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The myth of religious experience

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Abstract: **I argue that people do not and cannot have religious experiences that are perceptual experiences with theological content and that provide some justification for the belief in God. I discuss William Alston's resourceful defence of this idea. My strategy is to say that religious perception would either have to be by means of one of the ordinary five senses or else by means of some special sixth religious sense. In either case insoluble epistemological problems arise. The problem is with perceiving God as God, which we need to do if reasons to believe in God are to be generated. To do so, we would have to perceive the instantiation of His essential properties – being all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. But perceiving the instantiation of these properties of God, even by some special sixth religious sense, is impossible. Hence, God cannot be perceived either by the ordinary five senses or by a sixth religious sense. Religious perceptual experiences are a myth.**

Introduction

Can we perceive God? Are there perceptual experiences of God, which justify those who have them in believing in God?

In his impressive book *Perceiving God*, William Alston maintains that some people have perceptual experiences with theological content (Alston 1991). And he thinks that these experiences give these people some justification for their religious belief that God exists. This justification is *pro tanto* justification; it can be outweighed by reasons pointing the other way. But in the absence of countervailing evidence, Alston thinks that religious experience has enough evidential weight to provide an all-things-considered justification for belief in God.

Many critics have taken a weak line of attack against Alston. Either they grant that people have perceptual experiences with theological content but deny that they are veridical, or else they deny that they support religious beliefs. My view is that we should mount a stronger line of attack. It is not that religious perceptual experiences are not veridical, or that they have little or no evidential weight – but that there aren't any. They are a myth.

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Theological perception, causal interaction, and spatio-temporality

It is difficult to think of principled arguments to the effect that a certain concept can or cannot enter into the content of perceptual experiences. How are we to decide whether there can be perceptual experiences with moral, aesthetic, mathematical, counterfactual, micro-physical, or theological content? Whether we have perceptual experiences with theological content is particularly controversial.

It cannot be denied that people have *some* sort of experiences, which they describe in religious terms. But it is controversial, firstly, whether those experiences have theological *content*, and secondly, whether those experiences are *perceptual* experiences. If experiences have theological content, then they represent theological objects, events, or states of affairs. If the experiences are perceptual experiences with theological content, then they have evidential weight with respect to the belief in God.

This allows us to distinguish between perceptions and emotions with theological content. Maybe people *love* or *fear* God. But such emotions derive partly *from* the belief in God and provide no epistemic support *for* that belief. The emotion should be based on the belief, not vice versa. Compare pride: pride is not evidence for thinking that something has some positive quality or that it stands in some relation to oneself, because the emotion should be based (partly) on such beliefs, not vice versa. Similarly, fear of God cannot be evidence for the belief in His existence, because the fear should be based (partly) on the belief in His existence, not vice versa. Hence, if there are religious emotions, they provide no rational support for religious beliefs. On the contrary, religious beliefs rationalize such emotions.[1]

This presumes that the emotions in question have a definite God-content as opposed to having a more indefinite nebulous content or no God-content. What if the emotions are of a more nebulous sort, or have no God-content? Could such feelings provide support for the belief in God's existence? If they were to do so, we would need an independent correlation of such feelings with God's existence – which presumably we don't have if such feelings are our sole reason for believing in God. So let us ignore such nebulous emotions.

I will argue either that people do not have experiences with theological content, or if they do, they are not perceptual experiences.

Alston seems to me to be unduly sanguine about the existence of religious experiences of the sort he requires. The following is the alternative sceptical hypothesis:

(A) People have theological beliefs, or they think they have such beliefs.
(B) People have experiences, which they think are religious and perceptual, but in fact these experiences are either contentless non-intentional experiences, or they have content but not theological content, or they are not perceptual experiences.

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(C) People mistakenly project theological content on to such experiences or they mistakenly classify them as perceptual. That is, they mistakenly think of themselves as having had perceptual experiences as of theological objects, events, and states of affairs, such that those experiences provide epistemic support for religious belief.

We need to consider whether this *sceptical* scenario obtains or Alston's *sanguine* scenario.

This has not been the way the debate over religious experience has been conducted for the most part. To give one example: Richard Swinburne is another writer who argues for the belief in God from religious experience (Swinburne 1991, chapter 13). Like Alston, Swinburne assumes that there are religious perceptual experiences, and he then wants the debate to be about whether they provide sufficient reason to believe in God. Again, I say that we should not step on to this dialectical train in the first place. Swinburne operates with what he calls a 'principle of credulity', which is this: 'If it seems that there is present a table in the room, or a statue in the garden, then there probably is' (Swinburne 1991, 254–255). Swinburne thinks that, given this principle, the claims made on the basis of religious experience should stand unless there are special reasons to reject them. Michael Martin replies to Swinburne with many excellent objections to the 'principle of credulity' (Martin 1986). Martin has fun pointing out that on such a principle, we will soon be overburdened with fairies, goblins, and water nymphs, given the limited ways that Swinburne allows claims that there are such beings to be undermined. But Martin never questions Swinburne's basic assumption that there are religious perceptual experiences. Martin argues either that Swinburne's principle of credulity is defeated in the religious case or else that the principle itself is implausibly weak. But I think that we should question whether there is anything for it to get a grip on.

I shall argue that what makes trouble for the possibility of religious perceptual experience is the category difference between God and the usual sorts of things we perceive. God is a quite different sort of thing from Swinburne's table and statue, and He is a quite different sort of thing from Martin's fairies, goblins, or water nymphs. He is so different that we should doubt whether there are and could be perceptual experiences of Him, not merely whether perceptual experiences of Him (or 'as of' Him) have sufficient evidential weight (perhaps cashed out via something like Swinburne's principle of credulity) to provide reason for belief in God. My view is that perceptual experiences of God are *impossible*.

The question is: how can we argue over whether theological perceptual experiences are possible? The dialectic tends to take this form: some general criterion for perceptual experience is offered; Alston then tries to show either that religious experiences meet that criterion, or alternatively that the criterion is question-begging.

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A central example is that of causality. At a philosophical crux of his book, Alston concedes that perception has certain necessary causal conditions (1991, 63–66). If we have a perceptual experience of an X, then an X must play a causal role in producing that experience. Alston then goes on to say that God *does* cause perceptual experiences of God (1991, 64). All parties to the debate agree that perceptual experience involves a causal relation between experience and its object. But perhaps Alston is within his rights to say that this does not itself rule out the perceptual experience of God, since it might be that God is the cause of our experiences of Him.

Saying this does remove the *immediate* difficulty. But as Alston realizes, there is a question about how God *could* do this, because there is a problem over specifying the precise causal relation between God and our experience. Alston says: 'God intentionally presents Himself to the subject's awareness as so-and-so' (1991, 64). But the problem is: how, exactly, *can* God do this, given that He is what He is usually taken to be?

Alston rightly admits that it will not do to defend the claim that God is the cause of experiences of Him by saying that God created the whole world, and thus is also the cause of all our experiences along with everything else (1991, 64). For not everything that is a causal antecedent of an experience is represented in that experience. But this admission causes more difficulties than Alston realizes. Consider the Big Bang. The Big Bang is the cause of all current physical states of affairs, but when I look out of my window I do not perceive the Big Bang. That is, my perceptual experience does not represent it. Merely being an item in the causal chain leading to an experience does not suffice for being represented in it. Alston faces the question: why do we perceive God but not the Big Bang? We need some way of isolating the items in the causal chain which are privileged. This is a difficult question for Alston. How can God play the special *kind* of causal role that He needs to play in order to be represented in experience? God must cause our experiences in some more specific way than merely being *a* cause.[2]

Alston reacts to the issue over the causation of experience by trying to reverse the dialectic. He argues that we should not *begin* with assumptions about what kinds of causality are possible and *then* consider theological perceptual experiences. Instead, he says that we should first determine *that* we have theological perceptions, and *then* expand our view of what is causally possible (1991, 64–65).

This is a very interesting move. But it is not unproblematic. For having stipulated that psycho-theological interaction occurs, Alston never actually goes on to give an account of *how* God does it, even given some broad-minded view about the possibility of such causation. Psycho-theological causal interaction, on Alston's view, looks suspiciously like psycho-physical causal interaction on Descartes' dualist view of the mind. In both cases, there is an ad-hoc postulation of a causal process about which nothing can be said, and which is not really explanatory

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at all. This means that we should be reluctant to overturn the thought that such causal interaction is not possible. So Alston should not be allowed to reverse the dialectic with no cost. He owes us an explanation of how psycho-theological causal interaction is possible.

Alston could perhaps reply that psycho-theological causal interaction is simply a basic and fundamental kind of causal interaction, which cannot be explained in other terms. This move is parallel to a move that is sometimes made on Descartes' behalf over psycho-physical causal interaction. Perhaps psycho-physical causal interaction is basic, in the way that gravitational causation was once thought to be basic in the physical world. However, making that move commits Descartes to violations of the causal closure of the physical (see Lewis 1966). Similarly, on the assumption that religious experiences sometimes cause a person to have other mental states and make bodily movements, a parallel move of saying that psycho-theological causal interaction is basic would commit Alston to violations of the causal closure of the physical. This is something about which empirical science should have something to say.

We are uncomfortable with Cartesian psycho-physical causal interaction as a basic causal process because of the following argument. Firstly, we have general scientific and philosophical reasons to respect the physical closure principle. And secondly, neurophysiological scientists do not believe that there are physically uncaused brain events when people perform ordinary actions – so we have no reasons to reject the general principle of physical causal closure. A similar argument threatens psycho-theological causal interaction. If psycho-theological causal interaction occurs, then there are physically uncaused brain events. If science shows that there are no such physically uncaused brain events then psycho-theological causal interaction does not occur and Alston must be wrong. On the other hand, if science were to show that there are such physically uncaused brain events, then Alston *may* be right.

Unfortunately, I gather that, as things now stand, we lack any relevant empirical evidence. So far as I know, neurologists have not examined the brain during alleged religious perceptual experiences to check for brain events with no physical causes. Since Alston is committed to the falsity of the general principle of physical causal closure, he cannot avoid potential falsification by science. He is hostage to empirical fortune. However, since we currently lack empirical evidence either way, the appeal to the causal condition of perception and to the physical causal closure principle is dialectically inconclusive.

It might be suggested that there is another principle – one that is plausible on general grounds, independent of theology – that the cause of anything, including an experience, must stand in *spatio-temporal* relation to what it causes. The principle implies that if an experience of X is caused by X, then X must have spatio-temporal properties. This principle has a Kantian pedigree. For Kant, causality and spatio-temporality necessarily go together. But – someone might argue – the

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requirement that the cause of an experience is spatio-temporal rules out the experience of God. For God is not a part of the spatio-temporal world. I presume that Alston would respond by rejecting the general Kantian requirement as question-begging. He would say that God is a counter-example to the spatio-temporal principle. A theist is likely to say that *one* exception to the spatio-temporal requirement is God's causing the existence of the whole world; and if one exception is allowed, he might ask, why not more? However, when we discussed the causal requirement, we put the creation of the world to one side, because it did not suffice to explain how there could be perceptual experiences of God. Moreover, granting the creation of the world as an exception to the spatio-temporal requirement does not by itself encourage the idea that there are others. The appeal to the possibility of creation does not favour either side of the debate over religious perceptual experience.

Nevertheless – quite apart from issues to do with creation – Alston will insist that we have reason to believe that the spatio-temporal requirement fails. In particular, he will say that religious experiences are a counter-example, and as such give us reason to reject the requirement.

Compare the dialectical situation over abstract objects. If the spatio-temporal requirement holds, it means that we cannot be said to perceive abstract objects like universals or numbers – which is intuitively an attractive consequence. If we think that we nevertheless have knowledge of such objects, we have two options: (a) we can appeal to a priori intuition; or (b) we can embrace a holistic and indirect view of knowledge of abstract objects – that is, we do not perceive abstract objects but postulating them helps to explain other things that we do perceive. In either case, we should forget about perceptual experiences of those objects.

What we don't yet seem to be able to do is to force a similar dialectic over God. The Kantian spatio-temporal requirement has considerable intuitive appeal, but we need to find a non-question-begging way to argue for it in the face of someone who simply denies it. How can Alston be forced to take the Kantian medicine?

It seems that the appeal to spatio-temporality, as a dialectical weapon, fares no better than the appeal to causality: in the spatio-temporal case, Alston rejects the constraint, whereas in the causal case, he accepts the constraint and argues that the perception of God can satisfy it. We seem to have reached a dialectical impasse.[3]

Perceiving God with the five ordinary senses?

So far, we have seen that Alston is somewhat sanguine in thinking that theological perception is unproblematic; but on the other hand, I have to admit that I have not yet come up with a reason to think that there definitely are no theological perceptions.

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In order to try to break the dialectical impasse, then, let us explore the idea that if we are talking about perceptual experience, then the experience must correspond to *some* sense modality. Perception without a sense modality seems like a contradiction. We can now frame a dilemma: if we perceive God, it must be either with our regular five senses, or else with some special sixth religious sense modality.

Let us first suppose that it is the former.

If we perceive God with one of our five senses, then the Kantian requirement uncontroversially obtains: our sensing and that which we sense must stand in *spatial* relation to each other. If we think about visual or auditory experience, such a spatial requirement obviously holds. Our *visual* experience of something, for example, is an experience of something as *over there*, and having certain qualities. Visual perception involves thinking of the thing we perceive as standing in a certain spatial relationship to us. Auditory experience is similar. We think of a noise as coming from a certain direction (or at least from all around us). Touch also involves spatial commitment. And the introspective awareness of pain locates it at a certain place in our body. As we shall see, this spatial requirement makes serious trouble for theological perception involving such sense modalities.

The spatial requirement may not hold of all aspects of ordinary perceptual experience. Perhaps we experience purely 'two-dimensional' patterns of colour in our visual field or pure sounds ('sense data'). But religious experience cannot be like *that* because such experiences have no content that refers to something independent of them. Two-dimensional colour experiences or experiences of pure sound, if these occur, have no evidential weight (by themselves) with respect to judgements about the three-dimensional world. So they are hardly suitable models for Alston's experience of God. Maybe our faculties of taste and smell are more like two-dimensional colour experiences or the experiences of pure sound in that they do not involve spatio-temporal commitment in their content. These seem even less suitable models for Alston's experience of God. Can we *smell* God? Can we *taste* Him?

Hence, if we see, hear or touch God, the spatial requirement holds. If we perceive God by sight, hearing or touch, He has to have spatial properties.

What, exactly, would be wrong with saying that we have perceptual experiences of God, and that He is spatially located? Why not just *agree* that God is represented in our experience as standing in a spatial relation to us? Imagine someone who says this. This is not Alston's view, but let us take a detour to imagine someone who asserts that we do see or hear a God who has spatial properties, and thus stands in a spatial relationship to us.[4]

There are two persuasive but not decisive metaphysical objections to the idea of a God who has spatio-temporal properties. The first metaphysical objection is that such a God would have to be a *part* of the physical world. But that seems to contradict the standard Judeo-Islamic monotheistic conception of God as

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indivisible. For if God takes up space then He has spatial parts. But a part can exist without the whole. So if God is a spatial God, His absolute unity would be lost. However, I gather that Aristotle denied that something that is extended necessarily has parts (Aristotle 1985). Aristotle apparently thinks that something has parts only if it can be divided. So someone might argue that if God is a unity then it follows from His nature that He cannot be divided, but it does not follow that He is not extended in space. Perhaps God is extended in space but has no parts and is not divisible. So maybe a spatial God could retain His indivisible unity. This seems pretty strange to me, but perhaps it is a possible position.

The second metaphysical objection is that even if a spatial God would be all-knowing and all-good, He could not be all-powerful. In order to be all-powerful, surely He would have to be of a different *order* of being. He would have to be that on which everything else *metaphysically depends*. A spatial God might be *more* powerful than anything else, but He couldn't be truly *all*-powerful. For everything in space has *some* causal powers, and if God is just another spatial thing, His power has to compete with theirs. However, it can be replied that a God who wins easily – infinitely easily – is still in some sense, all-powerful. Despite the intrinsic causal power of all spatial things, God wins effortlessly against them (whether or not they are metaphysically dependent on Him). So maybe a spatial God could be truly all-powerful.

The problem with the idea of a spatial God that I want to emphasize is epistemological rather than metaphysical. But before I describe the problem, I want to note a general point, which will run through the discussion that follows. Propositional attitudes can take *objects* or *states of affairs* as their intentional objects. We can fear *the bear* or fear *that the bear will eat me*. We can desire an ice cream or we can desire that I eat an ice cream. Similarly, we can perceive an object (such as a kangaroo) or we can perceive a state of affairs (that the kangaroo has the property of being grey). We can describe the latter by saying that we perceive the kangaroo *as* grey. The relation between these two kinds of perception is controversial. Perhaps, if we perceive X then there must be some F such that we perceive X as F. But clearly, in many cases, we can perceive X even though X has many properties that we do not perceive. Making this distinction enables me to concede to Alston that we can in principle perceive God in what we can call the purely 'objectual' sense. However, such perception cannot be *pro tanto* grounds for religious belief. To supply such grounds, we must perceive God *as* God. We need the perception of a divine *state of affairs* not merely a divine *object*.[5] So the fact that God causes a religious experience in us which is of Him is not enough to ground religious belief if we do not represent Him in our experience as God.

Now to the epistemological problem. There is a dilemma. A spatial God might be *locally* extended, as a spatial proper part of the world, or He might be *globally* extended over the whole world.[6] On the local view, God is in some places but

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not others. But on the global view, God is everywhere. Let us consider these two alternatives in turn.

On the local view, God takes up a restricted portion of space. For example, perhaps God is a one-metre ball of green light. Or perhaps God is identical with (or constituted by) some human being. Let us call such a view an 'incarnation' view. It might be argued that religious epistemology is less problematic once we embrace a conception of God that allows for incarnation, as, for example, in the ancient Egyptian, ancient Greek, or Christian religious traditions. For if God is identical with Pharaoh, Zeus, Jesus, or Elvis, say, then we can surely perceive him in the straightforward way that we perceive anything else.[7] The content of an incarnation view will depend on our view of the metaphysics of human beings. If mind-body dualism is true, God is incarnate in a non-spatial soul; whereas if materialism is true, incarnation implies spatial existence. If God is incarnate in a dualistic non-spatial soul, it is difficult to see how we might perceive Him. The epistemological problems are obviously severe.[8] So let us assume that God is incarnate in some physical body.

The epistemological problem with physical incarnation is that although we might have an experience of the physical thing that is God's incarnation, there seems to be an insurmountable problem about experiencing that thing *as* an incarnation of God. Why is this? In order to perceive a physical thing *as* God, we would need to have a perceptual experience with the representational content 'That physical thing is the incarnation of God'. That is, we would have to perceptually represent the instantiation of the incarnation relation. But this is surely problematic because, although we could perceive a physical thing that is in fact the incarnation of God, the incarnation relation between that thing and God is not a physical relation that we can be sensitive to with our ordinary sensory faculties. So we cannot perceive that relation with our five ordinary senses. And that means that we cannot have ordinary perceptual experiences that alert us to the fact that some physical thing is the incarnation of God.

I do not take this to be an argument against an incarnation view of God, only against perceiving the incarnation relation by means of our ordinary senses. To recap: we can think of, or perceive, a physical part of the world without representing God. Merely perceiving something that happens to be God or that happens to be the incarnation of God, if one does not realize that fact, provides no *pro tanto* evidential support for one's theological beliefs. To be perceptually aware of the incarnation relation, that relation would have to make a causal difference to which we can be sensitive. But if the incarnation relation were instantiated, it would be a non-physical, non-spatial relation. Our ordinary five senses are by their nature physical and spatial, so we cannot by means of them be sensitive to a non-physical, non-spatial relation. Hence, we cannot perceive *that* something is an incarnation of God with our five ordinary senses. Our mundane perception of a physical thing cannot have a Godly 'mode of presentation'. So,

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even if God's incarnation in something physical is conceivable and possible, it does not help to make intelligible the existence of ordinary perceptual experiences with theological content.

What about a global spatial God? On the globally extended view of God, everything in the world is a *part* of God (as Spinoza is usually supposed to have thought). So nothing can be a causal force over and against God.[9] But then there is surely an intractable problem about our perceptual confrontation with such a global God.

Of course, in a sense, if God is globally extended, we would perceive Him when we perceive anything, since we would perceive a part of Him – much in the way we might say that we see a shark by seeing its fin projecting above the water. The problem is that we could not perceive *that* the thing is part of Him, as we can perceive that the fin is part of the shark. Again, we need more than objectual perception.

In order to perceive a globally extended God *as* a globally extended God, we would have to perceive the whole physical world – the sum of everything that exists, and represent that whole as God. The trouble is that it is not possible to perceive the entire physical world. One reason is that there is too much of it! It reaches into the distant past and future, and into deep space. A second reason is that we are a part of the world, and we cannot perceive our very act of perceiving. So we cannot have a perceptual experience of the entire world, which includes that very perceptual experience. Maybe we can *conceive* of the whole world, but it is impossible for us to *perceive* it. So if God is identical with the whole world, we cannot perceive Him.

Furthermore, even if we *could* perceive the entire physical world, which is identical with God, we might still be unaware that what we were perceiving was God. We would not necessarily perceive the whole world *as* God. Perceiving the whole world would be one thing, perceiving it as God would be another. This is because the identity relation between God and the physical world is not a physical relation that we can be sensitive to with our ordinary five physical senses.[10]

Of course, we can have perceptual evidence for asserting identity claims between physical things, such as the morning star and the evening star. The difference is that in such cases one has separate perceptual access to the morning star and to the evening star, and on that basis (in part) one identifies them. Perhaps we can even see that they are identical. But the theological epistemology we are considering is not like this. It is not that we perceive some physical thing and perceive God and then arrive at the view that they are identical (or that one is the incarnation of the other). Rather, the appeal to the identity relation (or the incarnation relation) is supposed to explain how we perceive God *by* perceiving a physical thing.[11]

Someone might argue that we *can* see God when we see ordinary human things if we do so in the light of the relevant background theological beliefs. Suppose

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someone has a background belief to the effect that Napoleon is the incarnation of God. He might then describe seeing Napoleon as seeing God. And if Napoleon *is* God, then, on this view, he would be perceiving God *as* God. Perhaps seeing Napoleon as God is theologically 'theory-laden'. However, we can only say this at the cost of conceding that the experience itself does not provide *pro tanto* evidential support for the theological belief. For the background belief is the source of theological content. Surprisingly, the appeal to the theory-ladenness of observation undermines rather than supports the idea that we can perceive God, in an evidential sense.

Of course, the more one downgrades the concept of God, the easier it is to perceive Him. If God is just one's Head of Department, the Dean of the Faculty, or Napoleon, then He is easily perceived. No problem. But assuming that the incarnation view aspires not to depart too much from something like the traditional monotheistic conception, it cannot explain the idea that we are perceptually confronted with an incarnation of God *as* the incarnation of God. Even if the idea of incarnation makes sense, the incarnation relation is perceptually inscrutable.

I conclude that we cannot perceive God with our familiar five sense modalities. For one thing, all those modalities involve a spatial dimension, which seems to be in tension with aspects of our concept of God – unity and all-powerfulness. These metaphysical difficulties may be able to be finessed. What cannot be finessed are the epistemological difficulties. Although we might perceive that with which God is identical or that in which He is incarnate, the identity and incarnation relations are not relations that we can be sensitive to by means of our ordinary five senses. So on either the local or global spatial view, although we might perceive something that happens to be God, we could not perceive Him *as* God. And that means that we cannot have ordinary perceptual experiences that figure *as pro tanto* reasons to believe in God. We cannot perceive God with our five ordinary senses.[12]

Perceiving God with a sixth sense?

Let us now turn to the alternative view according to which there is some kind of *sixth* sense that tracks a non-spatial God. This sixth sense is unlike our ordinary perceptual faculties. The five ordinary senses involve a spatial relation between the perceiver and the perceived, but a sixth sense might not. This sixth sense would be a special *religious perceptual organ*! Alston might agree that God does not exist in *space*. But he might reject a general spatial requirement on perception as question-begging.

When one reads many of the accounts of allegedly religious experience that Alston cites in his book – which are almost all from the Christian tradition – one usually gets the impression that it is *not* a special sixth religious non-spatial sense that is operating. It is rather that unusual religious objects, events, and properties

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are being perceived by one or more of the ordinary five senses. For instance, the people often describe themselves as being aware of God's *presence* – and this seems to mean His proximity in space. This can only be avoided if we are to attribute a lot of metaphor to the accounts. But if we allow so much metaphor, why not go further and say that the appeal to perception itself is metaphorical? However, let us assume that we can metaphorically reinterpret these accounts, and we can understand the experiences as lacking spatial content.

A sceptic about religious experience might try to make mileage out of the fact that objects and events that are perceived by one sense modality are typically perceivable by others. But Alston's reply would be swift: even if this principle holds only for the perception of spatial and temporal objects and events (which is not obvious since perhaps light can only be perceived by sight), there might be some things, such as God, that can *only* be perceived by a distinctive religious perceptual organ.

One writer who attempted to argue against the sixth-sense view is Anthony Kenny. He describes the sixth religious sense as a 'secret, internal sensory capacity' (Kenny 1992, 39), and he gives two arguments against it. But both his arguments are obviously question-begging. First, of what he calls the 'external' senses (=the ordinary five senses), he says that we need to stand in 'bodily relationship' to the thing sensed (Kenny 1992, 40). And he says that external sensing is a 'public' activity, and whether we have sensed something is 'interpersonally' checkable. Kenny then asserts that this would also have to be true of the sixth religious sense. Kenny thereby begs the question against the sixth inner sense idea by assuming 'publicity' and 'interpersonal' checkability. What goes for the ordinary external five senses need not carry over to the sixth inner sense. Second, Kenny also makes what he thinks is a point of principle against the possibility of perceiving a God who is 'everlasting, unchanging and ubiquitous' via a sixth sense (Kenny 1992, 41). Kenny asserts that we need a *contrast* in order to perceive something (Kenny 1992, 42). So to perceive God, we need to discriminate God from non-God. Kenny thinks that we cannot do this if God is everlasting, unchanging, and ubiquitous. But the defender of religious experience can just deny that the normal contrasts and discrimination scenarios that are characteristic of our ordinary five senses carry over to the sixth religious sense. Moreover, a sixth religious sense need not function as Kenny supposes. It might either detect God's presence *or nothing at all*. It need not detect God's presence or something else's presence. It might be more like the way one senses states of one's body: one feels a sensation or one feels nothing. It is not the case that we are always monitoring different states of one's body and having a constant stream of conscious sensations. Sometimes one senses nothing. It might be the same with sensing God.

A sixth religious sense would be unconstrained by the spatial requirement. It would not be the experience of a being that stands in spatial relation to us.

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But what about time? There is now a choice: either the non-spatial God exists in time or not.

What if God is neither in space nor time? The main difficulty for the idea of a sixth sense that tells us about a non-spatial and non-temporal God is that we are bound to wonder how such a sixth-sense experience differs from non-empirical a priori intuition in anything but name. The view that although God is neither a spatial nor a temporal being, nevertheless we perceive Him is implausible and bizarre. What is implausible and bizarre is not simply the idea that we might *know* about such a being. For there might be a priori knowledge of abstract objects, even though we stand in no spatio-temporal relation to them. What is implausible and bizarre is the idea that we *perceive* such objects.[13] Even if we are armed with a special sixth religious sense, it is difficult to see how we can perceive a God who is outside both space and time. Without the spatial and temporal requirements, there is no sense at all in which we are talking about *perception*. Our ordinary notion of perception has evaporated. There is then nothing separating such 'perception' from a priori intuition. We might as well say that God is like a Platonic abstract object and thus inaccessible to perception.

So if we perceive God via a sixth religious sense, then although such perception may not need to abide by the spatial requirement, it does need to abide by the temporal requirement. God must exist in time to be perceived. On this story, when we have religious perceptions, we are causally sensitive to God; but contrary to the Kantian requirement, this does not go along with a spatial story. Psycho-theological causal interaction is not a causal story that manifests itself in space, but it *is* manifested in time. Ordinary sense experience involves space, time and causality, as Kant said, but the perceptual experience of God involves just the last two. (Presumably there is no temporal delay between the divine cause of our experiences of God and the experiences themselves; it is a case of instantaneous causation.)

We are, then, considering a view that falls between two extremes. On the one extreme, the Kantian requirement says that perceivable things must have both spatial and temporal properties. On the other extreme, dropping both spatial and temporal requirements means that we are no longer talking about perception. But perhaps there is a half-way house according to which perception necessarily involves temporal properties but not spatial properties. Perhaps X's perceiving Y does *not* involve X standing in a *spatial* relation to Y, but it *does* involve X standing in a *temporal* relation to Y. The temporal requirement on perception rules out the perception of abstract objects, such as numbers, but maybe not God. This might be a way to save the perceptual theorist. Perhaps this hybrid view is a safe harbour for Alston.

A temporal conception of God is not usually thought to be *as* incompatible with what God is supposed to be as the idea of a spatial God. There is surely something intuitively repellent about the idea of a spatial God, even if it is difficult to defend

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that intuition. But it seems not to be as intuitive as that there is something wrong with the idea of a temporal God. That is more controversial. Many thinkers conceive of God as 'outside' both space and time. But others thinkers conceive of him as 'outside' space but 'in' time. So *they* obviously think that the idea of a temporal God is coherent.

There are metaphysical objections to the temporal conception of God that parallel those we encountered with the spatial conception. First, if God is in time then He has temporal parts, even if He lasts an infinitely long time. But if He has temporal parts then it seems that His simple and fundamental unity is in jeopardy. For a temporal part can exist without a temporal whole. That objection may or may not be good depending on whether having parts implies being divisible. There is the Aristotelian way out. Second, there is a problem about God's power. If God is a temporal God, His creation of the whole temporal world is immediately problematic. But even if we concede that it is OK to say that creation takes place in time, God's omnipotence with respect to temporal things seems to be threatened. God is now just a temporal being like any other. For one thing, God will not be able to effect the past, assuming that backwards causation is impossible. But even putting that to one side, it might be said that the fact that all temporal things have causal powers, means that God's power has to *compete* with their power. So He cannot be all-powerful. God can only be truly *all*-powerful if He is outside time, and all temporal things depend on Him for their existence. This objection may or may not be good depending on whether the power remaining is enough. God is no longer that on which everything metaphysically depends, but He does win decisively against any causal competition. So this objection is not decisive.

It is the epistemological objections that I think are decisive against the hybrid view, just as I argued that they are decisive against the spatial view. But the epistemological objections are not quite the same. When discussing the idea of a spatial God, I argued that we cannot, by means of our ordinary five senses, perceive that the incarnation or identity relations hold either between God and some bounded physical thing or between God and the entire physical world. The argument was that if God is identical with or incarnate in the whole physical world or part of it then there is no way we can be physically sensitive to the instantiation of the identity or incarnation relations by means of our ordinary five senses. But the sixth-sense view does not appeal to anything like the spatial conception of God. God is not thought of as incarnate in or identical with some limited physical object or the whole physical world. Rather He exists in time, at every moment sustaining the physical world and transcending it. And our sixth-sense religious perceptual experiences are directly of Him and of His properties. There is no need for a spatial and physical relation between perceiver and perceived. So the arguments that I directed against the idea of perceiving a spatially extended God will not work against the idea of perceiving a non-spatial but temporal God. We need different arguments.

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What exactly would the perceptual experience of a non-spatial God be? What would it be to perceive God by means of a sixth religious sense?

I have already emphasized that the believer in religious perception needs it to be the case that we represent God in perceptual experience *as* God if we are to have experiences that ground beliefs with theological content. Merely having *objectual* perceptions of God by means of some sixth sense would not give us justification for believing in God. But what would perceiving God as God amount to? I maintain that it would be the perception of God as having certain divine properties. Objectual perceptions of God do not represent Him as having divine properties, and that is why such perceptual experiences supply no *pro tanto* justification for believing in a God who is the bearer of divine properties.

Consider this example. I might perceive my friend Robert in the objectual sense, even though he is wearing a Ronald Reagan mask and I have no idea who it is I am seeing. Such an objectual perception supplies no *pro tanto* justification at all for believing that Robert is in front of me. Suppose we add the background auxiliary belief that Robert is wearing a Ronald Reagan mask. It is still not the case that the objectual perception supplies any justification for believing that Robert is in front of me. What supplies justification is the experience of someone in front me of as wearing a Ronald Reagan mask (together with the background auxiliary belief that Robert is wearing a Ronald Reagan mask), not the fact that the experience of the person as wearing the Ronald Reagan mask was in fact of Robert. Whether or not there is objectual perception of Robert makes no difference. We must experience *properties* of Robert, or at least what we think are properties of Robert if we are to be justified in believing that Robert is in front of me. Objectual perceptions of Robert supply no justification at all.

Similarly with other minds. Purely objectual perceptions of Lucy's embarrassment supply no justification for believing that she is embarrassed. For that I must perceive that she has properties, such as having reddening cheeks, and I add that to my background beliefs about the connection between reddening cheeks and embarrassment. And similarly with God. Theological beliefs about God could derive no justification at all from purely objectual perceptions of God. Adding background auxiliary beliefs does not alter that. Background auxiliary beliefs can indeed turn some perceptions into reasons, but not objectual perceptions. Hence it is not enough to experience God objectually; an experience that justifies the belief in God must be the experience of God *as* God, where this means experiencing Him as having certain properties.

I follow tradition in thinking that the properties in question are being all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good. (Let us here ignore God's being a creator.) To gain the kind of perceptual justification that Alston and others have in mind, we must represent God in our perceptual experiences as being all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good if we are to acquire a perceptual justification for believing in God. The experience of God must supply *pro tanto* justification for believing in

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God in the way that seeing a dagger in front of me supplies *pro tanto* justification for believing that there is a dagger in front of me (even if there isn't). The usual idea of perceptual justification is that the experience that *p*, or as if *p*, supplies *pro tanto* justification for the belief that *p*. So in the theological case, the perceptual experience which justifies the belief that God exists, or that He has various properties, is a perceptual experience with the content that God exists, or that something has various divine properties.[14]

But – it might be objected – why couldn't our perceptual content fall short of that? Could experiencing something as *very* knowing, powerful, and good suffice, given background beliefs? Of course we might have perceptual contents of a lesser sort; and perhaps these experiences together with other beliefs could warrant the belief in the existence of something that has the divine properties. But in this scenario, God is a theoretical posit that explains our perceptions. It is not too unlike the case of perceiving that there is order or design in the universe or that the world exists and inferring God's existence as an inference to the best explanation. But this model of the role of perception in religious epistemology abandons the idea that we gain justification primarily from perceptual experience or that we gain belief content from experiential content. In the inference to the best explanation model, perceptual experience itself has no God content. God content comes entirely from the background beliefs. But the idea of perceiving God that figures in recent writing in the epistemology of religion is unlike this. It is the idea that God is present or manifest to us as God in our experiences. So nothing less than the perceptual experience of a being as all-knowing, powerful, and good could yield this kind of perceptual justification for believing in the existence of a being that is all-knowing, powerful, and good. Otherwise there is too great a gap between the justifier (the perceptual experiences as of a very knowing, powerful and good being) and what is justified (the belief in an all-knowing, powerful and good being).

Now, in religious perceptual experience, if there is such a thing, we deploy familiar concepts to represent familiar properties – the only difference is that in religious experience the properties we represent are maximally instantiated, and moreover we represent them in experience *as* maximally instantiated. But they are the same properties that mundane non-divine things possess, to a lesser degree. This means that we can think about what is involved in perceptually representing God as knowing, powerful, and good, so long as we are careful not to extrapolate too hastily from mundane cases to the divine case.

Imagine a wanted poster: 'Wanted: an all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good entity.' How could a sixth sense detect, not *something that* fits that description, but *that something* fits that description? How could we perceive a being *as* all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good? The problem, I shall argue, is that these divine *properties* are perceptually inscrutable.

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Why so? The problem is not simply that we cannot represent *infinite* properties in our perceptual experience, as opposed to our thought. Perhaps we can perceptually represent some infinite properties. (For example, perhaps when we see lines as continuous we see them as infinitely divisible.) The problem arises from the particular properties that we need to represent as maximally instantiated. The difficulty is with representing God in perceptual experience as having the three properties – knowledge, power and goodness – to an infinite degree.[15]

Begin with knowledge. If we perceive that someone knows something, we perceive him as standing in a certain relation to what he knows plus whatever in him contributes to his knowledge (perhaps a belief plus certain psychological processes). Since God is all-knowing, that would mean that we must perceptually represent everything. But we cannot do that. For one thing, our capacities are too modest to represent all of space and time (past and future), and for another, we are a *part* of the world, which creates a problem with perceiving our act of perceiving. So we cannot perceive the objects of God's knowledge. What about the psychological aspects of God's knowledge? If God knows, He believes. There is a familiar issue, of course, about the possibility of perceiving *any* other minds. Perhaps we *know* about other minds but do not *perceive* them. But let us concede that we can and do perceive other minds. If we perceive that God knows everything then we must perceive all His beliefs and that they are all His beliefs, rather than just perceiving a lot of them. And presumably, if God is all-knowing, that means not only that for every fact or truth, God knows it, but also that God does not have false beliefs. Human beings sometimes have conflicting beliefs. But if God knows and believes that Hampstead is in London, then He does not also have the opposite belief that Hampstead is not in London. Thus, to represent God as all-knowing, we must represent His beliefs and that they are *all* His beliefs. God may or may not have an infinite number of beliefs. Either way, to represent all God's beliefs, we must represent the fact that He has no other beliefs. However, to represent an 'all fact', or a 'totality fact', we must represent the negative fact that there is nothing else (Molnar 2000, Zangwill 2003). But it is hard to see how we can perceive the negative fact that God has no other beliefs. What would it be like to perceive that? We might see that there is nobody in a room. But that is only because we can see the room's limits – the walls, floor, and ceiling. But with God, there are no such limits that we can perceive. Hence even if we generously concede that we can perceive each of God's beliefs, and even perceive them all together, we surely cannot perceive that they are *all* His beliefs since that would mean perceiving that He has no other beliefs. Since what God knows He believes, this means that we cannot perceive God as all-knowing. Perceiving God's mind is problematic. Perceiving negative facts is problematic. But perceiving negative facts about God's mind is more than merely problematic. It is impossible! Maybe we can conceive of them but we cannot perceive them.

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Similarly with power. How can we perceive (the instantiation of) the property of having a certain power? Let us put aside familiar issues about whether causal powers can ever be perceived. Assume they can. If we perceptually represent a thing as having a power (for example an engine's having 100 horsepower), it can only be because we represent it either as *manifesting* that power or because we represent *that in virtue of which* it has that power.[16] In the former case, we represent something beyond the object as that on which or in which the power is manifested. In God's case, it would mean perceptually representing the manifestation of His infinite power. But surely we cannot perceptually represent that. To do so, we would at least have perceptually to represent everything physical and represent God's power over it – and perhaps even that would not be enough if the physical world is not infinitely extended in space and time. Whether or not the world is infinitely extended, however, we surely cannot perceptually represent the whole world, even though we may be able to conceive of it: there is too much of it, and we are part of it. Since we cannot perceive the whole physical world, we cannot perceive the manifestation of God's infinite power. On the other hand, perhaps we perceive a thing's power by perceiving its intrinsic basis. In God's case, we perceive the intrinsic basis of God's infinite power, and, presumably, if it is to be epistemologically significant, we perceive that intrinsic basis *as* determining His infinite power. But we cannot do that. One problem is that whatever our perceptual experience represents is finite, and it is difficult to see how such a finite basis could determine infinite power.

But even if this point is not decisive, there is a problem about what these other properties are that are supposed to determine infinite power. The most plausible option seems to be that they are properties of God's mind.[17] Let us assume that there is no problem about perceiving God's mind. Presumably this would mean that we perceive that God believes such or such or desires such and such. Again, it is indeed difficult to see why we should think that such mental states determine *infinite* power. But maybe these are very special mental states. The idea would have to be that that the infinite causal efficacy of God's mental states holds in virtue of the nature of those mental states; and in perceiving His mental states we perceive their natures and the infinite causal efficacy that flows from their natures. But we have to perceive that God is *all*-powerful and that this all-powerfulness flows from His mental states. Being all-powerful means that God can do anything, and that means that there is nothing that God can't do. But how can we perceive that that there is nothing He cannot do? Surely we cannot perceive the absence of the things that He can't do. There are no limits that we can perceive to help us as there are when we see that there is no-one in a room.

Lastly, goodness. I doubt that we can *ever* perceive instantiations of the property of goodness. I think that both Hume and G. E. Moore were right about that. If so, it would immediately show that we cannot perceive God as God – a quick result! In brief, the argument against perceiving goodness is that although we can

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perceive the fact that makes something good, we cannot perceive the fact that that fact makes it good. And the impossibility of perceiving the good-making relation means that we cannot perceive instantiations of goodness. However, even if we *can* sometimes perceive some instantiations of the property of goodness, we surely cannot perceive the goodness of a thing without representing the properties that make it good. These good-making properties are mental states, or perhaps mental states plus their consequences. So perceiving God's goodness involves perceiving God's mental states and perceiving that those mental states (at least partly) determine infinite goodness. But this is problematic. Suppose we perceive that God wants world peace and wants to punish the guilty. Let us concede for the sake of argument that we also perceive the necessitation of goodness by these mental states. But there is now a totality issue like those over God's knowledge and power. Someone might not only want world peace and want to punish the guilty but also hate anyone whose name begins with 'D'. So to perceive God as all-good we have to perceive the *absence* of such mental states among all His other mental states. But this we cannot do. Negative facts about God's mind are perceptually inscrutable.

To recap: if a perceptual experience of God yields justified belief in God, it must be the perceptual experience of God as God. To perceive a non-spatio-temporal God as God, we must represent Him in our experience as possessing the three divine properties. So we deploy the same concepts of knowledge, power, and goodness in such perceptual experiences of God that we deploy when we perceive mundane, non-divine things. It is just that we perceive these properties as instantiated to an infinite degree.[18] In the case of all three divine properties of infinite knowledge, power, and goodness, we must perceive certain intrinsic and relational properties of God and we must perceive that they determine the divine properties. In the case of knowledge and power (and perhaps even in the case of goodness) perceiving the relational properties is beyond us, since we would have to perceive the whole world (past and future) – never mind perceiving all that as partly determining the divine properties. And, perceiving the intrinsic properties of God that determine the divine properties means perceiving God's mental states and that they determine (perhaps together with relational properties) the divine properties. But in order to perceive that they determine infinite knowledge, power, and goodness we would have to perceive negative features of God's mind – that He has no other beliefs and desires and that there is nothing that He cannot do. We have to perceive all God's mental states or powers and that they are *all* His mental states or powers. But that totality fact is the negative fact that there are no other facts. Even if we concede for the sake of argument that we can perceive mental states or powers, and also that we can perceive God's mental states or powers; and while we are at it, even if we further concede that we can perceive some negative facts (such as the absence of my bicycle) – still, in spite of all that, there is something profoundly problematic about perceiving the negative

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fact that God has no other relevant mental states or powers. Perceiving totality facts about His mental states or powers is not possible because we cannot perceive the limits that we perceive in other cases where we do perceive totality facts. Maybe we can think of such facts about God's mind, but perceiving them is impossible.

I have questioned whether we can be perceptually confronted with the instantiation of each of God's three divine properties. But in fact my argument only requires that I show this with one of these three properties, since perceptually to represent God as God we must perceptually represent Him as having all three divine properties. Thus, the overall argument can tolerate two failures! For to be God, a thing must have all three divine properties, and to represent God as God we must represent Him as having all three divine properties. For example, something that is all-knowing and all-powerful but not all-good would not be God. He might not only not be all-good but be all-bad, in which case he would be a devil. He need lack only perfect goodness not to be God. And, if we represent something as all-knowing and all-powerful but not as all-good, we would not be representing Him as God, even if he is God. If we perceptually represent Him as only having two of the three divine properties, then while we might be perceiving God in the objectual sense, we would not be perceiving Him as God. All three properties are essential to God; all three are essential to our conception of God; and all three are essential to our perception of God.

Conclusion

In sum, there are intractable difficulties with the view that we have theological perceptual content. We cannot perceive God as God. This means that there are no theological perceptions that give us *pro tanto* justification for believing in God. We can have no perceptual experiences of God that would provide such a justification. And it makes no difference if these perceptual experiences are of the familiar five senses or of some special sixth religious sense. Perhaps we can perceive something and then *infer* the existence of a being with the three divine properties, but what is deeply problematic is the idea that we might perceive a being *as* having the three divine properties, whether by the five ordinary senses or by some special sixth religious sense. Neither can alert us to the fact that God exists.[19]

The more plausible view is that there are no religious perceptions and there can be no religious perceptions. Those who are theologically inclined might still say that God's existence can be justified on purely rational or a priori grounds or else that He can be postulated to explain other things that we perceive (although some of the above arguments will carry over to this view). But none of that would involve specifically religious perceptual experiences – which is just as well if they are a myth.[20]

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Notes

1. There are interesting unexplored questions about the extent to which someone could have a genuine religious belief but be indifferent to religious matters.
2. On Alston's side, it must be said that it will not do to reach for principles about what properties something must have if it is to figure in our perceptual content that have been established empirically in the psychology of perception. For that research focuses on the ordinary perception of physical things, and those results may not generalize to the theological case.
3. A welcome exception to the over-indulgence of claims that there are religious perceptual experiences is a discussion of Alston by Richard Gale (Gale 1994). Gale is sceptical about the existence of religious perceptions, which, of course, I applaud. But, unfortunately, in arguing for the sceptical position, Gale presupposes that perception involves both a causal and a spatio-temporal relation between the perceiver and the perceived. But this plays into Alston's hands. For Alston can, and unsurprisingly does, reject such a restriction as question-begging (Alston 1994). Since Gale offers disputable conditions for perception, the dialectical situation with Alston is a draw. Gale is on the right track, but we need to find a non-question-begging argument of this sort.
4. Note that mystical experiences are not supposed to be quite so prosaic, but let us put this on one side.
5. We could put this by saying that we need to perceive God not just *de re* but also *de dicto*. But that jargon is probably best avoided (since the issue is about awareness of properties not words), as is the oxymoronic jargon of 'non-conceptual content'.
6. Global extension is only infinite extension if the world is infinitely spatially extended.
7. But note again that mystical experiences are typically not supposed to be so prosaic.
8. Even if interactionist dualism were true, why might we think that a divine soul is operating the body in question, rather than some more humble non-divine soul?
9. Since local spatial things are parts of the globally extended God, there is no problem about two things – for example, God and a tree – occupying the same place at the same time. A table and its leg can overlap spatially.
10. Alternatively, God might be extended over the whole of the spatio-temporal world without containing other things as parts. He might be a ghostly, ethereal God, coexisting with distinct spatial things, on another plane. But perceiving such a God is obviously going to be difficult, especially if the ghostly God does not causally interact with the ordinary things. But even if we could occasionally catch a glimpse of this great ghostly being who wafts among, around and through the ordinary things, why should we think of it as God, and not some weird cosmic being who is not divine.
11. Perhaps some people are causally sensitive to the identity and incarnation relations, but that would not be a *physical* causal sensitivity. So it would have to involve a sixth religious sense. For our ordinary five senses require a physical and spatial relation between perceiver and perceived.
12. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides famously draws attention to the prevalence of metaphor in discourse about God (Maimonides 1958). But according to him, that is due to an inadequacy in our *conception* of God. It is not due to an inadequacy in our description of our *perception* of God. I think that Maimonides would have thought that the idea that we literally perceive God was idolatrous.
13. In Plato's middle period, there is apparently the idea that our souls see the abstract forms – but only before our birth when they were not spatially embodied. But this use of the idea of 'seeing' is surely fanciful enough that we don't have to take it literally.
14. Although, for familiar Kripke/Putnam reasons it is not plausible that description theories of names are generally true, a description theory of 'God' is not implausible. It is not implausible that at least part of what we mean by 'God' is that He has certain divine properties. But even if a description theory of 'God' is not true, it is still true that in order to acquire justification for the belief in God on the basis of perceptual experience, we must represent the instantiation of various properties of God.
15. Some of the difficulties for the sixth-sense view that I raise in what follows also carry over to the idea that we represent God by means of the ordinary five senses.
16. Perhaps powers are simple and irreducible properties of things to which we have direct perceptual access. Even so, when a power has an intrinsic basis, we cannot perceive the power independently of perceiving their manifestation or intrinsic basis.
17. If the intrinsic properties are *not* properties of God's mind, then what on earth (or elsewhere) are they? At this point the view would become obscurantist and run into the ground.

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18. This may distance my view from views according to which the idea of God is incomprehensible. I think that the divine properties themselves are perfectly comprehensible and unmysterious. What is difficult to grasp is the idea of the maximal instantiation of these properties.
19. I have argued that perception is an inadequate model for understanding a human being's transactions with God, if any occur. But this is a purely negative thesis. So I shall take a footnote to mention what I suspect is a more plausible model of human–divine interaction, if it occurs. On this alternative view, knowledge of God is possible through the activity of *interpretation*. The idea is that the ideal of mental *perfection* is not an extraordinary explanatory posit, but a default ideal underlying our ordinary interpretation of other people. This is known as the 'principle of charity'. Of course we can become disillusioned. We may come to believe that others do not know, that they are irrational or that they desire bad things, but we start out assuming that they lack these flaws. In a sense, we assume that others are flawless, until proven otherwise. The same goes for texts. Finding perfection in a mind or a text is something we may have to work at. It may be a process, perhaps a dialectical process, and it may involve dialogue with others. The idea is that knowledge of God, if there is any, would be part of this dialectical interpretative endeavour or else a product of it under certain conditions.
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