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Between heaven and earth: sensory experience and the goods of the spiritual life

1. Introduction

There are of course many ways of conceiving of the goods of the spiritual life. In this paper, I am going to concentrate on one such conception, drawing on Thomas Aquinas's account of the infused moral virtues. Aquinas's discussion allows us to distinguish a kind of spiritual good that is concerned not simply with our relation to creatures, nor simply with our relation to the God, but with our relation to creatures so far as that relation is properly ordered to our relation to God. Such goods lie, as it were, between heaven and earth, and to mark this fact, I'll refer to them as hybrid goods. Thomas makes a helpful interlocutor for these purposes both because his work is authoritative for one central strand of Christian reflection, and also because, at least on these matters, it is representative of a much wider tendency of thought, which spans non-Christian as well as Christian traditions.

Having introduced Aquinas's category of infused moral virtue, and drawn out some of its implications for our understanding of the nature of spiritual goods, I'll then examine the claim that the senses can contribute to the realization of such goods. While the first part of the paper builds on themes from Aquinas, the second will use William James's influential discussion of conversion experience, to chart some of the ways in which a person's sensory experience may be more or less closely aligned with their theological context. It is of course a commonplace of accounts of the spiritual life that our thoughts and feelings, attitudes and behaviour are all important constituents of spiritual well-being. In this discussion, I aim to show how the goods of the spiritual life can be realized not only when our lives are properly ordered in these respects, but also in virtue of the quality of our experience of the everyday sensory world.

Following this general approach, let's begin by considering the relevance of Thomas Aquinas's category of infused moral virtue for our understanding of the nature of spiritual goods.

2. Aquinas on the goods of the spiritual life

Thomas Aquinas had, of course, inherited from Aristotle the idea that there are "acquired" moral virtues – that is, virtues that derive from some process of habituation, whereby the repeated performance of, for example, courageous acts leads to the formation in the person of the habit of acting courageously, so that thereafter they not only do the courageous thing but to do it as a person of courage.¹ He had also inherited from his theological forebears the idea that there are theological virtues – of faith, hope and charity – that are the product not

¹ Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nichomachean Ethics*, tr. J.A.K. Thomson, revised H. Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), Book II.

of any process of habituation but of divine activity or “infusion.”² It is against this conceptual background that Thomas develops his account of infused moral virtue.

The idea that there are such virtues is not original to Aquinas: his Dominican predecessor Peraldus seems to have been committed to much the same idea.³ But what is novel to Aquinas is the attempt to hold together an Aristotelian account of the “acquired” moral virtues, a traditional view of the theological virtues as infused, and the idea that there are infused moral virtues.⁴ We can see how Thomas understands the distinction between acquired and infused moral virtues by turning to his discussion of temperance, so far as it concerns the consumption of food in particular.

Acquired and infused temperance are both concerned with our relations to food (and with the regulation of other bodily appetites); so both are “moral,” rather than theological, virtues, in the sense that both are concerned, in the first instance, with the ordering of our habits of thought, desire and action in our relationship to created things – and to keep to this example, in our relationship to food in particular. But while acquired temperance is concerned simply with the person’s flourishing as a member of the kind *human being* (and independently, therefore, of any reference to their “supernatural” calling), infused temperance has as its ultimate end the person’s relationship to God. And for Aquinas, this difference in teleology makes for a difference in aetiology and in epistemology: acquired but not infused temperance can be produced by our own efforts, and the requirements of acquired but not those of infused temperance can be understood simply by the exercise of reason, and independently of “revelation.”

We can see Aquinas elaborating on this general picture in the following passage. Here, he distinguishes between the “rules” that are appropriate to the acquired and infused forms of temperance:

It is evident the measure of desires appointed by a rule of human reason is different from that appointed by a divine rule. For instance, in eating, the measure fixed by human reason is that food should not harm the health of the body, nor hinder the

² See *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae. 62.

³ For a helpful discussion of the relationship between Aquinas and Peraldus on this point, see John Inglis, “Aquinas’s Replication of the Acquired Moral Virtues,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 27 (1999), pp. 3-27.

⁴ Inglis notes that in his account of the moral virtues, Peraldus had allowed that human beings “can prepare for, but not cooperate in, the reception of moral virtue” (“Aquinas’s Replication,” p. 11). By admitting the acquired moral virtues, Aquinas gives a role to cooperation, and not only to preparation. Following Augustine, the bulk of the tradition had no place even for preparation.

use of reason; whereas [the] divine rule requires that a man should chastise his body and bring it into subjection [1 Cor 9:27], by abstinence in food, drink and the like.⁵

So we can judge the appropriateness of a given pattern of consuming and desiring food from two perspectives. First of all, we can adopt the vantage point of “reason.” Here, we are concerned with those habits of consumption that will, to put the point minimally, do no harm to the body. Such harm will ensue both when we consume too much and when we consume too little, and what counts as excess and deficiency here is, of course, relative to our human nature: the patterns of consumption that make for excess and deficiency will vary, depending on whether we have in view porpoises, or tortoises, or human beings.⁶ We can speak of a rule of “reason” in this context because harm-inducing patterns of consumption can be identified through the relevant empirical investigation, and without reference to scripture or “revelation.” So, in sum, there is a standard of right eating that is relative to human nature, accessible to reason, and that can be enacted simply by human effort, that is, via the inculcation of the right habits of thought, action and desire.

According to Thomas’s text, there is evidently a further perspective from which we can judge the appropriateness of a given pattern of consuming and desiring food. In this case, we are to appeal not to a reason-grounded, human-nature-relative understanding, but to what is revealed in the scriptures about the connection between various habits of consumption and our relation to God. When Aquinas talks here of “chastising the body,” rather than simply avoiding harm of the body, he is citing the following text from Paul’s first letter to the Christian community in Corinth:

1 Cor 9.25 Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27 but I discipline [chastise] my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.⁷

From this reference to an “imperishable wreath,” it is clear that Paul’s concern in this passage is with the person’s relationship to God in eternity; and when he imports this text into his discussion of infused temperance, Aquinas is indicating that he takes the goal of abstinence, and of “chastising the body,” to involve the person’s relationship to God not simply here and now, but in the afterlife. So the divine rule that is the measure of right consumption of food turns out to be grounded in a conception of the person’s future life with God.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, ed. T. Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-74), Vol. 23, 1a2ae. 63. 4.

⁶ There is also, of course, a person-relative measure of right consumption, as Aristotle observes with reference to Milo the wrestler (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II).

⁷ The translation is taken from the New International Version.

Generalising from this case, we can say that the infused moral virtues are like the theological virtues, and unlike the acquired moral virtues, in having as their goal relationship to God – but whereas the theological virtues aim directly at our well-being in relationship to God, the infused moral virtues aim at that well-being only indirectly, that is, via our relation to created things. As Aquinas puts the point:

The theological virtues are enough to shape us to our supernatural end as a start, that is, to God himself immediately and to none other. Yet the soul needs also to be equipped by infused virtues in regard to created things, though as subordinate to God.⁸

So the role of infused moral virtues is, in brief, to draw our relationship to “created things” into our relationship to God. We could see the infused moral virtues as, therefore, a kind of hinge: they bring together the “acquired” moral virtues and the theological virtues, since they share their subject matter with the acquired moral virtues, and their teleology with the theological virtues. In this way, the infused moral virtues are directed at a good that lies between heaven and earth, namely, a good that is realised in so far as our relations to creatures are properly ordered by reference to our relationship to God. And knowing the nature of these hybrid goods, and what it takes to attain them, depends on familiarity with the relevant divine rule, which in turn requires acquaintance with revelation.

We can clarify the nature of these hybrid goods by thinking a little more closely about the respective “rules” that serve as the measure for the acquired and infused moral virtues. The divine rule that provides the standard for a given infused moral virtue does not cancel the rule that is the measure of the acquired counterpart of that virtue. Hence, to return to the case of acquired and infused temperance, abstinence involves “chastising of the body” but not harm of the body. (It is for this reason, of course, that in Christian tradition, the young and infirm are standardly exempt from the full rigour of penitential fasting.)⁹ So the rule

⁸ *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae. 63. 3. ad. 2.

⁹ Aquinas himself notes this exemption with approval: “In children there is a most evident reason for not fasting, both on account of their natural weakness, owing to which they need to take food frequently, and not much at a time, and because they need much nourishment owing to the demands of growth, which results from the residuum of nourishment. Wherefore as long as the stage of growth lasts, which as a rule lasts until they have completed the third period of seven years, they are not bound to keep the Church feasts: and yet it is fitting that even during that time they should exercise themselves in fasting, more or less, in accordance with their age.” Aquinas adds that under special circumstances, even children are required to fast: “Nevertheless when some great calamity threatens, even children are commanded to fast, in sign of more severe penance, according to Jonas 3:7, ‘Let neither men nor beasts ... taste anything ... nor drink water.’” (*Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae. 147. 4: Reply to Objection 2, tr. Fathers of the Dominican Province, Benziger Brothers edition, 1947, available here:

<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/SS/SS025.html#SSQ25OUTP1>) So the prospect of a

that is appropriate to infused temperance does not involve any breach in the corresponding rule of reason. And that is because the first rule is relatively demanding: in eating in accordance with the divine rule, I do not harm the body, but at the same time, I restrict my consumption further than would be required simply for the sake of preserving bodily health. To put the point in general terms, in adhering to the relevant divine rule, I thereby adhere to the corresponding rule of reason, so that my conduct is fitting both relative to my human nature, and relative to a further, God-directed teleology. So the infused moral virtues orient us to the created order and at the same time to God, and in so doing, they realize not only spiritual goods but also the goods that are the object of the acquired moral virtues, whose measure is not a divine rule but a rule of reason.

We have been thinking about the nature of the goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues, noting their hybrid character, and their relationship to the goods that are the object of the acquired moral virtues. And we have seen that these goods arise in so far as a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviour are properly aligned with some theological truth, such as a truth concerning our future life with God. In concluding this discussion of infused moral virtue, I want to think a little further about what it is for our thoughts and behaviour to be properly aligned in this sense.

For this purpose, let's shift our attention from Aquinas's discussion of infused temperance and turn to his treatment of the cardinal Christian virtue of neighbour love. Although Thomas does not put the point in these terms, we can think of charity, or *caritas*, so far as it is directed to human beings, as a further example of an infused moral virtue. Like infused temperance, charity so understood concerns our relations to the created order (here the virtue's focus is of course our fellow human beings rather than food) and folds those relations into our relationship to God. And as with infused temperance, so here, Aquinas grounds the appropriateness of neighbour love in an appeal to our future life with God.

Of course, charity is the object of a dominical command, and for Christians, that is sufficient to establish its obligatoriness.¹⁰ But for Aquinas, there is another, more theoretical rationale for Christian charity, which is evident in the following passage, where he is considering whether the angels are properly the objects of neighbour love. To a modern readership, this might seem a rather arcane concern, but in structural terms, what Aquinas says here is no different from what he says when discussing the scope of neighbour love in other respects, as when he considers whether it properly extends to one's enemies, or one's body, or to non-rational creatures. So what he says in this passage is representative of this larger case, and worth heeding, therefore, even if we are not much exercised by the question of how we ought to relate to the angels. Thomas writes:

great calamity establishes that it is not just "fitting" for children to fast, but required, but this is still not to say that under these conditions their fasting may involve harm of the body.

¹⁰ For the command to love one's neighbour, see Mark 12:31 and parallels.

As stated above (Q 23, Art. 1), the friendship of charity is founded upon the fellowship of everlasting happiness, in which men share in common with the angels. For it is written (Mt. 22:30) that “in the resurrection . . . men shall be as the angels of God in heaven.” It is therefore evident that the friendship of charity extends also to the angels.¹¹

Here, Aquinas grounds the appropriateness of love of the angels in the thought that we will one day share with them in “the fellowship of everlasting happiness.” And as I have noted, he appeals to the same kind of consideration when asking whether, for example, sinners and non-rational creatures are to be loved.¹² From his remarks here, it seems clear that Aquinas is not proposing that I am required to love others (whether the angels or other human beings) as a condition of attaining the beatific vision myself, or as a condition of enabling others to attain that state. Instead, the thought seems to be that the already established truth that we will one day share with them in the beatific vision sets certain constraints on how we are to relate to other human beings here and now, in the present.

On this reading of Aquinas, what makes a particular pattern of life fitting relative to our theological context is not that it helps to bring about, say, our participation in the beatific vision, but the fact that it constitutes an appropriate acknowledgement of an already established theological context, such as the context provided by the fact that we will one day share with other human beings, and with the angels, in the vision of God. For present purposes, I am not going to defend or further examine Aquinas’s view, but it is perhaps worth noting the parallel between his position and one very familiar form of moral reasoning. As we all know, the history of our relations to another person can set moral constraints on how we are to relate to the person in the present. And if we follow Aquinas here, then we should say that it is not only the history of our relations to others that can play this role, but also the future (the eschatological future) of those relations. This parallel is enough, I think, to allow us to make some initial sense of Aquinas’s proposal.

In sum, we have seen that the spiritual goods that are the object of the infused moral virtues are realized in so far as a person’s relationship to created things is properly aligned with their theological context. And we have now considered a little more fully what this relationship of “proper alignment” amounts to. In brief, in at least some central cases, proper alignment is to be understood in terms of what we might call existential fittingness, rather than causal efficacy.

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae. 25. 10, ellipsis in the original, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

¹² These matters are treated in Articles 6 and 3 respectively. Aquinas is not a universalist about salvation, so there is a question about how to reconcile his soteriology with his ethics, given that he regards all human beings as properly the objects of neighbour love. But that is not our concern here.

Although we have been concerned here with just one kind of spiritual good, as understood within one spiritual tradition, it is not too difficult, I think, to find parallels between this general approach and the perspective of a range of other spiritual and religious traditions, including non-Christian traditions.¹³ Indeed, I think it reasonable to say, although I cannot argue for the claim here, that spiritual and religious traditions typically provide their adherents with a picture of our metaphysical context, of the kind that will ground a more-than-natural measure of the adequacy of our world-directed thoughts and actions.

We can say of such traditions, as we can say of the spiritual life as Aquinas understands it, that they are directed not simply at other-worldly goods (such as the good of the beatific vision), nor simply at this-worldly goods (such as the good of a diet that is conducive to bodily health), but at hybrid goods, that is, goods that concern our practical and intellectual relationship to the material world, where that relationship is deemed to be good because of its congruence with the beatific vision or some other truth concerning our religious context. So we can say of such traditions, as Aquinas says of infused moral virtue, that they are concerned with our relationship to “created things, as subordinate to God.”

Having examined one account of the nature of spiritual goods, I want to move now to our second major theme, by considering the significance of sensory experience for the spiritual life. I shall start by thinking about conversion experience, as it is represented in the work of William James.

3. Sensory experience and the spiritual life

William James notes that religious converts commonly take themselves to enjoy not only a new relationship to God, but also a newly enlivened appreciation of the everyday sensory world. As he notes in his discussion of conversion experience in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

When we come to study the phenomenon of conversion or religious regeneration, we ... see that a not infrequent consequence of the change operated in the subject is a transfiguration of the face of nature in his eyes. A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth.¹⁴

As James indicates here, a striking feature of conversion reports is that it is not simply the appearance of certain items, or of a localized region, that changes following conversion, but

¹³ For present purposes, I am assuming that religious traditions typically have a ‘spiritual’, and not only, say, an abstractly creedal, dimension, and that there can be secular as well as religious spiritual traditions. Any of a variety of ways of understanding the relationship between spiritual and religious commitment will be compatible with the drift of my case here. For further discussion, see David McPherson, “Homo Religiosus: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics?”, *Religious Studies*, 51 (2015), pp. 335-346.

¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), p. 151.

the appearance of the sensory world in general. To put the point in his terms, it is “the face of nature” that changes, so that there is now a “new earth.” James cites various examples of this transformation in the quality of the appearances. Here I’ll note just two of these cases. Jonathan Edwards, the American divine, describes his conversion experience in these terms:

The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind.¹⁵

Edwards is a careful, analytically precise writer, and when he speaks so insistently of the character of the world’s “appearance” following his conversion, there is good reason to take his remarks at face value, as a sober description of the phenomena, however hard it may be to make sense of the idea of God’s “excellency” “appearing” in the grass, and flowers and trees. In a similar vein, another of James’s sources remarks that:

Natural objects were glorified, my spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe...¹⁶

Here again, the convert reports a generalized transformation in the appearance of the sensory world, so that it is now, somehow, transparent to the divine glory.

John of the Cross’s description of the “joy” of the “awakened” person, that is, the person who has reached a condition of spiritual maturity, suggests a similar kind of experiential state. John writes:

Though it is true that the soul here sees that all these things are distinct from God, in that they have a created existence... it knows also that God in His own essence is, in an infinitely preeminent way, all these things, so that it understands them better in Him, their first cause, than in themselves. This is the great joy of this awakening, namely to know creatures in God, and not God in His creatures: this is to know effects in their cause, and not the cause by its effects.¹⁷

This passage is, I take it, a kind of play on Aquinas’s comments in the preamble to the Five Ways, when he remarks that a demonstration can move either from knowledge of a cause to a knowledge of its effects, or vice versa, and that proving the existence of God requires a demonstration of the second kind, so that, to put the point in John’s terms, we know “the cause by its effects.”¹⁸ In this passage, John in effect distinguishes the vantage point that is

¹⁵ *Varieties*, pp. 248-9.

¹⁶ *Varieties*, p. 250.

¹⁷ *The Living Flame of Love by Saint John of the Cross with his Letters, Poems, and Minor Writings*, tr. D. Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1919), Commentary on Stanza IV, p. 121.

¹⁸ See *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 2. 2.

appropriate for the project of proving the existence of God from the vantage point of the person of spiritual maturity. This person, he is proposing, knows “creatures in God,” or “effects in their cause,” rather than vice versa.¹⁹

Since he refers here simply to a knowledge of “creatures” without further specification, we have some reason to suppose that John takes this distinctive knowledge of the person of spiritual maturity to extend to the created order as a whole.²⁰ If that is right, then in this respect this person is like the converts whom James describes: in each case, the person has acquired a new appreciation of the sensory world in general. And while John does not explicitly connect this new knowledge to the quality of the person’s experience of the world, in the light of James’s discussion, we have some reason to suppose that such knowledge finds expression in, or perhaps in some measure it takes the form of, a transformation in the appearance of everyday things. If we can read his text in these terms, then we should think of the “joy” to which John refers not as simply a state of bodily feeling, but as extending into the world, so that sensory objects are differently experienced.

So taking into account James’s examples, and John of the Cross’s understanding of spiritual regeneration, we have good reason to suppose that, at least in some central cases, religious renewal goes along with – and perhaps in part it consists in – a changed perceptual relationship to the everyday world, so that the sensory world in general appears enlivened or inscribed with a new significance. Granted this much, it is natural to ask how we are to understand this shift in the appearances. How could one and the same sensory scene be differently presented to a person at different times, before and after spiritual renewal? Two phenomenological categories will be helpful in giving us at least an initial appreciation of what is involved in this sort of transformation.

Suppose I see a large, fast-approaching and unfamiliar dog and that I am, reasonably enough, afraid of the dog. In these circumstances, I will be focally aware of the dog, while various other features of my environment, such as the color of the linoleum floor on which I am standing, are consigned to the periphery of my awareness. Here, the salience of the object in my perceptual field tracks my affectively toned judgement concerning its significance for me; or we could say that the dog’s salience relative to other objects of itself involves a judgement about the worthiness of attention of this particular object, relative to

¹⁹ In this respect, the “awakened” person’s knowledge resembles angelic “morning knowledge.” See Aquinas’s comment on the varieties of angelic knowledge: “Knowledge of the Creator through creatures, therefore, is evening knowledge, just as, conversely, knowledge of creatures through the Creator is morning knowledge”: *De Veritate* 8. 16 ad 9, tr. R. W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), available here: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/QDdeVer.htm>. My thanks to Nathan Lyons for this reference.

²⁰ This reading is confirmed by the preceding paragraph where John writes of how “the soul sees how all creatures, higher and lower, live, continue, and energise in Him” (p. 121). The phrase “all these things” in our text is a reference back to “all creatures.”

other objects, where the appropriateness of that judgement can be assessed according to the strength of my reasons for thinking the dog a danger.

Let's take a second example. Suppose I discover that the meat that I am chewing derives from Shuttlecock, the pet rabbit. In that case, I am likely to become focally aware of the meat. Here again, my developing sense of the significance of an object can be registered in its newly prominent place in the perceptual field. But, of course, in this case, it's not just that the meat will now be newly salient relative to other objects. Its intrinsic phenomenal feel will also have changed: the meat will now be experienced as revolting or disgusting. Let's call this aspect of the appearance of a thing its "hue." So, in this instance, the changed significance of the object for me is recorded both in its heightened salience in the perceptual field and in its changed hue. These developments are, of course, standardly connected: notably, a change in an object's hue is likely to make for a change in its salience relative to other objects.

Following this example, we can understand the relationship between a change in the significance of an object (here, a change in the significance that the meat has for me), a change in the appearance of the object (here, the change in the meat's salience and hue), and a change in the quality of one's emotional engagement with the world (here, the shift to a feeling of disgust). This example invites the thought that it is the change in my judgement about the significance of a thing that gives rise to a change in the way that it appears to me, and at the same time to a change in its emotional import for me. But these developments might be differently ordered: for example, it may be a change in the appearance of a thing that alerts me to the new significance that it has for me, so that the changed appearance elicits a change in my reflective judgement of the thing's significance, rather than following on from a change in reflective judgement.

Returning to the main thread of our discussion, we can use these categories of hue and salience to understand James's reports of conversion experience. Those reports speak of a generalized shift in the appearance of sensory things, and they represent that change as a matter of objects being newly "glorified," so that their appearance is now somehow brighter or more vivid. As James puts the point, "a new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth." The obverse of this case is evident in James's discussion of depression, where the world appears to the person as grey or colorless, and devoid of life. As he says, in such cases: "The world now looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its color is gone, its breath is cold, there is no speculation in the eyes it glares with."²¹ If we focus on this strand of the experience of religious renewal, whereby everyday objects appear brighter or more vivid, then it is natural to say that it is the color or "hue" of the perceptual field that has changed.

James also notes that to the depressed person, the world can appear "flat." For instance, speaking of Tolstoy's experience of a period of existential crisis, he remarks: "Life had been

²¹ *Varieties*, p. 151.

enchancing, it was now flat sober, more than sober, dead.”²² And writing of another such case, he says:

The old man, sick with an insidious internal disease, may laugh and quaff his wine at first as well as ever, but he knows his fate now, for the doctors have revealed it; and the knowledge knocks the satisfaction out of all these functions. They are partners of death and the worm is their brother, and they turn to a mere flatness. The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with.²³

James associates such experiences of “flatness” with a loss of emotional interest in the world. And in the following passage, he invites his reader to apprehend that connection by imagining what it would be like to experience the world independently of any emotional engagement:

Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it *as it exists*, purely by itself, without your favourable or unfavourable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective.²⁴

Here, James associates a loss of emotional engagement with the world with the loss of any sense of the differentiated significance of things. And this flattening out of the distinctions between objects suggests, in turn, an absence of salience in the perceptual field. So when James’s converts speak of the world in general as being invested with a new significance, or as newly glorified, they may be referring not only to a change in the color or hue of the perceptual field, but also to a change in salience, so that the world no longer appears relatively flat, but as structured according to a clearly defined sense of the relative importance of things. We could distinguish, then, between these two kinds of change: a deepened sense of the significance of the sensory order considered as a whole, which we could take to be recorded in a generalized shift in color or hue; and a deepened sense of the differentiated significance of objects, which we could take to be registered in a sharpening of the patterns of salience that inform the perceptual field.

4. The contribution of perception to the goods of the spiritual life

We have been developing an account of the goods of the spiritual life, here drawing on Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of infused moral virtue, and an account of the role of the

²² *Varieties*, p. 152.

²³ *Varieties*, p. 141.

²⁴ *Varieties*, p. 150, James’s emphasis.

senses in spiritual change, here following William James. In concluding, I want to bring together these two accounts, to address our initial question: how may the senses contribute to the realization of spiritual goods?

Aquinas's discussion of infused moral virtue suggests a way of representing progress in the spiritual life. Suppose we think of the spiritually mature person as one who understands the significance of material objects according to the relevant divine rule, and of the relatively immature person as one who relates to creatures simply on the basis of a rule of reason, or who has not yet fully assimilated the perspective of the relevant divine rule. As we have seen, so understood, the spiritually mature person does not deny the significance that attaches to things in so far as we relate to them simply on the basis of a rule of reason. For instance, for the spiritually mature person, food retains its significance as a source of bodily nourishment, to be consumed in the measure that is required for the health of the body. But for this person, food has an additional significance, since it now serves the further goal of relationship to God, or the goal of living congruently with truths about God's nature or activity. Similarly, for the person who practices neighbour love, other human beings will have the significance they would anyway have had when considered from the vantage point of the relevant rule of reason, but they will now have, in addition, a further dimension of significance, one that is relative to the truth that we will one day share with them in the fundamental good of the beatific vision.

Granted this conception of the spiritual life, we can see how spiritual progress involves not simply a new found proximity to God, of the kind that might be realized in a person's prayer life, for example, but also a new sense of the significance of other people, and of everyday objects such as food, once they come to be seen from the perspective of the relevant divine rule. Moreover, it seems to be a consequence of this view that as a person matures in spiritual terms, their assessment of the significance of the sensory world will change not just locally, but pervasively: once I recognize the relevant divine rule, it is not just this food before me now that will acquire new significance, but food in general; and indeed, it is not just food in general that will acquire new significance, but sensory things in general, once I see how those things can now be folded into my relationship to God, by reference to the appropriate divine rule. And this new perspective will involve not just a new sense of the significance of things, but a deepened sense of their significance. Why? Because, once again, when viewed from the vantage point of the relevant divine rule, ordinary objects, such as food, will retain all the significance they have relative to the corresponding rule of reason, while bearing, in addition, a further dimension of significance.

So here is one story of the nature of progress in the spiritual life. According to this story, spiritual development requires a deepening appreciation of the significance of the sensory world considered as a whole, and perhaps a deepening appreciation of the significance of objects relative to one another, once they are seen from the vantage point of a divine rule. But as we have seen, a deepening sense of the significance of the world in these respects

can also be registered in perceptual experience, as the world comes to seem “brighter” and structured by more clearly defined patterns of salience. And if that is so, then the Thomistic story of spiritual development that we have been rehearsing could also be told in an experiential idiom, as a story of the changing appearance of the everyday world. And when told in that idiom, the story will sound, I take it, very like William James’s account of conversion, since James’s sources also talk of how the world as a whole appears different following conversion, so that sensory things now seem brighter, more sharply in focus, and newly “glorified.”

So drawing on these phenomenological categories of hue and salience, there is some reason to think that Aquinas and James have given us two vantage points on one and the same process of spiritual regeneration. Here as elsewhere, Thomas’s vantage point is, broadly speaking, metaphysical. On this perspective, we can represent spiritual development in terms of the person’s receipt of the “infused” virtues, and their capacity to set their choices within the relevant theological and metaphysical context. By contrast, James understands spiritual development in terms of a change in the phenomenology of the person’s experience of the everyday world. Alongside this difference of vantage point, there is also potentially a difference of chronology: James’s converts typically report a relatively sudden transformation in their experience of the world. By contrast, Thomas’s account is at least compatible with a much slower process, as the infused moral virtues gradually extend the acquired. But allowing for this difference, each story can be read as an exploration of the relationship between spiritual growth and a deepening appreciation of the significance of the everyday sensory world.

We can use this same Thomistic and Jamesian framework to understand John of the Cross’s remarks on the “joy” of the person who comes to know creatures “in God.” The person of infused moral virtue understands creatures in the light of a divine rule, that is, in terms of their significance for relationship to God. And we could read John’s talk of “knowing creatures in God” as a compressed allusion to this same condition. And following our discussion of James, we can think of the understanding of the person of infused moral virtue as having a perceptual dimension. So when John speaks of the “joy” of the “awakened person,” we may think of this joy not just as a matter of bodily feeling, but as radiating out into the world, so that the perceptual field is newly colored and newly ordered.²⁵

If all of this is so, then we can speak of a kind of religious experience which is not directly of God, but which is instead materially mediated, and which is, more exactly, an experience

²⁵ The language of ‘coloring’ may seem to imply that the person is simply projecting their feelings on to the material world. But as in our earlier discussion of ‘hue’, the thought is that a certain coloring can be appropriate to, and properly responsive to, the real significance of things. (Compare the discussion of Shuttlecock the rabbit.) Here, that significance concerns, of course, the relationship of the material order to our theological context, as I note in the next paragraph.

that registers the import of the everyday world for our relationship to God. On this account, religious understanding is not to be conceived as simply intellectual, or as affectively toned in ways that concern simply the inward state of the person, but also as perceptual: in our experience of the world, so far as that experience is properly ordered and colored, we can register directly, in perceptual terms, the God-directed significance of things. So this is an experience that is not simply of God, nor simply of the world, but of the world and God in combination. In the terms used by Aquinas's translator, we could say that it is an experience of sensory objects as "subordinate to God."

We are now in a position to return to the question with which we began. Following Aquinas's treatment of infused moral virtue, we have noted how our intellectual, affective and practical relations to everyday objects can be deemed good in so far as those relations are congruent with truths concerning God's nature or activity. And combining Aquinas's discussion of infused moral virtue and William James's account of conversion, we have noted how we can say the same of our experience of the everyday sensory world: depending on its structure and hue, this experience can also be assessed as more or less adequate relative to our ultimate, divine context. And to the extent that our sensory experience does prove congruent with our ultimate context, then our lives as perceivers – and not only as cognizers or doers – will participate in a God-directed significance. On this view, we should suppose that the life of the senses and the life of the spirit are mutually involving, because our senses are capable of realizing hybrid goods, which are neither simply this-worldly, nor simply other-worldly, but which lie, we could say, between heaven and earth.²⁶

²⁶ I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to present versions of this paper at Heythrop College, London, the University of Exeter, and the 2015 Logos conference on religious experience, held at Notre Dame, and I am grateful for the very helpful comments I received on those occasions. I would also to thank David McPherson for his insightful remarks on a draft of the paper.