



2025 SCP Eastern Meeting

Can an Unlocatable, Timeless God be Perceived?

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Alston's Perceptual Model of Mystical Experience



- ◇ Alston (1988, 1991, 2005) argues that we can have perceptual justification for beliefs about God in virtue of *mystical perception*.
 - ◇ Some (reported) mystical experiences are perceptual in character just like our sensory experiences, e.g., my visual experience of a sparrow feeding its baby.
 - ◇ This parallelism between mystical and sensory experience leads to a parity argument: “according initial credibility to sense perceptual beliefs and not to mystical perceptual beliefs ... it would be an arbitrary double standard to accord *prima facie* justification to experientially grounded beliefs in one area and not in the other” (2005, p. 207).
- ◇ Therefore, he concludes, just as my visual experience that a sparrow is feeding its baby *prima facie* justifies my corresponding belief, my experience of God offers *prima facie* justification for the relevant beliefs about the existence and properties of God.
- ◇ Call this view the *Perceptual Model of Mystical Experience*.

Perception and Spatiotemporality



- ◇ One crucial assumption of this model is that perception of God is *possible*.
- ◇ BUT: Is God really perceivable if God is entirely *outside of spacetime* as many Christian traditions suggest?
 - ◇ All workaday examples of perception seem to involve a specific, restricted spatiotemporal location of the perceived object.
 - ◇ Isn't it part of the nature of perception that it involves a distinct spatiotemporal locus?
- ◇ Objections along these lines have been made by So (2021) and Zangwill (2004, 2017).

Overview of the Objections

- ◇ So (2021) and Zangwill's (2004) criticisms is both based on the idea that spatiotemporality is essential to perception.
- ◇ However, they differ on the details of this requirement.
 - ◇ So : On the phenomenological analysis of perception, it is the in-principle possibility of the dynamic development of the perceptual “profiles” of the object through the movement of the body through space.
 - ◇ Zangwill: Being either in time or in space is what marks off perception from *a priori* intuition.
- ◇ Hence, So demands the spatiotemporal dynamicity of the experienced profiles of God while Zangwill asks for the spatiotemporality of God Himself.

So on the Phenomenological Analysis of Perception



- ◇ The phenomenological analysis of perception (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty)
 - ◇ Part of the nature of perception is that the subject can change her perspectives through space and thereby experience different aspects—*profiles*—of the object over time. In visual experience, the seen object exhibits its multifaceted profiles that unfold and hide depending on the subject's relative location to it.
 - ◇ E.g., The seen chair never reveals itself to my visual consciousness in its entirety at once. As I move around the chair, I see its front, and the next moment, the distorted yet juxtaposed images of its front and side, and then, its side shows and the initial frontal aspect is gone.
- ◇ The possibility of such *perspectival dynamics*, i.e., the subject's exploration of the object through movement of her phenomenal "body" through "lived space", constitutes the essence of perception. As So nicely summarizes, for phenomenologists, "*Perception is the peculiar mode of appearance by which objects of the senses are given to consciousness through the body in a spatio-temporal manner.*" (p. 1021)

So on the Phenomenological Analysis of Perception

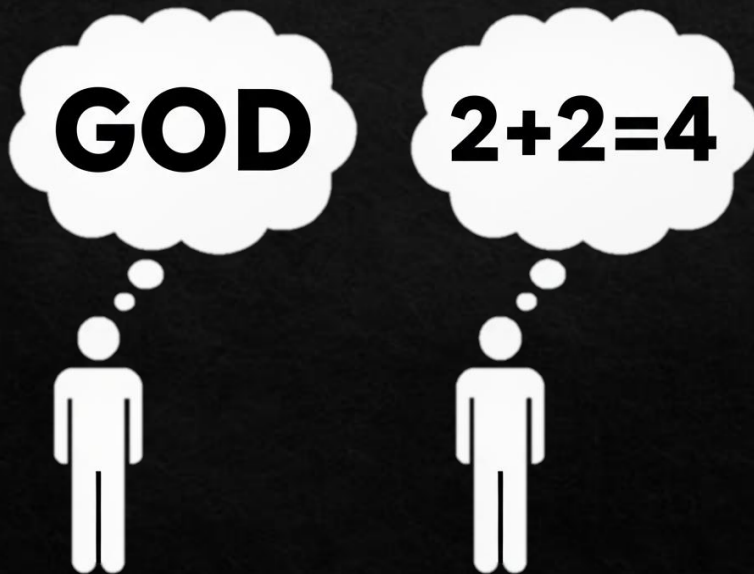


- ◇ However, this does NOT require that:
 - ◇ The perceiver her can switch her vantage point in every single instance of perception.
 - ◇ Our limited ability to see only the same side of the moon does not disqualify our visual experience of it from counting as perceptual. What the current account requires is rather that the exploration of the other side of the moon should be *in principle* possible by relocating ourselves.
 - ◇ The required “body” and “space” are physical.
 - ◇ “the requirement here will be a *formal* one: to be perceptual in a meaningful sense, “mystical perception” must involve at least some parallel notion of a *body* that gives mystics a *vantage point* for perception, and it must also involve a *parallel* notion of *space* in which *motility* is realized and in which God, as the object of “perception,” is being explored from different perspectives” (So, 2021, p. 1020).

So's Objection to the Perceptual Model

- ◇ So's objection is that we cannot find evidence for this spatiotemporal dynamicity of profiles in any reports of mystical experiences.
 - ◇ "there are no traces of such parallel notions of body, space, or motion parallel to our ordinary life ... the mystics do not experience different aspects of God through any changes of perspective, *and all that can be experienced by the mystic in that experience is given all at once*" (p. 1020).
- ◇ Therefore, So concludes, the experiences of the mystics are at best "perceptual" by analogy. Hence, the parity argument for the justificatory weight of mystical experience founders as well.

Zangwill's Objection to the Perceptual Model



- ◇ Traditional Christian theology has it that God is a non-spatiotemporal being; He is wholly outside of spacetime. Alston (1989) himself also explicitly endorsed the view that God is essentially timeless (p. 160-161).
- ◇ However, Zangwill notes that other non-spatiotemporal objects such as numbers, universals, and logical truths are directly presented to our consciousness through *a priori* intuition. In his view, what marks off perception from this intuition is that the objects in perception are in spacetime.
 - ◇ “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.” (p. 13)
- ◇ Hence, Alston’s treatment of mystical experience as perception cannot be justified.

Overview of the Solutions

◇ Responses to So:

◇ Evidence for Spatiotemporal Dynamicity

- ◇ *Contra* So, there are indeed evidence in mystical reports for the presence of the required elements of bodily movement through space and the resulting spatiotemporal dynamics of God's perceptual dynamics.

◇ Differential Revelation

- ◇ Even divine omnipresence does not imply the impossibility of such dynamics as to God, for God can reveal different aspects of Himself in different spatiotemporal locations.

Overview of the Solutions

- ◆ Responses to Zangwill:
 - ◆ **Further Commonalities with Sensory Perception**
 - ◆ There are two further features shared by mystical and sensory experience yet lacked by *a priori* intuition: (1) causation by the experienced object and (2) the relevant *qualia*'s contribution to the content of experience.
 - ◆ **Spatiotemporal Divine Actions and Quasi-Spatiotemporality**
 - ◆ Even rejecting the necessity of spatiotemporality, we can satisfy the insight behind it by noting that God's actions can be located within spacetime or that God has quasi-causal-spatiotemporal properties that abstract entities lack in virtue of His casual interaction with the spatiotemporal realm.



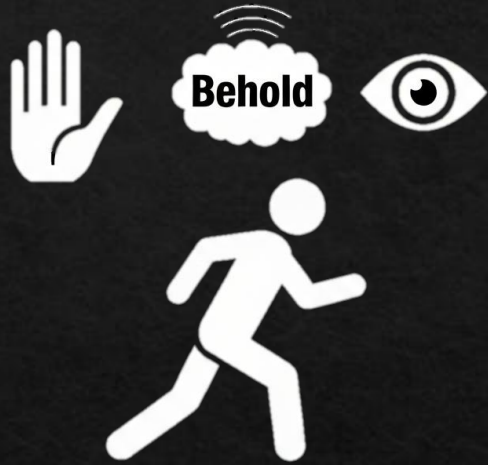
**Response to So:
Evidence for
Spatiotemporal
Dynamicity
in Mystical Experience**

- ◇ So's claim that no moving body, space, or changing profiles of God is present in the mystical reports is simply false.
- ◇ First, even So (2021) himself admits that some mystical accounts use "spatial terms like God is "near" or "dwells within" the mystics" (p. 1020). Of course, he quickly adds that "we use such spatial metaphors even when describing our ordinary life (like "she is close to me"), and these terms alone do not prove that there is a notion of *spatiality* involved" (p. 1020).
- ◇ Yet there is no evidence that these spatial terms were used invariantly in metaphoric senses alone either.



Response to So: Evidence for Spatiotemporal Dynamicity in Mystical Experience

- ◇ Second, other reports strongly suggest that God was literally experienced as bearing changing profiles through relative movement of the mystic's body through space.
 - ◇ “the Holy Spirit *descended* [emphasis added] upon me in a manner that seemed to *go through me* [emphasis added], body and soul. I could feel the impression, like *a wave of electricity, going through and through me* [emphasis added]. Indeed, it seems to come in waves and waves of liquid love” (James, 1902, p. 250, as cited in Alston, 1991, p. 14).
 - ◇ Such phrases as ‘descended’ and ‘go through me’ do not plausibly read like metaphoric expressions; nor would they not make sense unless some movements involving the mystic's body were detected, which in turn implies change in the experienced aspects of the object. And it is clearly the Holy Spirit—God—that is picked out as the object moving in relation to the mystic.
- ◇ Considering all this, at least some mystical experiences, contrary to So's suggestion, do seem to qualify as perception by the phenomenological standards.



Response to So: Omnipresence and Differential Revelation

- ◇ Potential strengthening of So's objection
 - ◇ God is regarded as omnipresent—present *everywhere as a whole* or *at once* either literally or analogically (Augustine, 1953, Letter 137, pp. 21, 1955, Letter 187, p.231; Anselm, 2000, Monologion 22, p.38; Hudson, 2009; Stump, 2013).
 - ◇ Given that God is equally and entirely present everywhere throughout, wouldn't it follow that God cannot be explored dynamically with respect to any kind of "space"?
- ◇ NO, because omnipresence is a feature of *God*—not His *profiles*. While being wholly present everywhere, God could *reveal* different aspects of Himself at different locations in spacetime. Then, the mystic could experience changing profiles of God by moving her body through space or detecting change in divine revelation over time.
- ◇ This might in fact be the mechanism of how God appears variously and dynamically to different people and at different spatiotemporal locations.



Response to Zangwill: Two More Commonalities with Sensory Perception

- ◇ I accept the traditional understanding of omnipresence as non-literal spatiotemporal presence. Besides, Alston (1989) himself cannot endorse literal spatiotemporal omnipresence of God, given his claim that God is timeless.
 - ◇ Therefore, I need to reject spatiotemporality of the object as a necessary condition for perceivability and what distinguishes perception from *a priori* intuition.
- ◇ Instead of spatiotemporality, I offer two differentiating yet essential features that justify the perceptual status of mystical experiences that group them together with sensory perception while distinguishing them from *a priori* intuition: **Causal Connection** and **Qualia's Contribution to the Content of Experience**.



Response to Zangwill: Two More Commonalities with Sensory Perception

- ◇ First, unlike other non-spatiotemporal entities, i.e., abstract objects, God is understood as a concrete being with causal powers to interact with us, just like things we see, hear, or touch through our ordinary senses.
 - ◇ As Alston himself notes, perception requires the right causal connection between the object and the experience (1988, p.32; 1991, pp. 56-58). Then, *pace* Zangwill, perhaps our intuition that universals, mathematical or logical entities cannot be objects of perception might be grounded in their lack of causal influence, not in their non-spatiotemporality.
- ◇ Given that God can cause experiences in us, Zangwill's (2004) claim that "there is no sense at all in which we are talking about *perception*" (p. 13) starts to lose its plausibility.



Response to Zangwill: Two More Commonalities with Sensory Perception

- ◇ Second, the roles of the *qualia* involved in mystical and sensory experience are markedly different from those in *a priori* intuition.
 - ◇ When we intuit facts about abstract objects, the characteristic phenomenological feel attests to the *truth or necessity* of the relevant propositions yet does not differentiate the content of the experiences. Both the intuition that $2+2=4$ and the intuition that an empty set is a subset of itself seem to have the same feeling of necessity.
 - ◇ In contrast, phenomenal qualities in sensory experience distinguish the very *content* of the experiences—what the perceived object is (object identification) and how it is (property attribution). It is in virtue of the differences in color *qualia* that I can tell a visual experience of the sky from that of a tomato.



Response to Zangwill: Two More Commonalities with Sensory Perception

- ◆ Likewise, in mystical experience, *qualia* contribute to or constitute the content of the experience rather than merely indicate the higher-order characters (e.g., truth, necessity) of that content.
- ◆ “She knows what He is, indeed she even tastes Him by the divine *contact*, of which the mystics speak, and which a *supernatural* knowledge *whereby the soul knows what God is* [emphasis added]; not from having seen Him, but from having *touched Him*” (Poulain, 1950, p. 106; as cited in Alston, 1999, p. 53).
- ◆ “now this that I have been speaking, viz. the beauty of holiness, is that thing in spiritual and divine things, which is perceived by this spiritual sense ... this kind of beauty is the quality that is the immediate object of this spiritual sense; this is the sweetness that is the proper object of this spiritual taste” (Edwards, 1746/1794, p. 185).



Response to Zangwill: Divine Action and Quasi-Causal- Spatiotemporality

- ◇ Even to a non-spatiotemporal God, one can ascribe some *quasi*-spatiotemporal features in virtue of His interaction with the world, thus satisfying something in the ballpark of Zangwill's insight about perception.
 - ◇ First, divine actions can be performed at a specific time and place and thereby God can be perceived as the agent indirectly in virtue of the perceived actions.
 - ◇ Second, by virtue of divine causation, God has quasi-causal-spatiotemporal properties that could serve just as well as spatiotemporality.



Response to Zangwill: Divine Action and Quasi-Causal- Spatiotemporality

- ◇ First, God, although being outside of time, might be capable of actions in time at a specific location.
 - ◇ “the temporal location of an action can be given by the temporal location of its worldly effect” (Alston, 1991, p. 64, fn. 57; see also Alston, 1989, p. 154). The divine agential event that “God is strengthening her or comforting her *then*, or telling her so-and-so *then*” (1991, p. 64) appears to happen at some particular time to some individual at a particular location.
 - ◇ Then, under the plausible assumption that actions arguably have their agents as their parts, it follows that God can be perceived as a part of the perceived divine actions situated at specific locations and times albeit rather in an indirect manner.



Response to Zangwill: Divine Action and Quasi-Causal- Spatiotemporality

- ◇ Second, God causally interact with things in time and space. And this alone is sufficient to attribute various *causal-and-quasi-spatiotemporal* qualities to God, attributes that are quite close to spatiotemporal locations yet lacked by abstract objects.
 - ◇ E.g., *being the cause of my continuing existence in 2025, responding to me during my prayer time in my apartment*
- ◇ Hence, Zangwill's insight that something like spatiotemporality is required for perception can still be somewhat accommodated.
- ◇ Zangwill could insist that anything less than full-fledged existence in spacetime isn't enough, but he would have to offer a stronger, non-question-begging reason to press that point, especially in spite of the further common factors between mystical and sensory experience I have described above are not enough.

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Thank You!

