

Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology

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The Demystification of Nick Zangwill's "Myth of Religious Experience"

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Abstract: The debate about religious experiences has recently been shaped by the question of whether they exist or if they are a myth. One of the most compelling arguments for the non-existence of religious experience was put forward by Nick Zangwill. In his "The myth of religious experience" (2004) he argued that God can be perceived neither by our ordinary five senses nor by some special sixth sense. While I agree with Zangwill that God cannot be perceived with our ordinary five senses (or a sixth religious sense), I do not think his argument shows that religious experience – based on Zangwill's own understanding of the term – is a myth. In this paper, I offer in two steps a philosophical defence – in the analytical tradition – of the possible existence of religious experience as perceptual experiences. In the first step, I adumbrate Zangwill's argument for the myth of religious experience, which fails because it ultimately begs the question – as I argue in the second step, by presenting a Berkelean answer to Zangwill's challenge.

Keywords: Perceptual Model of Religious Experience; Mediate and Immediate Perception; Religious Experience as Mediate Perceptions of God; Berkelean Solution; Philosophy of Religion; David Hume on Miracles

Introduction

The focus of Zangwill's "The Myth of Religious Experience" is William Alston's account in *Perceiving God*, where Alston famously claims "that experiential awareness of God, or as I shall be saying, the *perception* of God, makes an important contribution to the ground of religious belief. More specifically, a person can become justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about God by virtue of perceiving God as being or doing-so-so".¹ Alston calls these kinds of beliefs "M-beliefs". In his paper Zangwill attacks Alston's idea by arguing for the imperceptibility of God. Consequently he denies there is a justification for "M-beliefs". I will deal with this attack in the first section of this paper.

In the second section I will argue from an analytical perspective for a Berkelean solution to the problem Zangwill raises. I will show that while Zangwill can plausibly maintain God not to be *immediately* perceivable, he can neither demonstrate religious experience to be a myth nor perception to be an inadequate model of religious experience. It is possible, namely on his own characterization of the term, to understand some perceptions as having a theological content by being mediate perceptions of God. Therefore, perception cannot be said to be "an inadequate model for understanding a human being's transactions with God".²

¹ Alston, "Perceiving God", 1.

² Zangwill, "The Myth", 22, footnote 19.

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1 Zangwill's argument for the myth of religious experience

The central question of Zangwill's paper is whether or not we can perceive God. Zangwill plausibly maintains that if we are to perceive God it must be with our ordinary five senses or some sixth religious sense.³ Although there are proponents with interesting arguments for the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*,⁴ I will not discuss this possibility, for it is clear that the “perceptual” experiences with this sixth sense differ substantially from the ones with our ordinary senses. My focus will be on our ordinary five senses – on visual perception to be more specific – since the case against Zangwill's criticism can already be made. Furthermore this restriction makes for a more compelling argument from an analytical perspective. What then is Zangwill's argument for his view “that perceptual experiences [with our ordinary five senses; MF] of God are *impossible*”?⁵

Before I present Zangwill's argument, three methodological claims are in order. First, the aim of my paper is a philosophical critique of Zangwill's account on “his own terms”. This means I will follow Zangwill in most of his assumptions, most crucially in his characterization of (some) perceptions – e.g., cases of “perceiving as” – as a kind of experience with a certain content and his focus on seeing as the key sensory modality.⁶ I argue that even if all his assumptions are accepted he can still not demonstrate religious experience to be a myth without begging the question. Second, Zangwill never explains the scope or content of the conception of God he's dealing with.⁷ However, I shall not criticize this. I will, when not indicated otherwise, restrict myself to a Christian conception of God, since a Berkelean solution is best developed there. This means I will provide an argument for the possible existence of religious experience based on Zangwill's characterization of the term in the Christian tradition.⁸ Third, in light of the previous remarks and for the sake of brevity, I will ignore the problem of God's gender and grammatical reference. I follow Zangwill in referring to God with masculine and capitalized pronouns as not to imply there being a point of disagreement relevant to my discussion. But this shall not suggest God being male or even having a gender.

Zangwill's main argument concerns the categorical difference between God and the sort of things we usually perceive. Two principles are central to his argument: the spatio-temporal and the correspondence principle.

Zangwill's version of the spatio-temporal principle states: “the cause of anything, including an experience, must stand in a *spatio-temporal* relation to what it causes”.⁹ This implies, according to Zangwill, that “X” – if it is the cause of an experience – must itself have spatial-temporal properties. Since perceptions on Zangwill's account are experiences, their cause – that which is “represented”, i.e., that of which they are experiences – has to have spatial-temporal properties. But this seems to pose a problem for a theist,¹⁰ as Zangwill remarks, since God is a unified, unextended and all-powerful being and by definition, not part of the spatio-temporal world. But then, there can be no perceptual experiences of God since He does not fulfil what Zangwill calls the “causal condition of perception”.¹¹ There are of course several responses for a theist.

³ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 7.

⁴ John Calvin used this term to denote a special sense, which gives humans knowledge of God. For more on this see Helm, “John Calvin”, 87–107. Recently the idea was taken up by Alvin Plantinga (viz. Plantinga, “Christian Belief”, chap. 8) and Anthony Kenny (viz. Kenny, “Faith”, 39f.).

⁵ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 3.

⁶ Ibid., 2 and 7. Although Zangwill seems to hold his argument to be equally applicable to hearing and touching, he dismisses tasting and smelling as ways of perceiving God in the required sense (ibid.). For my purposes, it suffices to show that some visual perceptions can be understood as religious experiences; so by “perceiving” I mean “seeing”, unless stated otherwise.

⁷ From several remarks it seems clear that Zangwill aims to cover a wide range of conceptions and traditions. He explicitly mentions the Judeo-Islamic and Christian conceptions but also ancient Egyptian and Greek traditions (viz. ibid., 5 and 9).

⁸ The possibility of a wider application remains to be examined in the future.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰ I take “Theist” to mean someone who believes that God exists in one form or another. For the sake of brevity, “Non-theist” should be understood to include Agnostics as well as Atheists. In short, all people who do not believe God exists, are doubtful about his existence or have no opinion at all on the matter.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

Primarily she can insist that God has and continues to intervene causally in the world but it is a special sort of causation, one Zangwill dubs “psycho-theological causal interaction [which leads to; MF] physically uncaused brain events”.¹² To paraphrase Zangwill: the theist can reject the implication of the principle or the principle altogether, since it presupposes a materialistic conception of causation in the sense of the “causal closure of the physical”.¹³ Religious experience as a perception of God can then, according to the theist, be styled as counterexamples to this principle, precisely because the cause of the perception with a theological content has none of these features.

Zangwill identifies an impasse between the theist and the non-theist, since the latter tries to impose a principle on the former, which she cannot accept. The self-imposed challenge Zangwill then faces is “to find a non-question-begging way” to force Alston – and other theists like him – in taking the “Kantian medicine” (referring to the spatio-temporal principle).¹⁴ I will return to this self-imposed challenge in the second section because it is precisely in this respect that Zangwill’s argument fails to hit its target. Zangwill tries to bridge this “dialectical impasse” by introducing the correspondence principle. He claims (plausibly to my mind) that an experience, to be a perceptual experience, must correspond to some sense modality.¹⁵ Based on this principle he proceeds to formulate a dilemma for theists (like Alston). Either God is perceivable with our ordinary five senses or some sixth religious sense. Since the latter was already precluded, let’s look at Zangwill’s treatment of the former.¹⁶

Zangwill seems to think that while the spatio-temporal principle can be disputed by the theist when it comes to causality in general, it can hardly be denied in the case of perceiving with our ordinary senses. Although a theist could insist that the perception of God with our ordinary senses is a special kind of perception, where this principle does not hold for whatever reason, Zangwill’s claim shall not be contested. At least in the case of seeing, there are good reasons to suppose that the spatio-temporal principle applies. Seeing as Zangwill characterizes it, is a two place relation: one relata being a perceiver and the other thing perceived. This thing as the cause of the perception or perceptual experience has to have spatio-temporal properties (by application of the spatio-temporal principle) and stand in a spatial relation to the perceiver in order to be perceived. If, for example I visually perceive “X” (have a visual perception of “X”), I perceive it *as* being somewhere. So if the perceived “X” should be God, He has to be spatially located or as Zangwill puts it “*part of the physical world*”.¹⁷

Zangwill admits that the mentioned spatial requirement is not applicable to all aspects of visual perception. Proponents of sense data¹⁸ could deny this requirement – e.g., in the case of the two-dimensional patterns of colours, which they hold to be, on the most basic level, visually perceived. But it seems obvious, as Zangwill points out, that religious experience would have to be a case of *perceiving as*. Otherwise, as Zangwill rhetorically asks, how could it have a content referring to something independent, which is required for a religious experience? The two-dimensional patterns of colours or other sense data “have no evidential weight (by themselves) with respect to judgments about the three dimensional world”.¹⁹ Hence, religious experience has to be a (visual) perception of something as something and the spatial requirement cannot be denied.²⁰

If God should be perceived as God, the spatial requirement leads to metaphysical problems. At least in the case of the Judeo-Islamic tradition, God cannot be spatially located. In the first place, this is because

¹² Ibid., 6. Of course, a theist could also argue that God manifests Himself as a part of space and time by His revelation or by way of incarnation, but this possibility can be neglected since the epistemological problems Zangwill identifies also apply.

¹³ Ibid., 5. Zangwill refers to Lewis on this matter. Recently (2006) the principle was articulated forcefully by Vincente: “physical effects have only physical causes” (Vincente, “Causal Completeness”, 150).

¹⁴ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 4-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Zangwill presents it as a dilemma, since he argues that neither is possible (ibid., 11 and 20). But as I aim to show, there is a solution for the first horn of the dilemma, which means – strictly speaking – there is no dilemma at all.

¹⁷ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 5-7.

¹⁸ Viz Russell, “Problems”, chap. 1.

¹⁹ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 7-11.

²⁰ The question as to if sense data even exist, which is mostly denied in the current debate of the philosophy of perception, can be safely ignored for the present purpose.

God is generally assumed to be an undivided and indivisible being. In the second place, because God is as a being of a different kind – one on which the rest of the physical world depends for its creation and continuous existence. Hence He cannot be extended in the same way as His creation consisting in divisible beings. Zangwill concedes that these metaphysical problems might be solved with some refinement, but the problem of a “spatial God” is, for him, rather epistemological than metaphysical.²¹

Zangwill presents the epistemological problem in the form of another dilemma: Either a spatial God is locally extended as a spatial part of the world or He is extended over the whole world. The latter renders perceptions of God impossible. We would have to perceive the *whole* physical world to perceive God, since He is instantiated in every part of it. Now even if it would be granted that we could perceive the whole physical world, an epistemological problem would persist, since this would not entail us to perceive it as God. The identity relation which exists between God and the world is not itself a physical relation and accordingly not perceivable by sight or any other of our ordinary five senses.

In the former case, i.e., God as a localized part of the world, God could be incarnated as a human being, but this would not enable us to perceive God as God since we would need to perceive this human being (or other physical things) as God's incarnation.²² That is, we would have to perceptually represent the instantiation of the incarnation relation. But this is surely problematic because, although we could perceive a physical thing that is in fact the incarnation of God, the incarnation relation between that thing and God is not a physical relation that we can be sensitive to with our ordinary sensory faculties.²³

Zangwill then concludes that God cannot be perceived (as God) with our five ordinary senses since God would have to have spatial properties, which leads to metaphysical as well as epistemological problems, which in sum are insoluble. Of course, a theist could object to Zangwill's presentation and try to provide a solution to the epistemological problem by claiming that while it is true we see red because of redness, the latter is not red. More generally put, we don't see the relationship that instances God, because we never see instancing relationships at all. But, as I aim to demonstrate, Zangwill's argument fails on a more basic level, i.e., by not showing religious experience – as Zangwill's characterizes it – to be a myth without begging the question.

2 A Berkeleyan solution: Religious experience as mediate perceptions of God

One of the main problems of Zangwill's criticism is his equating religious experience with perceptions of God as God. To begin with, such an equivalency is unjustified on his own characterization of the term, to which I will return shortly.²⁴ I will argue that it is by no means evident how the imperceptibility of God justifies the conclusion that religious experience *per se* is a myth, i.e., that they are non-existent, *without begging the question*.

The term “religious experience” is notoriously vague. This is due not only to the great variety of different kinds of experiences, which are labelled as such, but also to the vagueness of “religion”.²⁵ Luckily Zangwill provides a characterization of religious experience as a perceptual experience with a “theological content”, meaning: “perceptual experiences representing theological objects, events or state of affairs”.²⁶ At first glance, it is apparently clear which experiences he's dealing with, especially since the vagueness of “religion” is – at least implicitly – removed by confining most of the arguments and characterization of

²¹ Ibid., 8f. As mentioned there is in the Christian tradition a possible exception in the form of incarnation. But, again this exception also faces epistemological problems.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Zangwill's focus on perceptions of God is understandable. He wants to argue against Alston that God cannot be perceived – but it is not sufficient for showing religious experience to be a myth.

²⁵ Viz. Webb, “Religious Experience”, 1.

²⁶ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 2.

God to the Christian and Judeo-Islamic tradition.²⁷ Nonetheless, this does not solve but merely shifts the problem of vagueness, because Zangwill never defines or characterizes what he means by “theological”. For example, is seeing the transcendent beauty in a lover’s face or being moved by the sight of someone suffering “theological”? Many religious people would certainly claim that these or similar experiences do or could be considered to have “theological” content. But is this what Zangwill is concerned with? From Zangwill’s paper this question is not answerable with any certainty. This is particularly irritating when one considers the general problem of vagueness concerning religious experience. So, what could Zangwill mean?

It would make no sense if by “theological” Zangwill only means something according to the dictionary definition of “relating to theology” where “theology” is defined as the study of God and God’s relation to the world. But in absence of any further explications and the general usage I suppose he has to mean something along the line of “involving God”. A theological content, then, would be an object, event or state of affair involving God in some way. While Zangwill convincingly argues that God Himself – as an “object” – cannot be this theological content two questions obtrude: why should God be the only candidate for a theological content or why does God’s imperceptibility void all perceptual experiences of theological content? Zangwill’s thesis seems to be valid only if no perceptual experience with a theological content can be found, i.e., no perceptual experience of any other theological object, event or state of affair. Consequently, only one counterexample has to be presented to refute Zangwill’s claim of religious experience being a myth. From a philosophical-historic perspective there is one obvious candidate for this counterexample: miracles.

Following David Hume’s definition, I understand a miracle to be “a violation of the laws of Nature” brought about by God.²⁸ This violation has to be more than a *mere* irregularity – as Hume remarks: “nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature”.²⁹ For such an irregularity to be a violation it is necessary that it cannot be “explained away” in the sense that more evidence would lead us to understand why “X” behaved in this unusual manner and to see how it occurred nonetheless according to the laws of nature.³⁰ For example, a woman of good health dying suddenly is not considered a miracle, but a dead person becoming resurrected would be “because that has never been observed, in any age or country”.³¹ There are of course many biblical examples of miracles in this sense, including that of Moses and the burning bush or his parting of the Red Sea, Christ turning water into wine, walking on water or his resurrection.³²

To put the Humean definition in a more formalized and general form: a miracle is a state of affair or an event, which goes against the ordinary course of nature and is caused by God. In short, there are two necessary conditions, which taken together, are sufficient for an irregularity to be termed a miracle. First, it has to be a *violation* of laws of nature, i.e., inexplicable by science, and second, it has to be caused by God. Before I turn to possible objections, it is important to explicate three implications of the proposed definition in order to show that a miracle could qualify as a religious experience on Zangwill’s own characterization.

First, based on the definition proposed, it is a matter of interpretation if an irregularity is actually a violation of the laws of nature or even a miracle. There is nothing in an irregularity, which “in itself” would prove it to be a violation or a miracle.³³ In other words, what an irregularity means is a matter of

²⁷ Viz. *ibid.*, 711.

²⁸ Hume, “Enquiry”, 114.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁰ There is even a more extreme case, where one is ready to change the entire research framework in order to make sense of an “irregularity”. But this can be neglected, since in both cases one rather wants to re-establish “nomic regularity” than allow violations or miracles to exist.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Viz. *Ibid.*, 130f. Since religious experience in the Christian tradition is the current focus of this paper I will mostly rely on them as examples, although there may be miracles which have no connection to religious experience.

³³ Hume explicitly states that miracles are highly improbable, since they’re contrary to our “uniform experience” and that no miracle has ever been *proved* to exist. Miracles for Hume are a matter of faith and not of fact, which is not to deny there may have been some (*Ibid.*, 127-131).

interpretation. While a theist is ready to understand the turning of water into wine or Christ walking on water as a violation of the laws of nature and attribute their occurrence to God, a non-theist would probably deny they occurred or he would search for other explanations. It may be that Christ had used a special “wine powder” or “water shoes”. In these cases, such “miracles” would indeed be almost miraculous inventions and Christ would have been a great chemist and inventor. Nonetheless, they would remain as inventions, which in fact did not violate any laws of nature but rather “made use” of them.

Second, this definition implies perceptions of an irregularity, violation or miracle, were any of them to occur, to be cases of *perceiving as*. Patterns of colours or sense data in general – even if they’re perceived or are the basis of our perceptions – are not (solely) what is perceived when perceiving an irregularity, violation or even a miracle. Irregularities etc. can hardly be said to be perceived at all, since the laws of nature themselves are unperceivable by sight or the rest of our ordinary senses. Basically, we only ever visually perceive their effects. But sometimes these effects appear to be outside of what is ordinarily experienced. But to *understand* events or state of affairs, which are apparently different from the ordinary course of nature, as an irregularity, violation of the laws of nature or as a miracle, presupposes not just the perception of the event or state of affair itself, but a theoretical framework to make sense of them in a certain way. So their perception is a case of, what Sellars refers to as “propositional seeing”.³⁴

Third, to understand a miracle as an interpretation of “X” – where “X” is the state of affair or event in question – has far reaching (theological) consequences. Thusly understood a miracle does not provide evidence for God’s existence and consequently cannot be the justification for believing in it.³⁵ On the contrary, as already stated, God’s existence must be presupposed in order to meaningfully interpret an irregularity as a miracle. Otherwise it would not make sense to interpret them as God’s work. So I agree with Zangwill that miracles, and religious experience in general, cannot provide (*pro tanto*) justification for believing in God’s existence,³⁶ at least not without the justification being circular.

In light of the proposed definition and its implications, one can now ask if miracles would qualify as a “religious experience” in Zangwill’s sense? The answer to which is yes. *Prima facie* there seems to be, if one is theistically inclined, no better reason for Christ’s resurrection than God’s willing or allowing it to happen.³⁷ The theist wants to *interpret* such events *as* the work of God and “sees God’s hand at work”.³⁸ This is a perfectly fine causal explanation, although by the standards of experience and empirical science quite an improbable one. But if irregularities are understood in this manner – i.e., as miracles – they would seem to be a candidate for the label “theological” precisely because they involve God: He allowed Christ to walk on water. Furthermore, these theological events and state of affairs could be, at least visually, perceived apparently without violating the correspondence or the spatio-temporal principle. Hence it seems they could be the content of a perceptual experience. Given that it really occurred, we obviously could have perceived Christ walking on water had we been there. “Had we been there” already implies that both principles have to hold because to actually perceive him, we would to have been standing there on the shore of Lake Kinneret almost 2000 years ago. But then we could see him,³⁹ maybe even touch him or hear his footsteps on the water.

Basically, it seems we could have a religious experience based on Zangwill’s own conception if miracles were to exist. This would surely be denied by Zangwill, but how exactly? Zangwill obviously could reject the

³⁴ Sellars, “Perceptual Consciousness”, 171.

³⁵ For an overview of the argument that religious experiences are excellent grounds for religious beliefs see: Webb, “Religious Experience”, sec. 3. But Hume on the other hand is convinced that miracles “can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion” (Hume, “Enquiry”, 127).

³⁶ Zangwill then was right to stress the importance of “activity of interpretation” for our knowledge of God, but wrong in denying religious experience any existence (Zangwill, “The Myth”, 22, footnote 19).

³⁷ The question about the nature of Gods’ causal powers and its relation to causation in general is of course difficult and highly debated (viz. the centuries old debate about Occasionalism). For my purposes this question can be neglected. It suffices that God is conceived as having causal powers, which seems to be an integral part of the Christian conception of God and generally accepted among theists.

³⁸ This formulation is borrowed from Richard Swinburne (Swinburne, “Existence”, 273ff.).

³⁹ That there are people to claim they saw it, is obvious by the testimony we have of it in the bible (e.g., Matthew 14:22-33).

existence of miracles by denying either of the two necessary conditions or both. Most likely he would attack both conditions in turn. So let us explore the possible objections in more detail.

Zangwill could start by conceding that based on his definition of the term we *could call something* a religious experience – namely perceiving a miracle if they were to exist. But *actually* there *are* no miracles, since there are no violations of the laws of nature. A fully developed answer to this objection, which incidentally would involve questions about the status of science, the status of scientific knowledge and the role of a naturalistic reductionism in general, is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴⁰ For the present purpose, i.e., to show that Zangwill provides an insufficient argument for the myth of religious experience and begs the question, it is sufficient to note that a naturalist-reductionist objection is weak. This is precisely because objections of this sort start to beg the question since they would have to impose naturalistic standards as the correct ones, e.g., by claiming that reality is exhausted by nature and there being nothing “supernatural.”⁴¹ Furthermore, it has to be presupposed that any violation of the laws of nature (past, present and future) will turn out to be a mere irregularity, which seems at least to be improbable – maybe slightly less as its negation. Currently, there are many events, which people believe to be miracles and which have neither been proven to not have occurred nor to be *mere* irregularities.⁴² Thus it is – at least until every supposed violation is proven to be a mere irregularity (or not to have existed at all) – still meaningful to reflect and discuss about having a religious experience, when witnessing certain irregularities. As long as someone walks on water and is perceived as doing so, it is possible and meaningful to understand it as a violation of the laws of nature. Furthermore, since God’s involvement has not been precluded, it can also be understood as a miracle.

But even if it were the case that every violation of nature could be explained away, i.e., be shown to be mere irregularities or to not even to have occurred, this would not suffice to declare a religious experience to be a myth. This would primarily demonstrate that the Humean definition of a miracle is deficient.⁴³ However, it is possible and consistent if the theist rephrases the definition and claims a miracle not to be a violation of the laws of nature but an *irregularity* caused by God. It may be that God did not “need” to violate a law of nature to permit Christ to walk on water, e.g., by adding a special ability or webbing to his feet. Maybe this ability could be explained by science, but still not the fact as how it came about precisely because it was God who caused it. However, this means that Zangwill could only reject the existence of miracles by denying God’s involvement in general. This argument would have to be a metaphysical one and demonstrate that no event, state of affair or object can *ever* be said to involve God in any way. Since Zangwill does not want to beg the question it is highly improbable that his adapted argument for the non-existence of religious experience would be of this sort. Otherwise he could have stopped after introducing the causal closure of the physical in the first place. But regardless of his intentions, we now reach a point where Zangwill could only hold religious experience to be a myth by *begging the question*. To say there can be no miracle or any other theological content for that matter is only a viable claim if God is already precluded as a possible cause. But it is a vital part of the theistic position to hold some things as being inexplicable or only explainable as the workings of God.

In short, Zangwill cannot, without *begging the question*, reject the possibility of the existence of miracles and hence, of a possible theological content for a perceptual experience. This could only be done by denying God’s existence or He to have causal powers, i.e., only by *begging the question*. Therefore, Zangwill fails his self-imposed challenge if he denies that miracles possibly exist and are a viable candidate for theological content or there being no theological content at all. This leaves him with one option to

⁴⁰ I only want to add, that it seems not to be entirely implausible, even from an empirical point of view, to doubt this reductionist thesis; see the discussion surrounding Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle (Hilgevoord & Uffink, “The Uncertainty Principle”).

⁴¹ For more on this, see: Kim, “Philosophical Naturalism”, 88-95.

⁴² There actually are attempts to explain away e.g., biblical miracles by science. In a recent paper (2005) Nof et al. suggest a scientific explanation for Christ’s walking on water: he actually walked on ice (viz. Nof et al., “Walking on Water“, 417ff.).

⁴³ Of course one could hold this to be an acceptable refutation and further deny that the definition could be expanded in the proposed manner. But it should not be forgotten that miracles were only but one candidate for the sought-after theological content and there is a more fundamental problem at stake if Zangwill wishes to deny any involvement of God whatsoever, as will be argued.

validate his claim that religious experience is a myth. He can accept that miracles are principally possible and would be a theological content of some sort but actually, even if a miracle were to occur it would not be the content of a *perceptual* experience. That is, contrary to what was said before, the perception, e.g., of Christ walking on water would not be the perception of a miracle. Hence, Zangwill would at least have succeeded in demonstrating that perception is an inadequate model for religious experience and he could still claim religious experience in this sense to be a myth.

This final objection works, not by denying God exists or lacks any causal power, i.e., not by denying that the content would be theological. Rather it would be denied, based on the spatio-temporal principle, that a miracle is the content of a *perceptual* experience. Since God's involvement – *nota bene* what makes the irregularity or violation “theological” – is still unperceivable, the irregularity or violation cannot be perceived as a miracle and hence not be the (theological) content of a perceptual experience. Accepting this principle for (visual) perception, as it were, it can be demanded of any cause to stand in a spatio-temporal relation to its effect. In consequence when perceiving “X”, “X” must stand in a spatial relation to the perceiver. Otherwise, it can hardly be said one (visually) perceives “X”. If there is a causal chain involved, the spatial requirement holds for every link of it. For example, I visually perceive my neighbour next to me, since she stands in a spatial relation to me. But her being there is the effect of her waking up in the morning, getting out of bed, leaving the house and walking over to my place. In other words, it is the result or effect of many events or causes, which in turn exist in a spatio-temporal relation to each other. While many of these events do not fulfil the spatial requirement for my current perception of another person and, furthermore, have not been perceived by me at all, I could have at least perceived them, had I been there.

While it is unproblematic to see how Christ walking on water stands in a spatial relation to a given perceiver, a problem arises if we follow the causal chain to its cause, which at some point – given the definition of a miracle – has to be God. But as Zangwill has established, God cannot – without many problems – said to be standing in a spatial relation to us or be perceived by sight or with our other ordinary senses. But if God is the cause of every miracle and is unperceivable, there seems to be at least an epistemological problem for understanding these irregularities as miracles or miracles as being a theological content of a perceptual experience. How can they be said to involve God if He is not perceivable and how can an irregularity be a theological event or state of affair if the involvement of God cannot be perceived? It seems that even if the experience of an irregularity can somehow be conceived as being theological in some way at least Zangwill was right to hold, then it is not a perceptual experience. Therefore, Zangwill was right to claim perception serves as an inadequate model for religious experience.

There is however a solution, which does justice to the spatial requirement and the role of causality in perception without precluding God from the perceptual realm altogether: one has to differentiate between mediate and immediate perceptions. These notions are borrowed from George Berkeley.⁴⁴ Berkeley held that there are mediate and immediate “objects” of perception for every sense modality.⁴⁵ In his *Essay Towards A New Theory of Vision* (NTV) Berkeley argued that distance can only mediately be perceived by sight, since the immediate (and therefore proper objects of vision) are light and colours in their various degrees.⁴⁶ Without going into further details and into a discussion if distance actually can be perceived by sight or not and what the proper objects of sight actually are, Berkeley's distinction seems to have an intuitive appeal. Moreover it in no way hinges on Berkeley's notorious immaterialism or commits oneself to accept the existence of sense data. This means one does not need to subscribe to Berkeley's thesis that there only are minds and ideas nor to the idea that the most basic form of perception are sense data of some sort. In other words, the fact that eyes are unable hear sounds does not involve a positive claim about the nature of visual perception or about what there is; it is just a claim of what cannot be perceived by sight.

⁴⁴ In the following the page numbers refer to Jessop and Luce's edition of Berkeley's complete works in nine volumes. The volumes are indicated by roman numerals.

⁴⁵ Viz. Berkeley's entry nr. 50 in his Notebook (167 (I)) or § 74 in NTV (201 (II)), where he speaks about the mediate and immediate objects of sights.

⁴⁶ Berkeley, “Principles”, 41 (II).

Prima facie it seems plausible that we do not perceive sounds by sight or colours by touch. But since religious experience is a case of *perceiving as*, the Berkleian distinction has to be slightly adjusted. Mediate perceptions, then, are always cases of *perceiving as*. But this is arguably not far from what Berkeley intended, since he holds that *perceive something as being at a distance from us*.⁴⁷ In this vein “mediate perceptions” are perceptions of something *as* something, e.g., of “Y” *as* being the effect of “X”.

I think the introduced distinction cannot easily be denied by Zangwill. I even venture that he has to accept some form of it – at least his treatment of the Big Bang seems to warrant this. There he has to distinguish some forms of perceptions, as he writes: “The Big Bang is the cause of all current physical states of affairs, but when I look out the window I do not perceive the Big Bang”.⁴⁸ Obviously the Big Bang does not fulfil the spatial requirement, but Zangwill would hardly deny its causal role for current perceptions. Therefore, it appears that while I immediately perceive the tree outside my window I only mediate perceive the Big Bang inasmuch as it is the starting point of the causal chain that led to the existence of myself, the window and the tree. To use another example, a magnetic field clearly does have effects that I can perceive immediately. The iron filings move towards the magnet and I can even measure the strength of the field. However, it is quite obvious that I do not and cannot perceive the field (i.e., immediately) in the way I perceive the movement of the filings. Moreover, there are links in the causal chain, which are causes of perceptions but do themselves not stand in a perceivable spatial relation to a given perceiver.

However, if we accept the distinction between mediate and immediate perceptions,⁴⁹ then it is apparent that it can be put to use in the case of miracles. A miracle does not entail an immediate perception of God. On the contrary, it would make perfect sense, according to the proposed definition of miracles, to claim that when witnessing a miracle, we perceive God mediate by perceiving his “hand at work”. Now Zangwill could only insist on the implication of the spatio-temporal principle – that each cause has to have spatio-temporal properties, i.e., it has to stand in a spatio-temporal relation to its effect. Contrary to God, the Big Bang does have such properties and would have been perceivable by sight or our other ordinary senses, if we were to witness it. Apart from the obvious difficulty of how to make sense of such a claim – because how can anyone witness the Big Bang, if the Big Bang was what brought about the existence of the perceiver as well as time and space? This is again *begging the question* because it is tantamount to the requirement that *any* cause (of a perception) has to have spatio-temporal properties, i.e., it presupposes the causal closure of the physical to be applicable for every link in the chain and thereby principally excluding cases of the “[so; MF] called psycho-theological causal interaction”. But to presuppose this again is to deny God any causal powers and therefore, Zangwill fails on his self-imposed challenge to “to find a non-question-begging way to argue”⁵⁰ for the myth of religious experience.

While Zangwill was right in asking Alston why we perceive God but not the Big Bang and plausibly argued that we are unable to perceive God with our ordinary senses, he wrongly concludes that religious experience is a myth without begging the question: why? This is due to his own conception of religious experience as perceptual experiences with theological content and the possibility of interpreting irregularities in the ordinary course of nature as miracles, which he cannot deny without begging the question. Further these irregularities are the (theological) content of perceptual experiences. They are immediately perceived with our ordinary senses – i.e., fulfil the spatial requirement – and allow for a mediate perception of God in the same way immediate perceptions of any event, object or state of affair are mediate perceptions of the Big Bang. As Zangwill himself stated, he cannot “appeal to the causal

⁴⁷ Berkeley holds we immediately perceive distance by touch or more precisely (and anachronistically formulated) he holds immediate perceptions of distance to be proprioceptive (viz. Berkeley, “Essay”, 187f. (I)).

⁴⁸ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 4.

⁴⁹ As I take it Zangwill has to accept (some form of) it, unless he wants to propose a model of perceiving causes, which is analogous to watching one billiard ball connecting with another and thereby excluding more interesting cases – from a scientific point of view – where e. g., a policy decisions is said to cause inflation or magnetic fields to be the cause of planets remaining in their orbit.

⁵⁰ Zangwill, “The Myth”, 6.

condition of perception or the physical closure principle", which would only be satisfied in the case of the Big Bang but not of God, since it "is dialectically inconclusive".⁵¹

To conclude, Zangwill can neither show religious experience to be a myth nor perception to be an inadequate model for religious experience without begging the question. This, of course, does not mean there *are or have been* miracles or other religious experiences. The present argument only shows, in accordance with Zangwill's general aim and his self-imposed challenge, there is *no* non-question begging way for Zangwill to deny the possibility that religious experience in his sense of a perceptual experience with theological content exists. Therefore, Zangwill's myth of religious experience is demystified.⁵²

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⁵¹ Ibid., 5.

⁵² I thank Charles Djordjevic and Yann Wermuth for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.