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Seeing is believing? How reinterpreting perception as dynamic engagement alters the justificatory force of religious experience

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Abstract William Alston's Theory of Appearing has attracted considerable attention in recent years, both for its elegant interpretation of direct realism in light of the presentational character of perceptual experience and for its central role in his defense of the justificatory force of Christian mystical experiences. There are different ways to account for presentational character, however, and in this article we argue that a superior interpretation of direct realism can be given by a theory of perception as dynamic engagement. The conditions for dynamic engagement are such that there can be no absolute discontinuity between individual perceptual experiences and more public forms of inquiry, and this requirement has radical consequences for the *prima facie* justificatory force of religious experience.

Keywords William Alston · Direct realism · Perception · Religious experience · Justification of belief · Dynamic engagement · Alva Noë

Introduction

Common sense holds that perception justifies belief: "seeing is believing." Or, to put it more precisely (since we do not always believe our eyes), perception is grounds for justified belief. Of course, common sense also recognizes that sometimes perception errs and that we often misinterpret or misremember what we perceive, so

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that beliefs based on perceptual experience are never certain. Nevertheless, we cannot *really* doubt the reliability of perception in general, the skeptical arguments of philosophers notwithstanding. Perception is too important to how we make our way in the world. Moreover, perception simply *feels real*; it is, after all, how the world appears to us. Even if we grant that all perception is interpreted, it is hard to deny that perceptual experience exhibits a special quality of forcefulness—a vividness of detail—that common sense takes to be the presence of objects directly encountered. Together, these common-sense notions of perceptual experience—general reliability rooted in feelings of direct encounters—have been given official philosophical status by the phrase, "direct realism."

It is dangerous to assume, however, that direct realism is simply common sense dressed up in philosophical jargon. Although direct realism endorses the vague presuppositions of common sense, it moves beyond common sense to articulate, refine, justify, and (in some cases) criticize these presuppositions. Moreover, there are many ways that philosophy can construe the presuppositions of direct realism, and common sense alone cannot decide between them. One of the primary concerns of this paper is to show that there is more than one way to account for our common-sense notions of perceptual experience, and that deciding between these alternatives has important ramifications for the justification of belief. In what follows we will distinguish two kinds of direct realism: the direct realism of instantaneous qualia "snapshots," and the direct realism of dynamic engagement.

A prominent example of the first kind is the direct realism of William Alston. Over the last couple of decades, Alston's articulation of an elegant version of direct realism, his "Theory of Appearing," has attracted a great deal of attention. The same is true for the use to which he has put this theory: a defense of the *prima facie* justificatory force of religious perceptual experiences, especially those that involve the mystical perception of God. Simply put, Alston argues that the reliability of perceptual experience in general arises first and foremost from the intrinsic character of perception—what he calls *presentational character*—especially in the respect of bearing an intrinsic relationship to the object that appears in experience. Against philosophers who admit only external standards of successful perception, Alston argues that perceptual experience carries its own *prima facie* warrant for veridicality, and this holds for *all* perceptual experiences, including exotic varieties of non-sensory mystical perception.

For the second kind of direct realism, we draw from a number of sources, including ecological psychology, embodied approaches to cognitive science, and pragmatism.[1] These sources are quite diverse in their details and cannot be claimed without qualification as unequivocally supportive of direct realism. For present purposes, however, our intent is only to show how their common theme, dynamic engagement, provides resources for an alternative framework for understanding direct realism. On the importance of dynamic engagement for perceptual experience, all our sources

[1] On ecological psychology, see Gibson (1986) and Reed (1996); on embodied approaches to cognitive science, see Varela et al. (1991), Clark (1997), and Skarda (1999); on pragmatism, see James (1890) and Dewey (1958). Perhaps the best recent account of perception as dynamic engagement is Alva Noë's *Action in Perception* (2004).

agree: "Experience has content only thanks to the established dynamics of interaction between perceiver and world."[2]

Alston's theory of appearing

Alston's brand of direct realism can be understood as a reaction against philosophical skepticism. In fact, Alston's rhetorical strategy is to play the roles of both Hume and Kant, first provoking an epistemic crisis and then providing the necessary means for its resolution. Alston would not welcome the comparison to Kant, as his stance differs from Kant's in important respects. First, Kant was no direct realist. In addition, for Alston the issue is justified belief, not knowledge, and Alston is concerned to extend the boundaries of reason so as to encompass objects of religious belief, rather than to limit reason so as to make room for faith. As we will see, however, Alston's strategy resembles Kant's in other ways.

The Hume-like phase of Alston's argument involves a critical examination of purely externalist theories of perception.[3] For example, according to a prominent class of such theories, veridical perception cannot be claimed unless certain causal conditions are met. But if perceptual experience itself bears no mark of its causal conditions,[4] then externalist methods of verification are doomed to circularity; they must presuppose reliability in order to demonstrate reliability. This epistemic crisis leads to the Kant-like phase of Alston's argument, which can be summarized as follows.

What must be the case if the justification of perception is to escape the most vicious kind of circularity? It must be the case that perception itself bears some degree of prima facie justificatory force. This in turn entails that the intrinsic character of perceptual experience conveys along with its phenomenal content a distinct feeling of relationality—an object relation—so that perception is the experience of some object (X) appearing to us in some way: "For S to perceive X is simply for X to appear to S as so-and-so."[5] This is the gist of Alston's Theory of Appearing.

The Kant-like pattern of Alston's argument consists of the way in which an epistemic crisis, brought on by the skeptical assertion that causal conditions are entirely absent from experience, leads to an internalist theory of the necessary conditions of justified belief. Kant would not settle for less than certain knowledge, and so he was willing to secure this goal at considerable cost: his well-known distinction between phenomenal and noumenal realms.[6] Critics of Kant have since lamented that he secured knowledge at the cost of direct epistemic access to the world. While Alston's epistemic standards are lower than Kant's, and also more appropriate, he will not settle for less than the possibility of belief justified by direct experiential contact with the world. From a common-sense point of view, this seems like a reasonable goal. However,

[2] Noë (2004, p. 216).

[3] See especially, Alston (1990).

[4] Alston (1990, pp. 94–95; 1999, pp. 193–194). It has been commonly accepted that we do not have direct experience of causation since Hume (2000). But see Whitehead (1959, pp. 30–59).

[5] Alston (1991, p. 55).

[6] Kant (1929).

Alston's Theory of Appearing is custom designed for special apologetic purposes: it is not just the reliability of sense perception that he wants to secure, but the reliability of all kinds of perceptual experience, including non-sensory mystical varieties. What cost has he paid for this prize?

We believe that the cost of Alston's Theory of Appearing is a problematic discontinuity between individual moments of perceptual experience and more socially and temporally extended—i.e. more public—forms of inquiry. Alston has isolated perceptual experiences as discrete justificatory events, resulting in a fragmented form of direct realism that presents deeper problems for the public evaluation of diverse religious beliefs than Alston typically admits.[7] This fragmentation is a cost that Alston is probably willing to accept insofar as it seems to preserve the perceptually based justification of Christian beliefs from attacks by outsiders. But we will show that the isolation of perceptual experiences as discrete justificatory events in Alston's Theory of Appearing is so extreme that it undermines the intrinsic relationality—the object relation—of perception that Alston is so concerned to establish. This extreme isolation is indicated by one of the most crucial ideas underlying his theory, the "phenomenal concept."

In the next section we unpack the implications of this concept in order to show that Alston's direct realism belongs to the qualia family of perceptual theories, most of which assume that perceptual experience delivers an instantaneous, comprehensively detailed "snapshot" picture of the visual field. Then, in the following section, we will show how the relationality of direct realism is better served by an interactive theory of perception as dynamic engagement.

The phenomenal concept and the relationality of perception

It is not enough simply to assert that perceptual experience bears on its face an intrinsic relationship to its object. If we do not have any experience of the unique causal role played by the object in experience, what form does this intrinsic relationship take? Alston's answer lies in the phenomenological details of his account of *presentational character*, the distinctive character of perceptual experience as opposed to memory, imagination, and, perhaps, hallucination (more on this later).[8]

Alston describes presentational character primarily as the givenness of what appears: "the subject is passive; no effort of will is needed; no powers of attention or reasoning, no activities of formulating propositions are involved."[9] Already in this description we see a tendency to emphasize receptivity and downplay activity so that perception is isolated from a context of purposeful interaction. According to Alston, perception just happens to us. We would like to contest this picture of pure passivity, but our present concern is to understand Alston's account of presentational character

[7] But see Alston (1991, Chap. 7), "The Problem of Religious Diversity," in which the confrontation with competing knowledge claims arises sharply.

[8] Alston also contrasts perception with introspection, a term that we find highly dubious as a special category of experience. This is not, however, a point worth disputing here, as we agree with Alston that perceptual experience is marked by the sense of direct encounters.

[9] Alston (1991, p. 16).

on his own terms. How do passivity, lack of effort, etc., constitute the intrinsic relational quality of what appears? Does Alston believe that we have a clear feeling of effort, and that perception is marked by its absence? Or are there additional, positive feelings that distinguish the receptivity of perceptual experience? Alston believes that there are such positive feelings, and that these feelings are the objects of a special class of concepts that he calls *phenomenal concepts*.

For Alston, phenomenal concepts indicate a fundamental aspect of *what it is like* for an object to look a certain way to someone. As such, they are "at the heart of the Theory of Appearing."[10] In Alston's own words:

> A *phenomenal* concept is a concept of the intrinsic qualitative distinctiveness of a way of appearing. When I use 'red' in a phenomenal sense in saying that something looks red, I am simply recording the qualitative distinctiveness of the way it visually appears to me, and that's all. I am saying nothing about its continuing powers and proclivities, its entanglements with other things, its intrinsic nature, or anything else that goes beyond the visually sensible character of its look. …There is a rather limited number of qualitatively distinctive ways in which things can present themselves to our experience.[11]

The example of the phenomenal concept of red raises some troubling questions. How particular is the feeling to which this concept refers? Is it a specific shade, or a class of shades? If the latter, how is it marked off from concepts of reddish orange and purple? Furthermore, is a color really identifiable all by itself—is its distinctive way of appearing really isolatable from immediately surrounding colors? Cognitive scientists and philosophers have raised a number of problems with the assumption that we experience discrete colors that correspond to properties of objects in the world.[12] No doubt Alston is aware of these problems, but apparently he thinks that his notion of phenomenal concepts escapes them.[13] Are we to understand that phenomenal concepts indicate something other than a one-to-one correspondence between elements of distinctive qualitative content, or *qualia*, and properties of the world? But then how else do phenomenal concepts capture the intrinsic relationality of perceptual experience?

This is a crucial issue for Alston's direct realism. It is clear that phenomenal concepts, the "heart" of Alston's Theory of Appearing, indicate qualia (or perhaps patterns of qualia), and that these qualia somehow communicate relationality in addition their qualitative content. But qualia *just are* elements of distinctive qualitative content or "subjective feels." How do they accomplish the essential work of also showing that something (X) appears?

Although Alston never fully explains how the presentational character of perceptual experience is constituted by qualia, what he does say strongly implies that he assumes what Alva Noë calls a "snapshot conception" of perceptual experience,[14] such that

10 Alston (2002, p. 80).

11 Alston (1991, p. 44).

12 See Hardin (1986) and Varela et al. (1991).

13 See especially, Alston (1993).

14 Noë (2004, pp. 35–39).

presentational character is explained entirely by recourse to qualitative distinctiveness. Now a "snapshot conception" holds that perception entails a comprehensive all-at-once picture of a qualitatively detailed scene, and nowhere does Alston explicitly stake his theory on this being the case. If pressed, he might admit that perceptual experience is always temporally extended. However, it is not the denial of the temporal extension of perceptual experience that marks Alston as a latent snapshot theorist, but rather his more explicit claims that qualitative distinctiveness alone does the job of conveying intrinsic relationality.

Consider Alston's favorite way to demonstrate how presentational character distinguishes perceptual experience, namely, to contrast experiences of thinking about a familiar scene with actually looking at this scene:

> When I stand before my desk with my eyes closed and then open them, the most striking difference in my consciousness is that items that I was previously merely thinking about or remembering, if conscious of them in any way, are now *present* to me; they occupy space in my visual field. They are given to my awareness in a way that sharply contrasts with anything I can do by my own devices to conjure them up in imagination, memory, or abstract thought.[15]

Alston knows that he is on highly contested ground. At least since Hume attempted to distinguish *impressions* from *ideas*, philosophers have disputed whether there really is such a sharp contrast between perceptual experience and memory. Nevertheless, let us grant the basic import of Alston's claim: perceptual experience has a special degree of vivid detail that distinguishes it from memory. Let us grant also that this vivid detail has the character of forcefulness. What then is the *prima facie* experiential warrant for treating this forcefulness as *presentational* rather than subjective? On Alston's account, it is merely the fact that we cannot manufacture such vivid detail at will.

A problem with this account is that it does not furnish a basis for distinguishing perception from hallucination. Alston tries to handle special cases of vividly detailed hallucinations by positing "mental images" as the objects of hallucinatory appearance.[16] But this move only emphasizes the failure of the phenomenal concept to indicate the phenomenal content of intrinsic relationality. In Alston's framework, if we are helpless to determine by intrinsic features of perceptual experience the difference between the appearance of a mental image and the appearance of an external object, what good is this apparent object relation? We could be thoroughly deluded about our perceptual experience and have no basis for detecting the error.

Alston's pitfall is that he assumes that the vivid detail of perceptual experience—hallucinatory or veridical—arrives all at once. This assumption seems to strengthen the presentational character of perception, but instead it undermines presentational character, perhaps fatally, by reducing it to the distinctiveness of what appears. Presentational character requires more than the positive feeling of distinctiveness and the absence of conscious effort; it requires a positive feeling of the dynamic character of

[15] Alston (1991, pp. 36–37). For other examples of this type, see Alston (1991, pp. 14–15; 1999, p. 186; 2002, p. 72).

[16] Alston (1999, pp. 191–192).

what appears, *and this cannot be given by any content that arrives all at once, no matter how distinctive its qualitative character may be*.

Virtual content

In an attempt to correct for this common oversight, Noë has argued at length that we do not perceive the details of a visual scene all at once.[17] At the same time, he supports the common sense assumption that we do experience these details in a way that preserves the basic import of direct realism.

Noë's point rests on a rather delicate phenomenological distinction. He is saying that at any given moment we simply do not perceive the details of an entire visual scene; rather we only perceive those details at the focus of our visual field (corresponding to the fovea of the eyes) and the rest is vague. This has been clearly demonstrated by experiment.[18] But Noë also supports our intuitive sense that we experience details of the scene surrounding our focus. The crucial difference is that, moment by moment, we experience this content only as "virtual."[19]

What is the point of calling this surrounding content "virtual" if in experience it is always vague? The phenomenological delicacy of Noë's account lies not just in the recognition of the difference between the crisp detail of the focus and the vague surrounding scene, but also in the *availability* of this vague surround for determination by perceptual exploration. What makes "virtual content" more than simply illusory is the fact that we have *access* to it.[20] Moreover, the access that we have is special to perception: the "virtual content" of perceptual experience is imminently determinable in a way that the vague content of memory or imagination is not. By saccades and other movements of the eyes, most of which happen without any conscious effort, we take in the detail of an entire visual scene—*but never all at once*.

Perception as dynamic engagement

Contrary to Alston's insistence on the passivity of perception, we believe that the dynamic agency of what appears is only felt by a subject engaged in active exploration of the environment. Presentational character is the outcome of perception as an *interactive process*: without the active contribution of the subject, the active contribution of the object is lost. Thus the dynamic engagement theory of direct realism agrees with Alston in a crucial respect: realism cannot be salvaged unless a subject–object relation is constitutive of perceptual experience, rather than inferred from it after the fact. However, Alston's picture of this relation is so isolated from the ongoing activities of organisms in their environments that relationality is undermined. In contrast, pragmatic, ecological, and embodied approaches all maintain that the activities out

17 Noë (2004).

18 Grimes (1996).

19 Ibid., pp. 66–67, 215–217.

20 Ibid.

of which perception evolved as a regulatory capacity provide an essential context for understanding the veridicality of perceptual experience. The rest of this section outlines the resources of these approaches for an alternative theory of direct realism.

First let us consider a common objection against perceptual theories that emphasize action, namely that they have sacrificed phenomenological sensitivity to the standards of a crude behaviorism or functionalism. Noë's subtle phenomenological analysis of how detail is presented to conscious awareness indicates that this is not necessarily the case. On the contrary, despite their preoccupation with qualitative content, it is the qualia theorists who have overlooked a crucial phenomenological distinction within experience. Still, one might wonder whether the realist account of perception as a temporally extended, interactive process can actually claim to be "direct." Can dynamic engagement really provide positive feelings of presentational character?

Indeed it can, if we admit the continuity of experience. Qualia theorists have inherited from Descartes and Hume the assumption that feelings arise in temporally and spatially discrete units, or sense data. Many philosophers who reject the purported mental or representational character of sense data fail to notice their atomistic character, and perpetuate other epistemological problems that come from atomicity.[21] For instance, note that the snapshot theory of perception can be understood as a consequence of atomicity: if sense data are essentially disconnected, we cannot have a perceptual experience of a single object (like an apple, for instance), let alone an entire visual scene, unless we can take it all in at once.

Surely one of the most powerful criticisms of sense-data theories (and perhaps one of the greatest works of phenomenology in western thought) is William James's reflections on "The Stream of Thought" in his *Principles of Psychology*.[22] Alas, we cannot go into the rich details of his argument here. Let it suffice to recall one of the central points of his analysis, that experience as such is irreducible to discrete moments: every moment of awareness carries traces of the past and anticipations of the future. On this phenomenological reading, the "directness" of presentational character is not severed by the assertion that perception is a temporally extended process. Only on the assumption of atomicity must we accept that the immediate content of experience cannot contain within it connections with a broader context.

Qualia theorists also tend to assume spatial discontinuity in addition to temporal discontinuity, such that sense data like "red" have simple intrinsic identities that are entirely independent of one another. This is not the place to enter an extended metaphysical discussion of whether redness per se is determinate independently of greenness. However its identity is determined, redness per se is an abstraction. We wish merely to point out some consequences of noting that in actual instances of visual perception we never experience any color in total isolation. All colors are experienced in the context of complex contrasts.

Again, it is curious to note how many champions of qualitative content have failed to register this basic fact. Perhaps this is because they have made use of such bizarre thought experiments, such as Mary the color-deprived scientist, to demonstrate the

[21] Noë calls this the "atomicity problem"; see Noë (2004, p. 134).

[22] James (1890, Chap. 9).

informational content of color experience.[23] According to the ridiculous premises of this thought experiment, Mary's knowledge of the world is so complete that when she is released from her black-and-white prison the only thing she learns about red is what it *feels like*. This is a misleading account of the function of red in actual perceptual experience insofar as it assumes that sensations of red simply attach to predefined objects as extra bits of information: e.g. this apple is round, smooth, shiny, fist-sized…*and* it is also red. It may seem as though we use red and other colors only to classify objects of perception, but in fact the role of color in perception is more basic than that: particular sensations of red function in complex contrasts with other color sensations to *constitute* the objects of perception. Apples are not occasions of seeing red; rather we use red to see apples. And once we appreciate the way objects are defined by complex phenomenal contrasts, including color contrasts, the apparent dichotomy between phenomenal character and cognitive function disappears.

The idea that we use color to see objects helps to explain why perception is a form of *engagement*. Perception is a way of regulating our interaction with the world; the apparent passivity that Alston observes is merely an indication that subjects are not the only agents in perceptual activity. The context of interaction between organism and environment precedes perception in evolutionary history (phylogeny), and within the history of an individual organism (ontogeny) this dynamic interaction continues to provide an essential context for the development of perceptual experience. Thus perception arises out of and is dependent upon the know-how of more basic regulatory functions and motor skills, which in turn have evolved and developed as the basic habits that define a way of life.

Awareness of this context has important ramifications for how we understand the representational character and potential veridicality of perceptual experience. Qualia theorists have failed to show how atomistic sense data can refer to the world except by simple relations of one-to-one correspondence. Meanwhile, cognitive science presents strong evidence that such relations do not hold.[24] In contrast, the veridicality of phenomenal character in the context of dynamic engagement is a matter of carrying over important differences of the environment into the experiential form of complex contrasts, with importance being defined by the interests and purposes of the organism. The achievement of carryover is a characteristic of the actual event of perceptual experience itself, while the verification of this achievement is dependent upon more extended processes of inquiry. Because the perceptual event is itself an interactive process, the *prima facie* justificatory force of its presentational character can be registered without making it discontinuous with more socially distributed practices of justification (more on this below).

The dynamic engagement theory confirms that our unexamined common sense notions of the world as we perceive it are often true for everyday purposes, insofar as these notions are implicitly embedded within a richly layered background of intentional, personal, cultural, biological, and ecological contexts. In everyday speech we seldom need to qualify the truth of these notions by reference to such contexts,

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23 Jackson (1986) and Dennett (2005, pp. 103–129).

24 See Hardin (1986), Varela et al. (1991) and Noë (2004).

because most of the time they are assumed. Outside of common sense or everyday purposes, however, these notions are often misleading or downright false. This is not a falsification of the representational character of perception; it is merely evidence that representational character is context dependent. If modern physics is right in saying that most of the volume occupied by solid objects is "empty space," that does not contradict our common-sense perception of solidity for purposes of getting around in the world, as any stubbed toe will attest. Once we adjust for contexts, it is obvious that both physics and common-sense notions of perception can be right about solidity.

The importance of a context of engagement is not merely that we are helpless to interpret the veridicality of perception without it; perceptual experience itself is impossible without it. We learn our perceptual forms of life by interaction with the world; absent a history of such interaction, sensation is a "blooming, buzzing confusion," as James described the experience of an infant.[25] Without the background of interactive know-how, the introduction of new phenomenal content does not actually give rise to perceptual *experience*. This may seem like a startling and counterintuitive claim, but it has been verified by the reports of blind patients who gain visual sensation after surgery,[26] and is implicit in our understanding of the development of perception in infants. Though we shudder to think of it, the most realistic outcome of the thought experiment of Mary the color-deprived scientist is that, upon release from her prison, she would feel color sensations without knowing how to organize them into an articulate full-color experience of the world. In such a jumbled state of mind, it is not clear that she could actually claim to know what red feels like.

The conditions of perceptual experience

The necessity of a history of interaction for the development of perceptual experience points to at least two other necessary conditions: a perceptual system capable determining complex phenomenal contrasts and an environment with structural regularities that afford perceptual forms of interaction. The first of these conditions may sound too abstract to be connected with the organic physicality of actual perceptual systems, but cognitive science shows otherwise. Again, with regard to color, physicists define color in terms of wavelengths of light. This suggests that color *perception* should be the detection of different wavelengths of light or, by extension, the detection of the reflectance properties of different surfaces. But the visual system operates not by detecting wavelengths and classifying them with names, but by detecting relatively stable *contrasts* that the organism can use for whatever purposes are presently directing its engagement with the world, such as discriminating objects and devising associated action plans. Despite the facts that some individuals have forms of color blindness and some cultures have significantly fewer color categories than others (some have only two), research has shown that the ability to discriminate wavelength gradations within the visible spectrum is fairly consistent across individuals and cultures.[27] At

25 See James (1890, Vol. 1, p. 488).

26 Noë (2004, pp. 4–6).

27 Deacon (1997, p. 116).

least in the case of color, therefore, perceptual discrimination is, to a significant extent, separable from categorical distinctions of color naming. In fact, color categories in various cultures tend to converge on paired contrasts of white–black, red–green, and blue–yellow.[28] If absolute wavelength measures were the relevant objects of color perception, we would expect color categories to be randomly distributed throughout the visual spectrum. But instead color categories in culture after culture gravitate toward predictable patterns of contrasting pairs.

Why do some pairs of colors contrast while others blend? The structural pattern of color perception is due to an underlying computational process called "opponent processing."[29] The retina of the human eye has three different kinds of cones, each with a different range and focus of wavelength sensitivity. Rather than simply conveying the signals of these receptors to the rest of the visual system, a second layer of inter-neurons compares the activities of these different receptors. These excitatory and inhibitory connections are such that some pairings of receptor activity permit combination, while others do not. The latter are opponents, and give rise to the red-green and blue-yellow contrasts, or "opponent hues," while the former give rise to complex or "binary hues." Thus, color perception, though based on differential sensitivities of the receptor cells, is "enacted" by the visual system. There is no set of contrasting properties in the world corresponding to opponent hues, just a blended spectrum of wavelengths. Because of the excitatory and inhibitory connections of the inter-neurons, the individual activities of the receptors (and their corresponding sensitivities) are not as important as their activities in comparison to one another.

Experiments in psychophysics have borne out the significance of opponent processing for perceptual experience. It is well established that perceived colors remain constant across changes of illumination, while surfaces with identical reflectance properties are seen as different colors in different surrounding contexts.[30] Both of these results point to contrasts rather than absolute wavelength measures as the determining factors of color perception.[31] Even more striking is the experiment that uses two projectors, one with a red filter, and two checkerboard patterns of black, white, and grey to produce a multicolored image with yellows, blues, and greens. Where could the extra colors come from, if not from the contrast enhancement of the human visual system? All of this information confirms that the first condition for the development of perceptual experience is in fact in place: we do possess a perceptual system capable of determining complex phenomenal contrasts.

The second condition for the development experience, the availability of structural regularities in the environment, is difficult to define with both needed precision and useful generality. We can confidently rule out the possibility of perceptual experience in a completely chaotic environment, i.e. an environment without any structural regularity whatsoever. Yet we cannot conclude from this extreme scenario that perceptual systems only detect regularities. In fact perceptual systems tend to ignore the most reg-

[28] Deacon (1997, p. 118) and Varela et al. (1991, p. 168).

[29] Varela et al. (1991, pp. 158–159).

[30] Ibid., p. 160.

[31] ibid., p. 161.

ular features of an environment and focus instead on features that change. Moreover, perceptual systems do not *detect* structural regularities of the environment so much as *use* these regularities to construct the objects of experience. For example, as we have already pointed out above, color vision is not about the detection of reflectance properties of things in the environment; rather color vision uses reflectance properties of things to construct a perceptual scene in which some of these things can be engaged as objects of interest. The condition that needs defining in general terms is the availability of structures like reflectance properties and the contrasts between wavelengths of ambient light. These structures afford the perceptual experience of color vision because at temporal and spatial scales relevant to animal behavior these structures consistently express contrasts that organisms can reliably interpret as signs of pertinent things and events in the world. The structural regularity condition of perceptual experience is, at bottom, the basis of interactive engagement. Without this basis, there can be no presentational character.

We can state, therefore, that the most general condition for perceptual experience is the existence of structural resources and a compatibly tuned perceptual system that jointly allow an organism to enter into interactive relationships with an environment.

Note that this condition has shifted the emphasis away from distinctive qualitative character *per se* and toward the uses of distinctive qualitative character in the form of complex contrasts. The simple appearance of a distinctive qualitative sensation is not a meaningful representation by itself; it has no intrinsic value or importance for the subject, because it is entirely disconnected from the rest of experience. This subtle shift, while leaving the basic idea of direct realism intact, does have important ramifications for the reliability of every possible type of perception, and thus for how we understand the justificatory force of religious experience. It is to that topic that we now turn.

The justificatory force of religious experience

Let us return to Alston's Theory of Appearing to contrast his direct realist account of religious experience with the alternate direct realist account provided by a theory of dynamic engagement. Alston's defense of the justificatory force of Christian mystical perception is predicated upon the notion that such experiences deliver special kinds of qualia: let us call them "God qualia." Alston himself insists that Christian mystical experiences have these God qualia despite the fact we have no phenomenal concepts for them.[32] According to Alston, the reason that we have no phenomenal concepts for God qualia is that the objects of mystical perception are not regularities of our environment that we can engage in any consistent or controlled manner.[33] While Alston must adopt this line, given his view of God as a supernatural agent, the dynamic engagement approach to perception stumbles on the idea of God qualia without phenomenal concepts. According to the dynamic engagement theory, this scenario could not even produce genuinely meaningful perceptual experiences, because they are (on

32 Alston (1991, pp. 48–54).

33 Ibid., p. 54.

Alston's own definition) entirely discrete sensations, completely cut off from the rest of experience. We question the meaningfulness of the idea of God qualia, accordingly; the perceptual-cognitive resources of an organism must be tuned to the affordances of an environment for meaningful experience to arise. This has a negative effect on the justificatory force of Christian mystical perception.

Alston might claim that insistence on the condition of structural resources for entering into interactive relations is arbitrary, and thus our questioning of the meaningfulness of so-called God qualia is a form of "epistemological imperialism." But the condition we have named contrasts not only with Alston's notion of non-sensory Christian mystical perception, but also with his own notion of normal sensory perception: it undercuts Alston's account of the presentational character that is definitive for perceptual experience of all kinds. On our account, God qualia cannot have presentational character unless they can function as complex contrasts in the context of interactive engagement.

Does the theory of perception as dynamic engagement rule out religious experience altogether? Not at all. Christians and other religious persons may well have unique perceptual experiences that are somehow supernaturally caused in just the way Alston imagines. The theory of perception as dynamic engagement *undermines only the prima facie justificatory force that Alston hoped to win for such experiences based solely on the presentational character of perception*. Moreover, the door is left open for a wide variety of naturalistic kinds of religious experience that do not require the idea of God as a supernatural being with focal intentions and awareness and powers of action—very good news for some Buddhists, among many other religious people holding generally non-theistic religious beliefs. Perhaps the basic condition of perceptual engagement might be met by deep structures of nature, even ultimate dimensions of reality, that are of vital existential importance for human persons and societies. But even so, the reliability of such perceptual experiences would not be such that their cognitive content could be simply "read off" their phenomenal character.

Reliability in terms of the Theory of Appearing refers to accuracy of the match between qualia and objects or properties outside the mind. Recall that the Theory of Appearing condenses to this: "For S to perceive X is simply for X to appear to S as so-and-so." Reliability in this framework thus entitles the philosopher to assume that X exists and that X has the properties it is perceived to have, regardless of the type of perception involved. In the case of non-sensory perception that supports Christian Mystical Practice (CMP), the reliability of CMP entitles the philosopher to assume that God exists and has the properties that God is perceived to have, such as awareness, power to act, loving kindness, perfection, and providential care that involves judgment and reward. "Entitlement to assume existence" is not a proof of existence. But it is rather a lot, just the same, and understandably forces Alston to worry deeply about the diversity of religious experiences across the world religions.[34] After all, some of those experiences imply that God does not exist or has different characteristics than CMP suggests—with about the same logical force as CMP delivers.

[34] This is the theme of *Perceiving God* (1991), Chap. 7, "The Problem of Religious Diversity," which deals with what Alston deems the most difficult challenge facing his viewpoint.

By contrast, reliability in the theory of dynamic engagement refers to the success of our embodied attempts to navigate our world according the diverse purposes of our complex ways of life. Reliability in this framework does not entitle the philosopher to assume that there is a discrete extra-mental object, such as the color red, corresponding to the perceptual experience of red, as we have seen. In the same way, the philosopher is not entitled to assume that there is a discrete extra-mental object, such as God, corresponding to a phenomenal aspect of a mental state, such as the feeling of God's presence. The feeling we call "God's presence" may enable us to navigate our existentially complicated lives more effectively, and in this sense it proves itself reliable. This fact in turn is a reason to think that God exists. But this is a much weaker reason in support of God-belief than Alston claims on the basis of his Theory of Appearing.

In order to make it all the way from religious experience to ontological propositions in the dynamic theory of perception, we require a suitable philosophical-interpretative overlay. In the case of sense experience, this overlay involves detailed investigation of the causal features of sense perception so as to assess with due caution the ontological significance of experiences of, say, color. In the case of putative non-sensory perception, the philosophical-interpretative overlay involves detailed investigation of the causal features of religious experience so as to assess with due caution the ontological significance of experiences of, say, God.

The philosophical-interpretative overlay required for navigating between religious experiences and ontology necessarily involves a sophisticated theory of symbols. This is because the causal features of religious experience—including social, cultural, historical, linguistic, conceptual, and neurological conditioning factors—are unintelligible without a theory of symbols that interprets their apparent cognitive content in relation to ontological theories about the objects of religious experience. This interpretative process is already complicated in relation to sense experience. It is much more complicated in relation to religious experience—and this is precisely as it should be, given the diversity of religious experiences across individuals, cultures, traditions, and eras. The interpretative complexity demanded by a dynamic theory of perception should be welcome, because anything less ends up artificially privileging one type or tradition of religious experience over others without due reason.

Alston is correct to worry about religious pluralism. The diversity of religious belief shows that his Theory of Appearing is a short-circuited philosophical account of perception. His argument for the reliability of religious experience collapses when an empirically more adequate theory of perception, such as the dynamic theory, is in place.

What can a more suitably dynamic and ecological theory of perception deliver by way of an argument for the reliability of religious experience? Like Alston, we are realists, but the kind of realists that build sensitivity to the possibility of cognitive error into a theory of perception from the outset. We don't need to struggle with visual illusions, for example; the ecological theory of perception takes for granted that the human visual system will be good for some tasks and vulnerable in relation to other tasks. Only actual performance can determine the regions of reliable and unreliable operation, and only inquiry can explain why these regions are what they are and how to correct for perceptual error. In the same way, we don't need to struggle with religious pluralism, or with the contradictory cognitive content that people attach to seemingly similar religious experiences. The reliability of a religious belief based on a religious

experience is assessed on the basis of the success of world engagement that it fosters. But the criteria for "success" are expressed and interpreted and adjusted within complex traditions of interpretation, so judgments of success take place at many levels.

First, at the level of subjective personal coping, a religious-experience-based belief that helps someone navigate a terrible tragedy or a personal loss is a candidate for a reliable belief *at that level*. If a particular religious belief consistently helps varied people "get a handle" on personal loss, then the case for the reliability of that belief at that level is stronger. If not, the case at that level is weaker. Second, at the level of physical and mental health, the same applies, but assessments of objective health outcomes in connection with religious belief are a much more complex matter than assessments of coping effectiveness, which are largely subjective judgments. Third, at the level of social effects, the ambiguity of religious beliefs, behaviors, and experiences is extremely well known and often discussed. At this level, the case for the reliability of religious experiences is clearly mixed because religious experiences appear to inspire both fanatical violence and self-sacrificial acts of compassion. Fourth, at the level of ontological claims, the case for the reliability of religious beliefs is most difficult to assess because, as pointed out above, the interpretative overlay required to link religious experiences to ontology is particularly complex and requires deep knowledge of multiple religious traditions and a hermeneutical framework powered by a theory of religious symbolism.

We have not entered here the evidence relevant to assessing the reliability of religious experience at any of these levels; our purpose lies elsewhere. But we suspect it is helpful to make clear that a dynamic theory of perception is quite amenable to the idea that we engage an ultimate reality in and through worldly events and processes. In fact, a dynamic theory of perception is positively allergic to stipulations of what can and can't be real in advance of experience; there is simply no basis for making such pronouncements from a standpoint of pragmatic inquiry. Religious experience is supportive evidence that we do engage an ultimate reality. Religious pluralism is evidence that we frequently and perhaps typically make mistakes in attaching cognitive content to those experiences. We are wise to rely on vast wisdom traditions to structure our imaginations and to guide the way we describe our religious experiences. But religious pluralism shows that, at best, these traditions offer an engaging perspective on ultimate reality. As such, this perspective is true at its level, and often reliable for guiding life, but expressed in symbols that necessarily fail to refer with complete accuracy even as they successfully engage us with their logical objects.

Despite sharing realism with Alston, therefore, our approach supports quite different conclusions about the reliability of religious experience. This demonstrates just how important the underlying theory of perception is in epistemological debates about religious experience.

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