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## Encountering God: Spiritual Perception in the Bible, Tradition, and Film<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The President of the International Orthodox Theological Association, Prof. Dr. Paul L. Gavrilyuk deals in this article with the main questions: “*what does it take to perceive God?*”. He shows that “similar to communication with human persons, our communion with God crucially involves an experiential dimension, which presupposes a form of perception. Recall the biblical prophets receiving the ‘word of the Lord.’ We rely on the reports of



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the prophets and, therefore, on testimony. But the prophets themselves received the word from God and, therefore, at some juncture a form of perception is involved in this communication.” Prof. Gavrilyuk presents in here the Spiritual Perception Research Project: “*Spiritual Perception*’ is an umbrella term that covers a range of perceptual powers that make divine-human communication possible. In the first phase of our project, we explored how different authors in the Christian tradition from Origen of Alexandria to John Wesley, Karl Rahner, and Hans Urs von Balthasar understood spiritual perception.”

### Keywords

Spiritual Perception, spiritual senses, attention, Karl Rahner, vision of God

## 1 Introduction

The main goal of the Christian life is communion with God. This communion is analogous to our communication with human persons. Human communication can be direct, as when we can see, hear, touch, or talk to another human being. Such a communication can also be indirect, as when we send each other text messages or learn about each other from the reports of others. Direct communication requires perception; indirect communication requires testimony, which at some point in the communicative chain relies on perception. This means that both direct and indirect communication are to different degrees based on our own ability to perceive. There is simply no communication and, therefore, no communion without some form of perception.

Similar to communication with human persons, our communion with God crucially involves an experiential dimension, which presupposes a form of perception. Recall the biblical prophets receiving the “word of the Lord.” We rely on the reports of the prophets and, therefore, on testimony. But the prophets themselves received the word from God and, therefore, at some juncture a form of perception is involved in this communication.

Furthermore, think of the invitation of the psalm to “taste and see how good the Lord is.” When the psalm is recited in the context of worship, what we see are various liturgical actions and what we taste is the Eucharist, but through those things we are invited to perceive the presence of God.

Additionally, call to mind a promise of the Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Think of the words of Christ to the Apostle Philip in the Gospel of John: “Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father” (John 14: 9). Is the language of perception purely figurative in these passages, or does this language point to a form of perception of God in and through Christ?

This lecture addresses the following question: what sort of perception might be at stake in these texts? Stated more generally: *what does it take to perceive God?*

Now, you might just shrug your shoulders and reply: well, God must be the cause of such perceptual experiences. God simply makes such an experience possible whenever God so desires. For example, when the Apostles, who are still absorbing the psychological shock of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, meet the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus, they interact with him for quite some time, but as the Evangelist adds “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16). But later that day, at supper, Luke tells us that the stranger “took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and [the disciples’] eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus and he disappeared from their sight”

(Luke 24:31). We may observe that “their eyes were opened” is what biblical scholars call a “divine passive,” indicating that God brought about the opening of the eyes and the recognition of Christ. It does take an action of divine grace to perceive God.

While such an answer is certainly on the right track, it is also too general and incomplete. First, the claim of direct divine action is too general because it can serve as an explanation for many (if not all) aspects of religious life. Second, such a claim is incomplete, because communication always involves *two* sides, God and humans. Without questioning the centrality of divine initiative, we must emphasize that human reception needs some consideration too. So, exploring what is required, on our part, to perceive God includes focusing on the question concerning the kind of *cognitive equipment that makes perception of God possible*. What enables humans to “tune into” God, so to speak?

## 2 The Spiritual Perception Research Project

This question has been at the heart of our Spiritual Perception Research Project. *“Spiritual Perception” is an umbrella term that covers a range of perceptual powers that make divine-human communication possible*. In the first phase of our project, we explored how different authors in the Christian tradition from Origen of Alexandria to John Wesley, Karl Rahner, and Hans Urs von Balthasar understood spiritual perception. The project was and continues to be a task that is too big for one person because we had to branch out into other disciplines besides systematic theology, such as biblical studies, historical theology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of perception, theological aesthetics, and even cognitive science and comparative religion. Spiritual perception is something that Christianity shares with other religions, but our team has thus far focused almost exclusively

on Christianity (we have some plans for doing a comparative volume on Buddhism).

At this point, you might ask, why should we talk of “spiritual perception”? Do we have to have some secret set of senses to experience God? Why not merely speak of the five physical senses engaged in the apprehension of God? A very preliminary answer to such a question would be this: the primary reason is that God is not like ordinary objects of perception. God is a very unusual sort of object. In fact, God is unlike anything in creation. Scripture bears witness to a God who is both immanent, that is, closely involved with his creation, and transcendent, that is, surpasses everything in creation. So God shows up in the Garden of Eden and speaks with Adam and the latter has no problem hearing what God says. However, in Exodus 33:20, God warns Moses: “You cannot see my face; for no one may see me and live.” John 1:18 captures the dialectic of divine transcendence and divine immanence superbly: “No one has ever seen God. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made him known.” Therefore, when we see God through Christ (as did the Apostle Philip), we see God in some way that is different from seeing ordinary physical objects. As the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus shows, it is certainly possible to look at Jesus and listen to his words without *recognizing* him and fail to understand the implication of what he says. Aside from the disciples, it was also possible for Pontius Pilate and others in authority to look at Jesus and fail to see “the Lord of glory” and, as a result, condemn him to death and crucify him as a common criminal (cf. 1 Cor. 2:8). It appears, then, that to look at Christ and to succeed in “seeing God,” one has to be able to see more or perceive more. I wish to explore precisely this form of perception that goes beyond physical perception.

We are now beginning to see a cluster of issues, which our research team has addressed over these years. Let me name two central issues here:

- What is the relationship between physical perception and our sense of the presence of God? In other words:
  - Is spiritual perception analogous to physical perception? and, if so,
  - What other models of spiritual perception are possible?
- What is the connection between spiritual perception and other powers of the self, such as will, emotions, mind, and heart?

The mechanism of spiritual perception can be explained in two ways, on the analogy with the (five) physical senses and without such an analogy, as a perceptual power *sui generis* or a superpower. In considering the first cluster of questions, I will develop an analogy between spiritual perception and the five physical senses drawing on scripture and tradition, with some help from recent work in the philosophy of perception. In addressing the second question, I will look at a model of spiritual perception as a power *sui generis* or a superpower and here my help will come from an unexpected source, namely, Hollywood.

### 3 The Analogy of the Five Senses

One way to understand spiritual perception is on the analogy with the five physical senses. First, let me clarify how I use the word “analogy” and then say more about the five senses. It is common to distinguish between the metaphorical and analogical functions of the language of perception. Metaphorical use is in play when no close similarity with the functioning of physical perception is intended. For example, we speak of “seeing a

point,” “having a point of view,” “viewing a hypothesis,” “envisioning a prospect,” “grasping a concept,” “embracing an idea,” “touching upon a subject,” “hearing what a person has to say” (in the sense of focusing mental attention), “smelling trouble,” and so on. In everyday discourse “taste” commonly refers to aesthetic judgment. These dead metaphors refer to ordinary forms of reflection, imagination, and judgment, not to perception *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, perception is taken to be the ability to acquire beliefs about objects in the world on the basis of experience and not as a result of a chain of reasoning. In its basic form, perception entails an awareness of a given object and is constrained by its object. As such, perception is different from imagination, memory, and reflection. Just in case you doubt that there is a difference between perception and imagination, ask yourself if there is a difference between *imagining* that she (or he) is into you and learning from experience that he or she is in fact into you. From what I can remember about college dating, the difference is profound and can even be devastating at times... But I digress.

To understand spiritual perception on the analogy of physical perception is to understand spiritual perception as an awareness of a religious object being present (as opposed to *merely* imagining it or thinking about it). The main point of the analogy of the five senses is to ensure that perceiving God is different from merely imagining God or having great thoughts about God.

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<sup>2</sup> In our second volume, which is currently underway, we explore the connections between perception, imagination, and judgment. We accept that cognitively loaded perception is shot through with judgments and that the work of attention and imagination is indispensable at the level of representation.

But the five senses analogy goes deeper than that. The analogy can be unfolded in three different scenarios correlating physical and spiritual perception. According to the first scenario, the physical and spiritual senses operate disjunctively. In other words, spiritual perception kicks in when the physical senses are not in operation. For example, the story of king Oedipus features prophet Teiresias, who is physically blind, but sees into the past and into the future. What the prophet sees, although he is blind, is that Oedipus murdered his father and married his mother. Oedipus, whose physical sight remains intact until the end, sees external reality, but fails to understand himself and the meaning of his actions. He remains spiritually blind. When Teiresias confronts Oedipus with the prophetic truth, Oedipus prefers to remain in denial and accuses the prophet of deceit and treason. Teiresias responds: "Since you have chosen to insult my blindness - you have your eyesight, and you *do not see how miserable you are*, or where you live, or who it is who shares your household." Only at the end of the tragedy does Oedipus conceded that Teiresias was right all along. Speaking to his eyes, Oedipus exclaims: "You will no longer see all those atrocious things I suffered, the dreadful things I did! No. You have seen those you never should have looked upon, and those I wished to know you did not see. So now and for all future time be dark!" At which point he gouges out his eyes... In a reversal of fortune, Oedipus becomes a prophet, he becomes Teiresias, only too late and only at a very high price of self-mutilation and ostracism. (Do not try this at home!) The first scenario sees spiritual and physical senses as disjunctive: one can operate properly only at the expense of the other. It would seem that this scenario is compatible not only with the "blind seer" phenomenon in the archaic Greek religion, but also with the account of St. Paul's blinding vision of the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul and his companions hear the voice



of Christ, but only Paul sees the light, which causes him to fall on the ground (Acts 9:4) and later causes his physical blindness: “for three days he was without sight” (Acts 9:9), which he regains after Ananias lays hands on him (9:17-18).<sup>3</sup>

According to the second scenario, the physical and spiritual senses operate in conjunction. Physical perception apprehends the physical features of reality, such as shapes and colors; working alongside physical perception, spiritual perception apprehends the spiritual features of reality, such as moral, aesthetic, and religious properties: goodness, beauty, and the presence of God.

According to the third scenario, spiritual perception is a form of physical perception operating in an unusual manner. One possibility would be to understand spiritual perception as a *graced* form of physical perception, which apprehends the presence of God in and through created things. The operation of grace leads to the transformation of all powers of the self, including perception, with the result that created things, which previously were perceived as being an end in themselves, are seen as means of communication with God. Grace makes the presence of God evident to the senses. This version of the five senses model was articulated and defended by the twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. In his monumental work, *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar wrote: “[I]n Christianity God appears to man right in the midst of worldly reality. The centre of this act of encounter must, therefore, lie where the profane human senses, making possible the act of faith, become ‘spiritual’, and where faith becomes ‘sensory’ in order to be human” (*Glory of the Lord* I, 365).

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<sup>3</sup> The manner of healing is similar to that of Jesus in Mark 8:22-25 and par.

When the physical senses refuse the guidance of grace and follow selfish desires, the result is that the presence of God becomes more opaque. Therefore, the hiddenness of God is just as much a function of divine transcendence as it is a dysfunction of perception. Different religious traditions, including Christianity, speak of “guarding the doors of perception,” of purifying the senses, directing the senses, and even training the senses in order to maximize their capacity to perceive God in all things.

#### **4 Developing Spiritual Perception**

This development or training of physical perception is something our research team has focused on in the second phase of the Spiritual Perception Project. (The topic is particularly important to Prof. Frederick Aquino and me). The training of perception can take a variety of forms. Consider the example of bird watching. When I hike in exotic places, I sometimes admire birds, but it usually takes me a considerable amount of effort to spot them, and when I spot a new bird, I often have no idea what I am looking at. In contrast, an experienced bird watcher is good both at spotting and at recognizing these delightful creatures and their particular features. Or, consider, an example of wine tasting. Is it OK to use an example of wine tasting at a Methodist school? An experienced wine taster will be able to distinguish the different types of grapes that are used to produce Merlot, Cabernet, and Pinot Noir. The same applies to scotch tasting. An experienced taster would have no difficulty distinguishing between Laphroaig 10, 15, and 25 (it’s an area where I defer completely to the expertise of Prof. Aquino). Or consider listening to music. A person with a perfect pitch, good musical memory, and some musical education, will be able to

hear the same piece of music in a manner different from a person whose auditory skills are not as advanced.

Similarly, our aesthetic sense or sense of beauty can be trained through art. In my new essay for the forthcoming volume, I discuss how art can enable us to “see more” in the things that surround us. I draw on the work of Claude Monet, particularly focusing on the *Water Lilies* series that he painted over and over again at his country estate outside Paris. I also discuss how looking at Monet’s art one begins to see the beauty that he saw and sought to bring out in nature. In other words, the study of art can help the viewer to become perceptually attentive to features of reality that have been previously neglected.

Similarly, one could argue that education cannot be confined to passing on information, but also has to do with a change of one’s worldview, which literally means the change of a way of looking at the world. As educators, we are as about giving you the background knowledge to understand the world as we are about influencing the way you look at the world. Perception and knowledge are intimately related.

Therefore, you could think of physical perception as a power or skill that can be directed, developed, and trained. The upshot of this development and training would be a greater capacity to notice, recognize, and appreciate the features of reality that escape a less trained eye. One might call perception trained in a particular field, such as bird watching, wine tasting, music, or art, expert perception and distinguish it from ordinary perception.

## **5 Methods of Training**

When it comes to the perception of God, what training methods do we have available? First, the study of scripture inducts us

into the world of expert perceivers of divine revelation, including the prophets and apostles. Scripture is an invitation to enter into the world of people who lived with their eyes open to the possibility and reality of God's presence. Second, prayer and meditation can help gather the powers of the mind and heart and make one attuned to the voice of God within by tuning out the things that distract us from God. You may have heard of the mindfulness movement; Christian prayer is a particular kind of mindfulness: it calls us to be mindful of God. Third, worship is another powerful vehicle for turning our physical senses into the instruments of spiritual perception.

To recapitulate, I have surveyed three scenarios for the five senses model: disjunction, conjunction, and transformation. What connects these three scenarios is the fundamental assumption that spiritual perception is analogous to physical perception and takes place along *five* distinct perceptual channels. I should add that in western philosophy the division into the five senses, no less and no more, originates with Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> He considered sight to be the "chief sense."<sup>5</sup> He also held that "indirectly hearing makes the largest contribution to wisdom," since it serves as means of verbal communication.<sup>6</sup> According to Aristotle, in comparison to vision and hearing, the remaining three

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<sup>4</sup> C. Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London, UK: Routledge, 1993). Cultural anthropologists have recently argued that both the 'Aristotelian' five-fold division of the sense-modalities and the predominance of the language of vision to describe mental activity are culture-bound, see D. Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991). While this may be true in some respects, the conclusions of the present study are not affected by this observation, since we limit ourselves to the thinkers that within the western Christian tradition shared the presupposition of the five-fold division of the physical senses.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *De anima*, III. iii, 429a.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *De sensu*, I, 437a11-12.

senses, smell, taste, and touch, were more susceptible to animal desires and passions.<sup>7</sup> On these grounds, the Aristotelian tradition sanctioned the following hierarchy of the senses, from the highest to the lowest: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.<sup>8</sup> The Christian tradition variously engages the “Aristotelian” sensual hierarchy. When sight is assumed to be the highest spiritual sense, it is not always obvious whether this assumption is made for philosophical reasons, or on scriptural grounds, or both. It is telling, however, that the eschatological culmination of the encounter with God has been expressed predominantly in terms of the beatific *vision*, rather than, say, “beatific olfaction” or “beatific audition.” Aquinas summed up this tradition with a characteristic economy of words: “The highest and perfect felicity of intellectual nature consists in the vision of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Those Christian writers who took the Song of Songs as a point of departure for their account of the comparative value of the spiritual senses, were however less constrained by the “Aristotelian” ranking of the senses. Gregory of Nyssa, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, and other mystical theologians at times freely reversed the “Aristotelian” order of the senses by positing that in the mystical ascent spiritual hearing and sight were toppled by spiritual touch as the mode of perception implying a

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X. 5, 1176a: “Sight differs from touch in purity, as do hearing and smell from taste,” trans. R. Crisp, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 191-92.

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of a Christian appropriation of the “Aristotelian” hierarchy, see R. Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 61-71.

<sup>9</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III. 1. 60. 2, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, *St. Thomas Aquinas: On the Truth of the Catholic Faith* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1956), p. 199.

closer contact with its object.<sup>10</sup> Augustine's dictum "touch is the end of knowing" aligns itself with this insight of mystical theology.<sup>11</sup>

The operation of spiritual taste is often considered within the framework of Eucharistic practices.<sup>12</sup> In the Latin sources wisdom (*sapientia*) was commonly taken to connote "tasted knowledge" due to its presumed etymological connection with taste (*sapor*).<sup>13</sup> In patristic and later sources spiritual smell was sometimes associated with spiritual discernment and discrimination, and taken as a paradigm of the "senses that are trained to discern good and evil" (Heb 5: 14).<sup>14</sup>

With the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on preaching as the main vehicle of communicating Christian teachings, the apostle Paul's words that "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10: 17) were freshly appreciated. The iconoclastic impulses of the Reformation further led to increased reliance on audition, often at the expense of vision, as well as other sensory modes of receiving the divine. To conclude, the "Aristotelian" hierarchy of the senses, while undoubtedly influential, was deployed by Christian authors with considerable freedom and historical variation. Both spiritual vision and spiritual audition played a

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* III. 1, 424b.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *De trin.* I. 9. 18; cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* VI. 7. 34. 8-21, VI. 9. 10. 12-16.

<sup>12</sup> See B. T. Coolman, *Knowing God by Experience: The Spiritual Senses in the Theology of William of Auxerre* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2004), chap. 10; C. W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1987); G. Frank, "'Taste and See': The Eucharist and the Eyes of Faith in the Fourth Century", *Church History*, 70 (2001), 619-43.

<sup>13</sup> Jütte, *A History of the Senses*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> For the discussion of spiritual smell, see S. A. Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 169-80.

prominent role in biblical prophecy. In addition, spiritual touch was significant for Christian mystics.

## **6 Spiritual Perception as a Superpower and its Connection to other Aspects of the Self**

The five senses analogy explains a wide range of perceptual experiences that retain connection to physical perception and go beyond it. The analogy works especially well for all cases when the object of perception has physical properties in addition to spiritual properties. But there are also peculiar cases of spiritual perception in which external sense organs and physical objects do not seem to be directly involved. Consider, for example, clairvoyance, which is an alleged ability to “see” into the past or future or beyond normal sensory contact. Or, consider, telepathy or mindreading, which is a communication of thoughts or ideas without the use of any regular external channels. While mindreading has some superficial connection with hearing, it could be more aptly interpreted as a perceptual power *sui generis* or a very rare superpower.

As you know, Hollywood is quite fond of humans with superpowers, as such powers are great for show business. In what follows, I want to look at a film that explores the implications of possessing one such power, namely, mindreading. Now, if you could read my mind, you would know that I am thinking of *What Women Want* (2000) with Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt. Mel Gibson plays Nick Marshall, an executive of an advertising firm who acquires the ability to read the thoughts of women before they express those thoughts. In our film, Nick acquires this capacity by getting accidentally electrocuted with his hair dryer. On discovering this ability, he first thinks that he has gone mad. It’s a logical reaction to a situation when you sudden-

ly start “hearing voices” in your head. Actually, it’s an understandable reaction to one’s acquisition of any odd power, but especially to “hearing voices.” The difference between “hearing voices” because you’ve gone bananas and Nick’s predicament is that his voices consistently *track the external reality*: women do actually think what he “hears” them thinking. This is not trivial: Nick’s “voices in the head” have a perception-like quality to them, namely, they seem to be constrained and in some way caused by women with whom he interacts.

Still suspecting the worst, Nick visits his therapist, who happens to be a female. Her thoughts tell him: Look, you are not crazy; in fact, it’s a tremendous advantage, you’d be the first man ever to read the minds of women. Most men don’t get us at all, even when we tell them. Upon receiving this advice, our hero is at first relieved and then begins to recognize the potential in his new ability. Now, in the film, Nick happens to be a womanizer and a climber. He does next what any womanizer and a climber would do in his shoes: he begins manipulating women. Knowing what women want becomes a way of getting what he wants. For example, he learns that a girl who works at a shop where he buys his morning coffee wants him to ask her out. He reads her thought, takes her out, and spends a night with her. On this occasion, Nick’s superpower allows him to avoid the awkwardness that often accompanies such encounters.

Raising the stakes higher, Nick reads the thoughts of his female boss, steals her ideas for a major project, and then claims those ideas for himself hoping that the higher-ups will give him her job. You might say, many men are perfectly capable of doing these kinds of things and have done these kinds of things without quite possessing telepathy. You are probably right. If the film simply gave us a ruthless philanderer and a climber, it would likely prove a disappointment.



But fortunately, the plot allows for a considerable character development: Nick grows into his powers. For example, he starts *noticing* people, whom he previously did not notice and, as a result, did not treat as people. He notices a previously “invisible” female clerk working on his floor and, reading her thoughts about how worthless her life is, saves her from suicide. Later he goes so far as to risk his reputation and career in order to win back the trust and the heart of his female boss, who is very capably played by Helen Hunt... The Hollywood-required “happy ending” is a bit too sugary for my Eastern European taste. To keep things real, the end also has a bittersweet twist: our hero loses his superpower and he is back to “normal.” Some men might regret such a loss, but Nick is relieved.

You might ask, how is Nick’s telepathy in any way relevant to the perception of God? Well, I am not saying that reading the minds of women is the same as reading the mind of God (some of my friends find the female mind equally, if not even more mysterious; I don’t have any opinion on the matter). I am only claiming an analogy here. How do *most of us* know the mind of God? Usually, by making inferences from revelation, experience, witness of scripture, and so on. Such knowledge does not normally require telepathy. However, since the divine mind is immaterial, God cannot be an object of perception in a manner completely *identical* to the physical objects. This is why the prophets and saints of the past have often received inner “locutions” in a manner closely resembling telepathy, in other words, without the help of the external senses. Telepathy or intellectual intuition could be a useful analogy for a model of spiritual perception that emphasizes an access to the mind of God that is more *direct* or unmediated by physical objects.

Furthermore, Nick’s use of his telepathic powers is instructive for the topic of spiritual perception in several other respects. First, Nick wants to know if the voices in his head track any

external reality. If the voices are purely in his head, Nick would be a good candidate for a psychiatric ward. Most people who “hear voices” are in this unfortunate position. Similarly, spiritual perception cannot be just hearing voices in your head. Some voices could be purely imaginary or delusional. Perception, spiritual or not, cannot be about just thinking great or crazy thoughts. Perception is not about making inferences. Perception has to be about a contact with external reality. Hence, after hearing voices in one’s head that purport to have a divine origin, checking with the relevant authorities, including psychiatrists and pastors, is a reasonable course of action.

Second, Nick’s telepathy is like spiritual perception because it makes possible a highly valuable form of experience and knowledge, not ordinarily available to others. Some religious experiences are also high value, life-changing events that subsequently color more mundane types of experiences received through regular sensory channels. I am thinking here, for example, of conversion experiences during American revivals or “Awakenings” of the past centuries or even in our time. We find an account of one such conversion experience in the life of John Wesley. I am speaking about the famous Aldersgate experience, which Wesley had on May 24, 1738. On that day, he attended a church meeting in Aldersgate, at which someone read a passage from Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*. As the commentary was being read, Wesley had a life-changing experience, which he described as follows:

While he [the reader] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Through the reading of a commentary, divine grace made John Wesley's heart "strangely warmed" and planted trust in Christ and assurance of salvation in his mind. Should we call it "divine touch" or "divine speaking"? Both seem relevant, but do not capture entirely what has been communicated. Was Luther's commentary merely an *occasion* for divine action, or was it *instrumental* in some way? It seems that Wesley's experience of his heart strangely warmed is not reducible to one particular perceptual mode and has to do with a direct action of God upon the heart, bringing about deep conversion. It would not be accurate to reduce the experience to a passing emotion, because it had a lasting impact on Wesley's life. The Aldersgate experience was something that underlay all other experiences.

Third, because mindreading grants a power over other human beings, the temptation to make it serve one's selfish desires is quite strong. Naturally, then, at first Nick does what he does best, even without telepathy, namely, he manipulates women. Similarly, consider people with spiritual gifts. For example, televangelists, who claim to possess powers of hypnosis or healing and often exploit those powers for the sake of financial gain. Or think of some believers in the Charismatic movement, who regard those who have not had their religious experiences as second-class Christians and become arrogant. Since the cognitive premium on the perception of God is greater than anything Nick ever had access to, it is understandable why the gift of such a perception is distributed sparingly among humans. Imagine if we could all read each other's thoughts! This would mean that we would have robbed each other of interiority, we would have removed from life any need to grapple with ambiguity and would have, therefore, removed many of the possibilities for moral growth. In our present fallen state the gift of mindreading might very well prove unbearable: it could spell an end of most relationships and friendships. This makes it more

understandable why, instead of giving access to Himself indiscriminately, God often chooses to remain hidden.

Fourth, spiritual perception resembles Nick's telepathy in being closely linked to affect, attention, will, and heart. For example, during the breakup with a girl in a coffee shop, Nick reads her mind and, as a result, shows a modicum of empathy for her. You might say that this makes very little difference and that he is still a jerk, and you will be right. In Nick's defense one could observe that he is now a jerk who is beginning to realize that the misuse of his perceptual powers has consequences. In the film, this relatively insignificant subplot is a turning point. Later, when Nick discovers the previously "invisible" female clerk on his floor and rushes to her dingy apartment to save her life, he clearly grows in his telepathic powers, as he becomes more attentive to the needs of others. Finally, when he proves himself capable of sacrificing his career for the sake of honesty and love (it does help that Helen Hunt is at stake), he is clearly at the top of his telepathic powers! While his career suffers, he is rewarded with more meaningful human relationships than he has had before, especially with women. What I want to emphasize is the extent to which an unusual perceptual act, such as telepathy is intertwined with affect, will, action, and moral decision-making. When it comes to the perception of God, the powers of the self are even more intimately intertwined than in our analogy of telepathy. For God, the end game is not merely our use of a higher form of perception. The point of divine-human communication is not for humans simply to "get high" on God. Rather, the end game for God is to draw his fallen and rebellious creatures through Christ into the communion of love. Such a communion requires aligning the human powers of affect, intellect, attention, will, and perception with the will of God. Eastern Christian tradition speaks of the synergy of divine and human wills, on the analogy of the two wills in Christ, and speaks of the

process of reaching union with God as deification. The Wesleyan tradition calls a similar phenomenon “entire sanctification.” But it does not matter much what we call it, as long as we understand that the exercise of spiritual perception requires spiritual growth and a gathering of affective, volitional, perceptual, and cognitive powers. Ultimately, we do not perceive God for the sake of having an unusual experience; rather, we perceive God so as to be drawn ever closer into the life of God. In this life, we are given glimmers of this experience; in the life of the age to come, all perception will be spiritualized, for the vision of God “face to face” is also a vision of God who is all in all.