

## Reading the mind of God (without Hebrew lessons): Alston, shared attention, and mystical experience

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**Abstract:** Alston's perceptual account of mystical experience fails to show how it is that the sort of predicates that are used to describe God in these experiences could be derived from perception, even though the ascription of matched predicates in the natural order are not derived in the manner Alston has in mind. In contrast, if one looks to research on shared attention between individuals as mediated by mirror neurons, then one can give a perceptual account of mystical experience which draws a tighter connection between what is reported in mystical reports and the most similar reports in the natural order.

In his book *Perceiving God*,<sup>1</sup> [hereafter *PG*] William Alston attempts to exploit structural similarities between sense perception and mystical religious experiences so as to elucidate the epistemic machinery of mystical practice and to safeguard its epistemic respectability as a doxastic practice by showing that the objections to its reliability are not in principle different from objections that can be mounted against sense perception. He argues that sense perception and mystical practice ought to be regarded as species of the same genus, perception *simpliciter*. However, it will be argued here, that, for the theist at least, Alston would do well to construe mystical experiences in terms of shared attention if he is to champion the epistemic status of mystical experience. It will be argued that a shared-attention account is in keeping with the spirit of Alston's project even if it runs contrary to the details of his own account.

### **Alston's perceptual model**

Alston's general thesis in *PG* is that one can become justified in certain kinds of beliefs about God through experiential awareness of God (*PG*, 1).

Alston grants that this is a controversial position because ‘the wise of this world, both believers and unbelievers alike, [take for granted] that ‘religious experience’ is a purely subjective phenomenon’ (PG, 4). However, Alston does not take these experiences to be ‘purely subjective’ because there is an established doxastic practice (or rather practices) in which these experiences are taken to be reliably indicative of reality. One experiences them *as of* external reality. The parallel with sense perception is helpful here. In both mystical experiences and sense perception one is aware of something that one takes to be ‘given’ to one’s consciousness. As a direct realist (PG, 3), Alston takes the givenness of sense perception as an indication that the practice is objective in the relevant sense; therefore, the givenness of mystical experience should lead us to a similar conclusion.<sup>2</sup>

On Alston’s account of sense perception, one perceives some object iff that object appears to one in a mode appropriate to a sense modality, where ‘appropriateness’ is a phenomenal requirement (PG, 55–56). Though mystical experience could be epistemically respectable as a doxastic practice without being perceptual, Alston thinks mystical experience is perceptual, and thus, he has a similar analysis of mystical experience. For Alston, one perceives God iff God appears to one in a mode appropriate to the perception of the kind of thing God is. One has a mystical experience of God when a special kind of *qualia* is presented to consciousness. Alston has some definite ideas concerning what kinds of *qualia* would not be appropriate.

Alston is insistent on the non-sensory nature of our perception of God. One may have sensory images along with one’s perception of God, (PG, 51–54) but these are not of epistemic significance because the perception of God is the perception of a spiritual entity. The Godhead does not literally possess either sonorous voice or white beard (PG, 19–20).<sup>3</sup> For Alston, non-sensory mystical experiences are not as cluttered with epistemically irrelevant material. He favours ‘focal’ mystical experiences for the same reason (PG, 33). A focal mystical experience is one in which ‘the awareness of God occupies one’s attention to the exclusion of all else’ (PG, 32). Background experiences would be ones in which something other than God’s presence is in the perceptual foreground. We see then that the mystical experience with the highest epistemic pedigree will be one in which no sensory imagery occurs and in which one’s awareness of God is the exclusive focus of attention.

Alston’s paradigm case is that of focal, non-sensory mystical experiences because he envisions mystical experiences as being structurally parallel to the perception of physical objects.<sup>4</sup> When one looks at an apple, what is given to consciousness is simple in the sense that it is exhaustively self-presenting.<sup>5</sup> One need not *perceive* anything else in looking at the apple. There need not be any structure to one’s awareness when one is looking at the apple. There may be structure to the apple, but there need not be any structure to one’s awareness of

the apple. One might infer things about the apple that one perceives, but those inferences need not enter in to the awareness of the dusky, red object before one. Just as one can most clearly perceive an apple in an uncluttered environment when the apple is the sole focus of one's attention; even so, one can most clearly perceive God when there is no sensory imagery and God is the exclusive focus of one's attention. However, construing mystical experiences as what we might call 'simple perception' proves problematic upon closer examination.

Consider the following case from Alston's book.

The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience. It was like the effect of some great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion. The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was ... . My highest faith in God and truest idea of him were then born in me. (*PG*, 22, italics removed)

This is clearly a case of putative non-sensory focal mystical experience. The phenomenal qualities of the experience are described in non-sensory terms ('ineffable joy'; 'exultation') and in negations of conditions which aid sensory cognition ('stillness of the night'; 'darkness'). The experience is claimed to have completely dominated the perceptual faculties of the person ('The ordinary sense of things faded'; 'nothing but an ineffable joy ... remained'), and, of course, the experience is supposed to be of God.

The case satisfies Alston's simple perception model only if the *qualia* of the experience are appropriate to an experience of God in the same sense that the *qualia* of a sense experience of an apple are appropriate to an apple. However, Alston admits that 'we are quite incapable of enumerating the basic phenomenal qualities of which "divine phenomena" are configurations' (*PG*, 49). In the case of perceiving an apple, it appears to one as having a certain size, shape, colour, etc, and, provided one is reasonably familiar with the produce aisle, one can consistently isolate particular characteristics of the apple which are indicative of its determinate nature. Alston wants to say that the person who has had the mystical experience related has been (putatively) aware of God. However, God is not an ineffable joy, a swelling harmony, a wafting upwards, or a solemn silence, nor are some conjunction of these necessarily indicative of God's determinate nature. To put it crudely, it is hard to see how this sudden onset of silence could be equivalent to 'having been appeared to God-ly' if what is at issue is simple perception.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, those descriptions which do seem to pick out an immaterial person and its activity are borrowed from descriptions applied to aspects of the created order which are not themselves subject to simple perception. After surveying a number of mystical-experience reports, Alston provides us with a

list of common ways God is described as being and common actions God is described as doing. God is described as being ‘good’, ‘powerful’, ‘loving’, and ‘compassionate’ (PG, 43). All of these attributes can be straightforwardly applied and withheld in the natural order but are clearly not used to describe what is given in simple perception. When one is aware of someone’s happiness by watching them smile, the contoured flesh is presented to your consciousness, and one is aware of the happiness of the other through the smile. However, the contoured flesh is not identical with a token of happiness, and simple perception is not at work here. Likewise, mystical reports claim to experience God as ‘strengthening’, ‘forgiving’, ‘sympathizing’, and ‘speaking’ (PG, 44). All of these are also experienced in the natural order but not in the manner of simple perception. How forgiveness might be given to consciousness in a self-presenting way is no less mysterious than how being powerful could.

A plausible response on Alston’s behalf is that the problem here is with mystical reports and not with mystical experiences. Although love may always come to one as mediated when it occurs in the natural order, God *is* love. To experience God is to experience what love is directly. Since human language is forged in the natural order, it ought not to be surprising if its locutions result in paradoxes when applied to experiences that lie outside of that domain. Therefore, it is not obviously impossible that what is not an object of simple perception in the natural order can become one in mystical experience.

There are two points to be made in response. The first is that the issue is not simply what a divine being can do, but what we can do. It seems plausible that a human being cannot have an infinite number of beliefs, but that an infinite being could. That is an example of something which is impossible in the natural order being possible for the divine. In the case of mystical experience, human beings can recognize and ascribe love, forgiveness, and the like in the natural order, just not through simple perception. Thus, given what human beings can do, there ought to be a bias in favour of an account which makes mystical experience structurally parallel to the kinds of experiences which produce similar reports in the natural order. Simple perception is not that kind of experience. The requisite experience may supervene on a pattern of simple perceptions, but it will not be one.

The second point is that appealing to mystery cannot help motivate the aptness of the appeal to the well-known. Consider the role that sense perception plays in Alston’s argument. Alston does not need to exploit structural parallels between sense perception and mystical experience in order to subsume mystical experience into his account of doxastic practices. Such a move is in principle consistent even with an inferential account of mystical experience of the sort that Alston intends his account to be an alternative to. In order to argue that it is plausible that a mystical practice be epistemically respectable, Alston needs a filled-out account which is consistent with mystical experience reports and can be

compared favourably to extant practices or general principles which his interlocutors already accept. This is what highlighting the structural parallels between mystical experience and simple sense perception does for Alston.

The objection in play is that those things which are closest in the natural order to the objects of mystical experience as indicated by mystical reports are not objects of simple perception for humans nor is it apparent how they could be. Thus, we are not shown *how* mystical experience could be respectable beyond the trivial point that, if simple perception were a workable model of mystical experience, then the experiences could yield justification. 'Perception' is a success term after all. Therefore, the farthest that Alston's argument can take us is the claim that it is logically possible that mystical experiences produce justification. This is a substantive claim, but a weak one. It would be better to find a replacement for simple perception that can do the same work within Alston's overarching project.

One might also hold onto a simple perception model if one thought it was required by a theology that includes the simplicity of God and the beatific vision. However, inasmuch as the beatific vision is supposed to be a state of communion and not mere observation, one might still want to embrace the shared-attention alternative put forth later in the paper. The beatific vision is supposed to be a participation in the inner life of the Trinity which, in order to be consistent with the doctrine of *perichoresis*, the interpenetration of the divine persons, should involve the fullest possible expression of shared attention. Furthermore, it is too quick to move from the simplicity of God to the necessity of simple perception being the cognitive mode in which a human encounters the divine. Deriving conclusions about the constitution of the cognitive apparatus necessary to have knowledge of an object from the part-whole relations of the object of knowledge doesn't seem like a simple matter. A uniform piece of plastic can require the synthesization of visual information processed by different neural modules like the so-called 'what' and 'where' systems. Likewise, an object of simple perception can have a complex mereological make-up.<sup>7</sup>

Although the sudden onset of ineffable joy and unnatural silence may not be able to ground an assertion of the direct awareness of a theistic God on a simple perception model, empirical research on the nature of shared attention suggests an alternative. In the next section, some of this research is utilized in order to build an alternative perceptual account of mystical experience which can accomplish Alston's goals. In doing so, simple perception will be abandoned in favour of what might be called 'intersubjective perception'.

### **The shared-attention alternative**

Shared attention occurs when one is engaged in an act of attending to something and in doing so one is consciously coordinating with another on what

both will attend to.<sup>8</sup> As such, shared attention involves coordinated ‘attention-focusing’.<sup>9</sup> Shared attention can be dyadic or triadic. In dyadic shared attention, both participants focus attention on the other, and in triadic shared attention, both participants focus on an independent object. Take the following three-stage example of a ten-month old and its mother interacting. First, the child looks the mother in the eye. Second, the child turns and points to a bright object. Third, the child looks back at the mother to see that she has followed the direction of the point. If the mother has co-operated with the gaze-direction of the child, then the child and the mother had dyadic shared attention at stage 1, and achieved triadic shared attention at stage 2.

As Ingar Brinck points out, shared attention is more than ‘mutual object-focusing’ because ‘the subjects will have to attend to each other as capable of attending in a goal-intended way, that is, in a way that is not controlled by the object of attention’.<sup>10</sup> In the pointing example, the awareness of the bright object is evidenced by the point, and the mother attends to the bright object because the child manifested a desire for both persons to attend to the bright object. If the child tries to check the gaze of the mother in stage 3 only to find that the mother has silently left the room, the child’s experience of attending to the object in stage 2 will seem to have been a different experience than it initially appeared to be.<sup>11</sup> The co-operation of the other in attending is a felt part of the experience itself.

Developmental psychopathologist R. Peter Hobson argues that the shared-attention impairment in the autistic is rooted in an inability to enter into inter-subjective engagement through recognizing the expression of attitudes in bodily cues.<sup>12</sup> Vasudevi Reddy traces a progressive increase in the scope of such activity beginning in the second month with some suggestive accounts of recognitional precursor behaviour even within minutes of birth.<sup>13</sup> Infants evidence a very early ability to re-identify persons that are important for them. By two weeks of age, a baby can recognize and respond to its mother’s face, voice, and even smell.<sup>14</sup> This demonstrates that the infant’s attention-focusing mechanism(s) target people from the beginning. Borrowing from Wittgenstein, Hobson characterizes inter-subjective recognition as a kind of perception.<sup>15</sup>

On Hobson’s model, attitudes ‘are manifest in bodily expressions, orientations, and actions’.<sup>16</sup> The idea is that, unless one has a related impairment like autism, one can, within limits, naturally perceive mental states by perceiving the physical expression of that state and, through perceiving those states, perceive the presence of persons.<sup>17</sup> One way of making sense of these odd claims is to appeal to the work of mirror neurons.<sup>18</sup>

It was discovered in the early 1990s that neuronal firing patterns in certain areas of both monkey and human brains encode types of actions. The same pattern of neuronal firing occurs in neuronal overlaps between the sensory and motor systems whether the individual is the one doing the action or displaying affect on the

one hand or is simply observing another doing these things. The firing patterns track not only types of motions, but motion-goal or motion-affect composites. That is, one's brain encodes distinctive ways of pursuing goals modelled by others with the same pattern it would use if it was oneself that was pursuing that goal. Of particular interest here, one pattern that is mirrored by one's neurons in this manner is the display of affect. For example, a pattern of neuronal firing tracks the enactment of disgust whether it is displayed by another or by oneself.<sup>19</sup>

Neuroscience is telling us that a display of affective or goal-intended behaviour by another is automatically registered by the brain in the same mental grammar as a first-person experience of the same type is. It does not seem implausible, therefore, to say that when this occurs it is more like perception than a discursive reasoning process. When one has registered the sensory stimuli of the other person, the work of one's sensory system has already recorded the motor equivalent in the motor system because of the overlap of the two systems in the mirror neuron system.

Because of its reciprocal nature, shared attention is a type of intersubjective perception in which there is a heightened opportunity for the communication of affect, and there is a resulting sensitivity to the pattern of affect displayed by the other. A study was done in which some infants saw their mother on a television screen in real time (and vice versa) and other infants saw a delayed feed of their mother. The result was that the infants that saw their mother in real time interacted with the image on the monitor as if the mother were present, but the infants who saw the delayed feed exhibited distress and averted their eyes from the screen.<sup>20</sup> The infants were not merely responding to expressions of emotion but to patterns of emotional expression which evidence interaction. Perceiving a face with lips upturned is different from perceiving the person who is smiling as expressing happiness, and part of what allows one to move from the former to the latter is a pattern of interaction which evidences what caused the person to move their lips, what pleased the person.

Given that the theistic God is supposed to be personal and that for the most prominent theistic stories the point of knowing God is having a co-operative, interactive relationship with the divine, one would antecedently expect that knowing God should look more like a case of shared attention than one of simple perception. This is not to say that the shared-attention alternative could be falsified if monitoring parts of the brain implicated in the mirror neuron system in supposedly holy people failed to show the proper pattern of activity. Rather, the point is that shared attention gives us a window in the natural order onto a perceptual process that naturally extracts an awareness of the psychological properties of a person from what is not identical with those psychological properties, and some process like that would have to be going on in order for case histories like the one cited in the first section to be consistent with, if not evidence for, a perceptual account of mystical experience.

The shared-attention model of mystical experience is as follows. Suppose that God exists, is inherently personal, aware of all human persons at all times, and at all times is desirous of communion with all persons at that level of intimacy which they are capable of having with God. In this case, there will be a hierarchy of types of mystical experience which are unequally related to their object. The most impoverished sort of mystical experience will be one in which God has an intersubjective perception of the human but the human approaches God not as a person but as a field of simple *qualia*, although of an extraordinary sort perhaps. The next type which would be more adequate to its object would be a mystical experience in which the human takes herself to have an intersubjective perception of God (e.g. to see the deity at work in the world), and God has an intersubjective perception of her. However, the co-operative phenomenal component of the attending is absent, and therefore, the human experiences God by observing God rather than as part of an act of communion. The highest tier of mystical experience would be one in which the human is engaged in dyadic shared attention with God. Dyadic shared attention with God can then be used as a foundation for a triadic experience, for example, by the divine showing a prophet the fate of a nation and so on. There is conceptual room here for the boundaries of these three divisions to be vague and, indeed, overlap such that the highest-grade experiences in one division may be of a higher rank than the lowest ones of the division directly above them. However, generally speaking, dyadic shared-attention experiences will be epistemically superior to mere intersubjective perceptions which will in turn generally be superior to mere simple perceptions.

One is engaged in dyadic shared attention with God iff one is aware of God as exhibiting some mental state which is directed towards oneself and the mental state which God exhibits involves an awareness of the co-operative nature of the present attention. This co-operation will be invested with an interactive pattern of affect since to experience God is to experience both the source of all goodness and to experience someone who wants to have the most intimate of relationships with one, although presumably shared attention with an angry, wrathful deity would have its fair share of affect as well. The emotional content will not be incidental but is a key ingredient in what we ought to expect of this interactive experience with God. Alston himself notes that one of the ways in which subjects individuate the object of their mystical experience is by ‘characteristic affective reactions’ (*PG*, 185–186). Likewise, when spiritual directors draw up criteria for determining the object of religious experiences, an affective component tends to be well represented (e.g. the experience will leave one in a state of ‘interior peace’) (*PG*, 203). It is hard to see how such a principle of individuation could possibly help the realist aspirations of Alston’s account; whereas, it fits nicely into this account.

On this model, it is not that one has a neutral observation of love as a self-presenting property or that one has a *sui generis* positive feeling which one infers



must have been of God given the available hypotheses. Instead, the pattern of one's experience appears to manifest a shared awareness between the divine and oneself within which affect and information can be communicated. Just as one may experience another human person as loving if they seek out an opportunity to be alone with one for no other reason than the sharing of the moment, even so God can communicate love by causing someone to have an experience in which everything is blocked out ('The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen') except for an awareness of the voluntary self-disclosure of affect of the divine naturally registered in a way that primes the impulse to reciprocate ('nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained'). If the shared attention becomes focused on one's sin as an object of mutual awareness followed by an immediate response of positive affect disclosure, it is also not hard to see how a mystical experience could communicate an action like forgiveness.

Let us look at a couple more examples from Alston's book.

*In a state of intense inner wretchedness, of such intensity that my mind seemed on the point of breaking, I got up at 4 a.m. and began wandering aimlessly on the wooded hillside. This went on for some time until, unexpectedly, the words of the 130th psalm sounded clearly in my mind: 'And plenteous redemption is ever found in Him; and, from all its iniquities, He Israel shall redeem.' With these words a light seemed to envelop me, and there flowed into my desolate heart such a flood of Love and Compassion that I was overwhelmed and overpowered by the weight of it. I was stricken by such wonder and amazement that I burst into tears of joy; it seemed to flow through my whole being with a cleansing and healing virtue. From that moment I knew that Love is the nature of reality. (PG, 18)*

For Alston's simple perception account, hearing a voice reading a psalm and the experience of light are not even putatively of God. The experience of God in this example is wholly contained in the presentation of inherently and uniquely divine *qualia*, probably at the point in the experience we are told 'there flowed into my desolate heart such a flood of Love and Compassion'. However, once again, though not obviously impossible, it is unintelligible how love and compassion could be mediated by simple perception. Since the auditory and light imagery are not of God, ironically, Alston could only claim they were of epistemic use in the disambiguation of the experience for the subject if they were used in a conscious inference.

In contrast, using the shared-attention account, we can claim that sound, light, and affect are all mediums that can be manipulated by God in such a way as to reveal the mind of God toward the subject of the experience. The subject hears the sound of a voice reading a psalm that responds to his situation, a manipulation of auditory stimulation that evidences an awareness and concern for the subject by some theistically affiliated entity. He or she then experiences an unnatural light which seems patterned to reinforce the extra-natural nature of the reassuring voice. Then, the subject has the experience as of being loved and then one of peace, perhaps through the activation of the subject's mirror neurons or

perhaps in another way. The preceding pattern of light and audition does not seem epistemically incidental to the experience of being loved. The shared-attention model allows the preceding pattern of sensory imagery to enter into how one experiences whatever *qualia* were present in the experience such that it is experienced as being loved by God.<sup>21</sup>

Let us take one last example from Alston's book which features a particularly extraneous *qualia* from Alston's point of view, the sensation of warmth.

All at once I *felt someone near me*, a Presence entered this little room of which I became immediately conscious ... Dazed I knelt by the nearest chair and here is the physical phenomenon that has recurred many times since. Into my heart there came a great *warmth*. The only way I can describe it is in the words of disciples on their way to Emmaus 'our hearts burned within us.' My hand raised in prayer also glowed from tips to wrist with a blessed warmth, never before experienced. (*PG*, 113–114)

The subject has an experience as of someone in the room. The subject is dazed, and responds by kneeling in prayer. Once he or she is praying, then a warmth is felt in his or her heart and praying hands. The presence of a someone does not necessarily pinpoint the divine as the presence. However, the interaction goes on. The subject responds to the ambiguous presence with a posture of religious devotion and is *then* the recipient of an unnatural warming sensation with strategic placement in the heart and praying hands. The feeling of warmth is the part the subject dwells on as the distinctive and revelatory experience. The warmth, not the feeling of someone in the room, is consciously associated with a tradition of such experiences through the reference to the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke's gospel. The pattern fits very well with the relational interactions endemic to the shared-attention model. For Alston though, warmth is an especially poor *qualia* type for mediating divine presence because it is not inherently of an external reality. Warmth, when taken in terms of simple perception, is the prototypical subjective experience. However, within the interactive, relational pattern of the experience above, we can see how a subject could experience it as being of the divine even without a subsequent conscious inference to that effect.

Given the availability on the shared-attention model of a closer connection between the content of mystical reports both person-specific and otherwise with their use in the natural order, the shared-attention model ought to be preferred for Alston's purposes. The account is dependent not on the claim that there exist mysterious *qualia* which can somehow communicate God to one by simple perception but on the claim that some medium or another can be manipulated by God so as to manifest interactive awareness. This move manages to be less metaphysically risky while at the same time opening the door to the possibility of affording epistemic respectability to mystical experiences which would have been sub-par for Alston, such as those mediated by sensory content or even other human persons so long as they are supple enough to divine agency to not obfuscate the view.

At this point we must be clear, the shared-attention account does not repudiate the possibility that one can have extra-natural simple *qualia* which are unique to the divine (even necessarily so). Rather, the claim is that to have a mystical experience of God one needs to experience God through some medium or another, and that there is no reason to think that one cannot have such an experience through many different sorts of mediums insofar as God's agency can order the patterns of many different kinds of mediums. It does not follow that all mediums are equally apt for such a purpose either in the degree of resolution with which God's mental state is communicated or in the range of such states that may be communicated. It may well be the case that the non-sensory, focal experiences with which Alston is concerned are using the highest quality medium. However, the door has been opened to many more sorts of experiences being capable of a robust epistemic status than Alston countenanced.<sup>22</sup>

### **Realism and being direct**

Although different in its details, the present account is intended to satisfy the same aims that Alston set for his own account and to take advantage of the same general structure. The account is intended to be perceptual and realist in contrast with explanations of mystical experiences which rely on a conscious inferential process being applied to paranormal experiences. Since the majority of this paper has carved out the difference between the view Alston presents in *Perceiving God* and the one defended here, let us spend a few words healing the breach between the two by assuaging Alstonian worries concerning the realism of the shared-attention view.

One of the features of Alston's account which he takes to establish the realism of his view is the very absence of a medium which could require one to disentangle what could have caused the experience from the experience itself. Direct perception is connected with a presentation of the object which has 'mediated immediacy,' *aka* '[o]ne is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolute immediate awareness, but is not perceived' (PG, 22). When one sees an apple, it is possible to be introspectively aware of this conscious state, but one need not be. To see apple X, all that is required is that one see X. Alston describes the relationship between the state of consciousness of seeing X and X as a 'nesting relationship' (*ibid.*). No inference is required. Alston contrasts 'mediated immediacy' with 'mediate perception' where 'One is aware of X through the awareness of another object of perception' (*ibid.*).<sup>23</sup> An example of what Alston has in mind here would be seeing an apple in a mirror. What is presented to consciousness in this case is a mirror, but through being aware of the mirror one is aware of the apple. Alston would think of shared attention as being, at best, indirect in the manner of mediate perception and, at worst, as requiring a conscious inference. One may be able to

employ such an inference in an epistemically virtuous manner. The claim is simply that shared attention with God would be something other than direct.

At one point, Alston actually mentions a doxastic practice he labels ‘interpersonal perception’ (PG, 252). On the question of its relationship with sense perception, he says:

There is some controversy over whether to regard this as an autonomous practice or simply as a department of our sense perceptual practice; I shall adopt the former view. That is, I shall suppose that we have a practice of objectifying certain ranges of our experience in terms of the presence, conditions, characteristics, and activities of other persons ... (*ibid.*)

Whatever else ‘objectifying’ may be, it does not sound like mediated immediacy. Four things need to be noted in response.

First, shared attention does not require making a conscious inference in the natural order, and there is no reason to think it should have to in mystical experience. There are a number of lines of evidence for this claim. Three are as follows. As related previously, an autistic individual can be remarkably competent in inferential reasoning while suffering radical impairments in shared attention. Persons with Williams syndrome can have serious degrees of mental retardation while having at least a four-year-old level of mentalizing, and thus being competent at shared attention.<sup>24</sup> In normally developing children, even before the emergence of triadic attention at nine to ten months, one sees sophisticated displays of dyadic shared attention. A colourful example is the emergence of coy behaviour at two months in which infants engaged in dyadic attention with another break off the attention with a head turn and the raising of the arm while smiling.<sup>25</sup> This behaviour is inexplicable in terms of mere boredom with a stimulus, and, although it is obviously hard to pin down exactly what the infant is aware of, one ought not to impute the awareness necessary to ground this behaviour on sophisticated inferential ability. If shared attention in the natural order is not dependent on a conscious inference, one is hard put to come up with a reason why the same or similar mechanisms cannot operate non-inferentially in a mystical experience.

Second, ‘subconscious inferences’ do not threaten Alstonian realism. Consider sense perception. One’s simple perception of physical objects is the result of a complex process requiring the integration of cognitive mechanisms devoted to different facets of one’s environment. In the case of vision, not only is one’s visual experience integrated with that produced by one’s other senses, not only does one have to bring together the data provided by each eye to form a complementary picture, but one has distinct neural circuitry sub-serving different aspects of one’s visual experience such as spatial ‘where’ properties and the ‘whatness’ of objects.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the integration of some or all of these processes in principle can be described according to general rules of transformation in a syntactically similar manner to conscious inferential reasoning would not cause

Alston to worry about visual perception being direct in the relevant way. Neither should he be concerned if it were possible to become consciously aware of how one is producing one's visual experience or use visual perception for further cognitive operations which may be inferential. Therefore, the mere fact that shared attention requires apparently complex cognitive mechanisms should not count against its being suited to realism.

Third, there is no principled reason to construe the nesting relationship of direct perception so narrowly as to exclude many cases of shared attention. Presumably, Alston would not say that a pair of corrective lenses makes one's visual perceptions mediate perceptions. Even though the most proximal object of one's visual experience is one's glasses or contacts, it does not seem right to say that one's glasses take away one's ability to have a direct perception of anything else. Rather, they enable one to have direct perceptions which are more distinct. Something can be a causal intermediary without being an intermediate object of awareness. If causal intermediacy is what's relevant, then not only do I never directly perceive anything when wearing my glasses, but it would appear that what I actually directly perceive is whatever neural state is either exactly prior to or identical with the neural state which realizes a given conscious sense experience. If what matters is causal mediacy not awareness, then why privilege the world outside the body?

It is mediate awareness that must be in view. However, as long as one does not confuse these two senses of mediation, there does not appear to be any inherent obstacle to being directly aware of an apple through a mirror. Also, there does not appear to be any obstacle to some shared attention being direct. For example, if one sees another's inner eyebrows arch, eyes directed down and bloodshot, making a frown, one is normally aware of the other as sad. Although one can refocus one's attention so as to privilege the facial symptoms, the description of the other person one is naturally drawn to is not one that describes them as having this or that facial feature, but one that describes them as sad. Sadness is what one is directly aware of.

Fourth, even cases of shared attention which fit wholly within the domain of 'mediate perception' satisfy Alston's realist goal. Some triadic cases of shared attention would seem to be plausible candidates for mediate perceptions even when mediacy is not causal mediacy but that of awareness. For example, if God redirects one's attention to one's sin, it may be that one's sin will take up one's focal awareness, but that the experience is of 'my-sin-as-being-revealed-to-me-by-God'. In this case, the immediate object of attention is one's sin. However, in attending to one's sin in the particular way at issue, one attends mediately to God where the mediacy in question is not merely causal mediacy. Even if it were the case that all mystical experiences only featured God in the background, it would still be the case that God's presence is not inferred but is contained in the qualitative texture of the experience.

To illustrate in the natural order, if A and B are carrying a large piece of furniture up some stairs and A cannot see B, A still experiences the couch-carrying differently than A would if A thought he were carrying it alone. Even though A is focused on carrying the item up the stairs and may not even see B, A is mediately aware of B, and does not use inferential reasoning to establish B's existence (though A could certainly try that). If A reaches the top of the stairs only to realize that A was carrying the item alone, A will not think that an inferential error was made somewhere along the way. It will feel like an illusion. The experience ends up being of a different nature than it seemed to be at the time even if A was focused on the furniture and not on B, the reason being that A took himself/herself to be aware of B in the way that B affected A's sense of the weight and movement of the couch.

In conclusion, the shared-attention account is a preferable realist account of mystical experiences to Alston's perceptual account, even for Alston's own purposes.<sup>27</sup>

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## Notes

1. Alston (1991).
2. 'The focus will be on what are taken to be *direct, non-sensory* experiences of God. In calling them "experiences" I am thinking of them as involving a *presentation, givenness, or appearance* of something to the subject, identified by the subject as God. It is this *presentational* character of the experiences that leads me to range them under a generic concept of perception' (PG, 5).
3. '[I]t is not inconceivable that God should appear to us as looking bright or sounding a certain way, even though He does not, in His own nature possess any sensory qualities ... . Nevertheless, I am going to concentrate in this book on non-sensory mystical perception. It seems clear that a non-sensory appearance of a purely spiritual deity has a greater chance of presenting Him as He is than any sensory presentation. If God appears to one, non-sensorily, as loving, powerful, or good, the appearance, so far as it goes, could correspond fairly closely with the way God is Himself. While if we experience God as looking or sounding a certain way, that can't be the way He is, not even approximately' (PG, 19–20).
4. '[The subjects in Alston's core set of mystical case studies] take it that something, namely, God, has been presented or given to their consciousness in generically the same way as that in which objects in the environment are (apparently) presented to one's consciousness in sense perception' (PG, 14).  
'It seems clear to me ... that our sources are reporting a distinct sense of something's ... *presenting* itself to their awareness in generically the same way as that in which physical objects present themselves to our awareness in sense perception' (PG, 16).
5. Even if what is presented to consciousness is simple, that does not exclude the possibility that a creative subconscious process underlies that simple awareness of the sort championed in work like that of Noe (2004).
6. I take Richard Gale to be pressing a similar line when he stresses the link between sense perception and what he calls 'objective accusatives' in the individuation problem he presents in Gale (1994).
7. This paragraph was inspired by critical comments by Faith Pawl.
8. Vasudevi Reddy records a similar general description of shared attention from Adamson and Bakeman, 'acting in concert with responsive partners', but this description seems to allow for satisfaction by actions such as participating in any organized military strike which seems too permissive; Reddy (2005), 89.
9. Brinck (2001), 262.
10. *Ibid.*, 270.
11. This case is a re-contextualization of one offered by Campbell (2005), 287–288.
12. Hobson (2005), 189ff.
13. Reddy (2005), 96.
14. Illingworth (1980), 6.
15. '[P]erception is relational, and to perceive a smile as a smile ... is to respond with feeling, in such a way that through the smile one apprehends the emotional state of the other'; Hobson (2005), 190.
16. *Ibid.*, 186.
17. Commenting on a study in which ten-week-old infants were monitored while their mothers displayed a particular emotion, Hobson says, 'Even in early infancy, then, to perceive emotion is also to react to emotion. If the infants had shown no reaction, we would have concluded that they were unable to perceive emotion at all. The emotional reactions seem to reveal that babies have a perception of feelings that prompts feelings'; Hobson (2004), 39–40.
18. See Rizzolatti, Fogassi, & Gallese (2006), 54–61; also Stamenov & Gallese (2002).
19. 'Taken together such data strongly suggest that humans may comprehend emotions, or at least powerful negative emotions, through a direct mapping mechanism involving parts of the brain that generate visceral motor responses. Such a mirror mechanism for understanding emotions cannot,

- of course, fully explain all social cognition, but it does provide for the first time a functional neural basis for some of the interpersonal relations on which more complex social behaviors are built'; *ibid.*
20. 'It was not that the mother's earlier responses were unpleasant in any way. It was just that they were suited to a different moment, and not in tune with what the infant was expressing now. The effect of introducing the delay was considerable infant distress. Often the infant would turn away from the mother's image and dart brief glances at the screen – a quite different set of reactions from those that occurred when the mother merely looked away to one side. Therefore it was not simply that the infant felt unattended to or even unresponded to – it was that the interactions were not in tune'; Hobson (2004), 38–39.
  21. Three other examples from Alston's book which can be treated in similar fashion due to the presence of voices and light are as follows from *PG*, 18–19: (1) 'At one time I reached utter despair and wept and prayed God for mercy instinctively and without faith in reply. That night I stood with other patients in the grounds waiting to be let in to our ward. . . . Suddenly someone stood beside me in a dusty brown robe and a voice said "Mad or sane, you are one of My sheep". I never spoke to anyone of this but every since, twenty years, it has been the pivot of my life.' (2) 'During the night of September 9th 1954, I awoke and looking out of my window saw what I took to be a luminous star which gradually came nearer, and appeared as a soft slightly blurred white light. I was seized with violent trembling, but had no fear. I knew that what I felt was great awe. This was followed by a sense of overwhelming love coming to me, and going out from me, then of great compassion from the Outer Presence. After that I had a sense of overpowering peace, and indescribable happiness.' (3) 'It happened one morning that the Servitor [Suso] saw in a vision that he was surrounded by a troop of heavenly spirits. He therefore asked one of the most radiant amongst these Principals of the Sky to show him how God dwelt in his soul. The angel said to him, "Do but fix your eyes joyously upon yourself and watch how God plays the game of love within your loving soul." And he looked quickly, and saw that his body in the region of his heart was pure and transparent like crystal: and he saw the Divine Wisdom peacefully enthroned in the midst of his heart, and she was fair to look upon. And by her side was the soul of the Servitor, full of heavenly desires; resting lovingly upon the bosom of God, Who had embraced it, and pressed it to His Heart. And it remained altogether absorbed and inebriated with love in the arms of God its well-beloved.'
  22. This paragraph is inspired by the critical comments of Brad Sickler.
  23. Revealingly, Alston uses interpersonal perception as a wedge to divide perceptual practices in general from a standard of predicatability commensurate with that which simple sense perception satisfies.
  24. See Carey & Johnson (2000), or Bellugi, Lichtenberger, Jones, Lai, & St George (2000). For an article that compares Williams Syndrome with autism, see Tager-Flusberg, Plesa Skwerer, & Joseph (2006).
  25. Reddy (2000), 186.
  26. Kosslyn & Koenig (1995), ch. 3. For colourful examples of what it is like for a person when different sub-systems fail, see the colourful work of Oliver Sacks.
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