

The Contours of Spiritual Perception: A Brief Note on Perceptual Training

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There has been a growing interest in thinking critically and constructively about the contours of spiritual perception (SP). One aim involves making philosophical sense of SP. How, for example, are statements about perceiving things divine to be construed philosophically (e.g., “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”)? What are the conditions under which perceiving the divine is possible? What are the objects and features of SP? Is it comparable to other types of perception (e.g., physical, moral, aesthetic, and value perception)? What is the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual? In what ways can conceptually-loaded forms of SP become epistemically beneficial or distorted?

Recent work in perception theory has provided some helpful resources for pursuing such questions.¹ For example, perceptual training is important in many fields of knowledge. It’s clear that an important part of the spiritual life involves honing the capacity to perceive things divine. Such a process does not take place in a vacuum but is conditioned by the relevant background beliefs, dispositions, practices, and virtues in a congenial environment. The focus here is on the conditions under which people depend on structures, practices, and others to improve their

¹See, for example, Frederick D. Aquino and Paul L. Gavrilyuk (eds), *Perceiving Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception*. This collection of essays argues for the possibility of spiritual perception. It also seeks to make progress towards a constructive account of the different aspects of spiritual perception while exploring its intersection with various theological and philosophical themes, such as biblical interpretation, aesthetics, liturgy, race, ecology, eschatology, and the hiddenness of God. The interdisciplinary scope of the volume draws on the resources of value theory, philosophy of perception, epistemology, philosophy of art, psychology, systematic theology, and theological aesthetics.

perceptual capacities. The training of SP will often involve a long process of moral, spiritual, and intellectual preparation.²

The point here is not to suggest that perceptual training fully captures or encompasses all of SP, nor is it to restrict SP to a few unique individuals with high-level perceptual training, such as mystics. However, the training of SP plays an integral role in redirecting our misapplied cognitive capacities or perceptual distortions. It requires deep immersion in a set of practices, materials, processes, and people over the long haul. A crucial aspect of the training of SP, then, involves focusing on the complex and inextricable relationship between the cultivation of a stable and properly disposed habit of mind and the different levels of SP.

An important research project along these lines will involve clarifying the role that particular virtues (e.g., purity of heart, love, humility, apatheia, discernment) and practices (e.g., prayer, fasting, contemplation) play in forming, guiding, and shaping the training of SP. Greater clarification on a case-by-case basis is needed. Thus, it will take analyzing the structure, aim, and role of each virtue and practice to figure out how each contributes to the training of SP.

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² See, for example, Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Isabel Gauthier, Michael J. Tarr, and Daniel Bub (eds.), *Perceptual Expertise: Bridging Brain and Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), T. M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton University Press, 2020).