Wynn, RENEWING THE SENSES: A STUDY OF THE PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Robert MacSwain

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How to Think Seriously About the Planet provides the richest context of which I am aware for a conservative approach to environmentalism. The shameful treatment of Bjørn Lomborg and Richard Lindzen by the environmental establishment has produced such mistrust that many conservatives simply dismiss even its strongest consensus. It is to Scruton’s credit that he acknowledges these battles concisely, then moves beyond them. Unlike some conservatives, whose environmental thinking begins with property rights and ends with free markets, Scruton places these elements in the context of the feedback loops and oikophilia, which do justice to both the Burkean and (if I may add an American) Hamiltonian strains of conservatism. He has done much to move the discussion forward and deserves a wide audience.


ROBERT MACSWAIN, The School of Theology, The University of the South

I am writing this review while sitting out on my covered screened-porch on a perfect Saturday afternoon in early October. The sky is a clear and flawless bright blue, the leaves are just starting to yellow, the temperature is around 75 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity is low. Crows are cawing in the woods around me, the wind is stirring the branches, and in the distance I can hear the muted sound of a dormitory air-conditioning unit. My bare feet are placed on the black and brown matted area-carpet and I can feel the weave with my toes; on the glass-topped coffee table in front of me, a plastic bottle of cold water has built up a cloudy but translucent skin of condensed droplets.

Mark Wynn’s latest book invites us to consider our perception and reception of such sensory details in greater depth, considering their implications for philosophy, theology, and spirituality. Exemplifying a recent trend in Anglophone philosophy of religion, in which authors trained in the analytic tradition engage with topics normally associated with Continental philosophy, Wynn focuses on phenomenological issues without being a classical phenomenologist. Thus, using the term in its literal rather than technical sense, he says that Renewing the Senses can be read as a “phenomenological rendering” of some central themes in David Brown’s God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience (Oxford University Press, 2004) (8, note 9). Wynn explores the general claim that “religious

1 I reviewed this volume of Brown’s, along with four others, in Faith and Philosophy 29 (2012), 362–366.
commitment can make a difference to a person’s bodily and emotional condition, their repertoire of concepts, and their conception of their circumstances” (vi). More specifically, he argues—contrary to some strong currents in both philosophy and theology—that instead of disparaging the senses and the material world, a proper understanding of the spiritual life greatly values them, and indeed is “realized, in important part, in a changed perceptual relationship to the sensory world” (3). In short, the material world is perceived (and thus valued) differently, depending on one’s degree of spiritual enlightenment and particular spiritual tradition.

Chapter 1 begins in Plato’s Cave, which Wynn states is arguably “the single best known account of the nature of the spiritual life” (1). In making this claim Wynn reminds us that Plato would not distinguish sharply between philosophy and spirituality—a point famously argued by Pierre Hadot but perhaps still insufficiently appreciated. Wynn focuses on the prisoner’s perceptual disorientation on returning to the cave after being exposed to the light of the sun. The prisoner now experiences his world differently, seeing shadows as shadows rather than substantial realities, and so on. Wynn thus reads this paradigmatic account of spiritual enlightenment as one in which “the appearance of the sensory world may be transformed, and not simply as a story of some transformation in the seer’s practical judgement or capacity to attend to another, non-sensory realm” (2). Wynn also acknowledges that “the same sort of point might be made through scriptural sources” and refers to Sarah Coakley’s arguments about what is required in order to see the risen Christ (3, note 3).

However, Wynn is well aware that the Platonic heritage is double-edged in this regard, and that both Platonic and Christian thinkers have been accused of evacuating the material, sensory world of any significance. Nietzsche’s claim that “God is the enemy of life” is cited, but so is Grace Jantzen, who “protests that [Christian] philosophy of religion is ‘necrophilic’ because it locates all genuine value in another, non-sensory realm, and sees death as a condition of full admission to that realm” (9). One of Wynn’s primary aims in Renewing the Senses is to defend an alternative account of the Platonic/Christian tradition, one in which “we are not required to make any such choice” between the material and immaterial worlds (10). Wynn also pauses to observe that much contemporary philosophy of religion is concerned with epistemic concerns to the neglect of existential ones, and yet contends that most objections to religious belief are in fact motivated by the worry that “religion requires us to adopt a set of evaluations that betray our human form of life” (12). It is that existential objection which he seeks to answer, although he also includes a chapter on “The Spiritual Life and the Justification of Religious Belief” (81–128).

To achieve these goals, Wynn engages extensively with William James, Roger Scruton, Matthew Ratcliffe, William Alston, Jonathan Edwards, Erazim Kohák, David Cooper, the architect Christopher Alexander, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. John of the Cross, as well as many others. The
volume is written in a clear, meditative, conversational style, interspersed with insightful descriptive passages and discussions of the natural world, architecture, and art. The book itself thus manifests what Wynn calls a “sensibility”—that is, “a particular way of taking hold of the sensory world” and not just “various ways of thinking about specifically religious questions” (vii). Form and content come close together.

To return to my opening paragraph, both philosophers and theologians are indeed often tempted to think of themselves as disembodied intellects and thus to regard the details of the material, sensory world as extraneous and dispensable distractions to the proper task of philosophizing or theologizing. Wynn suggests that this attitude is not simply an epistemic mistake but an ethical one as well, indicating an attenuated “sensibility” when it comes to valuing the world we inhabit as bodily beings who know primarily through our physical senses. His penultimate chapter argues that this is also a theological mistake, at least for Christians, who for incarnational and sacramental reasons should appreciate the material world as the means through which God has redeemed us. Renewing the Senses is an attempted exorcism of the Gnostic and Manichean ghosts that continue to haunt philosophy, theology, and spirituality, and is therefore a welcome and important contribution to contemporary Christian thought.