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MYSTICISM, VERIDICALITY, AND MODALITY

Robert Oakes

A 37 year old housewife told a Gallup interviewer, "It's indescribable, except that all of a sudden you have no more doubts that there is a God—no more questions—you just know!"

The Milwaukee Journal, December 11, 1976

I

It may well be that nothing constitutes hallowed ground for statisticians—not even hallowed ground. In any case, it seems incontestable that 'data' developed from Gallup polls—albeit of considerable sociological (and psychological) interest—has negligible relevance for attempts to adjudicate the time-honored philosophical issue of the *epistemic force* of 'religious experience'. This notwithstanding, our opening excerpt has inspired me to imagine that I have a very special friend—*so* special a friend that I can think of nothing more fitting to call her than '*SF*'. Now among the many distinctive and endearing attributes of *SF* is that of being a theistic mystic. While she is very pleased about this, *SF* finds (so she has told me in confidence) that being a theistic mystic can occasionally be socially wearisome. That is, her many *skeptical* friends—not lacking in epistemological adroitness—often try to disturb her metaphysical serenity by invoking a long-standing and ostensibly plausible challenge to theistic mysticism: specifically, they are wont to insist that, lacking some reliable *criterion* for discriminating veridical religious experience from the illusive variety, *SF* has no legitimate way of being certain that her 'apprehensions of God's presence' are veridical rather than illusive.

With characteristic pertinacity, however, *SF* responds by appealing to an epistemological doctrine which occupies a venerable place within the tradition of theistic mysticism.¹ Specifically, and with a philosophical sophistication that has eluded many a theistic mystic, she responds as follows:

The experiences in question are of such a nature that I do not *require* any criterion to be certain that they are veridical.² Rather, I have *non-critical* certainty that such is the case. Alternatively, that my relevant experiences constitute veridical apprehensions of God's presence is



immediately apparent to me since the experiences in question have the very special epistemic status of being *self-authenticating*, i.e., of *guaranteeing their own veridicality* to their epistemic subjects. Accordingly, every such experience provides me with *infallible justification* for believing that it constitutes a veridical awareness of God's presence.

Needless to say that *SF*'s skeptical friends (I am not one of them) regard this response as patently unacceptable. The only impact it has upon them is to arouse their epistemological ire to a level which may not be compatible with good mental health. Predictably, their counter-rejoinder proceeds along the following lines:

Clearly, *no* experience³—whether 'religious' or not—could conceivably *authenticate itself* to its epistemic subject, i.e., provide the latter with a *guarantee* of its veridicality. Rather, since no experience (even those which are in fact *veridical*) could enjoy *logical* immunity from being illusive, no veridical experience could be such that its veridicality was immediately apparent to its epistemic subject. Alternatively, for any experience *e* with the property of being veridical, *that e* is veridical could never be a truth which (in Chisholm's terms) 'presents itself' to its epistemic subject. Accordingly, without some (workable) *criterion* for discriminating veridical religious experiences from illusive ones, no one is *entitled* to be positive that his/her putative experiences of God's presence are in fact veridical. Hence, *you* are not entitled to be sure that *your* putative experiences of God's presence are in fact veridical.

'Oh yes I am', retorts *SF*—and thus the dialectic escalates, with not the slightest (chance for any) meeting of minds.

It seems clear that the foregoing encapsulates a long-standing and central disagreement between 'mystics'⁴ and their critics. Now while much has been said and gainsaid about 'self-authenticating religious experience', I suggest that it remains an issue about which there is considerably more confusion than clarity, and, accordingly, about which lots more *needs* to be said. First of all, it seems to me that there is yet to be provided anything like a satisfactory *explication* of the issue. Alternatively, just how are we to *understand* the doctrine that there can occur experiences of God's presence with the very special epistemic property of being self-authenticating? Since nothing is more central to the epistemology of religious experience than the question of veridicality and just how it is to be adjudicated, arriving at a *proper* understanding of the self-authentication doctrine is of the first importance.

I have argued elsewhere⁵—and remain convinced—that the concept of *modal veridicality* (discussed at length in the sequel) is absolutely indispensable to an

adequate grasp, let alone a satisfactory *resolution*, of the issue in question. In sum, I intend to show that the concept of modal (or essential) veridicality constitutes nothing less than the key to the entire matter. In so doing, I shall flesh out and add lots of needed muscle to the 'prolegomenon' developed in my previous paper on this topic. Moreover, I shall formulate and defend a line of argument which played no role whatever in my former paper, and which—assuming its success—can readily be seen to strengthen the mystic's position in no small way. While this line of argument falls short of establishing that *SF* and company should be regarded as decisively *victorious* on the self-authentication issue, it *does* establish a considerably less modest thesis than that defended in my previous paper.

Briefly, the purpose of my 'prolegomenon' was to establish that, while self-authenticating religious experience *may* be inconceivable, it is far from *obvious* (in contradistinction to what remains the strident contention of the critics) that such is the case. However, if my argumentation *to follow* is successful, what will have been established is the stronger or more significant thesis that the occurrence of self-authenticating religious experience gives substantial indication of being a *perfectly conceivable* state of affairs,⁶ i.e., entails nothing that is repugnant to the intellect. Moreover, and of greater significance yet, the intriguing and perhaps surprising conclusion to emerge from our subsequent deliberations is that, insofar as the most *spiritually profound* sort of theistic religious experience is concerned—i.e., 'spiritual-union-with-God' (hereafter just 'spiritual-union')—there is powerful warrant for denying the conceivability of there occurring an experience of *that* sort that is both veridical and *non-self-authenticating*.

II

I take it to be evident that a (logically) necessary condition of an experience's being self-authenticating is not simply that it be veridical, but—much more strongly—that there be no possible world at which precisely *that* experience (occurs and) is *nonveridical*. Consider a veridical experience *e* with person *N* as its epistemic subject: now if *e*—albeit *in fact* veridical—could *conceivably* have been illusive, it is thereby conceivable that *N*—though *in fact* she is not—should have been *mistaken* in believing *e* to be veridical. Given that, however, it hardly seems proper to regard *e* as providing *N* with a *guarantee* of its veridicality, i.e., with *infallible* justification for belief in its veridicality. Accordingly, to express the relevant point in the vocabulary of modality *de re*, since any experience that could not conceivably have been illusive would be veridical *essentially* (necessarily) rather than accidentally (contingently), a veridical experience would have to be veridical essentially in order to be self-authenticating. Thus, not only is *illusive* experience (obviously) disqualified from being self-authenticating,⁷

but no *veridical* experience that *could* have been illusive would enjoy that distinction. Hence, only if there could occur veridical experience of God's presence to which veridicality was essential could there occur veridical experience of God's presence that was self-authenticating.

Now I take it to be clear that any case of veridical *sensory* experience is such that veridicality is *accidental* to it. That is, for any sense-experience with the property of being veridical, it is conceivable that precisely *that experience* should have been illusive. Consider: at the present moment, I have no doubt whatever that I am seeing a telephone on my desk. Granted, however, that the 'telephone-experience' I presently am having is veridical, I should think it undeniable that the phenomenological configuration of my veridical telephone-experience is in every respect *replicable* by an *illusive* telephone-experience (perhaps under hypnosis, during extreme fatigue, drug ingestion, etc.). Accordingly, since my veridical telephone-experience is—in *this* regard—paradigmatic of veridical sensory experience in general, it seems clear that the modal property *being conceivably illusive* is one which it shares with *all* veridical sensory experience. However, since veridical experience that could conceivably have been illusive is, *ipso facto*, veridical experience to which veridicality is *accidental*, it seems clear that no veridical sense-experience could have the property of being veridical essentially. Rather, the property of veridicality must be⁸ accidental to any sense-experience exemplifying it. Accordingly, what *is* essential to all sense-experience is the conditional property *if veridical then veridical accidentally*. Hence, it seems clear that there could not occur veridical sensory experience to which veridicality was essential.

Could there, however, occur veridical *religious*⁹ experience (veridical experience of God's presence) to which veridicality was essential? I propose that there is very solid justification for taking the answer to *this* question—and perhaps *only* this question—as constituting the answer to the question of whether there could occur veridical experience of God's presence that was self-authenticating, i.e., veridical experience of God's presence that would, by itself, *guarantee* its veridicality to its epistemic subject. How so? After all, while it seems transparent—as discussed above—that an experience's being veridical essentially constitutes a *necessary* condition for (is entailed by) its being self-authenticating, it seems *far* from transparent that essential veridicality constitutes the *only* necessary condition for self-authentication, i.e., that an experience's being veridical essentially is also *sufficient* for (or *entails*) its being self-authenticating. Rather, this needs to be argued. Accordingly, let us turn to what I take to be a convincing—if not entirely unimpeachable—argument on behalf of the contention that veridicality constitutes a sufficient *as well as* a necessary condition for self-authentication (and thus for concluding that *being veridical essentially* and *being self-authenticating* are logically equivalent properties). The success of this argument

would, of course, legitimize our paraphrasing the question of whether there could occur self-authenticating experience of God's presence into the question of whether there could occur veridical experience of God's presence to which veridicality was essential. Upon achieving *that* step, however, I suggest that we will have the very solid prologue to a winning argument in defense of the conceivability of self-authenticating religious experience. Accordingly, I shall go on to conclude that there is impressively little basis for the time-honored and cavalier dismissal of the mystics' claim to such experience.

III

Necessarily, veridical experience that is veridical accidentally (such as veridical sensory experience) fails to be self-authenticating, and the *reason* for this is not in the least obscure. That is, since every such veridical experience could conceivably have *lacked* the property of veridicality, it could never be the case that the veridicality which is *in fact* exemplified by any accidentally-veridical experience was simply a function of *its qualitative character*. Rather, it is necessarily the case that factors (e.g., corroborative testimony) other than—and completely independent of—the qualitative or phenomenological character of any such experience would be *evidentially relevant* to an adjudication of its veridicality by its epistemic subject. Accordingly, regardless of how much we may be *prone*—as we so often are—to rely solely on the qualitative nature of our 'ordinary' experience as justification for belief in its veridicality, the point to be driven home is this: since the qualitative nature of any accidentally-veridical experience is *compatible with its being nonveridical*—since precisely *that experience* could have been illusive—there never could occur an accidentally-veridical experience such that its qualitative nature *alone* provided its epistemic subject with absolutely definitive or *infallible* justification for belief in its veridicality. Hence, it can properly be concluded that the *non-self-authenticating* status of 'ordinary' veridical experience is attributable to its *being conceivably nonveridical*. Alternatively, a veridical experience's being veridical accidentally is *all that it takes* for it to lack the property of being self-authenticating.

Suppose, however, that there could occur veridical experience to which veridicality was *essential*? What I believe is demonstrable is that there is considerably more than ample justification for viewing any such experience as self-authenticating. How so? Well, for any experience to which veridicality was essential, the precise qualitative nature of that experience would be *incompatible with*—would *preclude*—its being illusive, i.e., there is no possible world at which there occurs an experience that is (or could have been) *nonveridical* but shares the precise qualitative nature of some veridical experience that was veridical *essentially*. Since that is so, however, what *additional* to the qualitative nature or

phenomenological content of any essentially-veridical experience could ever be *required* by its epistemic subject in order to secure her entitlement to be *sure* of its veridicality? Alternatively, the phenomenological content of any essentially-veridical experience would seem to be *all that it takes* to provide its epistemic subject with *definitive* or *infallible* justification for belief in its veridicality. If that is so, of course, then any essentially-veridical experience would have the very special epistemic property of *authenticating itself* to its epistemic subject.

I suggest that this point can both be sharpened and strengthened as follows: any veridical experience to which veridicality was essential would be an experience the veridicality of which was among those properties (or their exemplifications) that *made up—composed—*its qualitative nature. Alternatively, since it is impossible for any experience that was actually or conceivably nonveridical to be such that its phenomenological content was precisely identical to that of any veridical experience that was veridical *essentially*, it is evident that veridicality would be among those properties that *compose* the phenomenological content of any essentially-veridical experience. However, for any given experience, its phenomenological content gives every indication of being such that the awareness which its epistemic subject has of it is *all-inclusive*. Specifically, for any person *P* and experience *e* that is *had* by *P*, there is considerably more than ample basis for holding that *P* cannot but apprehend *every property* that is a component of *e*'s phenomenological content, i.e., for holding that every such property *announces itself* to *P*. We need only consider, for example, the transparent perversity of claims such as 'Redness and luminosity are among those properties that compose the phenomenological content of the experience had by John at *t*, but John fails to apprehend redness at *t*.'

Accordingly, the phenomenological content of any experience would seem to be such that its epistemic subject's awareness of it differs dramatically in (what might be termed) 'epistemic breadth' from the sort of awareness that one normally has of external objects/events (recognizing, of course, that the major segment of our experiences surely seem to be *of* external objects/events, thereby exemplifying a 'referential' or 'extrapsychological' aspect). For our awareness of external objects is *rarely* all-inclusive. Our usual perceptions of cars and kitchen tables, for example, rarely involves our being aware of *all* of their empirically ascertainable features, e.g., every mark and stain on their surfaces. This does not, of course, rule out cases wherein one's awareness of some external object *is* all-inclusive. Rather, it is simply to drive home the point that, in contradistinction to what is characteristic of our apprehension of perceptual data *as such*, all-inclusive or 'comprehensive' awareness of some external object is in no way a function of its epistemic subject's being aware of that object *at all*.

Accordingly, there is very solid foundation for concluding that the epistemic subject of any experience the phenomenological content of which had *veridicality*

as a component—i.e., any experience to which veridicality was *essential*—would be *immediately aware* of its veridicality. Alternatively, for any veridical experience *e* to which veridicality was essential, *that e is veridical* gives every indication of being a proposition the truth of which is *guaranteed* to *e*'s epistemic subject solely by virtue of *e*'s phenomenological content. Hence, there would seem to be considerably more than ample justification for viewing any veridical experience to which veridicality was essential as—*ipso facto*—a veridical experience that was self-authenticating.

One can, however, raise a plausible objection to the foregoing argument—an objection that is largely *a priori* in character, and, accordingly, that can be held to vitiate *any* argument for the claim that an experience's being veridical essentially entails its being self-authenticating.¹⁰ Specifically, it can be contended that veridicality—as a property that applies only to *experiences*—is, *strictly* speaking, an *ontological* (rather than an *epistemological*) property. Moreover, it seems eminently plausible that ontological properties have no epistemic entailments. In any case, it seems incontestable that an experience's being veridical is perfectly compatible with its epistemic subject's failing to *know* that it is. (For example, the relevant person—perhaps as a consequence of the unusual character of the experience or some other respectable reason—may either believe that his or her experience is illusive or adopt a skeptical attitude about its veridicality). Accordingly, an experience's being veridical *essentially* is perfectly compatible with its epistemic subject's failing to know that it is—i.e., failing to know that it is veridical *at all*, and thus (*a fortiori*) failing to know that it is veridical in such a way as to preclude the conceivability of its being illusive. For veridicality does not magically become an *epistemological* property—or one with epistemic entailments—in those cases (should there be any) wherein some experience exemplifies it essentially rather than accidentally. Hence, an experience's being veridical essentially is perfectly compatible with its epistemic subject's failing to have *immediate awareness* of its veridicality. Accordingly, it would seem that an experience's being veridical essentially does *not* entail its being self-authenticating.

It seems to me that the preceding line of reasoning has considerable merit. However, I think it can readily be seen not to impair the thesis that an experience's being veridical essentially entails its being self-authenticating. For the occurrence of an essentially-veridical experience that was not *known* to be veridical by its epistemic subject (*a fortiori* not known by its epistemic subject to be veridical *essentially*) is perfectly compatible with its being true that essential-veridicality entails self-authentication. That is, while it could not fail to be the case that any self-authenticating experience would *guarantee* its veridicality to its epistemic subject, it must be emphasized that the relevant 'guarantee' has to be construed—strictly speaking—not as categorical but as *conditional* in character. For since

being-certain-that-p entails (as the strongest version of) *knowing-that-p*, which, in turn, entails *believing-that-p*, the 'guarantee' in question presupposes the epistemic subject's *belief* in the veridicality of the relevant essentially-veridical experience. However, since human beings are not *ideally* rational beings, there can be (and assuredly have been and will be) cases wherein some of us fail to assent to the epistemically indubitable. Accordingly, it must be allowed that the (conjunctive) state of affairs consisting in an experience's being veridical essentially and its epistemic subject's failing to *know* that it is veridical (let alone veridical *essentially*) is not self-contradictory. Hence, I propose the following contextual definition of 'self-authenticating' in terms of the intentional and epistemic notions of belief and certainty:

A veridical experience *e* that occurs to some person *N* is self-authenticating iff it is inconceivable *both* that *N* should (i) believe—strictly on the basis of *e*'s phenomenological content—that *e* is veridical and (ii) fail to be certain of its veridicality, i.e., if *N* believes—(once again) strictly on the basis of *e*'s phenomenological content—that *e* is veridical, such belief would be logically sufficient for (would entail) *N*'s being *absolutely certain* of *e*'s veridicality.

Consequently, if our preceding argument (for viewing any essentially-veridical experience as—*ipso facto*—self-authenticating) is sound, there is substantial warrant for holding that any veridical experience to which veridicality was essential would satisfy the definiens of the foregoing definition.

Now it seems clear that—*granted* the success of our analysis heretofore—there remains a rugged road to hoe before we can properly claim to have made any significant inroads on behalf of the doctrine represented and defended by *SF*. For her many skeptical friends can *agree* with all that has been argued thus far—i.e., can *agree* that there is very strong justification for regarding an experience's being veridical essentially as all that it takes for it to be self-authenticating—and still remain as recalcitrant as ever concerning their negative verdict on the conceivability of self-authenticating religious experience. Specifically, the skeptics can hold—and can plausibly be *expected* to hold—that (necessarily) *all veridical experience* (whether sensory or not) has at least *this* much in common with my veridical 'telephone-experience' discussed above: veridicality is *accidental* to it. Thus, the skeptics can hold to the conceptual impossibility of there occurring veridical experience of *any* kind (accordingly, veridical experience of *God's presence*) that could not conceivably have *lacked* the property of veridicality. Hence, they can be expected to contend that what *is* essential to each and every experience is the conditional property *if veridical then veridical accidentally*.

However, I suggest that we are now prepared to establish that the occurrence

of *essentially-veridical* experience of God's presence *is perfectly conceivable*, and, accordingly, for rejecting the skeptical view that, necessarily, all veridical experience is veridical accidentally.

IV

Initially, there might be the temptation to endorse an argument along the following lines: since the theistic conception of divinity entails that experience of God's presence is inherently revelatory¹¹—i.e., since there could be no veridical experience of that sort which failed to constitute a divine 'disclosure'—the omnipotence of God (if God exists) suffices to ensure His ability to bring about veridical experience of His presence to which veridicality was essential. Alternatively, God's omnipotence includes the power to bring about veridical experiences of His presence the precise qualitative nature of which could not be replicated in all respects by any *nonveridical* experience 'of His presence'. While it seems to me that this argument is very far from wrong-headed, and, moreover, constitutes an embryonic and very rough version of a *successful* argument on behalf of the conceivability of essentially-veridical religious experience, there would seem to be eminently good reason for rejecting it as it stands.

Specifically, the skeptic can readily and plausibly respond by asserting that, in the absence of compelling justification for believing otherwise, it is proper to maintain that there could not occur a veridical religious experience with phenomenological content that was not in every respect replicable by an *illusive* 'religious experience'. Alternatively, for any object *O* of possible experience, why believe that there can occur veridical experiences of *O* the phenomenological configurations of which are unique to *veridical* experience of *O*? Accordingly, why believe that there could occur veridical experience of *God's presence* with phenomenological configurations that were not replicable-in-all-respects by some *illusive* 'experience of God's presence'? Rather, and *notwithstanding* the omnipotence of God, it is proper to maintain that it would *not* be within His power to bring about veridical experience of His presence to which veridicality was essential. Call this the *Phenomenological Replication Argument (PRA)*.

It seems to me that the *PRA* deserves to be taken very seriously. That is, I think that in the absence of compelling justification for believing otherwise, it *is* proper to deny that there could occur veridical experience of God's presence to which veridicality was essential. However, what I hope to establish in the sequel is that—to the fatal misfortune of the *PRA*—*there is compelling justification for believing otherwise*. Before proceeding to adduce such justification, however, let it be clear that I shall make no attempt to produce what I take to be inherently *unproducible*—namely, a rigorous or *definitive* analysis of what would be central to the phenomenological content of veridical religious experi-

ence. Indeed, it would seem to be incontestable that phenomenological properties *as such*—not simply those indigenous to veridical experience of God's presence—could not but contain *some* unanalyzable or conceptually inexpressible components.¹² Moreover, this seems *especially* evident insofar as the phenomenological properties that compose *feeling*-states are concerned, and it seems abundantly clear that mystical states of consciousness—*notwithstanding* their 'noetic' component—are closer in character and texture to states of *feeling* than to states of cognition.¹³ Accordingly, I suggest that the mystics' traditional insistence upon the *ineffability* of religious experience—particularly of the incomparably profound experience of 'spiritual-union'—deserves to be treated with considerably more respect than has traditionally come its way from analytic philosophers.

This being said, however, I hope to establish that what *is* analyzable about the concept of veridical religious experience—specifically of veridical *spiritual-union* experience—yields us compelling justification for concluding not simply that the occurrence of essentially-veridical experience of that sort is perfectly conceivable (and thus that the *PRA* is unsound), but, more strongly, that the occurrence of veridical spiritual-union experience to which veridicality is *nonessential* is *inconceivable*. Accordingly, what emerges from our deliberations is that there is powerful warrant for concluding not only that it is conceivable for there to occur self-authenticating spiritual-union experience, but, more strongly and more intriguingly, that it is *inconceivable* for there to occur veridical spiritual-union experience that *failed* to be self-authenticating.

V

At the very heart of the effort to secure our thesis is the need to devote some close attention to a relational property that, if theists are correct, is exemplified by contingent—i.e., generable and perishable—objects in both the distributive and collective senses: namely, is exemplified by any single contingent object and by the *aggregate* of contingent objects that constitute what we call 'the cosmos'. The property of which I speak is *being-God-produced-and-God-conserved*.¹⁴ Our specific purpose in this section is to adduce compelling justification for maintaining that this property could not fail to be *essential* to any contingent object that exemplified it. The major *significance* of this for the success of our thesis will become clear in the subsequent and closing section.

Exactly what, however, mandates the conclusion that *being-God-produced-and-God-conserved* could not fail to be essential to any contingent object that exemplified it? Consider: *if*—as is held by theism—the final or foundational principle of explanation for the coming-into-being and continuance-in-being of contingent objects can only be found in the exercise of (respectively) God's productive and conserving powers, it seems unimpeachable that the property in

question is possessed by contingent objects simply *because* of their ontological contingency. Perhaps more perspicuously, contingent objects could properly be said to exemplify this property because—in contradistinction to *self-existent* objects such as, e.g., numbers and properties (though I recognize the controversy here)—no *contingent* object is such that its inherent or essential nature *dictates its existence*. Accordingly, *if* contingent objects have the property of being-God-produced-and-God-conserved, *that* they do so seems undeniably attributable to their *requiring*—ultimately if not proximately—the productive and conserving activities of God for (respectively) their coming-into-being and perdurance. Alternatively, the exercise of God's productive and conserving powers would be *what it takes* to ensure the initial and ongoing existence of contingent objects.

However, if the exercise of such divine powers is really (as theists, of course, urge) *what it takes* for the actualization of 'contingent being', then whatever is a contingent object is *ipso facto* God-produced-and-God-conserved—i.e., any contingent object's being God-produced-and-God-conserved would constitute a *function* of its being-a-contingent-object. Alternatively, any contingent object would exemplify the former property *solely by virtue* of exemplifying the latter. This being so, however, it is clear that there could exist a contingent object that was God-produced-and-God-conserved nonessentially *only* if there could exist a contingent object that was a *contingent object* nonessentially. Accordingly, all that is needed to warrant a rejection of the view that there could be contingent objects that exemplified *being-God-produced-and-God-conserved* accidentally is decisive justification for rejecting the view that there could be contingent objects that exemplified *being-a-contingent-object* accidentally.

Could there *not*, however, be contingent objects to which the property of being-a-contingent-object was accidental? Surely not. For the claim that there *could* exist contingent objects that were contingent objects accidentally—i.e., contingent objects that could have (existed and) *failed* to be contingent objects—has modal entailments that are patently unpalatable to reason. Specifically, that there could exist contingent objects that in some possible world or other exist as *non-contingent* objects entails that there is at least one possible world at which there exists, e.g., a polar bear, or a star, or a mountain—indeed, any contingent object that you please—that is strictly identical to an object which exists at some other possible world as God or as (an abstract object such as) a number, property, state of affairs, or proposition. However, if this is not paradigmatic of an intuitively or self-evidently unacceptable modal scenario, I am unable to understand what *would* constitute such a paradigm. Accordingly, its repugnance to the intellect dictates our rejection of the view that there could exist contingent objects to which *being-a-contingent-object* was accidental.

So: since this is precisely what is required to warrant a rejection of the view that there could exist contingent objects to which *being-God-produced-and-God-*

conserved was accidental, the proper conclusion to be drawn is that there could *not* exist contingent objects to which that property was accidental. Let it be clear that this does not constitute an affirmative begging of the question of God's existence since it does not entail that there *are* any contingent objects with the property of being-God-produced-and-God-conserved. Rather, that there is compelling justification for denying the possibility of contingent objects to which that property was accidental is—taken alone—perfectly compatible with the view that such a property is not exemplified by contingent objects *at all*.

Hence, the question which remains to be addressed is this: exactly what is the *significance* of all this for the success of our thesis?

VI

I take the following passage from Thomas Merton to be of central importance for what is to be established in this concluding section:

...true contemplation is the experience of an immediate spiritual union with God, a union which can only be effected by God and which is essentially a union of supernatural charity...no spirit other than God Himself can unite himself immediately to the soul, and no one but God can infuse supernatural charity into the soul...no spirit less than the Spirit of God can possibly produce even plausible imitation of mystical union...anyone who has experienced true mystical union can see at once the infinite distance that lies between it and the false article...¹⁵

In the foregoing, Fr. Merton reminds us of the significant axiom that has been emphasized by every major theistic mystic:¹⁶ namely, that (necessarily) *veridical* spiritual-union experience—i.e., what Merton terms 'true mystical union'—constitutes a *divine bestowal*. While we can refine our 'receptive faculties' to allow more of the 'divine light' to 'illuminate' the soul,¹⁷ finite (hence human) persons lack the power to *effect* true mystical union. Rather, no *limited* self could conceivably have the power to bring about spiritual union with the *Supreme Self*,

...a union that is so purely and perfectly natural that no created nature could possibly bring it about.¹⁸

In further elaboration of this point, Merton goes on to note:

Both Saint John of the Cross and Saint Thomas clearly distinguish between *acquired wisdom*, which is the fruit of man's own study and of his thought, and *infused wisdom or contemplation*, which is a gift from God...Man's "knowledge and ability"—acquired wisdom—can do nothing to bring a man to"...Union with God."¹⁹

Consider Merton's contention (in the opening quote) that '*...no spirit less than the spirit of God can possibly produce even a plausible imitation of mystical union*' (italics mine). I suggest that we are now positioned to establish the following: quite independently of whether Merton—and the mystical tradition in general—is *right* is maintaining that nothing short of God, e.g., our own imaginations, or, for that matter, malicious demons, could possibly be the source of even a *plausible imitation* of veridical spiritual-union, such a doctrine is extraordinarily *close* to the sober truth. Specifically, what can now be established is that no *nonveridical* experience of 'spiritual-union',—i.e., no putative spiritual-union experience that was *not* effected by God—could possibly constitute a *perfect* imitation of veridical spiritual-union, and, accordingly, that (necessarily) any veridical spiritual-union experience would be veridical essentially.

To begin with, since it is necessarily true that any case of veridical spiritual-union constitutes an occurrence that can only be effected by God, it is clear that:

Necessarily, for any putative spiritual-union experience *e*, if *e* is veridical, *e* is *God-produced-and-God-conserved*.

Conversely, however, since it is no less evident that there could not occur a God-produced-and-God-conserved spiritual-union experience that was *illusive*, it is also clear that:

Necessarily, for any putative spiritual-union experience *e*, if *e* is God-produced-and-God-conserved, *e* is *veridical*.²⁰

Alternatively, a spiritual-union experience's being veridical is *necessary* as well as sufficient for its being God-produced-and-God-conserved. Accordingly, and (I think) intriguingly, *being-a-veridical-spiritual-union-experience* and *being-a-God-produced-and-God-conserved-spiritual-union-experience* are logically equivalent properties, i.e., entail each other.

As we have seen, however, any contingent object with the property of being God-produced-and-God-conserved could not fail to exemplify that property *essentially*. Hence, this would also be the case for any contingent *phenomenological* object with that property, e.g., any experience of spiritual-union. However, since a spiritual-union experience's being veridical (in addition to entailing) is *entailed* by its being God-produced-and-God-conserved—is entailed by its possession of a property that can only be had essentially—no spiritual-union experience that was God-produced-and-God-conserved could fail to be *veridical* essentially. (Clearly, just as no contingent truths are entailments of necessary truths, the *de re* correlate of this unimpeachable *de dicto* modal axiom is that, for any object *O* and property *p*, *O* has *p* essentially if (1) there is some property *q* that *O* has essentially, and (2) that *O* has *q* entails that *O* has *p*.) Accordingly, the inexorable

conclusion to which we have been led is that there could not conceivably occur a veridical spiritual-union experience that failed to be an *essentially*-veridical spiritual-union experience. Thus, any veridical spiritual-union experience would have the distinction of being such that its phenomenological content could not conceivably be replicated-in-every-respect by any *illusive* spiritual-union experience.

Before finalizing, however, an important excursus is required: we need to consider a plausible objection²¹ to the principle—absolutely central to our thesis—that a spiritual-union experience's being veridical is *necessary* as well as sufficient for its being-God-produced-and-God-conserved. It proceeds as follows: If (God exists and)—as theism maintains—*everything* contingent is God-produced-and-God-conserved, then, since *nonveridical* spiritual-union experience is no less contingent than would be the veridical variety, it follows that experiences of the former sort would *also* be God-produced-and-God-conserved (and, of course, like everything *else* with that property, would exemplify it essentially). Hence, a spiritual-union experience's being-God-produced-and-God-conserved does *not* entail its being veridical. *A fortiori*, it does not entail its being veridical *essentially*.

I suggest that we can accommodate this objection by invoking a venerable metaphysical distinction—namely, that between substances and *modes*. This distinction—while not without some rough edges—has what I think is considerable intuitive appeal and the support of numerous influential metaphysicians throughout history. In Book II, Chapter 12 of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke observes:

...the ideas of *substances* are such combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct *particular* things subsisting by themselves...(Para. 6).

As for modes:

...*modes* I call such complex ideas which, however compounded, contain not in them the supposition of subsisting by themselves, but are considered as dependences on, or affections of, substances... (Para. 4).

Clearly, the core component of the substance-mode distinction, as formulated and defended by Locke and its many proponents is that the existence of such items as experiences, decisions, high-blood pressure and diabetes conditions presuppose (conceptually) the existence of a 'substance' or 'logical subject' *to whom they apply or occur*. In short, substances are 'metaphysically prior' to modes. Hence, since experiences lack the capacity for 'subsisting by themselves,' but rather are *modes* (or *affections*) of sentient beings—hence persons—beings of this latter sort constitute the 'logical subjects' of such modes.

Granted that this is so, however, precisely how does it constitute a foundation

for coping with the objection in question? Well, while theism entails that God produces and conserves all (contingent) *substances* 'as a matter of course', it does *not* entail that God produces and conserves all *modes* of substances 'as a matter of course', particularly when the modes in question are the *experiences* had by those 'substances' that constitute human persons. More strongly, an entailment of theism can readily be seen to be that God does *not* produce and conserve all of the experiences that occur to human persons. Consider: the doctrine of *human moral agency* occupies a venerable place in the theistic view of the world. Accordingly, it is central to theism that at least *some* human behavior is produced and conserved *by humans*. For if *God* were the productive and conserving cause of *all* human (decision and) action, then *we* could hardly be said to constitute moral agents. Rather, it would then be the case that *God* would be the moral agent responsible for 'our' (decisions and) actions. Hence, a doctrine which is central to theism (human moral agency) entails that some of our 'modes'—paradigmatically, those which constitute our (decisions and) actions—are such that *we alone* are their producers and conservers. Thus, while God—as the producer and conserver of all *substances*—is the producer and conserver of all *persons*, He is *not* the producer and conserver of all *modes* of persons.

Granted that the foregoing is sound, however, exactly how does it warrant the conclusion that God is not the producer and conserver of all *experiences* had by persons? As follows: what experiences we have is often a *decisional matter*, i.e., many of our experiences are a *function of the decisions that we make*.²² For example, if *N* decides to rob a bank, he thereby provides himself with a number of experiences that he would not have had otherwise—e.g., holding a gun on people, seeing a terrified teller, laying his hands on an extraordinary amount of cash, and, presumably, the 'introspective' experience of anxiety brought about by his participation in a serious crime. Hence, one of the clear implications of theism—by virtue of its commitment to the doctrine of human moral agency—is that many of the experiences that occur to persons are brought about and conserved *by those persons*, i.e., God is not the producer and conserver of *all human experiences* any more than He is the producer and conserver of all human (decisions and) actions.

Given, then, that one of the propositions denied by a theistic view of the world is that all of the experiences that occur (can occur) to persons are (would be) God-produced-and-God-conserved, I think it can properly be concluded that no *nonveridical spiritual-union experience* could have God as its productive and conserving cause. Let it be clear, however, that this is not to suggest anything so odd as the occurrence of any such experience would invariably be explainable as the result of some *decision* on the part of its epistemic subject.²³ While the purpose of the foregoing was to establish that the doctrine of human moral agency

yields us compelling foundation for concluding that not *all* human experiences are to be included among those contingent items that are (if theism is true) God-produced-and-God-conserved, this does not preclude the occurrence of human experiences that would fail to be God-produced-and-God-conserved for reasons that are completely *independent* of human decision. And what I think can readily be established is that such must be the case for any nonveridical spiritual-union experience. Alternatively, what I believe can be shown is that there could not conceivably occur nonveridical spiritual-union experience that was God-produced-and-God-conserved, and, accordingly, that it is demonstratively as well as intuitively correct to maintain that a spiritual-union experience's being-God-produced-and-God conserved entails its being veridical.

The relatively simple argument I have in mind is rooted in something very much like the Cartesian principle that a perfectly good being never deceives. While I do not (as, of course, Descartes did not) endorse what I consider to be the indefensible claim that there could never occur cases of epistemic deception that a perfectly good being would *fail to prevent*—indeed, given that God exists, there are uncountably many such cases—that there can occur nonveridical spiritual-union experience *that was God-produced-and-God-conserved* entails something *far* more pernicious than a perfectly good being's *acquiescence* in a case of epistemic deception, i.e., it entails that there could occur cases of epistemic deception that were *brought about* by God. However, it seems to me that the *coup de grace* has to be this: that there could occur nonveridical spiritual-union experience that was God-produced-and-God-conserved entails that God could be the productive and conserving cause of epistemic deception concerning not simply 'experience of His presence' as such, but experience of His presence that constitutes religious experience *of the most spiritually profound sort*. Surely, if it is not transparent that such a state of affairs is precluded by the concept of a maximally good being, I cannot begin to understand how *any* intelligible content can be assigned to that concept. Accordingly, it is eminently proper to conclude that no nonveridical spiritual-union experience could fail to be among those experiences or phenomenological modes of persons that lacked the property of being God-produced-and-God-conserved.

To finalize, then, I believe we have secured our thesis that any spiritual-union experience with the property of being veridical would, *ipso facto*, have the property of being veridical *essentially*, i.e., the property of being such that no *illusive* spiritual-union experience could be a *perfect* phenomenological imitation of that veridical spiritual-union experience. Hence, since we have seen there to be powerful warrant for holding that any experience to which veridicality was essential would be an experience that was self-authenticating, there is precisely such warrant for holding that the occurrence of self-authenticating religious experience constitutes a conceivable state of affairs solely on the condition that

the occurrence of *veridical spiritual-union experience* constitutes a conceivable state of affairs. Clearly, however—and notwithstanding the full range of disagreement concerning just how to unpack the attribute of omnipotence—the power to effect veridical spiritual-union experience could not be lacked by any being worthy of the title *God*. Accordingly, whatever might be said of the epistemological claims of *SF* and the mystical tradition in general, there seems to be very strong justification for rejecting as ill-founded the time-honored contention that the notion of self-authenticating religious experience is conceptually unacceptable.²⁴

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NOTES

1. Cf., for example, *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, translated and edited, with an introduction, by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1958), p. 251; John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Charles Scribner Sons, 1949), p. 132; and Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), p. 233, for variegated statements of the doctrine that the most spiritually significant apprehensions of God's presence are such that they *guarantee their own veridicality* to their epistemic subjects.

2. It seems to me that any attempt to provide a convincing rigorous definition of 'veridical' may well be no less quixotic than attempts to provide convincing rigorous definitions of so many other key concepts introduced into philosophical discussion. This notwithstanding, however, I suggest that our grasp of what it takes for an experience to be veridical is no more obscure than our grasp of what it takes for a proposition to be true (i.e., not really obscure at all). For some elaboration of this point, see my 'Religious Experience, Self-Authentication, and Modality *De Re*: A Prolegomenon', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (1979), pp. 217-24.

3. It should be clear that 'experience' is used here—and in the sequel—in the 'referential' or extrapsychological sense, i.e., the sense in which '*N* is having a veridical experience of *O*' entails that the *existence* of *O* is in no way a function of *N*'s *experience* of it. Accordingly, we are *not* using 'experience' in the sense in which one often is said to experience her pains, her regrets, her after-images, her disappointments, etc.

4. I shall often use 'mystic(s)' as a shorthand for 'theistic mystic(s)', i.e., for any theist who eschews the technique of discursive proof in favor of the view that knowledge/certainty concerning the reality and will of God is to be had by 'direct experience' of God/God's presence, *and*, in addition, claims to have had precisely such experience.

5. *Op. cit.*

6. The one *presupposition* of this argument is that God's *existence* gives compelling indication of being a perfectly conceivable state of affairs. It seems to me that, given the notorious unsuccess of 'ontological disproofs' of God's existence—indeed, so far as I know, there is no rationally persuasive argument for the conceptual falsity of *God exists* in the literature of philosophical theology—this

presupposition is entirely appropriate.

7. Unfortunately, a great deal of confusion has grown up around this point, i.e., it has often been held that the occurrence of self-authenticating religious experience is impossible because the occurrence of *illusive* religious experience is possible. For an attempt to establish the misguided character of any such argument, see my 'Religious Experience and Rational Certainty', *Religious Studies* Vol. 12 (1976), pp. 311-18.

8. Since the property of veridicality is accidental to any sense-experience that exemplifies it, then it *must* be accidental to any sense-experience that exemplifies it. Alternatively, given the incontestable modal principle that whatever is conceivable (or logically possible) is *necessarily* conceivable, since it is conceivable for all veridical sense-experience to be *nonveridical*, it is (ipso facto) *necessarily* conceivable for all veridical sense-experience to be nonveridical. Accordingly, no veridical sense-experience *could* have been such that its veridicality was essential to it—i.e., the property of veridicality *must* be accidental to any sense-experience exemplifying it.

9. This question, of course, assumes that experiences which qualify as *religious* in character are (ipso facto) *nonsensory* in character, or that experiences which are candidates for being veridical apprehensions of God's presence do *not* involve the external senses. Such a doctrine is absolutely central to theistic mysticism. One need only note Saint Teresa's disdain for 'visions which are seen with the eyes of the body' (*op. cit.*, p. 260) and the low esteem in which Saint John of the Cross held all 'apprehensions...which are communicated through sense...' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, translated and edited, with a general introduction, by E. Allison Peers, (New York: Image Books, 1958), p. 260. (Italics mine)). For an argument that raises some questions about the traditional bifurcation between sensory experience and religious experience, see my 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception, and God's Essential Unobservability', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 17 (1981), pp. 357-67.

10. See Michael Levine's valuable paper 'Can There be Self-Authenticating Experiences of God?', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 19 (1983), pp. 229-34 and my reply in the same (June) issue, pp. 235-39.

11. Cf. George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 53. This point, which is of major significance to our thesis, is developed and documented in significant detail in the final section of this paper.

12. Surely, we have learned at least *this* much from distinguished epistemologists of the 'immediate' such as C. I. Lewis.

13. As pointed out, of course, by so many commentators of mysticism. Cf., for example, William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902 and 1929), p. 371.

14. While the doctrine that contingent objects could not *continue*-in-existence without God's *conserving* activity any more than they could *begin* to exist without God's *productive* activity is absolutely integral to traditional theistic metaphysics, it seems to me that it may well have an entailment from which many traditional theists would recoil. See my 'Does Traditional Theism Entail Pantheism?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (1983), pp. 105-12.

15. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1951 and 1979), p. 70.

16. One might consult, for example, Saint John of the Cross (*op. cit.*), pp. 177-84, esp. pp. 179-80, Saint Teresa (*op. cit.*), pp. 173-219, and William James (*op. cit.*), p. 372.

17. The 'illumination' metaphor is, of course, used very widely among theistic mystics. See Saint

John of the Cross (*op. cit.*), p. 181, and Abraham Isaac Kook, *The Lights of Penitence, The Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems*, translation and introduction by Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 221. Kook contends there that all things endeavor 'to conform to the inflow of the light of the En Sof'.

18. *The Ascent to Truth*, p. 70. Incidentally, Fr. Merton has some intriguing things to say about the *phenomenological content* of mystical union—i.e., about the phenomenology of 'loss of self': see p. 284 of *New Seeds of Contemplation*. What Merton has to say there is remarkably similar to what is maintained by Saint John of the Cross on p. 182 (*op. cit.*).

19. *The Ascent to Truth*, p. 75 (Merton's italics).

20. Perhaps, however, this principle is not *obviously* as unproblematic as I take it to be. I shall deal very soon with a plausible objection to it.

21. I thank the editor of this journal for calling it to my attention.

22. I use 'decisional' here primarily in the broad or 'extensional' sense. That is, in choosing to perform some action, we do not usually choose (or intend) to have all of the *experiences* implied by that action (indeed, we rarely know what they are). For example, in choosing to go on an African safari, I do not thereby choose to confront a leopard, but such an experience may well be one *result* of my choosing to go on an African safari. In just this sense, many of our experiences are functions of our decisions.

23. There *could*, of course, occur nonveridical spiritual-union experiences which are to be explained in precisely this way, i.e., as a result of some drug ingested by its epistemic subject.

24. I thank the editor of *Faith and Philosophy* and an anonymous referee for comments and suggestions that led to (what I hope are) major improvements in this paper.