

## The Spiritual Brain: Intimations or Hallucinations of God?

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**Abstract:** *Do mystical experiences make it rational to believe in God? A fair number of theistic philosophers have thought so, and, for the mystic who is ignorant of current scientific findings, perhaps that conclusion is correct.<sup>1</sup> But the ignorant are not best qualified to judge: let us see how science might inform judgment. Here I will focus most particularly on the neurological basis of mystical experiences (MEs). It might initially seem that the evidence for such a basis is theologically benign—neutral on the question whether MEs may reasonably be considered veridical perceptions of the divine. I shall argue that this is a mistake.*

**Keywords:** Mystical Experience, Hallucination, Naturalistic Explanation, Sense Perception

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### Causal Mechanisms: Sense Perception vs. Mystical Experience

Faced with the growing body of evidence that distinctive neural processes mediate ME, a theist will naturally be inclined to observe that ordinary perceptual experience is also so mediated. Why expect ME to be any different? Short of embracing radical skepticism, we presume in favor of the deliverances of our senses. A similar presumption should be accorded to MEs. In neither case is the presumption vitiated by lack of knowledge of the neural mechanisms, or even by failure to understand that there *are* such mechanisms, or that things going well perceptually depends upon things going well neurally. It is acknowledged on all hands, to be sure, that a finding of significant malfunction in the relevant mechanisms may undermine the evidence they seem to deliver.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Wainwright, *Mysticism*; Alston, *Perceiving God*; Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*; and Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Religious Belief*. Others include Broad, “Arguments for the Existence of God,” 157–67; Hick, “Mystical Experience as Cognition”; Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 293–327; Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*; and Davis, *The Evidential Force of Mystical Experience*.

This, in its broadest outline, is a common theistic argument. Whatever the relationship between brain processes and conscious states generally, it should come as no surprise that MEs are similarly related to a neural substrate. That goes no distance toward showing that MEs are not perceptual experiences of God. The theme that an ME is a type of perceptual experience that has good *prima facie* epistemic credentials has been elaborated within the framework of a variety of theories of perception, though not generally with attention to neurophysiological findings.

But it should occur to one that there is a potential challenge to a theistic understanding of MEs that is raised by such findings. In the case of ordinary sense perception—visual or auditory perception, for example—we know of a neurological basis, and we are beginning to understand something of the way in which the relevant brain circuits process signals from the eyes and ears. But we know more: we know in some detail how the eyes and ears themselves are stimulated by physical things—light and sound—that carry in their form the imprint of those parts of the environment from which they originate: the objects seen and heard. We know, in short (mainly by using these very sensory modalities, among others) how information about the objects of perception is transmitted, via sense organs, to the brain. To be explicit: we have a growing body of empirical findings and theory that explain sense perceptions and the conditions under which they are dependable, that indicates how ordinary sense experiences provide a basis for informed judgments about the physical world, how and why our sense organs must be abetted in various ways to extend the range of features of our environment that we can investigate, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the discoveries we make through the use of any one sensory modality can be (and regularly are) confirmed by the deliverances of other sensory modalities. All of this, taken as knowledge of ourselves, relies, of course, upon the general veracity of the senses. So as not to beg any questions here, we may observe that, although we have no non-sensory access to sensory mechanisms, and no non-sensory basis for judgments of reliability, we do nevertheless find, remarkably enough, that all of our evidence—our ordinary perceptual judgments, empirical findings concerning the structure and function of our

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<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to suggest that all this has allowed us to make much progress with the *deep* mind/body questions—e.g., the problems of *qualia* and of intentionality. But that shortcoming, though a deeper understanding of the brain may ultimately play a role in helping us rectify it, is not a weakness for my present case. All that case requires is the recognition that the pervasive and detailed correspondences between brain activity and mental processes confirm the essential role that the production of brain states plays in the production of mental states, and hence the essential explanatory relevance of facts about the operations of the brain.

sensory mechanisms, physical theory, and input from all the sensory modalities—can be fit together into a single, highly coherent picture of our perceptual environment, and our perceptual relations to it.<sup>3</sup>

We now are beginning to understand the neurological episodes that underlie theistic MEs (hereafter, TMEs) as well; but we are not similarly able to trace the causal ancestry of those episodes to God—or to any supernatural thing whose character can independently be ascertained to be reflected in the experiences these episodes generate.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, although the causal ancestry, at the physical level, of MEs is largely unknown in detail, what is known suggests a purely physical explanation for the brain activity that generates mystical consciousness. I shall flesh this out shortly. But first, we should observe that the threat posed by this circumstance is an instance of a general sort of way in which hypotheses can be disconfirmed.

The mystic no more ordinarily thinks of God's presence as the *explanation* for his or her ME than the casual birdwatcher thinks of the presence of the bird as the explanation for his or her bird-experience. Both just take themselves to perceive the respective objects, however distinctive the respective perceptual modalities may be. Nevertheless, it seems indisputable that unless the presence of a bird is causally responsible for the bird-experience—unless, therefore, it figures in the right way in the explanation of that experience—it won't be the case that a bird is being perceived. And similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, the mystic won't be perceiving God unless God's "presence" or activity causally explains the mystic's experience in the right way.

### Non-Veridicality and Alternate Explanations of Experience

To ascertain what a perceiver perceives on a given occasion is to determine what, if anything, is in the right way causally responsible for the perceptual experience. God might in *some* way be causally responsible for *any* experience—for example, if he created the birder and the bird—but that won't

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<sup>3</sup> This fact, taken by itself, does not provide much ammunition against radical skepticism concerning the senses. But here we need to "bracket" that kind of skepticism and assume that we have the ordinary sort of empirical knowledge, in order to examine the relevance of neurophysiology to the epistemic *bona fides* of mystical experiences.

<sup>4</sup> Nor are there procedures *within* mystical practice comparable to those that permit one sense experience to corroborate another. See Fales, "Mystical Experiences as Evidence," 19–46.

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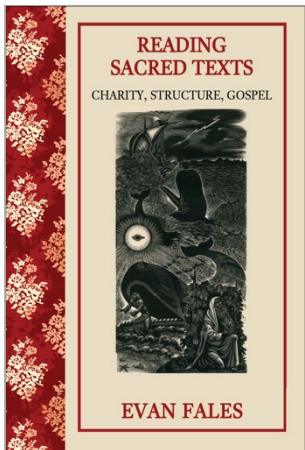
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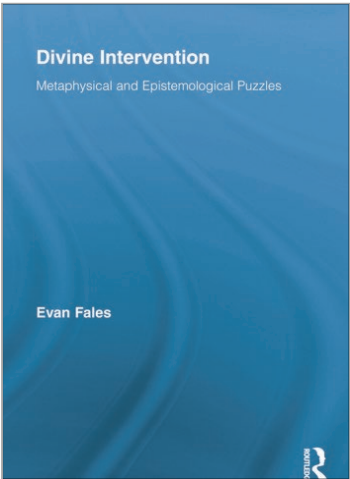
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Evan Fales, Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, University of Iowa, has published various articles on the nature of mystical experience and the question to what extent such experiences could provide evidence for the existence and nature of supernatural beings.

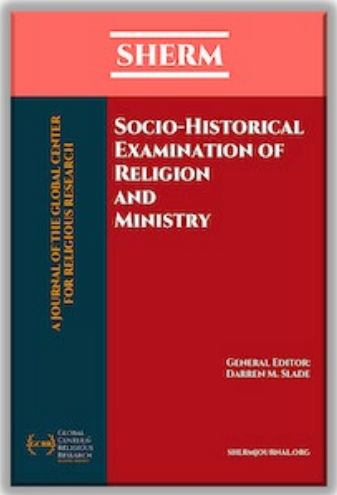
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