

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND THE ARGUMENT FROM AGREEMENT

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I

Do mystical experiences¹ have evidential value? Can we, for example, use their existence as grounds or evidence for the existence of some supernatural being, or perhaps even God? There are different ways in which it might be thought that we can. We might, for instance, treat such experiences merely as subjective, or purely psychological, phenomena and try to argue, perhaps from some unusual features they possess, to a supernatural being as their cause – much as we might try to argue from a headache of unusual intensity and duration to a tumor in the brain as its cause. Such an argument would almost universally be regarded as very weak.²

But we need not look on mystical experiences as merely psychological phenomena. We can instead treat many of them as perceptual, or perception-like, experiences. It sometimes seems to the experiencers – just as it does in ordinary sense experience – that they are in direct or immediate contact with something beyond the experience itself. William James depicts this perception-like immediacy as follows:

Our senses ... have assured us of certain states of fact: but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us. The records show that even though the five senses be in abeyance in them, they are absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality, if I may be pardoned the barbarous expression, – that is, they are face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist.³

Suppose we combine the claim that mystical experiences are perception-like with the claim, frequently made, that there is “agreement”, a kind of phenomenological sameness or similarity, among many mystical experiences. Then it may seem that we have the makings of a much more impressive argument. For among sense experiences, our paradigm of the perception-like, agreement seems often to constitute strong evidence that there exists something which the experiencers are commonly perceiving. Consider the following three examples, to which we shall be making frequent reference:

1. We are prosecuting the butler for the fatal knifing of the master. We may think our case rather weak if it rests only on the fact that the butler's handkerchief and fingerprints were found in the room where the victim was killed. But we will typically think it stronger if instead we can produce an eye-witness, someone who has had a visual experience which, if veridical at all, is most plausibly taken to be a perception of the butler knifing the master. And we would regard our case as stronger yet if we were able to find several people who have had similar experiences.

2. We are trekking in Alaska and see many geese coming and going from a spot just over the next rise. We might perhaps take this as a slight indication that there is a lake just over that rise. But if one of our party goes over the rise and has the sort of experience one typically has when actually seeing a lake, we have better grounds for supposing such a lake exists. And if the next day several others go to the same spot and have similar experiences, the rest of us have better grounds still.

3. You are wondering whether the Department Head has been on campus today. You will have some evidence that she has if you see her car in the parking lot. You will perhaps have better evidence if you learn that at noon a student in the library had a visual experience of the sort one might typically have were he seeing the Department Head. And you will normally have better evidence still if you learn that several people had similar experiences, one in the library at noon, another in the Department office an hour later, and a third while attending a lecture at three o'clock.

In each of these cases the existence of agreeing sense experiences seems to provide strong evidence for the existence of something — or more accurately: for the occurrence of an event, the existence of a physical body, or the presence-on-campus of a person — which the experiencers are commonly perceiving.⁴ And it seems to provide stronger evidence than that provided by just a single experience. Even if we think it unlikely that a single sense experience is hallucinatory, it is even less likely that each of several agreeing experiences is similarly hallucinatory. Or so it is natural to think.

Now if we press the alleged analogy with sense experience, it may be tempting to argue from the existence of agreeing mystical experiences to the existence of a supernatural being which mystics are commonly “perceiving”. Let us call this sort of argument the *argument from agreement*. Such an argument is endorsed by C.D. Broad. Consider the following two passages from *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research*:

Finally, I come to the argument for the existence of God which is based on the occurrence of specifically mystical and religious experiences. I am prepared to admit that such experiences occur among people of different races and social traditions, and that they have occurred at all periods of history. I am prepared to admit that, although the experiences have differed considerably at different times and places, and although the interpretations which have been put on them have differed still more, there are probably certain characteristics which are common to all of them and which suffice to distinguish them from all other kinds of experience. In

view of this I think it more likely than not that in religious and mystical experience men come into contact with some Reality or some aspect of Reality which they do not come into contact with in any other way.⁵

When there is a nucleus of agreement between the experiences of men in different places, times and traditions, ... it is reasonable to ascribe this agreement to their all being in contact with a certain objective aspect of reality *unless* there be some positive reason to think otherwise ... We cannot *prove* that what people agree in perceiving really exists independently of them, but we do always assume that ordinary waking sense-perception is veridical unless we can produce some positive ground for thinking that it is delusive in any given case. I think it would be inconsistent to treat the experiences of religious mystics on different principles. So far as they agree they should be provisionally accepted as veridical unless there be some positive ground for thinking that they are not. (p. 197)

Broad appears here to accept a version of what may be called the Doctrine of Unanimity. He claims that “specifically religious and mystical experiences” have occurred at different times and places and to people of different races and social backgrounds. Moreover there is a “nucleus of agreement” among these several experiences; while they may differ in one respect or another it is probable that there are certain characteristics which are common to all of them and which distinguish them from experiences of all other kinds.

Now, the reasoning continues, we take agreement among sense experiences to show that there is something the experiencers are commonly perceiving (“... it is reasonable to ascribe this agreement to their all being in contact with a certain objective aspect of reality ...”), unless there is some positive reason not to do so. Broad maintains that it would be “inconsistent” to treat the experiences of mystics differently. Accordingly, given the agreement among mystical experiences, we are entitled – again barring some positive reason to the contrary – to suppose that the mystics are veridically perceiving, or are in common contact with, “some Reality or some aspect of Reality which they do not come into contact with in any other way”.⁶

In the first of the passages quoted Broad announces that he is taking up an argument for the existence of God. But his conclusion makes no mention of God. This is no accident. Immediately following that passage Broad adds a caveat: While we can conclude that in mystical experiences men (probably) come into contact with “some Reality ...”, etc.,⁷ we have no good reason to conclude that they thereby come into contact with a personal being (and so, presumably, no good reason to think they come into contact with God).

But I do not think that there is any good reason to suppose that this Reality which manifests itself to certain men in religious and mystical experiences is personal. I think that we are inclined to believe this because we are most familiar with the religious experiences of Western Europeans and of Jews, most of whom have put this interpretation upon them. We do not know, or we forget, that the mystics and religious teachers of the Far East on the whole definitely reject this interpretation. And we are inclined to forget that certain Europeans, such as Plotinus and Spinoza, who have had these experiences also reject this interpretation of them. (p. 173)

Broad appears to be arguing here as follows. The best reason we have for identifying the object of agreeing mystical experiences as a personal being (or even God) is the fact that many of those having such experiences have taken them in this way. But our “best” reason is not a good reason. For many others have had essentially the same experience and yet rejected the “personal being” interpretation. It would thus be arbitrary to opt for that way of identifying the object. (Since presumably no group of experients rejects the claim that their experiences are of “some Reality or some aspect of Reality which they do not come into contact with in any other way”, there is so far no barrier to identifying the object in *that* way.)

Although there are various possible replies to Broad’s caveat, I will not pursue them here. For Broad is not objecting to the argument from agreement itself – indeed he endorses it – but only to certain ways of identifying or describing the entity whose existence it establishes.⁸ I wish to focus instead on the heart of the argument from agreement, viz., the inference from agreement among mystical experiences to the conclusion that there is something (no matter how identified) with which the experients are commonly in contact.⁹ If that inference is not successful, questions about identifying the object of the agreeing experiences will lose their urgency.

Let us make a terminological simplification here. Instead of speaking of evidence that there exists something which the experients are commonly perceiving, or with which they are commonly in contact, we will speak simply of “C-evidence”. Then we need to consider a number of questions. Is the analogy between sense experience and mystical experience, insisted on by apologists for the argument from agreement, apt? Do agreeing sense experiences constitute C-evidence? If so, do they always do so? Or only under certain conditions? Are these conditions met by agreeing mystical experiences? If agreement among sense experiences does not serve as C-evidence, then how must multiple sense experiences be related so that they do constitute that sort of evidence? Do the same relations hold among mystical experiences? If we deny that agreeing mystical experiences constitute C-evidence, would that be “inconsistent”, as Broad maintains, with how we deal with agreeing sense experiences?

I will argue that we have no good reason to think that, among mystical experiences, there exists anything analogous to what constitutes C-evidence among sense experiences. Hence, even if mystical experiences agree, that fact cannot be used to argue for the existence of some supernatural being, whether God, Broad’s “some Reality”, or whatever, with which mystics are commonly in contact. My pessimism is not based on the claim that we outsiders do not have adequate access to these unusual experiences. On the contrary, the pessimism would persist even if we had had the relevant experiences ourselves.

II

Suppose we ask of some set of experiences: “if we were to suppose that each of these experiences is a veridical perception of something, do we have good reasons for then supposing that they are perceptions of one and the same thing (e.g., same event, or physical body or person)?” If we can answer this question, “yes”, then let us say those experiences “gel”.¹⁰ Gelling experiences, then, are experiences which, if veridical, constitute perceptions of some single thing.

Now gelling experiences can have considerable evidential value. For if we ask: “what accounts for the fact that a group of people have experiences which if veridical would all be perceptions of one and the same thing?”, the simplest and most plausible answer frequently is: “these experiences gel because there really is some single thing the experiencers are commonly perceiving; their experiences are just what we would expect if there were, ‘out there’, something with which they are all in contact.” When gelling experiences are best explained in this way they constitute C-evidence.

Note that in talking about gelling experiences we are not introducing an unnecessary complication. For we are concerned ultimately with the question of whether a set of multiple experiences constitutes C-evidence. And that question has two components: (a) do the experiences have a common object?; and (b) if so, how are they best explained: are they hallucinatory experiences stemming, say, from common underlying psychological forces, or does there really exist something which the experiencers are commonly perceiving? The notion of gelling experiences allows us to concentrate on the first of these components in isolation from the second. If we want to attack the claim that agreeing mystical experiences constitute C-evidence we can do so by arguing that there is no reason to suppose such experiences gel, and thus avoid getting entangled with the different issue of how best to explain those agreeing experiences.

Multiple sense experiences will constitute C-evidence only if they gel. But how do we determine whether or not any two sense experiences gel? The first thing to notice here is that the notion of gelling experiences is independent from the notion of phenomenologically indistinguishable experiences. The experiences of two eyewitnesses to the slaying of the master, or of two of the Alaskan explorers, may be phenomenologically quite different – if only because of different points of view or, in the second case, different atmospheric conditions prevailing at the different times of observation. If you and I are looking at the same mule, you from the front and I from the rear, our experiences will certainly be quite different. Yet in none of these cases would we be thereby prevented from regarding the various experiences, supposing them to be veridical, as perceptions of one and the same event or lake or animal, respectively. Phenomenological indistinguishability is not a necessary condition for gelling. But it is also not a sufficient condition. Two different lakes could appear exactly the same, so that my visual perception of the one is indistinguishable from yours of the other. Yet if we knew my experience occurred in Alaska and yours in Utah we would not regard these experiences,

even if veridical, as perceptions of one and the same physical body.

There are, nevertheless, certain phenomenological requirements for gelling. Although two gelling experiences need not be indistinguishable they cannot be too dissimilar. Otherwise it may become too difficult, even allowing for different points of view, or different atmospheric conditions or whatever, to see both experiences as possible perceptions of a single thing. Moreover, in many cases two experiences will agree only they are *not* indistinguishable. In the butler case, for example, if A and B really are perceiving the same discreet event their experiences will be somewhat different, if only because the observers will have slightly different points of view at the moment the event occurs. And their experiences should not only be different, but *appropriately* different. If A is observing the event from the north and B from the south, we would expect A's experience to differ from B's in certain fairly straightforward ways and not in others. For instance we would not expect A's experience to be phenomenologically similar to what one would normally have were he looking at the same event from the east.

But even if these phenomenological requirements are met, we will not be able to determine that two experiences gel solely from a knowledge of their contents. Nothing in their contents will show that they are, if veridical, perceptions of some single thing and not perceptions of two distinct things. Consequently we will have to rely in part on extra-experiential considerations. Here criteria of space and time will play a crucial role. In the butler case we might suppose the experiences of A and B gel. But we would come to this conclusion not because of something in the content of the experiences, but because we know that each occurred at the same time and that each seems to be an experience of something happening at the same place.¹¹ Had exactly these experiences occurred at different times, or had we regarded them as experiences of events occurring at different places, we would not have taken them to be perceptions of some single event, but at best as perceptions of two distinct (though perhaps similarly appearing) events. In our Alaskan lake example, gelling experiences need not occur at the same time. But it is crucial that we be able to regard their objects as located at the same place. Otherwise we could at best regard the experiences as perceptions of two distinct lakes.

The Department Head example may seem different in this regard. Of course if the relevant experiences occur at the same time and their objects are located at the same place we would suppose they gelled. But in the actual case the experiences occur at different times, with objects at different places. Yet we can still regard them as gelling. It may appear, then, that considerations of space and time play no role here. For it seems that we could decide that the various experiences gel simply because: (1) their objects look the same; and (2) we know that only one individual (on this campus anyway) has that distinctive appearance. But spatial and temporal factors are relevant here also. In the first place, when we take the similarity in the appearance of the objects as a mark of gelling we assume that the spatial and temporal conditions of observation are not untoward. But if something is amiss in those conditions, the similarity in the appearance of the objects will count for nothing. For example, we would not regard these experiences as

gelling had they occurred at the same time while their objects were located at different places. Nor would they gel if they occurred at different times but their objects were located at places too widely separated to be travelled by a single person during the relevant time intervals. In these cases we might say either that the experiences were possible perceptions of different individuals after all or, if we hold fast to our belief about the Head's unique appearance, that some of the experiences were not veridical. But no matter how similar they are we would not say that, if veridical, they are perceptions of a single person.

The previous point hints at another, and more fundamental, way in which spatial and temporal criteria are involved here. For what are the grounds for our belief that only one person has the distinctive appearance of the Head? Possibly they will include the fact that we have never seen, nor do we know of anyone else who has seen, some other person who looks the same as the Head. No doubt this really is a "fact", but why are we so sure that it is? We can assume that there have been, over the years, a large number of sightings of the Head. Why do we think they have all been sightings of the same person, i.e., that all these visual experiences have gelled with one another? Obviously we cannot, without circularity, answer this question by re-invoking our belief that only one person has that distinctive look. And I do not see how it can be answered without appealing ultimately to spatial and temporal criteria: several sightings occurred at the same time with objects located at the same place; no sighting occurred at a time, nor had an object at a place, inconsistent with the spatial and temporal features of any other sighting. In sum our belief about the unique appearance of the Head, so far from allowing us to determine that experiences gel without relying on any considerations of space and time, is itself based on those very sorts of considerations.¹²

The spatial and temporal criteria used to determine that experiences gel reflect our conception of the nature of the various sorts of things that are possible objects of perception. Which criteria should be used in any given case will vary with the *kind* of thing which is possibly being perceived. In order for two people to perceive the same event they must perceive something which occurs in the same place at the same time. With relatively immovable physical bodies, like lakes, two observers must be perceiving something at the same place, but they needn't perceive it at the same time. In the case of moveable objects, two observers need not perceive something at the same place nor at the same time. But if they perceive something at the same time, it must be at the same place, and if at different places the difference in times cannot be too small.

On a given occasion we may not know which criteria to use unless we make some assumption about the kind of thing being perceived. Thus in the Alaskan lake example, if we suppose that the experiences in question are putative perceptions of lakes we could take B's experience as gelling with A's even if it occurred a day later. But suppose we think there is no lake there to be seen, that instead a mad hologrammer sometimes displays, once an hour for two or three minutes at a time, a large hologram which looks like a lake. Now we might think in terms of "hologram episodes", two to three minute events during which the hologrammer displays his

lake-hologram. Then if A's experience occurred at five o'clock, we might suppose there had been a hologram episode at that time. But if we look for confirmation in the form of a gelling experience had by B, we will now require that B's experience occur at approximately the same time as A's. If it occurs a day later we will not regard the two experiences as gelling.

Determining whether two sense experiences gel is thus a rather complex matter involving some or all of the following three factors. First we may have to make some assumption about what sort of thing (an event, like a hologram episode, or an immovable object like a lake) A and B are possibly perceiving. Second, we must assure ourselves (or assume) that there is nothing untoward in the contents of the experiences themselves, no inappropriate similarities or differences which, given everything else we know that is relevant, would preclude their gelling. And third, we will employ relevant spatial and sometimes temporal criteria, their exact mix being a function of the sort of thing we suppose may be being perceived. But for our purposes the important factor here is the third. If we did not know (nor made any assumptions about) when A's and B's experiences occurred, nor where the objects of their experiences appeared to be located, then no matter how appropriately similar or dissimilar we suppose their experiences to be, and no matter what assumptions we make about the sort of thing each may be perceiving, we will be in no position to ascertain that their experiences gel. For we will, so far, have no way of concluding that their experiences, if veridical, are perceptions of some single thing and not two distinct, though perhaps phenomenologically similar, things.¹³ Our spatial and temporal criteria enable us to locate possible objects of perception parsimoniously in a public and objective spatio-temporal world. They help us answer the question, 'are these perceptions of two things or one?', in an economical way which avoids over-populating our world with a multiplicity of perceptual objects.

III

Since the objects of sense experience are spatio-temporal, it is perhaps not surprising that we use criteria of space and time in determining whether two sense experiences gel. But how can we determine that there is gelling among the sorts of "specifically mystical and religious" experiences with which Broad is concerned? Broad himself maintains that there is a "nucleus of agreement" among such experiences, but what he seems to have in mind is simply some sort of phenomenological sameness or similarity. He claims that although these experiences are not indistinguishable they nevertheless share a common phenomenological core – "there are probably certain characteristics which are common to all". But phenomenological similarity, like phenomenological indistinguishability, is by itself no mark of gelling. The fact that we are dealing here with mystical experiences does not affect this point in the slightest. One cannot say, simply from the fact that two mystical experiences are similar in content, that they are, if veridical, perceptions of some

single thing and not two distinct things.

Could we show that mystical experiences gel by appealing to criteria of space and time? Surely Broad himself is poorly placed to use such criteria. He stresses the fact that mystical experiences are scattered through space and time. They occur to “men in different places, times, and social traditions and ... at all periods of history.” These remarks display an indifference to those particularities of space and time we use to determine gelling among ordinary sense experiences.

But more importantly, Broad could not effectively appeal to spatial and temporal criteria even if he wanted to. Such criteria do not even seem relevant when dealing with the sorts of experiences he is discussing. Recall that Broad endorses a version of the Doctrine of Unanimity. Presumably, then, the experiences with which he is concerned are roughly those around which debates about that Doctrine have centered. He is thus not discussing so-called “visions” or “locutions”, quasi sense experiences to which our spatio-temporal criteria for determining gelling might conceivably apply. These sorts of experiences are traditionally thought, by commentators and mystics alike, to be suspect and relatively unimportant when stacked against the mature and paradigmatic experiences of the great mystics.¹⁴ These latter experiences, the ones around which debates about unanimity center, include for example the sorts of experiences Otto calls “numinous”, those Zaehner calls “panenhenic”, “monistic” and “theistic”, and what Stace labels “extrovertive” and “introvertive” “mystical” experiences. (Of course whether all of these are essentially the same is what the debate about the Doctrine of Unanimity is all about.)

But it is just these latter sorts of experiences to which our normal spatial and temporal criteria for determining gelling do not apply. Reading the reports of many of these experiences one gets the sense that they do not have objects with a location in space at all.¹⁵ So it is difficult to imagine how in such cases we could ever plausibly say that since A and B each has an experience of an object that appears to be located at the same place (even supposing the experiences occurred at the same time) their experiences therefore gel. It is true that sometimes accounts of the relevant experiences appear to give some sort of spatial location to their objects: one may report a sense of something “present” in the room, another that God is “here” (present to the reporter). But even here our spatial and temporal criteria are not applicable. Taking what might seem to be the most favorable possible case, suppose A and B each senses an awesome or holy presence in the same room at the same time. Even if we suppose that each experient is perceiving something, the sorts of things that are thus said to be present, or here, are so unlike mundane physical objects that we can have no assurance — as we can were we dealing with lakes, for example — that A and B are thus perceiving one and the same thing. If the objects of the experiences we are discussing have spatial location such location is not limited or restricted by the spatial location of other entities. For example, God is sometimes said to be here or present. But God is also said to be “everywhere”; He is omnipresent. That there is a lake over the next rise does not preclude God also being “there”. But if God and a lake can be located at the same place,

why can't the object of A's experience be distinct from the object of B's experience and yet each be present at the same place?

Our knowledge of the nature of physical objects like lakes tells us that two distinct lakes cannot be located at the same place. It is this knowledge which allows us to use our normal spatio-temporal criteria to determine that the experiences in the Alaskan lake example gel. If A and B are each perceiving a lake at a particular place they are perceiving the same lake. But we do not have any analogous knowledge about the nature of the objects of the experiences of mystics. We do not know that two distinct mystical objects cannot be present at the same place. Consequently, even in the most favorable case just imagined, we cannot conclude that if A and B are each perceiving something they are perceiving the same thing. The spatio-temporal criteria we use to determine gelling among sense experiences are simply not applicable when trying to determine whether mystical experiences gel. I have read a good number of reports of mystical experiences. But I have never found some pair of such experiences to which I could apply our normal spatial and temporal criteria to conclude with confidence – with the confidence one might have, for example, in the Alaskan lake case – that they are, if veridical, perceptions of one and the same thing.

Broad thinks the nucleus of agreement (i.e., phenomenological similarity) among mystic's experiences constitutes C-evidence; to deny that it does would be "inconsistent" with how we treat agreeing experiences. This is mistaken. Sense experiences constitute C-evidence only if they gel. And although we may regard a set of phenomenologically similar sense experiences as gelling, we do so not merely because they are similar but because they – or other experiences used to ground a claim of uniqueness of appearance¹⁶ – satisfy certain criteria of space and time. But these criteria are not applicable to the experiences of the mystics. So we have no reason to suppose that mystical experiences gel.¹⁷ At best all we can know – and certainly this is all Broad is pointing to – is that they are phenomenologically similar. Consequently, there is no inconsistency in taking *gelling* sense experiences to constitute C-evidence but denying that sort of evidential value to *agreeing* mystical experiences. If there is a danger of inconsistency here, it lies in the opposite direction, viz., taking mere phenomenological similarity to be C-evidence when dealing with mystical experiences while rightly refusing to do so with sense experiences.

We can grant that many mystical experiences agree. But what we need are some grounds for supposing that they gel. Barring this, we have no reason to think that there is something with which mystics are commonly in contact, and so no argument from agreement, whether for the existence of God or for Broad's "this Reality which manifests itself", can succeed.

IV

In this final section I want to compare the objection just developed with a different sort of objection once suggested by William P. Alston. Discussing what he calls the “argument from widespread occurrences” of similar mystical experiences, which he treats as a possible argument for the existence of God, Alston says this:

In order to test the accuracy of a statement made on the basis of sense perception, we need some indication of what we have to do, or the conditions we have to satisfy, in order that our sense experiences will count for or against what is being claimed. ... nothing of this sort is forthcoming in the case of the mystic. Of course mystics do specify various things one can do if one wants to attain the vision of God: purify oneself morally, detach oneself from the affairs of the world, acquire the ability to concentrate the mind rigidly on a single point, and so on. But these are never intended to be testing procedures. If one does all these things and still has not experienced God, this would not generally be taken as even partially disconfirming the principle that God exists ... The belief is not subject to disconfirmation by the experiences of others. And ... this means that it is not subject to confirmation by the experiences of others. One cannot have the advantages of confirmation without running the risk of disconfirmation.¹⁸

Alston is speaking here of an experience confirming or disconfirming a perceptual belief. He adopts the principle that no experience of B's can confirm A's perceptual belief unless it is possible that some experience disconfirm that belief. Now suppose mystic A has an experience through which he believes that he has perceived God, or on the basis of which he believes that God exists. Given the principle just stated, no experience by any B can confirm A's belief unless it is possible that some experience disconfirm that belief. But Alston maintains that A's belief that God exists “is not subject to disconfirmation by the experiences of others”. So even if many B's have experiences similar to A's those experiences do not confirm A's belief. In this sense the widespread occurrence of similar mystical experiences, or what Broad calls “agreement” among such experiences, has no evidential value.

As thus presented, Alston's objection is not directly relevant to the sort of argument from agreement which we have been considering and which Broad endorses. That argument asserts that agreement among mystical experiences constitutes C-evidence, i.e., shows that the experiencers are veridically perceiving some common object, not that it is evidence for (or confirms) some *belief* that some of those experiencers might have about what exists or about what they are perceiving. So at best, all that Alston's objection will show is that if some mystics take their experiences to be perceptions of God, or believe on the basis of their experiences that God exists, the fact that other mystics have similar experiences will not confirm those beliefs. But this is only to say that *if* agreeing mystical experiences constitute C-evidence they do not constitute *further* evidence that the commonly perceived object is God. This result does not deny that agreement does constitute C-evidence and so does not undercut the argument from agreement. Indeed, as

we have already seen, it is a result which Broad himself would accept.

But perhaps we can vindicate the spirit of Alston's objection while at the same time better tailoring it to the argument from agreement. Let us speak of some experience confirming or disconfirming A's *experience* just in case it could be used as evidence for or against the veridicality of A's experience. Then we will need some principle like this: B's experience can confirm A's experience only if some experience could disconfirm A's experience. And we will need to show that none of the sorts of mystical experiences we are considering could be disconfirmed by some other experience. (Of course, the "other" experience need not be a mystical experience.) Then it would follow that no mystical experience can confirm any other, and so the sort of back-and-forth mutual confirmation among mystical experiences, which supposedly amounts to C-evidence, can be denied. Call this restatement of Alston's argument the "Disconfirmation Objection."¹⁹

Even if we accept the restated principle the success of this sort of attack on the argument from agreement depends on showing that mystical experiences cannot be disconfirmed by other experiences. Nothing Alston says even begins to show this. If we adapt what he says to our present concern, he can at best be seen as pointing out that B's failure to have an experience which agrees with A's mystical experience, even if B prepares himself in the most favorable ways, is not taken by anyone to disconfirm A's experience. But what does this show? The failure to have an agreeing experience is not the same thing as having a disconfirming experience. A blind B in the Alaskan lake example, even if he prepares himself properly (by going to the appropriate spot, facing in the right direction, etc.), will fail to have an experience which agrees with A's. Of course no one would take this to disconfirm A's experience.²⁰ But it would hardly follow that no experience could disconfirm A's. So how can the fact which Alston cites, a fact which reveals nothing but sound evidential principles, show that no experience could disconfirm a mystical experience?

Suppose A has the normal Alaskan lake experience. What would a genuine disconfirming experience be? Presumably, and very roughly, it would be an experience which, if itself veridical, would show or tend to show that A's is not. To take a blatant case, suppose B has normal eyesight, goes to the appropriate spot, etc., and has a visual experience similar to what one would normally have were he seeing an expanse of sand and rocks, or a parking lot full of trucks, at the place where the object of A's lake experience appeared to be. Here B's experience is so different from A's that, given the circumstances in which each occurred, we cannot plausibly see them both as veridical. If B's experience is veridical, A's is not.²¹

An advocate of the Disconfirmation Objection needs, at a minimum, to show that no experience can disconfirm any mystical experience in the way B's sand-and-rock experience seems to disconfirm A's lake experience. (For brevity, let us restrict ourselves to this sort of emphatic, direct, disconfirmation.) Here is where the comparison with our argument in the earlier sections of the paper is instructive. For the sorts of considerations we used there to argue that we cannot know that mystical experiences *gel* can also be used to suggest that no experience can discon-

firm any mystical experience.

Whether B's experience disconfirms A's cannot be decided simply from our knowledge of the phenomenological content of the two experiences. No matter how radically different those experiences are, we will not be able to say, without further information, that if one is veridical the other is not. For we have as yet no reason to rule out the possibility that A and B are accurately perceiving two distinct, and phenomenologically quite different, entities. A determination that B's experience disconfirms A's will have to rely in part on extra-experiential knowledge. Here, as before, considerations of space and time will be crucial. In the variation of the Alaskan lake example just described, A's lake experience is disconfirmed by B's sand-and-rock or parking lot experience, not simply because B's experience is phenomenologically so different from A's, but because the objects of such different experiences appear to be located at the same place. We believe that if something which looks like an expanse of sand and rocks exists at that place then something looking like a lake does not. Hence we suppose that if B's experience is veridical A's is not. Or consider a variation of our butler example. Suppose A has the "normal" butler-knifing-master experience while B has an experience one might naturally describe as one of seeing a small child playing a piano. B's experience is thus phenomenologically quite different from A's. This fact by itself will not allow us to regard B's experience as disconfirming A's. But if both experiences occur at the same time and their objects appear to be events occurring at the same place, then if B's experience is veridical A's is not.

Earlier we suggested that considerations of space and time help us to answer the question, "if the experiences of A and B were veridical would they be accurate perceptions of some single object or of two distinct objects?". Here it appears that the same sorts of considerations also allow us to answer the different question, "would the veridicality of B's experience preclude the veridicality of A's, or might both experiences be accurate perceptions of two distinct objects?" In the case of mystical experiences the first of these questions cannot be answered, for the nature of the objects of those experiences seems to render our normal spatial and temporal criteria inapplicable. Hence we are left with no way of ascertaining whether two mystical experiences gel. But for essentially the same reasons the second question also cannot be answered. And this means that no experience can disconfirm (i.e., can be used as evidence against the veridicality of) any mystical experience.

Consider some mystical experience had by A. What sort of experience, in what sort of circumstances, could B have such that we would be inclined to say that if B's experience is veridical A's is not? It is not enough simply that B's experience be phenomenologically quite different from A's. They might be accurate perceptions of two different objects. Nor will any consideration of space and time help. For suppose, to take the most favorable case, that A's experience appears to be of something "here" or "present", and that B's experience, phenomenologically quite different but occurring at the same time, also appears to be of something "here". If these were sense experiences we might naturally conclude that if B's experience

is veridical A's is not. But A's experience is mystical, and even if the objects of such experiences have spatial location their location does not seem to be limited by that of other objects. So even if A is veridically perceiving some mystical object located here, that is no bar to B's also veridically perceiving some quite different object (even some physical body) here. Consequently we cannot say, even in what seems the most favorable case, that if B's experience is veridical A's is not. And if our spatial and temporal criteria fail us here, it is not clear what else could do the job.

It is not my aim here to defend the Disconfirmation Objection. An adequate defense would require a convincing argument in support of the principle that if no experience could disconfirm A's experience then no experience could confirm it either. Perhaps such an argument is available, but I am not able to give it. I have been concerned rather with another requirement of the Objection, viz., the need to show that mystical experiences cannot be disconfirmed by other experiences. And I have tried to suggest how we can at least begin to meet this requirement by appealing to the same sorts of considerations we used earlier in developing our own objection to the claim that agreeing mystical experiences constitute C-evidence.

NOTES

1. I will use the term 'mystical experience' simply as a convenient label for a broad class of experiences. This class excludes "visions" and "locutions", but includes such experiences as those Otto calls "numinous", those Zaehner calls "panenhenic", "monistic" and "theistic", and what Stace labels "extrovertive" and "introvertive" "mystical" experiences. It is intended roughly to coincide with that class of experiences around which debate about the claim of agreement (see below) has centered.
2. "... an argument beginning with the occurrence, as psychological fact, of a given experience or set of experiences and ending with the ascription of them to a divine cause is either a poor explanatory hypothesis or a circular argument". Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality* (New York, 1971), p. 168.
3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1958), p. 324.
4. I am ignoring possible problems about how we should identify the event (or physical body, or person) which is allegedly commonly perceived. It is being taken for granted that if the observers are accurately perceiving anything at all they are perceiving the butler knifing the master, a lake, and the Department Head, respectively. Of course it is possible that in having just these same experiences the observers are commonly perceiving something distinct, but visually indistinguishable, from these objects – e.g., the butler's twin knifing the master, a lake-resembling hologram, or someone made-up to resemble the Department Head exactly. If agreeing experiences suggest that there is something being commonly perceived, they do not indicate *what* that something is. Frequently enough, however, we have sufficient additional knowledge to sift through various possible identifications and opt for just one as the most plausible. We can suppose that is the case here.
5. C.D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research* (New York, 1953), pp. 172–173. Further page references will appear in the text.
6. It is clear that Broad's argument here depends only on the claim that there is agreement among some or many mystical experiences, not among all such experiences. It is an argument from agreement, not unanimity. Hence although Broad endorses the Doctrine of Unanimity, his argument does not depend on it. Indeed, suppose the Doctrine of

Unanimity is false and that there are several subsets of mystical experiences, the experiences in any subset agreeing with one another but differing significantly from those in any other subset. Then given the way Broad argues, there could be as many different sound arguments from agreement as there are subsets of agreeing experiences (provided, of course, that the conclusions of the several arguments are mutually consistent).

7. For simplicity I will henceforth omit the condition that there be no positive reason to the contrary.
8. It is interesting to contrast Broad's treatment of mystical experiences with that given by Richard G. Swinburne in Chapter 13 of *The Existence of God* (Oxford, 1979). Swinburne defends the "Principle of Credulity": if someone has a sense experience on the basis of which he believes that he is perceiving X then it is reasonable, barring some positive reason to the contrary, to suppose both that the experience is veridical and that the experient really is perceiving X. Extending this principle to mystical experience, Swinburne argues, for example, that whenever someone has an experience on the basis of which he believes that he is perceiving God then it is *prima facie* reasonable to suppose that he really is veridically perceiving God. Swinburne's outlook has the following three features: (a) the emphasis is on individual mystical experiences; any given experience is said to enjoy a presumption of veridicality; (b) the experient's ultimate identification of the object of his experience plays a crucial role in judging the evidential value of that experience; and (c) mystical experiences are therefore used to argue for the existence of God. With Broad, by contrast, (d) evidential value is found not so much in a given mystical experience as in agreement among a collection of such experiences. Moreover (e) the experients' ultimate identifications of the objects play no role in the argument Broad endorses; however the experients finally identify the objects, so long as the *experiences themselves agree* they fall within the scope of Broad's argument. Finally, (f) Broad therefore does not use mystical experiences to argue for the existence of God. Given these differences it is surprising to find Swinburne himself claiming that Broad argues in the way he (Swinburne) does "for the *prima facie* justification of claims of religious experience" (footnote, p. 254). William L. Rowe also likens the approaches of Broad and Swinburne. See "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 13 (1982), pp. 85–92.
9. We are here concerned with an inference from agreement to the existence of some single entity, the alleged common object of the agreeing experiences. This is the sort of inference one accepts in using the argument from agreement as an argument for the existence of God. And it is the sort of inference Broad accepts, even while disputing certain ways of identifying the entity thus inferred. By contrast, one might try to argue from agreement to the existence of a species or kind of thing. Here it would not be supposed that the agreeing experiences are veridical perceptions with a common object, but only that they are veridical perceptions of things (perhaps several different things) of the same kind. This sort of argument would treat agreeing mystical experiences as evidence for the existence of supernatural beings in general, not some single supernatural being (e.g., God, or Broad's "this Reality which manifests itself"). Its conclusion would be entailed by, but would not entail, the conclusion of the argument we are discussing. Consequently it might be successful even if the argument we are discussing is not. But we will not consider this alternative argument further here. (However, see note 19 below.)
10. Where we have positive grounds for supposing that not every experience is veridical we will say they do not gel.
11. I will assume here, and henceforth, that in the cases we are discussing there is nothing untoward in the contents of the relevant experiences, no inappropriate similarities or dissimilarities which, given the spatial and temporal conditions of their occurrences, would rule out their gelling.
12. The situation is not changed if our belief about the Head's unique appearance is simply the result of an inference from the general statistical claim that it is unlikely that any

- given person will look *very* much like any other person. For again, such a claim is ultimately based on countless applications of the spatial and temporal criteria.
13. An exception may have to be made in the case where we judge that two phenomenologically similar experiences gel because we believe that in fact only one thing in the world appears, or ever has appeared, in the way the objects of those experiences appear. For example we may believe that nothing else has ever appeared the way the Grand Teton appears when viewed from a certain spot in Jackson Hole. Then if A and B have experiences whose objects appear in just that way we might argue: "since only the Grand Teton has ever appeared that way, if the two experiences are veridical they are accurate perceptions of one and the same thing, viz., the Grand Teton." Here our grounds for saying that the experiences gel do not include any reference to features of space or time. (Of course we can say that since the experiences gel, both A and B had those experiences at a certain spot in Jackson Hole and that the objects of their experiences appeared to be located at a place four miles from the point of observation. But these spatial claims are *consequences* of our conclusion that the two experiences gel, not assumptions made *in order to determine* gelling.) It is important to note, however, that our belief about the unique appearance of the Grand Teton will in part be grounded in the fact that other appropriate experiences (i.e., other visual experiences of the Grand Teton) have earlier met the normal spatial criteria for gelling. Thus the exceptional case cited actually reinforces the point about the indispensibility of criteria of space and time in determining whether or not experiences gel. (Recall the similar point made earlier in our discussion of the Department Head example.) Accordingly, the point in the text might be more thoroughly put as follows: if we do not know (or assume) where the objects of A's and B's experiences appear to be located, nor when their experiences occurred – and if we do not have that kind of knowledge about prior experiences used to ground a claim that only one thing appears in the way the objects of A's and B's experiences appear – then we will have no way of determining that their experiences are, if veridical, perceptions of one and the same thing.
 14. Thus W.T. Stace, for example, in chapter two of *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia and New York, 1960), begins the development of his version of the Doctrine of Unanimity by explicitly excluding visions and locutions from the scope of the Doctrine.
 15. See, for example, the accounts Stace relates of "introvertive mystical experiences" (op. cit., p. 85 ff.).
 16. See note 13.
 17. The Grand Teton example (note 13) suggests that sometimes we can determine that a particular set of experiences gel without first determining that they satisfy the spatial and temporal criteria. Instead we rely on the belief that only one thing appears in the way the objects of the relevant experiences appear. Such an approach would clearly be hopeless here. Our belief that only the Grand Teton appears in the way the objects of A's and B's experiences appear is itself grounded in the fact that earlier experiences similar to A's and B's have been found, by the normal spatial and temporal criteria, to gel. So the successful use of the "uniqueness of appearance" criterion requires the prior successful use, with experiences similar to A's and B's, of the normal spatial and temporal criteria. Now the claim in the text is that spatial and temporal criteria are not applicable to mystical experiences at all. No mystical experiences will be found to gel by those criteria. But then none can be shown to gel by the "uniqueness of appearance" criterion either.
 18. William P. Alston, *Religious Belief and Philosophical Thought* (New York, 1963), pp. 123–124.
 19. Note that the Disconfirmation Objection, if sound, will also work against an argument which takes agreement among mystical experiences, not as C-evidence, but as evidence for the existence of supernatural beings in general, i.e., for a species or kind of thing (see note 9). For the objection purports to show that agreeing mystical experiences do not confirm one another. So we cannot use the fact that such experiences agree to argue

that they are veridical perceptions either of some single thing or of various members of some species of thing.

20. Here we can recall that those who fail to have agreeing mystical experiences, even after suitable preparations, are sometimes suspected by religious apologists of being “spiritually blind”. The apologists are quite within their rights in not allowing such failures to disconfirm any mystical experiences which have occurred.
21. This is somewhat oversimplified. We may have to make an assumption about the *kinds* of things A and B are apparently perceiving before we can say that B’s experience disconfirms A’s. If we do not assume that both are perceiving a solid physical body or bodies (if, for example, we suppose B may be perceiving a hologram), then perhaps A’s experience could be veridical even if B’s is. I will ignore this sort of complication here.