

PERCEPTUAL DISANALOGY: ON THE ALSTONIAN ANALOGY
ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

by

WILLIAM COLEMAN WILLIAMS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

August 2009

Major Subject: Philosophy

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Chair of Committee,	Hugh J. McCann, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Perceptual Disanalogy: On the Alstonian Analogy Argument from Religious Experience.

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Analogy arguments from religious experience attempt to establish a direct analogy between sense perception and certain kinds of religious experience construed in terms of a perceptual model. C. B. Martin challenges traditional analogy arguments from religious experience by contending that there is a disanalogy between both kinds of experience due to the fact that there is a society of testing and checkup procedures available to sense perception that is not available to religious experience.

William P. Alston presents his own analogy argument from religious experience in *Perceiving God*. Alston establishes an analogy between sense perception and religious experience by arguing that certain kinds of religious experience can be construed in terms of a perceptual model. In doing so, Alston maintains that sense perception and certain kinds of religious experience that count as perception—mystical perception—produce justified beliefs in very similar ways. Thus, Alston defuses Martin's objection by arguing that both kinds of perception have testing and checkup procedures available to them, procedures which are necessary to defeat the prima facie justification of perceptual beliefs.

However, I argue that because there are apparently inconsistent core beliefs in the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of Christian mystical perception, the analogy between sense perception and mystical perception is threatened. In order for Alston's analogy argument to be successful, he must address this problem.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF ANALOGY ARGUMENTS
FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Arguments from religious experience for the existence of God have been prolific in the latter part of the 20th century, and versions have been proposed by philosophers such as William P. Alston, George Mavrodes¹, Keith Yandell², and William Wainwright³. For theists, of particular interest is the variation of the argument from religious experience known as the analogy argument. In this type of argument, religious experience is cashed out in terms of perceptual models. Sensory experience is taken as the standard example of what we normally refer to as perceptual experience, and as long as *some* kinds of religious experiences can be plausibly conceptualized as perceptual experience, one can establish the groundwork for a direct comparison between both kinds of experience, thus allowing one to infer that beliefs based on both are justified in similar ways. The analogy argument itself has several different variations, an example of which is provided by William Wainwright.

In his variation of the analogy argument, Wainwright claims that sensory

This thesis follows the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

- 1 See George Mavrodes' version of the analogy argument in *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion*, (New York: Random House, 1979).
- 2 See Keith Yandell's version of the analogy argument in *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- 3 Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 70.

experience is the paradigm example of a kind of cognitive perceptual experience, or “awareness”. Provided that the analogy between religious experience and sensory experience is very similar, the idea is that one can infer that religious experience is probably (a kind of) cognitive experience. Since sensory experience is naturally cashed out in terms of a perceptual model, religious experience is construed in a perceptual model as well to minimize the difference between the two. Wainwright's motivation for establishing this analogous relationship is to show that, if beliefs grounded in our sensory experience are often justified and subject to certain justificatory conditions, then there is good reason to think that beliefs grounded in religious experience (as the same kind of cognitive experience) are also often justified and subject to the same justificatory conditions. There are other forms of the analogy argument between religious experience and sensory experience, but for my purposes I will offer the “Alstonian” version as the argument I will analyze closely. According to William P. Alston, like sensory experience some types of religious experience seem to be a kind of cognitive perception. If religious experience (construed as cognitive perception) is similar in the right ways to sensory perception, then beliefs based on both kinds of experience are justified in similar ways. In the manner that I employ the term, cognitive perception is the same as a “broad” notion of perception such that, for a given subject S and some object X, S perceives X just in case X (seems to) appear or present itself in some way to S's consciousness. Accordingly, I will refer to religious experience construed in terms of perceptual models as “mystical perception”, in the manner that Alston refers to it.

The force of analogy arguments in general is felt when the fact that we often take our sensory perceptual experiences to be adequate grounds for justified belief is taken into consideration. If sensory perceptual experiences enjoy this role in many of our justified beliefs about the external world, and if religious perceptual experiences are justified in the same way, then there is nothing barring the inference that many of our religious perceptual beliefs ground justified beliefs about the existence of God. The problem that arises from careful consideration of the Alstonian form of analogy argument presented is whether theists can rationally form justified beliefs about God. The way to approach this issue is by asking whether theists (1) are able to rationally ground justified beliefs on the basis of religious experience, and (2) are able to understand (certain kinds of) such experience in terms of perceptual models that is analogous in the right ways to sensory perception.

In my second chapter, I will first provide a rudimentary notion of experience and provide a qualification that restricts its scope to “ordinary” sensory perception, which encompasses the kind of sensory perception that we actively engage in and has empirical content about the external world. While attending to sensory perception, I will carefully provide a notion of perception that is amenable to both sensory perception and certain kinds of religious experience construed in terms of a perceptual model that does not presuppose any existential commitments about the existence of God. This notion of perception will bridge the pathway to Alston's argument that some kinds of religious experience *can* in fact be construed as perception without existential presuppositions.

Afterwards, I will introduce the notion of religious experience and how it is worthy of its own categorization in the wide array of possible types of experience. Next, I will address the difficulty associated with defining religious experience, provide a basic definition based on our intuitive recognition of particular instances of it, and propose a possible taxonomy of different kinds of religious experience by discussing the properties that distinguish them from each other. Afterwards, I will narrow my focus to those religious experiences that are:

1. Capable of being constructed in terms of perceptual models. The idea of a perceptual model can be formulated as follows, pivoting on Alston's notion of "perception": for a given subject *S* and some object *X*, *S* perceives *X* just in case *X* presents or appears in some way to *S*'s consciousness. If *X* seems to present itself or seems to appear in some way to *S*'s consciousness without *S* having any existential commitments regarding *X*, then *S* *putatively* perceives *X*.
2. Characteristic of theistic religious traditions. For religious experience to qualify in this way, it needs to have a particular structure. The kind of structure in question is a discursive one consisting of a subject and object of a given religious experience. Alston argues that theistic religious experiences having this structure can be constructed in perceptual models as "putative direct perceptions" such that "[one is aware of *X* through a state of conscious that is distinguishable from *X*, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived."⁴

4 William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 22.

Constructing the foundation of (1) is at the heart of analogy arguments from religious experience, especially the Alstonian version that I present as representative of the arguments in the literature. The contention that certain kinds of religious experiences are analogues of sensory perception depends on the way in which we understand them. If these kinds of religious experience can be plausibly framed and given an analysis in terms of perceptual models, then there is a basis for claiming similarity between both kinds of experience which analogy arguments from religious experience require as a fundamental assumption. This assumption determines a basis on which sensory perception and certain kinds of religious experiences construed as perception can be compared with each other, providing a pathway of argumentation to the desired conclusion that they are similar in the right ways to ensure both are subject to the same justificatory conditions.

Next, I will discuss C. B. Martin's against the analogy argument from religious experience and showcase it as the principal challenge to the "Alstonian" analogy argument which I present in my second chapter. Martin's objection amounts to the argument that, because mystical perception is not subject to the same "testing and checkup" procedures that sensory perception enjoys, beliefs based on mystical perception cannot be experientially justified in the same way that beliefs based on sense perception can, thus dissolving the analogy between both types of perception.

In my third chapter, I will provide a thorough account of Alston's version of the analogy argument from religious experience, after having established his claim that certain kinds of religious experience can be successfully adapted in terms of a direct

perceptual model, which he calls mystical perception. As part of this careful reconstruction, I will address Alston's account of justification of perceptual beliefs in particular in terms of doxastic practices, which are collections of belief-forming mechanisms that we utilize to form beliefs of a certain kind. It is often held that sensory perception enjoys a kind of reliability and adequate internal grounds for justified belief that mystical perception lacks. In response, Alston argues that there is no epistemically non-circular way to show the reliability of sense perception, in virtue of which he concludes that sense perception in this respect is not substantially better off than mystical perception, thus chipping away at the conceptual chasm between the two.

Next, I will provide Alston's account of socially-established doxastic practices, which are doxastic practices that have the epistemic machinery Alston accounts for in his account of epistemic justification of perceptual beliefs and that produce output beliefs in accord with how we *normally, standardly* do. Accordingly, Alston posits that both sense perception (SP) and mystical perception (MP) qualify as such practices. The primary conditions that a socially-established doxastic practice must satisfy are that it confer prima facie justification on perceptual beliefs by providing adequate internal grounds via an overrider system, that it be reliable, and that it be accepted as a standard way of forming justified beliefs. Because one can only show the reliability of a given socially-established doxastic practice from within it, Alston avoids the problem of epistemic circularity by appealing to a notion of practical rationality and a corresponding commitment relation: if I am committed to the reliability of a socially-established doxastic practice, then I am committed to the judgment that it is rational to suppose that

practice is reliable. After individuating different MP practices to avoid the charge that MP across different religious traditions suffers from the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, a consequence which undermines the reliability of a socially-established doxastic practice, he concludes that we are rational to engage in the Christian mystical perceptual practice (CMP) for the purpose of grounding justified beliefs, just as we are for SP.

In my last chapter, I return to Martin's objection. Alston argues that the “society of testing and checkup” procedures that Martin requires for MP to confer *prima facie* justification on its output beliefs is already present in the epistemic machinery of MP as a socially-established doxastic practice. However, my objection embodies the concern that the overrider system of CMP is not sufficient to avoid the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs. I draw a distinction between core beliefs and peripheral beliefs⁵ which comprise overrider systems of socially-established doxastic practices, and present the example of a phantom limb case as an instance of an apparently inconsistent sense perceptual belief. I address how SP sorts out apparent inconsistencies among sense perceptual beliefs and offer a plausible reason why subjects throughout history have accepted the existence of phantom limbs even though there seem to be ample reasons, or rebutters, provided by SP to the contrary. The critical conclusion to take away from the analysis of my example is that, in order for SP's overrider system to be sufficient, it needs to have internally consistent core beliefs which comprise it.

⁵ This helpful distinction and respective terminology was suggested to me by Dwayne Raymond and the participants in my presentation of this chapter to the Department of Philosophy at Texas A&M University during the Graduate Colloquium Series.

After addressing SP, I turn my attention to CMP and how it sorts out its apparently inconsistent beliefs. In opposition to SP, I argue that there are apparent inconsistencies *among* the core beliefs of CMP's overrider system. As such, it seems that CMP's overrider system is unable to prevent the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, since there are some apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs that both practices produce that we can expect to resolve only with new, perceptual evidence that presents itself with a high degree of regularity. Accordingly, only SP is equipped with an overrider system to resolve apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs in this way. Despite this fact, we are intuitively *willing* to accept inconsistencies among CMP's core beliefs (and other individuated variations of MP), while it likewise seems unnerving to accept inconsistencies among SP's core beliefs, given the core belief of SP that our sense perceptual experience about the external world exhibits regularity. Because of this disanalogy between SP and CMP, I argue that the Alstonian analogy argument suffers from serious difficulties and gives rise to the question of whether Christian religious experience (and the religious experience of other traditions) is best construed as a perceptual model. Hence, in order for the argument to be successful, Alston needs to account for this disanalogy which otherwise threatens the *prima facie* justification that CMP confers on perceptual beliefs.

CHAPTER II

THE ANALOGY BETWEEN SENSE PERCEPTION, MYSTICAL PERCEPTION, AND MARTIN'S OBJECTION

Overview

In order to lay out carefully Alston's version of the analogy argument from religious experience, it is necessary to introduce a few concepts, the extensive discussion of which will dominate this chapter apart from an account of Martin's objection. A working definition of sensory perception is in order, since it is what we normally take to be the paradigm example of cognitive perception on which we ground justified beliefs. We also need a conception of religious experience; unfortunately, there are potential difficulties in distinguishing religious experience from other ordinary experiences, which I will address accordingly. After distinguishing religious experience from other types of ordinary experience and developing a corresponding taxonomy of different kinds of religious experience, we will be more readily able to see instances of those kinds that share analogous properties with sensory perception. Like Alston, I will focus on religious experiences that satisfy the following conditions:

3. Capable of being constructed in terms of perceptual models. The idea of a perceptual model can be formulated as follows, pivoting on Alston's notion of "perception": for a given subject S and some object X, S perceives X just in case X presents or appears in some way to S's consciousness. If X seems to present itself or seems to appear in some way to S's consciousness without S having any

existential commitments regarding X, then S *putatively* perceives X.

4. Characteristic of theistic religious traditions. For religious experience to qualify in this way, it needs to have a particular structure. The kind of structure in question is a discursive one consisting of a subject and object of a given religious experience. Alston argues that theistic religious experiences having this structure can be construed in perceptual models as “putative direct perceptions” such that “[one is aware of X through a state of conscious that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived.”⁶

By further narrowing the notion of perception that Alston defines to a particular kind of immediate awareness—putative direct perception, or putative direct experiential awareness—we are able to present Alston's argument that certain religious experiences can be construed in terms of a putative direct perceptual model, which enables him to propose the argument I address in my next chapter that both kinds of perception are on a par with respect to the capability of producing justified beliefs grounded in them.

Lastly, in this chapter, I will provide an account of Martin's objection to the Alstonian analogy argument from religious experience which contends that mystical perception lacks the relevant tests and checking procedures that we utilize when engaging in sensory perception. I will showcase this objection as the principal challenge that Alston must address in the course of his argument.

⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 22.

Sense Perception

For the most part, the idea of an “experience” or the “having of an experience” is a very intuitive one. Our experiences involve certain “happenings, going-ons, states of affairs in the world around us, which we ourselves take a part in”⁷ and “may refer to certain exceptional occasions, memorable ones or even disastrous ones: the experiences of being married, having children or traveling abroad, for instance, or the experiences of shipwreck, being lost in a strange city or having one's house burgled.”⁸ The key component of the concept of experience is that we experience certain things and events in the world around us and often participate in those experiences in some way. The examples that Peter Donovan provides are a testament to how we intuitively recognize the concept of experience when we see and participate in instances of them, and our recognition illustrates the lack of a need to provide a concise definition. On the other hand, experiential statements are easily subject to a more rigorous analysis. In providing a basis for restricting the scope of the set of experiences to the subset of sensory perception, I will first look at George Mavrodes' analysis of experiential statements and how such statements can be further qualified as sensory perceptual in nature.

Mavrodes' analysis of ordinary experiential statements is useful for a thorough treatment of sentences which refer to experiences of some kind, and I will restrict them in terms of ordinary sensory perception to provide a handle on what sensory perception amounts to. The general forms of experiential statements that Mavrodes provides are as

⁷ Peter Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 3.

⁸ Ibid.

follows, where N is the subject of an experiential claim and x is some object that is the intentional content of an experiential claim:

1. “N experiences (an) x”; and
2. “N had an experience of (an) x.”⁹

These general forms can be further qualified as ordinary sensory perceptual statements, a subset of the broader notion of experience on which I desire to focus.

Accordingly, one can restrict the experiential statements analyzed by Mavrodes to statements about ordinary sensory perception by qualifying them in terms of verbs associated with sensory modalities. “In some cases [experience] can be further specified by sentences such as “N saw (heard, smelled, etc.) (an) x.”¹⁰ Moreover, “[seeing], hearing and other sensory perceptions may be called *determinates* of the more general *determinable* experience. That is, the statement that one has had an experience of x can be made more precise (further *determined*) by the statement that one has seen (or heard, etc.) (an) x.”¹¹ Hence, the qualifications added to experiential statements of the general form I previously addressed can be called *determinates* that effectively determine what kind of sensory perception to which the resulting restricted experiential statements refer. Thus, one can provide a robust notion of sensory perception in the following way by appropriately modifying the definition of broad perception: for a given subject S and some object X, S has a sensory perceptual experience of X iff X (seems to) appear or

9 George Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion*, (New York: Random House, 1970), 50.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

present itself in some way to S's consciousness by way of a sensory modality (seeing, hearing, etc.).

Perception and Existential Commitment

Mavrodes analyzes other experiential statements, and in the process of doing so it becomes clear that a possible problem arises, namely that certain perceptual experiential statements commit us to the existence of those things that appear or present themselves in some way to our consciousness. For example, Mavrodes takes an experiential statement of the form “N experiences (or sees, hears, etc.) (an) x” to entail “(An) x exists.”¹² In addition, he takes an experiential statement of the form “N experiences (an) x” to entail “(An) x affects N in some way.”¹³ These statements help to give us a clear grasp of sensory perception and what that concept often implies. However, “perception” is a success term which suggests that, for a given subject S and some object X, S *perceives* X only if X has an objective existence apart from S. For many, this existential commitment is not problematic for the objects of our sensory perception, given that we perceive those objects in situations precluding the presence of obvious overrides to their veridicality, such as hallucinatory states, poor visual conditions, etc.

However, when we talk about perceptual experiences of God (if such experiences are in fact plausibly construed as perceptual), the existential commitment becomes problematic, especially since I am concerned with the prospects of analogy arguments from religious experience providing *justified* belief for the existence of God, not knowledge; the latter would surely require the proposition “God exists” to be true. If

12 Ibid., 50.

13 Ibid., 51.

there is a plausible analogy between sensory perception and certain kinds of religious experiences construed in terms of a perceptual model, the notion of perception to which I'm attending needs to be qualified to avoid existential commitments. Alston provides a qualification of this kind to avoid the presupposition that God exists while allowing subjects of religious experience to report (seemingly) perceptual experiences of Him.

Alston concedes that “awareness of X” and “perception of X”, whatever object X denotes, are “success” terms, and states that “[whatever] my state of consciousness, so far as that is wholly within my head, I can't be truly said to be *aware* of an external object, X, or to have *perceived* X, unless X exists and unless I stand in whatever relation to X is required for this.”¹⁴ Accordingly, Alston qualifies the notion of perceptual experience of God “to be understood as 'what the subject takes (or would take if the question arose) to be an awareness (perception) of God'” by prefixing “perceptual experience of God” with “putative.”¹⁵ *Putative* perception of God need not be, as Alston puts it, “the genuine article.” A similar caveat can be made for sensory perception. Hence, a way of understanding perception with respect to both sensory perception and “mystical perception” is that, when speaking of both types of perceptual experience, the veridicality of those experiences need not be relevant. On the other hand, what *is* important is the question of whether we rationally engage in both kinds of perception as grounds for reliably-produced justified beliefs in similar ways. Therefore, the definition of perception that, for a given subject S and some object X, S perceives X just in case X (seems to) present or appear in some way to S's consciousness suffices for both sensory

14 Alston, 11.

15 Ibid.

perception and mystical perception, given of course that the latter notion turns out to be a cogent one.

In sum, I have offered a brief description of the intuitive notion of experience, and have analyzed forms of experiential statements and how those statements can be qualified as sensory perceptual experiences. In preparation for my presentation of Alston's argument that certain religious experiences can be constructed in terms of perceptual models, or alternatively that such religious experiences can be considered instances of "mystical perception," I provided a caveat by Alston that one can distinguish between two different senses of "perception." One sense is that perception is a success term, and the other sense is that it need only be putative, such that it denotes only a perceptual "seeming." Now, I will move on to discuss what exactly distinguishes religious experience from other ordinary experiences, and how different types of religious experiences can be organized into a taxonomy. Afterwards, I will provide Alston's argument that certain religious experiences qualify as "putative direct perceptions," paving the way for Alston's argument in my next chapter that a successful analogy can be drawn between sensory perception and mystical perception.

Mystical Perception

There are potential difficulties with providing a precise definition of religious experience, but one can provide a general definition that distinguishes religious experience from other types of experience via careful analysis of what properties uniquely characterize it. The similarity between many kinds of religious experience and instances of ordinary sensory experience is an indicator of how difficult it is to

distinguish them. For example, the branch of neuroscience that specializes in the study of neurophysiological changes with respect to religious experience, which Matthew Ratcliffe calls “neurotheology,”¹⁶ is particularly concerned with drawing a distinction between religious experience and ordinary sensory experience. Many nonreligious experiences are imbued with the same intensity as religious experiences, but hardly count as such. Intense, nonreligious feelings often include grief, love, guilt, estrangement, and surreality.¹⁷ With respect to neurotheology, a large concern is the possibility of studying certain kinds of experiences while ignoring others that are significant, despite the overlap that many of these experiences share with both ordinary sensory and religious experience.

Caroline Franks Davis cites the difficulty of providing a precise definition of religious experience by stating, “If one restricts the term to experience in accordance with the doctrines of one tradition, then any argument from religious experience to those doctrines begs the question.”¹⁸ Defining religious experience within the framework of any given religious tradition will result in a circular argument, if one does so with the intention of arguing that, on the basis of having those experiences, she is justified in believing that the religious tradition in which the experience was initially defined is true. On the other hand, a precise definition cannot be formed with too broad of a scope, because it is often the case that words like “religious” and “mystical” are used

16 Matthew Ratcliffe, “Neurotheology: A Science of What?” in *The Neurology of Religious Experience*, vol. 2 of *Where God and Science Meet*, ed. Patrick McNamara, (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 81.

17 Ibid., 84.

18 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 29.

metaphorically.¹⁹ However, it is possible to provide a working notion of religious experience by which we can intuitively recognize particular kinds of religious experience.

It is possible to categorize different kinds of religious experience on the basis of the distinctive properties that each have; such a system of categories can aid our intuitive recognition of various kinds of experience that seem distinctly “religious.” “From the moment religious experience is mentioned, there is a common tendency to think only of the private, psychological side of experience, our inner life of awareness and feeling and subjectivity.”²⁰ Religious experience is often associated with subjectivity and, as the excerpt above states, “the private, psychological side of experience,” but these properties are not distinctive of religious experience alone, and thus are not sufficient for a basic definition. In a similar vein, ordinary experiences often overlap with religious experiences, but those experiences by themselves are not sufficient to include in a basic definition of religious experience. “Experiences such as ecstasy, being in love, deliverance from danger or despair, aesthetic experiences, and inspiration must all be given a religious incorporated or reflexive interpretation if they are to count as 'religious experiences.'”²¹

If we are to develop a basic definition of religious experience, careful distinctions are needed to exclude ordinary sensory experiences that seem to have religious elements but fail to qualify *as* religious experiences. Typically, subjects of religious experiences

19 Ibid.

20 Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience*, 3.

21 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 30.

have those experiences in a particular context and recognize the experiences as religious based on their content. However, not all experiences in a religious context can qualify as such.

Some experiences are seen as religious by the subject because of their religious content or context—for instance, a vision or revelation with religious content, or a feeling of peace while praying or taking communion. However, not all experiences in a religious context are “religious experiences”—an itch during communion is unlikely to be, for instance! Similarly, the perception of religious texts and works of art and the participation in religious rituals, though experiences with religious content, do not in themselves constitute “religious experiences.” Thoughts with religious content will be religious if they seem to the subjects to have been the result of divine inspiration rather than produced by their own powers of reasoning. Again, though, not all “flashes of insight” are religious experiences; suddenly seeing the solution to a mathematical problem, even if it seems to have “come out of the blue,” is usually not a religious experience, though it may be referred to metaphorically as such by an overjoyed mathematician.²²

As Franks Davis notes, the having of experiences in a religious context does not guarantee the religious nature of those experiences. For example, an ordinary sensory perception of feeling an itch while taking communion hardly seems to satisfy the conditions of religious experience, though the itch takes place in a religious context. Likewise, even sensory experiences with religious content, such as looking at a religious text or participating in a religious ritual, need not necessarily qualify as religious experiences. Flashes of insight may count as religious experiences in some cases, but even they can occur in a religious context and not satisfy the conditions of counting as such an experience. These experiences are only religious if the their subjects interpret them in some religious framework (religious tradition), or if the experiences themselves are intrinsically religious.

22 Ibid.

Religious interpretation of ordinary sensory experiences by subjects is especially noticeable in religious communities. Subjects of religious experiences in religious communities exhibit certain behaviors that indicate they interpret their experiences as religious, such as displaying certain ways of speaking in the context of classic stories of their religious tradition and a common framework in which they have religious experiences.²³ Therefore, ordinary experiences for a nonreligious person are interpreted outside a religious framework, one in which certain religious descriptions and traditions are adopted by a religious community.

However, certain experiences seem to be religious not on account of interpretation alone, but because they are what Franks Davis considers “intrinsically” religious.

Some religious experiences are what I call “intrinsically religious.” Such experiences involve at least one of those “other-worldly” factors...the sense of the presence or activity of a non-physical holy being or power; apprehension of an “ultimate reality” beyond the mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centers of consciousness; and the sense of achievement of (or being on the way to) man's *summum bonum*, an ultimate bliss, liberation, salvation, or “true self” which is not attainable through the things of “this world.”²⁴

An intrinsically religious experience, though it may have ordinary experiences as important constituents of it, also seems to have at least one “other-worldly” experience as one of its elements. These kinds of experiences are distinctive by the way they are attained; for example, it does not seem that the presence of a non-physical holy being or feelings of ultimate bliss, liberation and salvation are attainable through any ordinary

23 Donovan, *Interpreting Religious Experience*, 4.

24 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 30-31.

sensory experiences apart from religious experiences. Such experiences are not only interpreted as religious, but are also described in religious terms, much like religious experiences that, for a given subject, would be much like any other ordinary experience were it not for the religious interpretation that subjects give them. By observing particular kinds of religious experience, and given that subjects either interpret those experiences in a uniquely religious way or those experiences are intrinsically religious, we can recognize religious experience as different from ordinary experience in a very intuitive way. Another important feature of religious experience, especially the kind of perceptual religious experience I am concerned with, is the perceived relationship between subject and object.

It is important to note that religious experiences are not only significant because of their particular interpretations on the part of subjects or because they are intrinsically religious, but also because of the relationship that subject perceives herself to have with the object of her experience. In theistic religious traditions in particular, subjects who have religious experiences of God perceive themselves as being in a personal relationship with Him. Some characteristics of this relationship may include one perceiving herself to be in the presence of Supreme Holiness, feeling a bond of unconditional love, and receiving undeserved redemption from sin.

Having developed a general notion that distinguishes religious experience from ordinary experience, we can develop a taxonomy of religious experience on the basis of their general properties and how subjects experience them.

Developing a natural taxonomy of religious experience such that the relevant experiences seem to coalesce within certain categories in virtue of their particular properties results in the following categories as explicated by Franks Davis: interpretive, quasi-sensory, revelatory, regenerative, numinous, and mystical. It is worthy to note that not all religious experiences neatly fit into only one of these categories; in fact, many religious experiences overlap with two or more. For the sake of simplicity, I will consider the examples I give for each category solely applicable to the category in question without addressing other categories to which those examples may just as accurately be assigned.

Interpretative religious experiences are typically comprised of mostly ordinary experiences that both adherents of a religious tradition and others encounter in everyday life, but the subject of those religious experiences interprets them in a uniquely religious way. “Common examples of such experiences are seeing a misfortune as the result of sins in a previous life, going through an illness with joy because it is a chance to 'participate in Christ's suffering,' experiencing love for all things of this world because of the belief that they are permeated by the divine,”²⁵ etc. If a given subject perceives that a prayer has been answered by way of God bringing about an ordinary state of affairs, then this perception may count as an interpretive religious experience. The interpretative element of this kind of religious experience is necessary, because, had someone else perceived the same state of affairs against the backdrop of a conceptual scheme lacking religious content, it would in turn lack religious significance.

25 Ibid., 33.

Interpretive religious experiences differ drastically from subject to subject. A particularly “primitive” example, as William James puts it, is cited in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. It involves an English sailor taken captive on a French ship in 1689:

...and looking about again to see anything to strike them withal, but seeing nothing, I said, “Lord! [W]hat shall I do now?” And then it pleased God to put me in mind of my knife in my pocket. And although two of the men had hold of my right arm, yet God Almighty strengthened me so that I put my right hand into my right pocket, drew out the knife and sheath...and then cut the man's throat...²⁶

Fortunately, there are many other examples of interpretive religious experience which are not so morbid on which one can draw. What uniquely characterizes interpretive religious experience in many examples is the “ordinary” quality of the experience, which is given a uniquely religious interpretation by the subject that otherwise lacks any appeal to religious content or context. Franks Davis notes another example originally collected by Alister Hardy that is more palatable in character than the previous one. The example concerns a subject who felt a sense of uneasiness about the safety of her child while she was seeing a film with her husband and left the theater on account of her premonition:

...At last we were sprinting down the lane leading to the cottage. The smell of burning was now very definite to me though my husband could not smell a thing. We reached the door which I literally burst in. As I did so the dense smoke poured out and a chair by the fire burst into flames. I rushed through to the bedroom and got the baby out while my husband dragged out the unconscious girl [who was a hotel staff member at the cottage who volunteered to watch her child]. She had fallen asleep in the armchair and dropped her lighted cigarette into the chair which had smouldered for hours. Yes, God sent me home to save my baby. God was with me telling me to hurry home; of that I am convinced and also my husband.²⁷

26 William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Glasgow, UK: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1977), 450-451. Referenced by Caroline Franks Davis, 34.

27 Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 46. Referenced by Caroline Franks Davis, 34.

What is incredible concerning the above example is that the “paranormal” experience of the subject, though very extraordinary with respect to the experiences of most people, is only religious in virtue of the interpretation that *she* gives it. The experience exhibited by the example could easily be characterized as another type of “unwordly” experience divorced from any religious significance whatsoever.

Quasi-sensory religious experience is that kind of experience which involves one of the modalities of ordinary sense experience, such as seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting. “The most frequently discussed type of quasi-sensory religious experience is the apparent vision of a spiritual being who gives the subject advice.”²⁸ Of course, quasi-sensory experience, potentially involving any one or more of the modalities of ordinary sense perception, is not limited to this kind of example. Other examples may include hearing the voice of God, having some spiritual being such as an angel grasp one's hand, and so on. The most salient property of quasi-sensory experiences is that they are constituted by phenomenal properties in the same manner as ordinary sensory perception. I think it is fair to say that most adherents of theistic religious traditions come about their beliefs in God in other ways, not by hearing a literal voice booming from the sky or, say, by feeling the actual embrace of some spiritual agent. However, there are certain religious experiences that seem to qualify as quasi-sensory, revelatory, and to a certain extent, interpretative. “More often, the quasi-sensory elements of a religious experience are considered by subjects to be like

28 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 36.

'pictures', 'sent' by a divine being and requiring a certain amount of interpretation.”²⁹ For example, spiritual apparitions and dreams that seem to have an external source apart from the subjects who have those dreams³⁰ clearly fall under the category of quasi-sensory religious experience.

As Franks Davis notes, a helpful example of quasi-sensory religious experience is an account of the conversion experience of Sadhu Sundar Singh in 1904 as documented by B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy:³¹

At [4:30] A.M. I saw something of which I had no idea at all previously. In the room where I was praying I saw a great light. I thought the place was on fire. I looked round, but could find nothing. Then the thought came to me that this might be an answer that God had sent me [concerning the right path]. Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ. It had such an appearance of glory and love. If it had been some Hindu incarnation I would have prostrated myself before it. But it was the Lord Jesus Christ whom I had been insulting a few days before. I felt that a vision like this could not come out of my own imagination. I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, “How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it?” The thought then came to me, “Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be He Himself.” So I felt at His feet and got this wonderful Peace which I could not get anywhere else.³²

There are other more commonly recognized examples of quasi-sensory experience, however. Notable examples include St. Paul's conversion to Christianity from Judaism on the road to Damascus, and God's speaking to Jesus during his baptism by John the Baptist.

Revelatory experiences seem to be more common than quasi-sensory ones, and “comprise what their subjects may call sudden convictions, inspiration, revelation,

29 Ibid., 37.

30 Ratcliffe, “Neurotheology: A Science of What?”, 83.

31 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 36.

32 B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy, *The Sadhu*, (London: Macmillan, 1921), 5-7. Referenced by Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 36-37.

enlightenment, 'the mystical vision', and flashes of insight.'"³³ More often than not, it seems that revelatory experiences are religious because of their novel content and "suddenness". The distinctive features of revelatory experiences can be cataloged as follows:

1. They are usually sudden and of short duration, though the after-effects may last a lifetime (especially in the case of conversion experiences);
2. The alleged new knowledge seems to the subject to have been acquired immediately rather than through reasoning or sense perception;
3. The alleged new knowledge usually seems to the subject to have been "poured into" or "showered upon" him (metaphors abound) by an external agency;
4. The "revelations" carry with them utter conviction, somehow even more than that which attaches to sense perception; and
5. The insights gained are often claimed to be impossible to put into words.³⁴

As with the other categories of religious experience, there are elements of others that overlap with revelatory experience. Such experience can incorporate elements of quasi-sensory religious experience, along with regenerative, numinous, and perhaps even mystical experience (all three of which I will address shortly). Due to the "suddenness" that often accompanies revelatory experience (which (2) accounts for), it incorporates elements of interpretative experience less often.

St. Teresa of Avila provides a description of revelatory religious experience in

³³ Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

Life.³⁵ St. Teresa describes revelatory religious experience in the following way:

The Lord is pleased that this knowledge should be so deeply engraven upon the understanding that one can no more doubt it than one can doubt the evidence of one's eyes—indeed, the latter is easier, for we sometimes suspect that we have imagined what we see, whereas here, though that suspicion may arise for a moment, there remains such complete certainty that the doubt has no force...The Lord introduces into the inmost part of the soul what he wishes that soul to understand...It is as if food has been introduced into the stomach without our having eaten it or knowing how it go there.³⁶

As St. Teresa describes revelatory religious experience, it is a kind of experience that, as I stated before, has a certain “suddenness” about it. According to the lines “there remains such complete certainty that the doubt has no force” and “[it] is as if food has been introduced into the stomach ...” revelatory religious experience affects the subject in such that a way that she is gratified with “spiritual” truth of some sort and has strong convictions about it. Clearly, Teresa's account demonstrates the quality of revelatory religious experience that it seems to have some external source to the subject and that it seems to be “poured” into the subject in a way not of her own volition. The involuntariness of revelation appears to be captured in the last line of St. Teresa's account, “It is as if food has been introduced into the stomach *without our having eaten it or knowing how it got there*” (emphasis mine).

Regenerative experiences seem to be by far the most common type of religious experience had by subjects of theistic religious traditions. “Regenerative experiences are the most frequent type of religious experience among ordinary people—that is, people

35 St. Teresa of Avila, *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, tr. and ed. By E. Allison Peers, vol. 1, 172. Referenced by Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 41.

36 *Ibid.*, 41.

who are not mystics, ecstasies, prophets, or psychics.”³⁷ Such experiences “renew” and sustain the faith of subjects who have them. The renewal of faith is often accompanied by improvement of the subject's spiritual, moral, physical, or psychological well-being.³⁸ For example, the feelings associated with regenerative religious experiences—experiences of new hope, strength, comfort, peace, security, joy, and so on³⁹—are

apparently brought about by a divine power, or accompanied by the sense of a divine presence; experiences of being guided, 'called', forgiven, and 'saved', usually by an external power; healing experiences; an apparently divinely aided increase in moral virtues and love for others; and the discovery of 'meaning' in life.⁴⁰

John Wesley's conversion experience from the Protestant tradition of Methodism is a particularly poignant example of a regenerative religious experience. In his journal, Wesley wrote an entry on May 24, 1738⁴¹ that reads:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.⁴²

Wesley's religious experience is clearly a regenerative one due to the feeling of salvation he experienced and the change he underwent leading him to “trust in Christ”—both of which are characteristic of the “renewing” and “sustaining” qualities of regenerative religious experience with respect to spiritual well-being.

37 Ibid., 44.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 44-45.

41 Ibid., 46.

42 John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley A.M.*, ed. by Ernest Rhys, vol. 1, 102. Referenced by Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 46.

Mystical experience is often used as a broad term for many kinds of the religious experiences previously addressed, but Franks Davis limits the term to two different categories with respect to extrovertive and introvertive mystical religious experiences. For my purposes, mystical experience is that religious experience which has as characteristics:

1. The sense of having apprehended an ultimate reality;
2. The sense of freedom from the limitations of time, space, and the individual ego;
3. A sense of 'oneness'; and
4. Bliss or serenity⁴³

One can make a “useful distinction between 'extrovertive' and 'introvertive' mystical experiences.⁴⁴ For example, a multiplicity of distinct, external objects are seen by subjects of extrovertive mystical religious experiences as somehow unified and divine. On the other hand, introvertive mystical religious experiences are “‘unitary' rather than unifying'; subjects shut out all external and internal diversity and dive deep within themselves to discover 'the One'.”⁴⁵

Two relevant examples of mystical experience, extrovertive and introvertive respectively, are in order. R. M. Bucke's experience, found in Alistair Hardy's collection, is a clear example of extrovertive mystical experience:

One day I was sweeping the stairs down in the house in which I was working, when suddenly I was overcome, overwhelmed, saturated, no word is adequate, with a sense of most sublime and living LOVE. It not only affected me, but seemed to bring everything around me to LIFE. The brush in my hand, my

43 Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 54.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 55.

dustpan, the stairs, seemed to come alive with love. I seemed no longer me, with my petty troubles and trials, but part of this infinite power of love, so utterly and overwhelmingly wonderful that one knew at once what the saints had grasped. It could only have been a minute or two, yet for that brief particle of time it seemed eternity.⁴⁶

The subject of this example was instantaneously overwhelmed with a feeling of sublime love, which closely correlates with the common feeling of “bliss or serenity” by subjects accounted for by (4). An ultimate reality also seems to have been apprehended by the subject, as the subject explicitly reports feeling “at one” with the “infinite power of love” experienced, corresponding with (1) and (3). Furthermore, the “brief particle of time” which “felt like an eternity” for the subject corresponds with the feeling of timelessness marked by (2). Most importantly, the experience is extrovertive because of the report by the subject that the individual objects involved in the experience did not lose their status as distinct objects. For example, the subject reports that, “The brush in my hand, my dustpan, the stairs, seemed to come alive with love.” Each object—the brush, dustpan, and stairs—remain distinct, yet they are unified by “coming alive” with love, which is taken as an underlying component of “ultimate reality”.

On the other hand, a useful example of introvertive mystical experience can be found in descriptions of the experiences of adherents of Yoga: “That there is an infinite number of eternal selves, who through Yoga can attain isolation or liberation, a state in which the soul exists by itself, no longer implicated in nature and in the round of rebirth.”⁴⁷ The experience as reported clearly exhibits the properties expressed by (1)-

46 Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*, 89.

47 Ninian Smart, “Interpretation and Mystical Experience,” *Religious Studies* 1 (1965): 83. Referenced by Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 61.

(3), though whether it also has (4) is unclear. This experience qualifies as internal because of its “unitary” rather than “unifying” characteristic. There is not a multitude of external objects unified by some force or power, but rather distinctions are blurred by the “isolation or liberation” of a soul which “exists by itself” as a single entity.

Having discussed Franks Davis's taxonomy of religious experiences, it is clear that ordinary sensory experiences and religious experiences are marked by several differences, although at times those differences are subtle. Religious experience as a kind of experience is deserving of its own analysis, especially with regard to how it plays into belief formation. The question remains, however: can any of these kinds of experiences plausibly be construed as mystical perception; that is, are the properties they have sufficient for one to reconstruct them in terms of a perceptual model? If categorizing even some of the aforementioned types of religious experience as mystical perception is impossible, Alston's analogy argument from religious experience is effectively dead in the water.

Alston argues that several kinds of religious experiences can be successfully construed in a perceptual model, thus conceptualizing them as the same kind of cognitive perception that we take sensory perception to be. First, however, it is important that Alston draw a distinction between *direct* and *indirect* perception, which allows him to refine the kind of religious experience he has in mind to qualify as mystical perception. With respect a distinction between the two, Alston states that

[we] can distinguish *directly* seeing someone from seeing her in a mirror or on television. We have *presentation* on both sides of this distinction. Even when I see someone in a mirror or on television, the person appears to me as such-and-such, as smiling, tall, or smartly dressed. That person can be identified with an

item in my visual field. This contrasts with the case in which I take something as a sign or indication of X but do not see X itself (X does not appear anywhere within my visual field), as when I take a vapor trail across the sky as an indication that a jet plane has flown by. Here I don't see the plane at all; nothing in my visual field looks like a plane. Let's call this latter kind of case *indirect perception recognition*, and the former kind (seeing someone on television) *indirect perception*. We can then say that indirect is distinguished from direct perception of X by the fact that in the former, but not in the latter, we perceive X by virtue of perceiving something else, Y. In the indirect cases I see the person, T, by virtue of seeing the mirror or the television screen or whatever. On the other hand, when I see T face to face there is nothing else I perceive by virtue of perceiving which I see T. No doubt there is a chain of causal intermediaries between T and my visual experience. Light reflected from T strikes my retina, the disturbances from which are transmitted ... But I don't perceive any of this. I don't see X through *seeing* or otherwise perceiving anything else.⁴⁸

Alston is concerned with putative *direct* experiential awareness of God, as opposed to an *indirect* experiential awareness which, given the definition of perception that Alston adopts which states that a subject S perceives an object X just in case X (seems to) present itself or appear in some way to S's consciousness, would be a contradiction in terms.⁴⁹

Alston goes on to distinguish between three degrees of immediacy, mediated immediacy (or direct perception) being the primary perceptual model he has in mind on which to base mystical perception. The three degrees of immediacy that Alston addresses are

(A) Absolute immediacy "One is aware of X but not through anything else, even a state of consciousness."

48 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21.

49 *Ibid.*, 20-21.

(B) Mediated immediacy (direct perception). “One is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived.”

(C) Mediate perception. “One is aware of X through the awareness of another object of perception.”⁵⁰

(B) is the most relevant perceptual model to Alston's establishing of mystical perception as a viable reconceptualization of certain kinds of religious experiences since it is also the model on which sensory perception is based. For example, when we perceive an object by way of a sensory modality, such as a tree, by (B) we are aware of the tree through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from the tree itself. Though we perceive the tree through a state of consciousness of which the tree is the object, we do not perceive *that* state of consciousness itself. Accordingly, the state of consciousness through which we perceive the tree in question is made the object of our *absolute immediate awareness* of it such that we do not perceive *it* through a separate state of consciousness that is distinguishable from it, although we *can* become aware of states of consciousness through other states that are distinct from them. The point is, according to Alston, we are not aware of a state of consciousness through another that is distinct from it when engaging in sensory perception. This intuition rules out (A), absolute immediate perception, as a model for sensory perception, and likewise rules out (C), which corresponds with indirect perception. Therefore, since (B) is the proper model on which

50 Ibid., 21-22.

to base sensory perception, it is Alston's task to offer a reconstruction of at least some of the kinds of religious experience I previously discussed in terms of (B).

First, however, it is important to recognize what seem to be intuitive differences between sensory perception and certain kinds of religious experience; these differences potentially prevent a reconstruction of religious experience as mystical perception.

Alston states that

Sense perception is insistently and unavoidably present in all our waking hours, and the experiential awareness of God is a rare phenomenon except for a very few souls. Sense perception, especially vision, is vivid and richly detailed, bursting with information, whereas the experience of God is dim, meager, and obscure. Sense perception is shared by all human beings, whereas the experience of God, though more widely dispersed than is often supposed, is still by no means universal.⁵¹

Given these differences between sensory perception and religious experience, the initial prospects of construing certain kinds of religious experience as mystical perception seem bleak. Even so, Alston proceeds to address the phenomenal properties of sensory perception and argues that certain kinds of religious experience fit the bill as having phenomenal properties on a par with sensory perception, thus establishing a basis for the viability of the notion of mystical perception.

The broad notion of cognitive perception, which requires some object to (putatively) appear or present itself to one's consciousness, calls for that object to present or appear itself with phenomenal properties. The objects of our sense perception, for instance, appear to us as having phenomenal properties, such as being red, round, or

51 Ibid., 36.

smells, feels, or tastes a certain way.⁵² The worry is that the putative objects of many kinds of religious experience exhibit no such phenomenal properties. For example,

Consider putative features of God like power, goodness, love, and plenitude, and putative actions like forgiving and strengthening. Power and goodness are complex dispositional properties or bases thereof, dispositions to act in various ways in various situations. And to forgive or to strengthen someone is to successfully engage in certain actions with a certain intention.⁵³

Many of the religious experience I described earlier—and ones which Alston contends can be understood as mystical perception—possess these properties instead of explicitly phenomenal ones.

In response to this problem, Alston proposes a solution by first drawing a distinction between phenomenal concepts and “objective” concepts, and concludes that we often report the former in terms of the latter. For the purposes of this argument, properties are cashed out in terms of concepts. Phenomenal concepts can be distinguished from objective concepts by considering the color red. “When I use 'red' in a phenomenal sense in saying that something looks red, I am simply recording the qualitative distinctiveness of the way it visually appears to me, and that is all.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, objective concepts are markedly different. “When ... I use 'red' in a objective physical-property sense, I am saying something about the disposition of the object to look one or another way under one or another set of circumstances, and/or its physical structure, powers, or capacities.”⁵⁵

52 Ibid., 44.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

One type of objective concept that Alston focuses on in particular is what he calls a “comparative concept.”⁵⁶ A comparative concept is one that “is to say what sort of object can be expected to appear, in these circumstances or in normal circumstances, as this object is appearing.”⁵⁷ Alston provides an example illustrating the difference between a phenomenal concept and a comparative concept. The statement “This tie looks red (to me now)” can be taken as invoking a phenomenal concept, but it can also be taken as invoking a comparative concept by modifying it as “This tie looks to me now as a red tie would be expected to look under normal conditions”.⁵⁸ Alston notes that, in this modified sentence, we are not using phenomenal concepts. Rather, “we are using objective concepts of red tie, normal conditions, and so on, and characterizing this look by comparing it with other looks characterized in these objective terms.”⁵⁹ Alston carefully notes that, though subjects of religious experiences may use comparative concepts to accurately report their experiences by way of “conceptualizing appearances by some of their relational features,”⁶⁰ phenomenal concepts still operate in the background of those assertions as presuppositions. After all, “something can enter into relations only if it has an intrinsic nature to constitute what enters into those relations; this intrinsic nature is what is captured by a phenomenal concept.”⁶¹

56 Alston offers “doxastic” and “epistemic” concepts as instances of objective concepts, but it is enough to address comparative concepts since it is usually in this way that, even though concepts like power, goodness, and love are not phenomenal concepts, subjects can still accurately report how God appears to their experience.

57 Ibid., 45.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

The relevance of drawing a distinction between phenomenal concepts and objective concepts (in particular comparative concepts) becomes clear: even though concepts like power, goodness, and love are not phenomenal concepts, “that does not show our sources could not be accurately reporting how God appears to their experience by using such concepts.”⁶² For example, Alston states that X, whatever object of sense perception X may be, “looked like a house or a Porsche or a bald eagle or tasted like a white Burgundy or sounded like Handel ... thereby giving you an idea of how it looked, tasted, or sounded.”⁶³ It is possible that we report experiences of the sort Alston cites using phenomenal concepts, but he maintains that we do not often do this. Rather, we often use comparative concepts to convey what a given sense perceptual experience is *like*, which provides others with an idea of what the relevant phenomenal qualities of the experience resemble. It is in this way Alston argues that there is no reason to suppose subjects of religious experiences who use non-phenomenal concepts to describe their experiences have experiences devoid of phenomenal content. Hence, he concludes that it is very plausible to construct many kinds of religious experiences (many of which I addressed earlier and correspond with Alston's notion of direct perception) in terms of mystical perception. An argument for the analogy between the two is established as a viable enterprise.

Martin's Objection

In *Religious Belief*, C. B. Martin offers an objection against the analogy argument from religious experience by reducing existential statements about God to

62 Ibid., 46.

63 Ibid.

assertions about one's own psychological states. Since Martin's objection is directed against analogy arguments in general, one can reconstruct his argument against Alston's specific formulation with relative ease. Martin attacks the analogy argument by objecting to the argument that knowledge of God is like knowledge of color, thereby challenging the analogy between sensory perception and mystical perception. For example, H. H. Farmer offers the following account of the incommunicability of direct experience of God to an unbeliever:

(1) You don't know what the experience of God is until you have had it.

(2) You don't know what the color blue is until you have seen it.⁶⁴

In addition, Farmer makes the following claim: "All the basic elements in our experience are incommunicable. Who could describe light and colour to one who has known nothing but darkness?"⁶⁵ Martin objects that likening one set of sensations to another, as (1) and (2) do, is insufficient to support the existential claim "God exists." Martin then proceeds to break down the analogy between (1) and (2).

Martin argues that the analogy is only justified when "knowing color" is synonymous with "having color sensations," which has dire implications for direct experience of God if "having direct experience of God" is made synonymous with "having certain religious experiences." With respect to Farmer's analogy, Martin asserts that, "The theologian has made the analogy above hold at the cost of endangering the existential claim about God which he hoped to establish." If "knowing color" is made

64 H. H. Farmer, *Towards Belief in God*, (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 41. Referenced by C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, 69.

65 Ibid.

synonymous with “having color sensations” and “having direct experience of God” is made synonymous with “having certain religious experiences,” Martin concedes to the fact that a blind man cannot know color and that a nonreligious man cannot have direct experience of God. However, if this analogy is maintained, subjects of perceptual religious experiences, i.e., subjects who have direct experience of God, seem to be making claims about their own psychological states and feelings, and not existential claims about God. Martin continues:

[if] “knowing color” is to be shaken loose from its purely psychological implications and made to have an existential reference concerning features of the world, then a whole society of tests and checkup procedures, which would be wholly irrelevant to the support of the psychological claim about one's own color sensations, becomes relevant.⁶⁶

The requirement for a “society of testing and checkup” procedures is admittedly vague, but one can give a very general definition in that it amounts to a mechanism of sorts that allows for cross-checking and verifying experiential sources in which we ground beliefs. After making the above statement, Martin's next strike is well-anticipated. He claims that, unlike color, “having direct experience of God” does not admit to the same testing and checking procedures. “[Such direct experience of God] tends to place itself in the company of other ways of knowing which preserve their self-sufficiency, 'uniqueness,' and 'incommunicability' by making a psychological and not an existential claim.”⁶⁷

Concerning psychological claims of the sort addressed, Martin coins the term “low-claim assertion” and argues that perceptual religious experience can hope to attain only this status, and not the status of an existential claim about God. Martin contrasts

⁶⁶ Martin, *Religious Belief*, 72.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the term “low-claim assertion” about psychological states with “physical object statements.” Martin also offers a method of distinguishing the two.

One way of differentiating a physical object statement from a low-claim assertion is by means of prefixing the phrase “I seem.” For instance, the statement “I see a star” may be transformed into a statement concerning my sensations by translating it into the form “I seem to see a star.” The first statement involves a claim about the existence of an object as well as an announcement concerning my sensations and therefore subjects itself to the risk of being wrong concerning that further claim. Whether one is wrong in this case is determined by a society of tests and checking procedures such as taking photographs and looking through telescopes and by the testimony of others that they see or do not see a star. The second statement involves no claim about the existence of an object and so requires no such tests and no testimony of others; indeed, the final judge of the truth of the statement is the person making it. If no existential claim is lost by the addition of this phrase to a statement then the assertion is low claim. For instance, the statement “I feel pain” loses nothing by the addition “I seem to feel pain.”⁶⁸

Martin is more than willing to concede that the claim, “I am having a direct experience of God,” has the form of an existential claim, but because there is no relevant “society of testing and checkup” procedures, it is reduced to nothing more than a low-order claim. Hence, by giving the above argument, Martin challenges the standard form of analogy argument, and by implication the Alstonian version. Like Alston, the reading of the charge by Martin that I will take seriously is epistemic; the lack of a society of testing and checkup procedures prevents beliefs by way of mystical perception from being experientially justified.⁶⁹ Thus, without experiential justification, assertions about those beliefs remain low-order claims.

Returning to the idea of sense perception having access to checks and tests, the following example serves as an illustration. I see a tower on a particularly foggy

68 Ibid., 75-76.

69 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 210.

morning that I take to have a conical shape when perceiving it from far away, yet upon checking my visual perception of it against another sensory modality such as by touching it and discover it is cubical, I can abstain from forming an inconsistent belief about what shape the tower actually has. I can resolve this apparent inconsistency in other ways, namely by asking others what shape they perceive the tower to have, given that presence and position of the tower exhibits a regularity of remaining in the same place and is publicly accessible. All of these testing methods fall within the scope of what Martin has in mind when he speaks of a society of testing and checkup procedures.

Not surprisingly, Martin argues that mystical perception enjoys no such testing procedures. Very few mystical perceptions are obtained through some sensory modality (except for quasi-sensory religious experiences that count as mystical perceptions), and hence cannot be checked against others. To make matters worse, mystical perception is not typically the sort of thing that one can check by deferring to the experiences of other subjects, since many (if not most) are very personal in nature, involving only one subject having a direct experiential awareness of God. If sensory perception is susceptible to the society of testing and checkup procedures that Martin invokes and mystical perception is not, the former has a method of avoiding the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs while the former does not. Hence, the analogy breaks down.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the notion of sense perception and how it can be discussed as “putative” without existential commitments to external objects, which formulates the broad idea of cognitive perception in such a way that it is amenable to the

notion of mystical perception. Afterwards, I introduced the notion of religious experience by citing properties the latter has which the former lacks, and by providing a taxonomy by which we intuitively recognize a difference between both kinds of experience. Providing a taxonomy of types of religious experience is not enough, however; it is also important to firmly establish the plausibility of construing certain kinds of religious experience in terms of a “direct” perceptual model, which Alston calls “mystical perception”.

Finally, I presented Martin's objection to a general form of the analogy argument from religious experience and adopted Alston's terminology to present Martin's objection as one against the Alstonian version in particular. I consider Martin's objection to be the hallmark challenge that the Alstonian variation of the argument must address. In the next chapter, I will present William P. Alston's analogy argument which he presents in *Perceiving God* as representative of analogy arguments in the literature.

CHAPTER III

THE ALSTONIAN ANALOGY ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Overview

In the previous chapter, I presented C. B. Martin's objection to the analogy argument from religious experience as the primary challenge to the Alstonian formulation. To reiterate, the basic argument has the following form: Sensory perception is the paradigm example of cognitive perception. If sensory perception is similar in the right ways to those religious experiences that count as instances of cognitive perception, one can form justified beliefs based on each in a likewise similar way. Alston goes to great lengths to argue that several kinds of religious experience can be construed in terms of a direct perceptual model, aptly dubbed mystical perception. In doing so, Alston establishes the preliminary foundations for his argument which establishes that the conceptual gap between the two is minimal, and that in fact both are similar in the right ways to ensure that beliefs based on sensory perception are justified in a similar way as beliefs based on mystical perception.

Martin, on the other hand, contends that beliefs formed on the basis of mystical perception⁷⁰ cannot be justified in a similar way to sense perceptual beliefs. His challenge is ultimately that, because there is no “society of testing and checkup” procedures to test the existential claims made on the basis of mystical perception, they

⁷⁰ Martin does not use this locution, although I use it to reconstruct a version of his objection that is concentrated against Alston's argument.

are low-order assertions, or claims merely about the psychological states and feelings of subjects making those assertions. If it is true that mystical perception is not subject to the same testing procedures to which sensory perception is privy, an argument for the analogy between the two is jeopardized, because the presence of such tests give credence to our perceptual beliefs; without them, their *prima facie* justification is undermined.

In this chapter, I will first address William P. Alston's argument for the analogy argument from religious experience, especially with regard to the Christian religious tradition. Alston lays the groundwork for his argument by proposing a notion of epistemic justification with both internalist and externalist components, requiring first that we have adequate internal grounds for justified belief which in part utilize the Theory of Appearing, and second a corresponding overrider system and that perceptual belief-forming mechanisms be reliable, respectively. The term "epistemic justification," which I will later distinguish from "practical justification," can be understood as that kind of justification that "attaches to a belief if solid grounds for its truth were adduced, or to attach to a [belief-forming mechanism] if sufficient reasons were given for regarding it as reliable."⁷¹ According to Alston, a perceptual belief-forming mechanism must provide adequate internal grounds for our beliefs in order that they be justified. Alston argues that we have adequate internal grounds for our justified perceptual beliefs partly in virtue of the Theory of Appearing, which can be formulated in the following way:

71 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 168.

TOA (Theory of Appearing): For S to perceive X is just for X to be the entity that is [putatively] appearing to S as so-and-so.⁷²

By utilizing this principle, Alston presents an account of justification for perceptual beliefs:

PFJ (Prima Facie Justified Perceptual Belief): When a belief of mine that X is ϕ is based, at least in part, on an experience in which X appears to my experience as ϕ (or so it seems to me), that experience contributes to the justification of that belief.⁷³

An experience in which X appears to S's experience as ϕ (or so it seems to S) contributes to the justification of S's X-belief in that it is *prima facie* justified. If S is not aware of any defeating beliefs, which Alston calls “overriders,” S's belief about X is *unqualifiedly* justified. Consequently, Alston holds that a set of overriders, which constitutes an “overrider system” consisting of “rebutter” and “underminer” beliefs, is a core component of any perceptual belief-forming mechanism.

The notion of a perceptual belief simpliciter fails to be robust enough for Alston's account of justified perceptual beliefs, and thus distinguishes between purely immediately experiential beliefs and partly mediately experiential beliefs.

Although PFJ applies to both kinds of perceptual belief, complications arise by applying a purely internalist notion of justification to partly mediately justified perceptual beliefs—which are perceptual beliefs that rely in part on a background set of beliefs, as opposed to purely immediately justified perceptual beliefs that are purely experiential

⁷² Ibid., 58.

⁷³ Ibid., 79.

and not so mediated by other beliefs. A solution to this problem that Alston implements is the adoption of an externalist notion of reliability into his account of epistemic justification. Reliability attributed to a perceptual belief-forming mechanism can be understood as the property that mechanism has when it produces (mostly) true beliefs. In this way, even though there is no *general* way of formulating the relation that holds between background justified beliefs and partly mediated perceptual beliefs, the process by which such perceptual beliefs are justified is still truth conducive.

After establishing an epistemic account of justification for perceptual beliefs, Alston takes on the problem of the reliability of sense perception. Alston concludes that one cannot rationally hold that sensory perception is reliable in a non-circular way by appealing to what he considers the traditional arguments for its reliability. Rather, Alston proposes that one can maintain that sensory perception is a reliable belief-forming mechanism by cashing out “perceptual belief-forming mechanisms” in terms of “doxastic practices.” Just any doxastic practice will not do, since there are many that fail to provide adequate internal grounds for justified perceptual beliefs and fail to be reliable. Instead, Alston speaks of “socially-established doxastic practices” which are standardly accepted, both socially and psychologically, to correspond with the norms of justified perceptual belief-formation.⁷⁴ Alston concludes that the only way one is able to judge the reliability of a socially-established doxastic practice is by participating in it, and that, if we commit ourselves to the reliability of a given socially-established doxastic practice, we are committed to the judgment that it is rational to take that practice to be

74 Ibid., 100.

reliable, the belief of which enjoys a “practical” justification. Hence, we are able to enjoy a practical rationality in engaging in sense perception, which departs from, but functions on a different level than the stronger notion of epistemic justification.

After arguing that a given subject is practically rational in believing that the socially-established doxastic practice of forming beliefs on the basis of sensory perception, he moves his argument in the direction of mystical perception. Alston argues that mystical perception, like sense perception, meets the conditions of qualifying as a socially-established doxastic practice. Likewise, mystical perception, like sensory perception, cannot rationally be held reliable in a non-circular way without likewise appealing to a notion of practical rationality via a commitment relation from within socially-established doxastic practices. Since one cannot form justified beliefs about the reliability of sense perception in a non-circular way but can be practically rational to engage in it, Alston proposes that it is no less practically rational to engage in mystical perception, even though one likewise cannot form justified beliefs about its reliability in a non-circular way. A socially-established doxastic practice must avoid the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, and to rectify this possible problem regarding mystical perception, Alston individuates different kinds of mystical perception and focuses almost exclusively on mystical perception in the Christian religious tradition, or Christian mystical perception.

Epistemic Justification

The foundation of Alston's argument for the analogy between sensory perception and mystical perception begins with an explanation of the connection between direct

experiential awareness and justified perceptual belief, and a firm notion of epistemic justification which he carefully defines. For Alston, direct experiential awareness and justified perceptual belief are related in the following way: “If what seems to me to be a direct experiential awareness of X puts me in a position to form justified beliefs about X's perceptible features, that warrants me in supposing that X itself is indeed presenting itself to my awareness; otherwise how could the experience justify my beliefs about X?”⁷⁵ Direct experiential awareness can also be called “presentation, givenness, or appearance”⁷⁶, which corresponds with the kind of putative direct perception that Alston grants a privileged position as the perceptual model for both sense perception and mystical perception. The connection obtaining between direct experiential awareness and justified perceptual belief applies to both kinds of perception, but for this connection to be possible with respect to mystical perception, it is assumed that, on the basis of subjects having putative mystical perceptual experiences, there is no reason to believe that putative direct perception of at least some of God's qualities is impossible. In other words, it is reasonable to believe that God has certain perceptible qualities which He can present in some way to a given subject's consciousness.⁷⁷ Alston is primarily interested in arguing for the rationality of forming justified perceptual beliefs based on such a connection, but a clearly-defined account of epistemic justification is needed for this connection to have any import.

75 Ibid., 68.

76 Ibid., 37.

77 See my discussion in Ch. II pertaining to Alston's argument that some kinds of religious experience can be construed as mystical perception, even if the subjects of those religious experiences fail to report explicitly phenomenal qualities of those experiences.

Alston provides an account of epistemic justification that takes into account beliefs based on different kinds of perception, and incorporates the notion of “adequate internal grounds” as its core internalist component and “reliability” as its core externalist component. Alston posits the requirement that one needs to have adequate internal grounds for justified perceptual beliefs that she forms. Having such grounds amounts to having propositional justifiers (beliefs) for a putative perceptual belief which are subject to an overrider system, which are objectively based on putative perceptions, and which are likely to be true. How one obtains propositional justifiers for a given perceptual belief that are incorporated into a background set of beliefs by which that perceptual belief is evaluated depends in part on a simple principle that Alston calls the Theory of Appearing, which can be formulated as follows:

TOA (Theory of Appearing): For S to perceive X is just for X to be the entity that is [putatively] appearing to S as so-and-so.⁷⁸

The process of obtaining putative perceptions about which we form beliefs begins with the fundamental idea expressed by this principle. For some object X, we perceive X as being a certain way. The principle is no more complicated than that. However, the Theory of Appearing needs to be incorporated explicitly in an account of *prima facie* justification, or the justification a perceptual belief has in virtue of being based on a perceptual “seeming”. Alston formulates such an account as

PFJ (Prima Facie Justified Perceptual Belief): When a belief [of S] that X is ϕ is based, at least in part, on an experience in which X appears to [S's] experience

78 Ibid., 58.

as ϕ (or so it seems to [S]), that experience contributes to the justification of that belief.⁷⁹

For example, if a book on the table in front of me appears to me as being blue, that experience at least in part grounds my belief that the book is blue. Consequently, my belief that the book on the table in front of me is blue is *prima facie* justified.

It would be epistemically naïve of a subject to assume that, because it appears to her that some object X is ϕ , she has a strongly justified belief that X is ϕ . The undeniable fact of the matter is that subjects of perceptual experience often make mistakes. There is a world of extraneous factors and circumstances that can significantly weaken the *prima facie* justification of a perceptual belief. For example, with regard to sense perception, there are a number of possible confounding factors that can defeat the likelihood of the veridicality of a given sensory perceptual belief: hallucinations, mirages, poor lighting conditions, numbness of one's fingers when trying to establish whether a cup of coffee is hot or cold, the presence of loud sirens that effectively drown out other sounds when one is trying to determine how many different species of birds are singing in her general proximity, only to name a few. Thus, a strong account of adequate internal grounds for a justified perceptual belief requires a way to sort out those *prima facie* justified perceptual beliefs that fail to survive epistemic scrutiny, or, in other words, fail to meet the rigorous challenges to truth that we reasonably expect of *genuinely* justified beliefs. The idea of an “overrider system” that Alston proposes accomplishes this task.

79 Ibid., 79.

In order for a prima facie justified perceptual belief to be *unqualifiedly* justified, it must be subjected to an overrider system incorporated in the relevant perceptual belief-forming mechanism. An overrider system consists of sufficient reasons for thinking that a given prima facie justified perceptual belief is false, which are called “rebutters”, and sufficient reasons to think that, in a particular instance, “the ground [of a prima facie justified perceptual belief] does not wield its usual justificatory force”⁸⁰, which are called “underminers”. Alston provides the example of forming a perceptual belief about a flower:

The flower looks purple to me; but if I have overwhelmingly strong evidence that there are no purple flowers in the garden, or if I know that there is something about the lighting that makes white flowers look purple, I am not, overall, justified in believing the flower to be purple just on the basis of that experience. The purple look is sufficient to render me prima facie justified in believing the flower to be purple, but in this case that prima facie status (initial credibility) is overridden by other things I know or justifiably believe.⁸¹

Hence, if I form a prima facie justified perceptual belief, and there exist no overriders of which I am aware, then that belief enjoys unqualified justification.

The bare, straightforward notion of “perceptual belief” lacks the precision that Alston requires in his account of epistemic justification, thus he draws a distinction between purely immediately experiential perception and partly mediately experiential perception. Beliefs based on purely immediately experiential perception are those that a given subject has of some object which appears directly to her consciousness. On the other hand, beliefs based on partly mediately experiential perception are those that a given subject has of some object such that those beliefs are partly based on the subject's

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

background set of beliefs. Because of the distinction between purely immediate experiential perception and partly mediate experiential perception, problems arise for a purely internalist account of epistemic justification of perceptual beliefs.

The internalist notion of adequate internal grounds would be sufficient if our only perceptual beliefs were those based on purely immediate experiential perception, in which case the status of PFJ alone would be Alston's primary concern. Unfortunately, the fact that some perceptual beliefs are justified in part by other justified beliefs (i.e., partly mediately experiential perceptual beliefs) complicates matters greatly. For, as Alston states, "there is no way of giving a general formulation of the way(s) in which other justified beliefs [in a set of background beliefs on which a belief based on partly mediately experiential perception is grounded] have to be related to a perceptual belief in order to contribute to its justification."⁸² Without a general formulation of the nature of this inferential relation, the truth-conducivity of Alston's account of epistemic justification is threatened.

In order to account for perceptual beliefs partly based on other justified beliefs, Alston introduces an externalist component of reliability to his account of epistemic justification of perceptual beliefs. There is no clear account of the justificatory relation that holds between certain perceptual beliefs and other justified beliefs by which they are mediated. Alston addresses this issue by introducing an externalist component to his account of epistemic justification, one that requires the belief-forming mechanism of a given subject be reliable such that it produces (mostly) true beliefs. The notion of

82 Ibid.

reliability that Alston employs is not one of “infallible” reliability, but one of a very high degree.⁸³ A perceptual belief-forming mechanism that is reliable need not provide a precise definition of the aforementioned internal relation, since the mechanism is truth-conducive in its output of justified perceptual beliefs *regardless*. Thus, a perceptual belief-forming mechanism requires a means of initially producing prima facie justified beliefs, an overrider system that confers unqualified justification on prima facie justified perceptual beliefs that are subjected to it, and the mechanism in question needs to be reliable.

Until this point, I have presented Alston as talking about perceptual belief-forming mechanisms with certain qualities that ensure the output of beliefs produced by them are first prima facie justified, and if they meet certain conditions, can become unqualifiedly justified. However, Alston cashes out the idea of a perceptual belief-forming mechanisms more specifically in terms of “doxastic practices”. “[We] may speak of various 'practices' of belief formation—'doxastic practices'—each of which involves a family of ways of going from grounds—doxastic and experiential, and perhaps others—to a belief with a certain content.”⁸⁴ There is good reason to cash out perceptual belief-forming mechanisms in terms of doxastic practices. Alston's eventual argument that sense perception, and in turn mystical perception, can be rationally engaged in depends on a notion of practical rationality, which I will address shortly. According to Alston, we are practically rational in engaging in sense perception and mystical perception as doxastic practices, but by the very definition of “practical”, “[a]

83 Ibid., 105.

84 Ibid.

question of practical rationality arises only when we are dealing with what we *do*.”⁸⁵

Hence, understanding perceptual belief-forming mechanisms as a kind of practice, which involves a doing of some sort, is pivotal for the Alston's argument for the reliability of sense perception and later for mystical perception to go through.

Alston defines the notion of a doxastic practice in a very specific way. Doxastic practices have all of the characteristics of perceptual belief-forming mechanisms that Alston describes in his account of epistemic justification, including a way of providing adequate internal grounds for beliefs and being externally reliable. In addition,

[A] doxastic practice [is] the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type. Such functions differ in the width of the input and output types involved. The input type could be something as narrow as a certain determinate configuration of specific sensory qualia, and the output type something as narrow as a belief to the effect that the object in the center of the visual field is Susie Jones. ... Or the function could be wider in scope. In thinking about perceptual belief formation we have been thinking of a very wide function that takes inputs of the type an experience of the sort *S* would be inclined to take as a case of *X*'s appearing ϕ to *S*, and yields outputs of the correlated type a belief of the form “*X* is ϕ ”.⁸⁶

Doxastic practices are individuated from others by the type of inputs they receive and the kind of outputs they produce in accord with a particular function specific to them. For example, sense perception construed as a doxastic practice deals specifically with sensory input and has a particular function as one of its constituents that produces a corresponding sense perceptual belief as its output. The function in question can take a narrow range of input—such as a particular configuration of sensory qualia—and produce an output belief that the configuration of sensory input being perceived is a

85 Ibid., 174.

86 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 155-156.

particular thing, such as a person named Susie Jones recognized by the subject engaging in sense perception. As Alston notes, perceptual doxastic practices, like sense perception, typically accept a wider range of input characterized by perceptual seemings that produce output beliefs about those seemings.

The bare notion of doxastic practice is not sufficient to provide an account of the kind of doxastic practice we engage in when utilizing sense perception, and, according to Alston, mystical perception. A specific kind of doxastic practice is needed; in particular, those that Alston speaks of as “socially-established doxastic practices” which are standardly accepted, both socially and psychologically, to correspond with the norms of justified perceptual belief-formation.⁸⁷ Socially-established doxastic practices provide internal grounds for belief by incorporating an overrider system, which allows them to avoid the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, and we can judge it rational to consider them to be reliable. Furthermore, as the name implies, they are socially prolific in that they are deeply rooted in our lives, among other properties they possess.

Because a firmly established doxastic practice may be so psychologically or socially, my locution “socially-established doxastic practice” may be misleading. Suffice it to say that, when I use that term, I am referring to the kind of firmly-rooted doxastic practice that Alston has in mind, which distinguishes practices of that kind from idiosyncratic, unreliable ones that are not widely accepted and fail to conform with epistemic norms of justified belief.

87 Ibid., 100.

An important quality of socially-established doxastic practices is that they avoid the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, both internally and externally, due to the overrider system that each has. Consequently, if a socially-established doxastic practice suffers from an output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, the *prima facie* rationality can be effectively “knocked out”.⁸⁸

A large number of [pairs of contradictory beliefs], relative to the total output, would show that [a socially-established doxastic practice] is not sufficiently reliable to be a source of justification for the beliefs it generates and hence that it is not rational to engage in it, or would not be rational if we had a choice in the matter.⁸⁹

Alston distinguishes between two kinds of inconsistency: internal and external. Internal inconsistency involves the incompatibility among beliefs themselves, and external inconsistency involves the incompatibility of beliefs produced by different doxastic practices. Given that a socially-established doxastic practice must provide effective internal grounds for belief via an overrider system and that it be reliable, it avoids a massive output of inconsistent beliefs in both senses, even though it can yield some inconsistent beliefs provided that the output is not enough to override our judgment that it is reliable. Alston formulates the above discussion in a formulaic fashion:

[It] is *prima facie* rational to engage in [socially-established] doxastic practices. That *prima facie* acceptability can be overridden by such considerations as the internal and external inconsistency we have been discussing. To put it into a formula, *a firmly [socially-established] doxastic practice is rationally engaged in unless the total output of all our firmly [socially-established] doxastic practices sufficiently indicates its unreliability. In other terms, a firmly [socially-established] doxastic practice is rationally engaged in provided it and its output*

88 Ibid., 170.

89 Ibid.

*cohere sufficiently with other firmly [socially-established] doxastic practices and their output.*⁹⁰

In this way, Alston can speak of a socially-established doxastic practice as a way of “forming perceptual beliefs in the ways we generally, normally, standardly do, where this involves utilizing both experiences and a background system of beliefs as inputs to the ‘perceptual belief producing mechanism.’”⁹¹

Having presented his epistemic account of justification of perceptual beliefs, Alston takes on the task of arguing that one cannot rationally form justified beliefs about the reliability of sense perception in a non-circular way without appealing to the notion of socially-established doxastic practices.

The Reliability of Sense Perception

The logical progression of Alston's argument moves on to the issue of whether one is rationally justified in believing that perceptual experience is a reliable belief forming mechanism. Alston embarks on an extensive “case study”⁹² of arguments for the reliability of sense perception, but for the sake of brevity and relevance I will focus on a common form of argument that Alston addresses which emphasizes evidence for reliability obtained by utilizing sense perception itself. This form of argument falls within the boundaries of what Alston considers the traditional empiricist arguments for the reliability of sense perception. Alston's contention is that the traditional arguments are viciously circular; he considers Locke's famous discussion in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to be one possible representative of them:

90 Ibid., 175.

91 Ibid.

92 For an extensive discussion, see Ch. 3 “The Reliability of Sense Perception: A Case Study” of *Perceiving God*, 102.

But besides the assurance we have from our Senses themselves, that they do not err in the Information they give us, of the Existence of Things without us, when they are affected by Them, we are farther confirmed in this assurance, by concurrent Reasons.

First, 'Tis plain, those Perceptions are produced in us by exterior Causes affecting our Senses: Because those that want the Organs of any Sense, never can have the Ideas belonging to that Sense produced in their Minds...The Organs themselves, 'tis plain, do not produce them: for then the Eyes of a Man in the dark, would produce Colours, and his Nose smell Roses in the Winter: but we see no body gets the relish of a Pine-apple, till he goes to the Indies, where it is, and tastes it.⁹³

Alston takes Locke's circular reasoning exhibited in the above passage to be obvious.

How does Locke know that those without the use of their eyes never have visual ideas, except by relying on what he has learned through perception, including what other people say about their experience? Indeed, so sweeping a generalization could not be based solely on what he has observed, but requires crediting the testimony of others, which itself is known about only through perception.⁹⁴

The only way a subject can appeal to the reliability of sense perception in virtue of the Lockean argument presented or a similar traditional argument is to appeal to other instances of sense perceptual experience and their apparent regularity. Unfortunately, this appeal fails to produce a non-circular defense of the reliability of sense perception, since by appealing in this way we cite evidence for the reliability of sense perception that is obtained within the scope of the very kind of perception whose reliability is at stake. Evidence for the reliability of sense perception, provided it is gathered within the scope of it, runs the risk of having been obtained unreliably, thus giving rise to an interesting dilemma.

93 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 632. Referenced by Alston, *Perceiving God*, 124.

94 Alston, 124.

The lesson to take away from Alston's discourse regarding the reliability of sense perception is two-fold. First, many philosophers are wont to contrast beliefs obtained by mystical perception and sense perception unfavorably, concluding that mystical perception lacks the assurance of reliability to which sense perception is privy.⁹⁵ By conducting a case study of the reliability of sense perception, Alston concludes that this conclusion is not so obviously warranted. Secondly, Alston's case study reveals that another justificatory component is needed for one to rationally take sense perception to be reliable. Though showing that sense perception is reliable in a non-circular way has proven fruitless, we intuitively hold that it is so.

But surprisingly enough, as I argue in “Epistemic Circularity,” that does not prevent our using such arguments to show that sense perception is reliable or to justify that thesis. Nor, *pari passu*, does it prevent us from being justified in believing sense perception to be reliable by virtue of basing that belief on the premises of a simple track record argument.⁹⁶

The problem of epistemic circularity with respect to holding that our sense perception is reliable does not make us halt in our tracks. Alston provides an explanation of our intuitively holding that sense perception is reliable by appealing to the notion of doxastic practices and cashing out the notion of our sense perceptual belief-forming mechanism discussed in terms of such a practice.

Alston understands the sense perceptual doxastic practice, or SP, to be a socially-established one, such that it satisfies the conditions for being a way that we standardly form beliefs in according with acceptable epistemic norms. SP has an overrider system that evaluates the *prima facie* justification of our sense perceptual beliefs, and thus

95 Ibid., 102.

96 Ibid., 147.

avoids the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs, both in the internal and in the external sense. It also has many other characteristics indicative of socially-established doxastic practices, which I will discuss in more detail when I address mystical perception construed as a socially-established doxastic practice (i.e., MP) and compare it with SP. Furthermore, SP satisfies the condition required of socially-established doxastic practices that we can judge it rational to suppose that it is reliable. By discussing sense perception in terms of a socially-established doxastic practice, or SP, we are still unable to argue for its reliability in a non-circular way; however, Alston argues that we are able to maintain that SP is reliable *from within* by engaging in it.

The basic point is this. Given that we will inevitably run into epistemic circularity at some point(s) in any attempt to provide direct arguments for the reliability of one or another doxastic practice, we should draw the conclusion that there is no appeal beyond the practices we find firmly established, psychologically and socially.⁹⁷

In order to rationally hold that SP is reliable, Alston introduces a notion of justification different from his earlier account of epistemic justification. The new concept of justification introduced is that of practical justification, or practical rationality. If we recall the notion of epistemic justification, which “attaches to a belief if solid grounds for its truth were adduced, or to attach to a [belief-forming mechanism] if sufficient reasons were given for regarding it as reliable,”⁹⁸ practical justification turns out to be a weaker notion of justification, since it is apparently not so concerned with the truth of beliefs. Alston argues that the act of judging SP to be reliable (from within)

97 Ibid., 149.

98 Ibid., 168.

commits oneself to the rationality of judging SP to be reliable.⁹⁹ A commitment relation is at work here, which is the lynch pin of Alston's notion of practical justification.

When I say that in judging that p I am thereby *committing* myself to its being the case that q, what I mean is this. It would be irrational (incoherent...) for me to judge (assert, believe) that p and deny that q, or even to abstain from judging that q, *if the question arises*. The judgment that p puts me in such a position that either of those reactions would be irrational. There is no way in which I can both judge that p and take a doxastic attitude toward q other than acceptance.¹⁰⁰

The commitment relation that Alston utilizes is one integral to the notion of practical rationality. If I engage in a socially-established doxastic practice like SP and suppose it to be reliable, then Alston contends it would be *irrational* for me to adopt any other doxastic attitude towards it other than judging it to be rational for me to suppose it is reliable. Hence, Alston has “not shown SP to be reliable, but shown it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable.”¹⁰¹

Though we can judge that it is rational to suppose SP and other socially-established doxastic practices to be reliable by utilizing a notion of practical rationality, Alston's original notion of epistemic justification still applies. Practical rationality attaches to the higher-level claim that SP is reliable, but it does not apply to particular sense perceptual beliefs that are its output; rather, the robust account of epistemic justification that Alston presented earlier applies to those. Hence, to confuse the two kinds of justification and what they apply to is, according to Alston, a “level confusion”.¹⁰²

99 Ibid., 178.

100 Ibid., 179.

101 Ibid., 178.

102 Ibid., 182.

What follows is Alston's primary thesis, that, like the socially-established doxastic practice of forming justified beliefs about sense perception, one can be practically justified in supposing that the socially-established doxastic practice of forming justified beliefs on the basis mystical perception is reliable.

The Reliability of Mystical Perception and Christian Mystical Perception

Since “for any standard doxastic practice it is rational to suppose that it is reliable, and hence rational to suppose that its doxastic outputs are prima facie justified,” Alston concludes that one can be practically rational in forming justified beliefs about the reliability of mystical perception, and it is in this respect that SP is analogous to mystical perception, or MP. Like SP, MP has an overrider system that evaluates the status of prima facie justified beliefs produced by it, although the effectiveness of the overrider system is questionable until MP as a broad practice is individuated into different MP practices according to different religious traditions; that is, different experiential (perceptual) inputs, which Alston uses as a criterion for individuating doxastic practices in general. According to Alston, the socially-established doxastic practice of mystical perception, or MP, “displays certain [features] that...are characteristic of [socially-established] doxastic practices.”¹⁰³ MP is similar to SP as a doxastic practice by sharing with it the general characteristics of acceptable, socially-established doxastic practices:

1. Like SP, MP is engaged in before a given subject is aware that she is actually engaging in it.

103 Ibid., 187.

2. MP has available to it procedures to evaluate its “output beliefs” like SP. These procedures involve an “overrider system” such that either “there are sufficient reasons to think the belief false (a rebutter)”¹⁰⁴ or there are “sufficient reasons to think that...the ground of the belief does not wield its usual justificatory force (an underminer).”¹⁰⁵
3. MP involves a “belief-forming practice [that] is set in the context of wider spheres of practice that involve interacting with the perceived objects—forming relationships, developing attitudes and feelings toward them, and so on.”¹⁰⁶
4. MP is characteristic of social transmission from one person to another and is monitored and shared as such.
5. MP requires the utilization of other socially-established doxastic practices, like SP (such as in the case of engaging in religious ceremonies and rituals, and reading sacred texts).
6. MP is subject to change.
7. Lastly, MP “has its distinctive set of presuppositions, particularly the existence of God and the reliability of this way of forming beliefs.”¹⁰⁷

These resemblances of both SP and MP ultimately lead Alston to conclude that, since we are practically rational in supposing that SP is reliable, we are also practically rational in supposing that MP is reliable. However, SP does not have as its output massively-

104 Ibid., 79.

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., 179.

107 Ibid.

inconsistent beliefs, both in the internal and the external sense. If there is an analogy between SP and MP, MP needs to have these properties as well.

MP has an overrider system, but different, individuated MP practices are necessary to avoid the massively-inconsistent output of beliefs that would result if we considered MP as a single practice, spanning over all religious traditions in which their participants engage in MP. For example, massively-inconsistent beliefs would result from identifying each theistic religious tradition as a single MP practice, since the background beliefs and presuppositions of each tradition can fundamentally vary from one to another. In order to resolve this problem, Alston individuates different MP practices, and emphasizes the Christian mystical perceptual practice (or CMP). Taking each MP individually, such as CMP, Alston is able to alleviate the worry that MP taken as a broad practice encompassing many different religious traditions has as its output massively-inconsistent beliefs. Each individuated MP, such as CMP, has its own overrider system, and because of this each avoids the output of many inconsistent beliefs, the presence of which would disqualify MP as a socially-established doxastic practice. It is worthy to note that, just as a socially-established doxastic practice need not be *infallibly* reliable, it need not be completely free of inconsistent beliefs. For, after all, even our most deeply-rooted socially-established doxastic practices like SP suffer from the output of inconsistent beliefs from time to time, but not beyond a reasonable threshold that would deem it unreliable. Hence, Alston concludes that, like SP, individuated MP practices (with emphasis on CMP) satisfy the conditions for being

socially-established doxastic practices, and as such enjoy a similar output of justified beliefs that SP does in virtue of possessing the same epistemic machinery.

Conclusion

I have presented the Alstonian analogy argument from religious experience, which is true as possible to the actual progression of his argument in *Perceiving God*. I first presented his theory of epistemic justification, and progressed to his argument that sense perception cannot be shown to be unreliable in a non-circular way, which undermines the prejudices of many that sense perception has a stronger claim to reliability than mystical perception. Although we are unable to show sense perception to be reliable in a non-circular way, we are able to show that it is practically rational to suppose SP to be reliable by construing sense perception as a socially-established doxastic practice. Alston then argues that, like SP, MP enjoys the status of being a socially-established doxastic practice, and as such possesses the necessary components to produce prima facie justified perceptual beliefs and a procedure by which to evaluate them. Lastly, Alston mitigates the worry of MP having an output of massively-inconsistent beliefs by individuating different MP practices, focusing on CMP in particular. In my next chapter, I will recall Martin's objection, provide Alston's answer, and conclude that the Alstonian argument still suffers from the worry that CMP has an inadequate overrider system to prevent the production of massively-inconsistent beliefs.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: A PROBLEM FOR THE ALSTONIAN ANALOGY

ARGUMENT

Overview

In the last chapter, I carefully presented the Alstonian analogy argument from religious experience and how Alston concludes that SP and MP (with emphasis on CMP) both satisfy the conditions for being socially-established doxastic practices. As such, we can often form justified beliefs by engaging in both kinds of perception. In other words,

[It] is *prima facie* rational to engage in [socially-established] doxastic practices. That *prima facie* acceptability can be overridden by such considerations as the internal and external inconsistency we have been discussing. To put it into a formula, *a firmly [socially-established] doxastic practice is rationally engaged in unless the total output of all our firmly [socially-established] doxastic practices sufficiently indicates its unreliability. In other terms, a firmly [socially-established] doxastic practice is rationally engaged in provided it and its output cohere sufficiently with other firmly [socially-established] doxastic practices and their output.*¹⁰⁸

It is by construing both sense perception and mystical perception as socially-established doxastic practices that Alston draws a direct analogy between the two. The analogy is further strengthened by the fact that no appeal *beyond* either kind of perception is possible to establish that they are reliable, a fact which serves as the fundamental stratum of Alston's "doxastic practice" approach.¹⁰⁹ In addition, socially-established doxastic practices provide adequate internal grounds for justified perceptual belief, are reliable, and exhibit a large degree of internal and external consistency with respect to their

108 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 175.

109 *Ibid.*, 177.

output of beliefs and the output of beliefs by other practices, such as introspection, memory, and rational intuition to name only a few.¹¹⁰

In this chapter, I will return to Martin's main objection to the Alstonian analogy argument from religious experience that the lack of a society of testing and checkup procedures prevents beliefs based on MP from being experientially justified, which amounts to an allegation of MP's incapacity to confer prima facie justification on such beliefs. Next, I will address a similar objection to Martin's by William Rowe, and present Alston's response that his version of the analogy argument I presented in the last chapter does provide for a society of testing and checkup procedures for MP, and in particular CMP.

Afterwards, I will present my own criticism of the Alstonian argument. I will first provide an example of a phantom limb case, and analyze it in terms of how subjects lacking evidence to explain the case would form (and historically have formed) what initially appears to be an apparently inconsistent sense perceptual belief about the phenomenon while engaging in SP. Though it seems that SP's overrider system would defeat the prima facie justification of beliefs regarding phantom limbs, I conclude that it is plausible to understand the willingness by subjects to accept the phenomenon as true despite lacking the scientific resources to explain it due to the fact that sense perceptual beliefs about the existence of phantom limbs were merely peripheral; that is, the apparent inconsistency between the phantom limb sense perceptual beliefs and the set of beliefs of a given subject that comprise the overrider system of SP was not significant to

110 Ibid., 176.

the point of rendering the entire set of beliefs massively-inconsistent. However, the core beliefs of SP remained internally consistent, which are beliefs central to the overrider system and on which many beliefs in the set depend in virtue of some justificatory inferential relation—because of a large number of beliefs in the overrider system depend on the core beliefs, an inconsistency between them would compromise the internal consistency of SP's overrider system, thus rendering SP unreliable. One crucial example of a central core belief in the overrider system of SP is the belief we have about the regularity of our sense perceptual experience. Since this core belief is a constituent of the overrider system of SP, subjects who lacked the scientific resources to explain the existence of phantom limbs plausibly accepted the phenomenon as true because the very nature of SP suggests that we can expect a regularity of eventual, new sense perceptual evidence to explain away apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs.

However, with regard to CMP, I will argue that some of its core beliefs appear to be inconsistent with each other. Despite this internal inconsistency of some of the core beliefs of CMP, subjects intuitively have a willingness to maintain them. In contrast, subjects intuitively find the idea of having internally inconsistent core beliefs in SP's overrider system unacceptable because of our belief regarding the regularity of SP that we form within the practice itself. Thus, with respect to CMP, we are intuitively willing to maintain internally inconsistent *core* beliefs, while in SP we are intuitively willing to accept only internally inconsistent *peripheral* beliefs.

In addition, God has not revealed to us any dependable regularities of divine nature or how to predict it; hence, subjects who engage in CMP have a willingness to

accept apparently inconsistent core beliefs while lacking a belief about the kinds of situations and under what circumstances we can hope to have mystical perceptual experiences. As a result, there is nothing preventing CMP from producing apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs whose inconsistency is resolved only with the acquisition of new perceptual evidence. Since there is no reasonable way for us to expect new mystical perceptual evidence, it seems that these apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs of CMP go unresolved, while in SP the same kind of apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs *can* be resolved. I conclude that the overrider system of CMP appears to be insufficient to prevent the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs. The result is that there is an apparent disanalogy between sense perception and mystical perception that must be addressed in order for the Alstonian analogy argument from religious experience to be successful.

Martin's Objection Revisited

Having addressed the Alstonian analogy argument at length, we may now return to Martin's main objection. Martin objects that, because there is no society of testing and checkup procedures available to CMP, any output beliefs produced by it are incapable of being experientially justified. Take, for example, the famous example Martin uses of a blue book on a table. I can form the sense perceptual belief that I see a blue book on the table, but my belief is justified largely due to the fact that I can check my seeing a blue book on the table with other sensory modalities, I can ask other people what they perceive on the table, I can refer to my memory about past experiences I have had that make salient the circumstances under which blue books appear on tables and the

likelihood that a blue book is in fact appearing on the particular table in front of me, and so on. These procedures lend support to the strength of my experientially justified belief that a blue book is in fact on the table in front of me.

On the other hand, suppose that I have a putative direct perception of God. Martin maintains that I cannot check my mystical perceptual experience against other perceptual modalities, and I cannot ask other people around me what they perceive to cross-check my own perception. In being as charitable to Martin as possible, I think that he would concede to the fact that I can recall memories of my previous mystical perceptions of God against which to check my current experiences, if I in fact have had any, but the absence of any regularity concerning when such perceptions occur gives me no indication of the circumstances in which God is *likely* to appear to me. Without a society of testing and checkup procedures, it seems that my mystical perceptual beliefs are incapable of experiential justification, and any claims about them are demoted to low-order assertions about my own psychological states. At this point, it looks as if the scoreboard is counting in favor of Martin's objection.

However, having presented his own version of the analogy argument and an account of epistemic justification for perceptual beliefs, Alston is equipped with an answer to Martin's objection. Before addressing Martin's objection, however, Alston cites a similar objection against analogy arguments from religious experience by William Rowe.

We find this version [of Martin's "epistemic" objection to analogy arguments from religious experience, and by extension the Alstonian version] in Rowe (1982), where he alleges that the absence of effective checking procedures prevents the application of Swinburne's "principle of credulity" to mystical

experience, where the principle of credulity is roughly equivalent to our claim that established experiential doxastic practices confer prima facie justification on their outputs.¹¹¹

Alston accounts for Rowe's argument accordingly:

... there is an important difference between (1) knowing how to proceed to find positive reasons, if there should be any, for rejecting an experience as probably delusive, and (2) not knowing how to proceed to find such positive reasons if there should be any. When we are in situation (1), as we clearly are in the case of those who habitually drink alcohol to excess and report experiences which they take to be of rats and snakes, the application of the principle of credulity is clearly in order. But when we are in situation (2) as we seem to be in the case of religious experience, I am doubtful that the application of the principle of credulity is warranted. Since we don't know what circumstances make for delusory religious experiences ... we can't really go about the process of determining whether there are or are not positive reasons for thinking religious experiences to be probably delusive.¹¹²

Rowe's objection is similar to Martin's in that, essentially, socially-established doxastic practices are unable to confer prima facie justification on perceptual beliefs so long as there is no checks and tests to determine whether a given religious experience is delusory or not. On the other hand, Rowe contends that, in the case of someone who drinks himself to a stupor and reports perceptual experiences of rats and snakes, we have other standard, non-delusory experiences by which to measure his delusory experience. Accordingly, by citing the standard experiences as evidence, we can note that in situations where people drink to excess, it is possible for them to have hallucinations—which effectively undermine the prima facie justification of the perceptual beliefs about rats and snakes which our imbiber of alcohol forms. Adopting Martin's terminology,

111 Ibid., 210.

112 William Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982): 90-91. Referenced by Alston, *Perceiving God*, 210.

without the existence of a society of testing and checkup procedures, claims about our mystical perceptual experiences remain low-order assertions.

Despite Martin's and Rowe's objections, Alston contends that his account of CMP does have an effective society of testing and checkup procedures available to it.

For, as Alston states,

I have taken Martin's reference to “a society of tests and checkup procedures” to be equivalent to my “overrider system”. And yet tests can have a positive as well as a negative outcome; they do not always override. Actually I have been thinking of my “overrider systems” in this way all along, though the term fails to indicate that. ... [Whether] I speak of “checks and tests” or “overrider systems”, I should be taken as thinking of procedures and criteria for testing beliefs for correctness and putative justifications for efficacy, where these tests may have either a positive or negative outcome.¹¹³

For Alston, the overrider systems that he specifies of socially-established doxastic practices perform all of the functions a society of testing and checkup procedures could hope to perform; in fact, he takes the two terms to be coextensive. For example, when I form a belief on the basis of CMP, I can check and test it with respect to the set of beliefs that comprise its overrider system. Suppose that, while engaging in CMP, God tells me that I should be as disinterested in the welfare of those around me as possible. This new CMP belief that I form, upon being subjected to the overrider system of CMP, reveals that given my other beliefs about God's nature which I previously formed in CMP, it seems highly unlikely that God would ever command me to do such a thing. Furthermore, I can check this new CMP belief against the beliefs of others; my awareness of beliefs of other people regarding God's nature occupies a part of the overrider system as well. Hence, the new CMP belief is effectively rebutted.

113 Ibid., 209.

Alston concedes to the fact that these tests are somewhat different than those that we use for SP; for example, CMP experiences are not publicly accessible like SP experiences. But, Alston does not take this to be a problem. CMP has an overrider system, and its output should not be held accountable to the overrider system of another socially-established doxastic practice, which differs based on the kind of input received. Regarding Martin's demand that the output of CMP have the capacity to be subjected to criteria of public verifiability and “interpersonal confirmation”¹¹⁴, Alston states that

The argument rests on an unjustified, and unjustifiable, assumption: that reports of perception of God are properly treated in the same way as reports of perception of the physical environment, so that if the former cannot be validated in the same way as the latter they have no epistemic standing as objective claims. But there is no reason to suppose it *appropriate* to require the same checks and tests for them as for sense-perceptual reports, and every (or at least sufficient) reason to suppose it inappropriate. Here we have what is perhaps our most glaring example of epistemic *imperialism*, unwarrantedly subjecting the outputs of one doxastic practice to the requirements of another.¹¹⁵

The requirement that the output of CMP beliefs be subjected to the overrider system of SP commits the fallacy that Alston calls “epistemic imperialism”. It is inappropriate and in fact *unreasonable* to impose such a requirement. Hence, Alston concludes that CMP has a fully functional society of testing and checkup procedures available to it in the form of an overrider system, and it does not matter how the overrider system in question differs from that of SP.

Core Beliefs and Peripheral Beliefs

My own objection to the Alstonian analogy argument takes a different course than Martin's and Rowe's. First, however, it is useful to define the notions of “core” and

114 Ibid., 216.

115 Ibid.

“peripheral” beliefs of a given socially-established doxastic practice's overrider system. Core beliefs are those that are central to the overrider system and which bear a justificatory inferential relation with many of the other beliefs that comprise the overrider system. These beliefs are so central to an overrider system that, if they are not *internally consistent*, other beliefs that bear justificatory inferential relations to them also lack consistency. In SP, a prime example of a core belief to which many of our SP beliefs bear a justificatory inferential relation is the belief we have about the regularity exhibited by our sense perceptual beliefs concerning the external world. As Alston notes,

We have learned from SP that there are dependable regularities in the behavior of physical objects, including their interaction with the human perceptual apparatus, and we have learned what some of these regularities are. To take some modest examples, we have learned that plants mostly just stay where they are, open to the observation of anyone who is in the right place in the right conditions, whereas animals move around a lot and you can't depend on one staying at the same place over a long period of time. We have gained a lot of empirical knowledge of the dependence of visual perception on lighting, distance of the object from the observer, angle of observation, and other factors. It is because we are cognizant of regularities like this that we are in a position to spell out the conditions under which an observer will perceive a reported object if it really is there.¹¹⁶

The belief that we have formed on the basis of SP that our sense perceptual experience enjoys a high degree of regularity has allowed us to form other core, general beliefs about regularities exhibited by particular kinds of things in the external world. The justification of our particular SP beliefs about plants, animals, lighting, and so forth is possible only because our belief about the regularity of our sense perceptual experience in part comprises the overrider system of SP. Moreover, this belief is one of the core

116 Ibid., 218.

beliefs of SP's overrider system because it bears a justificatory inferential relation with many of the other beliefs that comprise the system. These beliefs first enjoy prima facie justification and then unqualified justification partially because our core belief about the regularity of sense perceptual experience does not rebut or undermine them; without the internal consistency of this belief with other core beliefs, we run the risk of having our other core SP beliefs about the typical behavior of plants, animals, and lighting be inconsistent with each other. The result would be that SP, since in this case its overrider system would lack internal consistency, is an unreliable socially-established doxastic practice.

Contrast the idea of core belief with that of peripheral belief. Like core beliefs, peripheral beliefs in part comprise the overrider system of a socially-established doxastic practice. However, peripheral beliefs do not bear a justificatory inferential relation with enough of the other beliefs of that overrider system such that their inconsistency would threaten the internal consistency of the entire system. An example of a peripheral belief incorporated in the overrider system of a socially-established doxastic practice is a sense perceptual belief about a particular object in SP's overrider system. For example, suppose I form an SP belief about the normal conditions under which I see an oak tree in my front yard. Having formed this belief, suppose that I later form another SP belief about the kinds of trees that are planted in my neighborhood, none of which are oaks. The inconsistency of my original SP belief with the new one I form does not render SP's overrider system internally inconsistent, since there are so few beliefs of SP's overrider system that bear a justificatory inferential relation with the belief I have about the oak in

my front yard. Accordingly, it is reasonable to allow for some internally inconsistent peripheral beliefs in the overrider system of a socially-established doxastic practice without undermining that practice's reliability, given that they are formed within SP and that a socially-established doxastic practice cannot be expected to resolve all inconsistencies among its output of beliefs.¹¹⁷ According to Alston, such a requirement would be "puritanic", a term that describes nicely the unnecessarily high epistemic standards involved with such a requirement.

The Main Objection

Alston's intention is to show that there is an analogy between SP and CMP in the right ways such that CMP can confer *prima facie* justification on its output beliefs and subject them to its overrider system so long as SP is capable of the same process. If there is any hint of a fundamental disparity between both practices, the analogy breaks down. I will demonstrate what seems to be such a disparity by first analyzing an example of how SP operates with respect to forming an apparently inconsistent belief and evaluating it by utilizing its overrider system. Next, I will turn to CMP and argue that it cannot evaluate its apparently inconsistent output beliefs in the same way. The example I turn to involves a phantom limb case and the apparently inconsistent beliefs that subjects form about it when engaging in SP.

Suppose Smith complains that he feels an itch on the tip of his right elbow. Jones is present alongside Smith and acknowledges his complaint, knowing that Smith is very sincere. Accordingly, Jones forms the SP belief that Smith has an itchy elbow.

117 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 237.

However, when Jones observes Smith's right elbow, he notices that Smith lacks a right arm. Jones can form one of two possible SP beliefs about Smith's insisting that he has an itch on his right elbow: either Smith does not have an itch on his right elbow, or there is a real phenomenon in which subjects feel sensations on nonexistent limbs. In evaluating this case, if Jones knew nothing about phantom limbs, it initially appears that he would form an apparently inconsistent belief about Smith's feeling an itch on the tip of his nonexistent right elbow. All sensory perceptual evidence with respect to Jones' observation of Smith's missing right arm to which he has access tells against Smith having an itch. If we put this example in the context of Jones' forming a belief while engaging in SP, it at first seems that the prima facie justification of Jones' belief that Smith feels an itch on the tip of his elbow is defeated by obvious overrider beliefs, namely that past sense perceptual experience has revealed to us that sensations are typically felt on existent limbs and Smith cannot possibly feel an itch on his nonexistent elbow.

Despite what our intuitions about phantom limb cases would be if we lacked the information we have now to offer an explanation for the phenomenon, subjects throughout history have witnessed cases of it and yet formed SP beliefs about the reality of phantom limbs. Given the presence of the aforementioned SP overrider beliefs, this past acceptance of the phantom limb phenomenon is both fascinating and surprising. One can hastily conclude that subjects throughout history irrationally accepted the existence of phantom limbs before a scientific explanation of the phenomenon was

available, but in the spirit of being as charitable as possible, it seems that there is a more plausible, deeper explanation.

The explanation I have in mind is that subjects throughout history were willing to accept the existence of phantom limbs because the beliefs they formed about the phenomenon, though apparently inconsistent, were merely peripheral beliefs.

The number of SP beliefs in its overrider system that bore a justificatory relation with the belief that phantom limbs exist was not sufficient to render SP's overrider system internally inconsistent, and thus was incapable of establishing SP to be unreliable.

Furthermore, subjects were able and willing to hold the apparently inconsistent peripheral SP belief that phantom limbs exist without submitting to irrationality because inconsistent SP beliefs are the *kind of beliefs whose inconsistency we can expect to resolve by acquiring new sense perceptual evidence*. We can reasonably expect to acquire new sense perceptual evidence due to the fact that sense perceptual experience exhibits a high degree of regularity and because the core beliefs of SP's overrider system are internally consistent in virtue of bearing a justificatory inferential relation to the core belief about sense perceptual regularity. This core belief regarding sense perceptual regularity undermined the force of otherwise obvious overrider beliefs that sensations are typically felt on existent limbs and subjects who experience phantom limb sensations lack actual limbs in which they feel them. The conclusion to take away from this example is that SP checks the prima facie justification of certain output peripheral beliefs by utilizing an internally consistent overrider system that incorporates the core belief that sense perceptual experience occurs with a strong degree of regularity.

Because SP checks certain output beliefs in this way, we can expect to resolve apparent inconsistencies between certain peripheral beliefs by acquiring new sense perceptual evidence.

After considering how SP functions in this way with respect to the phantom limb case I presented, we can now turn to CMP. My worry concerning CMP is twofold; that it has apparently inconsistent *core* beliefs in its overrider system, and that, given this internal inconsistency, we are unable to resolve certain apparent inconsistencies among peripheral beliefs because we do not have any core beliefs about the regularity of mystical perceptual experience. Accordingly, we cannot expect to resolve the inconsistencies among certain peripheral beliefs for the reason that we cannot expect new mystical perceptual evidence with any degree of regularity. For example, two core beliefs of CMP are that Jesus Christ is both perfectly human and perfectly divine. These beliefs, although one need not consider them hopelessly inconsistent, are still in the very least both *apparently inconsistent* and have the status of *core* beliefs in CMP's overrider system. If this apparent inconsistency amounts to genuine internal inconsistency among core beliefs, it is sufficient for rendering CMP's overrider system internally inconsistent *as a whole*, since so many other beliefs in CMP's overrider system bear a justificatory inferential relation with these core beliefs concerning both the humanity and divinity of Christ. In spite of this, subjects who engage in CMP are *willing* to accept this internal inconsistency. If we contrast this willingness of subjects engaging in CMP to accept internally inconsistent core beliefs with the attitude of subjects engaging in SP, we find that subjects engaging in the latter practice intuitively consider it unacceptable likewise

to have a willingness to accept internally inconsistent core beliefs in its overrider system. For, as I previously addressed, the overrider system of SP is internally consistent because of our core belief that sense perceptual experience exhibits a high degree of regularity.

Moreover, subjects engaging in CMP have no core belief that is comparable to that of SP regarding the high degree of regularity. Alston affirms this statement when he states,

God has not revealed to us, nor have we discovered by mystical perception or natural theology, any dependable regularities in divine behavior, particularly regularities in God's interactions with human perceivers. The Christian scheme does include certain basic points about the character and purposes of God, and about patterns in His behavior toward us in the course of history. God can be depended on to work for our salvation from sin, to keep His promises, and to see to it that the church continues to proclaim His message to mankind. ... But all this is far from yielding usable recipes for what God will do under certain circumstances.¹¹⁸

Alston does not consider this lack of regularity in mystical perceptual experiences to be problematic, since we should not require the output beliefs of one socially-established doxastic practice to pass the overrider system of another and since we should not expect God to reveal any regularities about his nature.¹¹⁹ Though I think Alston's reasoning carries much intuitive weight, the fact of the matter is that CMP lacks a core belief about the regularity of Christian mystical perceptual experience. Given this fact along with the fact that CMP appears to have an internally inconsistent overrider system, there is nothing preventing it from outputting apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs while being incapable of sorting out those inconsistencies. As we have seen in SP, there are

118 Ibid., 218.

119 Ibid., 219.

certain apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs that are sorted out because we can expect to acquire new sensory perceptual evidence that will oftentimes sort out those inconsistencies. On the other hand, we have no such guarantee when engaging in CMP that we will acquire new mystical perceptual evidence that would resolve the apparent inconsistency among certain peripheral beliefs. Worse yet for Alston, there is nothing preventing CMP from producing the same kind of apparently inconsistent peripheral beliefs that SP produces, though SP has the resources to resolve the inconsistencies among them. In conclusion, it seems that CMP, when compared to SP, is equipped with an overrider system that is insufficient for preventing the output of massively-inconsistent beliefs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an objection to Alston's claim that there is an analogy between SP and CMP such that they are both able to confer prima facie justification on their output beliefs in similar ways. The disparity I cited with respect to the internal consistency of overrider systems and the core belief about the regularity of sense perceptual experience is sufficient to dissolve the analogy that Alston wants to establish. The differences between both socially-established doxastic practices I address in this chapter serve as compelling reasons to think that SP and CMP do not confer prima facie justification on their output beliefs in the right ways that ensure there is an analogy between the two that Alston wishes to establish. If Alston is to salvage his argument, he must address the disparity that I have cited in order to maintain the plausibility of his version of the analogy argument.

My ultimate conclusion regarding the Alstonian argument is as follows. What I have tried to accomplish throughout my thesis is that although formulating analogy arguments from religious experience is not a hopeless enterprise, the making of a strong argument to this effect requires overcoming more conceptual obstacles than what was possibly first expected. Disparities between both kinds of perceptual experience are difficult to resolve, and much work is required in order for the prospects of developing a successful version of the analogy argument to be bright. As well-crafted and elegantly proposed as Alston's version of the argument is in *Perceiving God*, it is impossible for him to turn a blind eye to the implications of the disparity between SP and CMP that I have focused on extensively. Despite the problems facing Alston's argument and other versions of the analogy argument from religious experience, turning to religious experience arguments of some form seems to be a watershed for theists who study both epistemology and philosophy of religion. For, without appealing to some kind of experience of God to justify our beliefs about Him, what else do we have on which to go?

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