
The Problem of Perception and the Perception of God

In Christian discourse, our talk about God is replete with the language of ordinary experience. When I behold profound acts of kindness or self-sacrifice, I am inclined to think (or say) that I “see the love of God,” or in receiving such acts from the hand of others I might take myself to have “tasted the goodness of God.” In quiet moments of contemplation or in prayer I might regard myself as having “touched God” or as having been “touched by God.” In hearing Scripture read or preached I might “hear God speaking,” addressing me in particular.¹ In taking these experiences to manifest

1. The use of the language of ordinary experience to describe the self-presentation of God to God’s people can be traced directly to the language of Christian Scripture, as, for example, when Moses is given a visual presentation of the divine glory in Exod. 33:22–23, or when the prophets hear the voice of the Lord as in Isa. 6:8, or when we are encouraged to taste and see that the Lord is good” in Ps. 34:8. Similarly, we are told that in seeing and touching the person of Jesus, we behold and handle the Word who is God (1 John 1:1; cf. John 1). For a biblical theology ordered entirely by the notion of theophany, or divine appearing, manifest within the history and context of ordinary human life and sacralized by the cultus, see Samuel

God's presence and agency, I ordinarily take them to supply me with reasons to form beliefs about God. To take the first of these examples, I take myself to see God's love in the benevolent act of another, and on the basis of that experience I find myself forming the belief that God's loving presence has been manifested in this act of benevolence, or perhaps simply that God is loving. Although I need not, I might verbally express my belief that God is loving with an observation report such as "this act of kindness reveals God's love," or some such.

When Christians talk this way, such talk proceeds from a rather common-sense assumption about their relation to the world in which God appears to them—they assume that they are *open* to God in the sort of lived experiences described above. By our assumption that we are "open to God" I mean to single out two assumptions, one quite general and the other particularly theological. First, I have in mind a sort of "naive" or "common-sense" realism; our prereflective "default" understanding about the *directness* with which ordinary perceptual experience puts us in touch with a world not of our own making.² Second, I have in mind the idea that this default understanding forms the backdrop against which to understand the sorts of observation reports mentioned above that Christians routinely make about their experiences of God.³

Terrien's remarkable *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). See also Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

2. What marks an experience as *perceptual* in the sense that I shall be assuming throughout this study is that it involves the *qualitative and passive presentation* of something, typically of some feature of our environment. So while we may be able to identify a passive or qualitative dimension of, e.g., memory or abstract reasoning sufficient for them to count as experiential, they are not perceptual experiences insofar as their (purported) directedness on the objects of memory or abstract reasoning do not or need not involve the presence of that object to the subject of the experience. I expand and elaborate considerably on this intuitive way of carving out my topic in what follows.
3. The phrase "openness to the world" as a gloss on our implicit assumption that in experience we directly "take in" the world has come to prominence primarily through its usage by John McDowell in *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), on which, more later. But the fundamental idea captured by that phrase—that the world is not reducible to

2.1 Naive Realism and Our Openness to God

Taking both assumptions together, we might say that implicit in our observation reports about God are some of the very same naive realist assumptions we ordinarily make in our observation reports about everyday features of the world. Central among those assumptions is the notion that there is such a thing as the way the world is, irrespective of our thoughts or opinions about it (except, of course, when the things in question themselves involve our thoughts and opinions). Take, for example, an observation report such as, “My computer screen is cracked.” When I look at my computer screen and see that it is cracked, I take it that it would have been cracked even if I had not noticed it, and indeed even if no one had noticed it. If it could be sent back in time before any humans existed, before any cultural, linguistic, or social conventions even existed for identifying it *as* cracked, then it would still *be* cracked.

The more sophisticated among us might point out that what we really mean to say here is that it would still be what we now mean when we use the word *cracked*. Smart alecks notwithstanding, we ordinarily take it that however dependent our *recognition* of the way things are might be on our social or cultural formation, *that* they are the way they are does not depend on any recognition on our part.⁴

or dependent upon human minds and that such a world can nevertheless be perceptually present to the mind—is a standard gloss given by philosophers for the prephilosophical intuition about experience that forms the starting point for philosophical reflection.

4. The point is sometimes put by saying that—unless we think ourselves victims of illusions—we ordinarily regard our experiences as *factive*: as simply presenting us with the way things are, and not merely with the “raw materials” out of which we *construct* or *interpret* the way things are. As Heidegger memorably puts it in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), “Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must first be set aside. [In perception] . . . we yield ourselves to the undisguised presence of the thing. . . . We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things. . . . [W]e hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear the acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear

Thus, for example, it might be that in hearing a homily preached at our local worship gathering you perceive that God is addressing our congregation. I, on the other hand, did not recognize God as addressing us, or I did not recognize God addressing us in the way you are now reporting. Of course, that does not prevent me from believing that God in fact did address us—it might be that among my various background beliefs is the belief that God can or does address us through the homily in worship, and from this I might *infer* that because I have just heard a homily, whatever has been said in the homily must have included God’s address to us.⁵ But whereas you take your experience to have made the fact of God’s address directly present to you, I had to reason it out from the background belief. Whereas for my observation of the situation, my reasoning from the background belief does all the work, your belief arises from God’s actual *manifestation* to you in this particular homily.⁶ From the standpoint of hearing the homily, your

a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly” (25–26). As McDowell has it in *Mind and World*, “when we see that such-and-such is the case, we, and our seeing, do not stop anywhere short of the fact. What we see is: that such-and-such is the case” (29).

5. See, for example, John Hick’s distinction with respect to how we “become conscious of the existence of other objects in the universe”—that is, “either by experiencing them for ourselves or by inferring their existence from evidence within our experience.” “The ordinary religious believer,” he goes on to say, “is one of the former kind. He professes, not to have inferred that there is a God, but that God as a living being has entered into his own experience.” *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 95.
6. When God is present with us or acts on us by way of creaturely objects and events, is the divine manifestation direct or indirect? Phenomenologically, at least, we might imagine the addressee of God’s speech-acts taking things either way. If, for example, properties belonging properly to God are in any sense present in the address, then in directly taking in that address she directly takes in those properties, and, as such, directly takes in divine properties. Presumably, the direct perceptual intake of divine properties is sufficient for a direct perceptual relation to God. If, on the other hand, what is perceptibly present in her experience is only an intermediary that manifests divine properties extrinsically as a kind of proxy for God, then her direct perceptual intake will not count as a direct perception of God, but an indirect one. At this point, I do not wish to stake a claim in either direction, since the phenomenology I sketch is consistent with both sorts of analyses. If, therefore, I go on to describe a “naive realist” phenomenology as supposing one rather than the other, this should not be seen as a necessary analysis of how one takes oneself to encounter God, but only a phenomenologically possible one. If direct

sensitivity or receptivity to God produced in you an observational belief about God's address, whereas for my part nothing actually struck me as being any different from an observational standpoint than it might have struck the unbeliever who did not share the relevant background beliefs about God.

Part of what it would mean for me to take seriously your claim to have observationally registered God's address in the homily is to acknowledge the possibility that I was unreceptive to something that was nevertheless *there*—something you genuinely perceived and I missed. Even with our shared background belief in place, the belief that God does indeed address us in the homily of Sunday worship, it remains possible for me to acknowledge my failure to have *discerned* God's address—my “deafness” or lack of sensitivity to it. Moreover, to acknowledge that this happened is also to recognize that in claiming to have heard God's address you did not simply hear what you wanted to hear, or what your training or your formation alone had determined you would hear. Certainly, you might recognize that apart from what your mother taught you or your Sunday School class drilled into your head, you might not have been adequately *disposed* to hear God. But what you think you heard in such an instance is God, not your mother or your Sunday School teacher, and what you take to have triggered that belief is not a mere inclination but the perceptible presence of God.

In this way, we ordinarily assume that the way the world actually stands (and not merely what we happen to think about it) can exert a direct impact on what we think. In looking at my computer screen when the screen is in fact cracked, I take that fact to be crucial in accounting for my visual experience of it *as* cracked. In other words,

perception of God turns out not to be metaphysically possible, then the phenomenology of directness is illusory. I will not stake a metaphysical claim on the matter, however, until the final chapter.

my thought that the screen is cracked reaches “all the way out” to the reality of its being cracked, and its being cracked reaches “all the way in” to determine my thought. There is no distance between the qualitative character of my experience and an objective state of the world in the sense described above.

By fixing on the qualitative character of my experience, I mean to highlight that to have perceived something involves more than that the way the world is can itself determine our thinking about it. It is also to make a claim about *how* the world determines our thinking about it, the *mode* of its determination of my thinking. In experience we take it that some feature of the way the world is has become immediately present to us in our thinking about it. The distinctive phenomenal character of visually beholding my cracked screen (for instance, the appearance of a dark two-inch line zigzagging up the bottom left-hand side of my screen) names the particular *way* in which some state of the world is present to me (in this case, a small bit of the world—my computer screen—has presented itself to me *visually*). In taking my experience to be a disclosure of some feature of the way the world actually is under some perceptual mode of presentation (visual, auditory, and so on), and in taking my observational belief to be “based on” that presentation, I therefore take my belief to be directly informed by the world itself.⁷

7. To identify the qualitative or phenomenal character of experience with the way in which reality presents itself to thought—as a mode of object-presentation—will strike some as an unjustified preference for one theory of “qualia” (the subjective element in experience), and a controversial one at that. But at this stage I am not attempting any theoretical account, but only trying to describe our ordinary assumptions. Nevertheless, there are theoretical accounts of qualia predicated precisely on the attempt to capture our ordinary assumptions. Thus, e.g., it is this ordinary notion of a belief’s dependence on the world that Timothy Williams is attempting to capture in *Knowledge and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), when he says that we “conceive mind and external world as dependent variables” such that “belief as attributed in ordinary language is a genuine mental state constitutively dependent on the external world” (5–6). Likewise, the intuition that when I see that *x* is blue, its looking blue to me is determined by its *being* blue guides Gareth Evans in offering his controversial reading of Frege on “object-dependent senses” in *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (New

Similarly, when hearing God address me in particular, in hearing a homily, what I take to be the most fundamental explanation for what I heard is the fact that God is now speaking to me. The distinctive phenomenal character of this impression, such as the auditory experience of my pastor's delivery of a sermon, names the way in which God's address has become present to me—"what it is like" for the world itself to be present to me in that way. My observational belief that God is addressing us in the homily is therefore "based on" my experience of hearing God's address in the homily. In virtue of hearing the homily, I take myself to have heard God's address in the same way that in virtue of seeing the zigzagged line, I take myself to have seen that the screen is cracked.⁸ To recall a point I made earlier, this is not to say that I made any *inference* from the way things appear to me in experience to an observational judgment about the way things are. On the contrary, our beliefs and practices can be noninferentially grounded in perceptual experience. Precisely in perceptually experiencing some object X as having the property F, I can find myself immediately saddled with the belief that X is F. In such cases, my perceptual belief is rationally "based on" the

York: Oxford University Press, 1982). He argues that a Fregean analysis of thoughts is best rendered by the notion of a sense (*Sinn*) constituted by its referent (*Bedeutung*).

8. That is, in experience some feature of the world has been made directly present to my thinking, and that presentation of the world provides me the reason to form the belief in question—I thus form the belief *because of* the way in which my experience takes in the world, in virtue of it. But the world's saddling me with a reason to believe that-p does not imply that going on to believe that-p requires any additional move from passively registering the reason to actively reasoning my way to the belief. It is equally possible that the world's impartation of itself to me, e.g., my seeing that p, itself occasions my belief that-p—seeing the cup on the table might therefore itself "wring from me" the belief that the cup is on the table. In such cases, however, it remains true that the experience provides the reason for my belief. Suppose that you call out to me while stooped over a box looking for this particular cup and ask where it is, and I reply, "It is on the table." If you don't remember leaving it on the table, you might doubt or even outright reject my claim, and reply, "No, I didn't leave it there—how do you know that's where it is?" I might well reply, "Because *I see it sitting there on the table.*" It is natural to suppose that this reply indeed gives an accurate picture of *why* I found myself passively saddled with the belief that the cup is on the table—my reason for holding that belief—even before needing to draw upon it in an active exercise of reasoning to counter your challenge.

experience in that the very formation of the belief is constituted by the experience as a form of rational responsiveness to my environment.

In our perceptual experiences, the direct impact of the world on us can thus function as a rational “tribunal” for what we think, say, and do.⁹ When all goes well and we are not misled, we rely on our experiences as one way to hold our thinking and acting accountable to the way things actually stand in the world. Our perceptual experience of the world serves not simply to refer us to the world, but also to “check” the world in order to align our thinking with the way things are, to ensure that our thinking is justified by how things really are. When I went to bed last night, I wiped off my computer screen carefully and did not see any cracks, but this morning I do see one. I ordinarily take it that, provided I am not being misled, my cracked computer screen has corrected my prior belief or disposition to believe that my screen is perfectly intact. What does the correcting is not fundamentally my “interpretation” of the world but the world itself. Our ordinary presumption is that the way the world is affords me the ability to adjust my thinking to fit the facts by forming a belief (for example, “my screen is cracked”).

The support that the world lends to the adjustment of my beliefs or bodily responses is thus “rational” support, in the minimal sense of supplying me with *reasons* to make up my mind or act in some ways and not others. Similarly, if God is in fact addressing us in the homily

9. As Williams puts it, “If the content of a mental state can depend on the external world, so can the attitude to that content” (*Knowledge and Its Limits*, 6). In the case of perceptual experiences, it is not just that the content of our observational beliefs can be imparted directly by the world itself but also that stance or attitude that we take up to that content—believing, knowing, doubting, commanding, exclaiming, etc.—can also be imparted to us by the world itself. The image of the world as a “tribunal” comes from W. V. O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 20–43. When Quine says that “our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience” (38), he means simply that we must take the impact of the world registered by our senses to function as a norm, a standard of correctness that either vindicates or indicts our judgments about the world.

and that address is manifestly presented to me, impressing itself upon me in experience, then God's presence and agency in the world itself determines the reasons I have for forming beliefs about God's address to us in the homily. A Christian conception of "revelation" in its most general sense seems to include God's making the divine presence and agency available to us in experience, as well as our becoming appropriately sensitive or receptive to the relevant mode of God's availability so as to be successfully presented with God's presence and agency as a "tribunal" or standard of correctness against which to adjust our thinking.

The idea I have been elaborating is that we are perceptually open to God's presence and agency in the world in much the same way as we are perceptually open to the world itself. That is, God's presence or action in the world can make an immediate rational impact on our observational thinking, such observational thinking can represent the ways in which God is actually present and active in our immediate environment, and our ability to detect God's perceptible relation to the world can therefore furnish us with rational support for our dispositions to form beliefs about God or to respond bodily to God in some ways and not others. Our experiences of the world allow us to take in facts about the way the world is, including facts about God's manifestation in it.¹⁰ This "naive" or "common-sense" conception of our perceptual relation to God has important implications for the overall shape of our moral-practical reasoning about God.

From what has been said thus far, it is clear that, rather than seeing ourselves as purely imposing our will to believe upon reality, we most often take it that reality itself "tells" us what we ought to think, in the sense of rationally guiding our beliefs.¹¹ The same can be said

10. McDowell draws frequently on the image of "taking in the world" as a paradigmatic description of our ordinary conception of experience. See *Mind and World*.

11. That is not to say, of course, that our discernments or judgments about such matters are always correct, only that ordinarily they seem to us to be fitting responses to the way the world is. In

not only for our dispositions to form beliefs about the world but also—and perhaps even more fundamentally—for our dispositions to act. The way things are can call us not merely to think, but also to speak and more generally to act as we should, and it can impose its own demands on our practical reason no less than our discursive reason. For example, when I see a jaywalker darting into the road in front of my car, I might find myself forming a belief such as “I am going to hit him if I don’t slow down!” Or, perhaps in addition to or instead of forming that belief I simply find myself stomping on the brake in order to avoid hitting him. In such cases, I take it that there are a number of relevant facts—features of the way the world is—that appear to me via my visual apprehension of the jaywalker before me. Among the facts thus presented to me by my observation of the pedestrian are that he stands in danger of being hit, that I must avoid hitting him, and that applying the brake is my best bet for achieving that outcome. Such facts, we ordinarily think, are plainly before me—they become manifest to me in these circumstances, not because I have puzzled them out but because they directly present themselves to me as features of the way the world is that are disclosed in my passive experience of the jaywalker. In this case, the relevant facts are conveyed to me visually.¹²

those cases in which it turns out that we have thought or acted improperly, we regard what previously seemed to us fitting responses to the way the world is as mere seemings, while taking some set of revised responses as in fact fitting responses to the way the world really is.

12. There is a question here about the sense in which “seeing” the facts in this example is metaphorical. Clearly, we cannot see moral-practical facts in the same way that we see concrete particulars such as tables and chairs. We will have occasion to revisit this issue at a later point. At the moment, one brief observation will suffice to make explicit our prephilosophical views. Recall (e.g., from note 3 above) that we ordinarily do not take ourselves to experience “bare particulars” but everyday objects as they figure into facts: when I see a cup on the table, what I visually take in is not a mass of atomized features (“Look! A solid, cylindrical, hollow, liquid-containing thing—from which I may abstract out ‘this-cup,’ contiguously positioned on top of another solid, horizontally extended thing from which I can abstract out ‘this-table.’ Therefore, the cup is on the table!”) No, if anything, the abstraction goes the other way—we have to take a philosophy class in order to learn how to abstract from our ordinary experience to parse out an analysis. Instead, what we immediately observe phenomenologically is that a cup is on the

As such, we ordinarily presume in such circumstances that what I observed, not solely my dispositions as an observer, made my stomping on the brakes the right thing to do. The jaywalker's darting in front of me *called upon me* to form something like the above-mentioned belief or intention to act. Had I been deaf or improperly disposed to recognize what the situation itself required of me, we would understand this failure of my practical rationality as a failure to pick up on some reasons to apply my brakes that my immediate environment made readily available to me. Another way of putting this is to say that, in our everyday navigation of the world, our naive realist presumptions about what features of the world are available to perception includes a kind of realism about properties of value.¹³ Visually perceiving a crack in my computer screen as providing me with an objective reason to form certain beliefs and action-intentions bears an important parallel with visually perceiving a jaywalker as

table, a fact that in various circumstances furnishes us with correspondingly various reasons to think or do something (e.g., if it appears to be mine, reasons to pick it up or take a drink; in a coffee shop, reasons to wonder if someone else is sitting at this table, etc.). But how is taking in facts about cups and tables that we ordinarily see as giving us reasons to think and act in some ways and not others different in kind from taking in facts about jaywalkers as giving us reasons to think and act in some ways and not others? It is not.

13. Akeel Bilgrami contrasts the third-person perspective on ourselves as objects characteristic of scientific understanding with the first-person perspective of ourselves as agents characteristic of the evaluative stance. See "The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay," in *Naturalism and Normativity*, ed. Mario de Caro and David MacArthur (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 23–54. Bilgrami asks: "What must the world be like . . . such that it moves us to such practical engagement [of the agent-perspective] over and above detached observation and study?" The "obvious answer," he says, is that "over and above containing the facts that natural science studies it contains a special kind of fact, evaluative facts and properties . . . values, and when we perceive them, they put normative demands to us and activate our practical engagement" (26). Such a view, he emphasizes, is not particularly philosophical, but "commensensical" (27). Just as, when asked "Is it raining?" we do not attempt to examine our interiority to find the answer, but instead *look outside*, so when asked "Do you desire x?" we are prompted not to scan our own minds but to look at the world to determine whether x is in fact *desirable*. (28). If only a third-person point of view directed at our own minds could explain why x is desirable, then, since agency is a first-person phenomenon, we would have to deny not just that the world contains values, but the very fact of our agency. But precisely because we ordinarily regard ourselves as agents, we also regard the world as capable of calling upon our agency.

providing me an objective reason to form certain beliefs and action-intentions.

Ordinarily, we would say that the defect of practical reason on such an occasion is not that I failed to invent or *construct* the relevant reasons but that I failed to *recognize* them, in one of two senses. Either I failed to take in or *detect* the relevant reasons that were there anyway, or I failed to properly *acknowledge* those reasons I detected that were in fact salient to me in my experience of the situation. In the latter case, I failed to be properly motivated by the reasons I detected and hence failed to act in accordance with what the situation itself required of me. While this example draws particularly on our naive realism with respect to moral properties (broadly understood as features of the world that place rational demands on our conduct), something similar could be said about aesthetic properties.¹⁴

In much the same way, I might think that, for example, in silent prayer God has presented the divine presence to me as majestic in a way that calls for me to act by moving my body into a kneeling posture of humility. I could have responded instead by jumping on one leg and rotating at successive ninety-degree angles until I fell down, but I would not have considered that a *practically rational* response given what I was presented with. Kneeling, though, and not jumping on one leg, was what I observed God's particular way of impressing Godself on me to have required of me on that occasion. If it is possible for my observation of God to have figured into my practical reasoning in that way, then my failure to kneel on that occasion could rightly be analyzed either as a failure to pick up on the relevant reasons for kneeling made available to me by my perception

14. Though I think the matter is a bit more complicated here: whereas the action-guiding focus on agency is a fairly clear indicator for what we have in mind by "values," it is not so clear what sort of "calling from the world" we have in mind by notions such as beauty.

of God's presence or as a failure to comply with the rational demands imposed on me by those observational reasons.

Of course, just as we can imagine many different sorts of rational responses afforded by the situation of the jaywalker (such as swerving rather than braking, and so on), so too we might also recognize many other actions as suitable responses to the way in which God appeared to me, such as bowing my head or even remaining still. In such cases, it is perhaps better to say that my kneeling in response to a presentation of God's majesty was rationally *permitted* by that experience rather than rationally *required* by it. But we might equally well imagine a scenario in which only kneeling would do or in which it figures among many possible actions, at least one of which is required of me. Whatever the case, however, Christians can take the mode of God's presentation to us as evoking in us some disposition to exercise our agency precisely because the action in question is what we observe reality itself to demand of us.¹⁵

In this sense, the bodily act of kneeling is as much a rational response to reality as presented to me in my experience as my forming some perceptual belief such as "God is majestic" or "here is a manifestation of divine majesty" would have been. But this is not to say that I had to form some such belief before acting on it or that in the act of kneeling in response to perceiving God as majestic I thought much about what I did. What afforded me a

15. While the suitability of our ordinary understanding of perceptual experience vis-à-vis value properties would surely be disputed, the corresponding notion of "reality's demands" leaves it an open question how we should as Christians construe God's calling or demand on our practical reasoning. It is thus consistent with all theological metaethical proposals insofar as they espouse a "realist" understanding of value properties as genuine objects of intention. See, e.g., Herbert McCabe's Wittgensteinian-Thomist conception of natural law in *Law, Love and Language* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), Robert Adams's version of divine command theory in *Finite and Infinite Goods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), Linda Zagzebski's motivation-based virtue theory in *Divine Motivation Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and John Hare's Kantian "prescriptive-realism" in *The Moral Gap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

reason to act in that instance was not any explicit formation of the belief that God is majestic, but a perceptual experience of God as majestic. Sometimes we recognize the need to deliberately reflect on what reasons our experiences have actually afforded us in order to determine what exercises of our agency the relevant realities demand of us. For instance, while praying I may be strongly impressed with the idea that God is urging me to yield my will, but I may not be certain what exactly he is calling me to do.

But much (perhaps most) of the time, the reasons afforded us by God's presence and agency impinging in our experiences inform and justify our actions without our ever needing to actively reflect on them. Consider the batter who exhibits a practical rationality in knowing how to adjust his stance and his swing according to the way he perceives the pitch coming at him. Without needing to make any conscious decisions or assessments about what to do with his body, he attempts to determine what the situation requires of him and responds accordingly. If asked why he rotated his hips at angle X instead of angle Y, he might well respond, "I don't know, I just did." But if asked why he did whatever he did when swinging the bat, he confirms that his bodily actions were rationally motivated when he responds, "I was just trying to hit the ball." He saw the pitch coming at him, recognized what he saw as imposing on him a requirement that he attempt to hit it, and by calling upon his agency to hit the ball, eliciting his evaluative dispositions, desire, background knowledge, and prior training, moved his body appropriately in response.

Certainly, he did all of this unreflectively, but we nevertheless understand his action as rational, as a form of practical responsiveness to reason, as exhibiting a performative (rather than contemplative or discursive) understanding of what ought to be done. In this case, we take it that the reason in question was that a ball was rapidly approaching him and that he should try to hit it. And it was his *seeing*

the ball, his openness to it entering his visual field, that we take to have afforded him that reason, to have provided him the rational basis on which to appropriately adjust his stance and swing the bat. My kneeling in response to God's presentation to me was of this sort—a perceptual experience of God which afforded me a reason to act that in turn elicited the act itself, without any reflective or deliberative delay acting as intermediary between observing and acting, between God's majesty being made present to me in some way and the calling forth of my disposition to kneel.

2.2 Perceptual Knowledge versus Perceptual Intentionality

Thus far, I have been arguing that it is, in at least some sense, natural for Christians to think of themselves as capable of a perceptual “openness” to God's presence and agency in the world and as involved in various forms of moral-practical reasoning that presume our openness to God. Moreover, the sort of perceptual openness to God's presence and agency in the world I have been describing is intelligible in terms of the very same sort of perceptual openness we naively presume in our ordinary experience of worldly objects, properties, relations, and events. Importantly, however, to be *open* to some feature of reality in perceptual experience is not the same as having a perceptual *knowledge* of that feature of reality.

Rather, the notion of perceptual or observational openness to God is in a sense more fundamental than—logically prior to—the notion of perceptual knowledge of God. For me to know God, or to know something about God, is for my way of thinking about God to possess the epistemic credentials relevant for that way of thinking to constitute knowledge. But whatever credentials those might be, in order for my thinking about God to have them, such thinking must indeed be *about* God in the first place. The question of whether

a judgment about God is true or false cannot even arise if that judgment has not succeeded in being about God at all, if it fails to actually involve or have to do with God. This “aboutness” is what gives a judgment its content, whatever its epistemic credentials.

Our openness to something is our capacity to be directed on it, to have some aspect of that thing “in mind” such that our thinking, speaking, and acting are properly understood as world-involving. Being open to God is thus having our experiences *direct us upon* God such that our thinking comes to involve God, so that the beliefs and practices that include such thinking accordingly have to do with God. To be open to God is thus to presume that God (and not merely our socially and institutionally ratified way of using the word or concept “God”) rationally bears on our thinking and that our thinking reaches out to God. If what I imagine to be my experiences “of God” are in fact not in any sense directed on God but instead pick out or direct me on some other sort of thing (for instance, my participation in a religious community’s symbols of ultimate concern or my unresolved anxieties about death), then the beliefs that I form on the basis of such thinking cannot say anything truly or falsely about God because they are not in the first instance about God at all. As such, purportedly theological thinking would not succeed in being theological; it would not actually have anything to do with God, at least not as Christians have usually understood the intentional referent of their beliefs and practices.

To claim that we are open to God is therefore to claim that what we think, say, and do genuinely has God as its content, whether our thinking, speaking, and acting get things right with respect to God or not. For our thought, language, and performances to be God-involving, therefore, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for our knowledge of God. If what I think, say, or do is capable of reaching out to how things actually are with God, then it is possible

for how things are with God to form the standard of correctness for our beliefs and practices about God, and it is thus possible to have responded rightly or wrongly to what God's presence or agency demands of us. To claim that we are open to God by way of *perception* is to claim that God can enter into our experiences and thus that our observational thinking and reporting can have God as their empirical content. Our perceptual knowledge of God, on the other hand, presupposes that we are open to God in this way, and it is constituted by the correctness of our rational responsiveness to the demands impressed on us by our openness to God's presence or agency.

So a Christian's common-sense or naive presumption that she is open to God does not necessarily imply that she gets things right in her judgments about how God has presented Godself to her in experience or how she has responded to God's self-presentations, but rather that, given the proper circumstances, she *can* get things right in these respects. Our implicit assumption when we take ourselves to have a perceptual knowledge of God is that we have gotten things right, that our experience discloses that our judgments about God are correct or that our practical responses to God are what were called for (that is, because they are either required or permitted by whatever feature of the world our experience is an experience of).

Marking off the foregoing distinction by a bit of terminology, we can say that openness has to do with the *intentionality* of our experiences—their two-way directedness in which reality's bearing on our thinking affords us the rational resources to adjust and revise our beliefs and practices with its demands. The notion of our perceptual knowledge, on the other hand, has to do with the *epistemology* of our experiences, our ways of evaluating the credentials of the beliefs and dispositions to act that are based on experience, our attempts to identify or establish their correctness and the conditions under which our directedness on reality counts as knowledge.

Our naive or common-sense idea that we are perceptually “open” to God is thus equally well stated by saying that, when not misled, we perceive things to be a certain way with respect to God precisely because that is the way things in fact are with God. The epistemological question is just what constitutes things having gone well or badly, what is required for our experiences of God to afford us reasons for belief or action that, when based on those experiences, can be thought to furnish us with knowledge of God, whether reflective or practical.

If our ordinary and common-sense view of theological intentionality is that Christians are open to God in a way that possibly affords us a perceptual knowledge of God, this is only because we take ourselves to be similarly open to the world as the arena of God’s manifestations to us. When I take it that in the benevolent act of another I have seen the love of God, I can only regard my experience as directing me on God in that act if I am also perceptually open to that human act of benevolence. Similarly, I can only take the perceptual judgments about divine love that I have based on my experience of human benevolence to amount to a perceptual knowledge of God to the extent that I regard myself as having a perceptual knowledge of the human act of benevolence in which God’s love was made manifest to me. Or, openness to the perceptible presence of God in the Eucharist depends on our openness to the perceptible presence of the elements themselves.

If God is to impinge on my thinking in my experiences of the world by reaching out to me in it, then the world must likewise impress itself on me with reasons for forming my beliefs about it and responding practically to it. There is thus an internal relationship between our prephilosophical assumption that the world lies open to us, making possible our perceptual knowledge of it, and our assumption that God’s presence and agency lies open to us as a feature

of the world, making possible our perceptual knowledge of God. All of this is another way of saying that Christians customarily engage in observational talk about God and that such talk seems to work much like our ordinary observations of the world around us—it evinces the same kind of naive realism that underlies our perceptual talk about everyday objects, properties, and events in the world.

If I want to know if it is raining outside, I simply “consult the world” by looking out the window or by holding the door open and sticking my hand out to see if I feel any droplets. If I want to know whether my chutney needs salt, I can taste it to find out. In this way, my perceptual experience of the world affords me the ability to change what I think and do to fit what the demands of my immediate environment, whether in forming the belief that it is raining or that my chutney is bland, or in being appropriately disposed to exercise my agency by, say, looking for my umbrella or fetching the salt. In the same way, when I wish to know how God is addressing me in this morning’s homily or how God is reaching out to me in my silent contemplation or whether the Lord is good to me, Christians have thought—and many still do think—that I can in the same way consult God’s presence and agency in the world: I can listen for God’s address, I can receive God’s touch, I can taste and see that the Lord is good. God’s presence or agency can then itself impress itself on me and rationally shape my dispositions to believe or to act in whatever way such realities might require of me.

2.3 Ordinary Perception and the Perception of God in Premodern Theology

So this thought—that when everything goes as it should and I am not misled, mistaken, or deceived, my experience both puts me immediately in touch with the world and renders my thinking

vulnerable to correction by the world—is basic for us.¹⁶ It enjoys a kind of “default” status. We did not invent it to solve any prior theoretical problems, and we do not come to believe it on the basis of any explicit arguments.¹⁷ Rather, it thematizes a basic intuition the relinquishing of which would require some forceful and compelling reasons.¹⁸ While there is no universal agreement about the constituents of reality to which we are or can be open in experience, the idea that we are perhaps not open to reality at all is a suspicion only a philosopher would dream of entertaining.¹⁹ Moreover, until fairly recently, most philosophers entertained no such suspicions. Ancient and medieval philosophers for the most part simply presumed as a given that we are perceptually open to the world, even while they offered different accounts of that fact.²⁰ Similarly,

16. Here I mean “basic” in something like Plantinga’s sense of “not being believed on the evidential basis of other propositions” and in that sense fundamental to our “noetic structure.” See *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83. But it also has something else in common with the sorts of beliefs (testimonial, memory, etc.) that Plantinga uses for his examples. Namely, it is largely implicit, tacit, or assumed and need not be consciously held at all, until perhaps it is challenged.
17. And for precisely that reason even the label “naive realism” seems inappropriate, insofar as it projects the notion of a metaphysical doctrine. But holding a metaphysical position is a bit too high-flown a way of characterizing our ordinary assumption.
18. As P. F. Strawson rightly notes, the notion of our openness to the world or “the immediate consciousness of the existence of things outside us” is the commonsense point of departure for any subsequent thinking about the philosophical problems of perception. See Strawson’s description of “common-sense realism” in “Perception and Its Objects,” in *Vision and Mind: Selected Readings in the Philosophy of Perception*, ed. Alva Noë and Evan Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 91–110, reprinted from *Perception and Identity: Essays Presented to A. J. Ayer*, ed. G. MacDonald (London: MacMillan, 1979), 41–60.
19. Of course we might—and often do—disagree about the constituents of reality upon which our experiences direct us. We may even disagree about the way in which those constituents make themselves available to perception (e.g., I think particles in a collider are “observable,” you think that, strictly speaking, they are not). But those are disputes about the way the world is and the way it bears on our thinking, not disputes about whether it does in fact bear on our thinking as described above.
20. There was, for the most part, a shared assumption about the object-dependency of thought, which implies, first, that the extramental world is intrinsically meaningful and, second, that in perception its meaning is impressed upon the perceiver. Debates were primarily ordered by the question of whether to think of that imposition in Aristotelian terms of the “form” or “intelligible species” belonging to the extramental object or in some other representationalist terms. See Julia E. Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California

most ancient and medieval Christian philosophers and theologians presumed that we are open to God's presence and agency in the world. Insofar as God was taken to be present in and to the world and dynamically active within it, it was taken for granted that we are open to God in and through the world no less than we are to the world itself. The disagreements that arose were about how to best account for that fact.

In other words, the controversial theological question was not whether we are open to God in the common-sense way described above, but how—what such an openness consists in when it has God as its object. What do Christians regard as the modes of God's presentation to us, and what sorts of rational and moral-practical demands does this make available for us to perceive and respond to? The challenges of specifying the Christian's perceptual relation to God therefore lay primarily in marking out the dogmatic constraints that configure God's availability to perception and championing the philosophical stories thought to best accommodate those constraints, not in resolving any pressing challenge confronting the idea that reality can directly inform and justify perceptual beliefs *per se*.²¹ The aim was instead to distinguish correct ways of analyzing our *de facto* openness to God from mistaken ones.²²

Press, 1994); Dominik Perler, ed., *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Simo Knuuttila and Pekka Kärkkäinen, eds., *Theories of Perception in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Springer, 2008); H. Lagerlund, ed., *Representation and Objects of Thought in Medieval Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

21. See, for example, Aquinas under the heading of "How God Is Known by Us" in *ST* 1a, q.12.

22. While there were always debates about the *mode* of God's perceptible self-presentation in Israel's theophanies and in the person of Jesus, no Christian theologian qua theologian disputed that God was indeed *somehow* perceptibly present—in some sense manifest or revealed. The question was just how so. As Paul Gavriyuk and Sarah Coakley put it in their introduction to *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), "Theories of divine self-communication tend to focus on the properties of divine action, rather than on the features of human knowers that make the reception of revelation and religious experience possible. Nevertheless, numerous thinkers throughout Christian history have attempted to probe the conditions of divine-human encounter further. In the process these

Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophical traditions contributed most substantially to working out a theological understanding of our openness to God from late antiquity to the early modern period.²³ Theologians appropriated and innovated on the basis of these philosophical traditions to elaborate the nature of perceptible reality entailed by a properly theological conception of God's relation to the world.²⁴ In the same way, the various philosophical anthropologies by which these philosophical schools accounted for our openness to the world also heavily informed premodern theological analyses of the structure of the human person by virtue of which we are capable of being sensitized to and directed upon divine or spiritual realities.²⁵ Finally, their various conceptions of the virtues contributed centrally to competing frameworks of moral knowledge and of the form of responsiveness to reality involved in the spiritual transformation of the self.²⁶ But again, while such philosophical disagreements no less than dogmatic ones led to (sometimes radically) different theological construals of the *mode* of the Christian's openness to God in the patristic and medieval periods, a fundamentally naive realist conception of openness itself was never problematized in any serious or pressing way in premodern

thinkers have come up with various approaches, some of which could be subsumed under the general idea of spiritual perception" (2).

23. See A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2007); and Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 23752.
24. For example, the nature of the created world's participation in God could receive different analyses depending on the philosophical commitments through which they are inflected.
25. As the contributors to the Gavrilyuk and Coakley volume *The Spiritual Senses* demonstrate, much of the debate about human capacities of spiritual sensation or perception has to do with the proper way to relate the intellectual apprehension of God to the five bodily senses, and the question of whether our perception of God involves any necessary distinction between faculties of "inner" and "outer" sense. See Gavrilyuk and Coakley, *Spiritual Senses*, 12–19.
26. See Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 237–52; Hadot and Michael Chase, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); and cf. Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

philosophy and theology.²⁷ Rather than being rooted in any philosophical disagreements about naive realism, the differences and disputes about how to properly construe the mode of our perceptual openness to God during this period were rooted in three difficult problem areas of theological description.

First, there are difficulties in describing God's side of the perceptual relation, in saying what we take ourselves to be aware of when we are aware of God. A central question is how to properly characterize God's immanence to us in the created order given our conception of God as transcendent. This is a question about what features of God can actually present themselves to us or phenomenally appear to creatures constituted like we are. An ontological gap between God and creatures was often thought to generate puzzles about what of God is actually manifest to us in the various ways that God reaches out to us in Christ by the Spirit, puzzles related to what God-talk is properly about.²⁸ Christians take it that God's ways of reaching out to us in Christ by the Spirit have been extended to us from beyond the created order.²⁹ While taking for granted that, when all goes well, the phenomenal content of God's manifestations to us does in fact refer us to God, we can wonder whether God's ways of being manifest to us could ever include the manifestation of divine transcendence to us. How can God, who alone exists uncreated and in absolute transcendence of everything created, ever appear to us under that

27. This is only to say that the competing theories of intentionality for the most part presumed that we are open to the world—there could have been some who challenged that view, but there was no widely shared or pressing reason to put the “default” view on the defensive.

28. That is, what are the features of God that can become manifest to human creatures? This question lies behind theological debates about the eschatological vision of God and its continuity or discontinuity of God's availability to perception now as compared with the eschaton. See Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983); A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

29. For a useful conceptual analysis of the uniqueness of Christianity as consisting in its particular unpacking of God's bearing on the world as that of the uncreated upon creation, see Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

particular mode of presentation, given that we belong essentially to the created order? If we can only be perceptually directed on God in ways that fail to disclose divine transcendence of creation, then in what sense do we take it that God's transcendence has been (or can be or will be) disclosed or revealed to us?

The question of what properties of divine presence and action we can and cannot possibly perceive of God and the further question of whether and how the phenomenal content that we *can* perceive succeeds in disclosing to us the fact of God's transcendence are heavily thematized problems among writers of the so-called Christian mystical tradition.³⁰ But this problem was never conceived as an inducement to give up the implicit assumption that God in God's immanence (however construed) is perceptibly present to Christians and that we in turn are open to God's immanence in the naive realist sense specified above. Rather, the problem was conceived to be whether, in addition to or by way of our presumed openness to God's immanence to the created order, we are also in any sense open to God's transcendence of it. So the problem was not so much whether we ought to regard God as in some sense transcending creation (God does) or in some sense immanent to it and therefore to us (God is), but whether and how we can properly affirm the perceptual availability of God's transcendence *in* immanence.³¹

30. There is a debate here about whether to construe the Christian mystical tradition as properly oriented toward the cultivation of any particular sort of perceptual experiences, and consequently whether it is properly seen in terms of the structure of any such experiences. In *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Denys Turner argues that "in so far as the word 'mysticism' has a contemporary meaning; and that in so far as that contemporary meaning links 'mysticism' to the cultivation of certain kinds of experience . . . then the mediaeval 'mystic' offers an *anti-mysticism*" (4). Bernard McGinn, on the other hand, claims in *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) that mysticism involves "the immediate consciousness of the presence of God" and the attempt to express its inner structure (xix). But this is not a debate about whether the tradition in question is constituted by the question of the availability of God's transcendence within immanence, it is only a debate about whether "mystics" have offered a negative reply (Turner) or an affirmative one (McGinn).

A second and related problem area addresses a difficulty of theological intentionality from a different angle, from our side of the perceptual relation rather than God's. This is to raise a question not about the content of our perception but its mode: what it would be like for whatever we take God to be to become perceptible by physical creatures configured as we are. In the first place, we ordinarily recognize that my seeing my computer screen and my "seeing" God are different because the former involves a distinctively sensory way of being directed on a material object,³² whereas we take it that God is not a material object and as such does not have intrinsically sensible qualities in anything like the same way if at all. What phenomenal character, then, belongs distinctively to the manifestation of God to us? Further, what sorts of perceptual capacities can we be thought to possess that are receptive to those modes of presentation? Clearly, this question cannot be answered independently of the first matter above—different conceptions of the God-world relation will place different demands on our theological anthropology.

For example, in the illustrations at the head of this chapter about observation reports we make about our perception of God, we often take ourselves to perceive God as present or active *in* material features of the world that we take to be perceptible in an ordinary sensory

31. That is, given the ontological "gap" between God and creatures—the *diastema*, as Gregory of Nyssa calls it in his controversy with Eunomius—how can any creaturely form of thinking take in those features of God in virtue of which God transcends creation? As Scot Douglass summarizes Gregory's version of the question in "A Critical Analysis of Gregory's Philosophy of Language" in *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Alberto Viciano (Leiden: Brill, 2000) "More simply put, on what 'ground' can a creature speak from within a *diastemic episteme* about a transcendent creator?" (449). This is arguably the same question that the Pseudo-Denys was attempting to answer in his corpus.

32. It is important to recognize, however, the wider sense of the "material" prior to the physical sciences. Most notably, "material" was taken to be entirely compatible with its being intrinsically formed or informative. The question was only whether to think of matter's form in holistic or aggregative terms. See Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind*, 202–11.