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THE SENSORY PRESENTATION OF DIVINE INFINITY*

Edward L. Schoen

Reliable as well as unreliable indicators play a crucial role in various types of ordinary perceptual encounter. Since perceptual indicators may function perfectly well without any connection whatever to essences or essential natures, it is possible to find ways in which divine infinity may be perceptually encountered and even recognized as such in the course of ordinary human experience.

About two decades ago, John Hick accepted verificationist criteria as reasonable standards by which to judge the factual meaningfulness of utterances. In his *Faith and Knowledge*, he noted that the details of Christian conceptions of God present several particularly difficult problems for verificationists. According to Hick, one of these problems arises from the fact that

God is described in Christian theology in terms of various absolute qualities, such as omnipotence, omnipresence, perfect goodness, infinite love, etc., which cannot as such be observed by us, as can their finite analogues, limited power, local presence, finite goodness, and human love. One can recognize that a being whom one 'encounters' has a given finite degree of power, but how does one recognize that he has *unlimited* power? How does one observe that an encountered being is *omnipresent*? How does one perceive that his goodness and love, which one can perhaps see to exceed any human goodness and love, are actually infinite? Such qualities cannot be given in human experience.¹

Of course, the dramatic demise of the Positivist program has stripped the context of this argument of its original vitality. In recent years, verifiability criteria for cognitive meaningfulness as well as Hick's creative struggles to meet such criteria have lost much of their attraction. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss the content of this passage along with its original context. After all, the fundamental desire to trace evidential links between the ordinary course of human experience and religious belief remains as powerful as ever.² If Hick is correct in his contentions, formidable barriers lie in the path of those who would seek experiential access to a God that conforms to the descriptions of traditional Christian

theology. According to Hick, absolute qualities such as omnipotence or infinite love cannot be given in human experience. So, even if there were some way in which experiential contact with an infinite divine being could be achieved, such a being could not be perceived or recognized as infinite.

I

Before moving to a reconsideration of Hick's position, a few preliminary distinctions must be drawn. First, care should be taken to distinguish perceptual encounters from perceptual recognitions. People frequently perceive objects that they do not recognize. A string of specks on the horizon may be seen without being recognized as a caravan of camels. So, for the sake of clarity, issues surrounding the possibility of perceptually recognizing divine infinity as infinite should be kept quite distinct from those associated with the more basic attempt to encounter such infinity perceptually.

Second, two quite different types of perceptual encounter must be distinguished. Frequently, people see things like books or trees. In cases of this sort, that which is perceptually encountered is sensuously presented to the observer. Ordinarily, such acts are called perceptions and this commonplace nomenclature will be adopted here as well. Detections contrast strikingly with perceptions. In perceptual detections, that which is detected is not itself sensuously presented, though its presence may be detected in the sensuous presentation of something else. Fred Dretske provides a clear example in his description of Orfians. Orfians are strongly magnetic, though invisible. So, while they cannot be perceived by human beings, their presence may be detected by watching the behavior of surrounding metal objects.³ Less fancifully, doctors detect the presence of germs in the sensuous presentation of symptomatic skin rashes. Since detection provides a way in which imperceptibles may be encountered in the perception of sensibles, 'perceptual encounter' will be stretched to function as a generic term covering both perceptions and detections in this discussion.

Finally, various sorts of perceptual objects should be differentiated. In the course of ordinary life, people appear to perceive things as widely diverse as physical objects, qualities, motions and states of affairs.⁴ Confronted with a marching band, bystanders may shift from observing individual players to watching the band as a whole. They may move attention away from the color of the uniforms to the whirl of the drumsticks. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the range of perceptual objects can be restricted fairly narrowly to include only beings, attributes, manifestations of beings and manifestations of attributes.

With these distinctions in mind, it will be the burden of the following discussion to argue, contrary to the position of Hick, that nothing in the nature of either

ordinary human perception or divine infinity stands in the way of perceptually detecting the presence of divine infinite beings or attributes. Furthermore, such detections may permit the recognition of such beings or attributes as infinite. Beyond mere detection, it also will be argued that manifestations of divine infinite beings as well as manifestations of infinite attributes may be perceived and even recognized as such. More tentatively, the possibility of actually perceiving divine beings or attributes that may be recognized as infinite will be explored.

II

It might seem appropriate to begin with an investigation into the precise nature of divine infinity. In this connection, the work of Thomas Aquinas would provide a convenient, and classically Christian, point of departure. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas efficiently cataloged many of the diverse elements included in his own reflections upon the nature of divine infinity. He argued that God should be conceived as infinite because, among other things, he is perfect, his nature surpasses the limitations of generic categorization, he does not depend upon anything else for his existence, he is pure act, containing no potency, he is a necessary being and he is the greatest conceivable being.⁵

As would be expected, Aquinas tied much of his elaborate conception of God's infinity directly to the particularities of his metaphysics. Throughout his discussion, however, he took special pains to avoid the use of grossly quantitative ideas. As he stressed,

Since, as the philosophers teach, 'the infinite accompanies quantity,' infinity cannot be attributed to God on the ground of multitude. For we have shown that there is only one God and that no composition of parts or accidents is found in Him. Nor, again, according to continuous quantity can God be called infinite, since we have shown that He is incorporeal.⁶

Distinguishing his own position from those of previous philosophers, Aquinas argued,

The sayings of the most ancient philosophers are likewise a witness to this truth. They all posited an infinite first principle of things, as though compelled by truth itself. Yet they did not recognize their own voice. They judged the infinity of the first principle in terms of discrete quantity Or they judged infinity in terms of continuous quantity But, since it was shown by the effort of later philosophers that there is no infinite body, given that there must be a first principle

that is in some way infinite, we conclude that the infinite which is the first principle is neither a body nor a power in a body.⁷

In spite of such insistence, David Hume chose to move in a decidedly contrary direction when he wrote,

The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom.⁸

Whether Hume intended this as a recipe for constructing adequate conceptions of divine infinity or merely as a psychological description of the way in which people actually try to construct such ideas may be unclear. What remains clear, however, is his explicitly quantitative thrust. He began by moving in a direction exactly opposite to that of Aquinas.

Fortunately, for the sake of this discussion, it is not necessary to take sides on this or any other debate over the nature of divine infinity. In the attempt to determine whether infinite beings or attributes may be perceptually encountered or recognized as infinite in the course of normal human experience, there is no need to discern the essential nature of any particular infinite being or attribute. It is not even necessary to know what might constitute some specifically Christian conception of divine infinity. Such matters can be sidestepped altogether by relying upon a couple of facts about human perception.

First of all, it should be noted that people may perceptually encounter and even recognize objects without knowing, perceiving or detecting anything about essential natures. Consider ordinary experiences of maple trees. People sometimes see maples.⁹ One thing that might be meant by this unsurprising remark is that people occasionally see things that turn out to be maple trees. That is, they see objects that, as a matter of fact, are maples even though for one reason or another they are not recognized as such at the time of perception. Of course, there are all sorts of things that might prohibit the recognition of perceived objects as maples. A thick fog may shroud the trees, making them difficult to discern. Perhaps the observers are unsophisticated in their knowledge of trees, knowing enough to identify what confronts them as trees, but unable to distinguish species. Whatever the case might be, in this first sort of perceptual encounter with maples, percipients are confronted sensuously with things that are in fact maples, though not recognized as such.

A second way of encountering maples involves the perception of things that are not immediately recognized as maples, but subsequently are consciously inferred to be maples. In this sort of case, percipients are presented with objects that may be recognized as trees, green things, physical objects or something else. At the moment of perception, however, they are not recognized as maples.

Nevertheless, sufficient perceptual clues are available by which percipients may draw the conscious inference that the objects being perceived are, in fact, maples. Typically, in cases of this sort, percipients depend upon the presence of reliable indicators. Sometimes such indicators provide natural clues. For instance, observers might spot certain trees, noticing the presence of specially shaped leaves. Recalling that only maple trees bear such leaves, these observers might conclude correctly that the trees under scrutiny are maples. At other times, the clues used by percipients may be utterly arbitrary. For instance, as they enter an arboretum, visitors might be told that trees with red paint blotches are maples. In their wanderings, such visitors could see trees, notice the color of their paint blotches and subsequently consciously infer that the specimens under observation were maples.

A third way of perceptually encountering maples involves immediate recognition. This sort of case might be described as one in which people simply see maple trees as maples. In contrast with the second way of encountering maples, people who see maples in this third way do not first see objects as something else and then subsequently consciously infer those things to be maples. Without the aid of conscious inference, they simply see what they recognize to be maples.

There is still much controversy over the exact nature of such acts of immediate perceptual recognition. Clearly, since they are perceptual rather than purely intellectual acts, percipients must take advantage of certain clues or reliable indicators that are present in their perceptual fields. Exactly which perceptual clues are the most important ones and precisely how they are processed remains a matter of some mystery. Some theorists are convinced that such seemingly immediate perceptual recognitions, though lacking acts of conscious inference, still require certain inference patterns. Various unconscious, virtually instantaneous, inferences based upon perceptual clues lie at the heart of such perceptual recognitions. For example, with regard to maples, percipients unconsciously use visible indicators, such as the shapes of leaves, to infer with lightning speed the sort of tree being observed. Others hypothesize that perceptual clues are processed by Gestalt mechanisms or elaborate neural structures.¹⁰

Happily, for the purposes of this discussion, nothing depends upon the adoption of any particular fine analysis of the processing of perceptual clues in such acts. It is sufficient to note that, at times, people possess the necessary equipment, be it inferential, purely perceptual, neural or whatever, to recognize maples immediately as maples. For present purposes, this ability need be understood no more specifically than as the capacity to use perceptual indicators for recognizing maples without having to rely upon conscious inference patterns.

In each of the cases described so far, maples are sensuously presented. As would be expected, reliable indications of maples are not processed, as such, in cases where perceived trees are not recognized as maples. When perception is

coupled with recognition, however, reliable indicators come into play. In cases of perceptual detection, where maples are not sensuously presented, reliable indicators play a more pervasive role. Every perceptual detection requires some act of recognition based upon the sensuous presentation of reliable indicators. People never just perceptually detect. They always use perceived indicators to detect the presence of something that is recognized, at the very least, as something or other. Suppose all the plants at the local arboretum have been tented for fumigation. Trees, including maples, are covered with red tents while shrubs are shrouded in white. Unless visitors at the arboretum take tents to be reliably indicative of the presence of something or other underneath, nothing whatever that is concealed by the tents will be detected. This minimal realization, however, is sufficient to permit rudimentary perceptual detections. Visitors can detect the presence of unperceived plants by using tents as reliable indicators to infer consciously the presence of things recognized not as plants, but merely as something or other. Should visitors be told that red tents cover only trees, the recognition involved in their detections would proceed somewhat differently. Tent colors would be used to infer consciously the presence of things recognized as trees. In either of these cases, if maples were concealed beneath the tents, visitors would be able to detect the presence of maples without recognizing them as such. Certainly, in order to be detected, the maples would have to be recognized as something. But they might be recognized only as plants or trees rather than as maples. Of course, if visitors knew that only maples had red covers, this more precise information could be used for detecting the presence of maples that were recognized as such. As in the case of perceptual recognition already considered, a little repetition might permit the conscious inferences employed in these assorted acts of detection to be replaced by the ability to process reliable indicators without the necessity of conscious inference.

In bringing all of this to bear upon questions regarding the possibility of experientially encountering infinite beings or attributes, it must be stressed that none of the ways of encountering maples just described requires any knowledge, perception or even detection of the essential nature of maples. Presumably, if maples have essences at all, they are tied somehow to matters of genetics.¹¹ If botanists could be persuaded to use such terminology, perhaps they would argue that the essential nature of maples resides in some elaborate, fairly unique, genetic structure. Whatever botanists might say on this topic, however, it is important to notice that ordinary percipients need to know nothing about such matters. Even if maples should turn out to have no essential nature at all, perceptually encountering as well as recognizing them would remain unproblematic. All that is required for perceptual encounter is the presence of maples. In order to be perceived, maples must be sensuously presented. If they are to be detected, something indicative of their presence must be sensuously presented

and taken, at least minimally, as indicative of something or other. In neither case do essences play any crucial role. If perceived or detected objects are to be recognized as maples, reliable indicators must be processed more specifically. Such indicators, whether processed with or without the aid of conscious inference, need bear no special relation to essences. Of course, reliable indicators might be produced by essential natures, as would be the case with leaf shape on the supposition that the essential nature of maples lies in their genetic structure. Alternatively, such indicators might be purely conventional, as in the case where an arboretum uses red paint blotches or tents to aid visitors. Furthermore, it is not necessary that everyone use the same indicators. Some might rely upon the shapes of leaves or tents while others use color codes.

What has been said about perceptually encountering or recognizing objects applies equally to encounters with attributes.¹² Some percipients, particularly young ones, might be sensuously presented with five-sidedness, though unable to recognize it as such. Others may consciously infer five-sidedness on the basis of reliable indicators. Knowing that they have five fingers on each hand, they might conclude that an observed figure is five-sided after touching each side with a finger and noticing no leftover fingers or sides. Yet other viewers might work toward improving their capacities of visual discrimination so that five-sidedness might be recognized as such without conscious inference. Similarly, in cases of detection, if variously shaped objects were cloaked in red, percipients might detect the presence of what was, in fact, five-sidedness, recognizing it merely as some shape or other. If only five-sided blocks bore red tents, however, those same percipients might use this additional information to detect the presence of five-sidedness, recognizing it as such either with or without the aid of conscious inference. In none of these cases, whether they involve perception, detection or recognition as five-sidedness, is any knowledge, perception or detection of essences required.

III

Once it is realized that beings as well as attributes may be perceived, detected and even recognized quite specifically without taking recourse to essences, it is possible to overcome one of the most important obstacles raised by Hick. According to Hick, it is the fact that infinite divine beings or attributes are unrestricted in some radically unlimited way that prohibits their perceptual accessibility. He concedes that human beings may perceive as well as recognize such things as limited power or love. Because of this, a God of finite power or love might be encountered in the course of ordinary experience and even recognized as finite. But the very restricted and limited nature of human perception bars perceptual encounters with infinities as infinities.

This line of objection rests upon the conviction that infinite beings or attributes are unrestricted or unlimited in some very fundamental, radical way. For the sake of argument, this may be granted. In fact, it may even be conceded that the very essence of divine infinity is connected with some type of radical lack of restriction or limitation. The mistake to be avoided, however, lies in the assumption that in order for infinite beings or attributes to be perceptually encountered or recognized as infinite, this fundamental or even essential feature of unlimitedness must be encountered. As has been seen, neither perception nor detection requires the presentation of essences. Furthermore, recognition proceeds on the basis of reliable indicators, indicators that need bear no special relation to essences or essential natures.

Because perceptual encounter as well as recognition can occur without reference to essences, even if some Christian conception of divine infinity were constructed along Humean lines and emerged as essentially quantitative, perceptual encounters or recognitions would not be prohibited. Quantitative infinities would not have to be presented as infinitely large. They might be encountered on a minuscule scale. Given the right indicators, such infinities could even be recognized as unrestrictedly large in tiny, finite presentations.

It might seem that this form of response to Hick cannot succeed unless divine infinity can be presented in the ways in which maples or five-sidedness are presented. Although the sheer infinity of the divine may not prohibit such presentation, Christian tradition teaches that God is incorporeal. Taking inspiration from the work of Robert Oakes, it might be argued that

. . . it seems unproblematic that *being incorporeal* is . . . a property that God has essentially, and that the function 'X is incorporeal' entails the function 'X is unobservable'. Hence, since 'If God exists, he is incorporeal' expresses a necessary truth, it should be intuitively clear that the proposition expressed by 'If God exists, he is unobservable' is *also* a necessary truth.¹³

Granting the acceptability of this argument, it might be claimed that the suggested analogy between encounters with maples and encounters with God crumbles. While maples may be encountered and recognized in the ways described, this is because they are observable. An infinite, incorporeal God, being essentially unobservable, cannot be so encountered. Similarly, it might be argued that since God's attributes are incorporeal, they too are essentially unobservable. Hence, a radical disanalogy between encounters with observables like five-sidedness and unobservables like infinite love or power must be acknowledged.

Before conceding the cogency of these lines of objection, it must be remembered that several distinct ways in which maples and five-sidedness might be perceptually encountered or recognized have been outlined. Each requires that

something, though not necessarily maples or five-sidedness, be observable. When maples or five-sidedness remain unobservable, their presence can still be detected and their identity determined through the proper use of observed reliable indicators. So, if the proper relations among incorporeality, unobservability and the possibility of perceptually encountering divine infinity or recognizing it as such are to be traced, it would seem necessary to proceed more cautiously.

Consider first the problem of merely detecting the presence of divine infinity. Since nothing of substance turns upon which divine attribute is considered, attention can be limited conveniently to a consideration of any infinite characteristic. Take infinite love, for example. Furthermore, since nothing under consideration here depends upon the advantages of taking one sense modality rather than another, for the sake of convenience, consider only vision. Finally, some reliable indicator presented within the perceptual vicinity of human beings must be assumed. Consider the emergence of early spring grass as a reliable indicator of infinite love.

In perceptual detections, that which is detected remains unobserved. Sometimes, of course, whatever is detected is itself observable. This is the case with concealed maples or five-sidedness. But other times, that which is detected is by its very nature unobservable. Scientists using visible tracks on photographic plates to detect the presence of electrons find themselves in this situation. Electrons are unobservable in principle because they are too small to reflect wavelengths of visible light. Since even things that are essentially unobservable may be detected, conceding the essential unobservability of either God or his attributes does not prohibit the possibility of their perceptual detection.

If something unobserved is to be perceptually detected, a reliable indicator must be sensuously presented. In this regard, early spring grass presents no difficulties whatever, being an uncontroversial, perhaps even paradigmatic, perceptual object. Of course, spring grass must actually be a reliable indicator of infinite love. But this may be accomplished in any number of ways. It might be nothing more than an arbitrary sign of God's infinite love, similar in this respect to red tents concealing the presence of maples or five-sidedness. More likely, perhaps, early spring grass might be produced by God's love. In this case, it would be more like the distinctively shaped leaves found on maples. The details of the connection between early spring grass and infinite love are unimportant, so long as the grass reliably indicates divine love.

In perceptual detections, percipients recognize the presence of something by using reliable indicators. What precisely is recognized as present depends heavily upon what the available indicators are taken to indicate. This may vary widely from case to case. Unsophisticated percipients might take early spring grass to indicate merely the presence of something, they know not what. In this case, the presence of infinite love would be detected, recognized as something or

other, but not recognized as infinite love. Other percipients, armed with more specific information about what spring grass reliably indicates, might detect the presence of infinite love and recognize it as such. In this latter sort of case, the recognition of infinite love might proceed on the basis of conscious inference or, as with more practiced observers, without requiring conscious inference.

In each of these cases, it might seem that spring grass, being a reliable indicator of the presence of infinite love, functions also as a visible manifestation of that love. From this natural assumption, one might conclude that, although infinite love or an infinitely loving God may remain essentially unobservable, their manifestations can be perceived and even recognized as such. Unfortunately, this tempting move is slightly premature. The mere fact that something functions as a reliable indicator of the presence of something else is insufficient to ensure its status as a manifestation. Consider birds. Various chirpings and flutterings may reliably indicate the presence of birds. They also may be characterized as manifestations of the birds. Suppose, however, that clear weather appears only when birds are present. By functioning as an adventitious sign, clear weather may reliably indicate the presence of birds without being a manifestation of those birds. In order to be a manifestation of the birds, clear weather would have to be produced in an appropriate way by the birds. Similarly, if spring grass is to function as a manifestation of infinite love, rather than merely as an adventitious sign, it must be produced in an appropriate way.

Of course, whether or not God produces spring grass in an appropriate way has nothing whatever to do with human perceptual capacities. Rather, it depends upon the nature of God's loving activities. If God were to choose to produce spring grass appropriately, however, then it would become possible to perceive emerging grass as a visible manifestation of infinite love. As in other cases of human perception, manifestations of infinite love could be perceived without being recognized as such. All that would be required is a rather rudimentary perceptual awareness of the grass. In order to move beyond this basic level of perceptual awareness to the recognition of spring grass as a manifestation of infinite love, percipients would have to employ reliable indicators, indicators not of the mere presence of that love, but rather of its manifestation. As with any reliable indicator, such indicators might or might not be connected in any essential way with infinite love. Furthermore, they might or might not be used consciously. Percipients who saw spring grass as something other than a manifestation of infinite love might spot appropriate indicators in their perceptual fields and subsequently consciously infer that the grass was, in fact, a manifestation of infinite love. Those who processed such indicators without recourse to conscious inference would see spring grass immediately as a manifestation of infinite love. Of course, what precisely was recognized in these assorted acts of perceptual recognition would depend upon what the indicators were taken to indicate. They

might be taken to indicate a manifestation of either infinite love or an infinitely loving being.

IV

If infinite love itself, rather than just its manifestations, is to be perceived, it must be sensuously presented. In order to be recognized as infinite love, reliable indicators must be processed as well. Until now, the possibility of actually perceiving divine infinity has been blocked by arbitrarily assuming that the doctrine of incorporeality entails the essential unobservability of God and his attributes. If this assumption is questioned, it may be possible to find ways of perceiving and even recognizing either infinite love or an infinitely loving God.

Given the parameters of the present discussion, only the possibilities lying within the realm of ordinary human experience will be explored. Possibilities latent in mystical visions, nonsensuous intuitions or other extraordinary forms of perceptual encounter will be left untouched. As a convenient point of departure, consider the work of Richard Swinburne. In *The Coherence of Theism*, he depicts certain activities of God as basic actions. According to Swinburne, a basic action of an agent is “. . . one which he performs without having to perform some other action in order to do it.”¹⁴ Furthermore, “. . . God is supposed to be able to move any part of the universe directly; he does not need to use one part of the universe to make another part move. He can make any part move as a basic action.”¹⁵

Suppose, then, that certain observable occurrences, such as the emergence of spring grass, were basic actions of God. This would not necessarily mean that God was corporeal. Dualists can concede that certain bodily movements are basic actions of human beings while maintaining with perfect consistency that people are essentially incorporeal spirits. Furthermore, as Swinburne notes, claiming that certain observable occurrences are basic actions of God does not imply that God is embodied. Embodied creatures feel disturbances in their bodies, look out upon the world from a specifiable perspective and become hungry when their stomachs are empty. Because embodiment involves much more than the simple capacity to move physical parts directly, God might remain disembodied by refusing to become entangled in these additional relationships with his world.¹⁶

Now suppose that an infinitely loving God were to produce spring grass as a basic action. Whether seeing that grass could count as perceiving either infinite love or an infinitely loving God would depend upon the precise relationships among the grass, infinite love and God. Because nothing can be perceived unless it is sensuously presented to some percipient, it is important to realize that only spring grass is sensuously presented in this example. Unless God can be identified either in whole or in part with that grass, it will not be possible to perceive him.

While pantheists might permit such an identification, traditional theists would seem compelled to repudiate it, thereby abandoning the possibility of perceiving an infinitely loving being in emerging spring grass.

The possibility that a divine attribute, such as that of infinite love, might be sensuously present in a perception of spring grass does not dissipate quite so quickly, though it too appears problematic. Under the most natural interpretation, infinite love might be conceived as being some relatively high level disposition or, perhaps, some set of activated states in the mind of God. Given an understanding of divine love along these lines, emerging grass could not be identified as all or part of God's love. Spring grass could be produced by God out of infinite love, of course. Under these conditions, however, infinite love itself would remain hidden in the depths of God, leaving spring grass as nothing more than a sign, effect or visible manifestation of divine love. While infinite love might be detectable in the emergence of spring grass, it would not be sensuously presented.

Suppose, however, that a strictly behaviorist interpretation of infinite love were adopted. That is, suppose infinite love were identified with some collection of manifest behaviors. On this account, the production of spring grass could be included, quite literally, as a part of infinite love. Under this interpretation, part of infinite love would be sensuously present in a perceptual encounter with spring grass. Since, in ordinary human experience, attributes as well as beings may be perceived without being apprehended in their entirety, infinite love would be perceptible in the presentation of spring grass. Obviously, it would not have to be recognized as such. But by employing reliable indicators, percipients could either consciously infer that grass to be infinite love or, without conscious inference, immediately recognize infinite love in the presentation of spring grass. In the latter case, they would simply see spring grass as infinite love.

The obvious problem with this approach to perceiving infinite love lies with the difficulty of accepting such a thoroughly behavioristic analysis. But strict behaviorism is not absolutely necessary. A more chastened behaviorism would do. Suppose infinite love were not reducible totally to a collection of manifest behaviors. Perhaps only a small part of it could be so analyzed. This would be sufficient to allow that part of infinite love to be sensuously present in an experience of spring grass. Abandoning behaviorism altogether, if some plausible analysis of divine infinity could be developed wherein at least a part of some infinite attribute could be identified with something perceptible, then it would be possible to find ways in which that attribute could be perceived and even recognized as such. Without such an analysis, however, it is necessary to rest content with detections or the perception of manifestations of divine infinity.

V

Throughout this discussion, a heavy burden has been placed upon the assumption

that emerging spring grass could be taken as a reliable indicator of infinite love. A few objections to this assumption must be faced. Probably, the most obvious initial objection is that the selection of early spring grass as a reliable indicator is a poor choice. Perhaps significant theological reasons for repudiating the selection of spring grass can be found. Maybe God would be demeaned by displaying infinite love in this way.

It is important to notice that this kind of objection is utterly misdirected. Nothing whatever turns upon the question of whether spring grass is actually the right choice as a reliable indicator of God's infinite love. For the purposes of this consideration, any reliable indicator located in the perceptual vicinity of human beings will do. The arguments offered can be modified quite easily to suit candidates thought to be more suitable than spring grass.

Even if it is conceded that God might display infinite love in the emergence of spring grass, this particular choice might still be rejected as a reliable indicator on the simple grounds that, as a matter of fact, it is not reliable. Due to the mysteries and complexities of the divine nature, infinite love is never manifested in simple, predictable ways. While sometimes God's love is manifested in the emergence of spring grass, in times of drought there is no reason to conclude that the lack of grass indicates a dearth of divine love. For that matter, there may be circumstances in which the emergence of spring grass would be an indication of divine displeasure rather than a sign of love. In times of plentiful hay supplies, more spring grass might be viewed as a curse rather than a blessing. Even the location of spring grass could make a difference. Perhaps the grass that comes up in rose gardens or corn fields should be taken as a manifestation of malevolence, rather than love. In short, due to the complexities of divine activity, the vicissitudes of nature and other variables, early spring grass, at best, is a very unreliable indicator of divine infinite love.

Although this thread of objection complicates matters somewhat, it does not generate insuperable problems. Unreliable indicators can be used just as effectively as reliable ones for purposes of perceptual detection and recognition. Certain skin rashes are unreliable indicators of measles. Some people get rashes without having measles and measles victims display marked differences in their susceptibility to rashes. Nevertheless, such rashes are used commonly as indicators of measles. What is required is not some general, exceptionless principle of association between certain rashes and measles. All that is needed is some reason to believe that some particular manifestation of a rash is indicative of measles. In fact, when children are at just the right age and there is an epidemic afoot, the quest for additional confirmation of measles may be unnecessary. Under just the right conditions, it might be sufficient simply to note that there is no reason to doubt the reliability of the rash indicator.¹⁷

Bringing the example into closer analogy with the manifestation of divine

love, consider the manifestation of human love. A pat on the head is an unreliable indicator of human love. Some people love without patting and others pat without love. Indeed, the same individual may sometimes manifest love by patting, indicate patronizing contempt by patting or, knowing that physical contact is embarrassing to the self-conscious, show love by suppressing the impulse to pat. Since patting irregularly indicates human love, what is needed is some reason to believe or, perhaps, no reason to doubt that a particular instance of patting indicates human love. In similar fashion, as an unreliable indicator, early spring grass need not invariably or unfailingly indicate divine love. While it may fail as a proper indicator on many or even most occasions, it can still indicate infinite love under conditions where there is reason to believe or, perhaps, no reason to doubt its reliability as indicative of divine love.

This admission of unreliable as well as reliable indicators seems to demand that something be said about the ways in which indicators are determined. How would anyone discover whether spring grass is an indicator, reliable or otherwise, of infinite love? Put more generally, how could percipients find out what in their perceptual fields is indicative of what?

Strictly speaking, this last problem falls beyond the scope of issues considered here. The present discussion has focussed upon the nature and limitations of human perception. More specifically, attention has centered upon ways in which divine infinity may be perceptually accessible. In the course of this investigation, it has been found that religious percipients rely rather heavily upon information about what reliably or unreliably indicates divine infinity. Where percipients get such information however, is a separate question, one about the epistemology of religious belief. Certainly, how percipients know or are justified in believing that something indicates divine infinity is a significant, difficult question. What must be emphasized, however, is that the analysis of perception offered here stands entirely separate from the details of any answer that might be given.

Consider a few. It might be argued, rather simplistically, that information about indicators is provided by revelation. Alternatively, it might be claimed that beliefs about indicators are either properly basic or derivable from properly basic beliefs. Perhaps it could be argued that unsophisticated believers rely upon information provided by theological experts in the way that visitors at an arboretum depend upon the advice of curators.¹⁸ In turn, the experts might be thought to obtain their information in ways parallel to those by which physicists discover that tracks on photographic plates indicate the presence of negatively charged particles.¹⁹ Whatever the details might be, so long as appropriate beliefs about indicators have been obtained, percipients would be able to detect the presence of infinite attributes or beings, either recognizing or failing to recognize them as infinite. They also would be able to detect or perceive manifestations of infinite attributes or beings, recognizing or failing to recognize them as such.

Unfortunately, unless some plausible way could be found by which at least fragments of infinite attributes or beings could be identified with something sensuously presentable, divine infinities themselves would remain beyond the range of human perception.

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NOTES

*Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1986 Midwestern Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers and at the 1987 Meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion. On both of these occasions, I received helpful comments. Of particular benefit were those offered by Robert Oakes, William P. Alston and George I. Mavrodes. I also am indebted to the careful and very constructive comments of the referees for *Faith and Philosophy*.

1. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, Second Edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 189. Emphasis in original.

2. See William P. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, editors, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 103-34 for a straightforward attempt to validate epistemic links between various experiences and religious belief. Although his primary concerns lie elsewhere, when Alvin Plantinga uses reports of experience as examples of beliefs that might be properly basic, he seems to manifest this same interest in linking experience to religious belief. For details, see his "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, pp. 16-93.

3. See Fred I. Dretske, "Perception and Other Minds," *Nous*, Volume 7 (1973), p. 38. Robert Oakes discusses this same Orfan example in some detail in his "Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability," *Religious Studies*, Volume 17, Number 3 (September 1981), pp. 362-63.

4. See David Woodruff Smith, "Content and Context of Perception," *Synthese*, Volume 61 (October 1984), pp. 61-87 for an excellent discussion of the range of possible perceptual objects and the ways in which such objects are determined.

5. See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God*, Anton C. Pegis, F.R.S.C., translator (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 165-70.

6. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, p. 165.

7. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, pp. 169-70.

8. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, Eric Steinberg, editor (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), p. 11.

9. "Maples" is a generic term, covering a number of different kinds of trees. Interestingly enough, there seem to be levels of specificity with respect to the intentionality of perception. Some people see objects simply as trees. Others see the same objects as maples while still others see those objects as sugar maples. For the purposes of this discussion, such a detailed analysis of perceptual acts is unnecessary. So, "maples" may be taken either as a generic term or as shorthand for some particular

variety of tree. For fuller analyses of the kinds and levels of directedness possible in perceptual acts, see Izchak Miller, "Perceptual Reference," *Synthese*, Volume 61 (October 1984), pp. 35-59, and David Woodruff Smith, "The Case of the Exploding Perception," *Synthese*, Volume 41, June 1979, pp. 239-69.

10. The first chapter of Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983) provides an interestingly different recapitulation of the recent history of perceptual psychology. In the remainder of this volume, Fodor introduces yet another alternative to the familiar ones mentioned here.

11. See Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," in Hilary Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 215-71.

12. For the purposes of this discussion, it is not necessary to draw any subtle distinctions between attributes and qualities.

13. Robert Oakes, "Religious Experience, Sense-Perception and God's Essential Unobservability," p. 357. Emphasis in original.

14. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 103.

15. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, p. 103.

16. See Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, pp. 102-03. In Chapters 7 and 8, Swinburne discusses how God can be a spirit as well as disembodied while performing assorted basic and nonbasic actions.

17. Although his concerns and approach are quite different, William P. Alston offers an excellent account of various kinds of epistemic warrant and their significance in his "Christian Experience and Christian Belief."

18. Hilary Putnam defends a linguistic version of such a division of intellectual labor in his "The Meaning of 'Meaning.'"

19. This is the general direction I have tried to take in Edward L. Schoen, *Religious Explanations: A Model from the Sciences* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), Chapters III-VI.