Ontological Revelation
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Introduction

Perception of divinity through mystic experience is widely reported in all major religions. Philosophers have attempted to epistemically justify religious beliefs on the basis of such phenomena, which seem to provide evidence for religious doctrines in the same way that perceptual experience supports ordinary beliefs about the physical world (Alston, 1986, 1988, 1991; Broad, 2008; Brown, 2014; James, 1902: 423-24; Swinburne, 2004: 293-327).

This approach has encountered two major objections. The first argues that ordinary and divine perceptions are not sufficiently alike, so that the justification of the former cannot be conferred to the latter (Gale, 1994a, 1994b; Gale, 1994c; Pojman, 2009; Zackariasson, 2006). Another objection emphasizes how this approach might sever the problem of religious diversity, for as long as one religious doctrine can be justified by the appearance of its divine entities in mystic experiences, other religions with putatively conflicting worldviews can be equally justified in the same manner (Hick, 1997; Penelhum, 1986; Pojman, 2009).

In this paper, I will provide a general analysis of core mystic experiences across different cultures as what is minimally required for genuine religious justification. The account allows to refute most of the alleged disparities between ordinary and divine perception, as well as to undermine the defeating powers that could arise among different religions in philosophical discourses.

Not all religious experiences susceptible of mystic feelings are up for this task, nor is every feature of canonical mysticism indispensable. I will focus on experiences where divine qualities that transcend ordinary human epistemic constitutions are directly perceived. These perceptions shall be discussed under the term “ontological revelation”. They are “ontological” by presenting qualities surpassing what a cognizer in his particular species could normally conceive, and they are “revelations” in the sense that the purported divine entities are actually involved in the perceptions, either actively or passively, where these qualities are manifested. It might be worried that this objective dimension of ontological revelation is too strong a condition on religious experience, and naturalist philosophers might be ready to accuse us of talking out of thin air. While they could acknowledge some subjective mystic experiences and reduce their religious quest to socio-psychological activities, they would simply deny the occurrence of genuine ontological revelation, or any such possibility, in our human reality.

To this, it shall be clarified that I will not argue that ontological revelations have actually been instantiated, or that they will ever be instantiated at all. The reason is that, instead of arguing for the existence of God on the basis of subjective religious experience, my aim is simply to examine what the best epistemic status that religious beliefs can possibly enjoy under optimal religious assumptions, i.e., the existence of divine entities and the truth of their religious worldviews, etc. Indeed, that the very truth of such doctrines lies beyond the decision of each religious participant entails that one who genuinely perceives God, compared with a victim of a corresponding illusion, is not subjectively more justified or capable of providing more convincing argument. Still, some further epistemic advantage can be acquired for our faith. Ontological revelations, as I will show, provide their recipients with religious epistemic entitlement against
naturalistic reductions by constituting their cognitive processes with the perception of divine properties beyond ordinary human conceivability.

The concept of ontological revelation and religious epistemic entitlement will be clarified in Section 1. I will argue in Section 2 that, for each religious tradition, *with the assumption that its doctrines are true*, religious beliefs formed in ontological revelations are epistemically justified through exactly the same pattern in which our ordinary perceptions are justified. In Section 3, an *epistemic gap* shall be drawn between ordinary cognizers and recipients of ontological revelations. And we will see in Section 4 how the problem of religious diversity can be treated along this approach. In Section 5, we shall conclude with considering further merits of “ontological revelation” as a basic account of religious justifications.

1. Religious epistemic entitlement and ontological revelation

*Pace* Wittgenstein, language seems to transcend the limits of my world. I heard of *Antarctica*, and can use the word to refer to the continent it actually refers to, without having been there. Fortunately, this word is not so much void of meaning for me, as I saw pictures of the iceberg, watched movies about penguins, and might even have friends who have travelled back from that land. This is perhaps too ordinary an example. So think of mars, and further celestial bodies of which we had forged the names for long, but are only recently able to have a close look. Likewise, I admit, our representations of these objects were not absolutely poor in content, for they did have particular positions in the night sky, and have served as navigators for birds and sailors. Still, they did not put as much colour to my representation of the world as when their properties have become more accessible. Accessibility of a property is not a function of physical distance between the subject and the object, as the above examples might mistakenly suggest. A cognizer who is born blind but has complete knowledge about the physical properties of colours normally lacks the epistemic access to them, even when red objects are close at hand. He may know how to use the word “red” with the help of a detector that signals a sound every time the wave frequency is present, but he is still unable to see what the colour is as we understand it. Again, the gap is not insurmountable, for it is at least possible that the blind subject could have visually conceived of the colour in his mind, even if he had no way to know whether it is a colour.

The names that we use for divine entities belong to a whole different category. Divinity, it is supposed, substantially transcend ordinary human epistemic capacities. For those to whom God has not yet shown the grace of his presence, the word “God” can only be attached with representational contents like the images we saw in the church or the stories of his deeds in the Bible. Likewise, for those who have not experienced Dao, the concept is only a reminder of a complex of apparently contradictory propositions dictated by an inaccessible ancient text. While a human being can imagine what Antarctica is like without having been there or possibly conceive a colour unseen, he cannot genuinely understand what God is like without His divine qualities being revealed. Traditions pedagogically interpret divinity in ways we could understand. We are told, for instance, that God is loving and powerful, and we seem to know what God is like by attributing these properties to Him. Unfortunately, by doing this, we are more likely to be conceiving God as an extended human. And we know quite well that God is not an extended human. Inner religious experiences constitute another plausible source of our understanding of
God, but few of them are irreducible to mere projections of our own mental states. Members of religious tradition might often have feelings that are extraordinarily peaceful or sublime when directing their thought toward the name of God, as if God must have been present in the process. Such feelings are both religiously and morally valuable, but many of them can equally be realized through mere human activities, e.g. by watching a Greek marble statue or by listening to Bach.

Transcendence of divinity to human cognition is a canonical doctrine in many traditions. However, when not properly interpreted, it might cause trouble to the values of religious practice. If God exists but has never been cognitively accessible to human beings as a divine entity, our beliefs about Him as a divine entity are nonetheless true, they might even be justified on the basis of our religious education or inner experiences (Swinburne, 2004), but such beliefs would be epistemically degraded into Gettier cases where what makes the beliefs true, i.e., God’s divinity, is not causally connected with what makes us form the belief, i.e., mere human conception of divinity. This does not yet seem to be a sever problem. Gettier cases are situations where the cognizers believe justifiably and truly, although their beliefs fail to constitute knowledge. Human beings, it might be confessed, is so limited that it is not pitiful if we cannot aspire to genuine knowledge about God. However, if divinity absolutely transcends all human epistemic capacity, then all our religions would only consist of human activities that are reducible in naturalist terms, even in their own religious worldviews. God’s existence and his presence through prayers would no longer genuinely transform our religious experience, because these would then be equivalently constructable from mere human cognitions. By this way, even the most advanced religious participants are, let us say, unentitled to reject the Marxist-Freudian explanation of their own spiritual achievements.

This is not a welcomed situation. The competition between religious and naturalist explanation of religion can be recognized as a real philosophical battle, because we do appreciate the difficulty of rationally justifying our religious beliefs when God’s existence is precluded form our premises. However, if irreducible religious cognition remains out of reach even under the optimal assumption of God’s existence, the attempt would be doomed to failure from the very beginning.

Some different opinions that might arise at this point could help to clarify the issue.

First, it might be doubted whether the core value of religious practice purports to what we really know during our mortal lives. Perhaps they only point beyond to the promise that divine entities have made as told by our religious doctrines, e.g. us standing before Jesus in the Final Judgement, or having an eternal life with God in heaven, etc. However, if these doctrines are true, then divinity is no longer epistemically inaccessible, because we would know essentially more about God at the Judgement and during the life in heaven. That the genuine perception of divinity arrives only after death is not an argument for its absolute transcendence to human cognition: our lives extend beyond deaths under this religious worldview.

Second, it can also be doubted whether, when refusing naturalist reductionism, we imposed an implausibly strong criterion on religious justification. In fact, we seem to be requiring religious participants to provide by themselves decisive reasons against naturalistic reduction of their mystic experience. This would be equivalent to asking an ordinary perceiver to provide decisive reason against scepticism of the external world. As we know, epistemic interpretations that one might endorse for his beliefs are quite vulnerable against alternative potential defeaters. A subject who actually perceives a physical object is normally justified in believing so, even if he is
unable to discriminate and eliminate the possibility of a Cartesian Demon. Likewise, the objection continues, a religious person is normally justified in believing that God exists on the basis of testimonial religious education and prima facie supportive inner experience (Swinburne, 2004). It will be unreasonable to ask him to eliminate the possibility that his experiences are irreducible to alternative non-religious explanations.

To this, I concede that it is a task beyond normal human capacity to single out genuine perception of divinity from mere subjective mystic experiences. However, we are making no such request. Although a cognizer who perceives a physical object cannot internally eliminate the possibility of an illusion, he is epistemically entitled against such possibilities, because perceptions in general do have some cognitive mechanics that is not shared by dreams or illusions. Similarly, a mathematician who has just proved a theorem might be unable to tell whether he has been drugged and thus disposed to miscalculate. Nonetheless, he is entitled to ignore such possibilities, at least for the reason that genuine mathematical demonstration are not of the same cognitive processes as thoughts produced by drugs. To be epistemically entitled in this way, the ordinary perceiver or the mathematician does not even have to be aware of the underlying mechanism of perception or mathematical reasoning. They only need to instantiate such cognitive processes. By contrast, if divinity absolutely transcends our cognition, then even the extreme mystic experience, where God is in fact present, will be cognitively identical with its naturalist counterpart. As a result, he would not be in a position to ignore the naturalist interpretation.

Epistemic entitlement of a cognizer in view of a belief is thus derived from the cognitive process which produces the belief. Moreover, it is the also the basis of undefeated justification when the cognizer is confronted with alternative accounts of his experience. There is a sense in which an ordinary cognizer, in normal epistemic conditions, remains minimally justified for his perceptual belief, even if he is confronted by a sceptic that he is unable to refute.

The following condition on epistemic entitlement from ordinary cognitions and the justification it delivers can thus be postulated:

\[ (EEJ) \text{ If a subject usually employs a truth-conducive cognitive process, then when he activates the process and acquires a belief,} \]
\[ \text{ (a) he is epistemically entitled to endorse the belief;} \]
\[ \text{ (b) he is epistemically entitled to ignore other possibilities where the belief is produced through different manners and thus false;} \]
\[ \text{ (c) he is minimally justified to reject the accounts of his cognition in terms of the possibilities in (b).} \]

Our aim is to find the minimal justification that religious participant could possess against naturalist reduction according to this schema. For sake of convenience, this justification shall be called as religious justification (RJ), and the epistemic entitlement that delivers RJs as religious epistemic entitlement (REE).

In most cases, our religious experience does not provide REE. Piously reading the scripture, attending to rituals, feeling the joy of morality or emotionally shocked as if by a divine entity, etc., are all activities objectively identical to their humanly realisable counterpart that would be nonetheless instantiated even if God does not exist. By this way, they are not cognitive processes
conducive to the purported religious truth. The issue is not about whether the cognition is caused by God and thus satisfies the “causal constraint”. For God can be the cause of non-religious beliefs. He may reveal a mathematical truth to someone by scribing a demonstration into his mind. The lucky cognizer, however, is not thereby more entitled for his religious beliefs about God. Nor would it be sufficient if we further require that the resultant belief is about religious doctrines, because God may cause a person to see an illustration of Him from a book. Obviously, the cognitive process that we can reasonably individuate for the cognizer, i.e., feeling the urge to read a book and see an illustration of God, is identical with its humanly realisable counterpart.

It follows that, in order to instantiate an REE, two conditions must be minimally satisfied:

(DA) Divine qualities that would be otherwise inconceivable must become cognitively accessible to human beings.

(DP) What instantiates the divine qualities must have been causally involved in producing human perception of them.

Both conditions are configured to warrant that the cognitive process is distinct from mere humanly realisable activities. Despite the general assumption on the transcendence of divinity, the two conditions (DA) and (DP) are widely endorsed in various religious doctrines. They are assumed to account for the establishment of such traditions where divinities were revealed to the first prophets. They are supposed in mystic experiences that presumably provide direct evidence for our faiths, as well as in the promise of salvations where the secrets of the divine universe will be unveiled.

We are about to have a closer look at (DA) and (DP) through the concept of “ontological revelation” as previously introduced. It satisfies (DA) by being “ontological”, i.e., revealing divine qualities that humans are normally unable to conceive. And it satisfies (DP) by being “revelations”, i.e., by objectively involving the hitherto concealed truth as represented in the perception.

A more precise and general definition of the concept shall be given as follows:

(OR) A cognizer experiences an ontological revelation when he cognitively accesses to a quality that is instantiated and would be otherwise inconceivable for cognizers of the same species with their ordinary epistemic constitutions.

Some clarifications are in order to see how it might be a source for REE.

i. **Cognitive access to a quality and its conceivability**

By “cognitively accessing to a quality”, I mean detecting the quality through directly perceiving its purported phenomenal character. A physicist born blind can detect the presence of red objects by checking nearby wave frequencies, but he does not have cognitive access to the quality of redness unless his neurological system happens to be stimulated the same way as for a normal cognizer when he spots the colour of red.

“Conceivability”, in line with previous discussions, is determined by a cognizer’s epistemic constitutions rather than social conventions and psychological habits. Airplanes were
“inconceivable” many centuries ago, but the limit was only imposed by presumptions about the surrounding physical world. They were conceivable in our sense the same way that giant flying birds were conceivable. Atomic bombs were perhaps more “inconceivable” before the technic became available because, unlike our frequent sight of flying birds, its related destructive phenomena had never been witnessed until then. Nevertheless, it was not inconceivable in our sense either. If a genius physicist have thought of the mass-energy equivalence and anticipated its military byproduct many centuries ago, his cognitive process would not have to involve anything beyond ordinary human conceivable, although his intelligence level is much above average.

Notice that, by understanding conceivability as determined by our epistemic constitution, we are excluding miracles from ontological revelations. Miracles are only inconceivable in the same way the airplanes and atomic bombs were inconceivable. However, the existence of divine entities is only implied but not entailed by miraculous phenomena. A religion, whose faith is solely based on witnessing miracles, even if the miracles were genuine, is not religiously justified in our sense.

ii. What is the subject and who are the recipients?

Ontological revelations are relativized with respect to the “species” of the cognizer rather than “humans” in particular, and no reference to divinity is made explicit. This choice is made to account for perception of divinities in its most general form:

First, creatures other than human beings might equally receive the grace of perceiving God. Angels are cognitively superior to human, but as finite creations they do not fully understand God either. The inconceivability of God for angels, again, is not a result of psychological habits or laziness of the mind, but a constraint from their epistemic constitution. By this way, angels can also experience ontological revelation. The same applies to religions like Buddhism and Daoism with complex hierarchies of Gods and Goddesses above human, each confined in their own ontological-epistemic levels, while aspiring for further spiritual achievements.

Second, divinity is not explicitly referred to in our definition, because the multiple ontological levels between human and the Ultimate imply that “divinity”, with its connotation of ontological superiority, is a relational concept. For human beings, both God and angels have divine qualities that can only be perceived through ontological revelation. For angels, by contrast, no revelation is required for the perception of angelic qualities. In Buddhist traditions, every creature has the potential of becoming a Buddha and realizes this nature to some degree, so that few deities remain ontologically superior across all contexts. Actually, “divinity” is rather a tag on all versions of spiritual worlds whose truths are normally suspended in ordinary human discourses. As I will assume the truth of religious worldviews, no employment of this concept will be insisted.

iii. The category of quality instead of entity

We formulated ontological revelation in terms of “quality” instead of “entity”, again, with the purpose that more cases shall be accommodated. The concept of perceiving a divine entity as accusative is tailor-made for central Christian doctrines, while divinity in Oriental religions such as
Buddhism and Daoism are not understood with such metaphysical conviction. It might either be the ultimate nothingness or a divinized self. Although “quality” is perhaps not an adequate category for them either, it nonetheless includes more cases in a philosophical discussion with a lighter metaphysical load.

This choice of category does not compromise the Christian doctrine. Perceiving God ipso facto entails cognitively accessing to His otherwise unconceivable qualities. Moreover, it retrieves more prospective candidates. The Holy Spirit is not canonically interpreted as a distinct personalised entity, but it is nonetheless a source of ontological revelation.

iv. Subjective impression beyond humanity

Although ontological revelation requires that the purported quality be actually instantiated so that the cognizer is not having mere subjective impressions, the two moments are not inseparable. The visual image of redness can be neurologically stimulated at the absence of physical red objects. Likewise, the phenomenal character of divine qualities might also correspond to neurological states that can be activated without the quality being instantiated.

However, it does not follow that ontological revelation is naturalistically reducible. The reason is not that divine entities must be causally involved, but rather, apart from reducing everything in natural terms, naturalism of religion is also committed to the reduction of religions to mere human behaviours. As the quality of divinity is otherwise inaccessible to the ordinary human cognizers, the neurological state of the recipient through ontological revelation would nonetheless surpass ordinary human epistemic constitutions, whether the state is cause by God or simulated by a scientist. For an illustrative example, bats can detect objects with sound waves, and there might be some correlated phenomenal character inaccessible to human beings. It is not a priori impossible that, without the physical objects, a scientist can nonetheless show me what a bat feels by simulating in me the exact neurological state of a bat detecting objects. However, through such neurological simulations, I am literally turned into a bat, and my physical state consequently transcends human epistemic constitution. Indeed, the operation is humanly realizable, but it is not realizable by the cognizer himself without radical intervention. Religious human activities, as far as we know, include nothing comparable to such extreme neurological interventions. Thus, naturalists would fail to account for how the subjective experiences of genuine ontological revelations are humanly brought about.

To forward this argument, I am not obliged to take position on what constitutes humanity. The issue is too complex to be decided in a few sentences. Einstein might be epistemically more distinguished from ordinary human beings than one who is capable of echolocation. Fortunately, as my argument is purported to find REE against naturalist reductions, I can simply follow the conventions in the current debate where Einstein remains in his human epistemic constitution, while a cognizer capable of accurate echolocation does not.

One advantage of this independence between (DA) and (DP) is that we are free to individuate ontological revelations in the same way we prefer to individuate ordinary perceptions. Either, the divine property must be instantiated, so that the correspondent religious belief for each occurrence of revelation is true. Or, we can recognize an experience as an ontological revelation even if no entity actually instantiates the quality so that the correspondent belief about the quality can also be untrue. The first choice can be adopted if we conceive ordinary
perceptions to be strictly truth-entailing, namely, a subject can only perceive that \( p \) if \( p \) is true. The second shall be chosen if perception is considered as a subjectively identifiable cognitive process that is truth-conducive but not infallible. In Christian and many other religious traditions, cognitive accesses to divine qualities can lead to false beliefs because demons can deceive us into illusionary perceptions of God and angels. When this happens, even if the purported representational object was not the cause of our experience, we are nonetheless surpassing ordinary human epistemic constitution by cognitively accessing the quality. That is to say, non-veridical occurrences of such experiences are nonetheless irreducible in naturalistic terms. Through this analogy with perception, which provides ordinary epistemic entitlement along the lines of (EEJ), ontological revelations can deliver REE in the same way.

2. **Ontological revelation and ordinary perception**

We assumed ontological revelation as a source REE on the basis of its similarity with ordinary perceptions, i.e., the only cognition we presumably understand. Most philosophers on the topic of religious experience have followed the same strategy. William James has compared mystic experience with ordinary sense perception as sources of evidence for what they respectively support (James, 1902: 423-24). Swinburne and Alston also draw on the analogy between divine and ordinary perception to justify religious beliefs that are acquired or affirmed through the former (Alston, 1988, 1991; Swinburne, 2004: 293-327). However, the particularity of religious experience as opposed to ordinary perception has brought about some doubt on whether they equally provide religious justifications (Gale, 1994a, 1994b; Gale, 1994c; Pojman, 2009; Zackariasson, 2006).

In this section, I will show that, under the optimal assumption of the relevant religious doctrine's truth, and via ontological revelation as the model of divine perception, there are sufficient resources to dispel the alleged disparities between mystic and ordinary perceptions. As the task of listing their analogies lies beyond the scope of this paper, I will focus on criticisms against Alston’s most influential account.

Instead of regarding divine and ordinary perceptions as isolated cognitive processes, Alston considered both of them as socially established doxastic practices (DP). A DP is a mechanism that produces prima facie justified beliefs susceptible of being corrected by overriders in a background system. Ordinary perceptions presumably provide prima facie justification for their resultant perceptual beliefs. These are not infallible and can be defeated or corrected through further perceptions or by other cognizers of the same community. Perceptions of divinity also provide prima facie justification for religious beliefs. More importantly, these justifications are not immune from defeat, because the same subjective experience that one would have when perceiving divine entities can also be possessed through radical imagination or deception of demons (Alston, 1991: 210). Although the social dimension is constitutive of DPs, it does not imply that a participant should always be actually involved in a society. Rather, he must at least be aware how the resultant belief might be untrue and whether there is a checking procedure communicable with other cognizers capable of employing the same cognitive process (Alston, 1991: 204).

Here, I will not carry on the debate about whether the social dimension, substantial for
ordinary perceptions, is thereby substantial for the epistemic entitlement they provide. I will especially avoid the issue about whether some feature of ordinary perception is indispensable for the religious justifications from perceiving God. Instead, I will simply argue for the analogy between the two sorts of perceptions, so that divine perceptions will be at least as pertinent a source of justification as ordinary perceptions, whatever the result of the debate.

Although Alston did not articulate explicitly, he actually assumed the “social dimension” of divine perceptions to be constituted by humans belonging to a religious tradition, in his case the Christianity, and their background knowledge acquired from its teachings through our history. From this perspective, human beings who have “perceived God” are cognitively the most “advanced” within his religious group. However, if God does exists as he stipulates, and if the rest of the Christian doctrines are also true, then human mortals living in this physical world are epistemically the least advanced creatures for divine perception: Angels and human souls in heaven know much more about God than we do. By interpreting perceptions of God as human doxastic practices, Alston is therefore postulating only part of the Christian picture. Certainly, the negligence of non-ordinary-human perceptions of divinity is a quite natural approach to human mystic experience, but this position is not as coherent when the aim is to evaluate their epistemic status under the assumption that “God exists” (Alston, 1991: 9-10).

A consequence of Alston’s confining the social dimension to the ordinary human sphere, as I will show, is a series of disparities between divine and ordinary perceptions. Alston analyzed six motifs for refuting his model of divine perception, all of them pointing to one such difference or another. When incapable of rejecting the disparity, he is obliged to shift from the “argument via analogy” (Alston, 1991: 17, 49, 53, 187) to the strategy of “non-substantially damaging disparity” (Alston, 1991: 223-26). Unfortunately, this shift is a non-starter; it seems impossible for him to arrive at an agreement with his interlocutors on the standard of substantial disparity, and the same charges can be restated again for lack of previous conclusion (Gale, 1994b; Zackariasson, 2006). There are three major disparities that Alston is obliged to acknowledge between ordinary and divine perceptions: Partial distribution of mystical experience (Alston, 1991: 197); Mystical experience is not a source of new information (Alston, 1991: 205); Overrider systems of divine and ordinary perception do not satisfy the same criteria (Alston, 1991: 209).

Now, I proceed to illustrate how such disparities can be avoided by endorsing the whole religious picture. Then, I will show why ontological revelation is more adaptable to this task than the more restrictive models of perception like Alston’s that has an external accusative.

Partial distribution

The first disparity between ordinary and divine perception pertains to the obvious fact that, unlike the former, mystic religious experience is not commonly exercised among humans. Not all adult human cognizer can participate in divine perception in the same way as they can see, remember, introspect and reason.

Alston accepts these premises with reservation, and argues that partial distribution is not a reason against the rationality conveyed by the relevant activities (Alston, 1991: 198). The mild attitude he adopts as regards these premises is probably due to the limitedness of their damage, “there are large stretches of territory that are open to all normal human beings, but there are also restricted domains that are available only to a chosen few” (Alston, 1991: 198). As is evident from the quotation, the concession that there are commonly accessible cognitions is made by
confining our focus to “all normal human beings”. However, if all cognizers are taken into account, few doxastic practices would remain impartially distributed: Star fish are cognizers, but they have no vision. By this way, partial distribution would not have been a problem in the first place.

One reason for confining the social dimension of DP to the human sphere seems to be that they share similar epistemic constitutions. However, if we follow this motif, then the social dimension of divine perception should be extended to include celestial creatures in the religious world. In fact, as human beings perceive God, their epistemic constitutions are more like angels or souls in heaven than like ordinary human beings. This hypothetic movement might appear startling, but it is not as strong an assumption as the existence of God.

**Absence of new information**

Another charge of disparity is that mystic experiences, unlike ordinary perceptions, do not seem to provide new information about religious doctrines, some of them being established exactly by previous mystic experiences (see also (Zackariasson, 2006)). We believe out of religious education that God is loving, and we perceive his love through ontological revelation, but we do not thereby acquire new belief regarding His features.

Alston, again, offers both an analogy argument and an argument from non-substantial disparity. Perceptions of God, he suggests, are like ordinary perceptions in that the latter are not always providing new information either. Adult human cognizers are already familiar with their physical environments. They know what their houses are like or where to take the bus. Nonetheless, they still need to perceive them to keep their beliefs updated. Perceptions of God keep our religious beliefs justified in the same way. Meanwhile, Alston continues, although divine perception is not a source of new information, they do provide new justification for previously acquired beliefs.

When making this concession, Alston is not only confining to the human sphere, but to human activities inside the current Christian history. Indeed, most of the religious participants who report on divine perception already have faith in their respective traditions. But how were such beliefs initially acquired? What would the epistemic status of Christianity become of if Moses on Mount Sinai, in spite of God’s presence, was in the same cognitive state of a person listening to someone speaking through a loud speaker behind the smoke? Likewise, when Laozi experienced Dao, was he applying some previously acquired concept from Dao De Jing, a text he later wrote by himself? The first true religious beliefs, if religiously justified, must themselves be acquired through perception of divinity. Consequently, mystic experience must have been a source of new information at the very start of religious histories. And it is not to be blamed for being unable to provide new information with the excuse that subsequent religious disciples were unable to attain higher spiritual achievement in their mortal lives.

If we “chronologically” extend the picture in the other direction, then more knowledge of the Ultimate is promised according to many religious worldviews. Souls of the human that live in heaven after the judgment know more about God by their side. In Buddhist tradition, a subject will know much more about the reality after he retrieves his true nature. Admittedly, religious traditions have forged words to suggest what the Ultimate is about, but they are all negative because the Ultimate essentially transcends human intelligence. The as-it-is in Buddhism, the unspeakable of Daoism, are all such concepts void of any content in detail. Christianity seems different as God is depicted to be loving and graceful, but these are rather pedagogical images
that help the Christians to better conduce their spiritual lives in a humanly accessible way. Omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, as the more canonical descriptions of God, are equally void of representative content. It follows that, under religious worldviews, perceptions of divinity throughout the immortal soul of each subject, although they confirm the previously held religious doctrines, do provide new “information” about the Ultimate. There is a gap between our currently understood religious doctrines and what perceptions of divinities are promised to reveal. The gap is much deeper in comparison to “reading antecedent beliefs into essentially subjective experiences” (Alston, 1991: 205).

Different features of overrider systems

The most controversial issue that implies an epistemological inferiority of divine perceptions as opposed to ordinary perceptions pertains to features of their overrider systems. It seems that the former are not subject to checks and tests on certain criteria that the latter typically satisfy.

When an ordinary perception is reported, other cognizers of the same epistemic group are in a position to run a series of tests that are appropriate to confirm or disconfirm the report. As we are normally familiar with how the object can be causally linked to the perceptual experience, we may establish a standard procedure that checks the cognizer’s epistemic capacity as well as his cognitive environment. If these conditions are satisfied and if the object was present, then we can confirm his report. Otherwise, we shall disconfirm it.

By contrast, God is supernatural and His behavior has no comprehensible regularities, so a testing procedure is beyond our reach. Instructions delivered by religious disciplines are normally necessary but insufficient conditions for divine perception. If a person is humble and compassionate, then his soul is prepared to receive His grace, and we can disconfirm his report of having perceived God if he is arrogant and selfish. Unfortunately, there seems to be no list of virtues that guarantee the subject who possess them to perceive God (Alston, 1991: 213). This lack of a normal checking procedure suggests that, unlike ordinary perceivers, members of a religious society are in principle incapable of arriving at an agreement about whether a reported divine perception is veridical (Gale, 1994b).

Again, Alston is obliged to concede to the charge of disparity because he only selected part of the whole picture. To determine whether divine and ordinary perceptions are analogous, if God for the former corresponds to physical objects for the latter, then normal adult humans are not to be compared with humans who have reported divine perceptions, but with angels or souls in heaven. Human beings who perceive God, on the other hand, should be compared with infants that are barely capable of ordinary perception. While infants do not have a normal procedure to determine whether a perception of physical object is genuine, nor should a procedure be expected from human religious participants. The reason is that, although God is incomprehensible for ordinary human, his plan and intentions are not beyond comprehension for all creatures who can perceive Him. Angels, by God’s side, can better distinguish whether a human genuinely perceives Him or is merely having his mind seized by a fever or demon. That a humanly applicable checking procedure cannot be realistically revealed from the Angels does not constitute a further argument for disparity: neither could adults hand over to infants an applicable checking procedure for ordinary perceptions.

As a result, most religious worldviews have resources to refute the alleged disparities
between divine and ordinary perception. However, to include religious human participants and angels in the same epistemic society, they should be conceived as exercising the same type of cognitive activity, and this is hardly realizable if we only recognize religious experiences that consist in perceiving divine entities. As Alston’s discussion is based on the model of perceptions of external physical objects, he has excluded the extreme mystic experiences even in the Christian tradition where the subject becomes unified with God and no longer perceives Him through the mediate of a conscious state (Alston, 1991: 22-25). But if human religious participant can achieve this spiritual state, we cannot be sure that angels do not perceive God in the same way. Thus, by excluding some type of mystic experience of divinity, one possibly excludes part of the heaven dwellers from the epistemic society.

The concept of ontological revelation, by contrast, has no need to insist on such discrimination. Instead of focusing on the representation of an object for a subject, an ontological revelation only concerns the subject’s cognitively accesses to divine qualities. The latter is more generally adaptable because not all cognitions have an accusative. It might indeed be wondered: If ontological revelation is only defined in terms of epistemic constitution of particular species, then how cognizers of different species could be connected within the same community? To this it can be replied that, in each religious worldview, there is a straightforward way to coordinate cognitions of divinity for each creatures. That is, they are all ontologically revealed with what is above their conceivability and points toward their Ultimate.

For Oriental religions, this need for a general form of core religious experience is more obvious. According to Buddhists, for instance, a soul will consecutively discover many layers of reality through his journey of spiritual training. One does not access to the Ultimate from the very beginning. It always perceives the spiritual world above its own ontological level. And as the epistemic constitution becomes enhanced via ontological revelations, it eventually achieves ontological transformations, from man to Rohan, from Rohan to Buddha. Likewise, a Daoist starts by working on his own body where he would perceive inner Gods and Goddesses. In turn, this cognition better helps to enhance his bodily energy that prepares for the spiritual ascension. Subjects in such religious worldviews cannot possibly form an epistemic society if we focus on perceptions of divine entities, a fortiori of one particular divine entity.

3. The epistemic gap

What are the consequences of previous discussion on cognizers at the outside of religious epistemic societies where philosophical discussions such as ours usually take place? What epistemic status do philosophers have regarding such issues?

Suppose that, for instance, the Christian doctrines are true. Suppose further that the doctrine is religiously justified for the mortal, i.e., it has been ontologically revealed within our history. Now we can more precisely ask: If a Christian who has experienced ontological revelation enters in a dialogue with an ordinary naturalist philosopher and reports his perception of God, what would their epistemic status be in regard with each other’s interpretation of the report? In view of this issue, the following questions can be posed for each of the two interlocutors:

(a) Is he reasonably justified to refuse or to accept the other’s interpretation?
(b) Is he epistemically entitled to refuse or to accept the other’s interpretation?

As previously discussed, an ordinary cognizer is epistemically entitled to ignore the possibility of dream and illusion. And a mathematician is entitled to ignore the possibility that he was drugged when he demonstrated a theorem. Along the lines of (EEJ), they are also entitled, and thus minimally justified, to reject defeating accounts of their cognitions that refer to such possibilities: When an ordinary cognizer refuses to accept the septic’s argument, we do not consider the epistemic status for his beliefs as substantially degraded. Now, can a cognizer that is epistemically entitled to a belief be also entitled to accept a rival interpretation? He is, when the rival interpretation only pertains to this very particular belief. When he perceives a physical object, for example, he is entitled to doubt whether it was an illusion. Criticism is even encouraged by the imperfection of our cognitive faculties. However, the cognizer is not entitled to accept the radical possibility that the relevant cognitive process has never occurred, because this would not be consistently conceivable. To minimally understand why vision might never be veridical, we have to evoke visual impressions, but we cannot consistently conceive why visions are non-veridical at all by using our own visual impressions. Indeed, one might refer to more abstract resources, such as Descartes’ deceiving demon, but mere negligence of our basic cognition does not yet disqualify their products.

More of our interest is the following situation: If a subject has never instantiated a cognitive process, then he is not epistemically entitled to discuss issues that are only accessible to those who can employ such processes. In other words, he is neither epistemically entitled to suppose that there are qualities exclusively accessible via such processes, nor is he entitled to deny it. A cognizer born blind who has never visualized the colour of red is not epistemically entitled to assert that there are red objects as we see it, nor is he entitled to reject it. The issue is simply out of his epistemic horizon.

On the other hand, “being reasonably justified” pertains to reasons that a cognizer can subjectively appeal to against or in favour of his belief. It can be best distinguished from epistemic entitlement by considering a cognizer who has the same “internal experience” as an ordinary earth dwelling, but who actually leaves in a world of deceiving demons where no proposition he believes is true. As the cognitive process of such a cognizer is substantially different from ours, i.e., having no ordinary perception, memory or logical reasoning as ours, he is epistemically unentitled to what he believes. However, as he has an internally coherent vision of the world, his beliefs are subjectively justified.

With these in mind, we can answer the two questions for our interlocutors. Start with the non-religious philosopher:

(Na) He can both be reasonably justified to accept and to refuse the religious interpretation of his interlocutor’s divine perception.

(Nb) He is not epistemically entitled to reject the religious interpretation of his interlocutor’s divine perception. But nor is he entitled to accept it.

The philosopher can be reasonably justified to refuse the religious interpretation, as his naturalist worldview does not have to be contradicted by whatever arguments or descriptions his interlocutor can possibly put forward. However, he can also be convinced by his interlocutor, and
thus become reasonably justified in accepting the religious interpretation. After all, not every individual sceptic has to remain in Descartes’ *First Meditation*. Whatever the case may be, the naturalist philosopher is neither epistemically entitled to refuse or to accept it.

The following conditions hold for the Christian mystic:

(Ca) He can both be reasonably justified to accept and to refuse the naturalist interpretation of his divine perception.

(Cb) He is epistemically entitled to reject the naturalist interpretation of his divine perception. And he is not entitled to accept it.

As the naturalist has cognitive access to God that actually constitutes the world of his representation, the Christian is reasonably justified for his own religious interpretation of divine perception, so (Ca) is true. On the other hand, he can also be reasonably convinced by the naturalist philosopher. After all, it is not impossible for even an angel to doubt whether he is in fact a human and whether his perception of “God” is the trick of a demon. Whatever the case may be, as his cognitive process surpasses human epistemic normality, he is always entitled to refuse the naturalist interpretation of divine perception, and is not in an epistemic position to accept it.

The above situations can be evaluated from two aspects.

First, (Na) and (Ca) have shown that whether one is subjectively justified to endorse an interpretation of divine perception, directly experienced or reported, is independent from its truth. It is independent from God’s existence, as well as from whether ontological revelation has taken place if God exists. The argument that one might use to prove or disapprove the existence of God or the occurrence of genuine divine perception is therefore not essentially truth-conducive. It might be objected that this does not constitute a real problem for justifications for religious beliefs, because even justifications for ordinary beliefs, as revealed by the sceptic demon’s scenario, are not always truth-conducive either. However, we can nonetheless attribute more epistemic values to ordinary justifications without adopting a double-standard as opposed to justifications for religious beliefs. The reason why we recognize ordinary justification to be more valuable is that, in all philosophical discussions about their epistemic status, sceptic or not, all interlocutors are already epistemically entitled by the relevant cognitive processes. Therefore, the reliability of their justification is minimally acknowledged. By contrast, REE that delivers religious justifications is only possessed by a limited group among all interlocutors on this issue. Therefore, the arguments that we can propose on this topic in philosophical discussions have a much weaker epistemic basis.

Second, it naturally follows that the only epistemic level that is truth-conducive in the above scenario is epistemic entitlement, i.e., REEs derived from ontological revelation. A person who has not been ontologically revealed to is not epistemically entitled either to accept or to refuse the religious interpretation of divine perception, while one who has experienced genuine ontological revelation can be and can only be epistemically entitled to endorse the religious interpretation. To the extent that the champions of religious interpretation would aspire to epistemic statuses that are truth-conducive in favour of God’s existence and resistant against naturalist reduction, REE is both the *optimum* they can be bestowed with and the *minimum* they should ask for.
At this point, (Nb) and (Cb) draw a *demi-symmetrical epistemic gap* between the naturalist and the religious in the battlefield. They are standing symmetrically on each side of the gap because none is epistemically entitled to endorse the opposite interpretation of divine perception. However, they are not symmetrical in the sense that the Christian is entitled to refuse the naturalist interpretation, while the naturalist is not entitled to do the opposite. If we assume in line with the previous section that the whole Christian doctrine is veridical, then this asymmetrical situation can be explained by the fact that the religious participant, as having been ontologically revealed, not only belongs to the ordinary epistemic society that he shares with the naturalist, but he also belongs to the epistemic society that he shares with other mystics, with the angels and souls in heaven.

Although our strategy of defending religious justification against naturalism might seem to be over-elitist, it does not prevent ordinary believers from being epistemically entitled for religious issues. In fact, although they do not have REE for beliefs in heaven and God, they do have OEE for what they receive from religious educations. Every ordinary human cognizer has OEE to believe in what they see and what they hear, while those who gave them the messages have their own OEE derived elsewhere. As the chains of entitlement move backwards, they could eventually arrive at genuine ontological revelations. Faith, epistemically understood, is the confidence that one’s chains of entitlement must have such terminates.

4. **Religious diversity**

The problem of religious diversity is the issue about which of the apparently conflicting religious doctrines is true. Is one or are some of them veridical, or do all of them reflect some aspect of the Ultimate? The phenomena of divine perception make the situation worse as they prima facie support pluralism, a position that few religious traditions would opt for as a first choice.

One solution easily follows from our conclusion in the previous section. When a subject is not ontologically revealed with the truth of a particular religious doctrine, he is not in an epistemically defensible position to decide whether the doctrine is true or not. He might justify his opinion with whatever arguments, but such arguments, as we see, are not essentially truth-conducive on purported issues.

Our conclusion is more than this philosophical agnosticism. I will further illustrate how the approach through REE can be compatible with any of the main possible scenarios of religious diversity wherein, respectively, none of them is true, one of them is true, and many of them are true. It will be shown that, as long as a religious doctrine is veridical and has been ontologically revealed, the recipient of the revelation has REE for his corresponding beliefs, independently from the truth of other religions. This in turn allows religious participants to use justifications they regard as pertinent in defence of their own doctrines.

(I) If none of the religions is true, there will be no ontological revelation, and naturalist philosophers are *epistemically entitled* to reduce whatever religious claim into mere humanly activities. Accordingly, there would be no RJ (religious justification) for any relevant doctrines. Still, it can be rationally justifiable to hold religious beliefs.
(II) If only one of the religious doctrines is true, that is, if the whole picture of its worldview is true, it follows that there are ontological revelations as reported in its scriptures and elsewhere, so that the disciples of the doctrine can have REE for their beliefs, both against naturalism and other religions. As a result, they also have RJ against these positions. Participants of other religions, on the other hand, can still be rationally justified to endorse their doctrines, though they are not epistemically entitled to reject the veridical religion.

(III) If many or all of the religions are veridical, then members of each religious doctrine have REE for their own belief against naturalism. More importantly, as they are not ontologically revealed with the truths of other religious disciplines, they are not epistemically entitled to reject them. That is to say, in view of a particular religion, a person who has been ontologically revealed with the truth of another religious doctrine is on the same side of the epistemic gap as a naturalist philosopher. Accordingly, all religious participants have RJ against naturalism, but they have no RJ against each other.

It might be asked how we should rationalize the pluralist situation. It is always easy to endorse exclusivism for one’s own religion by discarding all other candidates as simply wrong. Whether one is epistemically entitled to do it or not, one can always find a reason. But how could we endorse pluralism? How would we conceive the relationship between the Christian and Buddhist worldviews? And what is the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Dao?

Our approach through REE as delivered by ontological revelation offers a metaepistemological explanation why such problems shall not be posed. In fact, as a cognizer is not yet ontologically revealed with the truth of a religious doctrine, he cannot possibly conceive what its Ultimate is like. That is, all the epistemic resources he activates to understand its content must be essentially inadequate. As a result, for an ordinary believer, the problem of religious pluralism is only an incompatibility between one inadequate picture and another. For a religious participant who has been ontologically revealed with one religious doctrine, the incompatibility is between one genuine perception and an inadequate picture for a religious participant. In none of the situations do we have an incompatibility between a genuine perception and another. Of course, it is not impossible that a person, by following various disciplines, can be ontologically revealed with divinities from more than one religion. However, for him, the problem of incompatibility is automatically dissipated. The reason is that, when we actually perceive one entity and then another, it would be much less reasonable to keep on doubting why the two entities can both exist than to further inquire what their relation might be.

To summarize: According to our approach through REE, religious plurality causes no problems, because there is no incompatibility between different religious doctrines that is genuinely conceivable. From the perspective of human cognizers, the distinction between different divine entities is much less significant than the distinction between divinity and humanity.

5. Conclusions

We attempted to find out what the best epistemic status a religious belief could possibly
enjoy under optimal religious assumptions. We have shown that the best status is obtained
through ontological revelations, i.e., perceptions of divinity that transcends ordinary human
epistemic constitution. We illustrated how they might provide epistemic entitlement and thus
minimal justification against naturalism. We defended the view by refuting several charges of
disparity, showing that ordinary and divine perceptions are analogous under the optimal
assumption that the whole picture of the relevant religious worldview is true. A solution to the
problem of religious diversity is also proposed along this line.

There are some additional virtues of considering core religious experience from our
perspective.

First, it accords with a literal interpretation of most religious doctrines. In the Bible, we read
that God is incomprehensible for human intelligence and that there are prophets who witnessed
His grace through a more direct pattern. It naturally follows that there is an epistemic gap
between us and the prophets or the inhabitants in heaven. As we read Buddhist texts, we are
told how Buddha Gautama has perceived layers of reality by realizing his own nature. It literally
follows that those who have not found their nature are not in a position to cognitively access the
reality Gautama depicts. Again, an epistemic gap is to be drawn.

Second, our account explains why we should be humble when interpreting religious
doctrines. That our understanding of divinity is limited cannot be essentially changed by asserting
more propositions or providing further arguments. The limit is rather due to our location on the
other side of the epistemic gap. Religious educations, apart from their moral lessons that are
equally applicable to the secular world, essentially consist in the preparation to step over the gap
and getting closer to divinity.

Third, our definition of conceivability in terms of a species’ epistemic constitution helps to
solve the paradox of how a transcendent divine entity can be understood by finite creatures. On
one hand, as we see, ontological revelation does not have to present divine entities as absolutely
transcendent, but only what transcend normal human conceivability. On the other hand, our
definition implies that a recipient of ontological revelation has his epistemic constitution
enhanced in comparison with the rest of his species. In other words, an ontological revelation of
divinity is *ipso facto* an ontological transformation of the recipient. This might appear astonishing,
especially hard to accept for the essentialists. Nonetheless, to regard God’s omnipotence during
divine revelations as consisting in enhancing human capacity, rather than directly presenting the
inconceivable, removes one further paradox from our human interpretations of His nature. In
Oriental religions, the revelation-transformation coordination is much more recognizable. As we
mentioned, a Buddhist only accesses to different layers of realities as he becomes a Rohan from
man, and a Buddha from Rohan, while the ultimate essence of Dao remains concealed to a Daoist
until he himself becomes immortal.
References