

Nick Zangwill*

The Myth of Religious Experience Revisited

A Reply to “The Demystification of Nick Zangwill’s ‘Myth of Religious Experience’”
by Manuel Fasko

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0046>

Received September 19, 2017; accepted October 6, 2017

Abstract: This article replies to Manuel Fasko’s “The Demystification of Nick Zangwill’s ‘Myth of Religious Experience’” (2017), showing how author’s argument against the possibility of religious experience presented in “The Myth of Religious Experience” (2004) remains in tact.

Keywords: religious experience, God, religion, perception, infinity

I am grateful to Manuel Fasko¹ for giving me the opportunity to revisit the argument of my paper “The Myth of Religious Experience”.² I still endorse the conclusion and the shape of the arguments for it. One motivation I had for the conclusion is the worry that a person who believes in religious perceptual experience has an idolatrous conception of God, and the thought is that if we are going to have a conception of God it should not be an idolatrous one. A God we can perceive would be an overly corporeal God. My inclination is to think that *if* God exists He is incorporeal and unperceivable.

Looking back on the argument today, I want to pay respects to Descartes’ potter’s mark argument of his Third Meditation.³ I suspect my main argument is a version of Descartes’, although I was not conscious of that when I wrote the paper. Descartes thought that the notion of infinity cannot be acquired from perceptual experience. Yet we have such a notion. So God must have implanted it in our minds before birth, like a potter marking his pots with his name. Hence God exists. This is an interesting argument.

The epistemological problem with God is mathematical. The argument is that it is impossible for us to grasp a conception of infinity, in the sense of completed totality, on the basis of sense experience—the evidence our senses. This is because all perceptual experiences have finite content. Perceptual experiences of a thing, or of a fact, represents something non-infinite. (Can we perceptually represent the infinite divisibility of a line?) It seems that we can *conceive* of infinity but not *perceive* it. The question is how we can conceive it if we cannot perceive it. There must be some other way, some other source of the idea besides perceptual experience.

There are general epistemological problems with certain kinds of properties, infinitary properties, among others, which do not seem to be perceivable. There are similar difficulties with negative properties and general properties.⁴ The thought is that empiricism has difficulties with these properties and our grasp of them. Can we see Pierre’s absence from the café?

1 Fasko, “The Demystification of Nick Zangwill’s ‘Myth of Religious Experience’”.

2 Zangwill, “The Myth of Religious Experience”.

3 Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation 3.

4 See Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*.

*Corresponding author: Nick Zangwill, Hull University, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland;
E-mail: Nick.Zangwill@hull.ac.uk

The defining properties of God are His being all knowing, powerful and good. I am not in general descriptivist about the meaning of names, following instead the direct reference account of Saul Kripke⁵ and others. Nevertheless, about “God”, a descriptivist theory seems right: God is that which fills the God-role, of having these infinitary properties, or “omni” properties, as I sometimes call them. (That leaves it open the possibility that nothing may fill that role.)

My premise for the argument against religious perceptual experience is that the contents of perceptual experiences are never infinitary. I am not sure how to argue for that. That is a weak point in my argument. Similarly, I think that we never perceptually represent negative properties or modal properties of necessity or possibility. We could perhaps build an argument from the fact that perceptual ‘factive’ perception is a causal process in which causes and effects are finite. I leave such a further argument to one side here.

The argument concerning God’s omni properties was the most important part of my paper. I was disappointed that Fasko does not engage with it. These arguments apply to both a sixth sense view and the traditional five senses.

He pursues the more restricted and admittedly inconclusive argument from God’s spatiotemporal properties, or his lack of them.

In order to conduct this debate, we need to know what religious perceptual experience is, or rather what it would be. I propose that religious experience is:

1. An experience with theological propositional content—that is, where God is represented as a thing with the distinctive divine properties (all-knowing, -good and -powerful).
2. An experience that provides pro tanto reason to believe the content of the experience.

I am not sure why Fasko finds such an account “vague”.⁶ It certainly excludes perceiving miracles, which Fasko makes much of. Miracles seem to be a red herring in the debate. I am not objecting to the existence of miracles, only questioning whether they help make sense of religious experience. Suppose God causes the sea to part or someone to walk on water. We may see the miraculous event and infer a Godly cause, but not see that the event is God-sent. If we believe that the event is a miracle, it would be based on an inference, and not itself something represented in perceptual experience, any more than Pierre’s absence from a café may be represented in perceptual experience.

I do not presuppose that there are no miracles as Fasko says.⁷ Maybe there are some. But if they support belief in God, it is by inference to the best explanation. It is not an argument from religious perceptual experience.

Fasko is right that for me the central issue is whether we can perceive God as God.⁸ That means perceiving God as a thing having the three omni-properties. This is what I mean by “Theological content”.⁹ What else could it be?

That conception obviously does not include seeing beauty in a lover’s face or being moved by suffering.¹⁰ Such a conception of religious experience would be unhelpfully broad. The reason for restricting the notion of religious experience as I do is that only the narrower one could in itself provide pro tanto reason to believe in God.

It might be objected that I surely do not deny that perceptual experiences can be enriched by background beliefs. (Perhaps Fasko has something like this in mind.) We might see a piece of metal as a Roman coin or hear sounds as human speech. The background beliefs ‘cognitively penetrate’ the experience so that the experience itself takes on a new content. No doubt many people experience miracles in the sense that they perceive a physical event and their background theological beliefs cognitively penetrate their experiences of that physical event.

⁵ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

⁶ Fasko “The Demystification of Nick Zangwill’s ‘Myth of Religious Experience’”, 373.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

But, firstly, cognitive penetration does not help to show that there are perceptual experience that by themselves yield pro tanto justification for belief in God. For the epistemological support is flowing in the wrong direction. Secondly, there are limits to penetration. We might have modal background beliefs, but experience can never have the perceptual content that something is possible or necessary. Similarly, we might think that something is absent or think that all Fs are Gs, but we cannot have perceptual content of these things, even though we can infer them and think them. God's omni-properties are similar. Hence, we cannot perceptually represent God.

What of Fasko's 'Berkeleyan' idea? I am not sure I understand it. According to Fasko, George Berkeley posits intermediate objects of perception between us and the world, and we cannot perceptually represent distances.¹¹ But Fasko thinks that we can represent the causes of what we directly perceive.¹² He thinks that this helps to show that we can have mediated perception of God. But Berkeley's problem was how to get from immediate perceptual content to a richer conception of a mind-independent spatiotemporal world. He was after all an idealist in the face of that problem. The gap was intolerable. Similarly, I find intolerable the gap between finite and infinite content. Berkeley was right that his gap cannot be bridged by perceptual means. Similarly, the gap between finite and infinite cannot be bridged perceptually. That is why we cannot perceive God. If we know God, it is non-perceptually.

References

- Descartes, Rene. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, edited and translated from the original Latin and French by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. 2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. [Vol. II contains the *Meditations*.]
- Fasko, Manuel. "The Demystification of Nick Zangwill's 'Myth of Religious Experience'", *Open Theology* 3 (2017): 370–379.
- Kripke, Saul. *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Russell, Bertrand. *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*, London: Routledge, 1948.
- Zangwill, Nick. "The Myth of Religious Experience", *Religious Studies* 40 (2004): 1–22.

¹¹ Ibid., 377.

¹² Ibid., 378.