

Spiritual Perception. Paradigms and Pathways

Dan Chițoiu

*Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași
Institute for the Study of Values and Spirituality*

Abstract: This paper consists in evaluating the way some philosophical paradigms were understood in the light of spiritual perception as well as their impact on spiritual practices. First, I inquire therefore about the degree in which spiritual perception was engaged in the doctrine of Plotinus, a doctrine that had provided us with the necessary language for expressing notions concerning the spiritual discipline. Then I discuss the novelty of Maximus the Confessor perspective on spiritual perception, comparing it with the perspective of Isaac of Nineveh in the Syrian tradition. Finally, I talk about Gregory Palamas understanding on the senses' role in spiritual perception and its importance for the hesychast practice in the Christian East.

Keywords: Perception, Senses, Spiritual, Human, Self

Introduction: Post/Super/Hyper-Human Condition

The *more-than-human* is nowadays an omnipresent topic in the philosophical discourses, the scientific research, or in the various forms of fiction. The propensity towards super-human attributes is now obvious, with the recent technologies providing support for such quest. A discussion on the spiritual senses is a matter of supreme importance for the current debates on transhumanism. Transhumanism assesses the implications of using new sciences and technologies in improving the human mental and physical abilities. As a doctrine that is shared by philosophers as well as scientists, transhumanism believes that ameliorating and correcting the imperfections of human nature is not only possible but absolutely necessary. However, this expansion of the human abilities and correction of all human imperfections involves an immense danger which is the Transcension of the human nature boundaries. Human beings should thus suffer a radical

transformation toward a ‘posthuman’ condition, and that takes a certain kind of transcendence: transcending human nature through technological means. The current state of the scientific research and technological applications boosted the credibility level with this very prospect of improving human nature, and we refer to both advances in genetics and in the areas of artificial intelligence. The transcendence aimed by transhumanism seeks a leap and a discontinuity from the human nature as we know it. Clearly, throughout the history of European philosophy of the past centuries, scenarios of overcoming human nature and becoming super-human, had constantly emerged. The actual state of technology takes this recurring theme from ‘above’ to ‘trans’, but the basic feature of this paradigm entails those same ends sought ever since the time of Renaissance. A crucial aspect has always been the radically enhanced ability of knowledge and *perception* at the same time. Super-man can know *differently*, but can also *perceive* differently.

A debate on the existence/possibility of spiritual perception should start by asserting the existence of the spiritual senses, as distinct from physical ones. First of all there are some aspects though that need to be clarified: if the spiritual senses do exist, are they active continuously, or just in exceptional instances; what relationship is there between spiritual senses and physical senses, do they duplicate the latter ones, interfering in any way; and if the spiritual senses are activated only in certain situations, what are the effects on the body?

On the other hand, evaluating the paradigms of the spiritual perception understanding should focus on several matters, including; how does the act of spiritual perception manifest, does it belong to conscious and volitional activity, or is it rather a passive process; what does facilitate the act of spiritual perception; is spiritual perception a conscious or unconscious act, and if it is a conscious act, to which extent, and, lastly, what is the role of spiritual practice in gaining spiritual perception?

Further on I will indicate how these aspects related to the spiritual senses and spiritual perception have been formulated by several major doctrines when assessing the human nature in its transcendent openness.

Origins of a Paradigm: Plotinus and the Need of Spiritual Perception

Plotinus is the author with quite a strong impact in imposing the vocabulary related to the spiritual experience, but also

in stating its goals. For Plotinus, the human self, in its upward oriented inner path, aims at uniting itself with the *One* from which all reality emanates, that *One* *SupraBeing*, the *Beyond Being*. The spiritual experience that essentially surpasses the human's natural capabilities implies the overcoming of a fallen and inauthentic status. Plotinus says that the human self can be shaped, and this is done through virtues, as tools that can temper emotional impulsiveness and even more than that. Three degrees of virtue are asserted, among which the higher virtues belonging to intellectual activity, capable of keeping the mind steady in the contemplation of transcendent forms. Through the practice of virtue one can achieve self-knowledge, which is, in the first instance, a kind of inventory of the levels of the self. Through this "self-understanding" is produced, through a radical movement, *the return to self*. Plotinus claims that there are laws governing the way our mind operates, originating in the self-observation level, and thereby setting the manner in which all judgments are made about sensible objects.¹ The impressions received from sensations are thus evaluated according to categories such as good or bad, but the act of judgment is performed in line with the benchmarks set by the Intellect. These laws provide us with guidelines that basically constitute our common opinion of ourselves, but at the same time are a sign that within us there is something higher, a truly divine core. Its integral presence and full activation, the actual source of the laws of our mind, can be achieved through renunciation of the ordinary self and union with *Nous*, the noetic level. This is the only way man can become *Nous*.²

There are two sources of perception, because being human means having impressions from both the sensible and the intelligible world, and this overlap causes an impossibility of possessing whole truths, so our mind is filled with impressions. Spiritual perception is the only one that can acquire true knowledge which can solely be obtained by separating impressions from the sensible level. Spiritual perception is not produced by senses belonging to the spiritual level, but actually emerges when the return to self takes place, as a self-consistent activity aimed at experiencing the union with the source of the intellect. Spiritual perception is a path leading to a self-level where normal intellectual functioning is transcended and transformed into non-dual experience of identity with the source that makes it possible.³ From

¹ D. M. Hutchinson, *Plotinus on Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 12.

² Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), V 3 [49].17.39.

³ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, V 3 [49]. 3.23-29.

the Neoplatonic perspective, to know oneself one must be a God. Plotinus argues that man *transcends* this way *his own humanity*.

Spiritual Perception as Mediation and Unification: Maximus the Confessor

In the Patristic approach, the possibility and meaning of spiritual perception were viewed from a different perspective. At least two fundamental aspects were dissimilar in this paradigm of spiritual perception: there cannot be an exclusive result of the human initiative and, secondly, the purpose of one's spiritual experience is not the identification with its source, because there is an unquestionable ontology-based distinction between the subject and the object of the experience.

Patristic anthropology describes humans using the paradigm of *person*, which implies another understanding of the soul-body relationship, as well as a different role of the body in the spiritual experience. The person is body *and* soul, not essentially and predominantly soul, so when affirming the existence of spiritual senses, this must be done together with the physical ones. In this anthropological paradigm there can be no diminution of the role of perception viewed primarily from the angle of the physical senses in relation to the spiritual ones. There simply cannot be just a spiritual perception by leaving aside or nullifying the contribution of the senses of the body. So, the fundamental aspect that had to be expressed in the patristic tradition was the relationship between the physical and spiritual senses in this realm of spiritual experience. There have been several approaches on the issue of parallelism between the two sources of perception. The differences in perspective on the relationship between the spiritual and physical senses, as well as on the question of various ways of perception depending on its source, were a sign of the implicit anthropologies coming from two great horizons of spiritual practice, the Greek-Byzantine and Syriac one.

In the Greek Patristic tradition, the most eloquent approach is that of Maximus the Confessor, for whom *soul* is not a distinct, separate entity with autonomous activity, since it cannot be understood otherwise than together with the body, with which it does not however mix or confuse. This bodily life of humans is not seen as a proof of their fall and imperfection, because the soul and body were actually given to cross the gap and chasm separating wo/man from the purpose of his/her earthly existence. Maximus describes as the essential aspect of human nature the rational propensity, thus distinguishing between two kinds of will; but if *the*

natural will is proper to the human nature, *the gnostic will* is proper to the personhood level of human (*hypostatic*). The anthropological model 'proposed' by Maximus is evident: there is a parallelism between the physical and spiritual senses, each of them having their own and distinct activities.

This distinction is nevertheless made to express the most important aspect of Maximus' doctrine, the concept of *mediation*. Wo/Man's existence purpose is to unify the entire created reality, and then to unify it with its Creator. This purpose is fulfilled by overcoming and unifying several polarities, such as those between created and uncreated nature, between sensible and intelligible beings, between earth and sky, or between man and woman⁴. It is further asserted that wo/man is not only composed of soul and body, but also of various distinct 'parts' and capacities or faculties, as long as she/he is in a fallen state, which can and should be restored.

This anthropological perspective, focused on restoration and mediation, expresses an ever-repeated pattern in the works of the Greek patristic authors where the theme of cosmic rationality and cosmic harmony is a reiterated assumption. The act of mediation and unification not only preserves the polarities, but brings them into a primordial harmony and higher order that has been lost through the Fall caused by original sin. The physical senses cannot be absorbed, diminished, annihilated in any way by the act of mediation. Wo/Man, being a laboratory of creation, brings both sources of perception into play, or else the unification process through *the gnostic will* would not be possible. Though they have distinct goals, both the intelligible and sensible part are naturally related to each other through an indissoluble power that binds them together. Maximus describes three natural and interrelated movements of the self. This noetic arrangement entails three modalities of knowledge, according to intellect or mind (*vous*), according to discursive reason (*logos*) and according to sense-perception (*aisthesis*). Though each one of them has its own natural motion, the unifying movement of these modalities is the reintegration of the self. Hence, the faculties of sense and reason are correlated and interrelated by the mind, while the spiritual subject owns the indissoluble power to unite them.⁵

⁴ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1995), 173.

⁵ Frederick D. Aquino, "Maximus the Confessor," in *The Spiritual Senses. Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, eds. Paul L. Gavrilyuk & Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 107.

Syriac Perspective on Spiritual Perception: Isaac of Nineveh and the Rapture Peak

In contrast, a distinct Patristic perspective on spiritual perception – archetypally expressed by Isaac of Nineveh – appears in the Syriac Christianity. Isaac lives in the same seventh century as Maxim, but he is driven by other goals, using altogether a different vocabulary, as well as a different manner of expression. Isaac's texts do not follow the rigors of discourse from the Classical Greek philosophy, indicating nonetheless a different kind of rigor and precision that come from the necessities dictated by the practical spiritual experience. Thus, the existence of a parallelism between the spiritual and physical senses, and of the relations between them is no longer in question, the focus being shifted to the *state of rapture*, the one in which the actual spiritual experience occurs. Spiritual perception is described as a state of discontinuity with the normal functioning of mind and senses, and that takes place when the mind and senses cease to function in a natural way.⁶ This is also the reason why the word `rapture` is used here: even if that implies a radical discontinuity with the normal state of mind, it is not the result of a human effort, but is made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Although there are affinities that can be found with the state of *ek-stasis*, as it was described by Neoplatonism, or by some of the Greek Fathers, what Isaac writes about this radical experience of the discontinuity of the mind in the state of rapture is different. Isaac claims that in the state of rapture the mind is engulfed with wonder receiving by the Spirit a deep understanding that pours unexpectedly into the soul, keeping the mind still. This is how an unlabouring mind looks like: in rapture there is no longer meditation, conversation with thoughts, no worries about that anymore, there is only a state of wonder outside and beyond human perception. Senses remain steady, and all thoughts are in awe, filled with a glorious vision.⁷

This pattern of spiritual perception implies a suspension of senses, whether physical or spiritual, since in rapture both mind and senses enter a state of immobility, the contemplative amazement being actually the only thing happening, in other words an experience that cannot be theorized.

⁶ Isaac of Nineveh, *The Second Part. Chapters 4-41*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Louvain: Peters Publishers, 1995), 3. 52.

⁷ Isaac of Nineveh, *The Second Part*, 35. 1.

The Palamite Paradigm of Spiritual Perception: The Vision of Uncreated Light

However, the assertion of a parallelism between the spiritual and physical senses involves several difficulties that became more obvious in the Hesychast controversy during the 14th century. In the famous dispute between the supporters and opponents of Gregory Palamas, the very role of senses in spiritual perception has been the central point of disagreement. The cultural context of the era was different from the seventh century, so the language was far more specialized and conceptually developed.

Gregory Palamas argued that knowledge involves the whole human being and not just his intellect, and has the shape of a relationship. He was expressing this way an anti-essentialist perspective on human. When talking about the ultimate and supernatural capability of human knowledge, Palamas developed a doctrine where knowledge addressed the whole human being and not just his mind. The criticism of Balaam, his main opponent, consisted in the fact that Gregory identified supernatural with immateriality. Palamas states that spiritual does not preclude material, while supernatural is in evident contradiction with the created world, and this way rehabilitates matter, which until his time had been despised due to the spiritualist tendencies of Hellenism. Knowing God does not require an exteriorization between the subject and object of knowledge, but a *union* of these two.⁸ Palamas says that the intellect does not receive divine illumination by its own power, but only to the extent it is made possible by the grace of God. The vision of uncreated light by means of intellectual perception is shown in analogy with the bodily eyes' perception. Perceiving the uncreated light, however, requires purification of the intellectual vision as well as an illumination from God. Therefore, a preparation is absolutely required. Perception at this level is not done through the bodily eyes, nor through the intellect, but through the Holy Spirit. On such level, wo/man is aware that sees supernatural light which surpasses natural light, but does not know with what he/she sees this light, nor can investigate its nature, because the Spirit through which he/she sees it is impenetrable. The ecstasy as described by Palamas should not be seen as a mind withdrawal from the body, but as transcendence of the human powers, following the self-concentration of the mind, achieved through divine illumination. When the mind is

⁸ John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 204.

concentrated in its own energy, self-conversion and self-observation are induced, and wo/man transcends and communes with God. Thus, through the descending ecstasy of God and the transcendent ecstasy of human, the mystical meeting and union is achieved: the mind is deified and communicates this grace to the body. The mind, being incorporeal, is not closed inside the body, but also outside of it, as it is connected to it. Centered within itself in the heart, the mind rules through all soul's faculties. Thus, self-control is cultivated by controlling both the content of sensory perception and its orientation.

A hallmark of the palamite anthropological and gnoseological view is his conception of *faith*. For Palamas, faith is different from any intellectual pursuits, being the equivalent of the union with God. In *Triads* there are several passages where Gregory expresses his understanding of faith: "Our holy faith is a vision of our hearts which goes beyond all sensation and all understanding, for it transcends all intellectual faculties of our souls. How is it that by vision we see what is promised for us in the time without end which is to come? By the senses? But faith is a firm assurance of our hopes; that is why the Apostle also called it 'evidence of things not seen.' Is there no intellectual faculty to see things we hope for? But how could that be, since they have never entered heart of man?" And in another place: "What is faith? Is it a natural faculty, or a supernatural one? Surely supernatural. That is why no one can go to the Father except through the Son who has lifted us above ourselves, granted us the deifying simplicity, and brought us back to unity with the Father."⁹ So, *faith* is described as a supernatural faculty granting the possibility of knowing God. Gregory surpasses dualistic interpretations of the spiritual senses, and he does that by diverting from the Evagrius' pattern on spiritual perception, where these senses were essentially a faculty of intelligence, as opposed to the body. The human being is understood as one and indivisible unity; supernatural grace is granted to the whole wo/man, and not to the mind only.¹⁰ Intelligence and senses only when transformed by grace are able to unite with God. Palamas says that "the sensual and intellectual faculties constitute means of knowing beings; they are limited to beings and manifest the Divine through these beings. But those who possess not only powers of sensation and intellection, but have also attained spiritual and supernatural grace, are not limited by beings

⁹ Gregory Palamas, *Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), II, 3, 3.

¹⁰ Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 172.

in their knowledge, but know also spiritually, above sense and intelligence, that God is Spirit, for in their entirety become God, and know God in God.”¹¹ “Spiritual light is not only the object of vision, it is also the faculty enabling us to see; this is neither sensation nor intellection, but a spiritual power distinct, in its transcendence, from all created cognitive faculties.”¹² Divine grace is not distinct from wo/man, but is divine life granted to wo/man.

From Paradigm to Pathway: The Hesychast Practice

Gregory Palamas` perspective on spiritual perception is exceptionally important due to his major role played in establishing the framework of spiritual practice in Eastern Europe, leaving also an indelible mark on its culture. The Palamite paradigm of understanding spiritual perception involves a series of assumptions that have become milestones in assessing the human nature and its ultimate reality. Spiritual practices in the Eastern Europe were done according to the guidelines given by the Palamite Hesychasm: the possibility of attaining spiritual perception was not doubted, and its acquisition was seen as a corollary of well-guided and oriented practice. Skepticism about the possibility of genuine spiritual perception does not exist in this tradition. After the 14th century, the Palamite paradigm of spiritual perception was the formula that no longer represented a topic of controversy. *More-than-human* is indeed the goal of spiritual practice in the Christian East, and this was to be achieved not by improving human capabilities through technological means, but rather by involving the body and the senses. That is why the corpus of writings compiled under the name of *Philokalia* was so successful in the Post-Byzantine Christian East: a selection of texts perfectly suitable for guidance in gaining the spiritual experience of uncreated light. The original Greek version of *Philokalia* was later translated into other languages, with an increasingly impact on the spiritual life in the Christian East. The Palamite paradigm of spiritual perception, withdrawn out of its framework, has been an important factor in shaping the cultural identity of the Eastern Europe.

Gregory Palamas acknowledged that divine energies can only be known through experience, so the Palamite paradigm of spiritual perception also gave to the Eastern Christianity certain spiritual criteria, becoming a true *path* of spiritual practice. This path, seen as a sum of milestones to be followed in acquiring

¹¹ Palamas, *Triads*, II, 3, 31.

¹² Palamas, *Triads*, III, 2, 141.

spiritual perception, implies practical experimentation, and involves a long series of attempts, returns, failures, resumptions. The spiritual experience is essentially under the sign of possibility: André Scrima, the contemporary Romanian theologian, describes it as *what comes from trials*, it is *knowledge by trial*. As Scrima indicates, the term ‘experience’ comes from Greek *peira*, meaning ‘trial’ (its root being identical to *pyr*, fire – putting into the fire).¹³

Conclusion

What is and how can be attained the spiritual perception was a constant quest, starting with Plotinus and then reiterated in every relevant period since then. I hereby invoke four major views on the spiritual perception, each of them with a really great impact. The first two views, formulated by Plotinus and Maximus were the result of a major concern in theorizing the frameworks of the spiritual perception and its consequences on human nature, while the expression of the other two views stemmed from practice, from the experience of this quest for acquiring spiritual perception. Isaac of Nineveh gave us his expression on the ways in which spiritual perception is experienced in the search for the state of rapture: the phrases and words used in his testimony were an attempt to accustom them to all stages of spiritual experience. That is why his texts were famous and used from that time till today as an experiential guide. Isaac’s words on the spiritual experience had a tremendous impact on the Russian and Romanian spiritual practice (mostly in the post-Byzantine time), but in general on the entire Orthodox Christianity. Gregory Palamas did a similar thing when answering to the objections made by Barlaam, expressing a view based exclusively on spiritual practice, and that is why he had, as Isaac, difficulties in wording his experience. So, it can be said that the Hesychast practice has been shaped by the Palamite doctrine, while its intention is pragmatic, that is to set the pathway to spiritual perception. Both approaches in outlining the practical steps toward attaining spiritual perception were, nevertheless, integrated in what is the hesychast practice of today. They are not, by any means, contradictory, but only lay distinct highlights when indicating capabilities of human experience. These pathways were integrated in the spiritual guidance across the entire Eastern Christianity, yet having distinct expressions due to the different cultural horizons and historical contexts. This is a strong point in

¹³ André Scrima, *Experiența spirituală și limbajele ei (Spiritual Experience and its Languages)* (București: Humanitas, 2008), 199.

arguing that human potentiality is so complex, and a striking fact in the spiritual practices that aim the transcendent perception. The conclusion is that they cannot be reduced to any technical or scientific approach, no matter how advanced are they. Yes, humankind can and should be enhanced, but by which means? The promise made by transhumanism seems to be extremely limited when compared to the generous scope of the spiritual practice.

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Dan Chițoiu
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași
Department of Philosophy
Carol I, no. 11, 700506, Iași, Romania
Institute for the Study of Values and Spirituality
<dan811@yahoo.com>