

Does Perception Track Deific Properties: A Case for Deific Perception

Hamid Nourbakhshi

Philosophy Department, University of Missouri-Columbia, MO, USA

Psychological Sciences Department, University of Missouri-Columbia, MO, USA

Email address:

Hnth5@missouri.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-6893-3451

Abstract: This paper argues for deific perception, the idea that some perceptual experiences represent deific properties, as an explanation for a certain type of religious experience. Using Siegel's method of phenomenal contrast, a pair of experiences are compared: an ordinary perception of a black rose, and one where the rose seems imbued with religious significance. Intuitively, these have different phenomenologies. Deific perception posits that in the religiously-significant experience, a deific property like "being a creature of God" partly constitutes the visual phenomenology. Rival explanations like differences in attention or cognitive penetration fail to account for the phenomenal contrast. Deific perception coheres with realism about religious properties and provides a naturalistic explanation of how some people directly sense the divine in nature. If valid, it suggests that with proper background beliefs and recognition capacities, perception can represent high-level deific properties, just as it may represent other abstract properties like natural kinds. The paper thus contributes to debates on the contents of perception and offers a sympathetic account of a class of numinous experiences.

Keywords: Phenomenal Contrast, Perception, Cognitive Penetration, Attention

1. Introduction

Within the realms of philosophical and scientific discourse concerning the nature of perception, there exists a well-established consensus regarding the human capacity to visually perceive properties deemed to be low-level, such as the chromatic qualities of objects, their kinetic attributes, spatial positioning, and illumination. Nevertheless, the notion that the contents of visual perception might also encompass high-level properties remains a point of contention, subject to ongoing philosophical deliberation and empirical investigation. Some philosophers have propounded the notion that an array of higher-order properties may indeed constitute elements of our perceptual content, arguing that such properties can be apprehended through visual perception without recourse to inferential processes predicated upon perceptual resources. These putative high-level properties encompass a diverse range of phenomena, including natural kinds (e.g., the property of being a pine tree), artifactual kinds (e.g., the property of being a chair), causal features (e.g., the property of being the cause of the increased illumination of the room) (Bayne 2009; Butterfill 2009; O'Callaghan 2008; Scholl & Tremoulet 2000; Siegel 2006, 2009, 2010b, 2014), agency features (e.g., the property of being the agent of voluntarily raising a hand), action features (e.g., the property of being graspable), emotional and intentional features (e.g., the

property of being surprised), social features (e.g., the property of being masculine), moral features (e.g., the property of the badness of igniting a cat) (Bayne 2009, 2011; Begby 2011; Block 2014; Butterfill 2009, 2015; Cullison 2010; Di Bona 2017; Fish 2013; Helton 2016; Masrour 2011; Nanay 2011, 2012; Scholl & Gao 2013; Siegel 2005, 2010, 2014; Toribio 2015a, 2015b; Van Gulick 1994; Wisniewski 2015, Werner 2014), and even the mental states of other individuals (Safdari 2021). The central contention advanced by these philosophers is that such properties can be directly perceived, that is, seen in a non-inferential manner, without the need for an intermediary process of inference grounded in perceptual resources.

In this article, by invoking the method of phenomenal contrast, I attempt to argue in favor of perceiving deific properties. First, I will draw a phenomenal contrast based on two perceptual experiences, one assumed as an ordinary perception of an object and the other as a perceptual experience which is a candidate for carrying deific contents. Secondly, I will try to exclude all proposed rival explanations in favor of my offered explanation: some perceptual experiences represent deific properties. In the following, I briefly point out the specific type of religious experiences based on which I will develop my phenomenal contrast argument.

2. Religious Experience

There are different types of religious experience. Here I will develop my phenomenal contrast based on a specific type of religious experience. This type of religious experience is where sensory experiences of everyday objects reveal additional information about a transcendent reality. This type of experience is exemplified by sensing the divine in natural surroundings such as a flower or the starry sky. While another individual may have the same perceptual experience, they may not attribute the same religious significance to it. Additionally, this type of religious experience may involve an ordinary perception of a physical object that holds religious significance, as seen in the examples of Moses and the burning bush, or the disciples of Buddha witnessing his levitation. Witnesses of miracles also have this type of religious experience, regardless of their interpretation of it (Mark 2022). One might object that by assuming a religious significance and meaning for a type of perceptual experience, I am beginning the question. Here by religious significance, I mean to point out the feature of the religious experiences where the subject undergoes an intense phenomenology that is manifested in a religious context.

It is intuitively expected that there would be a phenomenological difference between the subject's experiences before and while undergoing the religious experience. For this subject, what it is like to perceive the object through an ordinary experience is not the same as what it is like to perceive the very object through a religious experience. In the latter, the object seems to her differently. In what follows, I will set up a more detailed phenomenal contrast argument (PCA) based on this phenomenal contrast.¹

3. A Case for Deific Perception

Take it that S undergoes an experience O1 at t1. O1 is an ordinary perceptual experience through vision in which S looks at a black rose. The black rose in O1 looks to S as it looks to anyone in the regular conditions of a veridical perceptual experience. Fix O1 as the contrasting experience. Then take that S undergoes another perceptual experience O2 through vision at t2. O2 is a visual experience that bears a religious significance for S and she enjoys a powerful phenomenology through it. The object of O2 is the very black rose in O1. Now fix O2 as the target experience. It is expected that one can intuitively confirm a phenomenal contrast between O1 and O2.

O2 is an experience like Moses' perception of a burning bush and Buddha witnessing his levitation. There are reports of such experiences where people say they had been "aware of, or influenced by a presence or power, whether referred to as God or not, which is different from their everyday selves" (Hardy, 1971). In their experiences, these subjects were looking at an ordinary object while enjoying a phenomenology different from the phenomenology they used to enjoy while looking at

the same object. The starry sky, a flower, or the surrounding nature, etc. are the kind of objects that are reported to be observed with a different phenomenology. I set up my case on the perception of a flower.

- O1: S visually experiences a black rose at t1.
- O2: S visually experiences a black rose at t2 (while her experience bears a religious significance).

We can plausibly assume that S and S' both are already full-fledged believers. Two significant points to note here are: First, S, before undergoing both experiences not only believed in God, but also entertained a comprehensive collection of Catholic beliefs. This is because, in many reported cases of black-rose-type religious experiences (O2-type experiences from now), the status of beliefs before obtaining the experience has not been changed. In other words, the O2-type experiences were not necessarily results of obtaining new religious beliefs or even rigorous practice. This means that new religious beliefs are not necessarily relevant to experiencing such experiences. Most Catholic Christians, while believing in a full collection of Catholic beliefs, do not undergo such experiences. However, several believers of the very collection of beliefs have experienced these types of experiences. So, it is permissible to draw the contrast between the two experiences of one single full-believer subject. This assumption will let us rule out a specific rival explanation - cognitive penetration of new beliefs- more easily.

Secondly, although many of these O2-type experiences were unbidden and not necessarily the result of training in myth or long periods of meditation, we can assume that within the period from t1 to t2, S has been under mythical training or has been meditating. The advantage of such an assumption is that it helps us to hold O2-type experiences within the scope of ordinary perceptions. For it might be the case that O2-type experiences are ordinary perceptions by which S, by virtue of her new skills and perceptual capacities, could track some properties that were not falling in her perceptual scope before taking the training. This assumption makes O2 a more suitable candidate for resembling an ordinary perceptual experience than a non-ordinary perceptual experience through a sixth modality (as some philosophers do it). For, although it is broadly accepted that learning affects at least the overall appearance of our experiences, the controversy is whether this phenomenological change is in virtue of a change in perceptual phenomenology. It is still a matter of debate whether learning could change our perceptual phenomenology or not.

Thirdly, O1 and O2 are the overall experiences that S undergoes. This means that besides the perceptual component of these experiences, O1 and O2 might include other components that might have a contribution to the overall phenomenology. S, while looking at the black rose, might feel

¹ See Nourbakhshi (2023) for a detailed examination of the method.

a headache or a scratch on her back or have a background mood or a belief that black roses are pretty or a desire that she tends to smell the flower. Take the perceptual part of the subject's overall experience as E1 and E2. The advocate of (perceptual) MPC holds that the change in the overall phenomenology is due to a phenomenological change in the representational component—meaning that a change in phenomenology explained by the fact that (i) phenomenal character is representational content and (ii) there's a change in representational content. In the following, I will discuss different explanations as to why there is a contrast between O1 and O2.

4. Deific Perception (DP)

DP claims that a deific property such as being a creature of God is tracked by the visual part (E2) of the second side of the pair, and with regard to the point that “nothing counts as a content of experience if it does not reflect the phenomenal character of experience, either by co-varying with phenomenal character or by otherwise reflecting it” (Siegel 2013:850), the contrast is due to the phenomenological contribution of D to the overall phenomenology of O2. E1 fails to track D and thus differs in phenomenology.

In the case of the black rose, D stands for the property of being a creature of God. There are two points here: first, I am not to argue that properties such as D exist. I would assume a realism about D. The debate is not whether D exists or not. Rather the debate is whether we can access such properties through perception, on the assumption that they exist. Second, however, O2 in the black rose case is a candidate for involving the property of being a creature of God, D, in different black-rose-like cases, might be a property other than being a creature of God.

My offered explanation for the phenomenal contrast in the black rose case is:

Deific Perception (DP): some perceptual experiences represent deific properties.

In the following, I discuss a couple of rival explanations for the phenomenal contrast between O1 and O2.

Attention

Tye (1995) argues that the phenomenological difference between expert and naive experiences of a kestrel could be accounted for in terms of the different weight of attention the two experiencers give to the kestrel. Since the expert has learned to pay more attention to the fine-grained details of the bird, she would, as expected, enjoy a different phenomenology. Similarly, in the case of DP, perhaps O2 is obtained under more attention.

Reply:

It is plausible to say that attention is why the phenomenological difference happens in the case of kestrel. However, it does not seem a plausible explanation for my contrast. For it is not clear how much cognitive effort for attending to the black rose can induce an O2-type experience. One can watch the black rose with as great as possible attention to the details, without undergoing any O2-type experience.

Merely attending closely to an object fails to reliably elicit phenomenal transformations of the profundity described in religious experiences. While attention can improve perceptual discrimination, it does not necessarily intensify qualitative feelings in this manner. Furthermore, reports of these experiences often emphasize their unbidden, unexpected nature rather than resulting from an intentional direction of focus. The phenomenal contrasts arise in the absence of effortful attempts to control or direct attention in prescribed ways. Indeed, religious experiences are frequently described as effortless revelations, whereas controlling attention relies on cognitive exertion. Additionally, if attention explained the phenomenal difference, we would expect to observe correlations between phenomenal changes and objective improvements in attentional performance. However, such relationships are not clearly evidenced. For these reasons, appeal to attention alone falls short of explaining the dramatic phenomenal contrasts characteristic of the religious experiences under examination.

One might insist that there are some post-attentive gestalt properties that S fails to track in O1 but succeeds in tracking them in O2. S, due to her inattentive blindness at t1, does not represent some properties of the black rose, but she, due to her new perceptual capacities affected by her trained attention, could represent the untracked post-attentive gestalt properties and consequentially she enjoys a different phenomenology at t2.

I would reply, that S at t2 not only has not taken a typology course on black roses but also does not know anything further as to what she knows about black roses at t1. The only training, she has taken is mythical training which is irrelevant to new shapes or other gestalt properties. Grasping new skills might render the subject to detect new properties. But it seems impermissible to expect mythical training to make her capable of detecting new low-level properties or new gestalt properties. Mythical training includes nothing relevant to making S sensitive to new gestalt properties. I accept that learning could affect attention to detect new properties of a given object. But the problem with this explanation is how could the irrelevant learnings draw the attention of S to new gestalt properties.

Moreover, as I already mentioned, to draw the contrast it is not necessary to assume that S has taken any kind of training between t1 and t2. For, many of the O2-type experiences are reported from naïve subjects who have not taken any sort of this training and their experiences seemed to be a sudden pop-

up in regular conditions. So, it is conceivable that the subject has not taken any certain training, but her experiences phenomenologically contrast with each other. It means that the contrast could remain, even in the case of removing the learning or training from the machinery of our MPC. Stating that an experience is unbidden and irrelevant does not mean that the subject has not taken any prior steps to prepare or predispose themselves for it, as noted by Luhrmann (2012). However, the claim is only that the subject has not engaged in any specific practices with the intention of generating a religious experience. So, if practice and learning are not a necessary component of MPC, how could the opponent explain the contrast in terms of new attentional capacities resulting from learning and training?

Moreover, the mystical training undertaken was not targeted at honing perceptual attention to physical details that could enable detecting new low-level or gestalt properties. Rather, the training concerned transcendent realities. As such, it cannot explain any purported enhanced attention to physical qualities. Additionally, sudden religious experiences arise even in naïve subjects lacking such training. This demonstrates focused attention gained through practice is not a necessary precursor of the phenomenal contrast. Even in cases of extensive attentional focus on an object, this does not reliably culminate in the profound phenomenal change characteristic of religious experiences. Though attention may modulate perceptual discrimination, dramatic changes in qualitative phenomenology of this magnitude do not consistently arise from attentional focus alone. As such, appeals to attention fail to compellingly account for the vivid phenomenal contrasts reported in these distinctive religious experiences.

Cognitive Penetration:

O1, and O2, are overall experiences that other than the visual part, as already discussed, include other cognitive and/or non-cognitive states of the subject. This explanation proposes that the phenomenal contrast could be explained in terms of the cognitive phenomenology of her non-perceptual states. In other words, there is a phenomenally conscious non-sensory element in O2 that contributes to the phenomenology of O2 and thereby makes a phenomenal contrast. For instance, there might be a belief, a desire, an intuition, or any other cognitive state C that S lacks at t1 but not at t2. This suggests that the phenomenological contribution of C is responsible for the change in the overall phenomenology.

Reply

To reply to this objection/explanation, we are to assess the potential cognitive states that might be proposed by the opponent. One might think that the mythical training that S has received between t1 and t2 is what makes the phenomenal contrast. Mythical training can be a factor that increases the probability of undergoing such experiences. But many people

after even years of training do not undergo O2-type experiences. If training was responsible for the contrast, there would have been similar contrasts between all the subjects that received the training. Thus, it is not clear that the training is why the contrast happens.

It is important to mention that showing that gaining cognitive skills and receiving training make a change in phenomenology does not automatically refute DP. Because skills and training can help the perceiver track a property that she used to fail to track, for instance, one's experience, after receiving enough education in music, would differ. True that the subject owes this difference to the education she has received. But this is consistent with saying that musical skills now let the subject track new properties. Similarly, I can accept that the mythical training that S has received is making her able to track what she used to track.

Nor attaining religious beliefs can explain the contrast. Because, if cognitive phenomenology of religious beliefs could change a phenomenal difference, then O2-type experiences would be undergone by every religious believer. Not even degrees of belief can explain the contrast. Because again not every faithful believer -that believes in the contents of their beliefs with a degree of certainty- undergoes O2-type experiences. On the other side, O2-type experiences are also reported by non-believers as well. O2-type experiences are the initiative of religious faith among many people who used to ignore religious beliefs and did not hold a belief attitude to the contents of current beliefs.

What cognitive penetration could arise from belief would likely only elicit subtle phenomenal alterations, not the vivid, palpable transforms described in religious experience reports. And the profundity of the phenomenal changes exceeds what belief's cognitive penetration could be expected to produce.

Conclusion

Deific perception can plausibly give us a naturalistic account of some specific type of religious experience. DF helps the realist about D-properties gain a better understanding of a type of religious experience that has been traditionally problematic in literature. DF suggests that O2-type experiences are nothing more than the perception of certain high-level properties—D-properties.

References

- Bayne, T. (2009). Perception and the reach of phenomenal content. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 59: 385–404.
- Bayne, T. (2011). The sense of agency. In F. Macpherson (Ed.), *The senses: Classic and contemporary philosophical perspectives*. (pp. 355–374). Oxford:

Oxford University Press.

- Begby, E. (2011). Review of Tyler Burge, origins of objectivity. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2011(2).
- Block, N. (2014). Seeing-as in the light of vision science. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 89(1), 650–572.
- Butterfill, S. (2009). Seeing causings and hearing gestures. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 59(236), 405–428
- Butterfill, S. A. (2015). Perceiving expressions of emotion: What evidence could bear on questions about perceptual experience of mental states? *Consciousness and Cognition*, 36, 438–451
- Cullison, A. (2010). Moral perception. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 18(2), 159–175.
- Di Bona, E. (2017). Towards a rich view of auditory experience. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 174(11), 2629–2643. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45094209>
- Fish, W. (2013). High-level properties and visual experience. *Philosophical Studies*, 162, 43–55.
- Hardy, A. C. (1971). Leaflet entitled Research into religious experience: How you can take part. Reprinted from Faith and Freedom, Summer
- Helton, G. (2016) 'Recent Issues in High-Level Perception', *Philosophy Compass*, 11: 851–62.
- Lührmann, Tanya, 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, New York: Vintage.
- Mark, W. (2022). Religious Experience, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/religious-experience/>>.
- Masrour, F. (2011). Is perceptual phenomenology thin? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 83(2), 366–397.
- Nanay, B. (2011). Do we see apples as edible? *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 92(3), 305–322.
- Nanay, B. (2012). Perceptual phenomenology. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 26(1), 235–246.
- Nourbakhshi, H. (2023) The role of imagination and recollection in the method of phenomenal contrast. *Theoria*, 89(5), 710–733. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12489>
- O'Callaghan, C. (2008). Object perception: Vision and audition. *Philosophy Compass*, 3(4), 803–829.
- Safdari Sharabiani, A. (2021). Genuine empathy with inanimate objects. *Phenom Cogn Sci* 20, 831–846. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09715-w>
- Scholl, B. J., & Gao, T. (2013). Perceiving animacy and intentionality: Visual processing or higher-level judgment? In M. D. Rutherford, & V. A. Kuhlmeier (Eds.), *Social perception: Detection and interpretation of animacy, agency, and intention*. (pp. 197–230). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Scholl, B. J., & Tremoulet, P. D. (2000). Perceptual causality and animacy. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 4(8), 299–309.
- Siegel, S. (2006). Which properties are represented in perception? In T. Gendler, & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Perceptual experience*. (pp. 481–503). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Siegel, S. (2009). The visual experience of causation. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 59(236), 519–540.
- Siegel, S. (2010b). *The contents of visual experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Siegel, S. (2014). Affordances and the contents of perception. In B. Brogaard (Ed.), *Does perception have content?* (pp. 39–76). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toribio, J. (2015a). Social vision: Breaking a philosophical impasse? *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 6(4), 611–615.
- Toribio, J. (2015b). Visual experience: Rich but impenetrable. *Synthese*, 1–18.
- Tye, M. (1995). *Ten Problems of Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Van Gulick, R. (1994). Deficit studies and the function of phenomenal consciousness. In G. Graham, & G. Lynn Stephens (Eds.), *Philosophical psychopathology*. (pp. 25–49). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Werner, P. (2014). Moral Perception and the Contents of Experience. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 13(3): 1–24.
- Wisniewski, J. J. (2015). The case for moral perception. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 14(1), 129–148.