to its intrinsic character as a mode of conscious cognition, is the way in which, for example, *seeing* my house differs from thinking about it, remembering it, forming mental images of it, and reasoning about it. It is the difference between *presence* (to consciousness) and *absence*. If I stand before the house with my eyes shut and then open them, I am suddenly presented with the object itself; it *appears* to me as blue and steep roofed. People who report being experientially aware of God often take this to contrast with thinking about God or reasoning about God in just the same way, as is especially made explicit in (2).

We must be careful with perceptual verbs like "see," "hear," and "perceive" itself. They are ordinarily used with a strong "success" implication. If it seemed to be a car in the distance, but what I saw was really a cow or a shadow, then I didn't really see a car. It wasn't a car that was presented or given to my awareness; it wasn't a car that looked a certain way to me. Similarly if I take myself to "see" God, or, more cautiously, to "perceive" God in a certain way, but what I am aware of is just some subjective image or feeling or mind, then I didn't really see God after all. But there is also a purely phenomenological use of perceptual verbs, in which we say of the sufferer from delirium tremens that he "sees" rats, even though there are no rats in his vicinity to be seen. When, at this stage of the exposition, I make the claim that experience that is taken to be an experience of God is a form of perception (of God), I am not begging the question against the atheist, who denies that there is any God to be seen. I am using "see" or "perceive" in a purely phenomenological sense to specify the kind of cognitive consciousness involved. The subject's experience is distinctively of the *presentational* sort. To the subject it is just as if a divine being is presented to his consciousness, whether or not it is really a divine being of which he is aware. Later in this essay, I will be much concerned with the question of whether such experiences are ever veridical perceptions of God, perceptions of God in the strong "success" sense of the term.

*The (putative) perception is direct.* But how can any perception not be direct, if it always involves a *presentation* of the object, the object's being present to one? Well, we have to distinguish between direct and indirect, immediate and

mediated presentations. Think of the difference between seeing Bill Clinton face to face and seeing him on television. In both cases there is a visual presentation of Clinton; but in the second case, but not the first, one sees Clinton *through* seeing something else, the television screen. In a similar fashion we can contrast cases of direct perception of God, like the above, with the following cases of indirect perception.

- (4) There was a mysterious presence in nature and sometimes met within the communion and in praying by oneself, 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 (or seemed to do so to me). (Beardsworth, 1977, p. 19)
- (5) I feel him [God] in the sunshine or rain ... (James, 1902, p. 70)

There are those who hold that all experience of God is indirect. (Baillie, 1962, p. 39; Hick, 1966, pp. 98–113.) But though indirect perception undoubtedly occurs, and not infrequently, I deny that it exhausts the field. In addition to (1)–(3), which are most naturally read as involving direct perception of God, here is a general theoretical statement.

- (6) ... in the mystic union, which is a *direct apprehension* of God, God acts immediately upon the soul in order to communicate Himself to her; and it is God, *not an image of God*, not the illusion of God, that the soul perceives and attains to. (Fr. Roure, in *Les Études*, August 5, 1908, p. 371. Quoted in Poulain, 1950, p. 83)

*The perception is non-sensory.* This is made fully explicit in (1), and it is strongly suggested in (2) and (3). Here is another example from an “amateur” mystic, taken from Beardsworth’s collection.

- (7) Then, in a very gentle and gradual way, not with a shock at all, it began to dawn on me that I was not alone in the room. Someone else was there, located fairly precisely about two yards to my right front. Yet there was no sort of sensory hallucination. I neither saw him nor heard him in any sense of the word “see” and “hear,” but there he was; I had no doubt about it. He seemed to be very good and very wise, full of sympathetic understanding, and most kindly disposed towards me. (Beardsworth, 1977, p. 122)

Many people find it incredible, unintelligible, or incoherent to suppose that there could be something that counts as *presentation*, that contrasts with abstract thought in the way sense perception does, but is devoid of sensory content. However, so far as I see, this simply evinces lack of speculative imagination. Why should we suppose that the possibilities of experiential givenness, for human beings or other cognitive subjects, are exhausted by the powers of *our* five senses? Surely it is

possible, to start with the most obvious point, that other creatures should possess a sensitivity to other physical stimuli that plays a role in their functioning analogous to that played by our five sense in our lives. And, to push the matter a bit further, why can’t we also envisage presentations that do not stem from the activity of any physical sense organs, as is apparently the case with MP?

But not all MP is devoid of sensory content. Here is an example from Beardsworth.

- (8) During the night of September 9th, 1954, 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 the Outer Presence. After that I had a sense of overpowering peace, and indescribable happiness. (Beardsworth, 1977, p. 30)

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

- (9) 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. (James, 1902, p. 71)

In terms of these distinctions I will focus in this essay on *direct*, *non-sensory*, and *focal* experiences, since I consider the case for their veridicality to be the strongest.

There is another distinction worth mentioning, that between (a) experiences that occur spontaneously without the subject’s having done anything that is directed to inducing them, and (b) experiences that are deliberately sought. Most of the examples above are of the first sort. The most important examples of the second sort are those that involve systematic spiritual disciplines that aim at achieving a more intimate communion with God, and the consequences of that for one’s life generally. These practices are found mostly, though not exclusively, in monastic orders of the contemplative sort. Items (2) and (3) are of that sort.

(a) and (b) have complementary strengths and weaknesses. It might seem that (a) carries a stronger presumption of veridicality, since it is, so to say, forced on the subject, rather than something the subject produces because motivated to have it. Experiences we deliberately seek carry, in general, a weak presumption of providing objectively accurate information. But we must be careful not to caricature the Christian contemplative tradition and other such traditions. It is not as if the contemplative figures out in advance the kind of experience she or he would

like to have and then looks around for a technique for producing it. That would be a no-no. The discipline involves opening oneself up to the presence and activity of God within, and letting God work within one as he will. The contemplative's only "activity" is what is involved in doing what one can to remove blocks and obstacles to the conscious realization of what God is doing and to the more intimate communion with God. But, having said all that, it remains true that spontaneously occurring experiences of God are likely to carry more conviction to the skeptically minded, and perhaps it is right that they should. A notable strength of (b) is that it carries the promise of developing a more stable and a closer communion with God than a momentary encounter like (a) does in itself. (b) involves a practice that has developed over the centuries and has been continually tested and refined with the aim of attaining such communion and effecting appropriate transformations in the life of the individual.

### The Case for Mystical Perception

So much for a brief sketch of the phenomenology of mystical experience – its generic character and its varieties. This was a prologue to the central issue of this essay – whether ME is a source of knowledge of God. Though this is the most intuitively natural way of formulating the issue, we might also put it as the question of whether ME is a source of justification or rationality for beliefs that stem from it. The claim that it is, is more modest than the claim that it is a source of knowledge, for knowledge has more stringent conditions than rational belief. I will be thinking here primarily of the more modest version. Though I will sometimes speak in terms of knowledge, that should be understood as a stylistic variation of the formulation in terms of justified (rational) belief.

Even though ME is, phenomenologically, a perception of God, that does not in itself guarantee that it is a source of knowledge of God. Reflection on sense perception shows us that an experience can be phenomenologically a perception of a certain (kind of) object without yielding knowledge concerning any such objects. The rats of the deluded sufferer from delirium tremens, and other hallucinations, are enough to establish that. And there are many milder examples of misleading sensory experiences (hereinafter "SE"). We do not, unless we are extreme philosophical skeptics, raise doubts about the epistemic credentials of SP generally. We take it for granted that SE is generally a source of justified belief about what seems to be perceived in a given experience. Beliefs about what seems to be sensorily perceived are subject to doubt and critical scrutiny only when there is special reason to doubt them. But the epistemic credentials of ME by no means enjoy such near-universal acceptance. Many persons, especially in these times and in certain societies, doubt or deny that ME reveals anything about objective reality. To be sure, we should not overestimate the acceptance of this position. A number of sociological surveys in recent decades have uncovered

a large proportion of the population in American society that believe themselves to have enjoyed an awareness of the presence of God. See Stark and Glock (1968) for a good example. Nevertheless, the view that ME is a source of knowledge of any ultimate, transcendent reality is controversial enough to require extended critical examination, an examination to which I now proceed.

First, let us be clear that not all beliefs based on ME can be true. The not infrequent contradictions between such beliefs are enough to establish this. Such contradictions are found not only between such beliefs in radically different religious traditions, but even within the same tradition, broadly conceived. The bizarre alleged messages from God that are central to certain cults that claim continuity with the Christian tradition are testimony enough to that. For such alleged messages often conflict with the picture of God built up in mainstream Christianity, at least partly on the basis of ME. Here too there are parallels in SE, even if not to the same extent. Divergent reports of the same automobile accident are salient examples. The serious issue is not whether mystical perceptual reports are always true or rational, but whether they ever are, or, better, whether they are in a significant proportion of cases.

In discussing the question I will first consider reasons for a positive answer and then proceed to reasons for a negative answer together with responses to those reasons.

So far as I can see, the only impressive reason for giving credence to beliefs based on ME is a particular application of a more general epistemic principle that can be stated as follows.

(PF) The fact that a subject, S, has an experience that seems to be a case of x's appearing to S as so-and-so renders a belief that x (exists and) is so-and-so *prima facie* justified.

To say that a belief is *prima facie* justified is to say that it is (unqualifiedly) justified provided there is no sufficient reason to deny it or the epistemic efficacy of its grounds. (I will term such reasons *overriders* of the *prima facie* justification in question.) In other words, the belief is "initially credible," worthy of belief in the absence of sufficient reasons to the contrary, "innocent until proven guilty." Beliefs based on experience are rationally acceptable until or unless they are shown to be otherwise. They don't need any further *positive* support to be acceptable. They only need an absence of sufficient *negative* considerations. (Note that by crediting experience with conferring only *prima facie* justification on the beliefs that stem from it, we have abandoned any supposition that experience by itself renders beliefs absolutely certain in the sense of infallible, impossible to be mistaken.) Our principle is essentially the same as what in Swinburne 1979 is called the "principle of credulity." It is widely accepted, at least in application to SP. (See, e.g., Chisholm, 1977, pp. 76–8 and Price, 1932, p. 185.)

Before launching into a discussion of the principle in application to MP, it is necessary to be explicit as to what it is reasonable to expect, at most, in the way

of justified belief about God, from ME. Our sights can be set higher or lower. The highest expectation would be an unqualified one, taking any case of x's seeming to appear to experience as so-and-so to ground a *prima facie* justification of the belief that x is so-and-so. Lower expectations would involve such a commitment only for some subset of such cases. One might think that in view of the extent of incompatibilities between beliefs based on mystical experience, both interreligiously and intrareligiously, the unqualified expectation would be thoroughly unreasonable. But the elasticity of the notion of *prima facie* justification enables one to adopt the unqualified principle, while handling even a torrent of incompatible beliefs. For each such incompatibility all but one of the incompatible contenders might be eliminated at a second stage by *overriders*. So we have a choice between admitting any experientially based beliefs as *prima facie* justified, realizing that many will be subsequently eliminated by *overriders*, or being more selective in what sorts of beliefs we admit to that *prima facie* justified status. This is analogous to the choice between admitting all applicants to a university with the expectation that a large proportion will flunk out early on, and being more selective with admissions. For that analogue it is clear that the former, more lenient alternative, is much more wasteful, financially and in terms of well-being of the persons involved, than the latter, more discriminating alternative. I am inclined to make a similar point with respect to the epistemological choice before us. We will get a cleaner and more defensible version of the position favoring the epistemic efficacy of MP if we restrict the claims of *prima facie* justification to those areas in which we are not so inundated with incompatibilities as we are with, e.g., messages from God and any experiential reports that support distinctive beliefs of some particular religion.

We have a wide choice, of course, between ways of being selective. What strikes me as a natural choice is a restriction to experientially based beliefs concerning the existence and basic nature of God (henceforth "G-beliefs"), leaving aside more specific beliefs about God's plans, purposes, requirements, and actions in history, and particular messages for particular people. Using the terminology already introduced, I will now identify the principle that applies (PF) to G-beliefs generated by ME.

(PFG) The fact that a subject, S, has a mystical experience that seems to be a case of God's appearing to S as so-and-so renders a G-belief that God (exists and) is so-and-so *prima facie* justified.

The central issue of this article is whether to accept (PFG). I will be defending the principle, but I will give careful consideration to arguments on the other side.

What is to be said in favor of (PFG)? As I said earlier, (PF) is widely accepted for SP. The chief reason for this is that it provides the only escape from an extreme scepticism that denies that we get any knowledge from SP. One might think that we have abundant evidence for the epistemic efficacy, the reliability, of SP as a source of (mostly) true beliefs about the environment. But when we

scrutinize arguments for this conclusion, as I do in detail in Alston (1993), we find that those that are not otherwise defective suffer from "epistemic circularity," taking premises from the very source under examination. Here I will have time only to give a simple illustration of this. It is often said that we can be sure that SP gives us genuine knowledge of what we perceive because by relying on it and reasoning from its products we have been able to make great strides in the prediction and control of natural phenomena, and on that basis to achieve astounding technological advances. That sounds like an impressive argument. And so it is, until we ask how we know that we have made great strides in prediction and control and technological invention. To narrow down to one part of this, how do we know that a particular prediction has turned out to be correct? Why, by taking a look (listen . . . ) to see whether things have turned out as predicted. It is not as if an angel tells us this, or that it is a rationally self-evident truth. Thus we have confidence in the reasons offered for the reliability of SP only because we take SP to be reliable. If, as I argue in Alston (1993), we cannot find any otherwise effective argument for the reliability of SP that does not presuppose the conclusion, it is clear that the only way to save our conviction that SP is generally reliable – something that no one doubts in practice – is to take all perceptually generated beliefs as *prima facie* justified, to be taken as true in the absence of sufficient *overriders*.

Clearly, we cannot use exactly this same rationale for (PFG). For the supposition that ME is a source of rational belief does not command the universal assent that attaches to the analogue for SP. But we can build on the results for SP to construct what might be called an "undue partiality" or "anti-parochialism" argument. How can we justify according initial credibility to sense perceptual beliefs and not to mystical perceptual beliefs when it seems to the subject in both cases that they are simply reporting what is directly presented to their consciousness? If we had an independent argument for the credibility of the former and not the latter, that would justify the discrimination. But, as I have just suggested, and argued elsewhere, there are no otherwise-sound arguments for attributing reliability to SP that do not presuppose that reliability. And if we allow "epistemic circularity," we can give arguments for the (general) reliability of beliefs (at least beliefs of certain sorts, as specified above) based on MP. For the doctrinal systems of monotheistic religions, based in part on MP, contain excellent reasons for supposing that God would make himself available to the experience of his human creatures. For example, such religious belief systems generally hold that God is concerned to establish intimate personal relations with human beings, and this is not possible unless the latter are experientially aware of the presence of God. Hence since in both areas beliefs arise with the strong conviction that they are warranted by just reporting what is directly presented to the subject, and since in neither area is there any strong independent reason for supposing that the mode of experience in question is a veridical awareness of what seems to be presented, it would be an arbitrary double standard to accord *prima facie* justification to experientially grounded beliefs in one area and not in the other.

But even though SP and MP are on the same footing so far as the availability of non-circular ways of validating their epistemic credentials are concerned, they do obviously differ in several important respects. And it is not infrequently thought that one or another of these differences justifies us in taking the outputs of SP to be *prima facie* justified but not the outputs of MP. I will consider several of these differences. Although I am currently involved in dealing with reasons for supposing MP to be a source of knowledge, and the considerations I am about to examine could properly be construed as reasons for denying this, I will deal with them now because they are best regarded as reasons against my positive case for (PFG).

### Criticisms of the Positive Case

First, let's consider some obvious differences between SE and ME.

- (1) SE is a common possession of mankind, while ME is not. To be sure, as I pointed out above, a number of recent surveys have shown that ME is more widely distributed than many of our contemporaries suppose, but still by no means all human beings enjoy mystical experiences. But none of us are without SE, and almost all of us have a rich variety thereof.
- (2) SE is continuously and unavoidably present during all our waking hours. But for most of those not wholly deprived of ME it is, at best, enjoyed only rarely. It is very unusual for someone, like the famous Brother Lawrence, the author of *The Practice of the Presence of God*, to enjoy a constant experiential awareness of God.
- (3) SE, especially visual experience, is vivid and richly detailed, while ME is typically meager and obscure. Though one's experience of God is often deeply meaningful to one, and one often takes it to reveal something important 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, displaying details of flowers, trees, passing cars, houses, and so on.

Obvious differences like these make it difficult for many people to believe that MP can involve a genuine experience of objective reality. But on reflection we can see that this reaction lacks any significant basis.

We can usefully treat (1) and (2) together. The question is: what does the extent of distribution in a given individual's life, or in the population, have to do with whether or not the experience contains important information? Why suppose that what happens only occasionally cannot have cognitive value? No one would apply such a principle to scientific or philosophical insight. Those come only rarely and only to a few people, but they are not denigrated for that reason. Would anyone suggest that the kind of insight that led Einstein to the development of

his 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 the extent to which an experience can be a source of knowledge.

I can't see that (3) fares any better. Within SE itself there are important differences of this sort between the sense modalities. Vision is far ahead of the others in richness and detail, with hearing and touch a distant second, followed at a more considerable distance by taste and smell. One glance at what is before me gives a much greater variety of information than one taste or one sniff. And the latter are severely restricted in the kinds of information they contain. One glance tells me that I am looking across a valley at a hillside on which there are beautiful forests, meadows, barns, farmhouses, and sheep. How much more I learn from this than from a taste that tells me that the item tasted has a sour and pungent flavor. And yet this is no reason for denying that taste and smell can be veridical perception of external realities, giving us genuine information about them. Is less information no information at all? That would be like maintaining that since the crude map I draw to show you the route to my house gives much less geographical information than the Rand-McNally atlas, it gives no information.

A more serious reason for denying that ME is a source of *prima facie* justification of beliefs is the incidence of incompatibility between beliefs based on ME, a much greater incidence than is found in SE. I think there can be no doubt of this difference. Most normal observers will agree, at least roughly, in the beliefs they form about a scene at which they are looking. The incompatibilities come mostly in situations that are not favorable for accurate observation – being too far away, or what is perceived happening too rapidly. But even after the area of ME-grounded beliefs under consideration is restricted in the way suggested above, the incompatibilities appear to be much more serious. Here we run into the problem of "religious diversity." Although I have ruled that the MP I will be defending is confined to the monotheistic religions, when it comes to considering the bearing on the epistemic status of MP of incompatibilities among its outputs, I cannot, in good conscience, exclude non-theistic religions from consideration. It is often made a reproach to the claim of MP to be a source of knowledge, that if it were it would not yield such radically incompatible beliefs in different world religions. If ME involves a direct presentation of ultimate reality as *so-and-so*, how does it happen that the "*so-and-so*" differs so widely across the landscape? Of course, ME need not be infallible in order to constitute a source of genuine knowledge of its objects; infallibility is too much to expect of any human cognitive faculties. And yet when the beliefs about ultimate reality that issue from experience in various branches of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity differ so sharply and widely, it would seem that the more reasonable hypothesis is that the experience is primarily molded by the antecedent expectations the subject brings to it from his tradition, rather than from the impact of any experienced objective reality on this consciousness. And this is a criticism that cannot be dismissed out of hand, whatever rulings I might have made.

In agreeing to take this objection seriously I have, in effect, broadened out the conception of MP by taking it to range over any experience that the subject takes to be an awareness of ultimate reality, however the latter is construed. And, of course, the question of how we develop a taxonomy of what is often termed "religious experience" is itself a serious and difficult question, one I cannot enter into in this essay. But even if I were to deny that theistic ME is the same sort of experience as the Buddhist's experience of Nirvana or the monistic Hindu's experience of the absolute undifferentiated one, I would still be faced with the fact that experiences of these different sorts, which obviously have important features in common, give rise to apparently incompatible views as to the nature of ultimate reality. And that in itself could well be taken as a reason for doubting or denying the epistemic credentials of theistic MP. So what are we to say about these incompatibilities, which go far beyond any that we find in SE? People in radically different cultures sensorily perceive their physical and social environment in roughly compatible ways, but the same cannot be said for the perception of what they take to be ultimate reality.

Again I must plead that this is too vast and complex a subject to be treated adequately in a short section of the present essay. I will confine myself to pointing to two considerations that are relevant to a resolution of the problem.

1 We should not be too quick to assume that apparent incompatibilities are the genuine article. Consider what seems to be the most serious conflict, whether ultimate reality is personal or impersonal. A commitment to one of these options is in genuine conflict with the other only if it is so construed as to exclude the other, and that is by no means the only way to construe it. The key point here is that one and the same being can have both personal and impersonal aspects. All of us do. We are all persons – endowed with consciousness, cognitive capacities, emotions, feelings, desires, aversions, etc. But each of us also shares aspects with non-personal realities – weight, size, shape, chemical constitution, physical energy, etc. Hence, the fact that Teresa of Avila perceives the ultimate as personal, while Sankara perceives it as impersonal, does not necessarily imply that they are perceiving different beings, or that though perceiving the same being, at least one is mistaken as to what that being is like. They could well be aware of different genuine aspects of the same being. To be sure, the theologies of each tradition are often crafted in such a way as to exclude the claims of the other. In Hinayana Buddhism one not only experiences the ultimate as impersonal; it is a fundamental article of faith that ultimate reality is non-personal and that any supposition to the contrary is mere illusion. And similarly, in theistic religions the dominant view is that the deepest truth about ultimate reality is that it is personal, that God has knowledge, purposes, plans, that he loves his creation, works for the salvation of mankind, and so on. But the concern here is not with the overall theologies, but with ME as a source of knowledge. And my present suggestion is that if we stick to what seems to mystical experiencers to be strictly presented to them experientially, even widely different apparent features of what is experienced could

often be compatible. I do not suggest that there are no such incompatibilities, but it may well be that they are not so numerous and varied as to rob ME of all epistemic worth.

2 The second point has to do with what is minimally required for an experiential source of belief to qualify as a source of *prima facie* justification. I have already made it explicit that it need not be infallible. That is the point of the *prima facie* qualification; it signals that the positive epistemic status is vulnerable to cancellation by overriders. But so far I have been, deliberately, giving the impression that a large proportion of true beliefs in the set is required. But now I want to show that that is not required. Here a comparison with SE is useful. When we perceive the environment, its denizens appear to us as bearing what since the seventeenth century have been termed "secondary qualities" – colors, the various qualitative dimensions of sounds like volume and timbre, qualitative dimensions of touch like rough, smooth, hot and cold, the various qualitatively different tastes and smells – and bearing them as objective features of the things in themselves. That is how they were regarded in most ancient and medieval science. But modern physical science has been able to make tremendous advances at the price of a mathematized description of physical reality that recognizes as objective properties of physical things only "primary qualities," such as size, shape, motion, mass, electrical charge, and the many esoteric additions to that list of the last hundred years. The secondary qualities that bulk so large in our experience are construed as the result of the interaction of physical objects with our sensory receptors. They are simply how things appear to us, rather than properties physical things have in themselves apart from our ways of experiencing them.

Thus a large proportion of the beliefs about perceived objects that issue most directly from SE are tainted with falsehood. They are not strictly true. When I look at a shirt and take it to be red, when I feel a fabric and recognize it as very smooth, when I hear a bell ringing and recognize it as giving out a typical bell-like sound, I attribute to the perceived objects qualities that they do not, in strictness, bear. No doubt, I could, in principle, restrict myself to beliefs that do not suffer from falsity in this respect. I could, instead of taking the shirt to be red, take it to have primary qualities of such a sort that when it is seen under these conditions by a human being with normal vision, it will appear to have the color I call red. But that requires considerable reflection of the sort we do not typically engage in when perceiving things. And so it remains, as I said, that many of the beliefs that most directly issue from SE are false. Not all, because perceived objects also appear to me as bearing primary qualities like size and shape as well. We must also remember that the naive attribution of secondary qualities to physical objects is of practical usefulness, for those qualities are, in Leibniz's words in another connection, "phenomena well founded." They serve as reliable indications of genuine objective differences between objects. One shirt would not appear red to me and another blue (in normal circumstances and given normal

operation of my visual apparatus) unless there were significant and relatively stable differences between them in their intrinsic primary qualities. But that does not alter the fact that what we take to be the case as the most direct result of SP is often not strictly the case.

It would seem that ME and MP are strongly analogous to SE and SP in this respect. A great deal of the reports of ME are given over to descriptions of the affective reactions of the subject – ecstasy, delight, sweetness, joy, contentment, peace, calm, awe. These terms, taken from the citations given earlier, are clearly ways in which the subject reacts to the presence of the perceived being, rather than ways that being is in itself. They are “secondary properties” of ME. There is a clear distinction between these and the features of God the subject takes to be presented to her – goodness, power, love, plenitude, wisdom, sympathy, compassion. But this doesn’t give us a situation parallel to the one I sketched for SP above. For there the naive subject attributes secondary qualities to the object, whereas what I have just picked out as secondary qualities of SE are more plausibly taken as ascribed by the subject to her own reactions.

To see a strict parallel to the SP situation we would have to go much deeper into the problem of which of our concepts, if any, can be truly applied to God. Here the Christian tradition and other monotheistic traditions are mixed. On the one hand, many people, as in most of our quotations, take it to be unproblematically true that God is loving, powerful, wise, good, and so on, not to mention active in various ways. And theology is filled with such characterizations. On the other hand, there are strains in the traditions that emphasize the mystery, ineffability, incomprehensibility of God to such an extent that none of our concepts can be strictly true of him. Mystical movements in Christianity, a basic source of which is Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, constitute an extreme example of this. And no less a pillar of the church than St Thomas Aquinas says in his *Summa theologiae* that we can say of God only what he is not, not what he is, and in the *Summa contra gentiles* that as for the mode of signification every name is defective in application to God. Giving this tendency of the tradition full rein could well result in treating most of what is attributed to God on the basis of experience as secondary properties. This would imply that when someone reports experiencing God as wise or sympathetic or loving, he is reporting a result of God’s interaction with his experiential receptivity, rather than what God is like in himself, even though here too what is experienced is a valid practical guide to one’s relations with God. If we add that the secondary properties experienced in radically different traditions can themselves differ importantly without God himself (ultimate reality itself) being any different, we have available to us another way of revealing apparent incompatibilities as only apparent. (This would be to approach the well-known position of John Hick. See Hick, 1989.) There is no incompatibility in the same being appearing in different ways in different situations. I cannot go further into these issues here and now. Suffice it to say that the differences and apparent conflicts between beliefs about God that stem from ME might well be markedly reduced by a proper sense of the inadequacy of human faculties to attain an

adequate conceptual grasp of God as he is in himself. If this can be done without dissipating all the epistemic efficacy of ME, it will significantly reduce the force of the objection from incompatible characterizations of ultimate reality stemming from ME.

But even if the suggestions I have been making can be successfully developed, the fact remains that the full range of MP presents much less unanimity than does the full range of SP. And so we will have to judge that the support ME gives to beliefs formed on its basis is significantly less than the support SE gives to beliefs formed on its basis (not that we have any way of measuring this). But just as with the obvious differences between SE and ME discussed earlier in this section, less support is a far cry from no support at all. It can still be maintained that when someone believes on the basis of a being’s appearing to one as so-and-so that the being is so-and-so, that belief is thereby *prima facie* justified. And this means that (PFG) can be retained. G-beliefs formed on the basis of ME are to be judged as justified unless and until they run into strong enough overrides.

#### Does Mystical Perception Satisfy the Causal Requirement?

Having considered what can be said in favor of the claim that ME can be a source of knowledge (or justified belief), and having discussed objections to that positive case, we can turn to more directly negative reactions to the claim. A reason often given for a general dismissal of epistemological claims for MP 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. At best, having x among the causes of the experience is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for perceiving x. A visual experience, for example, depends on a variety of causes, by no means all of which are perceived in that experience. Most obviously, it depends on a complex concatenation of neural processes, none of which is perceived when, for example, one is looking at a tree. To come as close as we can to a sufficient causal condition for perceiving x in having a certain experience, we would have to specify the particular causal contribution x makes to that experience. And this differs for different sense modalities. 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 experience in question. We get analogous stories for other modes of SP. Extrapolating this line of thought to ME, 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. If so, God does not figure anywhere among its causes and therefore has no claim to be perceived in a mystical experience. And if one was not

perceiving God, then the experience has nothing to tell one about God, at least directly.

Even if ME can be adequately explained in terms of purely this-worldly factors (and I will raise doubts about this later), it would be much too fast to conclude that God does not figure among its causes. Think of the analogy with SP. Even though SE 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? Just 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 a mystical experience are all within nature, God could figure further back in the causal chain that leads to that experience. And, indeed, that is the case according to theistic religions, which hold that God is the ultimate cause of the existence and functioning of the natural world.

But, it may be contended, that doesn't show that God figures in the causal chain in such a way as to be the object of perception. I have just pointed out that not every causal contributor to an experience is perceived in that experience. 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 way that enables it to be perceived. And why should we suppose that God figures in *that sort* of way in the causal chain leading to ME?

When we reflect on this issue, we come to a startling result. Remember that in SP *how* a perceived object figures in the causal chain leading to the sensory experience differs for different sense modalities. In vision it is something like reflecting or generating light that then reaches the retina without certain kinds of additional reflection; for audition it is something like generating or reflecting sound waves that strike the eardrum; and so on. For MP it would 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. We must have identified a number of genuine perceptions of x in a given modality before we are able to discover 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, one can't even embark on the project of specifying the necessary causal contribution until one recognizes authentic cases of perception in that modality. Hence one who denies that people ever perceive God in ME has no basis for any view as to how God would have to be involved in the causal chain leading to ME if God is to be perceived in such an experience. Hence the critic can have no basis for maintaining that God's causal involvement is not of that sort. She could, of course, point out that the advocate of divine perception has no idea of what sort of causal contribution is required either. But that still leaves her without this *objection* to her opponent's position.

Hence we are left with the conclusion that even if there is an adequate naturalistic account of the proximate causes of ME, 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 such an 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. ME poses severe problems for empirical research. 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 has not been shown that findings concerning them can be extrapolated to spontaneous cases. Since the states are usually short-lived, we must rely on autobiographical reports; a researcher can hardly be expected 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 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 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. Nor have more recent attempts of this sort fared any better. (See, e.g., Lewis, 1989; Batson and Ventis, 1982.)

### Can Reports of Mystical Perception Be Checked?

I will conclude this survey of criticisms of (PFG) with one that is based on the impossibility of effective public tests of the accuracy of G-beliefs formed on the basis of ME. The contention is that this prevents ME from being an awareness of any objective reality. Here are two 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. (Gale, 1991, p. 316)

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 . . . (Flew, 1966, pp. 138-9)

The first thing to be said in reply is that there *are* tests for the accuracy of particular reports of mystical perception. Contemplative communities that "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 (a) conformity with what would be expected by basic doctrines concerning the nature of God, (b) such "fruits" of the experience as a stable inner peace and growth in spirituality, (c) a content of the experience that the person would not have developed on his or her 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 definitively settle the matter either.

But even taking that into account, it remains that reports of SP can be checked in ways that reports of MP cannot. Consider some of these ways. The most obvious ones appeal to 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, had normal visual powers, were not especially preoccupied, and 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 (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 saw it, that confirms the original report.

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 others? 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 on top of 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 MP. 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 SP way, we would have to say that S really perceived God at time t only if every competent subject perceives God all the time. But no one would take this to be an appropriate test. To put the point more generally, there is no set of conditions we

can specify 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," and so on. 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. Contemplatives 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." But there are two reasons why we still lack the kinds of test we have for reports of SP. First, we are far from having reliable intersubjective tests for humility and a loving attitude toward God. And second, we can't seriously suppose 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 MP is much more obscure and mysterious, much looser than this. God can, presumably, reveal himself to someone whenever he chooses to do so, whatever worldly conditions are satisfied. Hence we are still a long way from being able to carry out the kind of *other observers* tests we have for SP. What I have just said about God's not being bound by any worldly necessary and sufficient conditions for perceiving him implies that we have no effective *state of observers* test to rely on here either. And obviously nothing like chemical analysis is relevant.

But what epistemic relevance do these differences have? Why should we suppose that they prevent mystical reports from enjoying *prima facie* justification? Those who take this line make an unjustifiable assumption that reports of MP are properly treated by the same standards as reports of SP, so that if the former cannot be tested in the same way as the latter they cannot be 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 those based on SP. 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 SP are at least required for the epistemic efficacy of *experiential* sources of belief. But that has no stronger credibility than the claim for belief sources generally. What basis do we have for supposing that the features of SP constitute *necessary* conditions for any effective experiential cognitive access to objective reality? I take it as uncontroversial that

SP is a way of acquiring reliable beliefs of certain sorts about the world. SP satisfies sufficient conditions for epistemic efficacy. But why suppose that this is the only set of sufficient conditions for such a status? 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 by following established algorithms or, in some cases, by flashes of intuition. The picture of an ancient civilization can be built up from archaeological 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 SP is only one of many experiential ways of achieving such a result. And the fact that the aspects of reality that MP claims to put us in contact with are very different from those that are explored by SP tells against the idea that only what conforms to the latter can reveal anything about reality.

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