



## The Phenomenology and Metaphysics of Spiritual Perception: A Thomistic Framework

Mark K. Spencer

---

There has recently been a surge of interest in spiritual perception (SP),<sup>1</sup> that is, in experiences in which God or phenomena related to God are experienced directly, perceptually, and non-inferentially, similar to the experience of the bodily senses. But such purported experiences can seem foreign to our everyday lives. The claim that there are such experiences is made more plausible by seeing that there are other, everyday experiences that are similar to SP, so that SP can be seen to be a version of a broader phenomenon in human experience. Seeing this requires a phenomenology (an account of the place of SP and SP-like experiences in the structure of human experience) and a metaphysics (an account the way in which SP and SP-like experiences relate to and are explained by human nature and powers).

In this paper, I outline such a phenomenology and metaphysics. I focus on *Thomistic* metaphysics, for three reasons. First, a significant strand of the Thomistic tradition has, wrongly, rejected the notion of SP, and I wish to correct that tendency. Second, Thomistic metaphysics is experientially motivated: Aquinas arrives at his metaphysics by starting with descriptions of human acts and their objects, and then reasoning in an effect-to-cause manner to the underlying powers and nature. Although some phenomenologists reject the possibility of metaphysics, there is a growing movement that sees phenomenological accounts of experience as providing evidence for or parallels to accounts of the human person and human acts in Thomism. This paper builds on that tradition. I locate SP in the context of phenomenological accounts of human experience, and then show how both SP and that broader phenomenology are explained by Thomistic metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Third, Thomistic metaphysics is one of the

<sup>1</sup> Examples of recent literature on SP include: William Alston, *Perceiving God*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); John Greco, "Perception as Interpretation", *ACPA Proceedings* 72 (1999): 229-37; the many fine essays in Paul Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2012); Mark McInroy, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses*, (Oxford: OUP, 2014); Sameer Yadav, *The Problem of Perception and the Experience of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015.)

<sup>2</sup> See e.g.: David Braine, *The Human Person. Animal and Spirit*, (Notre Dame: UND Press, 1992), 70-73, 283-286, 309; John Haldane, "The Breakdown of Contemporary

most significant intellectual schools in the Christian tradition. If SP can fit plausibly into this metaphysics, then that will help motivate the plausibility and intelligibility of claims that there is SP. I first describe the basic kinds of SP, and then some phenomenological accounts that provide everyday analogues for SP. After that, I show how these experiences fit into the Thomistic metaphysics of the human person.

### Taxonomy of Spiritual Perception

SP experiences come in two basic kinds.<sup>3</sup> First, there are what might be called “sacramental” perceptions, in which God is perceived in or with some creaturely object. In one instance of this kind, one perceives God through some corporeal reality that is perceived by the bodily senses. One does not reason from a sensory presentation to God’s presence, but rather the latter are presented to one through the mediation of the former.<sup>4</sup> In another instance, one perceives, in a manner both corporeal and spiritual, a *Gestalt* that includes both God and creatures, where the latter discloses the former.<sup>5</sup>

Second, there are what might be called “intuitive” perceptions, in which God is perceived without any creaturely object. In one instance, one directly perceives the presence or attributes of God in an entirely interior manner, apart from any experience of the corporeal senses but such that the experience is like that of one or more of the corporeal senses. For example, one might experience God as illumining one’s mind, as entering into one in a tactile manner, or as having in His presence a sweet odor.<sup>6</sup> In another instance, God is experienced by one’s corporeal senses, but in a way that transcends the normal activity of those senses, such that the presentation is not mediated by any creature.<sup>7</sup> Each of the two kinds of SP are

Philosophy of Mind”, in Haldane, ed., *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Aristotelian Tradition*, (Notre Dame: UND Press, 2002), 57-58, 68; John Milbank, “The Soul of Reciprocity Part One: Reciprocity Refused”, *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 335-342, 349-350, 357-359, 365; Milbank, “The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Regained”. *Modern Theology* 17 (2001): 490, 501, 504-505; Mark K. Spencer, *Thomistic Hylomorphism and the Phenomenology of Self-Sensing*, (Buffalo: SUNY Buffalo Ph.D. Dissertation, 2012); Spencer, “Habits, Potencies, and Obedience: Experiential Evidence for Thomistic Hylomorphism,” *ACPA Proceedings* 88 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> This distinction draws on that given by Alston, *Perceiving God*, 21-22.

<sup>4</sup> One example is the perception of the divine *logoi* in sensory things, as described e.g. by Dionysius and Maximus; see David Bradshaw, “The *Logoi* of Beings in Greek Patristic Thought”, in Bruce Foltz and John Chryssavgis, eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, (Fordham University Press, 2013), 9-22.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are given by Hans Urs Von Balthasar; see McInroy, *Balthasar*, 122-133.

<sup>6</sup> Examples are given by writers in the Carmelite mystical tradition; see Albert Farges, S.P. Jacques, trans., *Mystical Phenomena* (New York: Benzinger, 1926), 279-289.

<sup>7</sup> Examples are given by Gregory Palamas; see Vladimir Lossky, Ashleigh Moorhouse, trans., *The Vision of God*, (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press, 1973), 124-137.

cognitive and perceptual, but have a strong affective component, being motivated, accompanied, or followed by experiences of love.

### Phenomenology and Spiritual Perception

The phenomenological tradition provides at least two kinds of experience that provide both analogues in everyday experience for SP, and a framework of kinds of experience in which SP has a place. The first comes in phenomenological analyses of the experience of value-perception, as described by Max Scheler, Edith Stein, and Dietrich Von Hildebrand.<sup>8</sup> Things are presented to us not just as conceptually intelligible, corporeally sensible, as actually existing, or as possible objects of aversion or striving, but also, through a set of perceptual feelings, as bearing “value.” We feel, for example, the usefulness of a tool, the joyfulness of a symphony, the vitality of an athlete, the holiness of a saint, or the beauty of the world. Value-perception is similar to sensory perception: just as when we taste a cherry or a peach, we are immediately presented with an irreducible, ultimately indescribable flavor, so when we feel beauty or holiness we are immediately presented with an irreducible, ultimately indescribable value. Value-perception guides our other cognitive and appetitive powers: we seek to know and appetitively strive for those things that are presented as having positive value, and we avoid things of negative value. We can develop or err in this experience; we can open ourselves through love to have more attuned value perceptions, or close ourselves to them through hate, such that we come to misperceive the values of things. A correct value-perception opens us to intuitively or non-inferentially perceiving aspects of reality that we did not perceive prior to having the value-perception. Most importantly for SP, we can feel things to have the value of holiness, and, guided by this value-perception, intuitively perceive God present in these things. When these value-perceptions and intuitions arise regarding the external world, the first kind of SP occurs; when they occur regarding one’s interiority, the second kind of SP occurs. Value-perception and intuition give SP a place within a ubiquitous form of human experience.

The second kind of experience is that of the saturated phenomenon, as described by Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>9</sup> This experience is more

<sup>8</sup> Scheler, Manfred Frings and Roger Funk, trans., *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, (Evanston: NWU Press, 1973), 48-110; Edith Stein, Kurt Reinhardt, trans., *Finite and Eternal Being*, (Washington: ICS Publications, 2002), 314-323; Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Christian Ethics*, (New York City, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1953), 35-37, 53-54. The phenomenologists disagree as to which and how many powers are involved here; one can accept this account of experience, but disagree as to the underlying metaphysics.

<sup>9</sup> Marion, Jeffrey Kosky, trans., *Being Given*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 221-247; Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, trans., *In Excess*, (Fordham: Fordham

ubiquitous than that of value-perception, and, on my interpretation, value-perception is an instance of it. In many of our experiences, such as scientific experiences or actions involving technical know-how, we regard our concepts as adequate for understanding the world. But we also have another kind of experience, in which some experientially-given content corresponds to some concept, but also (as in value-perception) entirely exceeds or “saturates” what can be understood with that concept. In these experiences, the phenomenon cannot be predicted or understood in advance, but arises as something utterly new. We can, as in value-perception, by adopting the right attitude of love, open ourselves to experiencing any phenomenon in this way; when we see all phenomena as loved, the world appears as beautiful. In each experience of the saturated phenomenon, I experience myself as being given to myself and being led to respond to the phenomenon in some way. I do not constitute the phenomenon; it constitutes my consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Marion gives a variety of examples of this kind of experience. Sensory phenomena, such as paintings and music, “bedazzle” us, exceeding our comprehension. In the experience of my own flesh, I sense myself as a pure stream of bodily experience immediately underlying and receiving everything that is given to me—and, in a version of SP, I can perceive God as giving me my felt, conscious, bodily life. In the experience of the face of another person, I see that the other sees me, and I perceive that the other commands me ethically (the other’s gaze is immediately perceived to say “do not murder me” or “serve me) or erotically (the other’s gaze commands me to love him or her, or it seduces me) or in some other way. These commands, like those felt in the perception of values,

University Press, 2002), especially chapters 3-5; Stephen Lewis, trans., *Negative Certainties*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 51-82; Koszky, trans., *In the Self's Place*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 138-144. Marion’s account is heavily influenced by Michel Henry and Emmanuel Levinas.

<sup>10</sup> Marion’s view has been criticized in the literature on SP by Yadav, *Problem of Perception*, 139-187, who contends that in order to be aware of anything, the content we receive must fit with and be able to correct our conceptual schemes. For this to be the case, the world must be normatively and conceptually constituted. We cannot receive a given that exceeds our concepts, as Marion thinks; we cannot make sense of anything that exceeds our concepts. But Yadav overlooks that on Marion’s view, the world *is* normatively structured, but this structuring is more than conceptual. Normatively-structured phenomena account for my having a conscious, concept-using self in the first place. Marion’s view is close to that of Aquinas, for whom what is given in sensation is structured so as to fit with our powers, and correct our concepts, but also always exceeds those concepts, and is the source of those concepts. Our powers are capable of receiving phenomena structured in non-conceptual ways, and concepts are themselves actualizations of what is potentially contained in given phenomena. See Thomas Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 64-66; Marion, Jean-Pierre Lafouge, trans., *Givenness and Hermeneutics*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013).

are not inferred, but are immediately given and perceived. This is a version of the first kind of SP: God can appear to me in the face of the other as the one Who ultimately commands me to serve the other, or the one Who is ultimately loved in the other. Finally, there is the experience of revelation, which is a version of SP, in which all other kinds of saturated phenomena are joined together and transcended. To perceive God (especially in Christ) is to perceive something dazzling, that affects me in my flesh, and that puts me under command. I might perceive of God in reading Scripture or in the sacraments, which would be versions of the first kind of SP. Even in the very raising of the question of whether there is a God, I can perceive God giving Himself to me in my experience, insisting on my continuing to entertain the question; this is a version of the second kind of SP. In each case of SP, the experience of God is one version of the broader phenomenon of the saturated phenomenon, and thereby SP has a place in the general framework of human experience.

### The Controversy over Spiritual Perception in Thomistic Metaphysics

As mentioned above, there is a debate among Thomists as to whether Aquinas allows for a literal notion of SP, or whether he sees SP talk as metaphorical. It must further be asked if all the experiences analogous to SP can be accommodated by Thomism. Phenomenology provides clear data; an adequate metaphysics must explain and not deny this data, so if Thomism cannot do so, that is a reason to give up or revise the theory.

All commentators on Aquinas agree that he does not posit real SP powers distinct from the powers of intellect, will, interior and exterior senses, and sense appetites. Some, especially those influenced by the Carmelite tradition like Philip of the Trinity and Augustin Poulain, argue that his references to SP are meant to be accounts of real experiences that we can have, of kinds of perceptual acts of which the intellectual power is capable, analogous to those of the senses.<sup>11</sup> Others, like August Saudreau and Richard Cross, argue that the language of SP is just metaphor for normal operations of the intellect. One does not, at least in this life, literally see God; rather, this is a

<sup>11</sup> Philip of the Trinity, *Summa theologiae mysticae*, (Lyon: Borde, Arnaud, and Rigaud, 1656), 299; Antony of the Holy Spirit, *Directorium mysticum*, (Venice: Pezzana, 1697), 5-6, 49-58; Augustin Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, 6th ed., Leonora L. Yorke Smith, trans., (London: Kegan Paul, 1921), 88-113; Adolphe Tanquerey, Herman Branderis, trans., *The Spiritual Life*, (Tournai: Desclee, 1930), 632; Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 279-289.

vivid metaphor for the clarity and ease with which one intellectually judges about God.<sup>12</sup>

I defend the first of these interpretations, along with the claim that the phenomenological frameworks for SP can also be accommodated by Thomistic metaphysics, not by directly arguing against the second interpretation, but by building up a Thomistic framework for accounting for SP and its phenomenologically-described analogues. I concede that Aquinas does not have a well-worked out account of SP, but his metaphysics, especially as developed by some of his followers, provides for a framework for SP, which places it within a broader metaphysics of human powers and acts. My goal here is not just to interpret Aquinas, but to work out a phenomenologically-guided metaphysical framework for SP in the context of contemporary Thomistic hylomorphism; for this reason, some parts of this framework will be drawn from later Thomists, rather than from Aquinas.

The disagreement over Aquinas is in part due to the ambiguity of his texts on SP. In texts from his commentaries on the *Sentences* and on *Philippians*,<sup>13</sup> Aquinas describes five spiritual senses. Both texts are brief, interspersed with Biblical passages that use SP language, and neither explains how to integrate the account of SP into his overall account of powers. The former discusses how, understood in one way, all five spiritual senses are in Christ and all the faithful, while, understood in another way, only spiritual touch is in the faithful, since touch is the most necessary sense.<sup>14</sup> This admission of two disparate understandings of SP might suggest that Aquinas just sees language of SP as metaphorical. But the discussion of the importance SP in these and other<sup>15</sup> texts suggests that Aquinas takes this language more seriously than that, as something irreducible to mere intellectual judgment, but rather as an experiential mode of contact with God. We<sup>16</sup> see God and His glory so as to be enlightened by and conformed to Him; we hear what He says and His wisdom so as to be happy; we smell His good odor and His meekness so as to run to Him; we taste the sweetness of His mercy so as to always be in Him; we touch the Word of life and His power so as to be saved.

<sup>12</sup> Saudreau, summarized at Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 288; Richard Cross, "Thomas Aquinas", in Gavrilyuk and Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses*. See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*, v.2, 12-13, who thinks that SP talk is symbolic for a mystical experience, in which God's presence is inferred. On this view, one could not literally perceive God, due to His immateriality and simplicity.

<sup>13</sup> *In III Sent.*, d.13, *expositio textus*; *In Phil.* 2:12, lect.2.

<sup>14</sup> See also *ST III* q.8, a.1-2.

<sup>15</sup> See *In Eph.* 8 lect.1 for more on how Christ gives spiritual senses to His body. That these are not merely metaphorical is supported by the fact that Aquinas worries about the dangers of losing these senses, at *In 2 Cor.* 11 lect.1, n.379.

<sup>16</sup> This list summarizes the attributes of each sense from the texts in *In Sent* and *In Phil.*

The text from the *Commentary on the Sentences* mentions the gift of wisdom, the discussions of which in Aquinas' corpus are key texts for the discussion of spiritual taste. In commenting on Psalm 33, Aquinas says that we taste God inasmuch as He is interior to us, since one tastes what is within one (while touch deals with what is exterior to and in contact with one, and the other senses with what is not in contact with one.) This taste yields intellectual certainty about God and secure affections for Him.<sup>17</sup> Taste implies ability to make discriminating judgments,<sup>18</sup> but this can be done in two ways; this distinction shows that, contrary to commentators dismissive of SP, spiritual taste is properly perceptual and cannot be reduced to straightforward intellectual judgment.<sup>19</sup> One kind of judgment is rational and discursive, not perceptual, and arrives at demonstrated propositions as to what one ought to believe and do. The other kind of judgment occurs through "knowledge by connaturality", which is an experiential form of intellectual knowledge, based on "connaturality", which is a state of affinity or similarity of form among multiple beings. Understanding this kind of knowledge, which is where Aquinas locates SP, requires that we unpack Aquinas' metaphysics of perception.

### Thomistic Metaphysics of Perception

On Aquinas' view, every being is the kind of being that it is through its immaterial form. This form, along with any other principles in the being, such as its matter, is actualized through an "act of existence" (*esse*), which is a principle in a being by which it exists or is a being, is unified, intelligible, and good or desirable.<sup>20</sup> To be a being is also to be beautiful (that is, self-manifesting, delightful to perceive, or intelligible as a good), to share or participate in God, and to be a manifestation of God; it is to be a "light" or a "radiance" coming from God.<sup>21</sup> When one being "participates" in another, the latter has certain characteristics essentially, and the former has these characteristics only through the latter's formal causality; the former receives a likeness to the former, but has this likeness only through a real relationship with the former.<sup>22</sup> "Light" is any phenomenon

<sup>17</sup> *In Psalms* 33[34].9. One can lose this taste by connaturality through the vice of foolishness: *ST* II-II q.46, a.1.

<sup>18</sup> *In II DA* lect.21.

<sup>19</sup> *ST* II-II q.45, a.2-3.

<sup>20</sup> *DV* q.1, a.1; *De ente et essentia*.

<sup>21</sup> *In I Sent.*, d.31, q.2, a.1, ad4; *ST* I, q.5, a.4, ad1; I-II, q.27, a.1, ad3; *In IV DDN* lect.5-6. See Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, (New York: Scribner, 1930), 24-33, 166-167.

<sup>22</sup> *In I Sent* d. 19, a. 5, a. 2; *In De Heb* lect. 2; *De substantiis separatis* c. 3; *ST* I q. 44, a. 1. See Gregory Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes*, (Washington: CUA Press, 2008), 195-212.

that either renders some being actually cognizable in some way, or that renders an intermediary medium or a power actually disposed to receive species or perform acts of some kind.<sup>23</sup> Beings, in virtue of their act of existence by which they are self-manifesting, are such a light: they render themselves cognizable.<sup>24</sup> But in addition to the light that they are, created beings also need lights external to themselves, and they need to be able to produce likenesses of themselves, to be manifested to perceivers.

When they manifest themselves, material beings send information about themselves out into the surround media, carried by what Aquinas calls “species”. This requires a visible light, such as the light of the sun. This light does not render visible objects actually visible; they are visible of themselves. Rather, it illumines and so renders the transparent medium and the eye actually capable of receiving any visible species. This light does not contribute any content to the sensory experience; rather, it is a disposing cause or medium under which (*medium sub quo*) some being is seen. When the species is received or “impressed” in the visual power, an act of seeing arises. The perceiver is not directly aware of these species; rather, they are a medium by which (*medium quo*) or a “lens” through which a knower perceives a real being—that is, they are signs that render that which they signify manifest to the knower.<sup>25</sup> The cognizable content contained in a species has what the Thomists call “intentional being” (*esse intentionale*). The self-manifesting being exists in the species in a way external to itself, such that any knower who receives the species participates in the being, and is capable of perceiving and loving the being; by this intentional being, the species experientially conveys the perceiver beyond itself to the real being.<sup>26</sup> An act of knowing makes one aware of the being as actually existing, present, and as having certain attributes; an act of loving makes one experientially present to the loved being as it really is, not just as known: it takes one out of oneself, and makes one experience the loved being

<sup>23</sup> *ST I* q. 79, a. 3, ad2; *In II DA* lect. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Beings, in virtue of their forms, have a multiplicity of intelligible contents formally contained in them, and they can manifest these contents individually; this is true even of God Who is one simple form: He can manifest Himself according to different contents formally contained within Him (*ST I* q. 12, a. 6; q. 13, a. 4.) The objection (made e.g. by Palamites like David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 242-265) that on the Thomistic view of divine simplicity, God could only manifest Himself in an all-or-nothing way misses Aquinas’ view of many intelligible, perceivable contents being contained in God: even in the beatific vision, God only manifests some but not all of these contents; see Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 289-90.

<sup>25</sup> *In IV Sent* d. 49, q. 2, a. 1, ad15; *DV* q. 18, a. 1. See Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 266. On this view of signs see John of St. Thomas, *Cursus philosophicus thomisticus*, v.1, *Logica*, p.2, q.21, a.2, ad1, (Paris: Vrin, 1883), 572-3.

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 392-6.



as entering into one and transforming one.<sup>27</sup> As in Marion's saturated phenomenon, beings manifest themselves as exceeding what can be conceptualized about them, and as transforming and constituting the perceiver. Once a knower receives the species of some self-manifesting being, he or she generally then expresses that content in "expressed species"—for example, by using the imagination to produce images by which things in the world can be considered, or by using the intellect to produce concepts and propositions by which the world can be understood—and so one comes to the first, discursive kind of judgment mentioned above. But the content made available in the impressed species always exceeds what is unpacked in the expressed species, and this is experienced especially in love and knowledge by connaturality.

Virtue and love render one connatural to some being. Love makes one present in an experiential, felt manner to a being, and virtuous love makes one present or attuned<sup>28</sup> to that being as it actually is, capable of attending to features of the being that one can cognize through impressed species, but without expressed species and so in an incommunicable way.<sup>29</sup> This is a knowledge through feeling, a value-perception, and an experience of the excess or saturation of experienced beings. Furthermore, one "savors" or "tastes" one's affinity for the other being, and the being entering into one and transforming one experientially; this language is linked by later Thomists to a genuinely taste-like experience described in mystical literature.

Knowledge by connaturality occurs naturally in the operation of our acquired virtues. For example, someone who has chastity is capable of non-discursively judging how to act in potentially sexual situations, in a way guided by chaste love for others; because his or her love is virtuously ordered toward other persons, the chaste person is attuned and experientially present<sup>30</sup> to those persons as they

<sup>27</sup> *ST* I-II q. 28. Thomists, beginning in the seventeenth century, speak of God's experienced penetration (*illapsus*) into the soul through love, which is felt in a manner similar to touch or taste: Antony of the Holy Spirit, *Directorium*, 5-6; Salmanticenses, *Cursus theologicus*, v.5, *De beatitudine*, (Paris: Palme, 1878), 206; Poulain, *Graces*, 88, 90.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, trans., *The Glory of the Lord*, v.1, *Seeing the Form*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 235-41.

<sup>29</sup> *ST* I q. 16, a. 1; I-II q. 15, a. 3; John of St. Thomas, *De donis*, a. 4, s. 11-13 (p. 166-7).

<sup>30</sup> Intellectual perception is called "experiential" by analogy with the act of the cognitive power, the internal sensory, non-conceptual power whereby we grasp that some particular is an instance of some kind, is good or bad for us, or is otherwise relevant to our bodily lives. Many such acts lead to a reliable act of this power, called "experience." See *ST* I q.78, a.3-4; I, q.86, a. 1; *In II DA* lect.13-15; *In III DA* lect.1-6; Daniel De Haan, "Perception and the *Vis Cogitativa*", *ACPQ* 88 (2014): 397-437. Such acts of perception can have acts of judgment, discursive reasoning, background beliefs, and intellectual virtues like prudence and art as their motivation. But prudence (and one's background beliefs) can also change on the basis of that sort of perceptual experience. See *ST* II-II q.47, a.1-4, 15.

actually are: he or she intuits certain features of those persons on the basis of and guided by his or her feelings regarding them. Because of his or her chaste love, the chaste person attends to and acts on the basis of genuine perceptions of features of other persons, rather than on the basis of the distorted perceptions of the lustful person.

It is true that Aquinas describes this knowledge by connaturality (and the taste that goes with it) as an act of judging (*iudicare*) in contrast to an act of perceiving (*percipere*).<sup>31</sup> But this is because, as I see it, Aquinas understands perception in a more limited way than the contemporary SP tradition. On the latter, perception is any non-inferential act. But both intellectual abstraction and the initial formation of judgments by the intellect are non-inferential on Aquinas' view. It is only when judgments are put together to yield further judgments via argumentation that inferences occur. Through initial, non-inferred judgments and propositions, one perceives states of affairs in the world, on the contemporary SP literature's<sup>32</sup> understanding of perception. So knowledge by connaturality counts as perception in the relevant sense.

Jacques Maritain and Piotr Jaroszynski expanded on this notion of knowledge by connaturality in explaining how we perceive beauty.<sup>33</sup> One with an eye for beauty sees these things by a kind of connaturality; love for, delight in, and openness to beauty renders one attuned to with the genuine beauty of the world, capable of receiving the manifestation of those beings as they actually are, and so experience their beauty lovingly and intellectually, but in a non-conceptual way. Perceptual knowledge by connaturality is not merely sensory, but includes an intellectual component. After the sense powers have received impressed species, the light contained in the intellect, the agent intellect, illumines the sensory species or phantasm, and renders the phantasm actually intelligible, that is, actually able to be cognized in an intellectual, universalizing way.<sup>34</sup> At this stage, one can perceive

<sup>31</sup> *ST* II-II q.45, a.2, ad3. On this and other aspects of knowledge by connaturality see Rafael-Tomas Caldera, *Le Jugement par Inclination chez Saint Thomas D'Aquin*, (Paris: Vrin, 1980), especially 59ff. While Caldera (especially 70-71) stresses that this experience is an active intellectual judgment, not a purely receptive perception, he also notes that it is inferential, experiential and taste-like, intuitive or similar to the experience of the senses in that it yields awareness of a thing as concrete and present to one, with a certain immediately grasped value. On the Thomistic view, judgment, while active, can be perceptual in the sense of a non-inferential, non-constructive, awareness of a things as it actually is.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Greco, "Perception."

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 23-27, 160-165; Piotr Jaroszyński, Hugh MacDonald, trans., *Beauty and Being: Thomistic Perspectives*, (Toronto: PIMS, 2011), 171-188. See John Trapani, *Poetry, Beauty, and Contemplation: The Complete Aesthetics of Jacques Maritain*, (Washington: CUA Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> This analysis of the order of the intellectual process is John of St. Thomas and Jacques Maritain's interpretation, drawing on *ST* I q. 79, a. 4; q. 84, a. 6-7; *In III DA* lect. 10. See Daniel Heider, "Abstraction, Intentionality, and Moderate Realism: Suarez

or “intuit”<sup>35</sup> the sensible being with one’s illumined sensory powers as radiantly intelligible and good, as transcending the sensible, though not yet in a conceptually-articulable manner. The agent intellect then produces a new species, which is impressed on the intellect so that the being can be cognized as falling under some universal; the intellect then unpacks the content of this species with an expressed species, the concept. Prior to this conceptualization, one can perceive the being in an intelligible, but not conceptually-articulable, way.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, though Aquinas does not say it, it would seem to be the case that one has this experience constantly, prior to any conceptualizing. Every act of cognition in which we perceive what the right thing to do or believe is, based not on discursive reasoning, but on a sense for right action, is an example of this kind of perception by connaturality (for example, when we act on the basis of a sense of tradition or cultural custom). Such a perception can also, even as act of the intellect, have the character of one of the five senses: the external senses are participations in the intellect,<sup>37</sup> and so, as that which is participated in, the intellect must contain in itself the experiential character of the five senses.

This view of perception fits well with Aquinas’ hylomorphic metaphysics of the human person. The human person is a composite of matter and a form that is a subsistent entity; the latter structures the matter into a body, and bestows powers upon it, but also has the powers of intellect and free will in itself. Human sensory bodily powers share in and can be “obedient” to intellect and will—that is, they can be guided by the intellect and will, and the intellect can “overflow” into them, such that one cognizes with them in a quasi-intellectual way.<sup>38</sup> In the pre-abstractive experience described above the agent intellect elevates the sensory powers, so that the intelligibility of some sensory being is seen with the illumined and elevated senses as radiant beauty. Maritain describes this as “intellectualized sense”,<sup>39</sup> and it is an experience of a being as a saturated phenomena.

and Poinset”, in Victor Salas, ed., *Hircocervi and Other Metaphysical Wonders: Essays in Honor of John Doyle*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013), 185-6; Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 162-3.

<sup>35</sup> The later Thomists adopted the Scotist and Ockhamist language of intuition, as an awareness of the presence of some individual being. But this adoption is rooted in Aquinas’ view (*In De Trin.*, q.6, a.1) that all rational thought begins in and aims at an act of *intellectus* or simple intellectual perception of some being.

<sup>36</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 28, expresses the experience of perceiving beauty as a perception of mystery. Aquinas describes poetic experience, in which one experiences less-than-fully-conceptual intelligibility, through the medium of the senses at *In I Sent*, q. 1, a. 5, ad3; *ST I-II* q.101, a.2, ad2.

<sup>37</sup> *ST I* q.77, a.7.

<sup>38</sup> *ST I* q.78, a.4; q.81, a.3, ad2.

<sup>39</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 160-162.

This overflow can also occur after abstraction: one's intellectual act is joined to one's sensory act as act to potency, and one then perceives beings through concepts (and through one's background beliefs and other conceptual frameworks), as instances of some conceptualized kind, where these intellectual items inform one's sensory acts. Aquinas calls this "incidental" sensation: one perceives with one's senses some object in a way proper not to the senses but to the intellect. For example, one might perceive not just a colored object, but a colored man, where color is properly grasped by vision and humanity by the intellect, but both together by incidental sensation.<sup>40</sup> Our powers "intertwine" with one another, such that we are not aware of multiple acts, but only of a single intellectual-sensory act of perceiving all these things.<sup>41</sup> Here one perceives through the "lens" of a conceptual framework; frequently, such experiences are not instances of the saturated phenomenon, though the sensory content can exceed one's conceptual interpretation of that experience, and so such a unified intellectual-sensory act becomes a paradigm case of Marion's saturated phenomenon. All of this is made possible by the way that matter and soul, sense and intellect relate as potency to actuality.

These perceptions account for the first kind of SP, which will occur perfectly in heaven: while the intellect perceives God in the beatific vision, the senses will be perceiving objects like the body of Jesus and the glory of God shining in material things. Conjoined with the beatific vision of the intellect, this will lead to an incidental sensation of God in Christ.<sup>42</sup> This kind of experience can occur imperfectly in this life. Our intellects reason (in a non-perceptual manner) from observed effects to their ultimate cause, God; this knowledge can then be applied to our sense perception of creatures such that we perceive God reflected in them. God can also cause some created phenomenon to appear that is in itself a sensory revelation of God.<sup>43</sup>

### Spiritual Perception in Thomistic Metaphysics

Knowledge by connaturality can also account for many instances of the second kind of SP. The act of the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom is an instance of such knowledge.<sup>44</sup> This act is motivated by the

<sup>40</sup> *In II DA* lect.13.

<sup>41</sup> The language of "intertwining" comes from the Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Colin Smith, trans., *Phenomenology of Perception*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 319, 352-3, 382, 530; Alphonso Lingis, trans., *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: NWU Press, 1969), 49, 133-9.

<sup>42</sup> *In IV Sent.*, d.49, q.2, a.2.

<sup>43</sup> *ST III* q.45, a.2.

<sup>44</sup> *ST II-II*, q.45, a.2. See John of St. Thomas, *Cursus theologicus In Iam-IIae, De Donis Spiritus Sancti*, (Quebec: Mathieu and Gagné, 1948), a.2, s.10, n.118 (p.35-6).

love of charity, which is a participation in God; charity and the gift of wisdom render one connatural and experientially present to God, and able to know divine things in a taste-like way. In this gift, one enters into God experientially, and experiences His sweetness as one cognizes Him not in an articulable way, but in an interior, unitive manner, like bodily taste.<sup>45</sup> That this is not mere metaphor is corroborated by texts in which Aquinas discusses spiritual smell, which is also a kind of judgment by connaturality, in which those who do not have the gift of wisdom's taste sometimes catch intimations of the perceptual judgment proper to taste.<sup>46</sup> This is an act that is simultaneously cognitive and appetitive, the two joined in a single act in which love guides perception, an experience which both phenomenologists like Scheler and Thomists like Philip of the Trinity and Maritain call an experience of the "heart".<sup>47</sup>

Other intellectual acts are likened to other senses. For example, the act of the gift of understanding is likened to vision, and explicitly said to be perceptual.<sup>48</sup> Through this gift we ultimately come to see the divine essence in the beatific vision, but this can also occur in this life during contemplation, so long as one's attention is removed from one's bodily senses.<sup>49</sup> This is a perceptual act that does not occur through the medium of impressed species, but is an act of perceptual cognition that is directly caused by God.<sup>50</sup> This might seem to contradict the metaphysics of perception already given, on which beings manifest themselves by delivering their formal content to perceivers through species, and thereby rendering themselves cognizable. But there are some everyday acts of perceptual cognition that we experience that do not require impressed species, and which provide an everyday analogue for spiritual vision. First, when we see light, light in its essence is joined to our eyes, rendering them capable of seeing any visible object. Likewise, to see God is to have Him joined to our intellects such that He appears to us, without any intermediary, in a vision-like way; just as light immediately brings about an actualization of the visual power, so God in the beatific vision immediately brings about an intellectual of seeing Him.<sup>51</sup> Second, one is aware of one's immediate presence to oneself whenever one's intellect comes to be in act by species of something external to oneself, without

<sup>45</sup> Poulain, *Graces*, 95-97 discusses degrees of this taste of God in memory and in actual experience.

<sup>46</sup> *In I Cor. 12:17 Reportatio Reginaldi di Piperno* and *In I Cor. 12:17 Reportatio Vulgata* lect.3, n.741. See Poulain, *Graces*, 112-3.

<sup>47</sup> Philip of the Trinity, *Summa*, 179; Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 163; Scheler, *Formalism*, 63.

<sup>48</sup> *ST* II-II q.8, a.7; q.45, a.2, ad3.

<sup>49</sup> *ST* I-II, q.69, a.2, ad3; q.180, a.5

<sup>50</sup> *ST* I q.12, a.2; I-II, q.3, a.8.

<sup>51</sup> *DV* q.8, a.3, ad17.

any further intermediary between one and oneself necessary to know oneself.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, God can appear to me anytime, so long as He removes all sinful impediments from me, because He is always immediately present to me as cause.<sup>53</sup>

This immediate act of knowledge without impressed species is also a form of knowledge by connaturality.<sup>54</sup> In order to achieve the beatific vision, I must have some degree of charity, which renders me participating in and connatural to God, and so experientially present to Him in a felt way; based on the degree of charity that I have, God gives my intellect a new participation in Him called the “light of glory”, which disposes the intellect to have God produce in it the supernatural act of seeing Him directly. This light does not add any content to this act, nor is it a lens through which I see God in a mediate way; rather, it just disposes my intellect to be able to perform an act that exceeds all created natures. In this vision, I see God, though I do not see everything formally contained in God, but only those that God reveals to me.<sup>55</sup>

On Aquinas’ view, we also have other imperfect perceptions of God in this life, which anticipate the perfect perception of God in heaven. To know the invisible missions of the divine Persons to us, such as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, requires that we perceive those missions experientially; they cannot be perfectly known speculatively, but require either an interior awareness of the habits they bring about or a perceptual awareness of the presence of the Persons themselves as they act in the soul. God’s love is felt and tasted (not seen with certainty) in the soul, which leads by knowledge by connaturality to an experiential perception of God.<sup>56</sup>

Later Thomists, especially those influenced by the Carmelite mystical tradition, expand on Aquinas’ accounts of indirect SP of God, making use of Aquinas’ accounts of angelic cognition, of the cognition our souls will have after death, and of Adam’s cognition prior to the fall.<sup>57</sup> On Aquinas’ view, species impressed on human intellects naturally come via abstraction from sense phantasms. But angels naturally have a mode of cognition in which they intellectually perceive or “intuit” objects, including material things and God, through the medium of species infused into their intellects by God.

<sup>52</sup> *DV* q.10, a.8. This is very much like the saturated phenomenon of the flesh.

<sup>53</sup> *In IV Sent* d.49, q.2, a.2, ad4; q.5, a.2.

<sup>54</sup> John of St. Thomas, *De donis*, a.3, s.46, n.414 (p.119).

<sup>55</sup> *SCG III* c.53-55.

<sup>56</sup> *In I Sent* d.1, q.2, a.2, ad2; d.14, q.2, a.2, ad3; d.15, q.2, a.1, ad5; d.15, q.4, a.1, ad1; d.15, exp.text.; d.16, q.1, a.2; *ST I* q.43, a.3-5, esp. a.5, ad2, and a.7, ad6; I-II q.112, a.5; *In Jn* 1:39, lect.15, n. 292. See Giles Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 393-410; Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 268.

<sup>57</sup> *In II Sent.*, d.23, q.2, a.1; *DV* q.18, a.1; *ST I* q.56, a.3; q.89, a.1. See Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 272.

Although Aquinas says that this mode of perception is natural only to angels, he holds that human souls after death will be given this mode of perception, and that Adam had it prior to the fall. So it is a possibility for human persons, and, if so, it is reasoned, then it is a possibility now.<sup>58</sup> Human powers, like all created powers, are both natural potencies to receive certain objects naturally, and “obediential potencies”, capable of being raised above their natural state by divine power to be capable of acts that are naturally impossible for them.<sup>59</sup> Many Thomists argued that much “mystical” experience and most SP experiences are versions of this kind of perception: though our natural intellectual activity requires the senses and the body, God can infuse species into the intellect (or even into the exterior or interior senses) and one thereby perceives God through that species, in a sensory manner.<sup>60</sup> For example, one might perceive with delight God’s touch on the soul, or a new “savor” of God whereby one gains a new experience of wisdom.<sup>61</sup> Like all species, these have intentional being which can convey the perceiver experientially to what is infinitely beyond themselves, namely, God.

Furthermore, God can also give to the intellect new lights, such as the “light of prophecy”, by actualizing the intellect’s obediential potency in a new way; this light disposes the intellect to receive these infused species, and so perceive God or divine revelations in a supernatural way.<sup>62</sup> Through this mode of SP, one can come to participate in God in such a way that He acts in us, and our actions are entirely motivated by Him, and we feel or sense this motion of His in us.<sup>63</sup> The immediacy of God’s giving of the impressed species highlights a crucial factor in almost versions of SP: that they are, as forms of saturated phenomena, given as something entirely new, unpredictable, and unattainable by our natural powers as such.

Some later Thomists contend that this mode of SP remains in the soul even after the beatific vision. Seeing God engenders, logically but not temporally posterior to the vision, a further love for and connaturality with God. This connaturality involves the experience of God entering into or penetrating the soul (an experience that occurs even in the “divine touches” mentioned in the last paragraph), which leads to a perfect SP experience of touching and tasting

<sup>58</sup> Farges, *Mystical Phenomena*, 269.

<sup>59</sup> *In IV Sent.*, d.11, q.1, a.3, qc.3, ad3; *De virtutibus*, q.1, a.10, ad13.

<sup>60</sup> See Philip of the Trinity, *Summa*, 283, 310-20; Antony of the Holy Spirit, *Directorium*, 56-58; Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 274-8. This reading softens the strong divisions between angelic and human cognition presented e.g. at *ST II-II* q.180, a.6.

<sup>61</sup> *ST I-II* q.69, esp. a.2, ad3.

<sup>62</sup> *ST II-II* q.173.

<sup>63</sup> See John of St. Thomas, *De donis*, a.2, s.30, n.176-8 (p.53-4), drawing on Cajetan *In I-II*, q.68, a.1, n.3.

God. Our complete beatitude, on many Thomists' developments of Aquinas' views, involves multiple modes of SP: we will both see God's essence, and feel and taste God as well.<sup>64</sup>

Aquinas' metaphysical framework provides a clear and flexible context for understanding how SP and its phenomenological analogues fit into a hylomorphic account of the human person and everyday human experiences. SP is just one, exceptional version of those experiences, and so should not be objected to as if it were entirely foreign or superfluous to a plausible account of our everyday experience.<sup>65</sup>

*Mark K. Spencer*  
*spen8444@stthomas.edu*

<sup>64</sup> John of St. Thomas, *De donis*, a. 3, s. 67-84 (p. 139-53).

<sup>65</sup> An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a symposium on spiritual perception at the American Academy of Religion conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on November 20, 2015. I am grateful to Paul Gavriluk and Frederick Aquino for organizing that symposium, and to the other participants for their feedback, especially to William Abraham, Sarah Coakley, Richard Cross, John Greco, Amber Griffioen, John Martens, Mark McInroy, and Ann Taves. The writing of this paper was also supported by a faculty reading group at the University of St. Thomas, which was funded by the Experience Project, which is conducted by the John Templeton Foundation, the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.