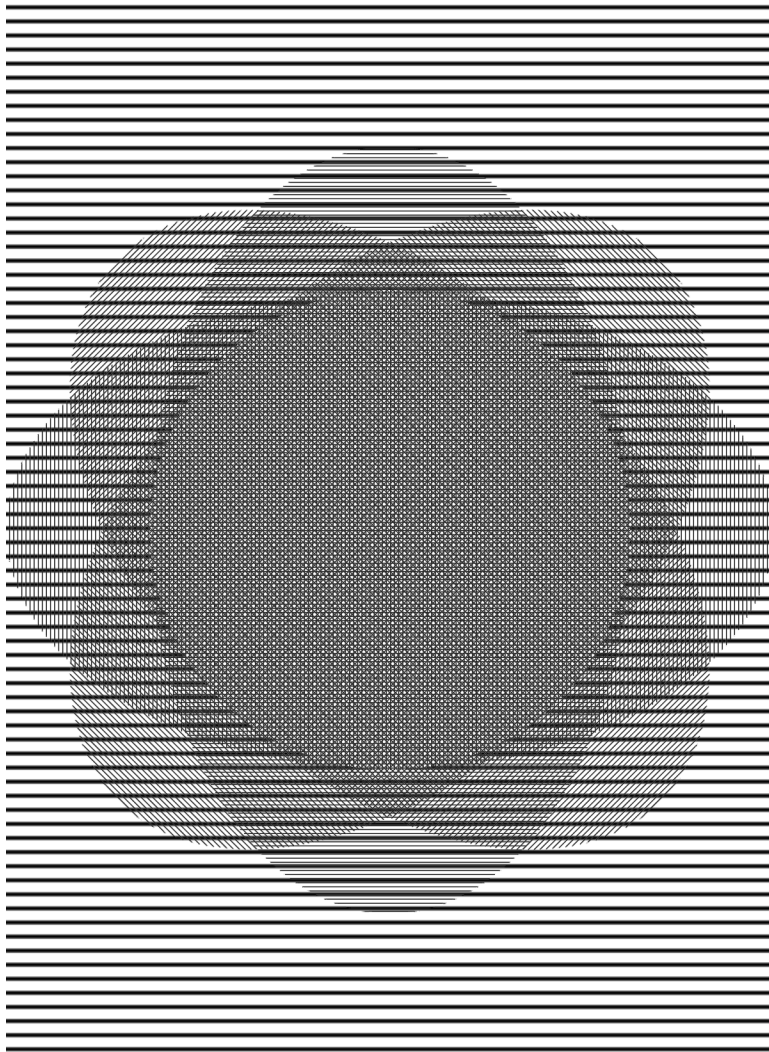


FREEING MYSTICISM: EPISTEMIC STANDARDS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE



ABSTRACT

With the growth of epistemology, an important debate in philosophy of religion has arisen: can mystical encounters—purported feelings of intense unity with the divine—serve as epistemic warrants? In this paper, I examine two of the most prominent and promising standards by which to determine the veridicality of such encounters—those of William Alston and Richard Swinburne—and demonstrate their respective strengths and shortcomings. Considering these shortcomings, I compose and defend my own set of criteria to use in evaluating the veridicality of putative mystical experiences which draws upon the subject's religious tradition, rationality, and affectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since William James published his seminal book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, mysticism has taken hold of the discussions of the theologians and philosophers alike, mainly in the debate over its status as an epistemic warrant.¹ This debate asks whether a subject is justified in forming beliefs about God based on a mystical experience. In this paper, I seek to contribute to this epistemological discussion by determining the grounds on which we can deem a putative mystical encounter veridical.² Amongst scholars who have argued for mysticism as a source of epistemic justification, many possible solutions have been posited. Unfortunately, not one has contained a truly compelling standard for determining the authenticity of mystical experiences. I thus attempt to remedy the shortcomings of the standards proposed by William Alston and Richard Swinburne by offering a standard which draws on the subject's religious tradition, rationality, and affectivity in considering the veridicality of a purported mystical experience.³

I. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF CURRENT THEORIES

Those who argue that mystical practices can serve as epistemic warrants fall on a spectrum concerning standards of veridicality. On one end are theories that seek a vantage point external to mystical practices themselves from which to judge the veridicality of mystical

- 1 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 1982).
- 2 Several of the scholars referenced below use "authentic" and "genuine" synonymously with "veridical." While recognizing their nuances, I will keep with this pattern and use all three words interchangeably.
- 3 Unless otherwise stated, I will operate within the Christian mystical tradition throughout this paper. I do this both because it is the context in which the above authors write and because it is the tradition with which I am most familiar.

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experiences. On the other end, there are the less popular self-authentication theories.⁴ These theories allege that mystical experiences are, by their very nature, veridical. In this section, I will expose the shortcomings of the two most promising approaches—William Alston’s and Richard Swinburne’s—before showing how my suggested epistemic standard can avoid them.

In *Perceiving God*, William Alston defends the ability of mystical practices to serve as epistemic warrants by demonstrating them to be socially established doxastic practices. Any doxastic practice is “the exercise of a family of belief-forming mechanisms” and requires what Alston terms an “overrider system,” i.e. a system—to determine whether an experience is genuine by comparing it to background beliefs and other doxastic practices.⁵ “Attached to each practice,” he writes, “is an ‘overrider system’ of beliefs and procedures that the subject can use in subjecting *prima facie* justified beliefs to further tests when that is called for.”⁶ To take an everyday example, consider the overrides we place on sense perception; whenever we perceive something through the senses, we scrutinize it through the lens of reason, memory, the testimonies of others, etc., to determine the likelihood that our perception is accurate. Such consultation with overrides can either be subconscious (e.g. when something seen is typical) or conscious (e.g. when something seen is atypical). In instances where a perception is not countered by the overrider system, we are justified in taking it to be veridical. Regarding Christian mystical practices (CMP) specifically, Alston lists “the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the undivided church, Christian experience through the ages, Christian thought, and more generally the Christian tradition as normative sources of its overrider system.”⁷ In other words, Christian mysticism cross-references the content and phenomenological characteristics of an experience with the Bible, ecclesial authority, and Christian tradition to determine whether it is veridical.

Alston exhibits sound philosophical work in his book, and his overrider system has several benefits. Its concrete standard operates as a rigorous vetting system, preventing the undesirable and untenable conclusion that any putative mystical experience is veridical.⁸ Additionally, the fact that it has a corollary in other doxastic practices

4 Robert A. Oakes, “Mysticism, Veridicality, and Modality,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1985): 217-24. To my knowledge, Robert Oakes—with whom I will not here contend—is the only serious proponent of self-authentication.

5 William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 165.

6 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 159.

7 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 193.

8 This is to say that he disallows self-authentication theories.

serves to increase its credibility. Yet, despite these valuable elements, Alston’s system suffers from several difficulties.

Jerome Gellman notes the first shortcoming in his article, “A Problem for the Christian Mystical Doxastic Practice.” Gellman argues that Alston’s proposed overrider system for Christian mystical practices has been compromised by mistaken physiological theories, the historical marginalization of women, and “the Church’s need to impose ecclesiastical order on uncontrolled spirituality.”⁹ If the standard being used in determining an experience’s genuineness is compromised—in this case, through ignorance and historical struggles for power—then it cannot be counted on to produce accurate evaluations. Notice that Gellman’s critique does not attack the idea of an overrider system itself but rather what Alston chooses to include in CMP’s specific overrider system. The problem lies in the fact that the content of CMP’s overrider is rooted in history and doctrine, both of which are, at least in part, products of chance and not divine revelation.

The second difficulty with Alston’s overrider system also stems from his emphasis on doctrine.¹⁰ In *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Father Joseph de Guibert discusses the discernment of spirits in mysticism. He composes a long list—quoted partially by Alston—of the respective effects of godly and satanic spirit-fueled mystical experiences. He then issues the following note of caution: “because a thought contains nothing contrary to Church doctrine or because an impulse has nothing incompatible with the law of God in it, it does not thereby follow that either should be immediately regarded as an inspiration of a good spirit.”¹¹ Assuming that a demonic force could create a pseudo-mystical experience without contradicting Church doctrine, de Guibert concludes that the standard of veridicality must not rely solely on the intellectual content of an experience but take into account the affective content as well, for an evil spirit cannot replicate both the intellectual *and* emotive dimensions of a mystical experience. It is the evil spirit’s inability to bring about peace which prevents a fall into a Cartesian universal skepticism regarding mystical experiences. In light of de Guibert’s concerns, clearly, Alston fails to consider the affective component of mysticism seriously enough.

The third problem plaguing Alston is one that he himself points out—the question of religious pluralism. Terrence Tilley formulates the

9 Jerome Gellman, “A Problem for the Christian Mystical Doxastic Practice,” *Philo: The Journal of the Society of Humanist Philosophers* 13, no. 1 (2010): 26.

10 I use the word “emphasis” because, while Alston does include other elements in the content of his overrider system for CMP, the focus is heavily doctrinal and ecclesial.

11 Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Paul Barrett (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 139.



problem in this way: “Because mystical practices in different religious traditions have different background beliefs and overrider systems, they are irreducibly different, not a single practice with multiple variations.”¹² Under Alston’s framework, no unified mystical doxastic practice can exist but rather only a multiplicity of practices equal to the number of diverse religious beliefs. Even within one religious tradition there can exist hundreds of different practices. Alston’s response to religious diversity is less than satisfying: “In the absence of any external support for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me is to sit tight.”¹³ Indeed, he even concedes later that “diversity reduces somewhat the maximal degree of epistemic justification derivable from CMP” and “reduces the rationality of engaging in CMP.”¹⁴ Any standard of veridicality tethered to specific religious traditions and beliefs will inevitably run into this problem of religious pluralism, but it is worth asking whether a more persuasive response than “sit tight” can be had.

The final critique of Alston’s overrider system is one that no other author has, to my knowledge, noted. Alston’s system includes a qualifier: mysticism seldom yields new beliefs. This restriction is the natural consequence of his judging veridicality by doctrine and previously held beliefs, for a person’s mystical experience must necessarily conform to the belief system they held prior to the experience, or else it cannot be considered veridical. I quote Alston at length:

In MP [mystical practices] God may appear to me in an experience as supremely loving, but I already firmly believed that. There isn’t even any significant updating to be derived here.... The experience can add to my total sum of justification for believing that God is loving, even if it doesn’t add to the firmness of the belief...it must be acknowledged that CMP does not typically alter the major outlines of a person’s faith. Ordinarily the subject already has a more or less firm Christian faith, which is left largely unchanged by mystical experience. What the experience does yield, cognitively, is: (a) information about God’s particular relations to the subject; (b) additional grounds for beliefs already held, particularly the belief that God does exist; (c) additional “insights” into facets of the scheme.¹⁵

Alston’s view is internally consistent but problematic. A true mystical experience ought to be the pinnacle of spirituality and epistemology, yet under Alston’s model, belief-altering mystical experiences are likely to jeopardize the experience’s veridical status.¹⁶ Consider that many

12 Terrence Tilley, “Religious Pluralism as a Problem for ‘Practical’ Religious Epistemology,” *Religious Studies* 30, no. 2 (1994): 162.

13 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 274.

14 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 275; 279.

15 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 207.

16 Perhaps the best example of this is Paul’s conversion on the road to

mystical experiences catalyze religious conversion. Insofar as conversion involves not “insights” into a doxastic practice but rather challenges to it, Alston’s overrider system may skew too conservative in ruling such experiences unveridical. It is at least worth seeing whether we can come to an improved standard, since Alston’s approach sits uneasily with the oft-accepted notion that mysticism is authoritative for the individual. As James writes, “the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe.”¹⁷ Alston, it would seem, attempts to win mysticism’s veridicality by sacrificing its potency.

Richard Swinburne posits a more promising view than Alston’s. Swinburne’s “Principle of Credulity” (POC) states that granted the absence of particular counter-considerations, a subject (*S*) is justified in taking their perception to be genuine. Swinburne enumerates four such “special considerations”: (1) the conditions of the perception or the subject are unreliable, (2) claims made under similar circumstances have proved false, (3) it is very improbable on background evidence that *X* was present, and (4) *X* was probably not the cause of the perception.¹⁸ Presuming the absence of these considerations, Swinburne argues that *S* is justified in taking their perception of *X* to be veridical.¹⁹

Swinburne’s standard for veridicality has its benefits. Most prominently, it maximizes the number of mystical experiences considered veridical without doing so indiscriminately, which is an improvement on Alston’s more circumscribed view. The POC also has the benefit of being independent of doctrinally and historically based criteria. Finally, Swinburne outmaneuvers the issue of religious pluralism by not basing his criteria in the specific content of the experience but rather the circumstances surrounding it.

The POC faces two major challenges, though. The first is causal convolution. On account of Swinburne’s first counter-consideration, all causally overdetermined mystical experiences—such as those which occur under the influence of psychotropic drugs—are ruled unveridical. The converse side of this issue is the impossibility of verifying the ultimate cause of an experience. Without including an additional criterion, Swinburne cannot escape the evil-spirit dilemma, for it is possible for an evil spirit to contrive a pseudo-mystical experience that does not violate any of the above considerations. In other words, his standard does not allow for the subject to accurately

Damascus. We should be wary of excluding one of the most quintessential mystical experiences from our veridical canon.

17 James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 427.

18 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 311-14.

19 This does not mean that the experience is necessarily veridical, only that *S* is *justified* in believing it to be so.



determine the principal source of a mystical experience, whether it be God or something more nefarious.

The second challenge of the POC is that it does not hold mysticism to an appropriately high standard. Swinburne certainly raises the bar for mystical experience candidates, yet, as the evil-spirit dilemma shows, the POC cannot weed out all counterfeit experiences—say nothing about natural experiences mistaken as mystical. These problems demonstrate that the POC is incomplete (as opposed to inherently misguided), making it no more ideal a standard for veridicality than Alston's.

II. RECONSTRUCTING A STANDARD OF VERIDICALITY

Following the analysis of Alston and Swinburne, we can articulate demands of an improved standard of veridicality. First, our standard needs to allow for new beliefs. The subject must be justified in accepting beliefs that are both consistent with their religious tradition and those which potentially expand or overturn it. Second, it must have the ability to weed out false and counterfeit mystical experiences or, at the very least, be able to make distinctions between experiences that have a higher probability of being veridical and those with a lower probability. Third, without disregarding them, it cannot be too dependent on doctrine and precedent. While these are the three essential requirements, an ideal standard should also allow for causally overdetermined experiences, avoid the problem of religious pluralism, and demonstrate a basic consistency with historically accepted accounts of mystical experiences.

To meet these demands, I propose the following criteria. They are divided into two categories: nonnegotiable and ancillary. The former must be met in order for an experience to be deemed veridical; concurrently, there is nothing conclusively (non)confirmative about the latter criteria, but they can serve to reinforce the confidence of the subject.

A. NONNEGOTIABLE:

1) *The doctrinal/intellectual element of the experience must conform to previously held beliefs or those of an established religious tradition to the degree that a subject can rationally accept its content.* If mysticism is to be considered seriously as an epistemic warrant, we must be able to evaluate instances of it on rational grounds, not just moral and affective ones. Some critics may be dissatisfied with the lack of a strict rule by which to judge the issue of doctrine, but having an indefinite threshold is useful for

several reasons. It first allows for the openness to newness that is present but limited in Alston's framework. Where Alston limits verification to the subject's religious tradition, this criterion allows him to seek verification through other established traditions. For instance, we can now allow Paul's mystical experience to remain veridical without tripping over his transition from Judaism to Christianity. Second, it comes closer to solving the problem of religious diversity and solves it on the intra-denominational level. By using the subject's rational purview as the measure of an experience's intellectual content, the standard avoids being constrained to a single tradition. Religious lines become malleable, and intra-denominational division becomes virtually irrelevant. By way of illustration, a Muslim can perceive God as Trinitarian and need not dismiss his encounter as unveridical (although he also need not accept it). That is to say, if he can reasonably assent to the idea of a triune God, he is not required to consider the experience unveridical simply because it is incompatible with Islamic belief. Finally, this criterion circumvents Gellman's objection that the Christian mystical tradition has been compromised by historically contingent sources but still functions as a restraint on putative mystical experiences, since the measure is not a specific tradition but the limits of the subject's own rationality.

2) *The experience must be free from Swinburne's four special considerations, with minor alteration.* Swinburne's considerations do well in setting a minimum bar for vetting mystical experiences. The one caveat regarding this criterion is that if an experience meets the other criteria in my proposed standard to an extraordinary degree but does not pass all of the considerations, then the subject may be justified in taking the experience to be overdetermined. For instance, if a subject had taken a psychotropic drug prior to a mystical experience, but the experience met all of the remaining requirements of the standard—including the ancillary criteria—then he could reasonably take the drug to be the proximate cause of a genuine mystical experience. This qualifier is an improvement in that it permits overdetermination while still rejecting experiences that fail to pass the fundamental conditions of any doxastic practice. Ultimately, this criterion serves a twofold purpose: it functions as a preliminary vetting mechanism and also helps diagnose overdetermination. In the latter case, if overdetermination is proven, this criterion is not overridden, for it is a nonnegotiable, but takes on its secondary function.

3) *There ought to be an engaging or arresting of all of the subject's faculties.* This criterion differentiates between true and false experiences. During a true experience, discursive reasoning is suspended—although situational-awareness will still occur—the will is concordant with



God's, bodily needs and desires are mitigated, and various physical reactions sometimes take place (among these accessory phenomena, Albert Farges lists stigmatization, levitation, luminous effluvia, odoriferous effluvia, mystical abstinence, inedia, and power over nature).²⁰ A false experience—one caused by psychotropic drugs, for instance—will likely only employ one or two faculties. This criterion also differentiates between mystical and other forms of religious experience. For example, a Marian apparition would not be considered a mystical experience in the truest sense of the word, for God is not the direct object of the experience, even if it is religious in nature. There are two lines of justification for this criterion. First, it tracks the experiences of many mystics who describe their encounters with the divine as including the entire person.²¹ Second, it respects a mystical experience as a unitive event. Mystics in most of the world's main religious traditions are careful to use non-dualistic language. If a mystical experience brings a person into (comm)union with God—and perhaps the rest of the natural world—then it follows that the subject should be personally unified as well. Hence, this criterion is an important factor in the discernment of varieties of religious experiences and of veridical mystical experiences. This criterion sharply departs from both Alston and Swinburne's systems. Each author heavily emphasizes the state of the subject prior to a mystical experience (e.g., background beliefs or levels of intoxication), but this criterion focuses primarily on the actual experience rather than its external context.

4) *The experience ought to be transformative, catalyzing effects in the subject that last beyond the experience itself.* We should expect a direct encounter with God to be a life-changing event. In the ordinary course of life, far less spectacular occurrences spark such about-faces: near death experiences, stints in prison, a cannonball to the leg, happening upon scripture, etc. If these events—which are hardly pedestrian but still less marvelous than an instance of mysticism—are sources of transformation, then mysticism most surely would be as well. Consider for instance, the change of trajectory in Gautama Buddha's life following his mystical enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, or Henry David Thoreau's mystical union in the woods. Mystical experiences of all varieties are transformative for the subject whether in the formation of new beliefs, the reassurance of previous beliefs, the persistence of the

20 Albert Farges, *Mystical Phenomena Compared with Their Human and Diabolical Counterparts*, 2nd ed., trans. S.P. Jacques (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1926), 514.

21 Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Group, 1957), 107-44. Saint Teresa, for instance, describes how during her mystical experiences she was able to read Latin and understand divine mysteries (intellect), levitate (body), and set aside all earthly desires (will).

affective dimension present during the experience itself, a permanent physical brand (e.g., stigmatization), or a will that is more closely aligned with God's. Unlike Alston's override system, this criterion prevents the standard from being too dependent on the doctrinally based criteria, which are not reliable.

B. ANCILLARY:

Before exploring the ancillary criteria, a few notes about their use. While an experience can be deemed nonveridical, not all experiences that we can justifiably call veridical are necessarily so, meaning that a spectrum of certainty accompanies each "veridical" mystical experience. If a subject meets all nonnegotiable criteria, they have sufficient epistemic warrant (just as sense perception may be relied on as accurate even if it is not infallible). Hence, the role of ancillary criteria. They do not determine whether an experience has warrant, but they serve to increase the subject's certainty in the experience's veracity. Ancillary criteria, then, are dissimilar from the overrides and counter-considerations in that they are unable to render an experience unveridical but only add to a subject's confidence.

1) *The subject is reasonably predisposed to a mystical experience.* By "reasonably predisposed," I simply mean practiced in introspective awareness and the discernment of emotional and spiritual states—especially through prayer, mediation, self-examination, etc. While mystical encounters require no preparation on the part of the subject, a contemplative or other individual so practiced will be able to judge the experience's veridicality with greater accuracy. In some ways, this is an extrapolation of Swinburne's first consideration: veridicality is, in part, proportionately correlated with the reliability of the subject. However, this criterion is more nuanced in that it also judges the *degree* of veridicality.

2) *The experience is accompanied by a sense of indubitability concerning the veridicality of the experience and the accuracy of its content.* A person who doubts their experience little-to-none can enjoy a higher degree of confidence in its veridicality than a person plagued by intense doubt. This is a thin criterion, but it can be useful to the subject all the same—particularly if mystical experiences bear any internal mark of veridicality. Again, the subject's certainty has no role in Alston or Swinburne's standards.

3) *The experience is consistent with those of others.* No plausible reason exists to believe that God appears to every person in the same manner or discloses the same content. If, however, a subject can cross-check their experience with the experience of another, then they naturally stand on firmer epistemic grounds, in just the same way we trust



scientific trials that are replicable. Simply, if two experiences are phenomenologically similar but dissimilar in content and cause, we cannot issue differing verdicts on the question of veridicality. The implication of this principle—sometimes referred to as the principle of causal indifference—is that if an experience coincides with other accounts, then the subject can demonstrate more confidence in the genuineness of their experience. Of course, a mystical encounter unlike any before it may be veridical nonetheless.²²

CONCLUSION

If we make the assertion that mystical experiences possess epistemic warrant, we must also admit that the beliefs derived from these experiences are of the highest kind. How could knowledge acquired via a direct encounter with the transcendent God be otherwise? This being said, they are also the most dangerous, especially if wholly authoritative for the subject. Accordingly, we must find a way to preserve the power and authority of mystical practices while simultaneously ensuring their authenticity.

In attempting to meet this challenge, I believe I have moved the present conversation forward by determining the qualities that ought to be incorporated into an effective veridicality standard. Nevertheless, many questions are left to be answered. Even if proved veridical, is mysticism authoritative for others or only the subject? Wholly or partially? Can better knowledge of mysticism as a doxastic practice make it as useful as sense perception? To conclude with the famous words of the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, “In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic (one who has experienced God for real) or nothing at all.”²³

22 To further distinguish this criterion from the second nonnegotiable, consider them in terms of form versus content. A Christian can have a mystical experience that is doctrinally sound yet be wholly unprecedented in the way it is perceived (i.e. similar in content but not form). This does nothing to decrease the veridicality of the experience. Nonetheless, a person who has an experience that is doctrinally sound and parallels the perceptive characteristics of another's experience (i.e. similar in content and form) can exhibit greater confidence in the veridicality of their experience.

23 Many thanks to Dr. Edward Glowienka, whose insights greatly informed this paper.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Cooney, a junior at Carroll College in Montana, is a theology and philosophy double-major with a political science minor. His primary philosophic interests include epistemology, Neoplatonic metaphysics, and medieval scholasticism. Outside of academics, John is a member of Carroll's cross-country team and enjoys general outdoor recreation.

