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## Introduction

A fundamental problem in Christian theology has been that of determining whether God is available to us in experience, and, if so, how to account for the nature of that availability and the role putative perceptions of God have in informing and justifying our theological claims. In addressing this matter, it has become widely assumed among Christian philosophers and theologians that this problem of Christian religious experience cannot be adequately addressed without also confronting more basic philosophical problems about the nature of perceptual experience per se. Broadly construed, perceptual experiences are just states or episodes in which some mind-independent reality (a) impresses itself on us, (b) enables our intentional directedness upon it in thought, word, or deed, and (c) is capable of determining whether or not the intentions grounded by such impressions are correct.<sup>1</sup>

1. This rough construal will be refined later. For now, note that here, as throughout, what distinguishes “perceiving” or “perceptually experiencing” from merely “experiencing” is the directedness of a perceptual experience upon reality. Insofar as reality-directedness is not constituent in an experience or in the way it seems to us, I exclude it from consideration.

So how do our ordinary perceptual experiences manage to make mind-independent realities available to our mental lives, such that our mental acts—what we think, say and intend to do—can somehow “reach out” to reality, can be “about” it? Conversely, how do realities outside the mind manage to “reach in” to impress themselves on us in our experiences, such that our experiences manage to be “of” them? In what way does the bearing of reality on us in experience determine whether what we think, say, or do is correct? What limits or constraints does the nature of reality itself impose upon the sorts of impressions reality can make on us? How is the nature or content of such impressions shaped by our own bodily or mental constitution? Are the impressions of perceptual experiences mental states, episodes, or acts of some sort, or are they fundamentally nonmentalistic in character?

All of these questions could just as well be asked about the putative perceptions of bumblebees and bellhops as they could about our perceptions of God. Moreover, whatever the purported object, each question above is usually regarded as philosophically controversial—it names a puzzle that we need to solve or a mystery demanding an explanation in order to determine just what sort of acquaintance with reality is capable of being brokered by perceptual experience. These various philosophical controversies cluster around a more fundamental puzzle: how are our perceptual capacities capable of

Moreover, as I use it, “perception” is a success-term, indicating the veridicality of a perceptual experience. When I wish to speak of experiences that seem to direct us on some reality without any presumption of whether or not they succeed in so directing us, I will usually affix some qualifier such as “putative.” I sometimes mark the distinction between perceptual experiences and putative perceptual experiences by a (confessedly contrived) distinction between “perceptions” and “experiences.” Because perceptual experiences are the focus of this study, and for stylistic reasons, I sometimes drop the adjective “perceptual” and speak simply of “experiences.” But context should make it sufficiently clear whether I mean to refer to a veridical perceptual experience, a putatively veridical one that *seems* veridical without judging whether it is or isn’t, or a falsidical putative perceptual experience in which such a seeming is illusory or hallucinatory.

enabling reality itself to inform and justify what we think, say, and do? This is what I call “the problem of perception,” and it will receive plenty of attention in what follows. At present the point is that—however we spell out the philosophical worry—we seemingly cannot address the theological problem of *God’s* availability to us in experience without also confronting the more general problem of perception. Accordingly, contemporary Christian philosophers and theologians have invariably appropriated various theories addressed to the problem of perception in the course of trying to say both (1) how *God’s* self-presentations to us might serve as a source of theological knowledge and a standard of correctness for what we say about *God* and (2) how theological talk grounded in such presentations manages to be directed on or “about” *God*. Both questions are interpreted and answered by deploying one’s preferred theory of perceptual experience. That preferred theory is then incorporated into one of two kinds of theological stories.

On one sort of story (the “cataphatic” sort), the structure of our perceptual relation to *God* is fundamentally the same as our perceptual relation to ordinary objects in the world. On another sort of story (the “apophatic” sort), we must say that because *God* is fundamentally different than any creaturely object of experience, the structure of our perceptual relation to *God* fundamentally consists in some disruption or overturing of the ordinary situation. But the crucial point is that on either sort of theological theory, the analysis of “experience” the theologian deploys (either for *God* to instantiate it or overthrow it) does not serve merely theological interests. It also aims at resolving the more general philosophical problem of perception, even if that aim is merely implicit. Therefore, most often a very heavily ramified conception of “perceptual experience” is brought to bear on the question of whether Christian beliefs and practices might be informed or justified empirically, whether

cataphatically or apophatically. Accordingly, contemporary philosophical theologians have tended to give various accounts of the Christian experience of God that differ from one another primarily in taking up opposing sides of controversies belonging to the philosophical problem of perception.

My purpose in this book is not primarily to wade into these controversies and take up my own position on the field, defending my own general theory of perception and then advocating for my own story about the sense in which God is and is not empirically available to us, cataphatically or apophatically. Instead, I aim to intervene on this entire way of proceeding. More specifically, I contest the idea that our theological interest in an empirical basis for Christian belief and practice must confront a general philosophical problem of perception in the first place. I claim not only that an entanglement of the theological problem with the philosophical one is avoidable but that the failure to avoid it proves disastrous for a Christian theology of religious experience. My aim, then, is to disentangle our theological interest in our perceptual relation to God from the philosophical interests motivating the problem of perception.

Prima facie, that claim seems utterly counterintuitive. If there are conceptual difficulties that attend the concept of perceptual experience itself, then any question about what it is to perceive God must confront those difficulties. But while I grant the truth of the conditional, I deny the antecedent. Contrary to the way things appear to Christian philosophers and theologians working in the epistemology of religious experience, the alleged conceptual difficulties about the nature of empirical content thought to lay behind the questions listed above are illusory. Such questions do not warrant the competing explanatory theories about the empirical grounds of our beliefs and practices to which they have given rise. No

doubt there have been philosophical *anxieties* about how experience can supply us with a kind of representational conduit or content that could serve to inform and rationally guide our thinking, and these anxieties have issued in a lot of spilled ink attempting to cast them as philosophical problems along with proposed solutions.

But despite an illusory surface clarity, in the final analysis none of these attempts has proven successful at presenting us with an intelligible difficulty that stands in need of a philosophical resolution. And without any coherent statement of a so-called problem of perception, there is nothing about the conjunction of (a), (b), and (c) above that requires a philosophical explanation. No account we might offer gives us any more fundamental insight than can be had by articulating our ordinary intuitions about the nature of experience.<sup>2</sup> Further, insofar as extant formulations of the “problem” of perception turn out to be *pseudoproblems*, the various sorts of philosophical theorizing aimed at answering such problems simply inherit the form of incoherence internal to the formulation of the question. This is precisely what creates trouble for contemporary theories about the nature and modes of God’s self-revelation. The most influential philosophical theologians working on those theories have been motivated by the problem of perception, and, as such, their theological accounts are inflected by underlying theories of empirical content addressed to that problem. As a result, theology too inherits the incoherence that infects that pseudophilosophical project.

The basic idea, then, is that we cannot formulate an intelligible Christian theology of religious experience unless we sever it from the problem of perception to which it has been wedded. But many

2. That is not to say, however, that the ordinary conception is not susceptible to any clarifying philosophical analysis, but while such an analysis might further elucidate our ordinary presumption that experience can make our mental lives rationally accountable to reality itself, it does not purport to furnish us with any further information about *why*, or *how*, or *how it is possible* that this is so.

question the value of maintaining a theological interest in “religious experience” in the first place. To those of a generally “postmodern” cast of mind, it is not merely the philosophical *problematizing* of our mental receptivity and accountability to the impressions of a mind-independent reality that is ill-conceived, but the very notion of any rational receptivity and accountability to a mind-independent reality. From this perspective, that “reality” is a domain independent of what we happen to make of it, is somehow conveyed to us in experience, and imposes its own rational demands on our thinking about it can only be seen as an objectionable “modernist” hangover.

Rather than radically rejecting the problem of perception as a pseudo-problem, this sensibility simply accepts the terms it sets forward—the requirement of a satisfactory philosophical explanation for how experience mediates between mind and world—and then concedes that the requirement cannot be met. For some, that concession gives way to a somber charge to keep a stiff upper lip and soldier on without the idea of “experience” embodied by the conjunction of (a), (b), and (c) above. For others, the concession signals the removal of an oppressive burden—freedom from the idea of experience as the imposition of a rational constraint on our intentions by the way things are external to our socially ratified conventions.

So whereas one theological attitude toward the problem of perception is to attempt to resolve it via a philosophical explanation of empirical content and then to deploy that preferred theory in one’s theological account, another is to regard the problem as genuine but intractable, and therefore to give up the very idea of “experience” as an epistemological ground of rational accountability to reality. But if the problem of perception is a pseudoproblem, then refusing to engage it by way of a radical concession is no less problematic than engaging it with the hopes of a resolution. In both cases, one’s picture

of God's self-disclosure in experience is ultimately determined by an incoherent notion of "experience."

If we are to have any hope of making sense of the idea of experiences that directly acquaint us with God's presence and agency in the world, then we must first disentangle that idea from the pseudophilosophical problem of perception with which it has been unfortunately alloyed. Still, while effecting that disentanglement might be a *necessary* step in showing that Christian beliefs and practices that purport to direct us on God can be grounded in experience, freeing theology from the problem of perception would not be *sufficient*. Being unable to problematize the notion of "perceptual experience" summarized above does not show that it is unproblematic. Clearly, there is a difference between being unable to show that position X is problematic and showing that X is unproblematic. But even if we were to grant that the notion of "experience" with which we began is *prima facie* unproblematic, whether a *theological* empiricism is coherent remains an open question.

On the conception of "perceptual experience" with which we began, a minimal theological empiricism would hold that it is in virtue of God's impressing Godself upon us in experience that at least some of what Christians think, say, and do succeeds in directing us upon God, and those impressions serve to determine the correctness or incorrectness of what Christians think, say, and do.<sup>3</sup> But suppose that the notion of "experience" involved in this claim in fact courts no genuine philosophical controversy in what we take it to affirm. Still, there might be something about a Christian concept of "God"

3. Note that, as I am characterizing it, such a theological empiricism is minimal in that it only requires that *some* Christian belief and practice is fundamentally informed and justified on the basis of experience. It is also possible to hold a maximal theological empiricism according to which *all* Christian belief and practice must be fundamentally informed and justified on the basis of experience, but I do not wish to commit myself to maximalism in what follows.

or a Christian conception of human cognitive capacities that makes it incoherent to suppose that God could be an object of perception. This would be an obstacle to theological empiricism distinct from the one raised by the problem of perception. Whereas the problem of perception imposes an explanatory burden on the notion of “experience” required by a theological empiricism, the sort of obstacle just mentioned is free from any such burden. Instead, the explanatory burden would rest on the question of whether Christian theological commitments can comport with that unproblematic and uncontroversially held empiricism.

We can therefore characterize the explanatory burden for the advocate of a minimal theological empiricism in one of two ways. On one reading, any problems we might encounter working out the theological bit of a theological empiricism logically depends on prior and more fundamental worries concerning the empiricism bit. On the other reading, the empiricism bit is unproblematic, and the explanatory burden of theological empiricism lies primarily in working out the theological bit. All of the most significant literature problematizing God’s availability to us in experience since the scientific revolution has been predicated on the first reading. In this book, I argue that that widely presumed reading is not merely false but also incoherent, and I explore the prospects for a Christian theology of religious experience instead predicated on the second reading.

My argument is divided into three parts. Part I identifies the problem of perception in Christian theology and exposes its incoherence. Accordingly, in chapter 2 I show how the problem of perception has historically and conceptually come to shape our understanding of the problem of religious experience in Christian theology. In chapter 3, with my reading of the *status quaestionis* in hand, I introduce a “therapeutic” approach to freeing theology from



the problem of perception. To do away with an alleged philosophical difficulty therapeutically is, first, to deconstruct that problem, exposing it as an incoherent pseudoproblem, and, second, to offer an “exculpatory explanation”—an explanation for why this particular bit of disguised nonsense should have appeared so compelling to us.

The purpose of chapter 3 is to unmask the problem of perception as ill-conceived and to expose the incoherence of the theories aimed at resolving it. Here I look to John McDowell’s recent deconstruction of the problem, and I elaborate his strategy for doing away with it. McDowell argues that the problem of perception is ill-conceived insofar as its various formulations require a solution of one of two sorts, which he calls “Givenist” and “Coherentist.” Givenism names the world’s giving or impressing of a mental content on the norms of our thinking that is itself independent of those norms, while Coherentism claims no need to acknowledge standards of correctness inhering in the world itself and presented to us as mental content independent of our established norms. Instead, the rational answerability of our thinking to the world in experience can be accounted for in terms of our irreducibly norm-governed dispositions to respond both to it and to one another.

But neither Givenism nor Coherentism can possibly succeed in characterizing “experience” as making us rationally answerable to the world, McDowell argues, because Givenism necessarily requires that our answerability fails to be a properly *rational* one, while Coherentism necessarily requires that our rational responses fail to be properly *answerable* to the world rather than merely to our own responsive dispositions. Since each view has what the other lacks in order to minimally make sense of “experience” as a kind of rational answerability to the world, they have been locked in a vicious and “interminable oscillation.” To hold together both Givenism’s conception of answerability and Coherentism’s conception of the

irreducibly rational constitution of that answerability in the most minimally consistent way, however, does not yield a new philosophical theory of “experience” so much as simply return us to our naively held view that in experience our thinking is capable of directly taking in or being presented with the way the world is anyway, the way it would be even if no humans were equipped to recognize it as such.

Having singled out the problem and entitled ourselves to ignore it as failing to surface any genuine philosophical worry, the task in part 2 is to show that contemporary approaches to the problem of God’s perceptual availability to us in experience are in fact essentially wedded to the pseudoproblem and, as such, are inheritors of its incoherence. In chapters 4 and 5, I therefore deploy the McDowellian strategy to critique some recent and influential accounts of our perceptual relation to God, both cataphatic and apophatic. I argue that Jean-Luc Marion ought to be regarded as offering us a theological Givenism of an apophatic sort, while William P. Alston relies on a theological Givenism of a cataphatic sort. Victor Preller and Kevin Hector, on the other hand, present us with theological Coherentisms of an apophatic and cataphatic sort, respectively.

Whereas the moves made in the first and second parts of the book are primarily critical and ground clearing, I turn in the third part toward constructively staking out the prospects for a minimal theological empiricism. My first step is to clarify the philosophically unproblematic notion of “experience” on which such a theological empiricism depends. In chapter 6, I therefore elaborate and extend McDowell’s retrieval of our ordinary naive realist conception of perceptual experience in terms of what he characterizes as a “naturalized platonism.” A naturalized platonism, McDowell claims, does not constitute a philosophical theory of perception but the fundamental conceptual grammar according to which the very

notion of “experience” is intelligible—that which we must minimally affirm in order to avoid the vicious oscillation between Givenism and Coherentism.

This idea—that a naive or common-sense understanding of “experience” is not only philosophically unobjectionable but unavoidable on pain of falling into incoherence—is precisely what calls out for an exculpatory explanation. It raises the question of how we were ever tempted away from the naive conception and toward our compulsion to worry about the problem of perception. In chapter 7, I therefore offer a broad sociological explanation of our bewitchment by the problem of perception as the product of a very wide cultural phenomenon involving not only philosophers and theologians, but diverse registers of society in modern Western, secular social orders. McDowell, for his part, gestures toward a Weberian genealogy of the problem of perception as a particularly modern prejudice that arises from a disenchanting conception of nature emerging in and around the birth of the modern sciences. That genealogy however, is inadequate to account for the nature and scope of the problem of perception as a *religious* problem. I therefore look to Charles Taylor to show how his narrative of disenchantment offered in *A Secular Age* can correct and buttress McDowell’s genealogy. Integrating McDowell’s story with Taylor’s has a mutually chastening effect that helps us distinguish between a genuine freedom from the characteristically modern problem of perception in our theological reflection and the nostalgic fantasy of returning to the “innocence” of a premodern conception of nature.

Finally, we must show how freeing theology from the problem of perception, which was the task of the foregoing chapters, actually reorients us toward the central question that the problem of perception has served to obfuscate: the theological question of how to properly characterize our perceptual relation to God. Chapter 8 offers

a critical retrieval of Gregory of Nyssa's theology of the "spiritual senses" as a performative display of how we might theologically account for our perceptual relation to God free from the problem of perception. In Gregory I find a viable contemporary theological empiricism—an account that characterizes both tasks of theological contemplation and spiritual formation in terms of a receptivity and responsiveness to the perceptible presence and agency of God in the world. The constructive account I appropriate from Nyssen requires further elaboration, but my aim in articulating it is not so much to demonstrate its correctness as to show how it manages to surmount a minimal obstacle that the most influential accounts do not manage to clear—that of consistency with a minimal empiricism.