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Perceiving an imperceptible God

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Abstract. While reports of sensory encounters with the divine come from a variety of religious traditions, philosophers as diverse as Thomas Aquinas and Robert Oakes have argued that such experiences of incorporeal divine beings are impossible. Nevertheless, by clarifying various relations among acts of perception, perceptual detections of presence and kinds of perceptual recognition, the sensory perception of imperceptible things emerges as a coherent possibility. So, even if they are essentially unobservable, incorporeal divine beings still fall well within the range of normal human sense perception.

According to the epic tradition of Homer, Athena once disguised herself as a sailor and appeared to Telemachus. After an extended conversation,

> … Athena left him
> as a bird rustles upward, off and gone.
> But as she went she put a new spirit in him,
> a new dream of his father, clearer now,
> so that he marvelled to himself
> divining that a god had been his guest.[1]

From a rather different cultural tradition comes another report. In a conversation with his Lord, Moses commented that the news of God's recent appearance was spreading rapidly. With particular regard to the Egyptians, he noted,

> They have already heard that you, O LORD, are with these people and that you, O LORD, have been seen face to face, that your cloud stays over them, and that you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.[2]

Many people, of course, are suspicious of accounts like these. There is one line of philosophical argument, however, that seems to suggest that such reports are not merely false, they are necessarily false. Echoing something of the ancient Platonic division between the intelligible and the sensible realms, Thomas Aquinas claimed,

> It is impossible to see God by the power of sight or by any other sense or sensitive power. Any power of this kind is … the proper activity of some corporeal organ.

[1] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 11. I would like to express my appreciation for the helpful comments that two anonymous referees for *Religious Studies* provided in connection with a previous version of this paper.

[2] Numbers 14:14. Translation taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

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> Such activity must belong to the same order as that of which it is the activity, hence no such power could extend beyond corporeal things. God, however, is not corporeal, … hence he cannot be seen by sense or imagination but only by the mind.[3]

More recently, Robert Oakes has offered something similar, though stripped of any characteristically Thomistic metaphysics. In the spare idiom of contemporary logical analysis, he wrote,

> it seems unproblematic that *being incorporeal* is … a property that God has essentially, and that the function ''*X* is incorporeal' entails the function '*X* is unobservable'. Hence, since 'If God exists, he is incorporeal' expresses a necessary truth, it should be intuitively clear that the proposition expressed by 'If God exists, he is unobservable' is *also* a necessary truth.[4]

If this line of argument were basically correct, then Homer's account would have been hopelessly confused. Were Athena corporeal, she might have appeared to Telemachus, but she could not have been divine. Had she been incorporeal, Athena might have been divine, but she could not have appeared to Telemachus. Moses, of course, suffers similarly, though perhaps with some hope of relief. According to Oakes, while Moses and his comrades could not actually have seen an incorporeal god face to face, they might have been able to detect the presence of such a god in their pillars of cloud or fire.[5]

Contrary to the sentiments of Aquinas and Oakes, the goal of this discussion is to reach somewhat different conclusions on these matters. While accounts like those of Homer or Moses may turn out to be false, they are not necessarily so. Oakes certainly is correct to admit the possibility of perceptually detecting the presence of items that are themselves imperceptible. More than this is possible, however. By clarifying various relations among perceptions, perceptual detections of presence, perceptual recognitions and essential imperceptibility, the perception of imperceptible things can be rendered a coherent possibility. In fact, not only may perceptually imperceptible items actually be perceived in the course of ordinary human experience, they may even be recognized as being essentially imperceptible.

INCORPOREALITY AND PERCEPTIBILITY

For the purposes of this discussion, it is not necessary to delve into the connections between divinity and incorporeality. While both Aquinas and Oakes found essential links between the two,[6] it is the move from incorporeality to imperceptibility that is of interest here. Oakes claimed that '…

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Volume I, *The Existence of God*, Part One: Questions 1–13, General Editor, Thomas Gilby, O. P. (Garden City: Image Books, 1969), p. 172.

[4] Robert Oakes, 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', *Religious Studies*, **17** (1981), p. 357. Emphasis in original.

[5] Robert Oakes offers the full details of his argument to this conclusion in his 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability'.

[6] Since the time of Xenophanes, many Western thinkers have echoed the conclusion that there is something peculiarly unfitting about the idea of an embodied divinity. This opinion is not universal, however. Most notably, Sallie MacFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress

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the function "*X* is incorporeal" entails the function "*X* is unobservable"',[7] while Aquinas relied upon his convictions about orders of being. For Aquinas, sense organs are corporeal and, being limited by their order of being, they cannot be used to experience anything from the incorporeal order of being. For both authors, then, something about the very nature of incorporeality essentially places incorporeals beyond the reach of human sensory capacities.

It is not at all surprising, of course, to discover that human perception is limited. Many perceptual limits are found quite easily. Unlike bats and dogs, people cannot hear very highly pitched sounds. Nor are people sensitive to infrared or ultraviolet light. Some people cannot see colours, while others cannot see at all. These and similar limitations, however, appear to be physiologically based, rather than metaphysically grounded. What exactly is it about incorporeals, then, that is supposed to render them imperceptible?

No doubt, it would help to know precisely what is meant by incorporeality. If a corporeal thing is a bodily thing, then an incorporeal thing must be something without a body. Unfortunately, this simple analysis does not imply that incorporeals are unobservable. Neither rainbows nor shadows have bodies, yet both are clearly visible. John Locke once suggested a list of five primary qualities for bodies: solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest and number.[8] While rainbows and shadows seem to possess four out of these five, they lack solidity. Does this mean that rainbows and shadows are incorporeal, or at least partially so? Descartes' suggestion was simpler. His sole requirement for corporeality was extension.[9] While this feature renders rainbows and shadows corporeal, many other clearly perceptible items remain unextended, and so fall into the incorporeal class. For example, this stabbing pain in my left foot is spatially locatable, but it is not spread across any expanse. It is neither wide nor thin, tall nor short. Unlike a sheet of paper, it has no top, bottom or middle.

Kant analysed corporeality in terms of the necessary conditioning of space nestled within the more comprehensive structuring of time.[10] Unfortunately, although many perceptibles, such as pebbles and dogs, neatly fit his understanding, others are not so clear. Consider the distinctively citrus flavour of

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Press, 1993) argues the merits of thinking of the world as the body of God. While MacFague admittedly offers this suggestion only as a model for understanding the world, rather than as literally true, even so restricted an idea of divine embodiment reveals that not everyone finds the concept of corporeality to be utterly incompatible with that of divinity.

[7] 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', p. 357. Emphasis in original.

[8] See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Volume I (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959), p. 170.

[9] See René Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, *First Part*: *of the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Principle LIII, Explanation, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), Volume I, p. 240.

[10] See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Unabridged Edition, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), p. 67.

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a sweetly acidic orange. According to current scientific opinion, the tongue is the organ of taste, though it needs olfactory help. This renders the spatial conditioning of an orange flavour perplexing. While nerve endings in the nose play a central role, the taste certainly is not there. If it is anywhere at all, it is somewhere in the mouth. But even if it is there, it is not spatially there in the way that colour patches are stretched over spatial expanses. Although the right side of a coloured patch may be darker or lighter than the left side, there is no right or left side of an orange savour. It has no discernable size or shape. In spite of the fact that visual attention can be directed to various parts of the spatial expanse of a coloured patch, gustatory attention cannot be directed to assorted spatial areas of some larger, spatially extended whole of orange flavour. While both the orange and the sense organs used for tasting it have definite sizes and shapes, the flavour of the orange does not seem to share the spatial characteristics of the orange, the mouth or the nose. If the savour is spatially conditioned at all, its conditioning is not of any obviously three-dimensional sort. Despite all this, of course, the flavour is readily perceptible.

Sounds can be temporally as well as spatially perplexing. Contrast the honk of a horn with the crack of a whip. While the honk may display a durational structure, the crack may be sensuously presented as an instantaneous whole. Both the horn and the whip are located somewhere, of course, as is the listener. But these locations should not be confused with the spatiotemporal characteristics of the sounds that are heard. Anyone who has tried to find a chirping cricket knows that the cricket is somewhere quite definite, though its chirping seems to come from here, there, everywhere and nowhere, all at once. If sufficiently loud, the perspectival aspect of sounds may be lost altogether. Instead of sounding as if they were coming from some specific location, extremely loud honks and cracks may appear simply as present to the listener.

Obviously, such an abbreviated tour of perceptibles is not sufficient to generate a definitive critique of Descartes, Kant or anyone else.[11] Still, it is

[11] Many authors have pursued such critiques, ultimately repudiating any tidy contrast between corporeals and incorporeals. As a result of his investigations, Avrum Stroll opted for metaphysical pluralism. See Avrum Stroll, *Surfaces* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 144–145. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) came to a more cynical conclusion. Reviewing the dualistic, metaphysical contrasts that dominated Western thought from Galileo, through Descartes, Locke and down to Kant, Husserl concluded that clear distinctions drawn between material and immaterial things must be purely artificial. Sharp contrasts between corporeals and incorporeals are nothing more than the artifactual remnants of early modern attempts to set boundaries for the sciences. Items in the natural world that turned out to be accessible to the methods of early modern science, no matter how diverse those items might be, were lumped together in the material, corporeal category. Everything else became incorporeal, immaterial or mental. More insidiously, the prestige of the sciences was inflated by dividing natural qualities into primary and secondary categories. Qualities accessible to the sciences were deemed to be primary, the truly real ones, while the rest became secondary and ultimately illusory. This tactic, of course, provided the groundwork for wildly overstated claims about the epistemological adequacy of scientific methods.

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enough to illustrate the extraordinary differences among perceptible items. Even if attention is restricted just to vision, the diversity among perceptibles is startling. Normal people can see everything from rocks to rainbows, shadows to clouds and sticks to misty bogs. If they sit up too quickly, they may see dizzily spinning rooms or bright spots flashing before their eyes. Crossed eyes yield two bottles instead of one and, by squinting just right, the face of Lincoln can be distinguished in an old, fuzzy photograph. If astronomers are to be trusted, people tonight will see ancient stars that burned out millions of years ago. With items so disparate as these falling well within the range of human perceptibility, what possible feature could incorporeals possess that would exclude them so completely from the range of perceptibility?

Perhaps insight can be taken from the Thomistic reference to orders of being. Maybe what motivates the conviction that there is some essential relation between incorporeality and imperceptibility is not a clear conception of incorporeality at all, but an underlying, implicitly causal theory of perception. Causal theories typically claim that perceptual objects must stand in peculiarly privileged positions in the causal chains leading up to their perception. If there is something about incorporeals, such as their order of being, that prevents them from entering into the causal chains leading up to perception, then obviously they could never enter into the privileged positions that causal theories demand. Consequently, incorporeals would remain forever beyond the range of human perceptibility.

Distressingly, both for this line of argument and for causal theories of perception in general, many everyday items are perceived, even though they do not show up in the privileged positions required by causal theories. In the case of rainbows, it is the light refracting and reflecting off water droplets, not light reflecting off the rainbows themselves, that permits rainbows to be seen. Light may reflect off sidewalks, but no light reflects off the shadows that are seen on those sidewalks. Similarly, a sharp blow to the head may cause bright spots to be seen, despite the fact that the spots themselves enter nowhere into the causal chain leading up to the perception of them. So, while incorporeals may be imperceptible, it cannot be their mere failure to enter into the causal chains of perception that prohibits them from being perceived.

THE PERCEPTUAL RECOGNITION OF PERCEPTUAL OBJECTS

According to Edmund Husserl, human consciousness displays a directional orientation.[12] Discussing a case of ordinary sensory perception, he wrote,

[12] See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 108.

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In front of me, in the dim light, lies this white paper. I see it, touch it. This perceptual seeing and touching of the paper as the full concrete experience *of* the paper that lies here as given in truth precisely with this relative lack of clearness, with this imperfect definition, appearing to me from this particular angle – is a *cogitatio*, a conscious experience … In perception properly so-called, as an explicit awareness (*Gewahren*), I am turned towards the object, to the paper, for instance, I apprehend it as being this here and now. The apprehension is a singling out, every perceived object having a background in experience. Around and about the paper lie books, pencils, inkwell, and so forth, and these in a certain sense are also 'perceived', perceptually there, in the 'field of intuition'; but whilst I was turned towards the paper there was no turning in their direction, nor any apprehending of them, not even in a secondary sense. They appeared and yet were not singled out, were not posited on their own account. Every perception of a thing has such a zone of *background intuitions* (or background awarenesses …), and this also is a '*conscious experience*', or more briefly a 'consciousness *of*' all indeed that in point of fact lies in the co-perceived objective 'background'.[13]

Characteristically, human perceptual acts include a primary focus of attention, in this case, a piece of paper. While it is not the only item in the perceptual field, that which is singled out by the primary focus of attention may be construed, quite naturally, as the object of the perceptual act. Generally speaking, this perceptual object is apprehended within a wider perceptual background, of which the observer is conscious, but in a less prominent way. Moreover, the object of perception need not be displayed fully in the perceptual field. In this case, the paper is given perspectivally. While the entire piece of paper is the object of perception, it is seen from here now as being over there now. Furthermore, only this side of it is visually displayed and, for that matter, is presented rather indistinctly and at a noticeable angle. If the primary focus of attention were to shift, the object of perception would shift accordingly. Staring fixedly in the direction of the piece of paper, attention might shift from the paper to the adjacent pencil or inkwell. For that matter, visual attention could be shifted to the spatial relation between the paper and the inkwell, to the colour or shape of the paper, or even to the intensity of the colour or the symmetry of the shape. Anything that can be singled out for isolated sensuous attention can serve as an object of perception, no matter what kind of thing it may be. With suitable shifts of attention, not only may things, parts, phases, organizations and processes become perceptual objects, but, among other items, various relations, qualities or even qualities of qualities can be perceived as well. The range of items that can serve as objects of perception is restricted only by the limits of the human capacity to discriminate attentively.

Some of these limits are physiological. Often, parents cannot see the fine print that their children can see. Orientation also seems to impose limits. Scientific studies suggest that humans can visually resolve vertical and horizontal gratings better than obliquely aligned ones. Other limits are

[13] *Ideas*: *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, pp. 105–6. Emphasis in original.

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spatial. Rainbows only can be seen from a distance, while ants must not be too far away. Moreover, human perceptual limits may vary as assorted factors change. When fog rolls in, it is hard to see anything at all. With the aid of his telescope, Galileo could see mountains on the moon that were not visible to his predecessors. Although these and similar perceptual limitations are well known, none of them appears to be characteristically metaphysical in nature.

Sometimes, the best way to discriminate objects perceptually is to employ nonstandard, even devious techniques. As Edmond Wright has emphasized,

> there are occasions, such as looking at a newspaper photograph of very coarse grain when screwing up the eyes deliberately to blur one's vision actually enables one to identify objects better.[14]

In fact, in severely grainy photographs, if the eyes are not screwed up in this way, the objects pictured cannot be seen at all. Wright also noted that

> It is not only possible to squint one object into two images: it is possible to squint the images of two similar objects into one (Put two cans of beans side by side, both aligned similarly, and try it).[15]

Wright's example of one object being squinted into two provides a straightforward illustration of the curious fact that, as Husserl insisted, the objects of sensory perception need not exist.[16] The lone can on the shelf really exists, of course. It plays an important, perhaps even essential, causal role in the production of the visual experience of the two squinted out cans. Nevertheless, while squinting, visual attention can be shifted away from the existing can on the shelf to one or both of the squinted out cans, neither of which exists. These two squinted out cans should not be confused with the one on the shelf, since they have features not enjoyed by the real can. Most prominently, the squinted out cans are two in number and stand side by side, while the existing can is solitary, standing next to no other cans at all.

For the sceptically inclined, it might be helpful to switch visual attention away from the squinted out cans in order to focus attention on the spatial relations between them. The two squinted out cans visibly display a variety of nonexistent spatial relations. For example, with the proper squint, the two cans may be seen quite clearly as standing side by side, perhaps several inches apart, with the left can slightly elevated above the right one. Yet, these observed relations are not the same as the spatial relations enjoyed by the lone can setting on the shelf. The real bean can stands in quite different, though equally visible, relations to its surrounding environment, spatial relations that are as thoroughly real as the can on the shelf. By contrast, the spatial relations between the squinted out cans, though easily observable, are

[14] Edmond Wright, 'Recent Work in Perception', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **21** (1984), p. 19.
[15] 'Recent Work in Perception', pp. 21–2.
[16] See *Ideas*: *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, p. 108.

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not real at all. Despite being seen, there simply are no such cans spatially related such that one is to the left and slightly above the other.

Sense data philosophers as well as those accustomed to distinguishing between appearance and reality may be tempted to complain that the squinted out cans just described really do exist after all. They do not exist like ordinary bean cans do, of course, but rather as weirdly produced sense data or, perhaps, as dual appearances of the existing can on the shelf. In the passage just cited, Wright offers a somewhat different suggestion, that the two squinted out objects should be construed as images of the original.

Surprisingly, the initially attractive strategy of substituting existing sense data, appearances or images for nonexistent, squinted out bean cans cannot be sustained. As classically defined, the sensory contents of sense data, appearances and visual images are supposed to be exhausted completely in present consciousness. Visual sense data, appearances or images never have any more visible features than are visibly present. Despite their nonexistence, however, the squinted out bean cans do have visible features that are not visibly present. If, while continuing to squint, an observer moves around to the left, the back sides of the squinted out cans, which were initially blocked from view, will come into sight. Sense data, appearances and visual images, however, have no back sides. For that matter, even the fronts of the squinted out cans have more features than are visibly present. By moving closer, an observer can see the fine print at the bottom of each label.

At this point, care must be taken not to confuse the continuous, seamless flowing into view of the unseen portions of the squinted out cans with a rapid succession of individually different, though closely similar, sense data, appearances or images. Although a rapid succession of static snapshots may simulate the dynamic flow of perception, it provides no real substitute for the genuine article, any more than the quick succession of static frames flashed on a movie screen adequately replaces the smooth gait of a trotting horse.

Here, the very nature of the squinted out cans, not to mention the nature of the assorted observable relations between them, may seem puzzling in the extreme. If the squinted out cans are not to be identified with the existing can on the shelf, and if they are not to be confused with individual sense data, appearances or images, nor even with successively organized collections of static sense data, appearances or images, then it is difficult to imagine what sort of things these cans or relations might be. Still, though their true nature may remain a mystery, both the squinted out cans and the relations between them are easily observed.

This is the next point of relevance. Perception must be distinguished from perceptual recognition.[17] The act of focussing sensuous attention upon a

[17] John Hick, Ian Barbour and others have used 'seeing as', 'experiencing as' or even 'interpreting as' to model their conceptions of the structure of religious experience. While it is not the purpose of this discussion to offer an extensive critique of such analyses, they are systematically avoided here, because

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perceptual object is an act of perceptual isolation, not one of perceptual identification. Perceptual isolation demands the use of discriminative capacities in order to separate the primary object of perception from its wider perceptual background. With regard to the strangely squinted out cans, anyone who is able to squint in the appropriate way and who is able to distinguish the distinctive colour, cylindrical shape, smooth texture of the labels, sharply defined edges of the lids or other visible features of the cans from surrounding colours, shapes, textures or edges of the perceptual background may isolate those cans visually as objects for sensuous attention. Whether they be bean cans or anything else, objects of perception can be isolated sensuously in this way without being recognized, either correctly or incorrectly, as any particular kind of thing.

There is so little connection between the perceptual discrimination of objects and their perceptual recognition that perceptually discriminated objects often remain stable despite undergoing radical transformations in perceptual identification. In his discussion of a phenomenon he dubbed 'perceptual explosion', David Woodruff Smith wrote,

> My brother, whom we may call Smith, was touring the London Wax Museum. In need of information, he approached a nearby bobby. But no sooner had he started 'Excuse me, sir' than he realized, to his own chagrin and his companion's amusement, that he was speaking to a figure of wax. In such a case, we may say, one experiences an 'explosion' of perception: at first Smith sees (is perceptually presented with) a bobby, but then that perception 'explodes' and he sees a wax figure.[18]

Smith's own theoretical extrapolations from this instance may be ignored. For present purposes, it is important only to note that, while the primary object of perception visually discriminated by Smith's brother remained the same, the perceptual identification of that object shifted from the mistaken recognition of it as a bobby to the correct identification of it as a wax figure. At least relative to most metaphysical schemes, this shift represents a substantial categorial switch. Although they may look similar, human beings and wax statues typically are considered to be dramatically different kinds of things. Smith also wrote,

> Once in New York I saw a large sculpture in front of an office building but then realized it was an artfully engineered spray of water, a water 'sculpture': thus, at first I saw a physical object composed of glass or some shiny material, but then I saw a spraying of water, an event rather than a concrete individual.[19]

In this case, the perceptual object shifted from being perceptually recognized as a physical object to being identified as an event.

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these and similar models do not sufficiently distinguish acts of perception from acts of perceptual recognition. As a result, they do not capture the range of distinctions needed to demonstrate how the perception of an imperceptible deity can be rendered a coherent possibility.

[18] David Woodruff Smith, 'The Case of the Exploding Perception', *Synthese*, **41** (1979), p. 239.

[19] 'The Case of the Exploding Perception', p. 246.

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A brief review of additional perceptual explosions reveals the possibility of other types of recognitional shift. In some cases, such shifts occur without changes in category. An approaching person initially identified as Jane may be recognized as June, resulting in a recognitional shift from one individual to another of the same kind. Sometimes, the number of recognized items shifts. From a distance, the front end of one goose may visually merge with the tail end of another, resulting in the mistaken identification of the perceived object as a single goose. If an observer becomes aware of this recognitional mistake, the perception may explode, resulting in the perceptual recognition of the object visually discriminated, not as a single goose, but as two geese, one partially blocking the view of the other. Similarly, biologists may perceptually identify something as a single withered branch, only to realize subsequently that their visual attention is focussed upon two quite different things, a dead branch and a brown, stick-like insect perched on top of it.

One reason why humans can perceive nonexistent things so readily is because the objects of perception may be anything that is perceptually discriminable from the wider perceptual background. Since humans can differentiate two squinted out cans from the surrounding visual environment by squinting at a real bean can in just the right way, squinted out bean cans may serve as perceptual objects. Similarly, if two distant, existing geese visually overlap in just the right way, humans may direct their sensuous attention toward a single, nonexistent goose composed of the head of one real goose coupled with the tail end of another. In this case, while no deviant perceptual processes may be involved, the object of perception still might be something that does not actually exist, a single, unreal goose visually assembled out of parts taken from two real ones. For that matter, formerly existing items also may be perceptually isolated, despite the fact that they no longer exist. Thanks to the finite speed of light, it is still possible to look into the night sky and see stars that burned out years ago. All that is needed to single out such stars is the ability to isolate specific pinpoints of light visually from the surrounding darkness.

Normally, objects of perception are not sensuously presented in their entirety. In Husserl's example, the paper was seen only from this side at this angle. Sometimes, however, items may be sensuously isolated, even though no part whatsoever of those items is sensuously presented in experience. Consider high school texts. Frequently, students cover their texts in jackets made from old, brown paper bags, then deposit their books on kitchen tables. Since normal observers can perceptually discriminate such freshly jacketed books from the contrasting tablecloth background, a high school text may be seen on a kitchen table. That is, the text may serve as a visual object of perception, be isolated in the visual field, even though no portion of its surface is visibly presented. That which is singled out from the wider perceptual

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background is, in fact, a high school text, though it is covered in paper. In the same way, Muslim women completely enshrouded in veils may be seen walking along desert paths. Despite the fact that no part of the surface of their bodies is visible, such women can be seen, because the colours, shapes or textures of their clothing can be isolated visually from the surrounding background of rock and sand. By discriminating the colours of their clothing from the surrounding colours of the desert, items that are, in fact, Muslim women may be isolated as objects for visual attention.

Once perceptually isolated, objects of perception may or may not be recognized as being whatever they happen to be. Typically, acts of perceptual recognition proceed on the basis of perceptually accessible, characteristic marks. Although the items on a table may be seen without necessarily being recognized, observers familiar with the characteristic size or shape of chemistry books may notice the sizes or shapes of the items on the table, thereby recognizing those items as being high school chemistry texts. Since the marks used as bases for acts of perceptual recognition may be as natural as the distinctive shape of maple leaves or as arbitrary as the bright plastic tags affixed to the ears of a local farmer's cattle, the observable marks used for recognizing perceived items need not be connected in any way with essences, essential natures, definitional properties or even standardized ways of appearing. Rodents, for example, can be recognized as being chipmunks in any number of ways. Since chipmunks usually have characteristic stripes, their stripes might be construed as being standard features displayed by normal chipmunks under normal circumstances. More boldly, if it is assumed that their stripes are produced by the genetic nature of chipmunks, then chipmunk stripes might be construed as being defining properties of chipmunks or visible manifestations of the very nature or essence of chipmunks. Whatever their status, whether the stripes are considered to be part of the normal appearance of chipmunks or definitive of their very nature, such stripes may serve as a basis for recognizing assorted rodents as chipmunks. Alternatively, the very same rodents might be recognized as being chipmunks by something as arbitrary and artificial as pink ear tags. While such tags would bear no significant connection to the essential nature of chipmunks, the defining properties of chipmunks or their standard ways of appearing, such tags still could provide an effective way of recognizing observed animals as being chipmunks.

Because the observable marks by which perceived items are recognized need not be connected in any way with standard ways of appearing, various items can be perceived and even recognized as being whatever they are, even when they do not sensuously display themselves precisely as they are. It is commonplace for straight sticks to appear bent under water, the bright yellow sun to appear red in a dense fog and long dead stars to appear to be shining brightly in the night sky. In fact, it is only under the most optimal

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perceptual conditions that objects are expected to display themselves as anything like what they truly are. Perhaps, in the full glare of a cloudless summer day, maples display themselves as they truly are. Certainly, under such conditions, most viewers would have no trouble whatsoever identifying maples by the distinctive shape of their leaves. In dim light or when stripped of their leaves in the dead of winter, however, maples may not display their specific nature so obviously. Under such unfavourable conditions, maples might look just like oaks or poplars to most observers, though perhaps trained botanists could find features by which to identify them properly.

Since the marks used for perceptual recognition need not be connected in any way with essences, essential natures or defining properties, perceptual objects may be recognized as being whatever they are, even when they do not sensuously display their essences, essential natures or defining properties, assuming they have any such things. Suppose an essentially straight stick, one straight by its very nature, were marked with a distinctive pattern of coloured bands. Submerged in a pond, that stick might appear bent. Nevertheless, anyone who could visually discriminate that essentially straight stick from its surrounding backdrop of mud and weeds could see it. Moreover, anyone who saw its distinctive bands and understood that such bands were used to mark essentially straight sticks could recognize that stick as being essentially straight, despite the fact that it looked crooked under water. Similarly, if Athena were an essentially female goddess who could disguise herself as a sailor, Telemachus would have had no trouble seeing her. Furthermore, if he had known that her distinctive, birdlike way of departing was characteristic of Athena, then when the sailor rustled off, Telemachus could have recognized the seafaring man who stood before him as being the essentially female goddess Athena.

Obviously, there is no guarantee that observers will process characteristic marks appropriately. Indeed, mistaken perceptual identifications are commonplace. Children may look at straight sticks under water and incorrectly conclude that they are bent, just as novice astronomers might look into the night sky and wrongly conclude that the bright stars they are watching still exist. On the other hand, just because sticks and stars sometimes are identified improperly, there is no reason to believe that the bent look of a stick under water or the current sparkle of a long dead star cannot be processed correctly. Adults normally have no trouble recognizing crooked looking sticks as straight and astronomers who are familiar with the distances of stars as well as the speed of light quickly and properly identify what they see in the heavens. In all of this, however, the point to be emphasized is that whether perceived objects are perceptually recognized, correctly or incorrectly, depends upon which characteristic marks are observed and how those marks are processed, not upon whether perceived objects sensuously present themselves or their essential natures in standardized ways.

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Between the extremes of correct and incorrect perceptual identification, there may be varying degrees of specificity. Knowledgeable golf enthusiasts might recognize Paul Azinger by his thin physique or his nervous, restless prowl back and forth on the green. Less informed spectators might recognize him only as a golfer or as a remarkably fidgety person. Some observers might recognize a white spot against the blue sky as nothing more than that, a white spot. Others might be able to identify it as anything from a flying golf ball to something as specific as a Top-Flite ball hit by the slashing stroke of Lee Trevino into the gentle arc of a perfect draw. Anyone with sufficient visual acuity to discriminate the image on a bright penny might identify it as anything from a shape stamped onto a coppery surface to the profile of a bearded man. Most Americans would recognize it easily as being the familiar face of Lincoln himself.

Finally, it is commonplace to use assorted aids in the service of perception and perceptual recognition. With the help of binoculars, bird watchers may see and identify birds beyond the range of normal human eyesight. With his telescope, not only could Galileo see mountains on the moon, he could recognize them as being mountains. Similarly, from the comfort of their living rooms, Americans may watch the British Open on television, identifying everything from golf balls to Paul Azinger to perfect draws hit into tight pin placements. In the case of grainy newspaper photographs, viewers might have to resort to deviant perceptual techniques, perhaps screwing up their eyes in just the right way in order to see or identify various items in the pictures properly.

PERCEPTUAL DETECTIONS OF PRESENCE

Although he believed that sense perceptions of God were prohibited by God's essential incorporeality, Oakes argued that it was 'logically possible for there to occur sensory detections of God's presence.'[20] In everyday life, of course, sensory detections of presence are routine. Noticing a ruffling bulge in a curtain, parents may detect the presence of their child hiding unseen near a window. In the same way, Oakes believed that Moses might have been able to discern the divine presence in a pillar of cloud even though he could never perceive God directly.[21]

To understand the precise relation between perceptions and perceptual detections of presence, it would be helpful to have a clear analysis of both. Disappointingly, Oakes was so sceptical of the possibilities along these lines that he based his own conclusions upon a scattering of examples rather than upon careful explications.[22] Still, while borderline or ambiguous instances

[20] 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', p. 364.

[21] For Oakes's own, considerably more subtle argument and defence of his position, see 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', pp. 357–67.

[22] 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', p. 359.

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might complicate the situation, a consideration of several cases can yield more benefit than Oakes may have imagined. To begin, compare a child who is easily visible in a room with one whose presence is only detectable behind a curtain. One is visible, while the other is not. This seems to suggest that the fundamental difference between perceptibility and perceptual detectability should be drawn in terms of causal role. Perceived children typically play special, standardized roles in the causal chains leading up to their perception, causal roles that are not played by children whose presence is merely detected. This causal contrast, however, is not universal, since the causal processes that precipitate perceptions are not always standard ones. Some things, like faces in blurry photographs or squinted out bean cans, may be perceived only by employing deviant causal processes. Other things, like shadows, are readily perceived without playing any causal role at all in their perception. Still other items remain unseen, despite playing appropriate causal roles in the perceptual process. When light refracts and reflects off water droplets in just the right way, it is rainbows rather than the water droplets that are perceived.

It might be thought that at least part of a perceived child always is sensuously presented to observers, while no part of a child whose presence is merely detected is ever sensuously presented. Remarkably, this suggested contrast between perceptions and perceptual detections of presence will not do either. Both high school texts completely enshrouded in brown paper covers and Muslim women clothed from head to foot may serve as objects of perception, even though no parts of their surfaces are sensuously displayed. Moreover, many things that sensuously present themselves in whole or in part remain unperceived. Some are unperceived simply because they are not isolated out as perceptual objects. Frequently, for example, plainly visible birds are missed among the branches of a bush, though their presence might be detected by hearing the fluttering of their wings. Along rather different lines, Brian McLaughlin noted that

> Seeing one brick of a brick building may not count as actually seeing the building. But we count someone as seeing the Atlantic Ocean who sees only a very small part.[23]

If a large billboard shields all but one brick of a building from view, part of the building is sensuously displayed, yet the building itself does not serve as an object of perception. Nevertheless, by noticing the exposed brick, observers might detect the presence of the building hidden behind the billboard. In the same way, if a wisp of hair curled out from behind a bulging curtain, seeing that wisp might be enough to permit the presence of a hidden child to be detected. Still, seeing only that wisp of hair would not count as seeing the child.

The fundamental clue to a more appropriate basis for discriminating acts

[23] Brian P. McLaughlin, 'Perception, Causation, and Supervenience', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, **9** (1984), p. 581.

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of perception from perceptual detections of presence emerges from one of Oakes's comments regarding detections of the presence of God. He wrote,

> it is unreasonable to expect that a sunset (or whatever) that afforded a visual detection of God's presence to *someone* who witnessed it would thereby be a sunset (or whatever) that afforded a visual detection of God's presence to *everyone* … who witnessed it … [24]

Watching the same sunset, one observer might visually detect the presence of God, when another does not. This point, of course, is not unique to perceptual detections of the divine. It is a standard feature of any perceptual detection. Confronted with the same bulging curtain, one observer might detect the presence of a child, while another percipient may stare directly at the bulge without detecting the presence of anything at all behind the curtain.

This obvious fact indicates that perceptual detections of presence involve something beyond mere perception. One observer extracts information from the perceptual field that is missed by another. In the case of perceiving a bulge in a curtain, one observer realizes that the bulge marks the presence of a hidden child, while another observer takes the bulge as indicative of nothing further.[25] To employ the terminology introduced earlier, if perceptions are acts of sensory isolation, then anything that can be sensuously discriminated from its surrounding perceptual background can be perceived. Among the diverse sorts of items that may be so isolated, some may be perceptually recognized as being whatever they happen to be by appropriately processing characteristic, perceptible marks. Other perceived items may not be so recognized. Sensory detections of presence, however, incorporate acts of recognition that are based upon acts of perceptual isolation, though what is recognized as being present is not itself the object perceived. In the perceptual detection of the presence of a child, an observer visually isolates the bulge in a curtain as a perceptual object, then recognizes that bulge as a telltale sign of a child hiding behind the curtain. By contrast, an observer who does not perceptually detect the presence of the hidden child behind the curtain may visually isolate the very same bulge as a perceptual object, yet fail to take that bulge as indicative of anything at all behind the curtain. If the telltale mark of the hidden child is a wisp of hair, that wisp is perceived by visually isolating it. Then, that wisp is taken as indicative of the presence of something that is not visually isolated as an object of perception, a hidden child lurking behind the curtain. In the example from Oakes, the viewer who perceptually detects the presence of God in a sunset does so by processing perceptually accessible marks of divine presence, marks that another observer also may see, but does not process appropriately.

[24] 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', p. 367. Emphasis in original.

[25] See 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', pp. 361ff, for the way that Oakes handles the informational aspect of perceptual detections of presence.

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Both acts of perceptual recognition and perceptual detections of presence typically proceed on the basis of perceptually accessible, characteristic marks. The difference between the two resides not in the characteristic marks themselves, but in what those marks are taken to indicate. Marks used in perceptual recognitions are employed to identify objects that are themselves perceived, while marks used in perceptual detections of presence are employed to identify items that are present, yet not themselves isolated out as objects of perception. So, in a case where pink ear tags are used to identify chipmunks, the marks may be entirely artificial. If the chipmunks themselves are isolated out as perceptual objects from the surrounding backdrop of straw, their pink tags might be used to recognize those rodents perceptually as being chipmunks. On the other hand, if the tags were removed and hung on the side of the cage, they could permit the perceptual detection of the presence of unseen chipmunks hidden under the straw. For that matter, even if the ear tags remained attached to chipmunks that had burrowed under the straw, so long as the pink tags remained visible, they could be taken as indicative of the presence of unseen chipmunks. In the case of maple trees, the characteristic shapes of their leaves offer natural rather than artificial clues for recognizing perceived trees as maples. Should the leaves fall to the ground, their characteristic shapes scattered across the forest floor might be taken as indications of the unseen presence of the trees above. Whether attached or unattached, artificial or natural, the very same marks that allow the perceptual recognition of perceived items under some conditions, may be taken only to indicate the presence of those items in other circumstances, when those items themselves remain unperceived.

As the examples surveyed here suggest, what is isolated out from the surrounding background as a perceptual object varies from case to case. Downtown, a distinctive style of brick may characterize a specific building on Main Street. If the entire building, save one brick, were shielded from view, seeing and recognizing that brick might permit an observer to detect the presence of the building. Nevertheless, since only one brick was visible, seeing it alone would not normally count as seeing the building itself. Even if a surrounding section of wall were visible, seeing that larger section probably would not be enough to count as seeing the building either. By contrast, if only a single stretch of the Atlantic Ocean were seen from shore, seeing merely that miniscule part, proportionally speaking, could still count as seeing the Atlantic. If observers were equipped with the proper geographical information, they might even perceptually recognize what they saw as being the Atlantic. Under certain conditions, despite the fact that they are not themselves perceptually present, some things can be both perceived and perceptually recognized. This is the case with high school texts covered in brown paper. By noticing the characteristic bulk, size and shape of a visible cover, a particular book not only may be perceived, it may be

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recognized as being an advanced chemistry text. When stuffed into an uncut shopping bag, the text may no longer be isolated out as an object of perception, though its presence might be detected by noticing the bulge protruding from the side of the shopping bag. As the face of Lincoln in a fuzzy photograph or mountains on the moon demonstrate, nonstandard perceptual techniques, such as using squints or telescopes, also may be employed to isolate perceptual objects, objects that may or may not be perceptually recognized as being whatever they happen to be.[26]

PERCEIVING IMPERCEPTIBLES

Many things are beyond the range of human perception, such as sounds that are too faint to hear or stars that are too far away to see. No doubt, if faint sounds were louder or distant stars closer, they could be perceived. So, at least some imperceptibles that are currently beyond the range of human perception may become perceptible, in principle anyway. On the other hand, some items appear to be imperceptible in a more formidable way. Being essentially imperceptible, their very nature seems to place them beyond the reach of human experience. Both Aquinas and Oakes were convinced that incorporeals fall into this latter class. Being essentially imperceptible, there is something about the very nature of incorporeals that renders them unobservable. In the case of God, Oakes explained,

> *being unobservable* is a property that God has *essentially*; for those at home with 'possible-world' semantics, this amounts to the claim that *being unobservable* is a property that God exemplifies at every possible-world at which he exists.[27]

Not everyone, of course, is comfortable with references to essences, essential natures or, for that matter, analyses in terms of possible worlds. Nevertheless, presuming the intelligibility of such references, Oakes equates being essentially unobservable with being unobservable in every possible world in which the essentially unobservable item exists.

Perhaps surprisingly, this comment from Oakes does not quite place God beyond the range of human observation. On one construal of the argument, of course, all is smooth sailing. If '*x* is unobservable … ' is taken simply to mean '*x* cannot be observed under any conditions or circumstances whatsoever … ', then the logical moves envisioned by Oakes become unproblematic. That is, if essentially unobservable items are unobservable in every possible world in which those items exist and, moreover, this just means that such items can never be observed in those possible worlds, no matter

[26] As some of these examples suggest, due to the general untidiness of everyday life and language, borderline or ambiguous cases may arise. Fortunately, since the line of argument developed here does not demand any universally sharp boundary between perceptions and perceptual detections of presence, such cases can be safely ignored, at least for present purposes.

[27] 'Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability', p. 357. Emphasis in original.

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what conditions or circumstances might prevail, then it certainly would be safe to conclude that an incorporeal God, if essentially unobservable in this sense, would never be observed anywhere by anyone.

Unfortunately, this particular construal, though perhaps initially attractive, ultimately trivializes the fundamental issue at stake. By rendering the requisite argumentative steps purely analytic, the centrepiece of the argument, which is the claim that there is something about the very nature of incorporeal beings that renders such beings utterly beyond the range of human perceptual capacities, is replaced by a set of logically impeccable, but purely tautologous transformations. What Aquinas believed to be an important point about the connection between incorporeality and imperceptibility is reduced to a sequence of transitions from one definitional stipulation to another. Perhaps more importantly, this way of construing unobservability obscures a crucial fact about the actual world. In this present world, which most logicians would be anxious to include among the logically possible ones, certain items are quite naturally categorized as unobservable, perhaps even essentially so. Nevertheless, there are times when some of these unobservable items are observed. This would seem to imply that, in at least one important sense of the term, unobservability does not automatically preclude the possibility of human perceptual access.

Consider microbes. If it is assumed that microbes have a nature or essence, perhaps a genetic one, then it is easy to imagine that the very nature or essence of microbes would be responsible for many of their features, perhaps including size. If this were true, if the microbial essence determined the size of microbes, then it would be reasonable to say that microbes are essentially as small as they are. Due to their very nature, they are so small that people with normal vision cannot visually isolate them as perceptual objects from their surrounding microbial environments. So, if size were a matter of essence for microbes, then they would be as small as they are in every possible world in which they exist. Now, if human visual capacities also were a matter of essence, then humans could not resolve microbes as perceptual objects in any possible world.[28]

Clearly, none of this would make it impossible to see microbes. Even if size were an essential attribute of microbes and current visual capacities were essential to humans, recent generations of people have been able to observe microbes without difficulty. Thanks to the invention of microscopes, bright lights and, in some cases, special staining techniques, observers now can isolate microbes visually from their surrounding environments. With the aid of modern technology, it is possible to view microbes and many other things that, perhaps by their very nature, are too small to see. Moreover, the crucial

[28] What is or is not possible in a possible world is, of course, a matter of notorious dispute. Fortunately, as should become clear in the remainder of this discussion, problems connected with identifying possibilities in possible worlds is not a central one. The pivotal consideration that permits essentially unobservable items to be observed is that things need not appear as they essentially are.

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factor that permits this recent possibility is fundamentally perceptual, not technological. While microscopes, bright lights and staining techniques may play important roles, the true foundation for being able to perceive essentially imperceptible things of this sort is the fact that objects of perception need not appear as they essentially are.

As has been noted, perceptual objects must be perceptually isolated from their surrounding environments in order to be perceived. To be so isolated, however, perceptual objects need not sensuously display themselves as they actually or essentially are. The bright yellow sun can be singled out as a perceptual object despite appearing dimly red in a morning fog. Under a hot desert sky, a distant patch of dry road may be observed, though it appears wet. Moreover, what goes for accidental qualities applies to essential ones as well. Even an essentially straight stick may appear crooked under water. If there were such things as essentially invisible people, smearing their faces with opaque grease paint would render them visible. Along less fanciful lines, detectives can make invisible fingerprints visible by dusting them. Even if the very nature of fingerprints made them invisible, dusting them would allow them to contrast sufficiently with their surrounding perceptual backgrounds so that they could be isolated as perceptual objects. In scientific contexts, not only do optical microscopes make it possible to see microorganisms too small to be resolved by unaided human eyes, electron microscopes allow the luxury of seeing things that are too small even to reflect visible light. Notwithstanding their actual or even essential invisibility, given the aid of proper equipment and sufficient magnification, many of these indescribably tiny things can be projected on to movie screens, thereby appearing as big as houses. Insofar as this world is concerned, then, to say that a microbe or anything else is, by its very nature, essentially unobservable is not to say that it can never be observed, but only that it cannot be isolated as an object of perception without appearing otherwise than as it essentially is.

DIVINE MANIFESTATIONS

As the history of technology reveals, it is difficult to know what unobservable things may or may not eventually be observed in the course of everyday life. Before the invention of television and satellite transmission, people could not imagine that anyone living in the United States would be able to watch the British Open. Before high altitude flight became a reality, who would have thought that the twisting flight paths of jets would become visible as streaking white contrails? Prior to the recognition that light travels at a finite speed and that the heavens stretch for countless millions of miles, no one would have believed that long dead stars still could be seen burning brightly thousands of years after their deaths.

Returning to the religious ideas of ancient Greece, if Athena really had

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been capable of the transformations envisioned by Homer, then despite her essentially femininity, she could have presented herself visibly to Telemachus in the guise of a sailor. No doubt, disguised as a sailor, Telemachus would not have seen Athena as she truly was. Still, so long as Telemachus could have isolated that particular sailor in his field of vision, he would have been able to see quite clearly someone who was, in fact, the essentially female goddess Athena. Moving to a more recent religious tradition, the Creed of Nicea claims that Jesus was 'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father … ',[29] If this important Christian affirmation should turn out to be correct, then whoever saw Jesus, saw God, someone of the same essence as the Father.

Obviously, it is difficult to know what a god might be able to do. Perhaps Athena could not have transformed herself into the bodily form of a sailor. Maybe the Creed of Nicea is mistaken and Jesus was nothing more than an unusually godly human being. Fortunately, for the purposes of this discussion, it is necessary neither to probe the depths of Greek mythology nor to penetrate the mysteries of Christian doctrines regarding the true nature of Jesus. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that whether Telemachus could observe Athena in the form of a sailor or the twelve disciples could perceive God in the person of Jesus are not matters to be determined primarily by reference to the extent of human perceptual capacities. It is the identities of that ancient sailor and of Jesus that are of critical importance. So long as that sailor and Jesus could be visually isolated from their surroundings, both could be seen. If that sailor were, in fact, the goddess Athena in disguise, then in seeing the sailor, Telemachus would have seen an Olympian goddess. Similarly, if God the Father were essentially incorporeal and eternal and if Jesus were of this same essence as the Father, then anyone who saw Jesus in his bodily form would have seen an essentially eternal and incorporeal God. Walking along the shores of Galilee, Jesus obviously would not have displayed this divine essence visibly. Instead, like microbes that are essentially too small to see, he would have appeared other than as he essentially was. On the other hand, if Jesus were not God, but turned out to be merely a godly human being, then in seeing Jesus, his disciples would not have seen God at all, but simply another human being, though perhaps an unusually holy one.

[29] Ed. John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 30–1. For present purposes, it is not necessary to determine whether this translation of the creed is the best one. The original language was *homoousion to patri*. Among alternative translations currently used by practising Christians, ed. LindaJo Kim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 15 offers two. Instead of 'of the same essence as the Father … ', the Creed of Nicea (Traditional) reads 'being of one substance with the Father … ', while the Creed of Nicea (Ecumenical) reads 'of one being with the Father … '. The point at issue here is not to determine the exact status of Jesus nor even what those who produced this particular creed might have intended to claim, but only to argue that specific essences do not stand as insuperable obstacles to ordinary human perception, since things may appear other than as they essentially are.

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Since perceptual recognition typically proceeds on the basis of characteristic identifying marks, marks that need not be connected in any direct way whatsoever with essential natures, Athena could have been recognized by Telemachus as being an essentially female goddess, despite the fact that she appeared to him in the guise of a sailor. Indeed, as Homer told the tale,[30] her sudden departure like a bird taking flight allowed Telemachus to recognize the man present before him as being the goddess Athena. Assuming that Athena really could disguise herself as a sailor, there is nothing mysterious about any of this. No matter how deceptive appearances might be, perceptual recognition can proceed straightforwardly, so long as relevant, sensuously accessible identifying marks are processed properly. If an essentially straight stick were to appear crooked when plunged into a crystal pool of water, young children might be fooled by its deceptive appearance. Nevertheless, practiced observers who noticed some telltale sign of its essential straightness, perhaps colour-coded stripes prominently displayed on one end of the stick, would be able to recognize that crooked looking stick as being essentially straight. In the same way, if Jesus were essentially eternal or incorporeal, his appearance as a thirty-year-old man might be deceptive to many of his contemporaries. Despite appearances, however, people who saw Jesus might have used appropriate, sensuously discriminable identifying marks, marks that could have been as arbitrary as the colour code on the end of an essentially straight stick, to recognize Jesus as being of the same nature as his essentially eternal, incorporeal Father.

As in more ordinary perceptual cases, whether the divine itself is actually perceived or its presence merely detected depends upon what can be isolated as a perceptual object from its surrounding environment, what characteristic marks are perceptually present and what those marks may be taken to indicate. No doubt, anyone with suitable visual capacities could have isolated Jesus as a perceptual object during his lifetime. Like high school texts covered with brown paper jackets or Muslim women enshrouded in veils, Jesus might have been so isolated, even when no part of the surface of his body was visibly presented. When perceived, Jesus could have been recognized as being whatever he was by correctly processing sensuously accessible, characteristic marks. Perhaps his disciples could recognize their Lord by his seamless tunic which, according to John 19:23, was divided among the soldiers at his crucifixion. If his disciples also knew, like the Creed of Nicea declares, that their Lord was 'true God of true God, … of the same essence as the Father … ',[31] then, in noticing his seamless tunic, they would have been able to recognize the person before them as true God, someone who shared his Father's essence, despite the fact that neither his divinity nor his essential nature were themselves visibly displayed. On the other hand, if his

[30] See *The Odyssey* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 11.
[31] *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, pp. 30–1.

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disciples knew that Jesus was nothing more than an unusually godly human being, then their notice of his distinctive tunic would have permitted them only to recognize the person before them as being that especially godly person.

If just a fragment of his tunic remained visible as Jesus whisked around a corner, his disciples no longer would have been able to isolate him visually as a perceptual object. Still, what they could isolate visually, that fragment of tunic, might give them a sufficient basis for detecting the presence of their Lord around the corner. As in cases of perceptual recognition, precisely what his disciples could have perceptually detected as present around the corner would have depended upon precisely what that fragment of visible tunic signified. If his disciples had known their Lord to be God, then by noticing that distinctive fragment of tunic, they could have detected the presence of God around the corner. Alternatively, if they had known that Jesus was nothing more than a godly man, then they would have been able to detect only the presence of that holy person around the corner.

In the final analysis, then, the possibility of sensory encounters with the divine does not turn primarily upon questions surrounding the natural limitations of human perception, essential unobservability or the essential incorporeality of God, but upon what the divine can or might be willing to do. Anything that can be sensuously discriminated from its perceptual background can be perceived, no matter what sort of thing it may be and no matter what sort of process may be used to effect its sensuous discrimination. Moreover, perceived objects may be recognized as being whatever they are, whether or not they sensuously display their true or essential natures. All that is required is the proper processing of sensuously accessible identifying marks, marks that may be entirely arbitrary, connected in no direct way with essences or essential natures. Whether perceived items are themselves perceptually recognized as divine or merely used as a basis for perceptually detecting the presence of divinity depends upon what various sensuously accessible marks may be taken to indicate, whether they indicate something about the identity of objects that are themselves perceived or only something about items that may be present, though not themselves perceived.

Obviously, theological opinions over the centuries have differed widely regarding what the divine might or might not do. Xenophanes, for example, was convinced that it was unfitting for the true god to take on a bodily form. As the Creed of Nicea indicates, however, many Christians have taken issue with that claim, arguing that the incarnation of Jesus was not only fitting, it was the supreme act of divine love. If Xenophanes should turn out to be on the correct side of this particular controversy, then perceptions of embodied divinities would never occur, not because of any limitations in human perceptual capacities, but only because of divine scruples against embodiment. On the other hand, if the Creed of Nicea should be correct, then

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perceptions of an embodied God are not merely possible, they were commonplace along the shores of Galilee about two thousand years ago. At that time, seeing an embodied God demanded nothing more than spotting Jesus. No doubt, few of those who noticed Jesus along the Sea of Galilee would have perceptually recognized him as God incarnate. Nevertheless, whether appropriately recognized or not, if the Creed of Nicea is accurate, then those who saw Jesus would have seen someone who was, in fact, God in bodily form. The goal here, of course, is not to take sides in this or any other theological debate, ancient or modern, but only to argue that sensory encounters with the divine, even sensory perceptions of an essentially imperceptible deity, are not necessarily beyond the range of human possibility.

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