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MYSTICISM AND SENSE PERCEPTION

I

In this paper I propose to examine the cognitive status of mystical experience.

There are, I think, (at least) three distinct but overlapping sorts of religious experience. (1) In the first place, there are two kinds of mystical experience. The extrovertive or nature mystic (in some sense) identifies himself with a world which is both transfigured and one. The introvertive mystic withdraws from the world and, after stripping the mind of concepts and images, experiences union with something which (in some respects at least) can be described as an undifferentiated unity. Introvertive mysticism is a more important phenomenon than extrovertive mysticism. (2) Numinous experiences are complex experiences involving dread, awe, wonder, and fascination. One (apparently) finds oneself confronted with something which is radically unlike ordinary objects. Before its overwhelming majesty and power, one is nothing but dust and ashes. In contrasting oneself with its uncanny beauty and goodness, one experiences one's own uncleanness and ugliness. (3) The experiences bound up with the devotional life of the ordinary believer (gratitude, love, trust, filial fear, etc.) are also religious in character. Nevertheless these more ordinary experiences should, I think, be distinguished both from numinous experiences and from mystical experiences, for they do not appear to involve the sense of immediate presence which characterises the latter. For the same reason, there is no *prima facie* case for the supposition that these experiences provide an independent source of knowledge, that they involve a glimpse of reality or some aspect of reality which is normally hidden from us. (Even those who deny this would—most of them—agree that the salient features of numinous and mystical experience only occur in these more ordinary experiences in an embryonic form.) I think it is clear that we should focus our attention on the more extraordinary varieties of religious experience. If the latter have no cognitive value, it is highly unlikely that common garden variety religious experiences have any cognitive value.

While I intend most of my remarks to apply to numinous experiences as well as to mystical experiences, I will only discuss the latter. There are two connected reasons for this. In the first place there is a voluminous religious literature connected with mysticism and in the second place mysticism has been institutionalised in a way in which the experience of the numinous has not. Because of this, it is easier to discuss mystical experience than it is to

A

discuss numinous experience. One has a better idea of exactly how the religious community deals with the experience, the criteria it uses for evaluating it and so on.

I propose to attack my question from a particular point of view. Mystical experience is often said to be a kind of 'seeing' or 'tasting' or 'touching'. We are told that mystical experience is a kind of 'experimental knowledge' of the divine. Mystical experiences like numinous experiences are believed to involve a direct or immediate awareness of reality or some aspect of reality which is normally hidden from us. It is difficult to deny that some analogy with sense experience is intended and that part of what is implied in ascribing cognitive value to these peculiar kinds of experience is that these experiences are in some important respects like ordinary perceptual experience. In the opposite camp we find critics like C. B. Martin,¹ who assume that ordinary perceptual experiences provide us with the paradigm of a cognitive or perceptual experience and then proceed to argue that religious experiences cannot be cognitive or perceptual because they deviate in certain important ways from that paradigm.

The analogy (or lack of it) between mystical experience and sense experience appears, then, to be important both to those who ascribe cognitive value to mystical experiences and to those who refuse to do so. In the remainder of this paper I shall explore that analogy.²

II

There are two respects in which mystical experiences and sense experiences are alike. (1) Both types of experience are noetic. (2) On the basis of both types of experience corrigible and independently checkable claims are made about something other than the experience itself, and in each case there are both tests for determining whether or not the object of the experience is real and tests for determining whether or not the apparent perception of that object is a genuine one.

A. Sense experiences (whether veridical or not) have a noetic quality. This involves two things. (1) The experiences have an object, i.e., they are experiences of something (real or imagined). In this respect sense experiences are unlike pains, feelings of depression and so on. The latter may have causes. They may be aroused or occasioned by certain kinds of events or objects but (in spite of certain continental philosophers) they are not experiences *of* those events or objects. (To the question 'What is the object

¹ 'Seeing God' in *Religious Belief*.

² For another (and different) exploration of the ways in which sense experiences and religious experiences are like and unlike each other see H. P. Owen, *The Christian Knowledge of God*, pp. 269–276. I became acquainted with Owen's very interesting book only after completing this paper. Though we touch on many of the same themes our treatment of these themes is quite different. I have indicated certain points of contact in footnotes in sections III and VI.

of a visual (auditory) experience?’ we can reply ‘Colors and shapes (sounds)’. The question ‘What is the object of a dull pain (a feeling of depression)?’ cannot be answered so easily.) (2) Sense experience typically involves the conviction that the object on which the experience is focused is ‘really there’, that it exists and that one is present to it. To use Berkeley’s language, the experience has ‘outness’.¹ This conviction should not be regarded as if it were only an interpretation placed upon the experience from outside. On the contrary, it is part of the experience itself.

In spite of the fact that some mystics speak as if their experiences transcended the subject-object structure of ordinary perceptual experience, many mystical experiences (and perhaps all of them) are noetic. (Mystics by and large agree that they experience something which transcends space and time, is devoid of distinctions, supremely valuable, etc.)

B. (1) No type of experience can be called cognitive if it typically induces those who have it to make false claims. Thus, the vision of a mirage, or the experiences one obtains by pressing the eyeball and seeing double and so on, can be called delusive because the very nature of these experiences is such that (until one learns better) one is likely to make false claims on the basis of them. (That water is really present or that there are two candles rather than just one.) I do not think that there is any very good reason to suppose that mystical experiences are delusive in this sense. The mystic does not make false empirical statements because he does not make any empirical statements at all. Rather he claims to know, on the basis of his experience, that God is real and present to him or that there is an ‘uncreated, imperishable Beyond’ or something of the sort. *These* are the kinds of statements which the experience induces those who have it to make, and it would seem that we are entitled to assert that the experience is delusive only if we have good independent reasons for believing that claims of this kind are false. It is by no means clear that we *do* have such reasons.

(2) The fact that experiences are not delusive in the sense we have just explained does not imply that they are cognitive. Pains are not delusive in this sense but they are not cognitive either. If we now turn to sense experiences (which are admitted to be cognitive experiences by all parties to the dispute) we see that not only do they not induce *false* claims, they also provide a basis for making *true* claims about something other than the experience itself.

Are mystical experiences like sense experiences in this respect? We can at least say this. On the basis of their experiences mystics do make claims about something other than their own experiences and (given that there is no disproof of God’s existence or of the reality of the One, etc.) these claims are not clearly false.

(3) When someone claims to see or hear or touch something, his claim is

¹ For Berkeley’s usage see an unpublished paper by Nelson Pike entitled ‘The Modes of Mystical Union.’

not self-certifying. Things other than the experience itself are relevant to a determination of the truth or falsity of those claims, and one who makes these claims is normally aware that this is the case. C. B. Martin¹ and others have asserted that in this respect sense experiences are radically unlike mystical experiences, for (they say) when the mystic claims to experience God, his claims are not corrigible—there are (to use Martin's phrase) no independent tests and checkup procedures which he and others would regard as relevant to a determination of the truth or falsity of the claims he makes. As far as I can see this is simply false. C. B. Martin and others, have, I think, been misled by the fact that certain familiar tests (e.g., the appeal to the agreement of others) play a very minor role here, or no role at all, and have illicitly jumped to the conclusion that the mystic therefore dismisses all tests and checkup procedures as irrelevant and regards his claims as incorrigible.

Suppose someone claims to have seen an elephant in his backyard. There are at least two ways in which his claim might be attacked. One might try to show that no elephant was there at all, or one might try to show that he could not have seen it because, for example, he was not in a position to observe it, or because his sensory equipment was defective. When we turn to mystical experience we find both sorts of tests and checkup procedures (at least in a rough and ready way), i.e., we find independent procedures for determining whether or not the object is real and we also find procedures for determining whether or not the experience, the claims of which are in question, is indeed a genuine perception of that object.

(a) In the first place, even when claims about God and Nirvana and so on are grounded in mystical consciousness, they are in fact not self-certifying. Things other than the experience itself are relevant to an evaluation of them. For example, considerations of logic are relevant. These claims cannot be true if the concepts of God or Nirvana or what have you, are self-contradictory. Again, the considerations adduced in the controversy between those philosophers who espouse some form of naturalism and theistic philosophers would appear to have some bearing on the truth value of the claims in question. When the mystic asserts that he has experienced God (Nirvana, Brahman) he implies that there is such a being and, if he has his wits about him, he will recognise that things other than his own experience are relevant to an evaluation of that claim. It is true that mystics are certain of the truth of the claims that they make but this is no more incompatible with a recognition of their corrigibility than the fact that I am certain that I now see a red pen is incompatible with a recognition of the fact that *that* particular claim is a corrigible one. In short claims about God, or Nirvana or other things of that kind are not self-certifying and there seems to be no feature of the mystical experience which would prevent a mystic from

¹ Op. cit.

acknowledging that fact. (Individual mystics might be confused on this point, but this can as easily be attributed to bad philosophy as to the experience itself.)

(b) Even if God exists and a direct experience of him is possible, it does not follow that every claim to be immediately aware of God is justified. How then do we distinguish those experiences of God which are veridical from those which are not? If we turn our attention to communities in which mysticism has flourished we find that various tests have been used to distinguish those experiences which genuinely involve a perception of the divine from those which do not. Each of the following six criteria is employed in the Christian (particularly the Catholic) community. Similar criteria are used in other communities.

(i) The consequences of the experience must be good for the mystic. The experience must lead to, or produce, or reinforce, a new life marked by such virtues as wisdom, humility, charity and so on. Let me make two comments at this point. (a) Sanity is a criterion which is often appealed to. It should, I think, be subsumed under the criterion which we are now considering. A genuine experience of God is believed to lead to, or produce, or reinforce, a life of rather extraordinary goodness. It seems reasonable to suppose that sanity is a necessary condition of such a life. (At least if we do not define 'sanity' too narrowly.) (β) We can understand why people are bothered by the presence of certain kinds of causes. Many find it impossible to believe that the use of drugs, nervous and physical disorders and so on, can play a part in the best sort of life. Consequently, if they find that these things play a major role in the life of a mystic, they will tend to reject (or at least be suspicious of) his experiences—not because there is some reason for supposing that a genuine vision of God cannot have natural causes but because these particular natural causes are (rightly or wrongly) deemed to be incompatible with the best life—that kind of life which is believed to be bound up with, and to follow, a genuine vision of the divine.

(ii) One must consider the effect of the experience upon others. One should ask, for example, whether the actions of the mystic, his words and his example, tend to build up the community or to destroy it.

(iii) The depth, the profundity and the 'sweetness' (Jonathan Edwards) of what the mystic says on the basis of his experience counts in favor of the genuineness of that experience. On the other hand, the insignificance, or the silliness of what he says counts against it. (On the basis of this criterion many would reject the claims of Margery Kempe. Cf. David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, Chapter VIII.)

(iv) We must examine what the mystic says on the basis of his experience and see whether it agrees or disagrees with orthodox talk.

(v) It will also be helpful to determine whether or not the experience in question resembles other mystical experiences which are regarded as para-

digmatic within the religious community. (In the Roman Catholic church, experiences are often compared with the experiences of St Teresa of Avila or St John of the Cross.)

(vi) We must also take the pronouncements of authority into account. In some communities the word of the spiritual director, or guru or master is final. (This is clearly the case in Zen, and is true to some degree in other religious communities as well.) In other cases the relevant authority may be the community as a whole or some special organ of it (e.g., the college of bishops). In some cases all of these authorities may be relevant.

If I am correct the criteria we have just considered are similar to those we employ in ordinary cases to show, not that the object of the experience is real or unreal, but rather that the experience of it is or is not genuine (because of, e.g., the position of the observer, or the condition of his sensory equipment, etc.). Of course the *nature* of the tests is not much alike. Nevertheless, the point of them is. (One would not expect the nature of the tests to be much alike. In the case of mystical experience there is no sensory equipment which can go awry because no sense organs are involved. Nor does there appear to be anything which clearly corresponds to the position of the observer in the case of sense experience. And so on.)

III

Among the more important tests and check up procedures which are used to evaluate ordinary perceptual claims are the agreement and disagreement of those who occupy similar positions, and the success or failure of predictions based upon the experience whose claims are in question. Are similar tests used to determine the cognitive status of religious experience?

A. The claim that mystical experience is cognitive is often supported by appealing to the rather surprising amount of agreement that exists. Mystics can be found in radically different cultures, in places which have had little or no contact with each other, and in both ancient and modern times. Not only are the experiences of these mystics alike, they base remarkably similar claims upon their experiences.

(1) It would appear initially that some kinds of agreement are irrelevant in the present connection, that the presence of certain kinds of agreement has little or no tendency to show that the mode of experience whose claims are in question is either cognitive or non-cognitive.

(a) It is true that the visual and auditory experiences of persons from different cultures, with different social backgrounds, different psychological makeups, and so on, are quite similar. Analogously mystics from different cultures, with different social backgrounds, different psychological makeups, etc., can and do enjoy similar experiences. It is equally true that those who

suffer from migraines or indigestion undergo similar experiences in spite of differences in culture, social background, psychological makeup and many other factors. Sense experiences are widespread and so are mystical experiences. But so also are migraines and stomach aches. Since migraines and stomach aches would seem to be paradigm cases of non-cognitive experience, the presence of this kind of agreement hardly provides a decisive reason for asserting that the mode of experience whose claims are in question, is cognitive.

(b) People who make visual (or auditory or tactual, etc.) observations can typically describe conditions under which others can obtain similar experiences. ('If you go into the room on the left, you will see the body.' 'If the telescope is trained on such and such a place at such and such a time, you will obtain a sighting of the moons of Jupiter.') Now the mystic can do something like this. He can prescribe a regimen, a mode of procedure, which is likely to lead to introvertive experiences. (These will include such things as postures and breathing techniques, moral behavior, meditation, ascetic practices of one kind or another, and so on. Sometimes the procedures are specified in great detail. Furthermore, in spite of some variation—particularly in the emphasis placed upon physical techniques—there is a great deal of agreement as to just what these procedures involve.)

We should notice three things about these procedures.

(i) The only agreement or disagreement which is directly relevant to an examination of the cognitive value of sense experiences, is agreement or disagreement among those who follow the prescribed procedures, who try to make the observation under the prescribed conditions. Agreement among those who fail to follow these procedures is not expected and, hence, its absence is regarded as beside the point. If sense experience provides the model for all cognitive modes of experience, then it would seem that the fact that most of us have never enjoyed mystical experience is irrelevant. For most of us, of course, have not subjected ourselves to the necessary discipline.

(ii) There is a closer connection between the use of the appropriate procedures and success in the case of sense perception than in the case of mysticism, i.e., one is more likely to obtain the relevant experience by employing the recommended techniques in the former case than in the latter case.

(iii) The presence of agreement among those who employ certain prescribed techniques to elicit the type of experience whose claims are in question, is not decisive. This kind of agreement can be found in the case of sense experience, but it can also be found in the case of other experiences which would almost universally be considered subjective. Thus it can be safely asserted that most of those who eat ten bratwurst sandwiches within twenty minutes will undergo strikingly similar and equally unpleasant digestive experiences. It would appear to follow that the fact that this kind

of agreement can be found in the case of mysticism, is not of crucial importance.¹

(c) We now come to the crucial point. Those who see, hear, touch, etc., base non-psychological claims (claims about something other than the experiences themselves) upon their experiences and the lack of agreement among those who follow the appropriate procedures is considered to have a special bearing on the truth of those claims.

Those who suffer from headaches or indigestion do not typically base non-psychological claims on those experiences and so do not consider the agreement or disagreement of others to be relevant to an examination of the truth of such claims.

Mystics, unlike those who suffer from headaches and indigestion, do base non-psychological claims upon their experiences. The question is, do they consider the agreement or disagreement of others to be relevant to those claims, i.e., do they take the fact that others have similar experiences (and thus say similar things) when following the appropriate procedures as counting *for* their claims, and do they take the fact that others do not have similar experiences when following these procedures (and so do not say similar things) as counting *against* their claims? If they do, then we have discovered what may be an important analogy between mystical experiences and sense experiences. If they do not, we have uncovered what is perhaps a significant disanalogy between the two modes of experience. Unfortunately the situation is ambiguous.

(2) Many mystics do, I think, believe that the fact that others have enjoyed similar experiences, and made similar claims, provides support for the claims which *they* base upon their experiences, and because of this agreement they are more confident of the cognitive value of their experiences than they would otherwise be. However, as far as I can see, no distinction is made between those experiences which are obtained by employing the appropriate techniques and those which are obtained in some other way. All similar experiences are thought to (equally) confirm the claims which are made or (what comes to more or less the same thing) the cognitive value of the experience upon which those claims are based.

It is not clear whether or not the mystic believes that disagreement (the failure of others to enjoy similar experiences) has any bearing upon the cognitive standing of his experiences. (a) Mystics are clearly not disturbed by the fact that most people never enjoy mystical experiences. Nor do they appear to be bothered by the fact that some of those who earnestly employ the appropriate techniques never achieve illumination or union. These points are not, however, decisive, for it might nonetheless be true that if there *was* more disagreement than in fact obtains (if, e.g., the mystic stood

¹ R. M. Gale makes a point similar to this in the last section of a paper entitled 'Mysticism and Philosophy' *Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 57, 1960; Walter Stace also makes a similar point in *Mysticism and Philosophy*, pp. 135-9.

alone) the mystic would withdraw or qualify his claim. Disagreement is regarded as relevant if there is *any* degree of disagreement which *would* be taken as counting against the claim if it *were* to occur. (b) Suppose that the mystic were to discover that those who were believed to have achieved a unitive experience after employing the standard techniques had not really done so. Would he regard this discovery as counting against the cognitive value of his own experiences? Of course he might do so (particularly if he had used these techniques himself) but he might only conclude that the techniques were not as effective as he had believed them to be. (c) Suppose the mystic stood entirely alone. While it is by no means clear that the mystic would (or should) repudiate his experience under these conditions (it is, perhaps, too impressive for that) he might nevertheless be bothered by the absence of supporting claims. (There is some evidence that those who believe that their religious experiences are unique are more suspicious of them than those who are aware of the fact that others have enjoyed similar experiences.)

(3) What emerges from these considerations is this. The mystic bases non-psychological statements upon his experiences and believes that the fact that others have similar experiences tends to confirm those claims (the veridical character of his own experience). It is possible that if others were to fail altogether to have similar experiences, he would take this fact as counting against the veridical character of his own experience. In these respects mystical experience appears to be more like sense experiences than like, e.g., feelings of nausea or depression.

On the other hand there are significant disanalogies. (a) *All* similar experiences are believed to confirm the mystic's claim. The fact that some of these experiences have not been obtained by employing the appropriate procedures is ignored. (b) Furthermore, it is not clear that a complete breakdown of the procedures for obtaining these experiences would induce the mystic to hedge his claims, though he might be bothered if no similar experiences occurred at all.

In both these respects mystical experience is unlike sense experience. In the latter case, the only relevant agreement is that which is found among those who satisfy certain appropriate conditions, and the failure to obtain similar experiences by employing the appropriate techniques is regarded as very bothersome indeed.

(c) Most significant, I think, is the fact that the presence of agreement or disagreement is not regarded as a crucial consideration by those who have had mystical experiences, or are interested in defending their cognitive value. It is not even clear to me that this consideration is believed to be important. In the case of sense experience, on the other hand, the presence or absence of agreement (among those who employ the appropriate procedures) is treated as important, and sometimes even as crucial.

B (1) In evaluating a particular instance of sense experience, we take

into account any predictions which have been based upon that experience. Successful predictions count for its veridicality and unsuccessful predictions count against it. Furthermore, if one were to attempt to justify the claim that sense experience is a cognitive *mode* of experience, he would undoubtedly appeal to the fact that large numbers of successful, and comparatively few unsuccessful, non-psychological predictions are based upon experiences of that kind.

(2) A few predictions do appear to be based upon mystical experience. (a) On the basis of their experience mystics often assert that the soul is immortal, and this, of course involves a prediction. (b) Mystics also sometimes claim that their experiences confirm theological systems which include certain predictions as an integral part. Thus, Christian mystics have sometimes become more deeply convinced of the truth of Christian dogma as a result of their experiences and the Christian dogmatic structure includes a belief in the general resurrection, the transfiguration of heaven and earth and so on. (c) A mystic may, on the basis of his experience, predict that if one subjects oneself to the appropriate discipline (e.g., recites the Jesus prayer in the right way or follows the noble eight-fold path) he will obtain a vision of God or pass into Nirvāna or something of the sort.

(3) Many, perhaps most, of the predictions made by those who are subject to sense experiences of a certain type can be checked *both* by others who enjoy experiences of that type *and* by those who have never had that kind of experience. Thus suppose I see thunderclouds approaching and predict that it will rain. Someone who was blind would be unable to do this (though he might, of course, predict rain on the basis of other factors). He can, however, check this prediction. If it rains he will not be able to see it, but he will (if suitably situated) feel, hear, and perhaps even taste the rain. Again, if he fails to have these experiences he can (if suitably situated) conclude that my prediction was a failure.

The claim that we are immortal and the claim that human beings will be resurrected are, I think, verifiable (though not falsifiable). But the experiences which would justify them if they were to occur are (in the first case) post-mortem experiences, and (in the second case) post-Advent experiences. These claims cannot be verified in this life, or before the second Advent either by non-mystics or by other mystics. If one verified the third prediction one would be a mystic. The conclusion then is that none of these predictions can be checked in this life by the non-mystic and the first two predictions cannot be checked in this life by anyone at all (unless perhaps immortality and the possibility of the vision of God, etc., can be made out in this life by reason and authority. This would be a check of sorts, though not an experiential one.)

In so far as these predictions cannot be checked, they cannot be appealed to in order to establish the cognitive value of the mode of experience whose

claims are in question, nor to establish the cognitive value of instances of that mode of experience. It would thus appear that a blind man may have a reason for ascribing cognitive value to visual experience (*qua mode of experience*) or to some particular visual experience, which the non-mystic does not have for ascribing cognitive value to mystical experience (*qua mode of experience*) or to some particular mystical experience, viz. that the blind man knows and the non-mystic does not, that the particular experience or mode of experience whose claims are in question leads to successful predictions. (Though, again, as I pointed out, someone might insist that he knows, upon the basis of reason and/or authority, that the predictions which the mystic makes are successful.) This difference is striking and some would think, deeply significant.

C. We have seen that a consideration of the presence of agreement or disagreement, and of the success or failure of any predictions which might have been based upon the experience do not play an important role in the evaluation of the cognitive status of mystical consciousness. Many think that they have explained these differences when they assert that sense experiences are cognitive and that mystical experiences are not. There is however another way to account for them. The differences can be explained by the fact that the objects of these two kinds of experience are radically different.

(1) Suppose¹ that God is the object of the experience (rather than Nirvāna or the Ātman, etc.). If God is what he is supposed to be—omnipotent, omniscient, mysterious, other, transcendent and so on, then whether or not one enjoys a vision of him will, in the last analysis, depend upon his will and there will be no set of procedures the correct use of which will invariably result in illumination or union. Hence while mystical experience may be repeatable in the weak sense that given exactly the same conditions (including the operation of God's grace), the same experience will occur, there is no reason to suppose that it will be repeatable in the strong sense, viz. that certain procedures or methods can be described which are such that (almost) all who correctly employ them will obtain the experience in question.

On the other hand, given the nature of physical objects (physical objects exhibit spatio-temporal continuity, are relatively accessible, behave in law-like and regular ways, etc.) one reasonably supposes that if one's experience of the object is indeed veridical, others will enjoy similar experiences under similar conditions. One expects experiences of these objects to cohere and mutually support one another in certain familiar ways. However, if physical objects were not of this kind, these expectations would not be reasonable. If the nature of physical objects was different in certain ways, the experiences of these objects would not be repeatable in the strong sense, *even if the objects were real and experiences of them were genuine*. Thus suppose that mountains

¹ The main point in this section (III C. (1)) can be found (in an abbreviated form) in William Alston's *Religious Belief and Philosophical Thought*, pp. 124–5. My discussion derives from his.

jumped about in a discontinuous fashion, randomly appeared and disappeared, and behaved in other lawless and unpredictable ways. If these conditions obtained, observation under similar conditions would not normally yield similar results even if mountains were real and experiences of them were genuine. There would be no reason to expect experiences in this area to cohere and support one another in the way in which they do.

The general point is this. The nature of the object should (at least in part) determine the tests for its presence.¹ Given the nature of physical objects it is reasonable to suppose that genuine experiences of these objects can be confirmed by employing certain appropriate procedures and obtaining similar experiences, and that non-genuine experiences can be disconfirmed by employing these same procedures and obtaining different experiences. But God's nature is radically different from that of physical objects and it is therefore, not so clearly reasonable to suppose that (apparent) experiences of God can be confirmed or disconfirmed in the same way.

The difference in the nature of their respective objects explains, then, why the presence or absence of agreement is an important test in the one case, but not in the other.

This difference also explains other disanalogies. God is not bound by our techniques. One person may employ these techniques and fail to obtain the desired experience while another who has never used them may experience (some degree of) enlightenment. It is therefore only to be expected that little distinction is made between similar experiences which are obtained by the use of these practices and similar experiences which are obtained without using them. Finally since God freely bestows the experience upon whom he will, we have no idea of just how many of these experiences to expect. Hence it is not clear at what point (if any) we should begin to be bothered by the absence of agreement. It should not therefore surprise us if we find ourselves unable to specify a degree of disagreement which is so great that in the face of it the mystic should withdraw his claim.

(2) Similar considerations explain why the disanalogy which was uncovered in section III B is not as significant as it might appear to be.

It is sometimes maintained that successful predictions—predictions which we can show to be successful—provide the only reason we *could* have for ascribing cognitive value to a mode of experience. However, it is not clear that we should accept this. (a) From the fact that successful predictions provide *a* reason for ascribing cognitive value to a mode of experience, it does not follow that they provide the *only* reason for doing so. (One would perhaps have a reason for ascribing cognitive value to mystical experience, (i) if there was a close analogy in other respects between mystical experience and the more ordinary sorts of cognitive experience and/or (ii) if the hypothesis that the experience involves contact with the transcendent were to

¹ As H. P. Owen asserts in various places in *The Christian Knowledge of God*.

provide the best explanation of all the relevant facts. (iii) Again, natural theology or revealed theology might provide the reason we are looking for.) (b) It might be reasonable to insist on successful predictions when the mode of experience in question is supposed to provide access to ordinary empirical objects—objects which exhibit spatial and/or temporal continuity, which are accessible, and which behave in lawlike and regular ways—for we rightly assume that testable predictions can be made about such objects. It is not however clear that such a demand is reasonable when the object in question is (like God) a-spatial, a-temporal (?), and neither accessible in the way in which ordinary objects are accessible nor lawlike and regular in its movements. (For this reason, I believe that the comparison which is sometimes drawn between mystical experiences and those psychic experiences (such as clairvoyance) which purport to provide extraordinary knowledge about perfectly ordinary events and objects, is less than apt. Since the objects of these two kinds of experience is radically different one would expect to find a corresponding difference in the appropriate tests and checkup procedures. The demand for a large number of clearly successful predictions is entirely appropriate, in the second case. I do not think that it is appropriate in the first case.)

(3) Summary. There is no reason to believe that genuine experiences of God will be supported by the experience of others in the way in which veridical sense experiences are supported by the experience of others, and there is no very good reason to believe that genuine experiences of this kind will provide data which can be used in predicting the future. Since this is the case it would seem unreasonable to suppose that a decisive consideration against the veridicality of mystical consciousness is provided by the fact that these experiences are not supported by the experience of others in the way in which veridical sense experiences are supported by the experience of others, and do not afford us a glimpse of the future.

IV

If a mode of experience is to be admitted as cognitive, more is necessary than that there be tests for evaluating the cognitive character of instances of that type of experience. It is also necessary that these tests be relevant to the cognitive status of these experiences, and that they be satisfied by many (most?) instances of that type of experience. Thus we would dismiss a test which specified that genuine experiences occur only in months the English name of which contains the letter r, on the ground that whether or not an experience occurs in those months has nothing to do with its cognitive status. Furthermore, if the relevant tests yielded negative results in almost all cases of a given type of experience we would not, I think, regard that mode of experience as cognitive. (Thus, if visual experiences normally conflicted with

one another and generally proved a deceptive guide to future experience, we should not, I think, regard visual experience as cognitive.)

In the light of these considerations we can see that two significant sorts of disagreement are possible. People may disagree as to the relevance of the tests which are used to evaluate instances of the experience whose cognitive status is in question, and opinions may differ as to whether or not the appropriate tests are met with any degree of frequency.

A. Whether or not the appropriate tests are met depends, of course, upon just what the appropriate tests are. The six tests which we considered in section II B (3) (b) are met in many cases. On the other hand while mystical experiences do not lead to patently false predictions, the few predictions which are based upon them are not, perhaps, known to be true. Nor is it clear that mystical experiences agree and cohere in the way in which sense experiences agree and cohere. Nevertheless for the reasons given at the end of section III, these last two tests may not be particularly relevant to the evaluation of religious experience, and, if they are not, then the fact that experiences of this kind fail to satisfy these tests, or satisfy them very imperfectly, is of no particular importance. At least it is not crucial. (One might, of course, insist that the satisfaction of these two tests is *always* crucial, and if anyone does, then—since mystical experiences either fail to satisfy these tests or satisfy them very imperfectly—he will probably refuse to ascribe cognitive value to this peculiar mode of experience. That the satisfaction of these tests is always crucial appears to me, however, to be a mere dogma.)

B. Others refuse to ascribe cognitive value to mystical experience because, though they admit that there are tests for evaluating experiences of this kind, and that these tests are often satisfied, they deny that the tests are relevant. This, however, may be a mistake.

As we saw in section II, the tests for evaluating mystical experiences break down into two kinds—those tests which are used to determine the reality of the object of the experience and those which are used to determine the genuineness of the experience of that object.

In determining the truth of the claim that God is real, one may address oneself to considerations of logic, review the more telling points brought forward by theists and atheists and so on. (One would do similar, if not identical things, in order to determine the reality of the Brahman or Nirvāna, etc.) It would be generally agreed that this procedure is legitimate and that these considerations do bear on the truth or falsity of the claim that God is real. It is the other set of tests—those procedures which are used to determine the genuineness of the experience of the object—which create the most suspicion. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that, at least under certain conditions, these tests are relevant.

(1 and 2) The first two tests are moral tests. A genuine experience is one

which is fruitful and edifying both for the mystic himself and for others. If the (apparent) objects of these experiences is God (in which case the experience is only genuine if it is really and not only apparently an experience of God), then these tests are relevant. For, if God exists, is good, cares for his creatures, etc. (and these things are analytically connected with the notion of God) then one would expect a direct experience of him to be fruitful and edifying, to result in beauty, goodness, holiness and wisdom.

(3) The third test also appears to be relevant if God is the (apparent) object of the experience; for if God is all good, omniscient, omnipotent, necessary, the *mysterium tremendum*, holy, numinous, etc. (and again, all of these attributes would seem to be analytically connected with the notion of God) then one would not expect a vision of him to lead to twaddle. Quite the contrary.

(4) The fourth test is relevant to an evaluation of experiences which seem to involve a direct awareness of God provided that (a) God is a God of truth and (b) orthodox beliefs are true. If God is a God of truth and orthodox beliefs are true, one would suppose that a genuine experience of God would not lead to (very much) non-orthodox talk.

(5 and 6) The relevance of the fifth and sixth tests depends upon the truth of doctrines concerning the holiness and authoritative character of the individual or community which is in question. For example the claims of the Christian community and its representatives would be supported by an appeal to the notion that the Church is the Body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, to the claim that its bishops possess teaching authority, and so on.

The relevance of the first three tests depends upon the truth of certain *conditional* propositions (viz. that *if* God exists and is good and cares for his creatures, then genuine experiences of him will be fruitful and edifying for the mystic and for others, etc.). One may be uncertain as to whether or not God exists and yet nonetheless admit that if a given experience really is an experience of God, it will be fruitful and that, therefore, there is a good reason to examine the consequences of the experience. One need not be a theist to admit the relevance of these tests. The last three tests, on the other hand, are relevant only if the specific tenets of some particular religious community are true. One would have no reason to compare the talk of the mystic whose claims are in question with orthodox Christian talk, or to stress the ways in which his experience is like and unlike the experience of St John of the Cross (rather than some Sufi or Therāvādin mystic) or to appeal to the concensus of the Church, if one were not oneself a Christian.

A minor question remains. Agreement is sometimes appealed to, to support the claims of mystical experience, though if I am correct this appeal is relatively unimportant. Now we have seen that because of the peculiar nature of the object of mystical experience, there is no reason to expect that

genuine experiences will be confirmed by the experiences of others in the way in which veridical sense experiences are confirmed by the experiences of others, and having seen this, it may occur to us to ask whether there is any logical connection at all between the presence of agreement and the absence of disagreement on the one hand, and a genuine experience of God on the other. True, agreement is appealed to, and the mystic might feel ill at ease in the absence of any agreement at all. But it does not follow that agreement and disagreement have any logical significance in the present connection. (Most of us take comfort in numbers and are uneasy if we find ourselves alone and there is nothing particularly significant in this fact.)

There are two considerations which suggest (but do not prove) that agreement and disagreement have some logical bearing upon the cognitive value of these experiences. (1) If God's behaviour were completely erratic and unpredictable, then perhaps agreement and disagreement should not count at all. However, though his behaviour does not possess the regularity and lawlike character which belongs to the behaviour of physical objects, it is not generally believed to be completely erratic and lawless either.

(2) The second consideration is this. Other things being equal, it *may* be reasonable to expect instances of a genuinely cognitive mode of experience to occur under radically different social and psychological conditions. (Similar visual experiences are of course, enjoyed by people with radically different natures and radically different backgrounds.) The presence of wide spread agreement shows that this expectation is satisfied, and the complete absence of agreement would show that it was not satisfied. Neither of these considerations are, I think, decisive.

V

1. Consider the following argument:

- (1) If the analogy between mystical experience and the more familiar modes of perceptual experience (=sense experience) is very close then we are (probably) justified in regarding mystical experience as a cognitive experience.
- (2) The analogy is very close. (Both experiences are noetic. On the basis of both of these experiences corrigible and independently checkable claims are made about something other than the experience itself. In both cases there are tests for determining the reality of the object of the experience as well as tests for determining the genuineness of the apparent perception of that object. In both cases, the application of these tests yields positive results in a large number of cases.)
- (3) Therefore, we are probably justified in regarding mystical experience as a cognitive experience.

There is a variation of this argument which may be more persuasive.

- (1) The analogy between mystical experience and the more familiar modes of perceptual experience (=sense experience) is close enough to warrant the conclusion that mystical experiences are cognitive *provided that* we have independent reasons for believing mystics when they assert that they have directly experienced some transcendent aspect of reality.
- (2) Such and such a bit of natural theology (this would be filled in by alluding to some 'demonstration of the being and attributes of God') and/or the sanity, sanctity and intelligence of the great mystics provides us with such a reason.
- (3) Therefore, we are warranted in drawing the conclusion that mystical experiences are cognitive.

2. The first premiss of the first argument is I think, a plausible one. The plausibility of the second premiss of the second argument depends in large measure upon the success or failure of natural theology, and here opinions can and do differ.

The second premiss of the first argument and the first premiss of the second argument involve the same kind of problem. One's opinion of these premisses will be determined not only by one's estimate of the number of respects in which sense experience and mystical experience are like and unlike each other, but also by one's judgment as to the relative importance of these resemblances and differences. (Thus, one's estimate of the significance of the fact that the presence or absence of agreement is regarded as vitally important when evaluating sense experiences, but as relatively unimportant when evaluating mystical experiences will depend upon whether or not one believes that the appeal to the presence or absence of agreement is an appropriate test for the evaluation of mystical experience, upon whether or not one thinks that this test *must* be among the tests used to determine the cognitive value of an experience, and so on.) There is no mechanical decision procedure which can be used to determine the truth value of these premisses, just as there is no mechanical decision procedure which can be appealed to, to determine what one should do when moral obligations conflict, or how one should appraise a new style of art, or the general plausibility of a world view. What is called for in all of these cases, is a judgment and reasonable men may differ. (There are criteria, but it is sometimes difficult to see whether or not they have been applied correctly. Thus, in choosing a world view, we should attempt to determine which view has the most explanatory power. But this itself is something which calls for judgment.)

3. It is often assumed that no experience can be cognitive which is unlike

sense experience in very many important respects. This is, of course, quite vague. (What deviations are important and how many deviations are very many?) There is however a more important point—it is by no means clear that the assumption is true. As far as I can see, all that we mean when we say that an experience is cognitive or perceptual, is that, through this experience we come to know something which we could not know, or could not know as easily, in other ways, and (probably) that the knowledge in question is non-inferential. If this is even roughly correct, then I doubt that *x is a cognitive experience* entails *x is very much like sense experiences*. Of course, sense experiences clearly are cognitive experiences. Therefore, if we could show that some other mode of experience is very much like sense experience, we would have thereby provided a good (if not conclusive) reason for supposing that the mode of experience in question is cognitive. On the other hand, if something like the analysis I have provided is correct then the fact that a mode of experience is radically *unlike* sense experience would hardly appear to be decisive. (Perhaps it should be pointed out that from the fact (if it is a fact) that mystical experience is radically unlike so-called objective experiences (seeing, hearing, etc.) it does not follow that it is like paradigmatic cases of non-cognitive experiences (suffering, headaches, feeling depressed, etc.). It may be—as Stace suggests—that mystical experience is unlike *both* of these two types of experience.)

4. The arguments we have considered are not the only ones which might be employed in an attempt to establish the cognitive value of mystical experience. However these are the arguments which should concern us in this paper because they are the arguments which are directly based upon the analogy between mystical experience and sense experience.

VI

Flew (*God and Philosophy*, Chapter 6), Schmidt (*Religious Knowledge*, Chapter 8) and Hepburn (*Christianity and Paradox*, p. 37) all argue that any cognitive claims which are made for religious experience (or any other kind of praeternatural experience) must be certified by independent checks. Thus, according to Hepburn, even if we (and no one else?) saw a red circle in the air whenever John was angry, we would be entitled to claim that John was angry on the basis of this experience only if we had learned by ordinary procedures that the 'code' was reliable (i.e., to justify these claims we would have to show that a correlation obtained between seeing the red circle and John's anger, the latter being established by normal criteria.) Or again, Schmidt asks us to look at a case in which we judge that we have a cavity because we feel pain in one of our teeth. He suggests that this judgment is warranted only because we have independent criteria (criteria other than the toothache)

by means of which we can establish the presence of a cavity and because we know (on the basis of past experience) that a correlation obtains between toothaches and cavities. Schmidt concludes that, in general, we can move from a first person psychological report about feelings (or some other kind of private experience) to a descriptive claim about some non-psychological entity or event only if we have independent criteria for determining the truth or falsity of that claim and have discovered by experience that there is a correlation between the presence of those feelings and its truth.

The implication of all this is, of course, that the mystic can legitimately base religious and metaphysical claims on his experience only if he has independent criteria for establishing the existence (or presence) of the supposed object of his experience, and if he can show that his experience and (the presence of) that object are correlated.

The first thing we should do is to notice exactly what is being demanded. We must distinguish (1) the demand that independent checks be provided for claims based on particular experiences of a given kind from (2) the demand that there be an independent certification of the claim that experiences of a certain kind (e.g., mystical ones) provide an adequate basis for cognitive claims (of a certain kind). (In the second case we are being asked to justify the cognitive status of a certain mode of experience. In the first case we are only being asked to justify the cognitive status of an *instance* of a certain kind of experience. An example of the second sort of demand would be the demand to justify the cognitive status of visual experience. An example of the first sort of demand would be a demand to justify the cognitive status of some particular visual experience.)

The first demand is rather easily met. Just as there are tests other than the visual experiences of someone who bases a cognitive claim upon one of those experiences (e.g., his own auditory and tactual experience, the sense experiences of others, etc.) so there are tests other than the mystical experiences of someone who bases cognitive claims on *those* particular experiences (e.g., his sanity, the similarity of his experiences to those of other mystics, etc.). But this is not what is at issue here. What is at issue is not the cognitive status of some particular mystical experience but the cognitive status of mystical experience in general; i.e., it is the second demand which is being made rather than the first.

For the sake of simplicity I will concentrate on Schmidt's remarks.

(1) There is something very wrong in supposing (as Schmidt and the others do) that 'having certain feelings and sensations' is an adequate description of the subjective side of mystical experience. If our description is to be adequate we must at least mention the intentional character of the experience. As William James pointed out many years ago the experience is noetic. (It has an object and the conviction that one is in the presence of that object is an essential feature of the experience.) Having a mystical experience

is not like feeling pain or being depressed. (None of this, of course, entails that mystical experiences are veridical.)

(2) In the second place there may in fact be independent reasons for thinking that God exists (the arguments for the existence of God) and that there is a correlation between the presence of God and certain kinds of religious experience (such reasons might be provided by tradition and authority). It is true of course, that many (including Schmidt) would not accept these reasons. Again (though this is clearly not what Schmidt is looking for) one might suppose that a kind of independent certification of the cognitive character of mystical experience is provided by one or more of the arguments considered in section V.

(3) Perhaps some other kind of experience can be used to test the claims made for mystical experience (by showing that judgments based on mystical experience do or do not square with judgments based on this other sort of experience). It might, for example, be suggested that numinous experience corroborates mystical experience in the way in which auditory and tactual experience corroborates visual experience, or (and this is essentially the same point) that mystical experiences and numinous experiences support and reinforce one another in the way in which the various kinds of sense experience support and reinforce one another. Of course Schmidt will not accept this because he believes that numinous and mystical experiences are equally suspect. He is demanding that we justify the claim that religious experiences (of either or both kinds) involve an awareness of the presence of God (or some transcendent being or state) in precisely the way in which we would justify the claim that toothaches are a sign of cavities.

(4) It is not clear that this demand is reasonable. Suppose that someone asks us to justify the claim that 'tree experiences' (those complex experiences involving visual, tactual . . . elements, which reveal the presence of trees) are experiences of something distinct from them, viz. trees. It is not clear that we would know how to satisfy this request. In particular, it should be noticed that we cannot independently (of those experiences) establish the existence of trees at certain times and places, and the occurrences of these experiences, and observe that the two are correlated. (To suppose that we could do this would be to suppose that there are tests for ascertaining the presence of trees which do not directly or indirectly rely on the tree experiences of ourselves and others, and as far as I can see there are none.) In short, while (a) the connection between mystical experiences and a transcendental object cannot be justified by the procedure which Schmidt suggests, it is also true that (b) the connection between tree experiences and trees cannot be justified by the procedure which Schmidt suggests. Since (b) does not entitle us to conclude that (c) tree experiences do not provide cognitive access to trees, it is unclear why (a) should entitle us to conclude that (d) mystical experiences do not provide cognitive access to a transcendent object. (Note:

Schmidt's demand might be in order when we are dealing with experiences which are not 'perception-like', e.g., toothaches, twinges, depression, etc. It is not clear that it is in order when the experiences in question are 'perception-like', e.g., visual and mystical experiences.¹)

(5) Schmidt might suggest (though he does not in fact do so) that the two cases are different in the following very important respect. When we learn the meaning of the word 'tree' we learn what trees look like, what they feel like, what they sound like when the wind blows through them, etc., i.e., in learning the meaning of the word 'tree' we learn the connection between these experiences and the presence of trees. On the other hand numinous and mystical experiences are not connected in this way with the meaning of 'God' or 'Brahman'. Someone who has never had numinous or mystical experiences and has no idea of what they are like can learn the meaning of 'God' or 'Brahman'. On the bases of these considerations we might conclude that tree experiences and trees are analytically connected, whereas mystical (numinous) experiences and God (Brahman) are not, and that therefore while some kind of independent justification must be provided to connect mystical (numinous) experiences and God (or Brahman), no such justification is needed to connect tree experiences and trees.

It seems to me that this move is plausible if statements about trees can be translated into statements about tree experiences (i.e., if phenomenalism is true) and if statements about God (Brahman) cannot be translated into statements about mystical and numinous experiences. In spite of claims made by Schleiermacher, John Wilson and others it is, I think, reasonably clear that God (Brahman) statements cannot be translated into statements about religious experience. A fair number of good philosophers have thought that statements about trees can be translated into statements about tree experiences. It is, however, by no means clear that they are correct.

(a) It is logically possible for trees to exist and for no one to have tree experiences just as it is logically possible for God to exist and for there to be no mystical or numinous experiences, and, as far as I can see, it is logically possible that there be tree experiences and religious experiences even if there were no trees and God did not exist. (b) However, while there is no necessary connection between the presence of trees and *actual* tree experiences, there may be a necessary connection between the presence of trees and the *possibility* of tree experiences, i.e., it may be necessarily true that if a tree exists, then, if a normal observer is present under standard conditions he will enjoy tree experiences. Unfortunately (for Schmidt) a parallel claim can be made about God and mystical experiences, viz., that it is necessarily true that if God exists, then if there is an adequately prepared mystic whom God chooses to visit, he will enjoy mystical experiences. (c) What I am

¹ H. P. Owen makes a point similar to the one made in this paragraph in *The Christian Knowledge of God*, pp. 276–80.

getting at is that it is by no means clear that there is any significant difference in the logical relations which obtain between tree experiences and trees, and those which obtain between mystical (numinous) experiences and God (though on the other hand, I would admit that the fact that phenomenalism is more attractive in the one case than in the other, *might* indicate some underlying logical difference).