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0521549892 - Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling

Mark Wynn

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Religious experience and the perception of value*

John and Joan are riding on a subway train, seated. There are no empty seats and some people are standing; yet the subway car is not packed so tightly as to be uncomfortable for everyone. One of the passengers standing is a woman in her thirties holding two relatively full shopping bags. John is not particularly paying attention to the woman, but he is cognizant of her. Joan, by contrast, is distinctly aware that the woman is uncomfortable . . . John, let us say, often fails to take in people's discomfort, whereas Joan is characteristically sensitive to such discomfort. It is thus in character for the discomfort to be salient for Joan but not for John. That is to say, a morally significant aspect of situations facing John characteristically fails to be salient for him, and this is a defect of his character – not a very serious moral defect, but a defect nevertheless. John misses something of the moral reality confronting him . . . John's failure to act stems from his failure to *see* (with the appropriate salience), not from callousness about other people's discomfort. His deficiency is a situational self-absorption or attentional laziness.<sup>1</sup>

In these remarks, Lawrence Blum describes a familiar set of circumstances. Some human beings are habitually more sensitive than others to the needs of their fellows; and in keeping with this passage we could think of this sensitivity as involving, on occasions, a kind of 'seeing', one which requires not just grasping the individual elements of a situation (here is a woman, carrying some bags, in some discomfort, and so on), but understanding their relative importance, or seeing them with proper 'salience'. On this account, while John may at some level recognise the woman's discomfort, this recognition fails to weigh with him appropriately: he is not focally aware of her discomfort, or aware in a way which involves a grasp of the proper significance of this fact, or aware in a

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 31–3, Blum's italics.

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fashion that will stir him to action. In this passage, Blum makes no reference to the part that the emotions might play in helping a person to realise the sort of sensitivity that Joan exhibits and John fails to exhibit. But it is natural to think that emotional experience is importantly involved in the kind of capacity that he is describing. Often, it is through our felt responses to others that we grasp their needs at all, and grasp them (so far as we do) with appropriate seriousness. And we ought therefore to acknowledge, in Blum's own terms, 'the necessarily affective dimension to the empathic understanding often (though by no means always) required for fully adequate perception'.<sup>2</sup> So Joan's livelier sense of the woman's needs in Blum's example may be realised in her felt response to the woman's predicament, so that it is in virtue of what she feels for the woman that the woman's predicament assumes due salience in her awareness of the situation; while she is also cognisant of other features of the situation (what colour of coat the woman is wearing, the gestures of a further passenger, and so on), these further features do not weigh with her in the same fashion, because they do not elicit a felt response. To put the point in Nancy Sherman's terms, we could say that: 'Without emotions, we do not fully register the facts or record them with the sort of resonance or importance that only emotional involvement can sustain.'<sup>3</sup> In summary, then, Joan's capacity to recognise the needs of others may well take the form of certain habitual kinds of 'seeing', whereby those needs are acknowledged feelingly.

Blum's example suggests how, in ordinary, everyday contexts, we human beings are capable of a habitual, affectively toned, action-guiding taking stock of a situation, one which turns upon seeing the various elements of the situation in proper proportion, or with due salience. These various themes (of feeling as taking stock, guiding action, grounded in character, and enabling the elements of a situation to be seen with due salience) will all be central to the discussion of this book. In the first three chapters, we shall consider in turn how feelings may play some such role in relationship to 'perception' of God, of other human beings, and of the world as a whole. I shall begin, in this chapter, with a discussion of the contribution of feeling to experience which purports to be of God. This is, I appreciate, a contested starting point. The very idea of experience of God will strike many (believers as well as unbelievers) as conceptually problematic – compare Frederick Copleston's comment that 'the God of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is not perceptible in

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 47.

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principle'.<sup>4</sup> However, notwithstanding this difficulty, this starting point offers certain advantages. The question of the epistemic status of purported experience of God has been a central topic in recent philosophy of religion. So this issue offers a potentially helpful way of illustrating a larger claim of this book: that the landscape of philosophy of religion looks rather different when considered from the vantage point of a reconceived account of the significance of the emotions. Moreover, Copleston's target is, I take it, the thought that we can identify God as a spatio-temporal particular, in rather the way that we identify physical objects; and that is not the model of experience of God that will figure in our discussion. And a reconceived account of the nature of the emotions will itself make a difference to our understanding of what is involved in an affectively toned experience of God; so even if the notion of such an experience does seem initially problematic (for reasons that we shall examine), it may come to seem less so. Even so, some readers may wish to skip this chapter, or to read it in the spirit of a move being made within a debate whose foundational assumptions are wrong-headed. Readers who take this view will find other, quite different accounts of religious experience in later chapters, accounts which do not take such experience to involve encounter with God considered as a particular object of experience (let alone a spatio-temporally located object of experience).<sup>5</sup> I add one further caution: in this chapter, I am setting myself a relatively modest objective – I am not trying to provide a comprehensive treatment of the epistemic significance of theistic experience, but just to consider how certain standard objections to such experience may be seen in a new light given a reconceived account of the nature of the emotions.

## MCDOWELL AND AFFECTIVELY TONED VALUE EXPERIENCE

Blum's remarks cited at the beginning of this chapter broach the possibility that our affective responses provide a mode of sensitivity to interpersonal values. I want to consider next whether this understanding of the

4 The comment is cited in Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 245. The comment is made in a review in the *Heythrop Journal*; I have not been able to trace the original source. In this book, Nielsen appeals for a shift in philosophy of religion away from discussion of the traditional arguments for and against the existence of God, and towards the question of 'whether we need a belief . . . in a Jewish, Christian or Islamic God to make sense of our lives and to live really human lives' (p. 21). Nielsen's own position is naturalistic, of course, but I hope that the present book constitutes a kind of response to his appeal to focus upon the connection of religious belief to larger questions of human agency and identity.

5 To name just one example, see the discussion of Chapter 6, where religious experience is understood in terms of recognising patterns in the sensory world.

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role of affectively informed experience in disclosing values may be extended to the case of experience of God. I shall be interested in particular in the models of experience of God that have been developed in the work of William Alston and John Henry Newman. But before setting out their views, I am going to sketch another account (to set alongside Blum's) of the idea that affectively toned experience can involve something like a 'perception' of 'moral reality' or values 'in the world' (so that in some cases anyway things affect us favourably because they are of value, rather than their being of value being simply reducible to the fact that they affect us favourably). I shall be concerned specifically with John McDowell's defence of this stance in his paper 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following'.<sup>6</sup> My aim is to show how McDowell's case may help to buttress the understanding of theistic experience that is defended in the work of Alston and Newman.

McDowell's argument takes the form of a response to an objection to a cognitivist reading of moral 'perception'. The objection runs as follows. Just as we can explain our colour experience by reference to qualities in the world which are themselves colourless (the 'primary qualities' of things), so we can explain our value experience by reference to qualities in the world which are themselves value-free. The conclusion to draw, so the argument goes, is that values, like colours, are not part of the fabric of things; they reflect not so much the character of the world as the character of the mind, and its way of apprehending the world. In general outline, the position that is articulated here is very familiar; it is of a piece with (though it does not require) the view that a thing counts as real if it features in the explanations of fundamental physics (or a perfected fundamental physics), and that things which lack an explanatory role in fundamental physics (be they colours, values, or whatever) are not fully real, but have rather to do with the way in which the mind represents to itself what is fundamentally real.

McDowell opposes this line of argument by challenging the distinction it seeks to draw between the element of value experience that can be attributed to value-free qualities 'in the world' and the element that reflects the human subject's contribution, its glossing of the world in the light of its needs and concerns. Perhaps it is possible to draw such a distinction in the case of colour experience, as when we suppose that light of a certain wavelength (where wavelength is understood in quantitative,

<sup>6</sup> The paper appears in Steven Holtzmann and Christopher Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 141–62.

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colour-independent terms) gives rise to a certain kind of colour experience (seeing red, say). But, McDowell suggests, there should be no presumption that we can match up in the same sort of way value-neutral qualities in the world and various kinds of value experience. And in that case, this particular argument for ‘non-cognitivism’ about values (for the idea that values are simply projected) will fail, since the argument depends on the idea that because some such pairing off is possible, we can trace our value experience to qualities in the world which are value-neutral (and should therefore infer that value experience, so far as it is of anything, is really of these value-neutral qualities which are its source).<sup>7</sup>

McDowell’s discussion is of interest to us because although he does not say much explicitly on the point, it is clear that he is thinking of value experience as affectively informed. For instance, he writes of the possibility that ‘we can learn to see the world in terms of some specific set of evaluative classifications, aesthetic or moral, only because our affective and attitudinative propensities are such that we can be brought to care in appropriate ways about the things we learn to see as collected together by the classifications’ (p. 142). So our question is this: if such affectively toned experience proves relevant to the identification of values in aesthetic and moral contexts, as McDowell proposes, then will it perhaps prove relevant to the identification of values in the case of religious experience? For example, perhaps theistic experience can be understood (in some cases anyway) as a kind of affectively toned sensitivity to the values that ‘make up’ God’s reality? If this sort of case is to be made, it is important to show that an experience may be affectively toned and yet afford access to a value that is not simply the product of the mind’s glossing of facts which in themselves are value-free (for on any standard view, God’s goodness is not reducible to human responsiveness to a set of facts which in themselves are value-free). And this is the proposal that lies at the heart of McDowell’s case.

McDowell does not present a simple knock-down argument for the claim that we cannot match up value-free qualities in the world and kinds of value experience in the way required by his hypothetical interlocutor. The main thread of his case runs as follows:

Consider, for instance, a specific conception of some moral virtue: the conception current in some reasonably cohesive moral community. If the

<sup>7</sup> In fact, elsewhere McDowell has challenged the idea that this explaining away strategy works even for colours: see ‘Values and Secondary Qualities’, in J. Rachels (ed.), *Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 228–44, especially pp. 237–8.

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disentangling manoeuvre is always possible [i.e., in my terms, disentangling the contribution made to value experience by some value-free quality in the world and the contribution made by the mind], that implies that the extension of the associated term, as it would be used by someone who belonged to the community, could be mastered independently of the special concerns which, in the community, would show themselves in admiration or emulation of actions seen as falling under the concept. That is: one could know which actions the term would be applied to, so that one would be able to predict applications and withholdings of it in new cases – not merely without sharing the community’s admiration (there need be no difficulty about that), but without even embarking on an attempt to make sense of their admiration. That would be an attempt to comprehend their special perspective; whereas, according to the position I am considering, the genuine feature to which the term is applied should be graspable without benefit of understanding the special perspective, since sensitivity to it is singled out as an independent ingredient in a purported explanation of why occupants of the perspective see things as they do. But is it at all plausible that this singling out can always be brought off?<sup>8</sup>

McDowell is suggesting, I take it, that the burden of proof in this debate rests on those who subscribe to the possibility of the ‘disentangling manoeuvre’. For if such disentangling were possible, then we would be able to grasp the extension of value terms independently of any appreciation of the very ‘concerns’ which give rise to the use of those terms, and why think that is at all likely? The thesis of the paper is then that arguments for non-cognitivism about values which depend on appeal to the disentangling manoeuvre fail to assume the requisite burden of proof.

To bring out the sense and force of McDowell’s remarks, it may help to consider a particular example. Take the quality of being funny or amusing. This quality seems to differ from qualities such as being in motion or being hot in so far as it cannot be specified independently of human reactions.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it also seems to differ from colour properties, such as the property of being red, even if we suppose that such properties cannot be specified independently of human subjective experience; for we do not have a ready way of grouping all the things that are funny independently of their tendency to provoke amusement, whereas we do have a ready way of grouping all the things that appear red

8 McDowell, ‘Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following’, p. 144.

9 Compare David Wiggins’s discussion of ‘the funny’ in ‘A Sensible Subjectivism’, in Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton (eds.), *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 232. See also Simon Blackburn on the range of things which we find comic, in his response to McDowell: ‘Reply: Rule-Following and Moral Realism’, in Holtzmann and Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein*, p. 167. His remarks are cited below on pp. 26–7.

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independently of their tendency to evoke this response (we can appeal to the fact that these things all reflect light of a certain wavelength). So to put the matter in McDowell's terms, whereas the term 'red' has an extension which can be picked out in colour-neutral terms, the extension of the term 'funny' cannot be given without reference to our responses of being amused. To turn to the case that interests us, we might say similarly that the class of morally wrong actions does not constitute a natural set when characterised in the language of physics, because the property of being morally wrong (unlike properties of an empirical kind) has a normative dimension, and its extension is therefore only visible in the light of a normative perspective, rather than the perspective of empirical science.

To summarise, on the view McDowell is challenging, we should 'explain away' value experience in rather the way that we can explain away colour experience: in each case, we should trace the experience to qualities which are themselves value- or colour-free, and therefore read the experience in so far as it involves value or colour as the mind's work (and not the product of a mind-independent reality which really is coloured or valuable). Against this view, McDowell urges that we cannot trace value experience to qualities in the world which are value-free, and the foundational assumption of the argument therefore cannot be sustained.

McDowell's proposal calls for further elucidation and assessment; and I shall return to these matters shortly. But first I want to consider how such an account might in principle be relevant to the case of religiously informed, affectively resonant value experience. Specifically, I want to consider the treatment of such experience in the work of John Henry Newman and William Alston; my aim is to show how the case that they present in support of the possibility of affectively toned theistic experience can be significantly strengthened at points if McDowell's arguments hold good.

## ALSTON, AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE, AND 'PERCEIVING GOD'

In his book *Perceiving God*, William Alston examines what he calls 'mystical perception' or (equivalently) 'direct perception of God'. In general, if one directly perceives X, then 'one is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived'.<sup>10</sup> (So my

<sup>10</sup> *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 22.

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awareness of the keyboard before me now will count as a case of direct perception on this account.) Alston goes on to consider the possibility that the state of consciousness through which we perceive God is purely affective in terms of its phenomenal content, and in this connection he writes:

One nagging worry is the possibility that the phenomenal content of mystical perception wholly consists of affective qualities, various ways the subject is feeling in reaction to what the subject takes to be the presence of God. No doubt such experiences are strongly affectively toned; my sample is entirely typical in this respect. The subjects speak of ecstasy, sweetness, love, delight, joy, contentment, peace, repose, bliss, awe, and wonder. Our inability to specify any other sort of non-sensory phenomenal qualities leads naturally to the suspicion that the experience is confined to affective reactions to a believed presence, leaving room for no experiential presentation of God or any other objective reality.<sup>11</sup>

Alston's remarks bring out the importance of our topic: a great deal of religious experience is indeed affectively toned. So an argument that purports to show that affects bear positively or negatively on the question of whether an experience can be taken to be veridical will be, potentially, of considerable importance for any assessment of the epistemic standing of theistic (and other kinds of religious) experience.

In the passage, Alston seems to allow that the phenomenal content of a genuine perception of God might be purely affective, but he regards this possibility as a source of 'nagging worry'. Why should he think of the possibility in these terms? At the beginning of the passage, he characterises the affective component of such an experience as 'various ways the subject is feeling in reaction to what the subject takes to be the presence of God'. It is striking that this formulation assumes that the element of feeling in a mystical perception is a 'reaction' to (what is presumably) a feeling-neutral thought. On this view, it seems that feelings are being construed as rather like sensations (such as the sensation of being bruised), in so far as they do not themselves bear any intentional content (they are not about anything), albeit that they differ from sensations in so far as they are occasioned by a thought, rather than by the impact of an object upon the sense organs. And this does indeed suggest that a theistic experience whose phenomenal content is purely affective will be epistemically dubious. For on this picture, it seems that the feeling component of the experience is not targeted at anything – or if it is, it is directed at the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.



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thought that God is present, rather than at God qua perceptual object. And that makes it difficult to see how such an experience could count as a case of perception. However, McDowell's discussion invites a rather different characterisation of the role of feeling, as I shall now argue.

We have seen that on McDowell's view, value experience should not be disaggregated into a value-neutral element that derives from 'the world' and a phenomenal element that reflects the mind's contribution to the experience. Instead, we should understand the source of such an experience in value-indexed terms, and accordingly think of values as 'in the world'. Moreover, as we have seen, on McDowell's account, it is by way of our affective responses that we come to recognise these values. As Simon Blackburn puts the matter, on McDowell's view, 'our affective natures expand our sensitivity to how things are, on the lines of any mode of perception'.<sup>12</sup> This suggests a model according to which feelings are ways of taking stock of (evaluative) features of the world, and to that extent, are themselves forms of thought. Indeed, it may be that our felt responses offer our only mode of access to certain values (just as in certain cases, our amused responses may offer our only mode of access to the quality of being funny).

If this is the right way to read McDowell, then his account does indeed pose a challenge to the model of affect that is implied in Alston's remarks. For on McDowell's picture, feelings are being represented as thoughts or perceptions (in the sense of having intentional content, or being about something) in their own right, and not simply by virtue of their association with some thought by which they are caused. By contrast, as we have seen, on Alston's account, feelings seem to be represented as in themselves thought-less, and as occasioned by feeling-less thoughts. It is, I suggest, this rather impoverished account of affect that leads Alston to remark (in the passage just cited) that: 'Our inability to specify any other sort [i.e., some non-affective sort] of non-sensory phenomenal qualities leads naturally to the suspicion that the experience is confined to affective reactions to a believed presence.' This suspicion is only 'natural', I suggest, given the assumption that affectively informed experiences can be (and in general ought to be) disaggregated into a thought component (which is of cognitive significance) and a feeling component (which is of no inherent cognitive significance); given that distinction, but not otherwise, it is natural to analyse an affectively toned experience which appears to be of God as simply an 'affective reaction' to a 'believed presence'. But if

<sup>12</sup> 'Reply', p. 164.

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McDowell is right, then this distinction is open to challenge. So here is a first point where McDowell's discussion proves to be relevant to Alston's account of religious experience. If we adopt McDowell's conception of affective experience (rather than Alston's), it will be easier to see how a religious experience whose phenomenal content is purely affective may, even so, be veridical. Again, this is a matter of some significance, given that religious experience is so often infused by feeling.

In the passage we have been discussing, Alston seems to concede that there is rightly some initial scepticism about the trustworthiness of a mystical perception whose phenomenal content is purely affective. However, he goes on to give an account of how such an experience could be veridical even so, and here he cites an analogy with sense perception: 'even if, as seems possible, sensory phenomenal qualities are as subjective as affective qualities, that does not prevent them serving as a phenomenal vehicle of the perception of objective external realities'.<sup>13</sup> And in that case, Alston asks, could we not suppose similarly that affects may serve as the 'phenomenal vehicle' for the recognition of mind-independent realities? Does this proposal suggest a more generous assessment of the role of affects in theistic experience? Here Alston does seem to allow that feelings may have intentional content: a recognition of the character of 'objective reality' can be realised in affective experience. However, a McDowell-inspired view might still be wary of Alston's analogy, on the grounds that it assimilates sensory and value experience too quickly: unless certain distinctions are noted (concerning the possibility of the 'disentangling manoeuvre'), we might find ourselves allowing that affects have intentional content (just as our phenomenal-colour-informed experience of colour has intentional content), while failing to allow that the 'real' source of that experience is a set of 'objective' value properties. However, in fairness to Alston, he does indicate that he intends the analogy to apply with reference to the 'perception of objective external realities'. Even so, while he admits the possibility of affects playing this sort of role, it is striking that he persists in trying to downplay them (as we shall see again shortly). This suggests to me that while Alston sees no objection of principle to this reading of the significance of affects, he thinks that in practice the model of affects as occasioned by thoughts and as themselves thought-less is truer to our experience (or preferable for some other reason). In that case, we might take McDowell's account as a helpful corrective to the idea that while the affective dimension of an experience

<sup>13</sup> *Perceiving God*, p. 50.