ABSTRACT. In at least some cases of justified perceptual belief, our perceptual experience itself, as opposed to beliefs about it, evidences and thereby justifies our belief. While the phenomenon is common, it is also mysterious. There are good reasons to think that perceptions cannot justify beliefs directly, and there is a significant challenge in explaining how they do. After explaining just how direct perceptual justification is mysterious, I consider Michael Huemer’s (Skepticism and the Veil of Perception, 2001) and Bill Brewer’s (Perception and Reason, 1999) recent, but radically different, attempts to eliminate it. I argue that both are unsuccessful, though a consideration of their mistakes deepens our appreciation of the mystery.

0. INTRODUCTION

We see the walnut tree in the yard and, on that basis, we believe that the walnut tree is there. Our belief is defeasibly justified. We base our belief upon our experience, and its epistemic status derives directly from the experience. Our justification does not stem from the fact that visual perception is a truth-reliable process. Our belief would be justified even if the process were not truth-reliable.1 Our justification does not result from our having some justified beliefs linking the experience to our belief i.e., that we seem to see a walnut tree and that such perceptions are generally reliable. Our belief would be justified even if we did not have those additional beliefs.2 Our belief gets its justification from our perception itself.

This quite ordinary situation is also quite mysterious. There are good reasons to think that perceptions cannot justify beliefs directly, and there is a significant challenge in explaining how they do. After briefly presenting the mystery, I shall consider Michael Huemer’s (2001) and Bill Brewer’s (1999) recent, but
radically different, attempts to eliminate it. I shall argue that both are unsuccessful.

1. THE MYSTERY

Direct perceptual justification is mysterious, in part, because it does not fit a model that is strongly suggested by what may be our best understood case of epistemic justification, that of one belief by another. Suppose we believe that the tree is a hardwood based on our belief that it is a walnut and that walnut trees are hardwoods. Our evidence beliefs must themselves be defeasibly justified to support the defeasible justification of the belief we base on them. One belief supports another by extending to it some of its own positive epistemic status. If our evidence beliefs are not defeasibly justified, they have no defeasible justification to give. If we generalize this understanding of justification, we get the Epistemic Extension Principle.

EEP: S's belief that p is defeasibly justified for S by virtue of being based on a mental state, M, only if M is justified, perhaps defeasibly so, for S.

The Epistemic Extension Principle applies to other mental states a demand that we quite confidently place on beliefs: one mental state epistemically supports another by extending to it some of its own positive epistemic status, and if a state has no positive epistemic status, it has no epistemic support to give. The principle gains additional plausibility from the fact that it explains why desires, imaginings, hopes and the like are not sources of justification. They have no epistemic status.

Yet, perceptual states also lack epistemic justification. From the perspective of (EEP), they cannot then provide it. We can, of course, reject (EEP), perhaps arguing that it is inappropriate to impose on perceptions a standard they cannot meet in the first place, but the mystery still remains. Why is it that perceptions do not have to meet a standard we so confidently impose on beliefs? How do they provide justification if, unlike beliefs, they do not do so by "passing on" some justification they already possess? Are imaginings, desires, hopes and the