

## Theoception: the perception of God as a basis for belief

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It is argued that our knowledge of the senses has extended far beyond the classical five senses, and that acknowledgement of a wider range of sensory perception has implications for our beliefs. In particular, if we accept that the sense of time is a universal human form of perception and refers to a real phenomenon, despite the absence of specific temporal receptor organs, then we also need to give serious attention to the multitudes of reports of people having sensed a divine presence, and to the question whether that, too, refers to a real perceptual experience and a real perceived object. If such a sense exists, arguing by analogy with the other known senses, there must be something for it to sense. We therefore have a modest basis for continuing to believe in god. However, the question of the nature and attributes of god remains wide open to debate. I was initially given the topic, "The need for continued belief in God? Some perspectives", and my first response was, "Couldn't I rather argue the opposite?" It is easy to write a paper about reasons *not* to believe in God. Gather a lot of juicy quotes from Dawkins, interspersed with a bit of Bertrand Russell and an ancient Greek or two to show that you do have a classical education of sorts, and you have a paper in the bag and can return to your proper position in life, that of marking undergraduate assignments. Arguing for reasons to continue believing is trickier, but perhaps more rewarding. In any case, as often happens, my investigation evolved a life of its own, hence the change in title.

One aspect we have to get rid of quickly is the question of god's existence. There are a number of traditional arguments for the existence of god, normally classified as the ontological argument,<sup>i</sup> the cosmological argument and the argument from design.<sup>ii</sup> Strangely, it appears that such arguments were a particular obsession within the Christian philosophical milieu. While it is possible to find similar arguments in, say, Hindu philosophy, they have rarely attained such a central position. The three arguments go back to classical antiquity and peaked in the late medieval period. Ever since Immanuel Kant's withering attack in the *Critique of pure reason*, these arguments have descended to the level of a harmless hobby for a small number of philosophers of religion. Just how devastating Kant's critiques<sup>iii</sup> were can be seen more than a century later, when John Henry Newman (quoted in Roberts 2007:58) writes:

I have not insisted on the argument from design, because I am writing for the 19th century, by which, as represented by its philosophers, design is not admitted as proved. And to tell the truth, though I should not wish to preach on the subject, for 40 years I have been unable to see the logical force of the argument myself. I believe in design because I believe in God; not in God because I see design.

In the light of this development, it is easy to dismiss religious experience. Kenny (2007:395-396) is one of the more charitable commentators. He can see a place for religion even if it contains little or no truth value:

If there is any truth in any religious revelation it is more likely that each of them is a metaphor for a single underlying truth that is incapable of being expressed in literal terms without contradiction. In this way religion would

resemble poetry rather than science. To say that religious language is not literal, and to say that different religious creeds therefore do not contradict each other, is not to say that all religions are of equal worth. The mode of utterance of Shakespeare and that of William McGonagall is poetic in each case; that does not mean that the writings of each of them display an equally valuable insight into human nature.

Elsewhere he compares religion to a preference for one political party over another. Religion therefore has a certain utility value in society, but should not presume to deal with truth.

In any case, if any philosopher was able to construct an irrefutable case for the existence of God, that would not be a reason for belief. Confronted with such evidence, we would know, we would be certain, and belief would be irrelevant.

Belief, therefore, is of a lower order than knowledge. Indeed, it is the demand for definitive proof or disproof that believers and non-believers have thrown at each other over the ages which bedevils relations between them. Belief is the movement between varying shades of confidence, never quite 0% and never quite 100. In this respect belief in god is a typically human experience. Consider the statement, 'I love my wife'. If this is said by someone who never actually shows evidence of thinking of her, or, on the contrary, if it is said by someone whose entire life is obsessively devoted to pandering to her every whim, we would in either case suspect a psychopathological condition. A normal human reaction would be to vary the attention paid to the wife one loves, or the god one believes in, as the demands of the situation dictate. And belief, unlike knowledge, can act in the background without necessarily coming to the foreground of one's consciousness (Everett & Fisher, in Burton 2005).

DiMuzio (2006) argues that the existence and the possibility of God are not even necessary for human life to be meaningful. Thus we cannot insist on God's existence to act as the guarantor of meaning, even if we can prove that belief in that existence does boost meaningfulness.

We do not, therefore, need to establish god's existence before we can consider belief in god. Belief in a non-existent god will do perfectly well. Later on, indeed, I will argue that it is belief that suggests existence, not existence that requires belief.

We also need to avoid parochialism. Far too many discussions of reasons for believing in god are really just attempts to justify believing in one particular deity. Alston's influential *Perceiving God* (1991), for example, attempts primarily to justify Christian belief in all its ramifications even as he attempts to do justice to the existence of other religions.<sup>iv</sup> But the reasons for believing in one religious institution's interpretation of god are not particularly interesting when set beside the wider issues of belief. Why do Christians believe in the trinity? Why do Hindus believe in karma? Why do UFO cultists believe in extra-terrestrial saviours? Indeed, why does anyone believe in anything?

But the very question, 'why does X believe in Y?', presupposes that the reasons for that belief lie somewhere outside X and Y, that we can explain that belief solely with reference to external factors. And yet this is invariably not the reason put forward by religious people. Religious people believe because they have experienced the object of their belief. If they have not experienced it themselves, then someone they trust has had this experience.

One need not look far to find people who claim to have experienced God. They are all around us. In every human culture we find them – every one without exception. They are not a small group that can be explained away as a historical relic or a marginal mental illness. Indeed, they seem to be in the majority. In one survey (Hood et al, in Peterson 2002:239) between 40 and 70 per cent of respondents in the US and UK claimed to have had some kind of religious experience. Peterson (2002:239) rightly warns against accepting such reports uncritically, but even if we take out the deceptions, misunderstandings and muddled responses we are left with

literally millions of people who tell us that they have made contact with something divine. To quote just one example:

There was no sensible vision, but the room was filled by a Presence which in a strange way was both about me and within me. I was overwhelmingly possessed by Someone who was not myself, and yet I felt I was more myself than I had ever been before (Beardsworth, in Alston 1991:17)

I intend to argue in favour of what is known in Reformed theology as *sensus divinitatis*, though inevitably not in any sense that Calvin or Plantinga would approve of. In fact, I am going to call it something else: *theoception*. Literally, the perception of God.

But when I say 'God' I am not referring to the god of any particular religion. For all the good they may represent, all those gods carry around vast amounts of cultural accretions. What interests me is the bare perception preceding recognition.

So let us use this word 'god', but only as a placeholder, and with a lower-case g. In what follows, I will not assume that god is a person, or that god is not a person. I will not assume that god created the universe, nor that god is particularly concerned about what goes on in it. I will not assume that god is one, three or infinite in number. I will start with the assumption that we perceive something without even stipulating that it is 'some thing'. I will temporarily shelve the ontological implications of my epistemological musings.

If there is a sense of god, then where does it fit in among the other senses? The study of the senses is a multidisciplinary endeavour involving neurologists, cognitive psychologists and philosophers, and has yet to be given a name of its own – perhaps perceptuology might serve?

Even today, we commonly follow Aristotle's lead in thinking of the Five Senses (vision, audition, gustation, olfaction and touch),<sup>v</sup> but in fact a much larger number have been identified. *Equilibrioception* is our sense of balance and our position within a gravity field. *Thermoception* is our awareness of temperature. *Nociception* is the perception of pain. And these are just the more common ones. Other, more obscure senses are the subject of uncertainty: There are internal sensors in the gastric tract that sense gas distension, but can 'that bloated feeling' really be classified as a full-blown sense? Nor do humans have a monopoly on the senses. We do not know whether bats and dolphins experience *echolocation* as an extension of normal hearing or as a separate sense. If the former, we can somewhat imagine its effect. But the *magnetoception* employed by migrating birds, or the *electroception* of the electric eel, are intrinsically non-human.

And then there is the sense that is most interesting to us: the sense of time. Too newly discovered, apparently, to have received a proper Latinate name (perhaps *temporaception*?), the sense of time differs from other senses in that it employs no specific receptors: no specific 'clock' cells have so far been found, and our best guess is that we derive our sense of time as a complicated gestalt of internal and external cues.

If there are no specific sensory organs to act as 'clocks', then how do we know that a sense of time exists? We extrapolate from our own experience, observation of other people's behaviour and the testimony of others. Occasionally it is claimed that time awareness is totally a cultural artifact, and that a given culture has no sense of time. Benjamin Whorf, following Franz Boas, made this claim about the Hopi, for example. But then further examination shows that the culture in question does have a sense of time, but chooses to express it in different ways than the investigator's culture. The Hopi, for example, were shown to have a sophisticated calendar (Parr-Davies 2001). However it is expressed, a sense of time appears to be a pan-human characteristic. In the abstract heights of philosophy and physics the existence and precise nature of time is highly debatable (and hotly debated!) but we accept as given that humans universally experience duration and change, that is, the passage of

time. We do not denounce the vast majority of the species as deluded because their experience of time does not match the latest theory.

Why, then, should we do so when those same millions claim to have had an experience of god? For this is precisely what we see happening: The collective experience of humanity is accepted when it comes to a sense of time, but pooh-poohed when it involves a sense of god. As Alston (1991:68) puts it:

I may be perceptually justified in believing that there is a lake in front of me even if I am a victim of a mirage and no lake is being perceived. But this is just an isolated incident that occurs against the background of innumerable cases in which perceptual justification involves authentic perception of the object. It strains credulity to suppose that an entire sphere of putatively perceptual experience could be a source of justification for perceptual beliefs, while there is no, or virtually no, genuine perception of the objects involved.

Like the sense of time, we can find no specific sensory organs, no 'god-detectors'. We know of god's existence only indirectly, by extrapolating from our own experiences if we have had any, and from the evidence we find when we examine humans and their society. And even circumstantial and anecdotal evidence starts to take on a certain truth value once it becomes overwhelming. There is NO society in which we do not find religious perception. I repeat, there are NONE. This perception may not express itself in terms of any conventional religion, but the 'peak experience', as it is known in some branches of psychology, cannot be reduced to the presence of endorphins. It could as easily be argued that it produces them. Even the most determined sceptics are not immune to the direct perception of god:

Oh mighty God, I believe! As to Monsieur the Son and Madame his mother, that is another matter!

– Attributed to Voltaire, on seeing a sunrise.

Undoubtedly, much of this experience is culturally influenced. Catholics have visions of the Virgin Mary: Buddhists have visions of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. It does not normally happen the other way round. But before culture has a chance to fill in the details, there is the bare perception of ... what? Of a presence or, its obverse, an absence. Of Otto's fascinating yet terrifying mystery. Of *tathata*, suchness. Of God. Studying the history of religions, and especially the history of mysticism, shows the universality of this religious perception.

All perception engages the whole brain, but there can nevertheless be brain areas more intimately related to one sense than to others. Vision, for example engages so much of the brain that we can fairly speak of that area as the visual cortex. If there are no specific 'clock' receptors, then we would expect that there are not necessarily dedicated brain areas that deal with the sense of time, and that the sense of time is more diffuse than most senses in terms of brain function. And indeed, that seems to be the case: while the suprachiasmatic nuclei have been identified as governing the 24-hour cycle, in general the sense of time is not localised within one part of the brain.

Theoception too, does not seem to be localised in a single brain area. Some years ago there was much excitement when the existence of a 'God-spot' in the temporal lobes was announced.

The most dramatic and controversial element of the neurotheology school is work by Michael Persinger. Reportedly, Persinger has been able not only to identify brain regions responsible for certain types of religious experiences, but has also succeeded at artificially inducing such experiences using electromagnetic fields, experiences that appear similar

to being in the presence of a supernatural being. If such experiences may be artificially induced, could it be that god concepts arise from misfiring of these same brain regions? (Barrett 2007:58)

For some, a God-spot suggested that religious experience is integral to human nature – that humans are made to communicate with God, and scientists had finally stumbled onto a clue as to how such communication worked. In the minds of others, however, the existence of a God-spot demonstrated the exact opposite: Religious experiences could now be explained as a kind of neurological aberration, and people who claimed to speak to God or see visions of the virgin Mary were in fact doing no such thing – their brains were merely short-circuiting. (Peterson 2002:238)

Certainly, if we start out on our research from the perspective that religious experience is an epiphenomenon of badly behaved neurons, that is what we will find. But there is no need to take these findings in a reductive way:

Suppose I believe I see a robin outside my window. You tell me you can exactly specify the neural pathways responsible for generating my belief. Does that mean the robin is not really there? Hardly. That religious experiences can be artificially manufactured is irrelevant in the same way. Neurologists have found that by stimulating the cortex they can create various perceptual experiences. No one wants to argue that if scientists can use electromagnetic fields to make me believe I see a robin that suddenly I am not justified under normal conditions in believing I see robins. (Barrett 2007:61-62)

More recent research has not borne out the existence of a specific 'God-spot'. It now seems that when we examine the brains of normal, though intensely religious persons (the most recent experiment was done with a group of Carmelite nuns) rather than epileptics, more than a dozen brain regions are involved in a religious experience. (Beauregard & Paquette 2006). If this latest finding turns out to be correct, then theoception would be even more diffuse than the sense of time. Perhaps this means that it is even more underdeveloped.

For another thing these two senses have in common is that in comparison with senses with dedicated sense receptors, they are neither robust nor reliable. Both can be affected by chemicals or by sensory deprivation. Marijuana use, for example, is promoted by the Rastafarian religion as a way to experience god. It is also known to affect the sense of time.<sup>vi</sup> Meditative techniques prescribed by a variety of religions can be regarded as a self-induced form of sensory deprivation.

Our sense of time, even when unimpeded by drugs, is not particularly accurate by contemporary standards. If it were, we would not need wristwatches, clocks and so on. The question now is if the analogy between the two senses still holds. Is theoception a relatively accurate sense, like vision, or is it inaccurate like the sense of time?

At this stage we can consider the fact that, even after taking account of cultural and linguistic differences, people can usually come to an understanding when it comes to describing visual input. A blue cube is never confused with a red sphere. This high level of consistency indicates that the basic sensory apparatus must be fairly accurate. Not so with our sense of god. As Alston (1991:36) puts it, "Sense perception, especially vision, is vivid and richly detailed, bursting with information, whereas the experience of God is dim, meager and obscure."

The immediate perception of god is taken up by cultures and described in millions of ways. Wars have been fought over differences in interpretations. If theoception was an accurate sense, there would be broad agreement about the nature of god. There would still be room for preference, as one might prefer red spheres to blue cubes, but not the fundamental disagreements we actually find in the

religious world. If theoception was vision, we would find ourselves in the position of the planarian worm or the single-celled *Euglena*, able to distinguish between darkness and light, but incapable of high-definition, fine-grained vision. We may be able to sense god, but only “through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). In evolutionary terms it seems that theoception is a very recently developed sense, and one that may well be limited to our species. We can distinguish between god and not-god. Another billion years of evolution, and who knows?

Is theoception unique to our species? As far as we can tell, yes. Just as birds and fish possess senses we can barely imagine, so have we evolved this ability to sense god.

Which brings us back to the central question: is this a good reason to keep believing in god? Not according to Snider (2008:192), who states, quite correctly, that

There is no requirement that those who believe humans have a cognitive function called the *sensus divinitatis* need believe there is a God. Belief in a *sensus divinitatis* does not depend on belief in God, nor even on the existence of God.

But this is where my concept of theoception differs from the notion of a *sensus divinitatis*. Theoception is not a cognitive function. It is part of the sensory apparatus that our cognitive functions are there to deal with. The Calvin/Plantinga view of *sensus divinitatis* sees it as an avenue for obtaining *accurate* information about God. Theoception is merely a direct perception of god, conveying a minimum of information until it has been analysed and interpreted. And if we accept the existence of theoception, then we are led to a far stronger reason to believe in the existence of god.

Consider the other senses. We are not able to gather information on everything that goes on around us. We cannot echolocate like bats. We cannot sense the earth's magnetic field like birds or feel the changes in nearby electrical currents like certain fish. But they too are limited. No known organism can detect neutrinos, for example.

Even with the senses we do have, we look out at a very limited hole in the total spectrum of events. We cannot see infra-red or ultraviolet. We can only hear sounds within a limited range of frequencies. And so on. But all this nevertheless reflects on the reality we live in. There really are photons streaming outside our bodies, and we have evolved ways to sense at least some of them. There really are pressure differentials in the air or water that surrounds us, and we have evolved ways of detecting at least some of those. Whatever time may actually turn out to be, there is a reality of duration, of things happening one after another, and we have a rough-and-ready awareness of that too. Unless we accept a thoroughly idealist philosophy – a solipsism, in fact – every one of our senses corresponds to the existence of a subset of physical reality.

In the face of this, why should there be a sense designed/evolved to detect ... absolutely nothing? Why should the vast majority of human beings be convinced that they are making contact with something that does not exist in reality? If we have a sense of god, however primitive and underdeveloped, then there must be a god for it to detect. In the end, we cannot ignore the ontological implications of epistemology.

But let us recall that we agreed to use ‘god’ merely as a placeholder. We cannot say that the god that we detect through theoception is the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac. It is not necessarily the God of the prophet Muhammad, nor is it necessarily the Buddha Amitabha, Lord Shiva or the Mandate of Heaven. All of that is interpretation. One of these interpretations may be true, but at this stage of our evolution we do not have sufficient evidence to tell which one. The only religious tradition that we can back up from within our sense of god is the vaguest kind of deism, and it is an insufficient basis on which to build an entire natural theology. Indeed, we must remain open to the possibility that if we actually knew the god we perceive, we might not like him/her/it very much.<sup>vii</sup>

Another shortcoming of theoception is that it is a one-way process. Let us recall that “For some, a God-spot suggested that religious experience is integral to human nature – that humans are made to communicate with God, and scientists had finally stumbled onto a clue as to how such communication worked” (Peterson 2002:238). But the object I see is not influenced by my seeing it, nor is the sound I hear affected by my hearing, unless it is way down on the quantum level. ‘Theoception’ describes our sense of god. If god also has a sense of us, it will have to be described by some other model.

To conclude: if we can accept that the sense of time is a universal human form of perception and refers to a real phenomenon, then it becomes clear that we need to give serious attention to the multitudes of reports of people having sensed a divine presence, and to the question whether it too refers to a real perceptual experience and a real perceived object. I have named this ‘sense of god’ *theoception*. If such a sense exists, again arguing by analogy with the other known senses, there must be something for it to sense. We therefore have a modest basis for continuing to believe in god. However, the question of the attributes of god remains wide open to debate.

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## Endnotes

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1 See Nagasawa (2007) for a contemporary look at this argument.

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- 2 Monton (2006) presents a modern variation of this argument that employs “The  
fundamental constants that are involved in the laws of physics which describe our  
universe”.
- 3 Interestingly enough, Kant himself put forward a version of the ontological argument  
earlier in his career: see Hall (2007). See also Kimweli (2005) for a concise description  
and critique of Plantinga's attempt to revive the ontological argument.
- 4 E.g. on p 24 and especially in ch.7 (pp 255-284). See Willard (2001) for a critique of  
Alston's approach to the problem of religious diversity.
- 5 Consider Zangwill (2004), whose sophisticated critique of Alston only contrasts the  
“sixth religious sense” with the conventional five senses.
- 6 <http://www.scienceclarified.com/lo-Ma/Marijuana.html>, accessed 25 August 2008.
- 7 Cf. Johnson (2004:353): “Alston claims that an experience of God will either add to or  
update our current web of beliefs. But he fails to consider a third possibility: that an  
encounter with a divine being could challenge some of our current beliefs or even  
require us to rearrange our entire network of beliefs.”