ON PERCEIVING GOD

In recent decades analytic philosophers of religion have advanced two approaches for justifying belief in God on the basis of the alleged perceptual nature of experiences of God. One approach, advanced by Richard Swinburne, Gary Gutting, myself, and others, depends on what I will call “The Argument from Perception,” or: AFP. The second approach, the “Doxastic Practice Approach,” or: DPA, of William Alston, trades on the alleged similarity between the epistemic practice of forming beliefs about God from alleged perceptions of God and other epistemic practices, especially of forming beliefs on the basis of sense perception. In what follows I wish to raise doubts about each of these approaches. My conclusion will be that both approaches are of doubtful validity in their present form.

I

The “Argument from Perception” begins by arguing that alleged experiences of God deserve to be called perceptual, like sense perception. Here’s why:

1. Alleged experiences of God have a subject-object structure, with a phenomenal content - “God-data” or “God-qualia” - presenting God to the subject.

2. Subjects who have alleged God-experiences are inclined to make truth claims in conjunction with and based on such experiences.

3. Experts, called mystics, claim that there are procedures, lengthy and arduous perhaps, for getting into a position to experience God.
The Argument from Perception then argues that just as other perceptual experiences count in favor of their own validity, so perceptions of God should count in favor of their validity. Richard Swinburne gave a classic form of this claim when he advanced his “Principle of Credulity”:

(PC) It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present."¹

In the "epistemic" sense of "seems," "It seems to S that O is present," means that S is inclined to believe O is present on the basis of his present experience.² “Special considerations,” refers to reasons to think or suspect that x had not been present to the subject, reasons that defeat a presumption, according to PC, that x was present, or reasons to think that the subject's experience, on the present occasion, is impugned by other evidence.

Swinburne argues for PC as follows against philosophers who would restrict PC to sense experience of physical objects:

Such writers do not seem to me to be aware of the skeptical bog in which failure to accept the Principle of Credulity for other experiences will land them. If it is all right to use it for other experiences, they need a good argument to show that it is not all right to use it for religious

² Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 245.
Swinburne's argument for PC can be presented as follows:

1. Skepticism regarding experiences apparently of physical objects is false. (Common Agreement)

2. Skepticism regarding experiences apparently of physical objects is false only if PC is true. (Swinburne's claim)

3. Hence, PC is true.

4. If PC is true for one type of seeming-experience, E1, then it is true for other types of seeming-experiences, unless regarding PC there is a significant difference between E1 and the other types of seeming-experiences.

5. Regarding PC, there is no relevant significant difference between the perceptual nature of apparent experiences of physical objects and apparent experiences of God.

6. Therefore, PC is true for apparent experiences of God.

The Argument From Perception concludes that (at least some) experiences of God justify belief in God.

Elsewhere I have raised objections to premise 2 and attempted to reformulate it. Here I want to concentrate on a serious objection to step 5 in the argument, which declares that there is no important difference between the perceptual nature of sense perception and apparent experiences of God. This claim

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echoes the attempt of the first part of the Argument from Perception to draw a close analogy between perception of physical objects and perception of God. There have been two major objections to the perceptual nature of alleged experiences of God, to which I now turn.

Richard Gale has argued that for a person to be said to have a perception of an object O, and not just be having an “O-ish-impression,” which could be illusionary, it must be possible, at least in principle, for there to be evidence that O was the common object of different perceptions. This condition, however, is possible only when it is possible in principle to distinguish perceptions of O from possible perceptions of other objects that might be perceptually similar to O, or to distinguish perceptions of O from mere illusions. In turn, this latter requirement is possible only if O exists in both space and time. Space-time coordinates, and only they, make it possible to distinguish O from objects of similar appearance existing in other space-time coordinates and to filter out illusions. Physical objects, but not God, pass this requirement. Therefore, there could never be a way to distinguish between a mere “God-ish sensation” and a true perception of God. So, there could never be a reason for thinking a person had a perception of God. The Argument from Perception crashes to the ground.

Evan Fales provides a second, related, argument against the perceptual nature of alleged experiences of God. Fales says that for an experience to count as a perception it must be possible, at least in principle, to (a) check the perceptual

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claim by employing inductive methods to determine causally relevant conditions antecedent to the experience; (b) “triangulate” the alleged perceptual event by correlating it with other effects of the same purported cause; and (c) discover causal mechanisms connecting the purported cause of the perception to its perceptual effects. Fales claims that such “crosscheckability” is necessary to any perceptual claim. However, none of these checks are possible for apparent experiences of God. Therefore, experiences of God are not perceptual.

These critiques of the Argument from Perception can be turned back by reformulating it as an “Argument from Seemings,” rather than as an argument from perception. I do this by expanding the analogical base to include all epistemic seemings, including any seeming that an object is present, that an event is occurring, or that a state of affairs obtains. This includes not only apparent perceptions of physical objects, but also memory seemings, seemings as to the logical status of propositions, seemings of the truth of mathematical propositions, seemings as to my mental goings on, and more.

Given this expansion of PC, let’s pretend we have formulated an individual, local PC principle for each of the above and for each of the appropriate "more." Let’s call this “the PC set,” and let’s call the collection of types of seemings mentioned in the PC set, “the seemings set.” Let’s also formulate a PC principle for God-seemings as follows:

\[(G\text{-PC}) \text{ It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that God is present, then probably God is present.}\]
Then let’s run an analogical argument as follows:

1. According to the members of the PC set, the instances of their corresponding members of the seemings set raise for their subjects the probability of their propositional objects.

2. A person S who has an experience that is an instance of a member of the seemings set is such that the propositional object of that experience seems epistemically to S to be true.

3. A person S who has an apparent experience of God is such that it seems epistemically to S that the proposition "God is present" is true.

4. Therefore, the situation of a person having an apparent experience of God is relevantly similar to that of a person who has an apparent experience that is an instance of a member of the seemings set. (From 2 and 3)

5. Therefore, it is warranted to conclude, by G-PC, that an apparent experience of the presence of God raises for S the probability that God is present. (From 1 and 4)

6. Therefore, experiences apparently of God's presence provide evidence that God is present.
The Gale and Fales objections fail against this analogical argument. Many memory-seemings, as well as seemings as to the logical status of propositions, seemings of the truth of mathematical propositions, and my mental goings on do not meet the Gale-Fales conditions. So, the analogy holds between other seemings and God-seemings.

Alas, this, as well as any similar analogical argument is of doubtful force. To see this, consider that our epistemic habits were not formed in reply to skeptical worries, and our commitment to these habits is independent of any philosophical worries about skepticism. These epistemic habits have a rock bottom character to them similar to preferences in taste and smell, and the like. With regard to the latter, there is no force to analogical arguments designed to make it *irrational* for you not to like something because you like so many other things similar to it. Similarly, our epistemic habits are the starting place for epistemic evaluation. They cannot be validated by analogical arguments.

To convince you of this, suppose some people had the epistemic habit of forming physical object beliefs from experience just as the rest of us do, save for color beliefs about objects. They made judgments about the shape, place, size, and texture of objects. But they formed no beliefs about color (even though they see colors). And suppose the rest of us tried to convince those others that they rationally *should* form beliefs about colors of objects as well. I can imagine a pragmatic argument for this, pointing out the practical disadvantages of refraining from color beliefs, how much better their lives would be if they did form such beliefs, and the like. However, it would not be a good argument to say that by analogy with their habit of forming other physical object beliefs these people were *obligated* to do so for color beliefs as well. There is no such epistemic obligation.
If you think that I am wrong and that such people do have an epistemic obligation to make color judgments, then I invite you to consider the following imaginary scenario. We Westerners suddenly discover an entire civilization that has an epistemic practice in which they make types of perceptual judgments we never make. They find great uses for the relevant vocabulary. Now, suppose we find this epistemic practice to be utterly non-compelling. Although we might become convinced somehow that it has practical advantages, surely we do not have an epistemic obligation to adopt such a practice simply because others employ it and it is analogous to other practices in which we do engage. The same holds for folks who would not make color judgments at all.

Return now to the habit we all have of forming beliefs from seemings in the above seeming set, and consider a person who shares this habit but refuses to recognize the validity of G-PC. While not a matter of mere taste and smell, such a person’s situation is comparable to situations we face with the ultimacy of likes and dislikes. It is quite therefore doubtful that arguments by analogy can generate epistemic obligations to follow practices. This undermines any argument from analogy for G-WPC.

II

My talk of habits and practices brings us to the second perceptual approach to experiences of God, the Doxastic Practice Approach of William Alston. Alston defined a “doxastic practice” as consisting of socially established ways of forming and epistemically evaluating beliefs (the “output”) from various cognitive inputs together
with an overrider system.\textsuperscript{6} Alston defines an “overrider system,” as what, “determines how we go from prima facie to unqualified justification; as such it has a crucial bearing on what outputs are ultimately approved.” p. 189. An example of a doxastic practice is the "sense perception" practice, or “SP.” In it, we form physical-object beliefs from sense perceptual input together with an overrider system. The latter consists of what we have learned from past engagement with SP and other practices, such as scientific theorizing.

Alston argues that the justification of every doxastic practice is “epistemically circular,” that is, its reliability cannot be established independently of the practice itself.\textsuperscript{7} The support for the reliability of any doxastic practice, including for its overrider system, is always internal support, which already assumes the reliability of the practice. However, we cannot avoid engaging in doxastic practices. Therefore, it is rational to engage in the doxastic practices we do engage in providing there is no good reason to think they are unreliable.

Alston's application of DPA to experiences of God proceeds in three stages. First, Alston argues for the perceptual nature of experiences of God. He does this in accordance with his “appearance theory of perception,” which says that "For S to perceive X is for X to appear to S as so-and-so," where the notion of appearing as so-and-so Alston declares to be unanalyzable. Next, Alston declares the “Christian Mystical Practice,” CMP, to be a doxastic practice consisting of forming beliefs about God grounded in perceptual experiences of God. CMP too has an overrider system, built up from past perceptual experiences of God, and from the Bible, and the Christian


\textsuperscript{7} William Alston, 1993, \textit{The Reliability of Sense Perception} Ithaca: Cornell University Press
tradition. For Alston, these latter two ultimately derive from experiences of God as well. But that’s OK since epistemic circularity is built in anyway to all doxastic practices. Finally, Alston argues that objections similar to those of Fales and Gale do not damage his defense of CMP. This is because it is illicit to carry perceptual features of the doxastic practice SP over to CMP. Each perceptual doxastic practice has its own internal rules for justifying the perceptual experiences to which it applies. To think otherwise, says Alston, is to engage in "epistemic imperialism": “There is no reason to suppose it appropriate to require the same checks and tests for [perceptions of God] as for sense-perceptual reports, and every reason to suppose it inappropriate.” (216). Alston concludes that it is rational for a person to engage in CMP unless it can be shown to be unreliable.

I want to raise a serious doubt as to the respectability of CMP as a doxastic practice, by raising a problem with its overrider system.

Alston quotes approvingly a representative cluster of criteria for an overrider system for CMP. (203) An apparent experience of God is genuine when the subject is not concerned with useless affairs, has interior peace and calm, trusts in God, and has patience, sincerity, and charity. An experience is false when a subject engages in exaggeration and excesses, endures perturbation and disquiet, and displays duplicity and false zeal. Alston claims that this list results primarily from the accumulated experience of “professional” Christian mystics over the ages.

It is difficult to determine “sincerity” and “false” zeal. So it is not easy to see how these could be used as handy criteria. However, my main problem is with Alston’s idealized picture of the creation of an overrider system for CMP. A more realistic picture emerges from the work of Nancy Caciola and others on the history of discerning
divine possession in the middle ages. Caciola especially makes a good case for concluding that the criteria for this discernment emerged from the need of the Church to restrain uncontrolled spirituality by providing social criteria for distinguishing between the God and the devil possessed. In particular, the criteria that grew up curtailed the power of women in the Church. For example, on the basis of theories about female physiology, women were deemed more vulnerable to devil possession than men. Hence one was to be more suspicious that women are devil-possessed, and not God-possessed, than about men.

The concern for criteria for divine possession began in the late 12th century because of the proliferation of possessed individuals, especially women. Outwardly, it was difficult to distinguish between one possessed by God and one possessed by the devil. Ways had to be found to make the discernment.

Early on, criteria were ad hoc and local. Gradually, in the 13th century various now defunct theories developed to determine divine possession. One curious example was a postmortem examination based on the belief that God would have entered into the person's heart, while the devil would have chosen the bowels.

What was to become an influential guideline for discernment finally arose in the fourteenth century from the impact of and Henry of Freimar (d. circa 1340), who was not known as a mystic. In his writings Henry bases his criteria on physiological theories of his day. These include a distinction between “open” and “closed” physiology and its application to the physiology of the heart. Although the Christian Testament speaks of

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the “peace” of Christ in the heart (see for example, Colossians 3:15), it was not until Henry, utilizing physiological theories, that after several centuries of meandering attempts at discernment, an abiding connection arose between divine possession and “calmness, serenity, and stasis.”¹⁰ One possessed by the devil, on the other hand, would be in turmoil and agitated. Subsequently, Jean Gerson (1363 -1429), himself a mystic, was acutely active in arguing against women mystics, whom he thought to exhibit obsessive-compulsive behavior typically feminine in character.

This led in the 15th century to increasing identification of devil possession with the convulsive and disorderly. This development, in turn, resulted in the increased marginalization of female spirituality, since men deemed women to be given to agitation and to engage in frivolous activities. The coalescing of these criteria in the 15th century went hand in hand with the centralization of Church power in standardizing exorcisms and their ritual forms. The Church was involved in asserting control over unsupervised spirituality.

This 15th century criterion for divine possession is echoed in the 16th century autobiography of Teresa of Avila, whom Alston quotes as writing that the devil’s part in her experience can be detected by the “restlessness with which it begins,” and by “the turmoil he creates in the soul.” When the experience is genuinely of God, “there is no attendant turmoil or spiritual unrest.” (Alston, p. 202).

What I am raising is the suspicion that what Alston advances as criteria resulting from the accumulated experiences of mystics, including Teresa, might be instead, at least in good part, the result of three factors: (1) the acceptance by mystics of criteria based on prevailing, and mistaken, physiological theories, (2) a desire to marginalize women because of a conception of their severe spiritual limitations and their proneness to

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¹⁰ Caciola, p. 217.
frivolous activity and agitation, and (3) the Church’s need to impose ecclesiastical order on uncontrolled spirituality.

If these suspicions are correct, the overrider system of CMP largely would not be a consequence of the accumulated wisdom of mystics over the ages, but the result of discredited scientific theories, an androcentric bias bent on excluding women from the center of spirituality, and the institutional desire of the Church to rule over spirituality in Christendom by finding some criteria or other.

If this is so, CMP is a non-respectable doxastic practice. It does not deserve to be considered reliable until proven otherwise. This is because we have good reason to suspect that the overrider system is, at least in part, irrelevant to the truth of the formed beliefs, given other doxastic practices to which most of us as well as many CMP practitioners are committed. I could do no better here than to quote William Alston:

[CMP] may fall victim to an excessive inconsistency of its output or overrider system with that of other, more firmly established doxastic practices, like SP or current empirical science or historical research. (238, my emphasis)

I have not raised “excessive inconsistency” with history, but do raise an historical problem for CMP.

An earnest CMP practitioner might counter that the development of the sort of criteria cited by Alston might appear to be caused in the way I suspect, but in reality this development was guided by the Holy Spirit, guiding, as it does, the Church’s path throughout history. Furthermore, that the Holy Spirit guides the Church’s history has been disclosed in experiences of God to the greatest spiritual
figures of the Church. This, of course, involves CMP in an epistemic circle, but that is no sin for doxastic practices, as Alston has ably argued.

In reply, I would say that even if the Holy Spirit does try to guide the Church, the Church has not so regularly allowed itself to be guided by the Holy Spirit. We know of massive, morally odious Church traditions that the Church has abandoned only in modern times. I will make do here by citing the Church’s contemporary abandonment of the entrenched age-old doctrine of supersessionism in relation to Judaism, which was the cause of great suffering and loss of life, in favor now of a hopeful two-covenant theology. If so, we cannot so readily agree that the overrider system of CMP must reflect the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If my suspicions are correct, the CMP is not on an epistemological par with SP or with other well-known doxastic practices. Before adopting Alston’s doxastic practice approach to experiences of God we must make further inquiry into the respectability of mystical overrider systems. Hence, even if we grant Alston the perceptual character of God-experiences, we do not have an argument for the validity of the latter as we do for sense-perceptual judgments.

I conclude that neither of the perceptual approaches to alleged experience of God is quite convincing as it stands.