

*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (October 1998)

*EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND THE RATIONALITY OF THEISTIC BELIEF*. By  
JEROME I. GELLMAN. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. x, 211.

In August of 1989, as an eighteen-year-old atheist spending his last night at home before setting off cross-country for college, I had the one and only mystical experience of my life to date. Rather than grapple with expressing the content of that experience, let me quote from part of the record Blaise Pascal made of his own mystical experience, one that seems to have been similar in many respects to my own:

From about half past ten at night till about half past twelve, Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned. Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Pascal's experience was like my own in its specifically Christian content and in its absolute sense of certainty. The experience was irresistible, and utterly unlike any ordinary state of consciousness.

Jerome Gellman's argument is that the widespread occurrence of such experiences makes it rational to believe that God exists. This is not to say that Gellman believes such experiences decisively prove God's existence. He is in fact frustratingly elusive in explaining exactly what weight such experiences should be given. Officially, he argues for what he calls the strong (external) rationality of belief in God, which is to say, letting *p* stand for *God exists*, that "there exists *some* reasonable application of the canons of rationality on which it is rational to believe that *p* and not rational to believe that not-*p*" (2). Gellman is not so bold as to claim that atheism is irrational in light of the widespread occurrence of mystical experiences. Rather, the claim seems to be that there are some "reasonable" perspectives from which atheism is irrational (or, at least, "not rational"). It is not clear to me that such a claim, so diluted, is even controversial.

Leaving the obscurities of his general thesis to one side, there is plenty of controversy in the perspective that Gellman himself wishes to advocate, the perspective from which atheism is not rational. His case rests on adapting Richard Swinburne's principle of credulity in the following way:

If a person, *S*, has an experience, *E*, which seems (phenomenally) to be of a particular object, *O*, then *everything else being equal* the best explanation of *S*'s having *E* is that *S* has experienced *O*, rather than something else or nothing at all. (46, slightly abridged)

This principle, which Gellman refers to as BEE, governs the book's entire

---

<sup>1</sup>*Pascal's Pensées*, trans. H. F. Stewart (New York: Modern Library, 1947), 363.

argument. The strategy is first to defend BEE and the applicability of mystical experience to BEE, and then to argue—against various objections—that everything else is equal. Hence, the best explanation of mystical experiences is their veridicality; hence, it is rational to believe that God exists.

Although Gellman is admirably precise on many fronts, he neglects to explain BEE's *ceteris paribus* clause. The more Gellman insists that everything else is equal, the more one wants to know, *equal to what?* The answer, presumably, is equal to ordinary sensory perception. But of course mystical experiences are very different from ordinary perception, and so what Gellman actually spends much of his time doing is arguing that the various differences are not significant, or at least not significant enough to undermine the application of BEE to mystical experience.

Given the peculiar nature of mystical experiences, Gellman needs to make the case for his use of a perceptual model. He does so early on by arguing that experiencing God should be understood as analogous to experiencing a tree: what is required, in each case, is "some phenomenal content which is *of* God" (13). Gellman grapples repeatedly with the difficulties involved in trying to understand how our minds can have the phenomenal content of an infinite being. But it is never clear how much of mystical experience will actually meet his criterion. We have seen Pascal describe an experience of fire, and then of certitude, joy, and peace. Is this an experience of God, or is it an experience of strong emotions combined with a conviction about certain propositions concerning God? To decide the question, in general, would require surveying a representative sample of mystical experiences. But Gellman is so far from wanting to take that route that he declines to describe even a single alleged experience of God. As a result, we are left to take Gellman's word for it when he claims that most mystical experiences involve an experience of God's presence.

Gellman supplements BEE with a second principle, STING, which holds that BEE's credibility "is strengthened in proportion to the number of purported experiences of O there are and in proportion to the variability of circumstances in which such experiences occur" (52–53). This leads Gellman to assert, plausibly, that mystical experiences are both common and various in their circumstances. But variety is a double-edged sword, and Gellman devotes a chapter to the question of whether the varying *content* of mystical experiences might undermine the entire phenomenon, across the board. His answer rests, in large part, on the claim that alleged experiences of God, "in the vast majority of cases" (94), do not have the sort of content that would be incompatible with other alleged experiences. One may experience God's consoling presence, then, but it would evidently be highly unusual to have, say, an experience of

Jesus Christ as savior. Astonishingly, no evidence for this claim is offered. If Gellman is to be believed, Pascal's case and my own are quite exceptional.

It is not hard to see why Gellman feels forced in this direction. Even a substantial minority of incompatible experiences would seem to show that human beings are regularly deceived in their apparent perceptions of God. And once one acknowledges that, say, 20 percent of mystical experiences are invalid, can Gellman still be right about the best explanation for the other 80 percent?

Gellman is ready with further replies at this point. He suggests, in particular, that God might have a purpose in giving one person an experience incompatible with that of another (96). So if we can tolerate the idea of God's misleading us, we can hold that the incompatibility of two alleged experiences does not entail that one of them is entirely illusory. Later, in a long footnote, Gellman suggests distinguishing the phenomenal content of an experience from its descriptive content, and looking for the common phenomenal experience beneath the superficial incompatibility (120–21). But this is a dangerous path for him to take. Once he begins to strip away the descriptive content of mystical experiences, he runs the risk that there will be no perceptual base underneath, thus undermining his central thesis. Here his need to make mystical experience analogous with perception comes into conflict with his need to make mystical experiences globally consistent. Since all of this takes place without any discussion of actual cases, it is a shaky game indeed.

It is interesting to note, although Gellman does not, that his principles BEE and STING do not give S any special reason to take E seriously. For all Gellman has shown, *my own* experience should count for no more, to me as a rational agent, than would my reading about *Pascal's* experience. Surely this is wrong: surely my experience has a special evidential force for me that it lacks for others. Gellman's failure even to take note of such issues must count as an important gap in his account.

The last two chapters of the book contain dense, careful treatments of two sorts of arguments against God's existence: arguments alleging contradictions among the divine attributes, and arguments from evil. All of this is characteristically interesting and worthy of study by specialists. Still, it seems out of place. Gellman's discussion of mystical experience leaves so much untouched that one cannot help but feel disappointed to see that course cleared away, and new dishes brought in.

ROBERT PASNAU

*St. Joseph's University  
University of Colorado*