

Précis of *Perceiving God**

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The central thesis of the book is that experiential awareness of God—the “perception of God”, as I call it—can provide epistemic justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God. I call such beliefs ‘M-beliefs’ (‘M’ for manifestation), beliefs to the effect that God is doing something vis-à-vis the subject—strengthening, guiding, communicating a message, etc—or to the effect that God has some (allegedly) perceivable property—goodness, power, loveliness, etc.

In Chapter I, I explain how I am thinking of the (putative) experience of God that I claim to provide such justification for M-beliefs. The focus is on what are taken to be *direct, non-sensory* experiences of God (“**mystical experiences**” in a broad sense of that term in which it is not restricted to experiences in which all distinctions are blotted out). I take mystical experiences to involve a *presentation, givenness, or appearance* of something to the subject, identified by the subject as God. It is this *presentational* character of the experiences that leads me to subsume them under a generic concept of perception, with this species termed **mystical perception**. According to the Theory of Appearing, which I favor as a generic account of perception, perception just *is* the awareness of something’s appearing to one *as such-and-such*, where this “appearing” is a basic, unanalyzable relationship, not reducible to conceptualizing an object as such-and-such, or to judging or believing the object to be such-and-such. It follows that (putative) direct experiential awareness of God is a mode of perception, though if it is to be veridical God must exist and be properly related to the subject. There is an extensive discussion of different kinds of concepts of what something appears to one as: **phenomenal, comparative, doxastic, and epistemic**. In specifying ways in which God appears to one’s experience comparative concepts bulk large, as they do in perception generally. Such concepts get at a way of appearing in terms of what kind of object would (normally, typically...) be expected to appear in that way. The doctrine of “spiritual sensations” in

* William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Catholic mystical theology seeks to give (indirect, analogical) phenomenal concepts of divine appearances. As for “external” conditions of veridical perception, particularly the condition that the object be appropriately causally related to the experience, it is argued that we have no reason to suppose that the condition is not sometimes satisfied for mystical experience. Various objections to the possibility of perceiving God are discussed. I do not aspire in this chapter to show that people do sometimes veridically perceive God. That would require establishing the existence of God and His causal role in producing mystical experience. The aim is rather to rebut objections to the conviction of the subjects that they are directly aware of God, and to point out that if their conviction is correct they are also properly taken to be *perceiving* God. Support for the claim that mystical perception is sometimes veridical emerges from the argument of the book as a whole. If mystical experiences provide justification for beliefs based on them, it is reasonable to think that they sometimes count as veridical perception.

I should stress that ‘mystical experience’ in my use of the term is not restricted to “big deal” experiences in which the divine presentation monopolizes consciousness, blotting out all else. The category also ranges over milder analogues, including “background” experiences of the presence of God that some people apparently enjoy much of the time.

Chapter II lays out the general account of epistemic justification, and of the justification of perceptual beliefs, that I employ. To be epistemically justified in believing that *p* is for that belief *to be based on an adequate ground*, which could either be experiences or other things one knows or justifiably believes. A ground is adequate provided it is a sufficiently reliable indication of the truth of the belief. There is a discussion of the extent to which, in both sensory and mystical perception, beliefs about what is perceived are based on experience alone, and the extent to which they are partially based on “background beliefs”. It is concluded that purely experientially based perceptual belief covers more territory than is often supposed, though by no means all. I think of our customary perceptual belief forming practices as including both sorts of cases. The unifying common feature is that the basis consists, in whole or in part, of perceptual experience. Perceptual justification, along with most other justification, is *prima facie*, i.e., is such that in the absence of sufficient reasons to the contrary it counts as unqualified justification. *Prima facie* perceptual justification can be **overridden** either by sufficient reason for supposing the belief to be false (**rebutted**) or by sufficient reason for supposing that the experience in this case does not indicate what it more normally indicates (**undermined**). Attention is also given to the question of how one identifies the subject of a perceptual belief, particularly when the subject is identified as God. The use of background beliefs in perceptual identification is stressed. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that the perceptual presentation itself is sufficient to uniquely identify

the perceived object. Hence the fact that we are not in that position in mystical perception does not distinguish it from the usual situation in sense perception.

As the issues are laid out in Chapter II, the central problem of the book is whether the ways in which people typically form M-beliefs on the basis of their experience (plus background beliefs where these are involved) yield *prima facie* justified beliefs. And because we are working with a reliability constraint on justification (a mode of forming beliefs is justificatory only if it is reliable), this means that we are faced with the question of whether the usual ways of forming M-beliefs are sufficiently reliable. Since the epistemology of sense perception has been much more extensively studied, the idea suggests itself of determining whether our typical ways of forming sense perceptual beliefs can be shown to be reliable. Chapter III is devoted to a survey of attempts to establish the reliability of sense perception without running into “epistemic circularity” (using sense perception itself as a source of premises). A wide variety of attempts is surveyed. These include both *a priori* arguments—such as the contention that our concepts of perceivable objects involve “justification conditions”, and the claim that we learn our concepts by learning the conditions under which an attribution is justified—and empirical arguments, particularly those of an explanatory form (sense experiences, or our customary ways of forming sense perceptual beliefs, are best explained in ways that imply that those beliefs are by and large true). The conclusion is that none of these attempts succeeds. Either they are infected with epistemic circularity in spite of themselves, or they are ineffective for other reasons. Thus even if mystical perception cannot be shown, without epistemic circularity, to be reliable, it can’t be judged epistemically inferior to sense perception on those grounds. To suppose it can, in the face of these results, is to apply a “double standard”.

But then do we have any sufficient basis for taking sense perception and other familiar sources of belief to be reliable and to confer justification? Chapter IV tackles that question. Building on work by Thomas Reid and Ludwig Wittgenstein, it develops the notion of a “doxastic practice”, a way of forming beliefs and epistemically evaluating them. Examples of such practices (or families of such practices, depending on your taste in individuation) would be those involving reliance on sense perception, introspection, memory, rational intuition, various kinds of reasoning, and mystical experience. The chief focus is on the practice of forming beliefs about the immediate environment on the basis of sense perception (SP) and the practice of forming M-beliefs about God on the basis of mystical perception (MP). I argue that it is rational to engage in any socially established doxastic practice that we do not have sufficient reasons for regarding as *unreliable*. The defense of this principle is, in part, practical: given that there are no non-circular ways of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable basic doxastic practices, it

would be foolish to abstain from established practices, even if we could. The claims of a doxastic practice can also be strengthened by “significant self-support”, exemplified by the way in which reliance on sense perception and reasoning therefrom puts us in a position to predict and control the course of events. This is *self-support* because we can’t determine that our prediction and control is successful except by relying on sense perception.

In Chapter V we return to our central concern, the justification of M-beliefs. Applying the results of Chapter IV, we look at the possibility of treating *M-belief formation on the basis of mystical perception (plus, in some cases, background beliefs* (MP) as a socially established doxastic practice. Though it is found to exhibit all the defining characteristics thereof, in one respect it is too rich. When we consider the background system of concepts and beliefs that furnish potential “overrides” for *prima facie* justified M-beliefs, we find markedly different systems in different religions. That forces us to distinguish different forms of MP for the different major religious traditions. Hence the most effective way to proceed is to consider one such practice as typical. I choose the Christian practice (CMP, for ‘Christian mystical practice’) for this purpose. In the remainder of the chapter I consider reasons for denying that CMP is a full fledged perceptual doxastic practice. The most important of these are (1) the partial distribution of mystical perception, (2) the extent to which there is a shared system of checks and tests for particular M-beliefs, and (3) the differences between the system of checks we have here and the ones we have for sense perception. I conclude that none of these features disqualifies CMP from the rights and privileges due a socially established doxastic practice.

As for (1) it is argued that we have no reason worthy of the name for supposing, *a priori*, that a universally shared doxastic practice is more likely to be reliable than one that is restricted to some sub-set of the population. Moreover there are plausible examples of (reasonably) reliable doxastic practices that is practiced by relatively few people, e.g., theoretical science. As for (2) appeal is made to the checks and tests for particular mystical reports that are recognized in established mystical communities, e.g., conformity with the background system of doctrine and conducivity to spiritual development and purity of life. Outside such communities there is no comparably definite system of testing, but there is still significantly more than nothing. As for (3) it is acknowledged that in SP more or less precise conditions can be specified such that if a qualified observer satisfies those conditions and doesn’t perceive X, that is a strong reason for disqualifying another observer’s claim to have perceived X. While in MP nothing comparable is possible. But the possibility of an SP style of intersubjective testing is not a necessary condition of veridical perception or of the justification of perceptual beliefs. Furthermore the differences in the domains of reality disclosed by SP and by MP explains why there should be this difference. The physical world, as re-

vealed to us by SP and what is based on that, exhibits the kinds of discoverable regularities that make strict intersubjective testing possible. The “divine realm” as depicted by MP and other sources presents no such regularities; hence it would be unreasonable to suppose that M-beliefs can be tested in the SP way even if MP is as reliable as you please. The insistence that the SP mode of intersubjective testing is necessary for an experiential doxastic practice’s being a source of justification is shown to be a kind of “epistemic imperialism or chauvinism”, unwarrantedly taking the procedures of one doxastic practice as a requirement for any acceptable practice. We find either epistemic imperialism or the double standard exhibited by many objections to the epistemic pretensions of MP.

Even if CMP is rightly regarded as *prima facie* rationally acceptable, this status could be overthrown by sufficient reasons for considering it to be unreliable. In Chapter VI, I consider candidates for such reasons, most notably (1) naturalistic explanations of mystical experience, (2) contradictions in the output of CMP, and (3) alleged conflicts with the outputs of secular practices, particularly the sciences and their extrapolation into a naturalistic metaphysics. Again, I conclude that none of this is disqualifying. As for (1) the main point is that even if there are causally sufficient conditions of a naturalistic (this-worldly) sort, that by no means precludes God’s being further back in the causal chain that leads to the experience. This is analogous to the way in which the existence in the brain of causally sufficient conditions for sensory experience does not prevent the putatively perceived object from figuring further back in the causal chain leading to the experience. (2) Contradictions can be tolerated if they do not overwhelm the enterprise. SP generates plenty of contradictory reports, as witnesses to an automobile accident can testify. How much is too much? I don’t know a precise answer to that, but there would seem to be enough convergence among practitioners of CMP to render it viable. (3) Conflicts between science and religion are greatly overblown. Any such conflict must be peripheral, as can be seen by the realization that whereas the job description of science is tracing out the structure, causal and otherwise, of the natural world, the job description of religion is the discernment of ultimate reality and the guidance of our interactions therewith. To take one area of allegedly serious conflict, theistic religions have been committed to the belief in divine interventions in the natural order; and it is widely supposed nowadays that science has shown this to be impossible. But science has shown no such thing. Science is dedicated to tracing out how things go *within* the natural order. No results along those lines can have anything to say about whether things always go as they would if only purely natural influences are involved. To be sure, if things went otherwise too often, science would not have the success it does. But sophisticated theistic religion doesn’t suppose that God frequently intervenes in natural processes. Naturalistic metaphysics, on the other hand, clearly does contradict theistic re-

ligion. Indeed, it does so by definition, if naturalism is essentially the view that nature is all there is. But until something more impressive is forthcoming in support of this metaphysics than has been vouchsafed up to now, this should cause the practitioner of CMP little concern. The chapter ends with a consideration of the significant self-support that is enjoyed by CMP. This is analogous to the self-support enjoyed by SP, since in both cases it consists in the success of the practice in carrying out its basic function. In both cases this is a practical rather than a purely theoretical function—guiding us in our interactions with a domain of reality: physical or divine as the case may be. In the case of CMP the success consists in giving us the insight into God, His nature, purposes, requirements, and patterns of activity that we need to direct our footsteps toward what may alternatively be called “salvation”, “fulfillment”, or “sanctification”.

The severest difficulty for my position stems from the way in which we are forced to “Balkanize” the sphere of mystical perception. Since there is a plurality of mystical perceptual doxastic practices with mutually contradictory output and/or background belief systems, how can it be rational to accept one of these rather than any of the others (or none at all) without having sufficient *independent* reason for regarding it as sufficiently reliable, and more reliable than its competitors? In Chapter VII, I address this problem on a “worst case” scenario, according to which we have no such independent reason. On the basis of various analogies I conclude that, though this is not epistemically the best of all possible worlds, it is rational in this situation for one to continue to participate in the (undefeated) practice in which s/he is involved, hoping that the inter-practice contradictions will be sorted out in due time.

The support given to M-beliefs by mystical experience is only one part of the total basis of religious belief, in Christianity and elsewhere. What are these other possible grounds, and how does mystical experience interact with them in the larger picture? That is the topic of Chapter VIII. I distinguish between various kinds of experiential grounds, various sorts of “revelation”, and natural theology. I reduce this diversity to two main headings: perceptual presentation and inference to the best explanation. It is then suggested that the different grounds interact not only by adding up to a total case that is greater than any of its components, but also in more intimate ways, for example by one source contributing to the background system presupposed by another source, or by one source helping to remove doubts about another.