

Reply to Commentators

WILLIAM P. ALSTON
Syracuse University

Reply to Gale

Both Gale and Pappas argue that I fail to justify the claim that mystical experience is perceptual. Hence, in Gale's terms, my project "gets derailed before it leaves the station". However, the two criticisms are rather different. Gale's is the more radical, since he seeks to show that mystical experience is not even a candidate for being a source of justification for beliefs about any objective reality.

His strategy is to lay down two requirements for "perceptual status" and argue that mystical experience satisfies neither. The first, or "metaphysical" requirement is that the object of the experience occupy a position in some dimension "by which it is individuated and within which it is causally hooked up with different perceivers, thereby explaining how it is possible...for it to be the common accusative of different perceptions..." The requirement is stated in this unspecific way—"some dimension"—because Gale wants to avoid tying the requirement too closely to sense perception by requiring a spatio-temporal location of the object. He points out, quite correctly, that God's individuation is not based on any location (God is everywhere all the time). Rather it is based on His satisfying certain descriptions.

So what? What is the difficulty? So long as God gets individuated somehow, that should be sufficient to satisfy any *metaphysical* demand for a principle of individuation. What Gale takes to be a difficulty is that "there is no way in which we can experientially identify someone as satisfying" the descriptions that allegedly uniquely apply to God. In other words the individuating features do not provide us with an effective handle for determining when we are perceiving God rather than something else or nothing at all. Clearly, though the label 'epistemological' is reserved for the second requirement, it is an epistemological consideration that provides the rationale for imposing this "metaphysical" requirement as a condition of "perceptual status". So far as purely metaphysical considerations are concerned, they would seem to be satisfied by the provision of an effective way of distinguishing God from all other beings, whether by descriptions or otherwise.

Gale doesn't tell us why he thinks that we cannot experientially identify God. In the book I discuss perceptual identification at some length, pointing out that the identification of objects of sense perception does not typically involve the sensory presentation of features that uniquely identify the object. Instead we use background knowledge (belief) to connect what is presented with what we take the object to be. In recognizing something as your house it will often be the case that the visual appearance is not unique to your house. Instead my confidence that it is your house draws on my knowledge or belief that your house is the only one that looks like this in the area I take to be my present location. I suggest that we use analogous background knowledge (belief) to identify God on the basis of relatively sketchy experiential presentations.

The second requirement, explicitly dubbed "epistemological", concerns the tests to which an experience must be subject if it is to be "cognitive", "in that it bestows a *prima facie* justification upon the objective belief based on it". These tests include "having the right sort of causal hookup with the object", "agreement among perceivers", and "predictive success". Gale fails to say in any detail why he thinks that susceptibility to such tests is a necessary condition of being a source of justification for objective beliefs. As he acknowledges, I point out in the book that the practices of mystical belief formation embody socially established tests of particular beliefs, but of a different sort, suited to the character of this practice as sense-perceptual tests are suited to that doxastic practice. As I acknowledge, since these tests involve using the doctrinal system of a particular religious tradition to screen particular perceptual beliefs, we run into the problem of religious diversity, a (too) simple statement of which is that we are confronted with the problem of how to justify using one of these belief systems rather than others as a background check on perceptual beliefs about God. Gale doesn't go into this, and I won't either. Chapter 7 of the book is devoted to the problem.

Gale's one pass at saying why he supposes the applicability of the tests he mentions is required to underwrite "cognitivity" is that they are needed to render beliefs "verifiable". Unfortunately, he does nothing to indicate the basis for this claim. I would say that when a person supposes him/herself to have been experientially aware of God as such-and-such and the claim passes tests of the sort I mention, that supposition has thereby been "verified". Gale appears to think that the term 'verify' is semantically, conceptually tied to tests of his favored sort. But this is surely false. 'Verify' means *show to be true*. No further specification of how this is to be done is built into the *meaning* of the term. People can differ, even radically, as to how certain hypotheses are to be verified without talking past each other by using 'verified' in different senses. Hence when someone claims that beliefs of a certain kind can only be verified in such-and-such a way, some support for the claim is needed over and above simply trotting out the term 'verified'.

Anticipating a response of this ilk, Gale suggests that if I reject the demand for the sense-perception kind of tests for all perceptual beliefs, then the claim of a “commonality” across sensory and mystical perception amounts to “nothing more than that both types of ‘perceptions’ involve a presentation”. Even if that were the case it would still not be without significance. Gale takes it to be insignificant on the grounds that what I call ‘presentation’ doesn’t distinguish (objective) perception from dreams and introspection. For my answer to that see the reply to Pappas.

Moreover, it is not true that this is the only commonality involved. On my position, it is also the case that the practices of forming beliefs on the basis of both sensory and mystical perception involve social established systems of tests involving, *inter alia*, background belief systems built up by the use, *inter alia*, of the very practice in question. And both practices enjoy what I call “significant self-support”.

More generally, I would like to register a protest against any attempt to enforce *a priori* constraints on what we can perceive and on what kinds of experience enable us to perceive something. It seems clear to me that we learn both of these by experience. We have learned by experience that we can perceive various features of the physical environment by various kinds of sensory experience. And we have also learned by experience what features we can and cannot perceive in what ways. We didn’t start out with some general principle to the effect that certain kinds of experience count as perceptions of X’s only if we have tests of Gale’s sorts for the putative perceptions in question. We learned that those tests are available for certain kinds of perception that we have learned from experience count as perceptions. I suggest that we should be equally open to learning from experience what other modes of experience, if any, enable us to perceive other aspects of reality. The “epistemic imperialism” (see the *Précis*) of Gale’s argument just gets in the way of this enterprise.

One final note. Gale says that I aim “to establish that we have epistemic justification for believing that MP’s are *reliable* in that for the most part their belief outputs are true...”. The plural form (MP’s) is fatal to this interpretation. I certainly know better than to think that “we” are justified in believing that (all or most) MP’s are reliable, since there is significant incompatibility between their outputs. The claim was rather that a practitioner of a form of MP that is not discredited in ways I specify can be *prima facie* justified in the beliefs s/he forms by engaging in that practice.

Reply to Pappas

Pappas does not seek to show that mystical experience cannot be a source of justification for beliefs about God. He contents himself with arguing that it can’t succeed at this in the way I suppose, *viz.*, by being a mode of percep-

tion. He contends that my way of explaining a concept of perception broad enough to include mystical perception is too broad to be viable, and, more specifically, he argues that what I take to be claims by people that God was directly presented to their awareness are not plausibly so viewed. Since my generic concept of perception is in terms of such presentation, this amounts to an argument that the kinds of experiences on which I focus are not presented by their subjects as satisfying my general concept of perception.

This second part of Pappas' argument bothers me more than anything else in these essays. It is troublesome just because it is so difficult to arrive at a definitive interpretation of reports of mystical experience. Those who give such reports are, by common consent, working under the severe disadvantage of lacking a direct, publicly shared terminology for describing such experiences. In the book I suggest that this is due to our lack of stimulus control over such experiences, leaving us in no position to establish publicly shared meanings for terms for features of the experiences. Faced with this situation the mystic is forced to use analogy, metaphor, and other figurative devices, and that makes it notoriously difficult to nail down a unique interpretation. In the present case there is the additional difficulty that our informants are unconcerned with the question of how their experiences relate to one or another philosophical theory of perception! Hence when Pappas challenges my supposition, with respect to various reports, that they indicate that the subject took the experience to involve something that would be correctly described in my terms as a direct presentation of God to one's awareness (as such-and-such), I cannot claim to have the knock-down contrary argument I would like to deploy. What I can do is to examine Pappas' reasons for his rejection of my readings.

First I need to set aside a red herring. Surprisingly, one of the points Pappas makes against my perceptual interpretation is that some of my informants make it explicit that the experience involved no sensory content. This is surprising because in the book I took pains to emphasize that I was concentrating on nonsensory experiences of God, though I recognized sensory ones as well. Hence in disclaiming any *sense* perception of God, the reporters are supporting my reading rather than the reverse. To be sure, as indicated above, Pappas also argues that I have not made out a sufficient case for a concept of perception that includes such nonsensory awareness of God, but that belongs to his more general argument, to be discussed below.

More to the present point is Pappas' claim that when St. Teresa, for example, speaks of "being somehow conscious of God's presence", this is not the same as God being presented. I agree with that. I need other support for my reading. He also argues that my report (5) only speaks of love's being presented and not of something or someone expressing love being presented. It is at most the effect that is presented, not the agent responsible for that ef-

fect.¹ He sums up this line of criticism by saying “I do not think we have been shown that the subjects have God presented to their consciousnesses in a way analogous to what occurs in ordinary perception”. Well, there are certainly large differences. When I sensorily perceive another person expressing love to me I perceive the person in many ways that are different from, and independent of, the exhibition of loving behavior. In the case of God this may not be so. Of course, where God is, as I would say, perceived as loving, there may be other modes of divine appearance as well, as in my case (1) where the person says: “I felt the presence of God...as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether”. Even here Pappas will, presumably, doubt that the subject experienced God as “presenting Himself” to him, but that at most only the two attributes—love and power—were thus presented. And in other cases the love that the subject feels coursing though him may be the only phenomenal content he takes to indicate the presence of God to him. Why should we say in any of these cases that the person takes *God* to be presented to him as loving, rather than just feeling love coming into him from some outside source?

We should not ignore the fact that the informants in question regularly speak of God as what they are aware of, as being present to them, and so on. But to this Pappas replies that there is no reason for him to think that this was (taken to be) a *perceptual* awareness rather than one of some other kind.

Another difficulty in discussing this issue is that my examples were perforce fragmentary. In almost all cases I took a small selection from a much larger passage in order, as I supposed, to illustrate a certain point. I could have used larger selections by using fewer, but I sought to convey as much of the variety in mystical experience as possible. Without being able to document the claim here, I am convinced that embedding my snippets in their original context would make it much clearer that the subjects are thinking of their experiences in ways that are naturally expressed by the language of perceptual presentation of God to the subject. But just sticking to what we have in the book, I will make the following points.

(A) The fact that my subjects frequently use perceptual verbs like ‘see’ and ‘feel’ while denying any sensory content, indicates to me that they take the experience to be perception-like though non-sensory.

(B) As to whether they think that God is perceptually presented, (1) flatly says “he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him”. (4), whom Pappas does not discuss in any detail, introduces the third of

¹ In this connection Pappas also says that (4) speaks of feeling great joy but not of being presented with the cause of that joy. But (4) is presented as an example of someone who explicitly distinguishes a perceptual presentation of God from other ways of, as we might say, being experientially connected with God. The reference to feeling joy is taken from the first of Angela’s three ways, which is contrasted with the direct perceptual presentation of God (the third way).

her three ways of experiencing God (the one involving a perceptual presentation of God) as follows. "And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her, 'Behold Me!' and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another". (Angela goes on to make explicit that this "seeing" is with "the eyes of the soul".)

(C) (1), (3), and (4) explicitly report God's "speaking" to them or otherwise communicating with them. And this would seem to presuppose some kind of awareness of God (of the general sort they are assuming, which I take to be perception-like) as the other party in the communication. Here again Pappas suggests that all that is presented is an *effect* of God's action rather than God's acting. We might be driven to such a position in the end, but this is clearly not the way in which (at least most of) my informants think of it.

(D) Finally the discussion in the book of "spiritual sensations", phenomenal qualia of mystical experience conceptualized by analogy with the qualia of different senses, indicates that at least those who use this terminology think of the experiences in question as perception-like.

I now turn to Pappas' objections to my wide sense of 'perception' that (possibly) extends beyond sense perception. He, wisely, does not contend that there can be no nonsensory perception. Instead he argues that my account of perception in terms of *presentation* is too wide—that it includes, e.g., object or event memory, especially "flashbulb memory". I must plead guilty to this charge. I did not say enough in the book about the concept of presentation involved to exclude these cases. Let me remedy that. The kind of presentation I take to constitute perceptual consciousness comes to the subject, first, with the "impression" that it is something *external*, something not part of the subject's mind or consciousness, that is being presented. This suffices to exclude introspection. Secondly, in perception the object is presented as *present*, both in the sense of being currently in some sort of dynamic relationship to the subject and as presently existing. This is what excludes memory, even of the object or event sort. In this connection I should stress that I take presentation to be necessary and sufficient for *perceptual consciousness* (experience). I don't claim it to be sufficient for *veridical perception*, i.e., for the subject's making a correct identification of the object perceived. Whenever I have an experience that is *phenomenologically* a case of perception, *something* is presented to me in the ways just specified. But I could suppose that something to be a (real) dagger whereas it is only a vivid mental image. What is, on my account, necessary and sufficient for my seeing a real dagger is that *it* be what is presented to me in the specified ways.

Finally, let me point out that even if I were convinced by Pappas that mystical experience should not be thought of as a kind of perception, I could still argue in essentially the same way for the epistemological thesis that M-beliefs are *prima facie* justified by being based on mystical experience. For, whether or not my perceptual model is viable, there is a socially established,

undiscredited, doxastic practice of forming M-beliefs on the basis of mystical experience.

Reply to Adams

Adams' paper is different from the others in a respect that is most welcome to me. He is continuing the enterprise of my book, making fresh and insightful contributions thereto. He highlights aspects of the subject matter that were neglected in the book, often in ways that I heartily applaud, though sometimes in ways I am forced to take issue with. Whichever way it goes, it elicits my hearty endorsement.

Adams favors a more individualistic emphasis in assessing the rationality of doxastic practices than is found in the book. He is “uneasy about the degree of conservatism” suggested by my stress on the social establishment of doxastic practices. However, in plumping for more focus on the individual practitioner Adams argues not from the undesirability of conservatism but from differences between “religious doxastic practices” (he seems to be addressing a wider topic than just MP) and SP. Here he makes some valid and useful points. SP belongs to the “substructure” of our thought, the former to the “superstructure”, along with philosophy and “ethical doxastic practice” (EP). There is much more disagreement in the upper than in the lower practices. And the role of this disagreement is different. “When there is a disagreement in SP, we can normally infer that the practice is not working as it is supposed to in at least one of the contending parties. No such inference holds in philosophy”. Moreover, anyone who cannot argue for a controversial position in philosophy is incompetent in the practice, whereas one can be very good at SP without being good at arguing about disagreements. He takes “religious doxastic practices” to be similar to philosophy and EP in these respects. “...*internal* disagreement is a persistent feature of religious life”.

I find most of these points to be well taken, and quite illuminating to boot. I would only cavil at the statement that “a real mastery of a religious doxastic practice will include an ability to take a stand on disputed issues within the tradition”, at least in application to MP. Here the analogy with SP seems to me to carry the day. One could have thoroughly mastered the practice of perceiving God and forming beliefs about God on that basis without having any skill at theological disputation. But, as Adams anticipates, even where I agree with his distinctions I do not always go along with him on the implications he draws from them for the epistemology of the practices. Although he agrees that too frequent inconsistencies within the belief system of a single person is “a crushing objection to the practice”, “it is harder to say how far frequent, persistent interpersonal disagreements within a doxastic practice should be regarded as a powerful overrider of the *prima facie* rationality of the practice...”. In support of the view that it does not constitute such

an overrider, he recurs to the point that “in some important doxastic practices [such as philosophy]…people can show themselves exemplary practitioners in disagreeing with each other”. But if the reliability of a doxastic practice is one factor that bears on the rationality of engaging in it, as seems obvious, then the fact that philosophical belief formation cannot reasonably be claimed to be highly reliable (given the persistent disagreement in philosophical beliefs of different people) must be taken to count against the rationality of engaging in it. If that engagement is rational, it must be *in spite of* the extensive interpersonal disagreements.

In support of his position on this issue, Adams says that with respect to an area like philosophy or ethics or religion, though one does rely on the practice, “…I will tell more of the truth if I say that I rely on myself as a practitioner…”. There is wisdom in this. To be sure, one must tread carefully in making this distinction. When we are speaking generally about doxastic practices, we must recognize, as Adams says, that “it is practitioners, not practices, that form and hold beliefs”. Nevertheless, practitioners form and hold those beliefs in the way they do just because they have internalized the socially established practice. Both sides are essential and there is no competition between them. But Adams is not speaking here about practices generally, as the bit just quoted might suggest. He means to be drawing a distinction between doxastic practices like SP, and those like religion or philosophy with respect to which individual differences—in expertise, sensitivity, and authority—are important. Since there is relatively little difference in the mastery of SP (except for exotic branches thereof like wine tasting), we can focus on the reliability of the practice generally and largely ignore the reliability of individual practitioners. But in philosophy, morals, and religion, there are great differences in the expertise of the players, as I point out in the book. Authority rightfully plays a larger role. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the reliability of the practice generally has no bearing at all on the rationality of engaging in it, as Adams acknowledges. The discussion comes down to questions of the relative weight to be given to global and individualized considerations.

In connection with his stress on the individual subject, Adams assigns a considerable epistemic value to such factors as whether something “feels right” or “seems true or plausible” to the individual. But it happens too often that something that “feels right” or “seems plausible” turns out to be false, and this should give us pause before taking such factors to be a strong indication of truth. In the absence of any way of quantifying degrees of strength here there is no clear cut opposition between Adams and myself on this point.

Reading Adams’ insightful delineation of differences between SP, on the one hand, and interpersonal, ethical, philosophical, and religious doxastic practices on the other led me to realize that I should have cited, e.g., philoso-

phy as an illustration of the way in which a relatively low reliability is compatible with rational engagement in the practice. Few philosophers, at any rate, would deny that it is rational for one to engage in the enterprise of making the best judgments we can on philosophical issues. This is not quite the moral that Adams draws from his discussion, but it is something I learned from it.

In his final section on religious diversity Adams again makes insightful comments about which I will want to think further. I take the main contribution of this section to be found in his discussion of the relation between theology and high level religious doctrines, on the one hand, and mystical perception on the other. He holds that MP can make only a limited contribution to the justification of any doctrinal system, since perceptual beliefs about God are neutral, to a considerable extent, with respect to competing theological positions and competing ways of understanding doctrines. This seems to me partly right and partly wrong. In the book I tried to emphasize the point that although there is, in principle, no limit to what one can learn about God from perceiving Him, in practice mystical perception mostly yields information only about certain of God's attributes and about what God is doing (including "saying") vis-à-vis oneself at the moment. In general, what we learn from particular perceptions of God is *compatible* with a wide variety of theological and doctrinal options. I have no aspiration to be a 20th century Schliermacher, spinning the whole of Christian doctrine out of my own experience. But I also stressed the fact that a socially organized practice of forming perceptual beliefs about God like CMP contains a system of background doctrines by reference to which particular perceptual beliefs can be tested for acceptability. Because of this entanglement of the organized practice with a system of doctrine I cannot regard the two as being as independent of each other as Adams seems to suggest. In particular, this point would seem to block Adams' suggestion that since "affirming the reliability of the doxastic practice will...not carry with it the acceptance of any well worked out theology", "this makes it easier... to ascribe reliability to the ordinary doxastic practices of a religion different from one's own". If forms of MP and other religious doxastic practices presuppose a background system of belief and doctrine (though perhaps not a "well worked out theology") one can hardly acknowledge the reliability of the former without subscribing to the latter.