

Against Justification

Howard Wettstein

University of California, Riverside

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Jerome (Yehudah) Gellman's paper, "Perceiving God," presented at the Henle Conference at St. Louis University, April 2008, evaluates a couple of arguments that attempt to establish the existence of God on the basis of individual religious experience. I can send his paper if anyone is interested. The following are my comments on his paper.

1. William James, speaking of the sorts of experiences at issue in the literature that figures in YG's (Yehudah Gellman) paper says, that these experiences are "gifts to our spirit." "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded." James suggests that these are (or may be) of cosmic significance. He seems to suppose that these experiences bespeak quite literally another form of consciousness, and that it is an open question as to whether such forms reveal worlds, as it were, that are ordinarily beyond our reach. Leaving that aspect of his view aside, clearly these experiences are of immense importance to the people who undergo them. And whether or not one is a believer, even if one is tone deaf to this form of music, as it were, these experiences ought to rank up there with, e.g., sublime experiences in the arts.

2. It's good to have a look at James on these topics since he has a gift (like Strawson and Harry Frankfurt) to raise and discuss very basic questions in a way that's free of the later analytic scholasticism that in some sense takes off from his work. Turning to considerations of truth and epistemology, James asks whether these sorts of experiences (I'll soon come to the question of how to characterize them) furnish "any warrant for truth."

- For the agent who has the experience, he says, they "Usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative...." They are, he says, "face to face presentations," "as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us."
- For the mystically deprived, there is no obligation at all to accept them as authoritative. One central reason he gives is the great variety of such experiences, testifying as it were to many different gods, non-

gods, metaphysical realities, etc. (The distinction is reminiscent of Hume's discussion of miracles.)

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3. The literature to which YG's work is responsive, and which he criticizes in the current paper, can be seen as a kind of updating, an amplification of James' discussion. In a very well-done Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy piece on mysticism, YG points out that the current "argument from perception," (which YG criticizes in the first part of his present paper) is really a response to James' second point above, the question of whether experiences of God obligate the rest of us to believe their dictates, as it were. The "argument from doxastic practice," which YG critically explores in the second half of the present paper, is really an attempt to defend the idea that for the individual who undergoes these experiences, they are, as James says, absolutely authoritative.

4. A few preliminary points:

- a. The putative experiences of God that are in question are not, in any ordinary sense, perceptual. The closer they are to actual perceptual experience, the more likely we are to dismiss them as authoritative; we will take them to be a bit crazy. This is not to deny any number of analogies with perception that the philosophical arguments highlight. But we should not beg questions by speaking of the experiences as perceptions or even speaking of them as perceptual. James speaks of them as face to face, but we should remember that the Bible speaks of Moses as distinctive among the prophets for his face to face interactions with God, but that when Moses asks to see God's face, he is told that no one can do so and live. The experiences in question are to be sure very various, ranging from ones that involve a deeply felt sense of God's presence, God's love, etc. to quasi-sensual "almost seeings, almost hearings," and the like.
- b. James speaks of these experiences as if they issue in hypotheses, propositions about God to which the experiences testify. But it doesn't seem to me inevitable that an agent who undergoes such an experience sees it in anything like this way. One might—and this applies both to the agent and to others who hear of the experience—see the experience as a deep **expression** if one's religious outlook, rather than as the sort of apprehension of an

independent reality. Alternatively, one might be inclined to take it to be such an apprehension, but knowing that others have had such experiences with “other gods,” one might be agnostic about the apprehension question.

- And importantly, both of these latter attitudes are compatible with the experience being of utmost religious significance to the agent. (I may here tell a story of my own case of such an experience—of great personal significance, but as I experienced it of no epistemic import.)
- c. Terminology: How can we characterize, neutrally as possible, the experiences in question? I don’t want to call them perceptual as explained. I don’t want to speak of them as experiences, quasi-perceptual or whatever, **of** God, since that begs the question. I don’t want to think of them as “epistemic seemings” (God will forgive Swinburne for this expression maybe—kidding) since, as YG explains, that suggests that the agent is inclined to believe something on the basis of the experience. And I think although lots of agents are so inclined, it’s not, as explained, essential. So I’ll speak of these as experiences “as of God.” Don’t worry; it won’t come up much in conversation.

5. I want to make a very general point about the treatment of these phenomena in James as well as in the literature that YG is reacting to. The point I want to make is parallel to one that Bernard Williams and others make about something they call “scientism,” what they take to be the misapplication to philosophy of scientific modes of explanation, or something like that. What I have in mind I call “legalism.” I recently commented at the apa on a very interesting book by Charles Griswold on forgiveness, in which he speaks frequently of **warranted** and unwarranted resentment, of the **obligation** to forgive, to forswear resentment, of the question of who has **standing** to forgive. In that discussion I called attention to what seemed to me like an invasion of legal terminology/conceptualization into the ethical domain. Of course the whole matter is controversial, and for many, e.g. deontologists, it is perhaps the apt terminology. But that’s not obvious and it’s worth noting. Here too, in the literature to which YG is responding, some of the central notions are

justification, warrant, and obligation. Since we are talking epistemology, perhaps you will think that all this goes without saying and that these are obviously the central notions that pertain to knowledge and belief, inevitably so. I don't think so.

5. Let me try to make this a bit clearer. What if we think about the ethics of belief not in such terms, but in terms of **responsibility**? I had spent 5 years or so in college increasingly committed to Orthodox Judaism, but eventually left due to pangs, one might say, of epistemological conscience. I couldn't see how the version of religion to which I was inclined had a leg up on many other versions, not to speak of various agnostic and atheist approaches. I felt **irresponsible** in simply believing what felt compelling.

I spent most of the 80s at Notre Dame, I felt appreciation for the religious character of the place and the people. At the same time what the philosophers of religion were up to was somehow alienating. My *bar plugta* (Talmudic term for good friend with whom you disagree about almost everything) was Al Plantinga. AP once told me there were 32 good arguments for God's existence and I replied that I knew the 5 basic ones and they were no good. AP gave a talk entitled "Is Belief in God Rational?" but "rational" seemed to mean something relatively anemic, like "you can't catch me in a contradiction." I had a conversation with Fred Freddoso in which he commented that when St. Thomas asked the question, it meant something more like "Is belief in God dumb (or foolish)?," which seemed to me a real question, one that I cared about.

6. So I'm wondering if the subject is being skewed by the epistemological framework. I want to focus especially on the concept of justification. There is a scene in the movie "Ordinary People" in which Judd Hirsch, who plays a psychotherapist, says to the protagonist (who is extremely self-critical, maybe suicidal) that "he is not big on shoulds." I feel that way about justification, that it's an overworked idea, in life as well as in philosophy. If people and nations thought less about justification and more about listening to the other side, the world would be a better place. In philosophy justification often has a defensive flavor. As if the skeptic (read—in Hebrew—the satan) is standing behind one, whispering in one's ear, "How do you know; are you certain?" And we try to

supply a justification, a very difficult project even for the most pedestrian beliefs; witness Descartes. This is not to say that one can't theorize about justification without the skeptic in mind. But somehow there is the scent of skepticism in the air, perhaps in epistemology generally but especially in these discussions of justifying religious belief. I'll return to this below in connection with YG's paper.

7. I think that the sort of philosophical defense of God's existence under consideration has a rough road to hoe. I want to explain my sense of it, which I hope yields some perspective. There is no substitute of course for a detailed treatment of the intricate arguments involved, the sort of thing that YG does in his current paper.

- As noted, I spent some years worried about whether belief in God is, in St. Thomas' words, foolish. Of course, I know, did know, that people, including myself at moments, have powerful experiences "as of God." But I still worried about it. And here is this literature, produced by really smart people, who are arguing not only that it's not dumb to believe—that it's ok—but that it's rationally obligatory. And the grounds for this go roughly as follows:
 - If you believe that Eleonore is sitting here since you see her, then by some sophisticated philosophical argument, you should believe that God exists, the grounds being that some people, no small number over history, have had profound quasi-perceptual experiences "as of God."
 - Remember that these admittedly profound experiences are and are not like actual cases of sense perception. So the argument needs to make the case that the difference(s) from sense perception do not make a difference.
 - Remember also that these sorts of quasi-perceptual experiences have been used to give testimony to all manner of religious belief—inconsistent with one another—and to non-theistic metaphysical beliefs about unity, etc. as well. This point gets elaborate discussion by YG in various place, by Gary Gutting, by Alston among others. But my present point is that this "many god" problem constitutes a severe obstacle to their program.

- Because the argument seems to trade on a mere analogy with perception, and because of the last “many gods” point, the argument has a rough road to hoe. Indeed, I, a religious person, find myself reacting with incredulity to the move. My incredulity is such that I’m not sure I want to hear the argument. I’m sort of kidding. But let me explain.
- My colleague, Larry Wright once said to me that extreme intelligence is sometimes a hindrance in philosophy; it opens the door to brilliant moves that may violate the sense of reality that Russell (against Meinong) taught was essential even in the most abstract studies. And David Kaplan, brought up in the home, so to speak, of father Frege, says that when he was thinking about indexicals and everything pointed away from the perspective of Frege, he knew that Frege’s brilliant approach could be made to cover the issues. But he felt that one should not indulge this brilliance. One final story I just learned this am. At a conference at which YG and perhaps Eleonore were present, Swinburne argued that the incarnation was, in objective terms, probable to a degree of .95. A prominent philosopher who was present said, “He is absolutely brilliant...(pause) and absolutely stupid.”
- It’s striking that this form of argument we are discussing is propounded by people defending the faith. (Being propounded by believers would be fine if they became believers on the basis of such arguments.) The apologetic character of this sort of argument suggests or mandates a certain circumspection. It’s as if someone with a strong stake in a political or philosophical position advances a defense that intuitively looks very suspicious, but with incredibly sophisticated arguments. And a look at the arguments indicates that it would take a great deal of work to say where they may have gone wrong. Thus my joke that I’m not sure I want to work my way through the arguments.

8. YG, who has dwelt in these arguments for some time—seems to be moving away from them. In the present paper, he criticizes leading positive responses

to both of James' questions. I want to focus on his response in the first half of the paper, to the claim that we have an epistemic obligation to believe in God on the basis of others' experiences "as of God." He makes some comments that are extremely suggestive, but I found it difficult to put it all together. He says that our belief forming ways should not be thought of as responsive to skeptical challenges. They are somehow "rock bottom," more like preferences than like...and here he doesn't really say, but perhaps he means ...than like decisions made on the basis of considered reasoning. And this leads him to deny that any such arguments from analogy (between perception and experiences "as of God") can establish epistemic obligation.

9. I'm not sure how YG's argument goes in detail, but clearly he too smells skepticism at work. I want to return to what Eleonore commented was ancient history: Al Plantinga's early book, *God and Other Minds*, in which his defense of theism seemed to rely on the fact that belief in God is in the same boat as other highly respected, indeed indispensable, ordinary beliefs, all of which fail to make the skeptic's cut. Eleonore further commented that things have come a long way since then—specifically with respect to the extremely sophisticated literature in the epistemology of religion, as with the arguments we are exploring here. But I'm wondering if the new way and the ancient way are so far apart. I'd love to hear from YG on this. What I have in mind is his sense that skepticism is in the air in the argument from perception.

10. Here's an attempt to put a bit of detail in place on this question. I say this—I make this semi-speculation—on the basis of studying YG's paper and reading around a bit in this literature about which I am no expert. How exactly does the modern approach bridge the gap between ordinary perception and these experiences "as of God"? How does it show that the differences with actual sense perception do not make a difference? My sense is that something like the following is not untypical : When one reflects on the justification (read: response to skeptical challenges) of our ordinary perceptual beliefs, it will be apparent that we don't need anything more powerful to defend religious belief. Religious belief vindicated.

11. Before I suggested that we refocus our thinking about the ethics of belief away from justification and towards responsibility, and I quoted St. Thomas in

this connection. Having the skeptic on the stage puts beliefs together that arguably don't belong together. The skeptic wants me to question my belief that I left California yesterday, my belief that Eleonore is in front of me. No way. I don't know how to defeat the skeptic in a non-question-begging way, but I can live with that and think about why it is. But the issue with metaphysical beliefs about God was never a matter of skepticism, except in a much wider use of that terms where it means questioning just about anything. You don't need a hyperbolic skeptic to appreciate the worry about God's existence; you need a reflective, open minded person, with or without religious instincts.

12. To return to YG's comment that ordinary beliefs do not arise with an eye to skepticism, I see us as members of the animal kingdom, proceeding around the world, trying not to bump into things. The ways we proceed reflect the kinds of creatures we are (verbal, large brained, social, products of culture...). Descartes speaks as if the rational agent is one who accepts nothing that she cannot justify from the very bottom up. But that's not how we proceed; we just proceed... blindly, as Wittgenstein says.

Now we come to people's powerful experiences "as of God." Some people react to these as if they were perceptual disclosures of fact. Others pointedly do not. The philosophical move under discussion is to credit the former people, and to argue that the latter are making a mistake. But you are not going to establish that it's a mistake simply on the basis of an analogy. I'm guessing that this is YG's point.

13. Conclusion: If a Martian anthropologist were to reflect on our ways, there is no doubt that the gods and our relations to them—cognitive, affective, behavioral—would get a great deal of attention. Religion would surely constitute a central chapter in the anthropologist's study. My hope is that the study would not be dismissive of religion, as the lingering reflection of what seemed natural to primitive humanity. Instead, it might see religion as the extremely powerful thing that it is; ennobling at some times and places, horrifying at others, able to bring out the best and worst in us. And it might see experiences "as of God," as James saw them, as gifts of or to the spirit.

But from where I stand, religion is one thing, religious metaphysics and its supporting epistemology quite another. At least since Greek philosophy made an impact on Israelite religion, the religious metaphysics—explicating it, defending it, squaring it with scripture and tradition—has become the central topic, almost definitive of the domain. Or perhaps I should say that, more generally doctrine and belief in doctrine have become definitive. We speak of a religious person as a **believer**. This is not inevitable, and pointedly it's not the idiom of the Hebrew bible. (Heschel's point that in biblical Hebrew, one speaks of the religious person as one who stands in awe of God.)

If doctrinal belief is the central topic, then the status of religious beliefs becomes a central agenda item for religious advocates (and their opponents). The sort of epistemic responsibility I've been discussing dictates that whatever we do with religious belief, we stay clear of anything that seems forced and not entirely natural, that we stay sensitive to the Talmudic remark that "the question is better than the answer."