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Natural Theology: Experientialism without Fideism

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Abstract

This article considers the question whether we can have direct, non-inferential knowledge of God, as experientialists such as Alston and Plantinga claim. Moreover, this needs to be done in a way that takes religious diversity into account. I contend that two developments in recent philosophy enable us to argue for direct knowledge of God in an inter-religious manner. The first is naturalized epistemology. I use a version of it in place of the epistemology employed by the experientialists. Specifically, I use methodological continuity between epistemology of science and epistemology of religion. This would help us to overcome dangers of religious balkanization and fideism. The second development is the increased focus on the importance of nature mysticism. This helps us to maintain the autonomy of religious experience. Since these experiences are considered universal, they enable us to engage in an experientialist version of natural theology in a manner that is at once continuous and discontinuous with Aquinas. It is continuous in its universality and generality and is discontinuous in using nature mystical experiences and not sense experience, as its starting point. The knowledge of God it gives is an inchoate awareness that finds different expression in different cultures.

Keywords: experientialism; inchoate awareness of god; naturalized epistemology; natural theology; nature mysticism; religio-cultural diversity

The First Vatican Council confidently asserted that God 'can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made'.[1] Often this is taken to mean, or at least was taken to mean, that God's existence can be known through the kind of arguments that Thomas Aquinas gave in his Five Ways.[2] Contrary to this kind of natural theology, Fergus Kerr has shown that 'the Vatican I decree left open a whole array of ways of knowing

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[1]'Dei Filius: Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Church', Holy See, 1870, accessed 18 May 2024, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum20.htm.

[2]Fergus Kerr, 'Knowing God by Reason Alone: What Vatican I Never Said', *New Blackfriars,* 91(1033) (2010), pp. 216–19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43251393.

God's existence … including the theory that we know God non-inferentially and immediately …'.[3]

Such direct, non-inferential knowledge of God is the basic claim of experientialists such as William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and others. They claim that just as our perceptual beliefs are based on sense experience; so also, some of our religious beliefs are based on religious experience. Such religious beliefs are immediately known without any inference or testimony. Thus, the experientialists made room for religious experience. But the works of these pioneers have been criticized on various counts. I shall focus on the problem of religious balkanization pointed out by Terrence Penelhum.[4] The word 'fideism' occurs in the title because the charge of religious balkanization parallels the charge of fideism made by Kai Nielsen against Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion. I shall argue that contemporary philosophy offers sufficient resources for overcoming these charges without sacrificing the experientialist insight of an immediate awareness of God. The resources I have in mind are: (1) a development in epistemology, namely, naturalized epistemology and (2) the study of 'extrovertive' or nature mysticism. Naturalized epistemology provides an alternative to the epistemology adopted by the experientialists, and studies in nature mysticism provides another starting point to the narrower range of religious experiences considered by the experientialists.

The article is divided into three main sections. Section 1 discusses the difficulty of experientialism raised by Penelhum and the possibility of an alternative natural theology based on immediate experience. Section 2 discusses the naturalized alternative to the epistemology of Alston. Section 3 elaborates on nature mystical experiences and why they can be said to lead us to an inchoate awareness of God as understood in the theistic traditions.

1. Experientialism and its problems

Experientialism is a name given by William Hasker to the epistemology of religious experience developed by the likes of William Alston and Alvin Plantinga.[5] Alston's work, *Perceiving God: Epistemology of Religious Experience*, is considered a classic in its field. Plantinga's famous books in the field are *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000) and its simpler version, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (2015). In what follows, I shall focus primarily on Alston's claim.

Alston argues for a parity between perceptual experiences and some religious experiences. As he puts it, the epistemic role played by 'beliefs about God [are] importantly analogous to that played by sense perception with respect to beliefs about the physical world'.[6] Citing an earlier article of Plantinga,[7] Alston argues that

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[3]Kerr, 'Knowing God by Reason Alone: What Vatican I Never Said', p. 223.

[4]Terence Penelhum, 'Parity is not Enough', in *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism: Essays by William P. Alston, Robert Audi, Terence Penelhum, Richard H. Popkin*, ed. by Marcus B. Hester (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 111.

[5]William Hasker, 'evidentialism', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi (2nd, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 294.

[6]William P. Alston, 'Perceiving God', *The Journal of Philosophy,* 83 (1986), p. 655.

[7]Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 81.

'God is good' or 'God gave me courage to meet that situation' self-evidently entail 'God exists', just as 'That tree is bare' or 'That tree is tall' self-evidently entail 'That tree exists'. Hence if the former beliefs can be perceptually justified, they can serve in turn, by one short and unproblematic step, to justify the belief in God's existence.[8]

The implication of such parity is that the standards applied to justification of perceptual beliefs also apply to the justification of beliefs about God. Or else we would be guilty of 'arbitrarily imposing a double standard' whereby the standards applied to sense experience would be denied to experience of God.[9]

According to Penelhum, the difficulty with Alston's epistemology is that we have a diversity of belief systems in the contemporary world. It must be kept in mind that though Alston talks about justifying belief in God, his focus is on a Christian God, and the argument is developed in terms of Christian mystical practices. Let us consider Penelhum's criticism of this feature.

1.1. Diverse belief systems

Alston himself recognizes that religious diversity poses 'the most serious difficulty' for his epistemology and hopes that we will eventually overcome this difficulty.[10] Penelhum goes a step further and draws our attention to the fact that we live in a world that boasts not only of many religions besides Christianity but also of many quasi-religious systems of thought (such as Marxism, Freudianism, sociobiology, etc.) each of which 'can have their own apparently revelatory experiences and illuminations'.[11] In this situation,

> although it is rational to yield to the claims of those religious beliefs that are occasioned by the religious experiences one may have, it is also rational for those who have experiences that occasion incompatible religious beliefs to accept them, and for those whose experiences are intrinsically secularizing ones to reject religion altogether.[12]

This manner of justifying religious beliefs, therefore, would force us to live in a 'religiously Balkanized world'.[13] It may be noted that a similar problem has also been pointed out for the epistemology of Plantinga[14] and the Wittgensteinian philosophy of

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[8]William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 3–4.

[9]Alston, 'Perceiving God', 657.

[10]Alston, 'Perceiving God', 662.

[11]Penelhum, 'Parity is not Enough', 111.

[12]Penelhum, 'Parity is not Enough', 112.

[13]See Footnote 11.

[14]His critics say that just as Plantinga relies on his Calvinist theology to argue for the rationality of his Christian beliefs, an *Advaitin* (Hindu) could argue for the rationality of her belief system. See Rose Ann Christian, 'Plantinga, Epistemic Permissiveness, and Metaphysical Pluralism', *Religious Studies,* 28(4) (1992), http://www.jstor.org/stable/20019577. David Tien has argued that a Confucian could consider his Confucian beliefs warranted. See David W. Tien, 'Warranted Neo-Confucian Belief: Religious Pluralism and the Affections in the Epistemologies of Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and Alvin Plantinga', *International*

religion developed by people such as Peter Winch, Norman Malcolm, D.Z. Phllips, and others.[15]

Penelhum goes beyond criticism and suggests that some kind of natural theology, if it were to be successful, would offer a solution to religious balkanization.[16] Moreover, he does not define natural theology in terms of passing from non-religious premises to a religious conclusion about God's existence (as in Aquinas). For him, premises of a natural theology could include 'reports of events known or experienced'.[17] This enables us to explore experiential approach to natural theology, in keeping with Kerr's contention. And this brings me to the possibility of natural theology.

1.2. Possibility of natural theology

The word 'natural' has various meanings in contemporary philosophy. Sometimes it is contrasted with the supernatural and some other times it is used as a synonym for the scientific. We shall see the latter meaning while considering naturalized epistemology in Section 2.1. In Aquinas, 'natural' stands for a source of knowledge that is common to human beings. Put differently, what is natural is innate and spontaneous to human beings. Common perception and its derivatives are the most obvious examples. The innateness of perception is confirmed by cognitive psychology[18] and evolutionary epistemology.[19] Moreover, we shall see that natural reason can be extended to include rudimentary hypothetico-deductive (H-D) method as well as to beliefs arising from experiences of nature mysticism. But for the moment, let us remain with Aquinas' natural knowledge.

According to Aquinas, common perception gives us knowledge of the world around us and from our knowledge of the world we can infer to God as from effects to cause. He contrasted such natural knowledge of God with revealed knowledge that is not common to all. The purpose of natural theology, in Aquinas, was to demonstrate that 'there is a common … knowledge of God which is found in practically all men [and women]',[20] though such knowledge is 'general and confused'.[21] Natural theology can do this because of the universal character of natural reason;

Journal for Philosophy of Religion 55(1) (2004), http://www.jstor.org/stable/40021230. Even non-religious belief systems such as Freudianism and Marxism can claim such warrant. See James K. Beilby, *Epistemology As Theology: An Evaluation of Alvin Plantinga's Religious Epistemology*, Ashgate new critical thinking in religion, theology, and biblical studies, (Aldershot, Hants/ Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), p.132.

[15] The original charge is found in Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy,* 42(161) (1967), pp.191–209, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3749076.

[16] Penelhum, 'Parity is not Enough', 115–16.

[17] Penelhum, 'Parity is not Enough', 116.

[18] Jerry Fodor, 'Observation Reconsidered', *Philosophy of Science,* 51(1) (1984), pp. 24–25, http://www.jstor.org/stable/187729.

[19] Franz M. Wuketits, *Evolutionary Epistemology and Its Implications for Humankind*, SUNY series in philosophy and biology, (State University Plaza, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990), 89, pp. 91–92.

[20] Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith Summa Contra Gentiles Book 3 Providence-Part1*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday, 1956), p. 125 (ch. 38).

[21] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1911), 1 q.2, art.1, reply to obj.1.

'all men [and women] are forced to give their assent' to natural reason, as Aquinas put it.[22]

Plantinga's epistemology is explicitly opposed to natural theology.[23] Although Alston does not oppose it, he does not think that the existence of God can be proved from extra-religious premises.[24] The problem is not so much with extra-religious premises as with the fact that the religious experiences Alston considers are exclusively Christian.[25] This defeats the very purpose of natural theology in the Thomistic tradition. Nevertheless, if the First Vatican Council was on the right track, we need to explore the possibility natural theology seriously. And following Kerr's insight, we have to explore this possibility in terms of immediate experience. For that purpose, I shall (1) adopt a different epistemology than the epistemology adopted by Alston, and (2) in keeping with the universality of Aquinas, explore whether there is any experiential knowledge of God that is common to human beings, though it may be 'general and confused'. I shall do these in the next two sections. The coming section will explore an alternative epistemology, and Section 3 will explore nature mysticism as kind of experiential knowledge that is universally available to human beings. It will go on to consider how and why such experiential awareness can be considered an inchoate awareness of God.

2. Epistemology beyond appearing

Alston's epistemology of perception is a theory of appearing. He says, 'Upon undergoing a certain visual experience, I believe there to be a beech tree in front of me. We ordinarily suppose that I am justified in believing this by virtue of the fact that the belief is based on that experience'.[26] He is careful to say that such justification is only *prima facie*, in the absence of other overriding concerns. This fallibility distinguishes Alston's epistemology from other foundationalist epistemologies, which consider some beliefs as basic (comparable to Alston's experiential beliefs) which are self-justified. In the next step Alston seeks to extend the privileges accorded to perceptual experience to some religious experiences. Not to extend those privileges to religious experiences would amount to applying 'double standards'.

To claim parity between perceptual and religious experiences is to say that religious experiences are a different kind of experience. This amounts to saying religious experiences are an autonomous kind of experience that do not fall in the same category as perceptual experience. Since empirical sciences are based on sense experience, the experientialist claim could be understood as affirming the autonomy of religion

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[22]*Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book I, chapter 2.

[23]Alvin Plantinga, 'Reformed objection to Natural Theology', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association,* 15 (1980), pp. 49–63.

[24]He finds that 'there is much to be said for the ontological, cosmological, and moral arguments, in certain of their forms'. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 289.

[25]In the case of Plantinga, it is even narrower as it is Calvinist.

[26]William P. Alston, 'Back to the Theory of Appearing', *Nous* 33, Supplement: Philosophical Perspectives 13 (1999): p. 197.

from empirical sciences.[27] Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion have claimed such autonomy.[28]

The autonomy of religious beliefs has also been criticized on various counts. One criticism that has proved difficult to surmount is the fideistic charge of Kai Nielsen, similar to the balkanizing tendency pointed out by Penelhum. Even after a prolonged discussion on the matter with Phillips, Nielsen pointed out that the kind of autonomy advocated by Phillips leads to protecting religious discourse from external criticism.[29]

The remedy for religious balkanization and the fideistic charge is to maintain that while religion is not science, and therefore, indeed autonomous, it is not cut off from sciences either. In other words, we need to maintain continuity between epistemology of science and epistemology of religion, even while maintaining that religion is not science. Continuities between sciences and epistemology is the central theme of naturalized epistemology.

2.1. Naturalized epistemology

Naturalized epistemology has come a long way from its early days when psychology was expected to replace epistemology.[30] We need not accept the replacement thesis but can easily accept the more moderate thesis of cooperative naturalism. It only holds that empirical findings about the nature of human beings, especially their cognitive capacities, are relevant to epistemology. In other words, cooperative naturalism merely demands that empirical investigations (sciences) are continuous with epistemology.[31] Of the various continuities between sciences and epistemology, I shall focus only on methodological continuity. It claims that the methods used by the sciences are relevant also for epistemology in general and epistemology of religion, in particular. In this sense, epistemology is 'science self-applied' as Quine tells us.[32] Among the methods, I want to focus on the H-D method or the problem-solving method of Karl Popper.

2.2. H-D method

H-D method involves three identifiable steps: (1) identifying a situation as problematic, (2) formulating possible solutions or hypotheses, and (3) testing them by deducing observable consequences of the hypothesis being tested. After explaining the general

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[27]While Alston is explicit about the autonomy of religious experiences, Plantinga talks about epistemic parity. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 451–53.

[28]Among his numerous works, I cite just two works of Phillips. See D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) and *Faith After Foundationalism: Critiques and Alternatives* (San Fracisco; Oxford: Westview Press, 1988).

[29]Kai Nielsen and D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 56.

[30]Richard Feldman, 'Naturalized Epistemology', *The Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2012 (2001). http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/epistemology-naturalized.

[31]James Maffie, 'Recent Work on Naturalized Epistemology', *American Philosophical Quarterly,* 27(4) (1990), pp. 283–84.

[32]W. V. Quine, 'Reply to Smart', in *Words and Objections. Essays On the Work of W. V. Quine*, ed. by Donald Davidson and Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1975), p. 293.

procedure, I shall give examples to show that this method is not peculiar to modern science but is a common practice of human beings.

Popper's description of the method begins by becoming aware of some situation as problematic and in need of resolution. He considered this step so crucial that he made it an essential feature of rationality. He said:

> Should anybody present us with the equations of classical mechanics without first explaining to us *what the problems are* which they are meant to solve, then we should not be able to discuss them rationally.… In other words, any rational theory, no matter whether scientific or metaphysical, is rational only because it ties up with something else - because it is an attempt to solve certain problems; and it can be rationally discussed only *in relation to the problem situation* with which it is tied up.[33]

A problem situation is marked by the close links between the situation and goal or goals we seek to achieve. Take, for example, a crowded road and the traffic snarls it causes. This is merely a situation; it involves no problems as long as one stays at home. The same situation becomes problematic the moment I wish to travel on that road and want to reach my destination fast. What is involved here is a judgment of the situation as *anomalous.* The anomaly of the situation could be better brought out by another example. Poverty and starvation in the country would be a situation, but it would not be a problem (except to the starving ones, of course) unless it were also not judged as an anomalous situation that needs to be overcome. The moment the situation is judged as anomalous it becomes a problem. I emphasize this step so that the rationality of H-D method becomes obvious.

Once a situation is identified as problematic, then comes the next step. This step consists in formulating hypotheses; we conjecture various possible solutions to the problem. Let us consider some examples. My first example is from medical science, as narrated by Carl Hempel.[34] He narrates the story of a medical doctor, Ignaz Semmelweis, working in Vienna General Hospital in the middle of the 19th century. He came across a situation where many women were dying after giving birth in the hospital. They called it childbed fever. Since the death-rate was judged too high to be considered normal, it became a problem that called for a solution. The problematic character of the situation was accentuated by the fact that many more women were dying in one division of the hospital than in another. In finding a solution, the doctor had to rule out many hypotheses for one reason or another. For example, he had to rule out that the deaths were caused by an epidemic, as there was no report of an epidemic in the news; nor could this hypothesis explain why substantially more women were dying in one division than another. After his personal efforts failed to find a solution, a committee was appointed to find a solution. The committee concluded that rough handling of the women by the medical students was the cause (midwives alone assisted women in the other division). Although this explanation proved wrong, the committee rightly saw a correlation between the involvement of the medical students and the

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[33]Karl R. Popper, *Quantum Theory and the Schism In Physics*, ed. by William Warren Bartley (Totowa, N.J: Rowan and Littlefield, 1982), p. 200. Italics original.

[34]Carl Gustav Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.,: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 3–6.

high rate of death. The real solution came when one of Semmelweis' colleagues accidentally cut himself while doing an autopsy, developed the same kind of symptoms as the women with childbed fever, and died after a few days of illness. Suddenly, it struck Semmelweis that the medical students caused the fever by introducing 'cadaveric matter' into the bloodstream of the women they attended to. He further conjectured that this occurred because the students did not clean their hands properly after doing autopsy as part of their studies. Having arrived at this hypothesis, Semmelweis decided to test it. He asked the students to clean their hands well with chlorinated lime before assisting at childbirth. This resulted in an astonishing improvement and Semmelweis knew that he had found the real solution to the problem.

There are three things to be noticed about this method. I shall call the first genesis-is-not-evidence principle. Semmelweis' successful solution to the problem originated in the accidental death of his medical colleague. And Semmelweis is not alone in this matter. In a 1921 experiment to decide whether nerve signals were electrical or chemical in nature, Otto Loewi found the solution in a dream.[35] But the irrational nature of the origins of the solution had nothing to do with the acceptability of the hypotheses. Their acceptability depended on the supporting evidence obtained for it from the test results. In the case of the medical students, it meant cleaning their hands thoroughly before assisting with childbirth. Therefore, H-D method bids us to abandon the genetic empiricism of the classical empiricists, such as Locke and Hume, in favor of justificatory empiricism.[36] The former focused on the genesis of ideas whereas the latter focuses on their justification.

The second point to notice is the process of obtaining evidence. This involved a distinction between perception and observation. Often philosophers tend to use 'observation' synonymously with natural perception whereas not all perception is observation in science. Both are direct experience. But natural perception contrasts with indirect means of knowledge such as inference and testimony whereas observation in science contrasts with theory. Dudley Shapere has noted that those who tried to abandon the distinction between theory and observation ended up abandoning the objectivity and rationality of science itself.[37] The example of Semmelweis makes it clear that objectivity of science (of any knowledge, for that matter) consists in keeping the distinction between theory and observation and seeing the right relationship between them. That relationship becomes clear only when we distinguish between perception and observation. Perception is a natural human ability shared by human beings; it is a common human possession, but not all perception is observation. Observation is a subclass of perception that is deliberately undertaken while looking for evidence. Semmelweis looked for a solution to childbed fever. And this search was guided by some prior hypothesis. There can be no observational evidence

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[35]Anton E. Lawson, 'The Generality of Hypothetico-Deductive Reasoning: Making Scientific Thinking Explicit', *The American Biology Teacher,* 62(7) (2000), p. 485.

[36]This insight is from Nancy Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, ed. by Robert C. Neville, SUNY Series in Religious Studies, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 38 ff.

[37]Dudley Shapere, 'The Concept of Observation in Science and Philosophy', *Philosophy of Science,* 49(4) (1982), p. 490, http://www.jstor.org/stable/187163.

without some prior hypotheses or theory guiding the search. Neglecting this distinction between perception and observation has been the bane of traditional (genetic) empiricism. H-D method helps us to overcome that.

My final lesson is not so much from the method as about the H-D method. Although Popper proposed H-D method as a characteristic mark of science as distinct from metaphysics, it has a much wider application. Consider the case of a 13-year-old Kenyan boy called Richard Turere. He lived with his parents close to the Nairobi National Park. Coming from the Maasai tribe, pastoralists by tradition, Turere faced a peculiar problem when he began to herd his family's cattle at the age of nine. Lions would wander into the human habitation at night and attack the cattle. He had to protect them. Just as Semmelweis had a moment of insight when his colleague died accidently, so, too, Turere had his moment when he found accidently that lions are afraid of moving light at night. He used this insight to invent a low-cost system to scare away lions. Ever since his cattle has been safe. Many in the village wanted his help to do the same to protect their livestock.[38] The process he adopted is the same as in the previous example. This boy was faced with a problem situation, found accidently that the predators are afraid of moving light, and he put the idea to test.

The point I want to make through this example is that the H-D method is not peculiar to modern science. If it can be used by a little boy who had no knowledge of modern science, it cannot be its preserve; its basics are a common possession of human beings. Turere's example is from this century. Take another example from the ancient world to make the same point. Jesus narrates the parable of a barren tree in Lk. 13: 6–8. A certain man had planted a fig tree in his vineyard and came looking for fruits year after year. Finding no fruits for three years, he orders the tree to be cut down. But the gardener pleads with the master to leave it alone for another year when he would dig around it and manure it. By doing so, he hypothesizes that by caring more for the tree it would produce fruits. If it does not, he agrees to cut down the tree. Here again, a rudimentary hypothesis is involved. This is tested by observation. If the H-D method is a primitive form of human rationality, this adds to our repertoire of natural reason. Natural reason need not then be limited to reasoning from effects to cause as in Aquinas's Five Ways, but can include H-D procedures.

2.3. *H-D method and experiential beliefs*

An important insight of the experientialists is the parity of perceptual experience and religious experience. This also brings about the possibility of religious balkanization. To overcome that danger, we adopted a kind of naturalized epistemology that maintains continuities between general epistemology and epistemology of religious experience. Of the various sorts of continuity, we discussed only the methodological continuity. Further, we noted that the main lines of the problem-solving method are a common possession of human beings and not a specialty of modern science.

In applying the H-D method to experiential beliefs, two specific problems arise. The first is that many contemporary epistemologists do not consider any beliefs, including experiential beliefs, to be infallible or immune to doubt. Even our experiential beliefs

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[38]Richard Turere: My invention that made peace with lions | TED Talk.

can be mistaken and we do make occasional mistakes about them. For example, sometimes we judge that the long object seen in the grass is a snake, only to realize later that it was a piece of rope. It is for this reason that Alston gives them only *prima facie* justification.

Realization of one's mistake can come either from oneself or from others. The latter leads to what Michael Williams calls 'default and challenge' model of justification.[39] It means that although believing the knowledge-claim of another is the default position we adopt, there are times when such default position stands in need of more explicit justification, as when a claim is challenged by another. Default and challenge model, therefore, involves a social dimension where claims to knowledge are public and their justification involves an intersubjective dimension. Since the other person is endowed with independent cognitive abilities, that person might challenge my experiential claims to knowledge. When the claim is challenged by another, with reasons for challenging the claim, the claimant is expected to provide evidence for one's claim, which must be made available to the challenger. In other words, the claimant needs to go beyond *prima facie* justification at that point and give intersubjective evidence for the truth of the claim.

Ordinarily, such intersubjective evidence should pose no problems for the problem-solving method, as such evidence is the norm, rather than the exception, in that method. But in trying to apply this process to experiential beliefs, we come across a second difficulty. It arises from defining evidence as coming from theory-guided observation. It is easy to talk about observations being guided by theories or hypotheses in the sciences, but how do we apply that principle to experiential beliefs? Neither Alston nor Plantinga face this problem. But once we adopt default and challenge model, this problem stares at us.

In responding to the fallibility of experiential beliefs, the first thing we need to realize is that ordinary people resolve disputed experiential claims without the help of any professional epistemologists. Once we realize that it is the practice of ordinary people, we can learn from their practice. When we look at their practice, it seems clear to me that they act upon the shared meaning of the perceived object to resolve the dispute.[40] Take the example of snake/rope given earlier. Irrespective of whether the perceived object is a snake or a piece of rope, both are physical objects. Quine has correctly recognized that to perceive is ordinarily to perceive physical objects.[41] That perceptual objects are physical means that they are in space and time. The implication is that one physical object can only be in one place at the same time. Therefore, the perceived object can either be a snake or a rope, but not both; only one of the disputants can be right. Next, how do they decide which of them is right? Having implicitly agreed that both are physical objects, they narrow down to the meaning of 'perception' to perceiving a snake or rope. Snake is a living object, whereas rope is not. Using this

[39]Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction To Epistemology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25, 36, etc.

[40]For details see, Karuvelil George, *Faith, Reason, and Culture: An Essay in Fundamental Theology*, 314–15, 225–35.

[41] W. V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 11–13.

semantic knowledge enables the disputants to engage in further exploration to see if the perceived object is a snake or rope.

There are two things to be noted about this application of the process. The first is that meaning of perceived objects function as the 'theory' or 'hypothesis' that guides the search for evidence. While the meaning guides our search, the finding is not determined by it. In the words of Hans-Johann Glock, 'Our conceptual net does not determine whether we actually catch a fact, but it determines what kind of fact we can catch'.[42] Therefore, the finding of the search can function as evidence that can settle the dispute. Second, since perception is a common human ability and observation is its subclass, observation satisfies the condition that the available evidence should be intersubjective. As a common ability shared by human beings, observation enables us to maintain the intersubjective character of evidence.

3. Nature mysticism and God

When the teaching of the First Vatican Council about our natural knowledge of God is given an experientialist turn, we need to find if there are some religious experiences that are as natural to human beings as perceptual knowledge. Studies show that nature mysticism is, indeed, natural to human beings.

3.1. The naturalness of nature mysticism

By 'nature mysticism', I mean those extraordinary experiences that take place in nature, leading the experiencer to make unusual claims about reality. Perhaps it was William James who first noticed that nature has the power to awaken mystical moods in us.[43] Walter Stace called such experiences 'extrovertive mysticism', and contrasted it with the 'introvertive'. He called extrovertive experiences spontaneous as against the introvertive experiences that are acquired with the help of special techniques.[44] It is due to their spontaneous nature that Arthur Deikman calls this kind of experiences 'untrained sensate'.[45] R.C. Zaehner is explicit that nature mystical experiences (Stace's extrovertive mysticism) 'may occur to anyone whatever his religious faith or lack of it and whatever moral, immoral or amoral life he may be leading at the time'.[46] Such universality makes this kind of experiences natural in the sense in which Aquinas used the term. Later, Paul Marshall drew our attention to the importance of this kind of experiences,[47] though he does not connect it to the idea of God as understood in the theistic traditions. We shall try to make this connection in Section 3.4.

In order to make the connection between nature mysticism and God, we must pay attention to three things: (1) the characteristic features of nature mysticism; (2)

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[42]Hans-Johann Glock, 'Relativism, Commensurability and Translatability', in *Wittgenstein and Reason*, ed. John Preston, Ratio book series (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), p. 25.

[43]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature*, Centenary ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 305.

[44]Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, Bombay: MacMillan, 1960), p. 60.

[45]https://www.deikman.com/deautomat.html.

[46] R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. xv.

[47]Paul Marshall, *Mystical Encounters With the Natural World: Experiences and Explanations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

another feature of natural knowledge, besides its being common to human beings that Aquinas emphasized; and (3) see that the basic features of nature mysticism are the same as some features that theists attribute to God. Let us begin with the first.

3.2. Characteristic features of nature mysticism

The very first thing we should note about nature mystical experiences is that they are utterly unlike ordinary experiences of nature. This can be seen in the way the experiencers narrate their experience. For example, Bede Griffiths narrates his experience that occurred to him when he was a school boy while taking a walk in nature. While narrating his experience he talks about 'the shock of surprise' he felt and wondered whether it was the same nature he had known before. He wondered because he felt that he 'had never seen such a sight or experienced such sweetness before'.[48] If it were the same kind of experience of nature as he had earlier, there was no reason for him to say this. In other words, although nature mystical experiences take place in nature, those moments of experience are entirely different from ordinary experiences.

A second feature of such experiences is their twofold character. Although what is experienced is entirely different from ordinary perceptual experiences, it does not mean that senses are not involved. The involvement of the senses becomes explicit in Deikman's terminology of 'untrained sensate'; though not as explicit, Stace's terminology of 'extrovertive' carries the same meaning. However, Stace's Upanishadic bias toward introvertive mysticism prevented him from appreciating the importance of extrovertive experiences. It was not until the work of Marshal and Perovich that the intrinsic worth of extrovertive mysticism began to be appreciated.[49]

A third feature is what James described as the 'noetic quality' of mystical experiences.[50] By this expression he meant that mystical states also give us knowledge. But such knowledge is very different from the kind of knowledge gained through the senses. An excellent example of gaining such knowledge is found in the autobiography of St Ignatius of Loyola in his experience by the river Cardener. In that one moment of experience, he 'understood and learned many things … with so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him'.[51] Newness is the same as in Griffiths; what is different is the explicit emphasis on knowledge. It makes us aware that although senses are involved in nature mysticism, the content experienced is not sensory. This is extraordinary because there is no such distinction in sensory knowledge. In our perceptual knowledge, the content known is the same as the perceived object. But in mystical experiences, we need to make this distinction between sensory involvement and sensory content.[52] In other words, although the locus of nature mystical experience is nature, the content of experience is not nature. This connects us to the first

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[48]Bede Griffiths, *The Golden String* (London: The Harvill Press, 1954), p. 9.

[49]Anthony N. Perovich, 'Taking Nature Mysticism Seriously: Marshall and the Metaphysics of the Self', *Religious Studies,* 47(2) (2011), pp. 165–83, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23013379.

[50]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature*, p. 295.

[51]Ignatius Loyola, *Testament and Testimony: The Memoirs of Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. Luis Goncalves Da Camara (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1994), p. 42 para 30.

[52]See George Karuvelil, *Faith, Reason, and Culture: An Essay in Fundamental Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 291–94.

feature and explains why nature mystical experiences are very different from ordinary experiences of nature.

Moreover, not only is there a noetic quality to mystical experiences but also the reality known this way comes to be considered as more real than ordinary physical reality. One of the nature mystics cited by Marshall, after referring to the noetic quality of his experience, goes on to say 'I had the sense of this being utter Reality, the real, far more "real" and vivid than the ordinary everyday "reality" of the physical world'.[53] What makes this reality so very different from what is experienced ordinarily in nature? Difference consists in the fact that ordinarily nature is experienced as a space–time reality. Nature mystical experiences take place in space and time, but the experienced reality is not in space and time. This is such a defining feature of nature mysticism that Zaehner says that 'nature mysticism means to transcend space and time'.[54]

The extraordinary nature of these experiences creates a special problem for expressing those experiences. This is because 'words in all languages are the products of our sensory-intellectual consciousness'.[55] This makes mystical experiences ineffable by their very nature. It means our language is inadequate to express the experienced reality. Such ineffability leads to the paradoxical language used by mystics all over. The following example from William Blake will shows this:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
And Eternity in an hour.[56]

A fourth feature is the remarkable positivity that accompanies such experiences. Recall Griffiths talking about the sweetness he felt in his experience. This is also the experience of others. Not only are nature mystical experiences capable of calming troubled minds but they leave such an impact on the experiencers that they tend to cherish it for many years after the experience, sometimes even their whole life time.

A final feature I want to point out is the sense of a living presence reported by many. It is as if in those moments, even stones and mountains are experienced as alive. Stace quotes Sri Ramakrishna to say that 'everything was full of consciousness. The image [of Kali] was consciousness, the altar was consciousness … the door-sills were consciousness'.[57] In philosophy of mind, this phenomena is called panpsychism.[58]

Having seen some prominent features of nature mysticism, it is time to ask whether the reality experienced in nature mysticism is the reality of God as understood by

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[53] See Marshall, *Mystical Encounters With the Natural World: Experiences and Explanations*, p. 24.

[54] Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, p. 41.

[55] Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York and Toronto: The New American Library, 1960), p. 14.

[56] Cited in Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism In the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), p. 11.

[57] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 77.

[58] For more on panpsychism see Godehard Brüntrup, *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, Philosophy of Mind Series, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

theists. In order to do that, we need to focus a little more on the nature of natural knowledge.

3.3. More on natural knowledge

We have already noted that natural perceptual knowledge is innate and spontaneous. As innate, it is noticed that even newborn babies look in the direction of a loud sound or a bright light. Once a child has begun to speak its first language, we begin to notice another feature of natural knowledge that is related to the language and communication of natural knowledge. In order to notice it, one has only to take a walk with a child. Using its innate abilities, the child will identify something in its surroundings, say an ant, and ask what it is. The elder says 'It's an ant'. But the point to note is that 'ant' is a word in English; a Spanish speaker would use the word '*hormiga*'. There are three things happening here. One is the identification of the object by using the child's innate natural abilities. The object is identified on the basis of its salient features: an ant is tiny and can sting, a dog is four-legged and barks, etc. Second, although the innate abilities help to identify the object, the child has no words to express what it has identified; words are learned from the elders. Third, one and the same object of natural perception gets expressed in diverse ways in different cultural contexts. A child's perception of the object remains inchoate in this sense. It can find expression in diverse culturally conditioned ways: as 'ant' in English and '*hormiga*' in Spanish. On the assumption of parity between natural perception and nature mysticism, this inchoateness should also be applicable to nature mystical experiences.

I shall argue in what follows that the reality experienced in nature mysticism is an inchoate awareness of God that is expressed differently in different cultural contexts. I assume that this is what Aquinas meant by 'general and confused' knowledge of God. They are general in the sense that such knowledge applies not only to the Christian understanding of God but to many other ways of understanding the experienced reality, Christian understanding being one of these ways. In other words, an inchoate understanding of God will not have the specific features of a Christian or Hindu (which are themselves very varied)[59] way of understanding the ultimate reality. At the same time, I shall show that some of the most basic features of what Christians call God can be derived from the features of nature mysticism and can be related to different religious traditions.

3.4. An inchoate awareness of God

Let us begin with the noetic quality of nature mysticism. We noted that experiences of nature mysticism make us aware of a reality that is not accessible in sense experience. Theistic traditions consider such knowledge to be the result of divine revelation; Hindus say it the result of *Sruti* (meaning 'heard by the seers'); Buddhists call it the

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[59]According to Sontheimer, it is misleading to call Hinduism a religion. See Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer, 'Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term', in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2001), pp. 32–53. Historian Thapar gives a historical account of how this family of religions came to be considered one religion. See Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism', in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, pp. 54–81.

result of Enlightenment. In other words, knowledge of a non-sensory reality is a common claim of practically all religious traditions. But the naming of this accessed reality will depend on the cultural context. Hindu philosophers call this reality Brahman; Western theists call it God; Buddhists call it Nirvana; Muslims call it Allah. In spite of such different terminologies, they share the same features we found in nature mysticism.

Consider the utter difference between this reality and sensory reality. We noted that this creates problems for communicating the knowledge gained in this experience. Such ineffability gives rise to what is known as apophatic theology or *via negativa* both in the East and the West. Upanishads (Hindu) use the Sanskrit expression *neti-neti* ('not this', 'not this') for the purpose. Negative theology in the Christian tradition is well-known. Following that tradition, Aquinas says that 'we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not'.[60] What can be done is to contrast the reality of God with other beings we know. This is exactly what Aquinas does. He goes to contrast the being of God with material objects. Even religions that do not explicitly have a tradition of negative theology use negative language to talk about this reality. The Swazis of Africa is a good example. They describe the divine reality as '… unapproachable, unpredictable, of no specific sex'.[61]

That this reality is ineffable does not mean that it is completely unknowable like Kant's Noumenon. Ineffability only means that all our attempts to describe this reality are inadequate, not that it is totally unknowable. We can know some features of this reality. One feature we come to know is that this is not a material reality. This has implications. It is generally agreed that matter can be divided into parts. This is not possible with the divine reality. Aquinas called this indivisibility of God divine simplicity.[62] What the Western theists described as divine simplicity is found as indivisibility (*akhanda*) in the Indian traditions.[63] That which cannot be divided must be one. This explains the emergence of monotheism as well as monism.

Consider the next defining feature of this reality: not only is it considered real but more real than any physical/material reality. We saw this in connection with nature mysticism. In various religious traditions, this glimpsed reality is rightly considered as the Ultimate Reality. It is to draw attention to this feature that Upanishads call this reality 'the Real of the reals (*satyasya satyam*)'.[64] Theists generally acknowledge that God is not a being among beings. Christian theologian Ingolf Dalferth says that 'God is the one without whom nothing possible would be possible, and nothing actual would be actual'.[65]

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[60] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1 q 3.

[61] Aloysius Muzzanganda Lugira, *African Traditional Religion*, 3rd ed., World religions, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), p. 45.

[62] It many noted that Aquinas derives the non-temporality of God from divine simplicity. See Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas*, Arguments of the philosophers, (London/ New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 96. But here we proceed from experience to God.

[63] *Tejobindu Upanishad*, Ch. 2.4, 41; *Brahmasutra Bhashya* of Ramanuja Ch.1, sec 13.

[64] *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.1.20.

[65] Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Radical theology: An Essay on Faith and Theology In the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 3.

Another feature of nature mysticism we saw is the panpsychic claim of everything being alive. This makes Ultimate Reality different from a force like electricity or magnetism. In Hindu terminology this makes consciousness (*cit*) a defining feature of Brahman. Note that the statement is not that Brahman has consciousness as we have, but that Brahman is consciousness itself. Since the best example of conscious beings we know are human persons, theistic traditions tend to characterize this feature by saying that God is personal. Sometimes, panpsychic claims are said to lead to pantheism or the claim that everything is God. But the next feature of nature mysticism helps us to see that this does not follow.

Twofold character is an inalienable feature of nature mysticism. It means that while ultimate reality is experienced in nature, it is not an ordinary experience of nature. This led us to distinguish between the locus of experience and the content of experience. Theists express this distinction in terms of the immanence and transcendence of God. While God is present and active in nature (locus of experience) the experienced reality is something more than nature (transcendence). Therefore, this reality cannot be identified with anything in nature, either individually or collectively.

A further feature of nature mysticism is the positivity they engender in the experiencer. Aquinas expressed it in terms of God's goodness, where goodness means desirability.[66] It is so desirable that the Psalmist sang that a day in the divine presence is better than a thousand elsewhere (Ps. 84:10). Hindu and Buddhist traditions use the word bliss (*ānanda*) to characterize Brahman and Nirvana, respectively. A typical impact of experiencing such bliss is freedom from all kinds of fear and anxiety, which is only to be expected, given the positivity and the energizing role of such experiences.[67]

4. Conclusion

This article began with Kerr's observation that the teaching of the First Vatican Council about the possibility of knowing God through natural reason need not be taken to mean engaging in arguments for God's existence. It could also mean that God can be known non-inferentially and immediately, which is also the claim made by experientialists. But experientialists face a serious problem in handling diverse belief-systems. In order to overcome that shortcoming, we had to do two things. First, we abandoned *prima facie* justification and adopted a version of naturalized epistemology. Second, we found a class of experiences (nature mysticism) that are natural to human beings, and, therefore, universal, unlike the Christian experiences on which the experientialists depend. After taking these major steps, the argument for an experiential knowledge of God is pretty straightforward. Examining nature mystical experiences, we found their defining features. Those features become inchoate attributes of God in the theistic tradition. Thus, it is shown that unlike the Thomistic tradition that begins with sense experience of the world and then argues to the existence of God on that basis, we can have an immediate experience of the divine through nature mysticism. But

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[66]Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1. 5.1.
[67]*Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.9.

this awareness of God is inchoate and finds expression in diverse culturally conditioned ways. Therefore, this understanding of God has an inter-religious character. Thus, we are able to overcome the problem of religious balkanization and fideism that haunted experientialism. On the other hand, some of the attributes a theistic God (such as being Creator, Omnipotent, Omniscient, etc.) are not dealt with here. Some of them may be derivable from God being a nonphysical reality. But as an inchoate awareness of God, we should not expect all features found in any particular religious tradition to be present here.