

# Re-Identifying God in Experience

Jerome I. Gellman  
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

---

**ABSTRACT:** If an alleged experience of God can constitute evidence for God's existence, then it must be possible for God to be a *perceptual particular*, that is, a substantive, enduring object of perception. Furthermore, if several such experiences are to be cumulative evidence for God's existence, then it must be possible to reidentify God from experience to experience. I examine both a "conceptual" and an "epistemological" argument against these possibilities that is derived from the work of Richard Gale. I argue that neither of these arguments is successful. For God to be a perceptual particular, he must have an inner life; for God to be reidentified across experiences, he need not exist in dimensions analogous to the spatiotemporal.

---

If an alleged experience of God is to provide evidence for God's existence, it must be possible for God to be a perceptual particular: a substantive, enduring object of perception. If several such experiences are to be cumulative evidence for God's existence, it must be possible to re-identify God from experience to experience. I want to examine arguments against each of these possibilities. These arguments are, respectively, a "conceptual" and an "epistemological" argument embedded in the writings of Richard Gale.(1)

On Gale's conceptual argument, for us to have a coherent concept of an object, O, as a perceptual particular:

- (1) We must know what it means for O to exist when not perceived.
- (2) O must be able to be the common object of different experiences, and
- (3) We must be able to understand the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity with regard to O.

We need these requirements to distinguish perceptual from "phenomenal particulars." A "phenomenal particular" cannot exist unperceived and cannot be the common object of different experiences. Also, each occurrence of a phenomenal particular presents a particular numerically distinct from one presented in another occurrence. So there is no application to phenomenal particulars of the distinction between qualitative and numerical identity.

Gale takes physical objects as the paradigm of perceptual particulars. Physical objects having spatial-temporal location, makes possible the idea of their existing when not perceived. Also, physical objects can be perceived by different people simultaneously because they are all perceiving the same object at the same place, it being a conceptual truth, says Gale, that "two material objects of the same kind cannot spatio-temporally coincide."(2) And a person can be said to perceive the numerically identical object O at different times because there exists a contiguous spatial trail through which O travels, giving content to the notion of its being the same object on different occasions.

So if God is to be a perceptual particular, God must have spatial-temporal location, or something analogous to it. However, God does not have spatial-temporal location, or anything analogous.

Hence, God cannot be a perceptual particular.

Now, while Gale is right that spatial-temporal location is sufficient to give meaning to the notion of an object's existing unperceived, it is hardly necessary. In God's case in particular it is not necessary. God is conceived of as having an inner life. So when God exists when not perceived God's inner life continues. And that's sufficient to give content to the concept of God's existing unperceived, without God being in anything like space.

I am aware that some philosophers object to the notion of a being not possessing a body having an inner life. I find little value in such objections. I need not argue that point, however, because if these philosophers were right, this would show not only that God could not be a perceptual particular, but also that God does not exist. Gale's point, however, is to show only that if

God does exist He could not be a perceptual particular. So I will bypass the arguments here and declare Gale's argument unsound concerning his first requirement. Similar remarks apply to Gale's other requirements. In order for an object, O, just to be the common object of different experiences, it is not necessary that anyone know this. And the same for there just being a distinction between numerical and qualitative identity. To possess the concept, in particular, of God being the common object of different experiences, it is sufficient that we understand that God, individuated by a certain inner life, is perceived by several persons. It is not necessary that we be able to know when this is true. So Gale's conceptual argument against the idea of God's just being a perceptual particular fails.

Here now is my reconstruction of Gale's epistemological argument, where "perceptual identity" means "having the same perceptual qualities":

- (1) In order for an experience to be evidence that someone perceived an object O, it must be possible for there to be evidence that O is the common object of different perceptual experiences.
- (2) It is possible for there be evidence that O is the common object of different perceptual experiences only if it is possible to distinguish perceptions of O from perceptions of objects that are perceptually identical to O.
- (3) It is possible to distinguish perceptions of O from perceptions of objects that are perceptually identical to O, only if O has spatial-temporal location, or something analogous.
- (4) However, God does not have spatial-temporal location, or anything analogous.
- (5) Therefore, no experience can count as evidence that someone perceived God.

The idea is that unless it were possible for there to be evidence that O is the common object of different perceptual experiences, one could not be justified in thinking one had experienced a perceptual particular rather than a mere phenomenal particular. One could be so justified only if O has spatial-temporal location. It follows that there can be no evidence in favor of experiencing God rather than having experienced merely a "Goddish" phenomenal content.

The epistemological argument pertains to the re-identification of an object on different occasions. It says that if there is no way to apply the distinction between numerical and perceptual identity, we can have no evidence that what is now perceived is numerically identical with what is perceived on other occasions. Re-identification is possible only if the perceptual particular exists in something at least analogous to space and time. Being in the same space at the same time implies numerical identity, as well as does a series of contiguous positions in space and time. Being in different spaces at the same time or lacking a series of contiguous positions in space and time implies numerical

distinctness even if there is perceptual identity.

However, God does not exist in anything analogous to a space-time grid. Thus, there can ever be evidence that what is experienced at two times is the same being: God. In reality, Gale's argument, if correct, poses a problem for re-identification far beyond the confines of the distinction between perceptual and numerical identity. After all, it is possible for a physical object to change in appearance over time, remaining the numerically same object. But what sense can be given to that notion, on Gale's requirements, unless the object exists in space and time or their analogues and traces a route through them? The answer to that question is no less difficult than the problem Gale is addressing in his argument.

Gale's argument in effect rejects the possibility of a "holistic practice" specific to the re-identification of God, parallel to the holistic practice of re-identifying physical objects. Re-identifying physical objects is "holistic" in that we determine the space an object occupies relative to re-identification of surrounding objects, while at the same time re-identification of surrounding objects depends on a judgment as to what space is occupied. As Peter Strawson has put it:

...the identification and distinction of places turn on the identification and distinction of things; and the identification and distinction of things turn, in part, on the identification and distinction of places. There is no mystery about this mutual dependence. To exhibit its detail is simply to describe the criteria by which we criticize, amend and extend our ascription of identity to things and places. (3)

There is no reason why the re-identification of God cannot occur within a holistic practice, not beholden to the practice of re-identifying physical objects. We ought not link the very notion of a "perceptual particular" to the holistic practice of re-identifying physical objects.

It is instructive to compare perception of God to Strawson's "world of sounds." In *Individuals*, Strawson presents a scheme in which a subject locates objective sound particulars by their "position" as determined by the gradually changing pitch of what Strawson calls the "master-sound." Being heard together with a certain pitch of the master-sound fixes the location of a sound without the aid of spatial features. Different locations at the master-sound yield distinct sound particulars. Strawson thus provides a way to distinguish between numerical and perceptual identity in a purely auditory world, on the basis of the pitch of the master-sound. In this scheme, perceptually identical sounds are distinguished by their relationship to the pitch of the master-sound. Now, if perceptual sound particulars can be numerically re-identified without benefit of space, then space is not required to apply the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity for perceptual particulars. In that case, God could be a perceptual particular even though there exists no analogue of spatial position for God. Gale argues against Strawson's treatment of sounds, as follows: The position of every sound, S, other than the master-sound is determined by the pitch of the master-sound with which S is heard. It is the difference in the pitch of the master-sound between when S is heard and when S' is heard that determines that S and S' are numerically distinct even if S and S' are perceptually identical. However, counter-argues Gale, S and S' are never perceptually similar in such situations, because they have different perceptual relational properties, namely being heard at different pitches of the master-sound. Pitch is a perceptual quality, and relations to that quality are perceptually discernible. Hence, in Strawson's scheme each case of perceptual identity yields numerical identity. The case is different for spatial objects, since being in a certain space is not a perceptual quality of an object.

Now, Strawson is aware that the individuation of sounds bears disanalogies to the individuation of physical objects. One disanalogy is that in the world of sounds one cannot hear different sounds together as located by the master-sound, whereas we can apprehend distinct spatial objects together. Another disanalogy is that the location of pitches of the master-sound are not determined holistically. The master-sound is simply given, as the master-sound and sounds identified in relation to it. Spatial locations, on the other hand, are identified holistically.

However, Strawson rightly declares that there is no standard by which we can determine whether his sounds are "really" objective particulars.(4) Strawson writes:

The resultant conceptual scheme...is not compelling. We could adopt a different scheme...which allowed for re-identifiable universals but not for re-identifiable particulars. What we cannot do is, as it were, to appear to accept a scheme which allows for reidentification of sound-particulars and then to say that, of course, particular-identity would always be in doubt....This would be the position of philosophical scepticism about the identity of sound particulars.(5)

Strawson's point is that one could reject a conceptual scheme in which particular sounds were reidentified as they are in his sound-world, and speak instead of re-instantiations of sound-universals. But we could say the same for physical objects. We could adopt an ontology of only universals and their instantiations, or of only processes, ruling out abiding perceptual physical particulars altogether.

Mind you, I have no interest in defending Strawson's world of sounds. What does interest me is his insight that there can be different conceptual systems each with different criteria for perceptual particular-hood. In a penetrating examination of Strawson's chapter on sounds, Gareth Evans raised a number of criticisms that do not apply to the case of God.(6) Evans argues, for example, that Strawson's sound scheme is open to phenomenalist reduction, to saying that "if the master-sound were at pitch 1, then a sound of a certain sort would be heard," rather than that there was a substantive sound particular. Also, Evans argues that Strawson cannot distinguish between objective particular sounds and objective sound-processes, thus driving a wedge between objectivity and particularity. Third, Evans argues that sounds cannot be conceived of as perceptual particulars at all, since sounds have only secondary perceptual qualities and not primary, enduring qualities. To get a perceptual particular in a world of sounds, declares Evans, we must import an enduring physical object which produces the sound.

These objections do not apply to experiences of God. The latter are commonly of someone possessed of an inner life. This makes difficult any phenomenalist reduction of God's appearances. Similarly, experiences of God resist an interpretation of God as a process rather than a particular. Finally, even if we were to be restrict ourselves to secondary properties of God, experiences of God suggest that the object in question possessing these secondary properties has an enduring inner life. So we need not posit a spatial particular in which God's secondary properties abide.

One relevant point made by Evans (and by Jonathan Bennett ) is that Strawson could have done without the master-sound altogether.(8) In place of it could come a sufficient regularity of experience that supported generalizations of the form:

An experience of kind K will intervene between any experience of kind K' and kind K".

A subject could then, in a holistic way, distinguish between the changes in the world and changes in her position, in a way that could generate the notion of re-identifiable particulars. This could be done without any master-sound. This could be especially effective, asserts Evans, if the subject had a notion of a "block" that accounted for her not perceiving a specific perceptual particular on certain occasions.

Now something analogous to Evans' suggestion is possible for experiences of God. Since God is perceived to have an inner life it is possible for there to be a series of occurrences that can be seen as expressions of a series of events in God's inner life. This could give a sequence that a subject could attribute to a particular that persists between experiences. This is especially possible if the subject has a sense of something blocking the having of an experience of God. Such a block can be found in the idea that the possibility of one's experiencing God depends to some degree upon what Merold

Westphal has called a "decentering" of oneself.<sup>(9)</sup> To decenter oneself means to move away from being the center of one's ultimate concern, and opening oneself to God. An inability to decenter oneself would tend to block one's ability to be aware of God's presence. Of course we would have to apply holistically the patterns of experience and the blocks. But in that there is nothing new.

I conclude that in principle, for experiences of God there could be a holistic reidentification practice parallel to Evans' re-identification practice for perceptual sound particulars sans master-sound. So, with or without the master-sound, the epistemological objection fails for not having recognized the possibilities of different holistic schemes in which we could have evidence for the existence of non-spatial perceptual particulars.

I have argued that in principle there could be a re-identification practice for experiences of God. Now I ask: what are the features of experiences of God, in a particular religious tradition, say, which do in fact determine the re-identification of God? I will focus here on but one such feature of experiences of God unlike that of the experience of other objects. This feature helps determine the re-identification of God in a non-holistic way. Remember that in Strawson's sound world, the identity, of every sound other than the master-sound is determined by the pitch of the master-sound at which it is heard. The identity of the master-sound is not determined by anything. The master-sound has no location in Strawson's world of sounds. Its identity as the master-sound is simply given in the conceptual scheme. It is that in virtue of which all location is assigned. All else is measured by it. The role of the master-sound simply doesn't allow for questions such as "Is that still the master-sound?" or, "Is that the master-sound again?"

A feature of perceptions of God is that one is experiencing something which is not an ordinary particular amongst particulars, but that in reference to which all particulars have their existence and find their value. God is perceived to be, as it were, the master-sound of the world. I suggest that the re-identification of God across experiences takes place within a practice that recognizes an ontological-valuational center around which all existence becomes organized and understood. The question of whether it is the same center from occasion to occasion just does not arise. In the practice being considered, it just is the same center. That's the way God functions in the conceptual scheme attached to experiences of God. And experiences of God tend to give rise to just such judgments.

This suggestion is reflected in a dominant feature of experiences of God, alluded to earlier. Such experiences are thought to be available generally only to those who are capable of a "decentering of self." The decentering of self and the perception of God as the center are elements of the re-identification practice for God across experiences that make the re-identification of God different in kind from the re-identification of other perceptual particulars.

Nothing I have said proves that one object, God, rather than distinct, similar objects is perceived in alleged experiences of God. Rather, my point is that the re-identification practice for

God is holistic and radically different from the re-identification practice for physical objects. I conclude that the epistemological argument fails to show that in principle there could not be evidence from experience for the existence of God.

---

## Notes

(1) Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge University Press), pp. 326-343, and Richard Gale, "Why Alston's Mystical Doxastic Practice is Subjective," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994), 869-875.

(2) 'Why Alston's," p. 872.

(3) P. F. Strawson, *Individuals, An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 37.

(4) *Individuals*, p. 81.

(5) *Individuals*, p. 77.

(6) Gareth Evans, "Things Without the Mind - A Commentary upon Chapter Two of Strawson's *Individuals*, in Zak Van Straaten, ed., *Philosophical Subjects, Essays Presented to P.F. Strawson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 76-116.

(7) See Jonathan Bennett, *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge: 1966), p. 37

(8) See Evans, "Things Without the Mind," pp. 81-82.

(9) See Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).