The Philosophy of Spirituality

Analytic, Continental and Multicultural Approaches to a New Field of Philosophy

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CHAPTER 3

Spiritual Experience and Imagination

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Many people claim to have undergone spiritual experiences, some of which are personally significant or involve radical characterological transformation. Much philosophical discussion on spiritual experiences has centered on the religious variety, and it is common in this literature to construe spiritual experiences along the lines of perception—often focusing on whether such experiences are veridical or confer justification on religious beliefs that arise from having these experiences. After presenting a variety of reports of spiritual experiences, I will present several problems with the typical perceptual approach to spiritual experience, especially since it fails to capture adequately a wide spectrum of spiritual experiences including those undergone by non-theistic or non-religious individuals. I then propose an account of spiritual experience in which the imagination plays a much more prominent role. To bolster the plausibility of this proposal, I spend a good deal of space discussing the nature of imagination and how it can be utilized to overcome several of the worries that beset the perceptual approach. The main advantage of this account is that it better captures the actual reports of spiritual experiences by both theists and non-theists, and hence the imaginative approach should be preferred over the perceptual approach. At the very least, I hope to have provided a case for why such an underexplored inquiry into the role of imagination in spiritual experiences demands more attention.

1 Reports of Spiritual Experiences

At the outset, I should explicitly admit that I will not attempt to define what is meant by "spiritual" (or its cognates) when discussing spiritual experiences. Neither necessary and sufficient conditions nor any substantive analysis for spirituality will be forthcoming in this chapter. Rather, I pay attention to experiences that individuals who undergo them regard or characterize as being spiritual in some sense or other, where such experiences involve transcending mundane experiences. As Cottingham nicely describes:

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> [Spiritual experiences] take us beyond the routine world of useful toil and pleasant recreation, important and valuable though those things are, towards a domain of value and meaning that is not obviously manifest in the material structures that compose our bodies and our environment, nor derived merely from our biologically inherited drives, but which seems to reflect something richer, deeper and more awe-inspiring.[1]

This characterization lends itself to some imprecision, but the subjectivity of spiritual experiences itself is imprecise. Hence any account of the nature of spiritual experiences will likely leave out some cases, and I do not pretend that the account that I propose will capture every report. But a satisfactory view should capture a good deal of the reports, especially those that appear to be paradigmatic instances of spiritual experiences.

Without offering a taxonomy of the kinds of spiritual experience, I will present different types of reports of experiences that are spiritual in some relevant sense. It should come as no surprise that religious individuals report having spiritual experiences, some of which can be described as having sensory content:

> In a vision I have seen what no man has seen before; I rejoice in exultation, and yet my heart trembles with fear. Have mercy upon me, Lord of Gods, refuge of the whole universe: show me again thine own human form. I yearn to see thee again with thy crown and scepter and circle. Show thyself to me in thine own four-armed form, thou of arms infinite, Infinite Form.[2]

Spiritual experiences have also been described as involving a sense of another's presence, even though such experiences may lack straightforward sensory content. For example, Simone Weil describes an experience during her suffering where she felt "a presence more personal, more certain, more real than that of any human being, though inaccessible to the senses and the imagination."[3] Teresa of Avila recounts a similar experience:

1 John Cottingham, "The Spiritual and the Sacred: Prospects for Convergence between Religious and Non-religious Outlooks," in *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*, ed. Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman (London: Routledge, forthcoming), 5 typescript.

2 *Bhagavagita* ch. 11, paragraph 43–46, quoted in Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 42.

3 By Simone Weil, quoted in C.S. Layman, *Letters to Doubting Thomas: A Case for the Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42.

> One day when I was at prayer… I saw Christ at my side – or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul (the imagination). He seemed quite close to me and I saw that it was He. As I thought, He was speaking to me. Being completely ignorant that such visions were possible, I was very much afraid at first, and could do nothing but weep, though as soon as He spoke His first word of assurance to me, I regained my usual calm, and became cheerful and free from fear. All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be at my side.[4]

Another subject reports the felt presence of God as having "neither form, color, odor, nor taste" and being "accompanied by no determinate localization," thereby concluding that "the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images … he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him."[5]

Putative contact with some transcendent reality can be described as being so intimate or unifying that the subject of the experience might describe herself as being identified with the object of the experience or that the subject loses her sense of self altogether:[6]

> Actually, we should not say, "He will see." What he sees … is not seen, not distinguished, not represented as a thing apart. The man who obtains the vision becomes, as it were, another being. He ceases to be himself, retains nothing of himself. Absorbed in the beyond he is one with it, like a center coincident with another center. While the centers coincide, they are one.[7]

4 By Teresa of Avila, quoted in William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 13.

5 Quoted in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), 67–68.

6 These extreme mystical experiences have been categorized by Pike as coming in three stages: quiet, full union, and rapture, in Nelson Pike, *Mystic Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). Another crucial distinction in the literature is between extrovertive and introvertive experiences, see W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: *Macmillan* Press, 1960), ch. 2. These distinctions, however, do not play a crucial role in this paper.

7 Plotinus *Enneads* 6.10, in C.D.C Reeve and Patrick lee Miller, *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2015), 501.

> The ego has disappeared. I have realized my identity with Brahman and so all my desires have melted away. I have arisen above my ignorance and my knowledge of this seeming universe.... My mind fell like a hailstone into the vast expanse of Brahman's ocean. Touching one drop of it, I melted away and became one with Brahman ... I see nothing, I hear nothing, I know nothing that is separate from me.[8]

However, not all spiritual experiences include the sense of another's presence. Some spiritual experiences involve the subject as having entered into an unfamiliar, out-of-the-ordinary state or as apparently acquiring certain supernatural qualities:

> With the knees high and head low, in deep meditation, [Mahavira] reached Nirvana, the complete and full, the unobstructed, unimpeded, infinite and supreme, best knowledge and intuition, called *Kevala* ... he was *Kevalin*, omniscient and comprehending all objects, he knew all conditions of the world, of gods, men, and demons; whence they come, where they go, whether they are born as men or animals, or *become* gods or hell-beings; their food, drinks, doings, desires, open and secret deeds, their conversation and gossip, and the thoughts of their minds; he saw and knew all conditions in the whole world of all living beings.[9]

Hence some experiences have sensory content and others lack them. Others are described as involving contact with an ineffable object of experience, though the subject may at times be able to recognize or identify the object of experience. And other experiences involve entering into a radically altered state, such as the loss of self or transcending ordinary abilities.

Although it is common to link spiritual experiences with a religious context, the two are not inextricably associated. Many non-theists and non-religious individuals testify to being spiritual or having spiritual experiences. Sam Harris, well-known as one of the major figures of the "new atheists," bemoans the atheistic or non-religious tendency to preclude spirituality, and he avers that "spiritual experiences often constitute the most important and transformative moments in a person's life."[10] Elsewhere, Harris claims:

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8 Swami Prabhavananda, trans., *Shankara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination* (New York: Mentor Books, 1970), 103–104.

9 *Jaina Sutras* I, 201, 202, quoted in Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 43.

10 Sam Harris, "The Problem with Atheism," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2007, https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/the-problem-with-atheism.

> [A] true spiritual practitioner is someone who has discovered that it is possible to be at ease in the world for no reason, if only for a few moments at a time.... Those who have never tasted such peace of mind might view these assertions as highly suspect. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a condition of selfless well-being is there to be glimpsed in each moment.[11]

And,

> I can say that the true goal of meditation is more profound than most realize – and it does, in fact, encompass many of the experiences that traditional mystics claim for themselves. It is quite possible to lose one's sense of being a separate self and to experience a kind of boundless, open awareness – to feel, in other words, at one with the cosmos.[12]

Some experiences may not be as dramatic as some of the other types mentioned earlier, and yet these experiences seem to be no less spiritual. Harris describes one such event:

> I was feeling boundless love for one of my best friends, and I suddenly realized that if a stranger had walked through the door at that moment, he or she would have been fully included in this love.... The interesting thing about this final shift in perspective was that it was not driven by any change in the way I felt.[13]

Spiritual experiences, even of the non-religious and non-theistic variety, may involve the sense of selfless well-being, unity with the cosmos, or a perspectival shift. Not only do non-theists and non-religious individuals undergo spiritual experiences, but many can even be regarded as spiritual experts, such as Zen Buddhists. One reason for ascribing the status of expert to these individuals may be because they have "lots of spiritual experience, especially advanced spiritual experiences, and lots of competent reflection of spiritual experience, usually via helping others develop their spiritual capacities."[14]

Even this small sample of reports exhibits how variegated spiritual experiences are claimed to be – anywhere from making contact with a numinous,

11 Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 17.

12 Sam Harris, *Waking Up*, 43.

13 Sam Harris, *Waking Up*, 4–5.

14 Bryan Frances, "Spirituality, Expertise, and Philosophers," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 1, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 62.

transcendent reality (whether personal or impersonal) to an extreme self-awareness accompanied by dispositional or characterological changes.

2 Spiritual Experience as Perceptual

Although spiritual experiences can be characterized non-cognitively (as perhaps feelings or emotions oriented), the standard characterization of these experiences has been to treat them as perceptual (or perceptual-like) such that one's account of perception can be used to model the nature of spiritual experiences. Why might one be inclined to do so? Perhaps it is because of the way in which these experiences are described. Isaiah saw angels, a Hindu had a vision, Plotinus sees that he is not distinct from what he is experiencing, and so forth. The language of spiritual experiences, then, often employs perceptual language. Even when many descriptions of spiritual experiences explicitly admit the lack of perception, such experiences are often understood in reference to perception – as being super-perceptual or sub-perceptual.[15]

Though the main reason for using perception as a model for spiritual experiences seems to be primarily because of the way in which perception confers epistemic justification to someone's belief on the basis of having that experience. For example, William Alston defends the claim that religious experiences, including mystical experiences, fit under a general account of perception.[16] Alston's primary reason for regarding perception as the proper analogue to spiritual experience is because of the claim that an object is being

15 For example, Gellman defines "mystical experience" (in a wide sense) as follows: x is a mystical experience $=_{df}$ x is a (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection (in Jerome Gellman, "Mysticism and Religious Experience," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138). And in his discussion of spirituality, Frances focuses the discussion to include the claim that "people are often divinely 'zapped' in some kind of quasi-perceptual way" (Frances, "Spirituality, Expertise, and Philosophers," 45).

16 William Alston, "Mysticism and Perceptual Awareness of God," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Mann (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 198–219. Mystical experiences are sometimes distinguished from mere spiritual experiences insofar as the former includes a unitive aspect, see Stephen Grimm, "The Logic of Mysticism," *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015): 131–145; and Gellman, "Mysticism and Religious Experience." However, Alston seems to treat the two alike such that mystical experiences need not be unitive.

presented to the subject in a perceptual experience.[17] Since perceptual experiences yield justified belief in the object experienced, so (religious) spiritual experiences also yield justified belief in the object(s) experienced. Since the computer screen is, in a sense, presented to me in my perceptual experience, then I am justified in believing that there is a computer screen in front of me. Similarly, as Simone Weil experienced "a presence more personal, more certain, more real than that of any human being,"[18] so she is justified in believing that there exists such a being that is the object of her experience.[19]

Now there are several problems with the perceptual approach to spiritual experiences. First, the perceptual approach strains to include those spiritual experiences that lack sensory content of any kind. Some of the reports nevertheless use perceptual language to describe what is occurring in the experience, but given the lack of sensory content, such descriptions fit better with our tendency to use perceptual metaphors, for example, seeing the solution to a math problem. Moreover, the perceptual approach is apt when there is an object of presentation (which is Alston's main reason for construing religious spiritual experiences as being akin to perception). But many spiritual experiences lack a sense of another or do not involve an object of experience. Many reports by non-theists or non-religious individuals, as we have seen, merely involve the sense of selfless well-being or unity with the cosmos. In some cases, nothing is being presented to the subject, and yet such experiences are clearly spiritual insofar as they "take us beyond the routine world" and move us into "something richer, deeper and more awe-inspiring."[20] The failure to adequately capture non-theistic and non-religious reports of spiritual experiences makes such an approach problematically incomplete.

Furthermore, imagine a case in which two individuals have the same perceptual experience and yet one of the two is undergoing a spiritual experience whereas the other is not. Such a scenario seems possible. If so, then the perceptual approach provides nothing that can distinguish between a spiritual

17 Alston does not intend for the notion of presentation to beg the question against those who regard such experiences as unveridical. For Alston, "perception" is used in a phenomenological way such that "perception" is not being employed as a success term (Alston, "Mysticism and Perceptual Awareness of God," 201).

18 See note 3.

19 Hence religious spiritual experiences are often used as a basis for an argument for theism, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) and Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). These arguments often focus on the perceptual nature of the experiences of God.

20 Cottingham, "The Spiritual and the Sacred," 5, typescript.

experience from a non-spiritual experience in this case. But if one experience is spiritual and the other is not, then something besides perception must be involved.

Additionally, the mere fact that an object is being presented to a subject should not make us regard spiritual experiences as perceptual. To explain why, consider the problem of perceptual presence.[21] When you face a basketball, you are only seeing a certain surface area; you are not seeing the back of it nor are you seeing its internal parts. But your experience is of the ball as a whole. So your perceptual experience involves more than what is being strictly perceived.[22] It is not obvious, then, that perception alone can account for the presence of an object (as a whole). So merely the fact that something (or someone) is being presented in a spiritual experience does not provide us with decisive reason for treating the experience perceptually.

One final problem for the perceptual approach can be raised when examining the debunking objection to the veridicality of (religious) spiritual experiences on the basis of religious diversity.[23] The common objection arises from the alleged incompatibility between the reports of spiritual experiences (for example, that ultimate reality is personal, or that it is impersonal). Another worry is due to diversity that seems to arise from cultural conditioning: some western theists experience angels, some Roman Catholics experience the virgin Mary, some Hindus experience Vishnu, and so forth. But the issue I want to raise is different since we can maintain that some of these spiritual experiences are veridical (or we can mitigate some of the worries by proposing a harmonization of putatively conflicting reports of certain experiences). Even if some are veridical, the perceptual approach fails to explain the remarkable coincidence that individuals of a certain religion often have spiritual experiences that include figures or symbols pertaining to that very religion. Indeed, not all of one's experiences correlate with one's own religion, as some reports of spiritual experiences have included aspects of another religion than one's own. But there is a noticeable correlation between experiences had by believers of a certain religion and experiences that involve imagery from that religion. On this basis, it is easy to see why debunkers would regard such experiences as

21 I borrow the basketball example from Amy Kind, "Imaginative Presence," in *Perceptual Presence*, ed. Fabian Dorsch, Fiona Macpherson, and Martine Nide-Rumelin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), 1, typescript.

22 In Alva Noe, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), Noe attempts to resolve the worry by his sensorimotor view of perception, thereby staying within the confines of perceptual processes.

23 For an example of this criticism, see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

delusory or hallucinatory. But even if the perceptual approach can maintain the veridicality of one's spiritual experiences, it goes no way in explaining the correlation. Given this and all of the other difficulties with the perceptual approach to spiritual experiences, it is time to reconsider and search for another framework in understanding the nature of spiritual experiences.

3 The Nature of Imagination

Rather than treating spiritual experiences as perceptual or perceptual-like, I propose that spiritual experiences be construed as involving the imagination. To be sure, I am not suggesting that spiritual experiences preclude perception (though some spiritual experiences may not involve perception at all), but I do suggest that what is missing in the perceptual approach can be supplied by noticing the larger role that imagination plays in such experiences. This shift will also require thinking of spiritual experiences as much more active for the subject than typically construed under the perceptual approach. But in order to make this case, we need an account of the nature of imagination.

Although there is no agreement over the correct analysis of imagination, Amy Kind suggests that an intuitive understanding of the imagination yields three characteristics.[24] The first feature is the directedness of imagination: in imagining something, one must direct her imagining at that very thing – and this is so even if the object does not exist. For example, when imagining Harry Potter acquiring his wand, I am directing my imagination at Harry Potter.[25] Secondly, imagination has a qualitative character; there is a "what it is like" to imagining. One may not be able to phenomenologically discern between two similar imaginings (for example, imagining a beech tree and imagining an elm tree), but the imagination nevertheless has a phenomenal aspect. Finally, imagination is a kind of activity – it involves the subject doing something. Regarding this third feature, Kind notes that the active nature of imagination does not entail that it be done intentionally. An example

24 Amy Kind, "Putting the Image Back in Imagination," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 (2001): 89–90. Although there is debate as to whether imagination requires mental imagery, I leave that issue aside – though I am inclined to think that imagery is not a necessary condition for imagination, see Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and that might help make sense of those reports of spiritual experiences that are non-sensory or lack any imagistic feature, such as the kind described by Teresa of Avila.

25 On the assumption that Harry Potter does not exist. Though some might suggest that he exists as an abstract, fictional object.

she offers is a case where someone views a graphic murder scene in a horror movie and then imagines that scene later. In some cases, the imagined scene can occur to an individual even when she doesn't want it to occur, and she might even have difficulty in preventing the image from popping back into her head (so to speak). Kind elaborates on this unintentional aspect of imagination as follows:

> [A]n imaginer can discover to her own surprise that she is imagining.... There are many instances where I might find to my surprise that I am humming a tune aloud, or tapping my foot. Both of these are clearly things that I *do*....Just as I might realize to my surprise that I am tapping my foot, I might realize to my surprise that I am once again imagining the gruesome murder from last night's horror movie.[26]

Although some acts of imagining are intentional, there are cases in which one may engage in unintentional imagining, yet imagination is nevertheless a cognitive activity even if undergone unintentionally. The spontaneity of the imagination or the lack of full control over the occurrence of the imagination does not make it a passive matter. Even if we are unable to prevent imaginings or to put a stop to them once they have started, "with effort, we can sometimes put an end to them."[27]

The phenomenological aspect of imagination makes imagination feel like perception from the inside, as it were, so much so that it may be difficult to distinguish between the two.[28] Consider, for example, the famous experiment conducted by C.W. Perky.[29] In the experiment, subjects were asked to stare at a particular section of a screen and to imagine a certain representation of an object, such as a banana or a certain patch of color, as being located in that particular region. During this time, a faint image of the object they were asked to imagine would be projected onto that section with increasing intensity. The surprising outcome was that many of the subjects did not realize that they were experiencing an actual image of the object; rather, they believed that what they experienced the entire time was due to their imagination (though allowing for variations of what they thought they were imagining). Although not everyone agrees on what this experiment actually shows, some have taken this "Perky effect" as revealing the phenomenological similarity between

26 Kind, "Putting the Image Back in Imagination," 91.

27 Kind, "Imaginative Presence," 14, typescript.

28 Kind, "Putting the Image Back in Imagination," 94.

29 C.W. Perky, "An Experimental Study of Imagination," *American Journal of Psychology* 21 (1910): 422–452.

imagination and perception.[30] But even if the phenomenal aspect of imagination does not distinguish it from perception, imagination can be distinguished from perception since the former has an active nature whereas the latter is passive.[31] Additionally, hallucinations along with perceptions can be regarded as being passive in nature, and hence imagination can be distinguished from hallucinatory experiences as well.[32]

4 Imagination and Spiritual Experience

With this characterization of imagination at hand, why bother with a larger explanatory role – or any explanatory role at all – for the imagination in spiritual experiences? Recall that for Alston, the association of spiritual experiences with perception arises because of the alleged presence of something or someone in the spiritual experience. Further recall the worry regarding the problem of presence such that perception does not by itself seem to provide us with an experience of an object, such as a ball, as a whole. But as mentioned earlier, the problem cannot be resolved by relying on resources involving only perception. According to Kind, this worry can be resolved by noting the role that imagination plays. What may not be perceptually present may instead be imaginatively present. Imagination fills the gaps in our perceptual experience so that the experience is of the object as a whole and not merely what is in the actual content of one's perception (which might include only limited surface features from a certain visual perspective). As Kind explains:

> Working in tandem with our perceptual capacities, our imaginative capacities contribute to our perceptual experience by making unseen features of objects seem present. As I'm looking at the Diet Coke can on my desk, it is via a conjunctive effort of vision and imagination that I have the perceptual sense of the can as a voluminous whole. The front side of the can is seen; the back side of the can is imagined.[33]

30 The phenomenological similarity between imagination and perception may also be another reason why some are inclined to treat spiritual experiences perceptually – they do not feel different. But given the differences between imagination and perception (more anon), I argue that the former should be included in one's account of spiritual experience.

31 Kind, "Putting the Image Back in Imagination," 91–92.

32 Kind, "Putting the Image Back in Imagination," 92.

33 Kind, "Imaginative Presence," 13, typescript.

Now consider two cases of spiritual experiences: first, an experience of an ineffable, transcendent deity; and second, one that involves perceiving the universe-as-a-whole. The objects of experience are not even capable of being perceptually present, and yet the reports suggest that there is an experience of the presence of these objects. Where perception fails, imaginative presence is able to make sense of how such objects can be present to the subject of experience by filling in the content of what is missing in ordinary perceptual experience. Regarding the first experience, the subject may be only perceptually aware of an effect of a divine being, yet the divine being is imaginatively present. And concerning the second, what is perceptually present may be some small portion of the world (e.g., the landscape in front of the subject), and yet the cosmos-as-a-whole may be imaginatively present to the subject.

Just as the Diet Coke can as a whole is made present via the interplay between perception and imagination, the object of a spiritual experience may be made present through perception and imagination working in tandem. So *pace* Alston, it would be too hasty to suppose that the presentation of an object gives us reason to construe spiritual experience as merely perceptual, since certain presentations require imagination – especially when there is nothing perceptually available.

One consequence of this view is the pervasiveness of the use of imagination; we imagine much more frequently than it might initially seem.[34] For almost every object we perceive is such that the whole is not perceptually present, and hence our experiences of whole objects are in virtue of our perceptual and imaginative faculties working in tandem. Some have suggested that spiritual experiences – including mystical experiences of a unitive nature – occur regularly, though at different degrees of vivacity and awareness. For example, Grimm argues that mystical experiences occur quite frequently, though at different grades and likely at fairly low grades for most individuals.[35] Grimm's proposal becomes much more plausible given the pervasiveness of imagination, especially when we take into account the different degrees of vivacity for imagination.

34 Imagination and perception also work in tandem when we "make-perceive." For more on this, see Robert Briscoe, "Mental Imagery and the Varieties of Amodal Perception," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 92 (2011): 153–173. For example, we make-perceive when we look at an object and then utilize that object in our imagination, for example, looking at a sofa in the store and (simultaneously) imagining how it would look in one's living room. For more on this example, see Bence Nanay, "Imagination and Perception," in *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Imagination*, ed. Amy Kind (Indianapolis: Routledge, 2016), 124–134.

35 Stephen Grimm, "The Logic of Mysticism," in *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 7 (2015): 131–145.

Unlike the perceptual approach, the imaginative approach is also able to distinguish spiritual experiences from non-spiritual experiences. As stated earlier, what makes an event a spiritual experience must be something over and above the sensory content given that two individuals can have the same perceptual experience yet differ with respect to its status as a spiritual experience. Something needs to be posited to distinguish the cases, and it cannot be something perceptual. The imaginative approach has a ready explanation: what more is being experienced in the spiritual experience arises from one's imagination. For example, suppose one is having a spiritual experience of a divine being while meditating in an open field as the sun is setting. The scenic view is (or at least can be) part of the experience, and hence there is a perceptual element. However, the divine being is imaginatively present (in the way that the back-side of a soda can is present to the person experiencing the can-as-a-whole). As we will see below, it may even be the case for religious individuals that a divine being utilizes a subject's imagination without perception in order to be experienced.[36]

Another theoretical advantage for the imaginative approach is that it is able to better capture non-theistic reports of spiritual experiences. Consider those reports of spiritual experiences that involve entering into an unfamiliar, out-of-the-ordinary state or apparently acquiring remarkable qualities. This can be explained by someone imagining herself as being in such a state or having such qualities (akin to what we do when we "make-perceive."[37]) The same goes for other reports of non-theistic spiritual experiences such as senses of selfless well-being, self-transcendence, unity with the cosmos, and so forth. Some of these experiences will involve quite a bit of imagination while others less so. But the imaginative approach does not preclude such experiences from counting as spiritual nor does it require regarding them as somehow inferior (phenomenologically, epistemically, and so on) to reports of religious spiritual experiences.

Recall that a serious worry for the perceptual approach was the lack of an explanation for the high rate of correlations between spiritual experiences that involve a religious figure or symbol and the subject of experience who is

36 I should note that the interplay between imagination and perception depends on the type of spiritual experience one is undergoing. In cases involving some sensory content, it seems that both perception and imagination are at work; however, it may be the case that in other spiritual experiences, only the imagination is at work (since what is being experienced cannot be perceived, for example, the cosmos as a whole or the divine essence).

37 For more on this, see Briscoe, "Mental Imagery."

an adherent of that religion – and this remains a worry even if one's experience is veridical. But this is no problem for the imaginative approach, for imagination can be triggered in such a way that the subject does not intend to imagine something in particular or even to continue to imagine it. It might be difficult for someone to disengage from a certain imagination, such as Kind's example of spontaneously imagining certain scenes from a horror film that was viewed earlier. But the content, vividness, and even feelings associated with the later imagining of the horrific scene can be explained by the source of that conceptual content from previous experiences (*viz*. the viewing of the film). Similarly, one's spiritual experience of the virgin Mary or of Vishnu can be explained by one's regular devotion or encounter (in religious study and practice) of such figures.

To be clear, this is not to rehash the debunking arguments that treat these spiritual experiences as delusory or unveridical. However, the inclusion of the role of imagination in spiritual experiences goes some way in explaining the high rate of correlations. And this does not render spiritual experiences as having a lower epistemic status.[38] Furthermore, given the deficiency in human cognition, an experience of a divine being may even require the imagination to play a significant role. Thomas Aquinas seems to claim something along these lines, suggesting that non-perceptual images are required to think about God let alone to have an experience of God.[39] Aquinas goes on to claim that "the intellect's natural light is strengthened by the infusion of gratuitous light; and sometimes also the images in the human imagination are divinely formed, so as to express divine things better than those do which we receive from sensible objects, as appears in prophetic visions."[40] According to Aquinas, God can produce additional conceptual content, such as "images in the human imagination," whereby a subject of experience can apprehend God. So the use of the imagination by itself does not make an experience unveridical, for a divine being can be apprehended or made present through the imagination.

38 Moreover, imagination can have epistemic significance, see Amy Kind, "Imagining Under Constraints," in *Knowledge Through Imagination*, ed. Amy Kind and Peter Kung (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 145–159. Kind's account permits the justification or rationality of certain beliefs that may arise from imaginative spiritual experiences. Hence those that maintain that (prima facie) justified beliefs can arise from spiritual experiences are not forced to adopt the perceptual approach.

39 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947), 1.12, a.11, ad.1. http://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/summa/FP/FP012.html#FPQ12A11THEP1

40 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.12, a13. http://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/summa/FP/FP012.html#FPQ12A13THEP1

This is, of course, not to say that all such experiences are in fact veridical; only that the incorporation of imagination as having a significant role in spiritual experiences is not incompatible with the veridicality of such experiences. So it is an advantage of the imaginative approach that it explains the widespread correlations between adherents of a certain religion and spiritual experiences that involve figures and symbols of that religion while also allowing that some of these experiences be veridical.[41]

Imagination also aids in explaining those experiences that involve either the loss of self or the identification with the object of experience, be it a divine figure such as Brahman or some mystical being such as the one encountered by Plotinus. Concerning the experiences of losing one's self, consider Bernard Williams's well-known puzzle of imagining that I am Napoleon. On the face of it, this appears quite simple for me to accomplish. But on deeper reflection, it becomes problematic. I cannot merely be imagining that I am in France wearing French military attire with my hand on my breast covered by the outer garment, for then I am not imagining being Napoleon but am imagining that I am dressed up as Napoleon, located in a place associated with him, posing in a posture that he is oft-depicted as holding, and so on. Or I might imagine Napoleon undergoing various events but from his visual perspective, but this again is not a case of imagining that I am Napoleon. The main problem is that given the necessity of identity, imagining that I am Napoleon seems impossible since I am not actually Napoleon and so there is no possible world in which I am Napoleon. Now Williams's resolution is to suggest that I can engage in the imagining in such a way that the self does not enter into the content of the imagination. As Williams states, "what I am doing, in fantasy, is something like playing the role of Napoleon."[42] So only Napoleon is involved in the content of the imagination, not one's self. Imagination, then, allows the self to be lost in the experience; and this might go some way in explaining why a spiritual experience may be so dramatic that reports of such experiences can

41 One potential worry are reports which disavow the use of the imagination, such as Teresa of Avila's claim that neither the "eye of body or soul (imagination)" was employed. However, her claim may be overstated—as 'imagination' in her sense might be understood as merely make-believe – whereas the suggestion here is that imagination can make objects present even if there is no perceptual construct or mental imagery (and this is especially so if imagination does not even require imagery, see Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe*).

42 Bernard Williams, "Imagination and the Self," in *Problems of the Self*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 44. For additional discussion of issues concerning the self in imagination, see Dilip Ninan, "Imagination and the Self," in *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Imagination*, ed. Amy Kind (Indianapolis: Routledge, 2016), 274–285.

only be described phenomenologically as the loss of one's self (i.e., where the self is absent from the content of the experience). Rather than regarding such spiritual experiences as incoherent or nonsensical, the imaginative approach can aid in explaining how the loss of self in those types of spiritual experiences does not render them absurd. This may also go some way in rendering intelligible a subject's identification with the object of her experience. If the self is absent in the content of the imagination, then it is less mysterious that the putative subject can be identified with the object of experience, such as a deity or a numinous other.[43] So having a substantive role for imagination to play in spiritual experiences aids in demystifying some of the paradoxical claims in spiritual experiences that involve reports of losing one's self or being identified with the object of one's experience.

5 Some Remaining Concerns

Now one may respond by claiming that some spiritual experiences are so vivid that the phenomenological impact is no less than what one undergoes in ordinary perception (such as my seeing the desk in front of me). The vividness of an experience is often used as evidence that a certain experience is veridical or accurate (for instance, Alexander Eban, the physician who claims to have gone to heaven and back, seems to think the vividness of his experience lends more support to the veridicality of his near-death experience). In response, there is a strong case that the vividness of an experience does not necessarily make an experience any more accurate.[44] As technology advances, it is not improbable to suppose that virtual reality (VR) machines will be able to simulate environments where the subject undergoes experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from reality – though such experiences would not be veridical.

43 Consider cases that report of dreams where an individual identifies with both the dreamer and the object of that experience simultaneously (e.g., imagining that *I was Brigitte Bardot and that I kissed me*), see G. Lakoff, "Linguistics and Natural Logic," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1972). If the self can drop out of the experiential content, then perhaps such cases are not incoherent or absurd, and the same may be said for spiritual experiences that involve the identification between the subject and the object of the experience. There are, of course, many more issues and worries concerning this topic. For more on this subject as it relates to imagination, see Ninan, "Imagination and the Self."

44 Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argue that experiential vividness does not entail accuracy or veridicality in John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, *Near-Death Experiences: Understanding Visions of the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 5.

Another worry has to do with the fact that spiritual experiences appear to just happen to us – as though we are being "zapped," as Bryan Frances put it. But imagination, construed as an activity, does not seem to accommodate this fact. In response to this worry, it should be noted that not all spiritual experiences just happen to us, for there are spiritual practices that can be deliberately pursued – such as yogic or meditative activities – to conjure a spiritual experience. Furthermore, imagination though active need not be intentional. We must remember Kind's claim made earlier that sometimes we imagine things unintentionally, such as a graphic scene from a horror movie, and sometimes we are unable to stop doing so, but such imaginings are nevertheless something that we do. Similarly, spiritual experiences might occur such that our imagination is employed (perhaps along with our perceptual faculty) even though it is not something we intended. So the "zappiness" of spiritual experiences does not rule out the role of the imagination.

One final problem for the imaginative approach that I will discuss is the difficulty in understanding how spiritual experiences can have transformative and life-altering effect of the kind that it seems to possess once we posit such a large role to the imagination—and this is true for spiritual experiences of both the religious and non-religious variety. There is often an assumption by some that transformative experiences require veridicality or accuracy, but that appears to be false.[45] For example, there is the story of Virginia Hamilton Adair (presented by Oliver Sacks), who underwent episodes of hallucinations and was even aware that these episodes were hallucinatory and hence unveridical.[46] She nevertheless found such experiences inspiring and transformative. Character-altering experiences, then, do not depend on one regarding one's experiences as perceptual or even as accurate. In a related context (concerning near-death experiences), Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin claim:

> [I]t is important to keep in mind that contact with the supernatural is not the only way in which these profound changes can come about. It is possible to come to a greater understanding of the universe and one's place in it through experiences understood in wholly physical terms. And it is certainly possible for this newfound understanding to transform one's moral character. The transformations we are talking about do not necessarily depend on the supernatural.[47]

45 Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, *Near-Death Experiences*, 107.
46 Oliver Sacks, *Hallucinations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 32–33.
47 Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, *Near-Death Experiences*, 111.

The drastic transformations can arise from out-of-the-ordinary experiences (such as spiritual experiences or near-death experiences) that give rise to awe and wonder – and this is so even if the experiences can be explained naturalistically.[48]

In support of the claim that imaginative experiences can be emotionally engaging and transformative whether veridical or not, we can consider what happens to individuals who use VR systems. Although the current technology of VR machines does not completely simulate what we experience in our actual perception – due to the lack of periphery, the slight temporal lag in responsiveness and effects, and so forth – nevertheless, subjects almost immediately buy-in to the program (for example, shifting bodies to dodge projectile objects, excitement when moving through virtual environments, and so on). As some researchers have noted, "You know that the events you see, hear and feel are not real events in the physical meaning of the word, yet you find yourself thinking, feeling and behaving as if the place were real, and as if the events were happening."[49] The ability to engage with unreal entities is possible because there is a sense in which such objects are present (one cannot walk through virtual buildings but will have to find an opening or walk around them – and one's mental and physical activities will respond accordingly). The presence of virtual objects (sometimes labelled "telepresence") has been discussed by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists as having an explanatory role in the subject's ability to engage in virtual reality. In order to have a sense of telepresence, the subject must be able to act and be responsive to the virtual environment, which requires a "sense of self-location and perceived possibilities to act."[50] Of course much more can be discussed about telepresence, including disagreement over whether the primary concept concerns location, action, or functionality.[51] But it would seem that presence, not veridicality, is what is required for genuine engagement. And imagination, as we have seen, can account for such presence.

The concept of telepresence might also explain our engagement in pretend behavior, where the source of the content of our experiences is not from an external VR machine but from our own cognitive system. What then of a naturalist who does not believe in a deity but is having a spiritual experience which

48 Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, *Near-Death Experiences*, ch. 13.

49 Maria V. Sanchez-Vivez and Mel Slater, "From Presence to Consciousness Through Virtual Reality," *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 6 (2005): 332.

50 James J. Cummings and Jeremy N. Bailenson, "How Immersive is Enough? A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Immersive Technology on User Presence," *Media Psychology* 19 (2016): 274.

51 Sanchez-Vivez and Slater, "From Presence to Consciousness," 333.

requires employing concepts that transcend her naturalistic framework in order to adequately describe what she is undergoing? Imagination can here be utilized. A naturalist might be able to understand the spiritual experience as imaginative and so not believe in the putative objects of experience, and yet she can immerse herself in the experience through pretend behavior, much as she would if she were interacting in a virtual environment. Moreover, characterological transformation or an altered outlook on life can even be the result of such experiences, much in the way that it can for those who undergo dramatic experiences in a virtual environment. Imagine a virtual environment in which one saw thousands of individuals lying before them and dying from malnutrition. The viewer comprehends that no one is dying, and yet if the program is vivid in such a way that someone is undergoing the telepresence of a massive number of deaths, it is easy to understand how such an individual might be transformed after that experience – perhaps by having the subsequent desire to donate much more to relief aid. Similarly, spiritual experiences, especially when vivid through an active imagination, can help the subject overcome a certain measure of banality and be stimulated into pursuing a more pro-active life aimed at the well-being of others and of larger communities. So the focus on the veridicality or the perceptual-nature of spiritual experiences, then, is unnecessary to account for the transformative aspect of such experiences.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that several worries that beset the perceptual approach to spiritual experiences can be avoided by providing a larger explanatory role for the imagination in such experiences. The inclusion of imagination in understanding spiritual experiences does make spiritual experiences fall under a kind of activity (since imagining is something that we do), yet the imaginative approach can maintain the transformative and meaningful aspect of spiritual experiences without having to focus on the veridicality or accuracy of such experiences. Indeed, much of what has been proposed in this chapter is merely a sketch, but I hope that this discussion of imagination in spiritual experiences has shown to be fruitful and worthy of further exploration.

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