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The Perception of God

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Many persons have supposed themselves to be experientially aware of God. For example.

> I. . . . all at once I . . . felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether . . . I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in humility and poverty, leaving him, The Almighty God, to judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted . . . I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization . . . At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.[1]

When one is confronted by such an account, one naturally is primarily interested in determining whether the subject was really aware of God as he supposed, rather than just having subjective feelings that he interpreted as due in some way to God; or, more generally, one will be interested in determining whether persons who suppose themselves to be experientially

aware of God are sometimes correct in such suppositions. However, I will not be engaged in that task in this paper. If I were to do so, it would either be from an "internal" or "external" standpoint. From an "internal" standpoint, I would be taking it that people do sometimes genuinely experience the presence of God. In that case I would simply be seeking to determine whether this case, or some other particular case(s), belongs to the veridical rather than the illusory class. I would be doing something quite analogous to what we do when we seek to determine whether a particular putative sense perception is veridical or illusory; we make use of what we take ourselves to have learned from sense perception (assuming that mode of perception to be, in general, veridical), including what we have learned about the conditions under which a particular perception is veridical. If I occupied an "external" standpoint, I would be, at the outset, completely neutral as to whether the experience of God is a real phenomenon. Here I would be seeking to determine whether anyone ever genuinely experiences the presence of God. And, of course, this would have to be on the basis of "external" considerations drawn from sources other than the experience of God.

I will not pursue this question from an internal standpoint, partly because I want to address an audience containing many who do not occupy this standpoint, and partly because I wish to address more general questions than whether this or that alleged experience is genuine. I myself have no objection to such investigations; quite the contrary. But this is not the place for them. I will not pursue the question from an external standpoint, since I think that to be futile and hence misguided. I doubt that any fundamental kind of experiential cognition of reality, or, indeed, any basic epistemic access to reality, can be shown to be genuine from the outside. Consider the all too familiar enterprise of showing that we really do perceive independently existing physical objects, as we ordinarily suppose, showing this without relying on anything we think we have learned about the physical world through perception. I think it would be generally conceded nowadays that such attempts have failed miserably, and that any solid reasons we have for thinking that we really do perceive physical objects makes use of what we have learned from perception about physical objects and hence presupposes that we really do perceive them. And so it is here, I believe.

An external demonstration that some people really do experience the presence of God would involve showing that God exists, as well as that people are sometimes in the right sort of experientially cognitive relation

to Him. I can make use of this division of the enterprise to explain what I will seek to do in this paper. I will not be at all concerned with the first part, the question of whether God exists. Rather, I shall simply assume the existence of God and focus on the second part of the problem. But even here, as just noted, I shall not attempt to show that people do in fact sometimes genuinely experience the presence of God. Rather I shall confine myself to arguing that a genuine experiential cognition of God is a real possibility for human beings, if God exists. I shall be seeking to exhibit the idea of such cognition as intelligible, coherent, a live possibility so far as we can see.

Before proceeding, a few preliminary points are in order. First, I am restricting myself in this paper to putative experience of God as construed in theistic religions—a supreme or ultimate personal agent that acts in the light of knowledge, purposes, and intentions. The wider category of putative experience of Ultimate Reality is, of course, well worthy of investigation, but I shall not attempt that here. Second, I want to stress that, as the above discussion indicates, I am concerned with experiences that seem to be cognitions of a reality distinct from the subject, a reality that has a career independent of the subject's life. This may seem to exclude the more extreme forms of mysticism, in which the subject takes herself to lose her identity and to merge into the Supreme Reality; but it does not, at least when that mysticism is firmly rooted in a theistic context. For the theistic mystic will, when not in the heat of ecstasy, recognize that that into which she took herself to have been, for the nonce, absorbed, infinitely transcends her own puny self.

Finally, I need to be more explicit about the range of cases that will be taken as live candidates for being "experiential awareness of God" and about the criteria for assigning cases to this category. I mean to be ranging over all cases in which a person takes herself to be intuitively, experientially aware of God, as contrasted with merely thinking about him, forming beliefs about Him, entertaining propositions about Him, drawing inferences concerning Him, and the like. I am interested in all those cases in which the person takes God to be "presenting" Himself to her experience.[2] Within this category I want to range as widely as possible. I want to include experiences as unusual and striking as classic "mystical" experiences, as well as the more humdrum awarenesses of the presence of God that some devout souls enjoy during most of their waking hours. As our initial example illustrated, I want to include experiences of God as doing something vis-a-vis the person, including those in which one is aware of God

"speaking" or otherwise communicating a message to one, as well as those in which one just experiences God as being "present" and displaying certain features. I want initially to range over cases in which the awareness of God is mediated by sensory content, whether via the veridical perception of something in the physical environment or via physically hallucinatory sensory experience; as well as cases, like our initial example, that are devoid of sensory content.

Experiences of God vary in their degree of vividness and focality in consciousness. I certainly want to recognize the pervasiveness and importance of background, relatively dim and subtle awareness of the presence of God. That is the mode enjoyed by many believers much of the time. I believe that such experiences play an important role, both epistemic and otherwise, in the lives of many. Nevertheless, in studying a phenomenon we need to focus on the most distinct and prominent examples if we are to gain an adequate impression of its main lineaments. Therefore we will be appealing to reports of the more intense, vivid and focally conscious cases. I am convinced that we can take the basic features of these cases as a key to the dim, background experiences as well. For I am convinced that the two groups are separated by no fundamental differences of kind.

There is also the difference between experiences that come spontaneously and unbidden, and those that occur in the context of a systematic cultivation of a way of life that is aimed, *inter alia*, at the direct awareness of God. Here I am not forced to pick and choose, since sufficiently vivid and prominent experiences can be found in both contexts, and I shall be drawing on both the professional and the lay sectors.

Let me say a word about the relation of my category of the experiential awareness of God to "religious experience". In the widest sense 'religious experience' ranges over any experiences one has in connection with one's religious life, including any joys, fears, or longings one has in a religious context. My category is much narrower; it embraces only those experiences in which it seems that God "appears" or "presents Himself" to one as so-and-so. To emphasize this, let me emphasize the general distinction between x's appearing to one (being in the phenomenal field) and x's being involved in the explanation of some experience one is having. The movements of straw in a pile on the barn floor is, let's say, best explained by supposing that a rat is moving around underneath it, but I do not actually see a rat; nothing in my visual field is identifiable as a rat. Then the rat emerges from beneath the straw, thereby coming into my field of vision. In both cases I had, as we might say, sensory or perceptual evidence for

the rat; in both cases I perceptually detected the rat's presence. But only in the second case was the rat actually perceived. Similarly I might take God to be involved in the best explanation of certain experiences or perceived phenomena, e.g., the changed behavior of a person after a conversion; but that in and of itself does not constitute my perceiving God. On the other hand, if I am aware of God as, e.g., pouring out His love into me and thereby strengthening loving attitudes, that is a different kettle of fish. Now God is identifiable as something of which one is directly aware. In this paper we are restricting ourselves to cases of the latter sort, (i.e., to cases taken by the subject to be of the latter sort).

To effectively engage the question of the real possibility of an experiential cognition of God, I will have to develop the conception of such a cognition more explicitly than is generally done in the literature. I shall do this by taking sense perception of the physical and social environment as my model, a model that has been subjected to an enormous amount of study, philosophical, psychological, and otherwise. I will propose a conception of the "direct" perception of an object that I take to be exemplified by our ordinary perception, at least visual and tactile, of physical objects, including other human beings. I shall then extend this to the putative experience of God, suggesting that this exhibits the same generic structure as the former. In anticipation of those results I shall feel free to use the terms 'perception' and 'direct perception' in referring to cases like the one with which we began.

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To get started on this enterprise I must both explain the concept of perception I am using and explore the distinction between direct and indirect perception.

'Perceive', and more specific perceptual verbs like 'see', are used in a variety of ways, some of them rather far removed from sense perception. We speak of "seeing the point of an argument", of "perceiving that some trouble was about to break out", and of "feeling that the motion has little chance of passage". When I claim that the experience of God can be construed as a form of perception I mean to be sticking closer than this to the sense perceptual model. But, of course, I do not deny that there are many significant differences between sense perception and the experience of God. Just to take the most obvious and the most important, sense perception is insistently and unavoidably present in all our waking hours,

while the experiential awareness of God is a rare phenomenon except for a very few souls. Sense perception, especially vision, is vivid and richly detailed, bursting with information; whereas the experience of God is usually but dim, meager, and obscure. Sense perception is shared by all human beings, whereas the experience of God, though more widely dispersed than is often supposed,[3] is still by no means universal. Many putative experiences of God lack sensory content, and, as I will make explicit shortly, it is those on which we will be concentrating. Nevertheless, despite these differences I want to claim a basic identity of structure. Just exactly what I take this to amount to depends, of course, on my view of the nature of sense perception, a matter to which I now turn.

The philosophy of sense perception is at least as controversial as any other branch of philosophy, and psychologists are also deeply divided on how to think about the phenomenon. Obviously I can't properly go into all that in this paper. I shall have to content myself with the following remarks. What is distinctive about the perception of something in the physical environment, as a mode of cognition, is that it involves a "presentation" or a "givenness" of the object to experience, to consciousness. The object *appears* (looks, feels, . . .) as bearing certain phenomenal qualities (configurations of colored shapes, soundings of varying pitches and intensities, rough or smooth, hot and cold, and so on). This is what gets added when one has first been thinking about the room or remembering it, and then, being in the room, opens one's eyes and actually sees it. The room, or parts thereof, are presented to one's awareness as bearing certain visual qualities. This is what, most basically, distinguishes perceiving an object from thinking about it, remembering it, or reasoning about it.

I mean this statement to be theoretically neutral, to be something that any account of the nature of perception has to take account of. A number of theories seem to deny it and some perhaps actually do. Thus the sense-datum theory holds that what is directly presented to consciousness in sense perception is a "sense-datum" rather than anything in the external environment. The adverbial theory, it may be thought, denies that anything at all is directly presented to consciousness in sense-perception. The "doxastic" theory maintains that sense perception is basically a certain kind of process of belief formation (or formation of tendencies to belief). Nevertheless, proponents of all these views, when not in the grip of *parti pris*, feel the need to come to terms with the phenomenological character of "presentation" to which I have been calling attention, and show that the view allows for, and explains, that striking and distinctive phenomeno-

logical character of perception.[4] If any thinker should be so blind as to suppose that one can treat the conscious act of seeing a tree as purely "self-enclosed", characterizable without mentioning the tree, a mode of consciousness that then counts as seeing the tree purely by virtue of some causal or doxastic relation of that self-enclosed experience to the tree, without being under any necessity to explain how it is that it seems so obvious to the perceiver that the tree is directly presented to one's visual awareness, I shall exclude him from further consideration. The account of sense perception I myself favor, the Theory of Appearing, takes this relation of "appearing" or "presentation" to be ultimate and irreducible; so that a perfectly adequate answer to the question "What is it for S to see a tree?" is "It is for that tree to be presented to S's awareness as bearing visual qualities". However, I do not want to insist on that for the purposes of this paper. I only want to insist that we must fundamentally distinguish sense perception from other modes of cognition by the phenomenological fact that it at least seems to involve a direct presentation of the perceived object to the awareness of the perceiver as bearing sensory qualities. Different theories will give different accounts of what underlies this phenomenological fact. The Theory of Appearing is distinctive in that it takes that phenomenological character to be an adequate guide to the underlying ontology. Sense-datum, adverbial, and doxastic theories suppose that the phenomenology masks more or less complicated underlying structure, the character of which does not appear on the surface of experience. But, however, all that comes out, it will remain that perceiving X will at least be a matter of X's being, phenomenologically, presented to the subject, S, as bearing certain phenomenal qualities. In order to avoid intolerable circumlocution, I shall often, in the sequel, speak without qualification of the perceived object being (directly) presented to the subject, where this is to be understood as an account of the phenomenology of the experience.

Now for the sense in which perception is direct (immediate). The basic idea is that the perceived object X is presented to awareness "on its own", so to speak, without this being effected through the presentation of some other object. It is clear that if anything is presented to awareness in a given experience, something must be presented directly, on pain of infinite regress. My suggestion is that most of the things we take ourselves to sensorily perceive are perceived directly in this sense. (Remember that we are talking phenomenology in all this.) When I see a tree it does not seem to me that I am aware of the tree through being aware of some other object. But to properly set this out I will need to distinguish at least three grades

of immediacy of the experiential cognition of objects.

1. Let's begin in the middle with what I shall call "mediated immediacy". This is what I take to be exemplified by ordinary normal vision of objects directly before one's eyes. Here the awareness of the tree is mediated by a state of visual consciousness of which one is aware in a different way, but of which one is not ordinarily focally aware, and which is distinct from the external physical object that one perceives. One might be said to perceive the external object through one's visual consciousness, though one is not, as we might say, aware of the latter as an object.[5]

2. On the one side of mediated immediacy we have "absolute immediacy", exemplified by one's awareness of one's own conscious states—sensations, feelings, thoughts, and the like. Here one can't find even a state of consciousness, distinct from the object, through having which one is aware of the object. The feeling of which one is aware is, so to say, self-luminous—appears to one by virtue of its own status as a state of consciousness. Sense perception of external objects is never that immediate.

3. On the other side is mediate perception. Here one is aware of x by virtue of being aware of another object (not a consciousness of the former). This is most clearly exemplified by seeing a table in a mirror or on television. One is aware of the table by being aware of the mirror (television screen) but not vice versa. Note that mediate perception of x is distinguished from the situation in which one *infers* the existence or presence of x from something one perceives but doesn't perceive x itself at all, as when I infer the presence of a jet plane from a vapor trail without the plane itself appearing in my visual field. In mediate sense perception of x, x itself is sensorily presented to one's awareness, but only through something else's being so presented.

Within the sphere of experience of God, claims to absolute immediacy might be illustrated by those forms of mystical experience in which, so it is claimed, there is no distinction of object and subject, the subject being so merged into the object as to form an absolute unity; here there is no room for anything distinct from the object through which it is experienced.[6] Mediate perception (or claims thereto) is exemplified by the alleged awareness of God in the starry heavens or a beautiful mountain scene or the moral law within or the words of the Bible or the actions of a loving friend. Finally, mediated immediacy is what I take to be usually (and perhaps always) exemplified by those cases in which one is prepared to say that one is *directly* aware of the presence and/or the activity of God.

For in such cases one is obviously undergoing a distinctive state of consciousness through which, or by virtue of which, one takes oneself to be aware of God.

In this paper I shall be concentrating on experiences that, so I shall claim, are best regarded as (phenomenologically) exhibiting mediated immediacy. I have already, in the previous footnote, aired my doubts that absolute immediacy is a real possibility here; and even if it is sometimes exemplified this is only in very rare cases. Moreover, the paradoxicality and relative lack of intelligibility of extreme unitive mysticism raise special problems over and above the issues on which I shall be concentrating. As for mediate perception, it presents a more complex structure than that in which there is only one object; and we would be well advised to study the simpler form before tackling the more complex. Moreover, direct awareness of God would presumably, if available, give us more information about the divine nature and doings than an experience in which one is aware of God only as "reflected" through one or more other objects; and the direct awareness would likewise make possible a more intimate communion with God. In fact, I think it is fair to say that those who have stressed mediate perception of God have done so because they have felt that a more direct awareness is unavailable to us and, hence, that this is the best we can do.

Note that in leaving mediate perception of God to one side, we are steering clear of experiences with sensory content. For where the experience involves visions or voices (in the literal sense of items of the sort perceivable by sight or hearing), whether veridical or hallucinatory, there is a sensorily perceivable object of awareness, which cannot be identified with God Himself.[7] Hence if one is aware of God in such an experience it is via one's sensory awareness of the Virgin Mary, the sunset, or whatever.

If, as I suppose, all or most experiences that seem to the subject to be a direct awareness of God belong to the category of mediate immediacy, that puts us in a good position for our project of exhibiting a basic commonality between such experiences and the sense perception of external objects; since we have already pointed out that such perception, when direct, itself belongs to that category.

To return to that project, what we have seen thus far is that if the direct experience of God is to be regarded as exhibiting the same basic structure as direct sense perception of external objects, then it will have to involve (phenomenologically) God's being directly presented to the subject's ex-

perience as bearing certain phenomenal qualities. But of course this is not enough to make the experience a case of perception in the same generic sense as my seeing a tree. Clearly I could be having an experience that is, phenomenologically, a visual presentation of a tree and still not be seeing any tree; the experience might be a complete hallucination. For one thing the putative phenomenological object must actually exist; but we have already stipulated that this whole discussion is conducted on the assumption that God exists. For another thing, there are widely accepted causal requirements on object perception; the object must make a causal contribution to the occurrence of the experience involved. And it is not sufficient that it make some causal contribution or other; many items involved in the causation of a visual experience, e.g., goings on in the nervous system, are not seen in that experience. It must make a contribution that is of the right sort to render it the object of that seeing. Finally, it is held by some that in order that I see a tree, a belief about that tree, or a tendency to such belief, must be involved. I do not accept any such requirement, but since we will be focusing on cases in which the experience of God does lead to beliefs about God, it will do no harm to consider whether this requirement can be satisfied there.

Thus our inquiry will be divided into two main parts. First, I shall consider whether putative direct experiences of God are best regarded (phenomenologically) as involving God's directly presenting Himself to experience as phenomenally qualified in certain ways. Second, I shall consider whether it is possible that the causal and doxastic requirements for direct perception of God should be satisfied in at least some of these cases.[8] Note the following difference between the two main parts of this enterprise. For the causal and doxastic requirements, I shall merely aspire to show that it is *possible* that they should be satisfied in at least some of the cases in which people suppose themselves to be directly aware of God. But I can go further with respect to the phenomenology of the situation and argue that all or most such cases are best construed, phenomenologically, as a matter of God's seeming to present Himself directly to the subject. Since all the requirements must be satisfied for genuine perception, the whole thing adds up only to an argument that the perception of God is a real *possibility*.

As a basis for the ensuing discussion I had better add to the initial example a small selection of reports of putative direct experience of God.[9]

II. In the beginning it happened to me that I was ignorant of one thing—I did not know that God was in all things; and when He seemed to me to

be so near, I thought it impossible. Not to believe that He was present was not in my power; for it seemed to me, as it were, evident that I felt there His very presence. Some unlearned men used to say to me, that He was present only by his grace. I could not believe that, because, as I am saying, He seemed to me to be present Himself . . . (St. Theresa, U, 242-3)

III. I was in prayer one day . . . when I saw Christ close by me, or, to speak more correctly, felt Him; for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body, nothing with the eyes of the soul. He seemed to me to be close beside me; and I saw, too, as I believe, that it was He who was speaking to me. As I was utterly ignorant that such a vision was possible, I was extremely afraid at first, and did nothing but weep; however, when He spoke to me but one word to reassure me, I recovered myself, and was, as usual, calm and comforted, without any fear whatever. Jesus Christ seemed to be by my side continually. As the vision was not imaginary, I saw no form, but I had a most distinct feeling that He was always on my right hand, a witness of all I did; and never at any time, if I was but slightly recollected, or not too much distracted, could I be ignorant of His near presence . . . For if I say that I see Him neither with the eyes of the body nor those of the soul—because it was not an imaginary vision—how is it that I can understand and maintain that He stands beside me, and be more certain of it than if I saw Him? . . . He renders Himself present to the soul by a certain knowledge of Himself which is more clear than the sun. I do not mean that we now see either a sun or any other brightness, only that there is a light not seen, which illumines the understanding, so that the soul may have the fruition of so great a good. (St. Theresa, U, 284-5)

IV. At times God comes into the soul without being called; and He instills into her fire, love, and sometimes sweetness; and the soul believes this comes from God, and delights therein. But she does not yet know, or see, that He dwells in her; she perceives His grace, in which she delights. And again God comes to the soul, and speaks to her words full of sweetness, in which she has much joy, and she feels Him. This feeling of God gives her the greatest delight; but even here a certain doubt remains; for the soul has not the certitude that God is in her . . . And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her, 'Behold Me!' and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another. For the eyes of the soul behold a plentitude of which I cannot speak: a plentitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can

say nothing. And the soul rejoices in that sight with an ineffable joy; and this is the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her. (Angela of Foligno, U, 282)

V. I beheld a fullness and a clearness, and felt them within me so abundantly that I cannot describe it, or give any likeness thereof. I cannot say I saw anything corporeal. It was as though it were in heaven: a beauty so great that I can say nought concerning it, save that it was supreme Beauty and sovereign Good. (Angela of Foligno, U, 342)

VI. That which the Servitor saw had no form neither any manner of being; yet he had of it a joy such as he might have known in the seeing of the shapes and substances of all joyful things. His heart was hungry, yet satisfied, his soul was full of contentment and joy: his prayers and hopes were all fulfilled. And the Friar could do naught but contemplate this Shining Brightness; and he altogether forgot himself and all other things. Was it day or night? He knew not. It was, as it were, a manifestation of the sweetness of Eternal Life in the sensations of silence and of rest. Then he said, 'If that which I see and feel be not the Kingdom of Heaven, I know not what it can be: for it is very sure that the endurance of all possible pains were but a poor price to pay for the eternal possession of so great a joy. (Henry Suso, U, 187)

VII. But as I turned and was about to take a seat by the fire, I received a mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost. Without any expectation of it, without ever having the thought in my mind that there was any such thing for me, without any recollection that I had ever heard the thing mentioned by any person in the world, the Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love; for I could not express it in any other way. (J, 250)

VIII. Between twenty and thirty I gradually became more and more agnostic and irreligious, yet I cannot say that I ever lost that 'indefinite consciousness' which Herbert Spencer describes so well, of an Absolute Reality behind phenomena. For me this Reality was not the pure Unknowable of Spencer's philosophy, for although I had ceased my childish prayers to God, and never prayed to It in a formal manner, yet my more recent experience shows me to have been in a relation to It which practically was the same thing as prayer. Whenever I had any trouble, especially when I had conflict with other people, either domestically or in the way of business, or when I was depressed in spirits or anxious about affairs,

I now recognize that I used to fall back for support upon this curious relation I felt myself to be in to this fundamental cosmical It. It was on my side, or I was on Its side, however you please to term it, in the particular trouble, and it always strengthened me and seemed to give me endless vitality to feel its underlying and supporting presence. In fact, it was an unfailing fountain of living justice, truth, and strength, to which I instinctively turned at times of weakness, and it always brought me out. I know now that it was a personal relation I was in to it, because of late years the power of communicating with it has left me, and I am conscious of a perfectly definite loss . . . What I have spoken of as 'It' was practically not Spencer's Unknowable, but just my own instinctive and individual God, whom I relied upon for higher sympathy, but whom somehow I have lost. (J, 64-5)

iii

At last we are ready to tackle the first part of the enterprise. Does putative experience of God exhibit the basic phenomenological structure of the sense perception of objects? One thing is clear from the above reports, and from many more that could have been supplied. The reporters take themselves to have been in an experiential cognitive relation to God that satisfies the above condition.[10] Thus our initial chap (call him 'Bonnet') supposes God to have presented Himself to his experience as *goodness* and *power*, and as *communicating* certain messages. Angela of Foligno takes God to have presented Himself to her as a "*fullness* or *plentitude*" and as "*supreme Beauty* and *sovereign Good*", Suso, as "*Shining Brightness*", and the second anonymous reporter from James (call him Swenson) took the Holy Spirit to present itself to him as "*waves and waves of liquid love*". The last anonymous reporter from James was aware of God as a being that *strengthened* and *supported* him. All these people report ways in which God appeared to their experience, what God was presented to their experience as being or doing. One might still ask whether they took the awareness to be direct or mediate, and it must be confessed that they do not really speak to that distinction. But the absence of any specification of mediate object(s), plus the frequent insistence on the closeness of the communion ("I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God"), can be taken as testimony to direct awareness. Moreover analogies are used that strongly suggest direct rather than mediate experiential awareness. Thus in III.

Theresa says "He renders Himself present to the soul by a certain knowledge of Himself which is more clear than the sun". And in IV. Angela says "She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another".

Note, too, that several of our sources comment on the absence of sensory content. Bonnet says ". . in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste . . . he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him". Theresa in III. says "As the vision was not imaginary, I saw no form . . . .". And Angela in V., "I cannot say I saw anything corporeal".

If one were to challenge the reporters' own construal of their experiences, what alternative(s) could be suggested? One possibility is the following. These people were all having strongly affective experiences that, because of their theological assumptions and preoccupations, they confused with a direct experience of God. Thus Bonnet was in a markedly unusual state of exaltation that he interpreted as the power and goodness of God penetrating him. Suso experienced, as he says "a manifestation of the sweetness of Eternal Life in the sensations of silence and of rest", all of which can be enjoyed without God Himself appearing to his experience in any way. Swenson was experiencing some unusual bodily sensations that he described metaphorically, first as like a wave of electricity going through him and then as "waves and waves of liquid love". Another possibility is that the person is suddenly seized with an extremely strong conviction of the presence of God, together with sensations and feelings that seem to confirm it. Thus Theresa in III. says that she "had a most distinct feeling that He was always on my right hand, a witness of all I did".

One reason to give credence to the subjects' accounts of the phenomenology of their experiences is that the more sophisticated of them explicitly consider alternative construals and are confident in rejecting them in favor of the view that God Himself is present to their experience. Thus in II. Theresa considers the possibility that "He was present only by his grace", i.e., that her experience was produced by God, perhaps as a sign or indication that He was present to her, but that she was not directly aware of God Himself as an item in, so to say, her experiential field. But she rejects this as a false reading of her experience. "I could not believe that, because, as I am saying, He seemed to me to be present Himself". Again Angela of Foligno contrasts the direct perception of God as "plentitude" with God's instilling into the soul "fire, love, and sometimes sweetness; and the soul believes this comes from God, and delights therein. But she does not yet know, or see, that He dwells in her; she perceives

His grace, in which she delights''. (There is also an intermediate state in which God is taken to speak to her.) Here Angela is not dealing with alternative construals of the same experience but rather experiences of these different sorts enjoyed at different times. But again the point is that she clearly distinguishes the types and, at certain times, identifies her state as one of directly ''seeing'' God, rather than as being filled with effects of God's activity. The fact that these people can make these distinctions and are confident in characterizing their experience now in one of the ways, now in another, definitely adds to the credibility of their reports.

Nevertheless, though an individual's account of the phenomenology of his/her own experience must certainly be taken seriously, it cannot be regarded as infallible. It is conceivable that one should suppose that a purely affective experience or a strongly held conviction should involve the experiential presentation of God when it doesn't, especially if there is a strong need or longing for such a direct awareness. But we would need strong reasons to override the subject's confident report of the character of her experience. And where could we find such reasons?

One might think that there are serious difficulties in the notion of the infinite Creator and Lord of the universe's being directly perceived by a mere human being. We shall consider this contention a bit later, but now is not the time; here we are dealing with the phenomenology, not the ontology of the experience. Even if it were impossible that God should be related to a human being, S, so as to be directly perceived by S (and I don't for a moment suppose that this is the case), that would not prevent S from having an experience the phenomenological content of which is an experience of God pouring His love into S. The phenomenological character of the experience is the way it presents itself to the subject, whether that correctly reflects the fact of the matter or not. S can phenomenologically be directly aware of a unicorn or King Arthur or an alien from outer space, whether or not any such things exist and, if they do, whether or not they are in the right connection to S to be directly perceived by S. The price of being, phenomenologically, the direct object of my awareness is rather low.

A more pertinent reason for scepticism is this. If the perceptual model fitted these experiences the subjects would have to be aware of God as bearing certain phenomenal qualities. By hypothesis, those qualities are not sensory. Then what are they? Have our writers succeeded in communicating any intelligible possibilities as to their identity? This is a difficult question. I choose not to tackle it head on, but rather approach it

indirectly by first noting that most of what God is said to appear as in these passages cannot possibly be regarded as consisting of phenomenal qualities. Consider power, goodness, love, beauty, and plentitude, as features of God, and actions like supporting and strengthening. Power and goodness are complex dispositional properties or bases thereof, dispositions to act in various ways in various situations. And to support or strengthen someone is to engage in certain actions with a certain intention (and to succeed in carrying out that intention if these terms are given their normal interpretation as "success" terms). How can something present itself to one's experience as good, powerful, or as strengthening or supporting one, in the same sense as that in which it can be experienced as red, round, acrid, or bitter? It certainly looks as if the subject was simply expecting to be aware of God and hence took herself to be aware of a being that is powerful, supremely good, and infinitely loving. That is not something that could be read off the phenomenal surface of experience.

To come to grips with this objection we must be more explicit than heretofore about the notion of phenomenal qualities and their difference from what we may call "objective" qualities. Let's make the distinction in terms of concepts rather than qualities, since I don't want to assume that the same quality can't be grasped both as phenomenal and as objective. Let's say, then, that:

1. A *phenomenal* concept is a concept of the intrinsic qualitative distinctiveness of a way of appearing (looking, smelling, . . .). When I use 'red' in a phenomenal sense, in saying that something looks red, I am simply recording the qualitative distinctiveness of the way it visually appears to me, and that's all. I am saying nothing about its continuing powers and proclivities, its entanglements with other things, its intrinsic nature, or anything else that goes beyond the visually sensible character of its look. When, on the other hand, I use 'red' in an *objective* physical property sense, I am saying something about the disposition of the object to look one or another way under one or another set of circumstances, and/or its physical structure, powers, or capacities. Most of our concepts fall into the "objective" category. There is a rather limited number of ways in which things can present themselves to our experience.[11] And even with respect to these, the terms that express the phenomenal concepts thereof will also be used for associated objective concepts, as the example of 'red' shows.

Next let's note that we frequently report how something looks, or otherwise appears, not by recording a phenomenal distinctiveness of the ap-

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pearance, but by conceptualizing it in some other way. The other sorts of "appears as . . ". concepts can be classified as follows.

2. Comparative. This is to say what sort of object can be expected to appear, in these circumstances, or in normal circumstances, as this object is appearing. Thus to say 'This tie looks red (to me now)' could be to say 'This tie looks to me now as a red tie would be expected to look under normal conditions'. Here we are clearly not using a phenomenal concept of red or any other phenomenal concept. We are rather using objective concepts of red tie, normal conditions, etc., and characterizing this look by comparing it with other looks characterized in these objective terms.

3. Doxastic. This is to say something about the belief to which this appearance could be expected to give rise. To use the doxastic concept of looking red in saying 'The tie looks red' is to say 'The tie looks so as to normally lead one to believe that it is red'. Here, again, none of the concepts employed are phenomenal ones, even the concept of 'red', for the belief that the tie is red, to which the look is being said to normally give rise, is the belief that the tie has a certain physical property.

4. Epistemic. This is like 3., except that the look is characterized in terms of what beliefs it can justify or provide an adequate basis for, rather than in terms of what beliefs it can be expected to engender. Here 'The tie looks red' means 'If one formed the belief that the tie was red on the basis of the way it looks, that belief would be justified'.

Please note that we are not distinguishing different ways or modes of appearing (looking) but rather different ways of conceptualizing, specifying, or identifying appearances. One and the same look of the tie to one and the same person at a certain time could be correctly reported in each of these four ways. It is important to note that a phenomenal concept is, so to say, always in the background even when not explicitly employed. If, e.g., I make a true report by using a comparative concept in saying 'X looks red', I am really presupposing that there is some qualitative distinctiveness to the appearance that could be captured by a phenomenal concept, even though I am using no such concept at the moment. For I am supposing that there is some way in which an X like this looks under normal conditions, and this way would have its intrinsic nature captured by a phenomenal concept. The same comment is to be made for the doxastic and epistemic concepts. In other words, when we report appearances with the use of comparative, doxastic, or epistemic appear-concepts, we are conceptualizing appearances by some of their relational features. But something can enter into relations only if it has an intrinsic nature to constitute

what enters into those relations; and this intrinsic nature is what is captured by a phenomenal concept.

Now for the bearing of all this on our problem. Our critic was pointing out that such concepts as power, goodness, and love are not phenomenal concepts. And so they are not. However, that does not show that our sources could not be accurately reporting how God appears to their experience by using such concepts as these. We have just noted various alternatives to the use of phenomenal concepts in specifying how something looks, or otherwise appears. In particular, there are comparative concepts that can be used to characterize a particular appearance in terms of how something of a certain objective sort could be expected to appear under certain conditions, e.g., these conditions. To illustrate this with sense perception for a bit, I could correctly report that x looked like a house or a Porsche or a bald eagle or tasted like a white Burgundy or sounded like Handel, or, to switch to the particular, that something looked like Susie's house or Jason's Porsche, thereby giving you an idea of how it looked, tasted, or sounded. And yet these are objective, non-phenomenal concepts that are being employed here. No doubt, in each of these cases there will be some complex pattern of visual, gustatory, or auditory qualia that is being presented, by virtue of the awareness of which I can recognize the object as a house, Jason's Porsche, or whatever.[12] And, no doubt, it is in principle possible to form and use a phenomenal concept of just that phenomenal pattern. But we rarely make use of any such concepts, and for good reasons. The diversity of such patterns is enormous; we could hardly put a concept of each such distinctive pattern in our repertoire, even if we restrict ourselves to those we actually encounter. Nor do there seem to be any intuitively natural principles for classifying such patterns into types on the basis of intrinsic features.[13] Hence, what we do instead is to group such patterns, such complex "looks", into types on the basis of extrinsic features, most usually on the basis of how a certain sort of objective thing (event, state of affairs) will look under certain frequently recurring types of conditions. Thus we group the phenomenally heterogeneous looks of houses, under not unusual conditions of observation, into a general concept of 'looks like a house'.[14] Moreover, and this is the point I have been leading up to, we typically report all but the most elementary ways of perceptual appearing in these comparative terms. Except for basic sensory qualities like color, shape, size, loudness, softness, bitterness, etc., we report how a thing looks, sounds, tastes, feels, etc., by specifying some objective kind that could be expected to look, sound, etc., in that

way. It looks like a cow, it sounds like a gong, it smells like a pineapple. Nor is this due to laziness or an excessive interest in the objective as opposed to the subjective, in the extrinsic as opposed to the intrinsic. As we have seen, we are left with no real alternative. We are simply in no position to classify complex appearances on the basis of their intrinsic features, and so we are driven to classify them in terms of what objective sorts typically appear in that way. Even where we set out to explain what it is about the look of something that leads us to classify it as, e.g., a tree, we rarely have recourse to phenomenal concepts. I am likely to reply that it has a trunk, branches, leaves, etc., i.e., that it has the look of something with branches, leaves, etc. But these part-looks are being reported in comparative terms, just as much as the whole-look that is being explained.

And so it is here. Our sources could quite well be using comparative concepts to specify how they are being appeared to, just as we typically do in reporting sense perception whenever the mode of appearance is complex. They can be interpreted as saying something like: I was aware of God as presenting the kind of appearance it would be reasonable to expect a supremely powerful (good, loving, beautiful) being to present. And so from the premise that they are not using phenomenal concepts, it does not follow that they are not reporting how God appears to their experience.

Of course in using a comparative concept of *looks like a P* to characterize an experience, S is assuming that he knows what a P looks like (in normal conditions or whatever), and this assumption may be challenged. How does Bonnet know how a supremely good being would present itself to his experience? Presumably his experience with more or less good human beings has given him some idea as to what it is like, experientially, to be interacting with a good person manifesting his goodness, as contrasted with what it is like experientially to be interacting with an evil person, manifesting that quality.

So far so good. It can hardly be doubted that we have made progress in framing an intellible conception of an experience in which one takes God to be appearing to one as so-and-so. But we have still not answered our question as to the basic phenomenal qualities of this modality. We have spoken in a holistic way of an unanalyzed concept of the way(s) in which a loving being might characteristically appear to one. But we have made no progress in enumerating the basic phenomenal qualities of the sphere of divine perception, analogous to color and shape for the visual

modality, temperature and texture for the tactile, and so on. Where does that leave our project?

It must be confessed that we are quite incapable of enumerating the basic phenomenal qualities of which "divine phenomena" are configurations. That's the bad news. But the good news is that we can understand why this should be the case. To see this let's reflect on why it is that we are able to carry off this job for sense perception. The basic point is this. Sensory experience is governed by fairly tight regularities involving its physical, physiological, and psychological conditions; and we are able to discern some of those regularities and make use of them. As a result we have discovered quite a bit about the stimulus conditions of various sensory qualities, and we have been able to subject the experience of those qualities to a considerable degree of stimulus control. The more rudimentary forms of these accomplishments predate recorded history; this is why we have had an intersubjectively shared language for sensory qualities since time immemorial. This knowledge and control has, of course, been greatly extended in the last 150 years by physiological psychology, and as a result we have been able to dimensionalize and study various sensory qualia and gain much more understanding of them and their role in perception. But nothing like this has happened with respect to the perception of God, nor is it at all likely to. We know nothing of the mechanisms of such perception, if indeed it is proper to talk of mechanisms here; nor can we grasp any useful regularities in the conditions under which God will appear in one or another qualitatively distinctive way to one's experience. Perhaps such conditions have to do with God's purposes and intentions, but if so that gives us absolutely no handle for prediction and control. Thus we lack the most elementary prerequisites for analyzing divine appearances into their phenomenal elements, cataloguing them, associating them intersubjectively with names, dimensionalizing them, and so on. The reason this is good news is that it explains why we would be in a position of almost complete ignorance here even if there are basic phenomenal qualities that make up the phenomenal character of divine appearances. Thus our deficiencies in this regard give us no reason to doubt that divine appearances do present distinctive phenomenal characters.

One nagging worry is that even if there is distinctive phenomenal content to experiences of God it wholly consists of affective qualities, various ways the subject is feeling in reaction to what the subject takes to be the presence of God.[15] There is no doubt but that such experiences are strongly affectively toned; my sample is entirely typical in this respect. Our inability

to specify any other sorts of non-sensory phenomenal qualities naturally leads to the suspicion that the experience is confined to affective reactions to a believed presence, leaving room for no experiential presentation of God or any other objective reality.

But does this last conclusion follow? How damaging would it be to our subjects' construal of their experiences if these suspicions were well founded? Does the restriction of phenomenal content to affect rule out the possibility of an objective reality's appearing to the subject therein? Well, why should it? After all my experience of other human beings as friendly, hostile, demanding, open, warm, etc., features prominently my own affective reactions to the other person's demeanor or behavior. But in these cases, it will be said, there is the sensory presentation of the other person on which this is built? Could the affective content carry the whole load of an objective presentation?

To come to grips with this question we have to consider the status of sensory phenomenal qualities. What is *their* ontological status? Since the seventeenth century it has been widely held that the "secondary" phenomenal qualities do not really characterize material substances as they are in themselves. Phenomenal colors, sounds, tastes, etc., are purely subjective; they are either ways in which we are conscious (adverbial view) or they are, or qualify, special "mental" objects that have no being over and above their role in furnishing phenomenal content to experience. Berkeley and others have argued that we cannot pick and choose among sensory qualities in this way; if some are purely subjective they all are. And the view that they are all subjective is one that has not infrequently been taken. The point of this excursus on the status of sensory qualities is that even if, as seems possible, sensory phenomenal qualities are as subjective as affective qualities, that does not prevent them from serving as a phenomenal vehicle of the perception of objective external realities. Of course some who have gone all the way in taking all sensory qualities to be subjective have denied or doubted that they can so serve, at least on a realist construal of the objects perceived. But that is by no means an inevitable consequence of the subjectivity of sensory phenomenal qualities. We are encouraged by these considerations to take seriously the possibility that veridical perception of objective realities could be mediated by phenomenal content that is purely subjective. Thus even if the whole phenomenal content of the experience of God were affective, something I see no reason to suppose, I would not take that to rule out the possibility of veridical perception of God.

It is pertinent to add that, as with sense perception, one does not have to be able to isolate and identify basic phenomenal qualities in order to have experience and to use it as a vehicle of perception. Children learn to recognize people, buildings, and toys without having any conception of the way in which the sensory appearances of things are built up from elementary phenomenal qualities. Nor is there any reason to think that such perceptual achievements require that someone in the society have a grasp of the composition of complex sensory phenomena. Fortunately we have the capacity to learn to respond to complex phenomenal totalities without being able to analyze them into their ultimate constituents. Fortunately, because otherwise only a consummate introspective psychologist could find his way home from the office.

Before leaving the phenomenology of the experience of God, I should bring out into the open what seems to be a powerful bar to recognizing the real possibility of what I have been exploring. Many people identify perception so firmly with sense perception that they find it incredible, or unintelligible, that anyone should suppose themselves to directly perceive something other than themselves without sensory qualities being involved. When one speaks of perceiving God, or when the more common expression, "directly experiencing God" is employed, they think that must mean that God is encountered in visible, auditory, or other sensible form, and when that is denied, as we have seen it denied by several of our sources, they profess to make neither head nor tail of the matter. Insofar as this attitude reflects something more than mindless parochialism, it presumably betokens an assumption that the familiar facts of human sense perception constitute a priori limits on what is possible by way of direct experiences of objective beings by cognitive subjects. I hope that it is sufficient to dispel any such idea to point out that there is absolutely no reason to suppose that there are any such limits. Just as we can easily envisage different forms of sense perception, based on receptivity to different forms of physical energy and involving different kinds of basic sensory qualia, so we can easily envisage the possibility of objective beings' appearing to the experience of a cognitive subject, where this is not based on the operation of any physical, organic sense receptors at all. Those who take themselves to enjoy a non-sensory direct experience of God consider themselves to have realized this possibility; and there is no a priori reason to suppose that what they believe to be the case is logically impossible.

iv

So much for the question of whether the experience of God can be phenomenologically structured in basically the same way as the sense experience of environmental objects. But even if that is possible it does not follow that it is possible that we should perceive God, for there are other conditions that must be met. Before coming to the causal and doxastic conditions mentioned earlier, I want to flush out a consideration that seems to inhibit some people from taking seriously the idea that God should really, in propria persona, be what is appearing to one. To put it crudely, the idea is that God is too "big". How can the infinite, unlimited, omnipotent source of all being and Lord of all creation be contained within the paltry confines of my experience? How can I hope to have a direct awareness of so transcendently vast an "object"? To answer this we will have to get misleading pictorial associations out of the way. The perceived object doesn't have to literally take up residence within my head, mind, or experience in order that I perceive it. Appearance is best thought of as a relational fact; the object is related to me in a certain way. And relative size has nothing to do with that; objects of any differences of magnitude can be variously related to each other. It is also salutary to remind ourselves that, in sense perception and elsewhere, I don't have to perceive the whole of X in order to perceive it. I rarely, if ever, perceive all of the physical object I am perceiving, e.g., a house or another human being; but if I see enough of it under the right conditions, I am properly credited with seeing it.

Now for the causal and doxastic conditions. The latter can be quickly dispatched. There is absolutely no reason to doubt that experiences of the sorts we have been considering do typically lead to the formation of beliefs about God. Typically these are not fundamental beliefs about the divine nature or essence, but rather beliefs about God's being present to one, acting toward one in certain ways, or being otherwise related to the perceiver. But this is quite in line with the doxastic side of sense perception, which typically leads (directly) to "localized" beliefs of this sort, rather than to fundamental beliefs about the nature of the objects perceived.

The causal condition calls for a bit more discussion. First, there is no reason to think it impossible that God, if He exists, does causally contribute to the occurrence of experiences of the sort under consideration. Quite the contrary. If God exists and things are as supposed by classical theism, God causally contributes to everything that occurs. That follows just from

the fact that nothing would exist without the creative and sustaining activity of God. And with respect to many things, including experiences of all sorts, God's causality presumably extends farther than that, though the precise story will vary from one theology to another. Just in order to fix our thoughts let us say that it is possible (and remember that we are concerned here only with whether this causal condition *can* be satisfied) that at least some of these experiences occur only because God intentionally presents Himself to the subject's awareness as so-and-so.

It may well be pointed out that not every causal contributor to an experience is perceived via that experience. When I see a house, light waves and goings on in my nervous system form parts of the causal chain leading to the visual experience, but I don't thereby perceive them. Thus it is not enough that God figure somehow or other in the causes of the experience; He would have to make the right kind of causal contribution in order to be perceived therein. But what is the right kind? There is no general answer to this question, applicable to all perceptual modalities. The causal contribution a seen object makes to the production of visual experience (roughly, transmitting light directly to the retina) is different from the causal contribution a felt object makes to the tactile experience, different from the causal contribution a heard object makes to the aural experience, and so on. And how do we tell, for each modality, what the crucial causal contribution is? We have no a priori insight into this. We cannot abstract from everything we have learned from perception, and still ascertain how an object must be causally related to a visual experience in order to be what is seen in that experience. Quite the contrary. We learn this by first determining in many cases what is seen, felt, heard, etc., in those cases, and then looking for some causal contribution that is distinctive of the object perceived. That is, we have first to be able to determine what is seen; then on the basis of that we can determine how an entity has to be causally related to the visual experience to be seen therein. We have no resources for doing it the other way around, first determining the specific causal requirement and then picking out objects seen on the basis of what satisfies that requirement.

The application of all this to the topic of divine perception is as follows. We will have a chance of determining just how God has to be causally related to an experience in order to be perceived therein only if we can first determine in a number of cases that God is being perceived. And since that is so, we can't rule out the possibility (actuality) of perceiving God on the grounds that God can't be (isn't) related to the relevant ex-

perience in the right way. For unless we do perceive God we are unable to determine what the right way is. Hence, so long as God does make some causal contribution to the relevant experiences, we can't rule out God's being perceived in those experiences on the grounds that He isn't causally related to them in the right way. To be sure, by the same token we cannot show that we do (can) perceive God by showing that God is (can be) causally related to the appropriate experiences in the right kind of way. But showing this is no part of our purpose here. It will be sufficient to show that, so far as we can see, there is no reason to doubt that it is possible that God should satisfy an appropriate causal requirement for being perceived in at least some of the cases in which people take themselves to be directly aware of Him.

V

Thus far I have argued (1) that (at least typically) where people take themselves to be directly aware of God their experience is best construed phenomenologically as involving God's presenting Himself to their awareness as bearing certain phenomenal qualities, and (2) that it is possible that any further requirements for one's perceiving God should be satisfied in at least some of these cases. This adds up to an argument for the possibility of a human perception of God that exhibits basically the same structure as human sense perception of the physical and social environment, though with different phenomenal content. But it may be felt that there is still a glaring deficiency in the argument. How does a person identify what is appearing to her at a given moment as God, the source of all being other than Himself, judge and redeemer of mankind, . . .? Even if one is being appeared to in ways it is reasonable to expect a very good, powerful, and loving person to appear, that doesn't suffice to show that it is God Who is appearing. Why should St. Theresa or Angela of Foligno suppose that it is God in particular of Whom they are aware?

The first thing to note here is that my failure to deal with this question is by no means a lack in the argument for the possibility of perceiving God. It is not necessary for an experience's being a case of perceiving God that the subject know, or even be able to tell, that it is God she is perceiving. This point holds quite generally for perception. I can be seeing the Louvre while supposing that it is the Palais Royale; I can hear the Vienna Philharmonic while under the mistaken impression that it is the Berlin Philharmonic. Even if we had been setting out to show that people

sometimes do perceive God we wouldn't have to show that people can sometimes ascertain that it is God they are perceiving in order to establish that. Nevertheless, and these legalisms aside, I am interested not only in whether (it is possible) that one sometimes does perceive God, but also in whether (it is possible) that one can sometimes determine that it is God that one is perceiving. For one thing, that interest stems from my interest in the idea that perceiving God can provide knowledge (justified belief) about God. Perceptions of God will not give you knowledge of God (construed as such) unless you know that it is God you are perceiving. And, indeed, the function of the perception of God in personal relations with God also requires, for the full-blown result, that the human percipient (as well as the divine knower) know Who it is that he is perceptually cognizing at a given moment. So let's take a look at the question of whether, and how, one can identify what is appearing as God.

Let's set this issue in a larger context. The mere fact that X, whether physical, divine or whatever, is experientially appearing to one as P does not of itself enable one to identify what it is that is appearing to one as P, except, of course, as that being that is then appearing to one as P. And usually, as in the present case, we are interested in determining whether various other identifying descriptions apply to it, descriptions the accuracy of which depends on facts that are not themselves exhibited in the experience. Thus the supposition that it is the president of General Motors that I am looking at depends on whether this person holds a certain position in a certain corporation and that will not be any part of what the person is experientially presenting himself as. The subject is in no privileged position to answer the question "What is it that is appearing to me?", even though she is, of course, in a privileged position to answer the question "How is it appearing to me?".[16] So how do people tell what they are perceiving?

This is a complicated and untidy subject, one that is not understood as well as we would like, and certainly one that I do not understand as well as I would like. And I don't have time at the tag end of this paper to go into the matter even as far as I am capable of doing. But here are a few remarks on the subject.

First, there is the obvious point of suitability of appearances. Would we expect X to appear like this, in circumstances like this? Put crudely, does this look like X? Or better, would we expect X to look like this, in circumstances like this, to a perceiver situated and constituted as this one is? In order to answer that question we need to know (have some basis

for supposing) how X would appear under various circumstances. (At a crude level of understanding we might not distinguish different circumstances but merely rely on normality of circumstances.) Does this look the way your house could be expected to look at this distance, from this angle, and in this lighting? To know or justifiably believe things like this we either have to have had experience with the ways the thing in question, or similar things, look in various circumstances, or we have to have learned this from others, or our concept of X has to provide guidance. In the case of God all three sources may be operative. Our concept of God would lead us to expect that He would appear as very loving, good, and powerful. If I, or other people in my tradition from whom I learn, have had considerable experience of God's presence and activity in our lives, that will teach me something about how He can be expected to appear to us, perhaps under certain circumstances. Of course, to pile up this experience I or others must know in earlier cases that it is God Who is appearing. And how did we manage it then? Aren't we launched on an infinite regress in which any particular identification presupposes that we have learned about divine appearances from earlier identifications? Again, it is relevant to point out that we have exactly the same problem with sense perception. If it is important for our identification of perceived physical objects to have learned by experience how various objects look, etc., under various conditions, and surely it is, we have the same problem there as to how this learning process ever gets started. Presumably, in both cases we have to think in terms of a bootstrapping operation, in which initial tentative identifications eventually get upgraded into something more solid by virtue of their (the ones that survive the process) fitting into a coherent system of perceptual identifications, other perceptual judgments, generalizations, theories, and so on.[17]

Another relevant consideration is the context in which the experience occurs. Being in the middle of the Sahara counts against identifying an object of perception as a 1000 ft. waterfall, and being in San Francisco counts against identifying a building as my house (I live in Syracuse, New York). Since God is everywhere we can't deploy just the same considerations for the perception of God, but there are analogues. Theological considerations can support the supposition that the fact that a putative perception of God occurs in prayer or in worship counts toward its being veridical. No one, of course, would suggest that perceiving God in other contexts is impossible or even terribly unlikely; and no one would suggest that it is impossible for one to mistakenly think one is directly aware of

God while engaged in prayer or worship. But if one is aware of something with the right kinds of characteristics in the course of prayer or worship, those surroundings go some way toward supporting the identification as God.

Finally, we can consider what the object goes on to do beyond the immediate experiential presentation, whether we find out about this from further experiences of one's own or otherwise. If it looks initially like a duck and then walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, etc., we have a strong case for identifying it as a duck. In the case of God we don't really have the ability to continuously track Him in the way we can with a sensorily perceived object, but something analogous applies. Given standard theistic conceptions and beliefs, it is reasonable to expect that prolonged communion, perceptual and otherwise, with God would lead to an increasing sanctity of character and a more Christlike mode of life, ceteris paribus. This will not give us a test for the identification of the object of a single experience, and even as applied to a long continued series it is highly defeasible. Nevertheless, it is not without weight, and it is a criterion that is universally employed by spiritual directors. Our second and third considerations also raise questions as to how one comes into possession of the crucial generalizations about what it would be reasonable to expect if one really is perceiving God; the comments made on this point in connection with the first consideration can be applied to these also.

Much more could and should be said about this topic, but perhaps this will suffice to indicate that we are not without resources in identifying a perceived object as God.

vi

Let me sum up my aims in this paper. I have sought to show that it is possible that in at least some of the cases in which people take themselves to be directly aware of God, they are in fact perceiving God. In arguing for this I used what I hope is a minimally controversial view of the basic nature of sense perception and tried to show that it is possible that the experiences in question (or some of them) should exhibit the same generic structure, thereby earning the title of "perception" (of an objective reality) in a significant sense. I have not tried to show that anyone ever does in fact perceive God; indeed I expressed scepticism that an external validation of any major sphere of perception is possible. I hope that the results of the paper will lead its readers to take more seriously the idea that a genuine

experiential cognition of God is a real possibility for human beings, and that they will be further led to explore the importance of such cognition both for the epistemology of religious belief and for the character of the religious life.[18]

NOTES

1. This anonymous account is taken from William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, The Modern Library), pp. 67-68.
2. To be sure, I don't want to suggest that people perceive God only when they suppose themselves to be doing so, any more than one perceives the planet Mars only when one supposes oneself to be doing so. One can see Mars when looking up at the sky at night while having no idea that it is Mars, or even that it is a planet, that one is seeing. However, since our only way of picking out live candidates is to consider people's reports of their experiences, including our own, this is where we must start.
3. In *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* by Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), there is a report of a survey of a wide range of Christian denominations that indicates that 75% of Christians take themselves to have been at some time directly aware of the presence of God.
4. A particularly striking example of this is found in H.H. Price's *Perception*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1950). There Price, as a sense-datum theorist, characterizes the perception of a physical object as "pseudo-intuitive", a state in which we fail to distinguish between the sense-datum, of which we are genuinely immediately, intuitively aware, and the physical object, which is rather "accepted".
5. I will not try to decide whether this judgment is also "neutral", or whether I am committed here to a direct realist view that is opposed to, e.g., the sense-datum theory.
6. It seems clear to me that one could not be aware of God, or any other objective reality, in such a way that there is no state of consciousness involved through which one is aware of God but which is itself distinct from God. My suggestion was only that the extreme "unitive" form of mystical experience is the strongest, or least weak, candidate for absolute immediacy.
7. Except in the special case in which what is visually or auditorily perceived is the historical Jesus Christ. There, according to traditional Christian doctrine, one is directly perceiving God in visually or auditorily perceiving this human being. I shall sidestep this complexity by restricting myself to experiences of God that are open to people at any time.
8. Why "at least some"? Why shouldn't I claim that it is *possible* that God is directly perceived in all these cases? Because there are many incompatibilities between particular experiences, particularly those in which God is perceived as communicating a message to the subject. Hence they can't all be genuine perceptions of God.
9. All this material is taken either from William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (J) or from Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: World Publishing, 1955), (U).
10. To be sure, this is not surprising, since I chose reports to meet this specification, thereby passing over, e.g., reports of mediate perception of God. But the significant point is that there is no dearth of reports that do satisfy this condition.
11. At least, there is a very limited number of basic or atomic ways, and, as I shall soon be pointing out, we are not much given to working with phenomenal concepts of complex

modes of appearing.

12. To be sure, people don't recognize perceived objects solely on the basis of their phenomenal appearance; background knowledge commonly figures in as well. There will be various Porsches that look, from this distance and angle and in this light, just like Jason's. But I happen to know that Jason's Porsche is parked in this vicinity. However, we can safely suppose that the phenomenal appearance is always at least part of what I go on in recognizing perceived objects; and so there will always be some pattern of sensory qualia that plays an essential role in the proceedings. See the section v for a brief discussion of perceptual recognition.
13. It is also worth mentioning that we are incapable of analyzing such complex looks into their constituent basic sensory qualities and spelling out how they are combined into the totality. However this in itself would be no bar to a liberal use of concepts of complex phenomenal patterns, provided it were feasible to attach a concept to each such pattern, grasped holistically.
14. These concepts are quite vague; there is no sharp boundary between 'looks like a house' and 'doesn't look like a house'. But this doesn't prevent the concepts from being useful.
15. I am grateful to Linda Zagzebski for forcing me to remove my head from the sand and face this issue.
16. The points made in this paragraph short circuit an easy objection to the supposition that subjects can identify what they are perceiving as God. That objection runs as follows. "The ways in which what is supposed to be God appears to one do not uniquely identify the object as God. One is aware of X, let's say, as very powerful, loving, and good. But none of that uniquely picks out God; there could be other beings with those characteristics. Even if one experiences the object as claiming to be God, that doesn't do the job either. Many different beings could *claim* to be God. If we could experience God as unlimitedly powerful and knowing, the source of the being of everything other than Himself, we would have, within our experience, a solid basis for identifying what is experienced as God. But it would seem to be quite impossible for anything to present itself to one's experience as bearing those features".

    What we have shown in the text is that these points hold quite generally of the perception of objects; and so if this were to prevent one from identifying an object of experience as God, it would also prevent me, frequently, from identifying an object of perception as your house. It is unusual for anything I see to look, phenomenally, in a way that uniquely identifies it. When I glance at your house while driving down the street and recognize it as your house, it may well not look in a way that no other house looks.
17. For a stimulating presentation of this kind of view see Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).
18. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1987 Midwestern Regional Meetings of the Society of Christian Philosophers at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota; at the 1988 Eastern Regional Meetings of The Society of Christian Philosophers at Wofford College, Spartanburg, South Carolina; and at a session of the Philosophy of Religion Society (Southern California). The paper was also discussed at a week-long seminar I gave at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois in June, 1988. I am grateful to the participants at all these sessions for many useful criticisms and suggestions.