

Mark R. Wynn, *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 224 pp. £52.00).

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Mark Wynn explores the way that religious thoughts and feelings can function as shapers of our sensory experience, making available renewed possibilities for practical and ethical engagement with our physical environment. It is a “familiar truth,” Wynn says, that “one and the same sensory scene can appear to us in very different ways” depending upon the one’s “bodily and emotional condition, our repertoire of concepts and our conception of our circumstances” (vi). He focuses on three aspects of this conceptual and emotional “coloring” of our sense-perception: its impact on the way things appear to us (the *modes* of perception), on what we take to appear (the *objects* of perception), and on how those appearances become available to us (the *formation* of our perceptual capacities).

To cite an example he uses more than once, consider my present sensory experience of a patch of ice, which may take on a distinctive sort of conceptual and affective shape after having previously injured myself in a fall on ice (28-30). Post-injury, my sensory receptivity to the patch of ice can now have a mode or way of appearing which includes kinesthetic and emotional elements that it didn’t before, such as the involuntary triggering of thoughts of caution, an accompanying tensing of my muscles and a visceral feeling of fear. Moreover, this enriched mode of sensory awareness serves to inform a new range of possible responses. My perception of the ice now furnishes me with reasons to form beliefs (e.g., that I will fall unless I am careful) and undertake actions (e.g., altering my stance), whereas prior to the injury it might not have afforded me such reasons.

This transformation of my post-injury experience of patches of ice is not merely a change in the mode of my sensory experience, but also a change in *what* appears to me – the purported *object* that forms the content of my experience. I regard the cautious hue of my sensory experience not merely as consciously tracking my mental and bodily states, but also as tracking something about my distal environment – that *this ice is dangerous*. The content of my perception – in this case the dangerousness of the ice – may be determined not only by how things are with me, but also with the world itself. The dangerousness of the ice thus seems to be a feature of it that is perceptually presented to my awareness by way of the emotionally structured and thought-infused character of my visual awareness. In this way our sensory awareness of the physical environment seems capable of

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presenting us with non-sensory properties (such as danger) precisely *by way* of its sensory properties (the visual properties of the ice).

Finally, this ability to perceive such features of the material world by way of the coloring of sense experience is one that we acquire socially and practically via the relevant training of our conceptual, emotional and kinesthetic dispositions. My ability to perceive the patch *as* dangerous presupposes a prior learning that enables me to discriminate ice from water, as well as the prior training of my affective and bodily sensitivities to the presence of ice (given by my emotional and kinesthetic responses to previous falls). When we thus become subject to different ways of *forming* our conceptual and emotional/bodily capacities, we thereby acquire a “perceptual gestalt” (45). Accordingly, our perceptual gestalts can be altered by our subjection to new schemes of conceptual and emotional formation. This can make it appear as if various features of the world previously hidden from us now stand revealed. Shifts in perceptual gestalt explain how our visual experience of, say, the innocuousness of ice can be transformed into a capacity to detect its dangerousness.

Wynn’s central move is to appropriate the idea of emotional and conceptual shifts in our perceptual gestalt as a way of understanding the structure and practical significance of religious phenomenology. Just as a prior conceptual, emotional and bodily formation can make the ice visually appear to us to bear a non-sensory value property (dangerousness) which merits our practice of caution, so too “the world’s appearance can sometimes bear the stamp of specifically religious concerns or ideals or practices” (vi). Both Wynn’s thesis and his strategy for defending it are first and foremost phenomenological. His primary thesis is that we can acquire a perceptual gestalt in which it can seem to us that the world itself has taken on a religious significance and it can thus seem to us that we are rationally entitled to the religious beliefs and practices elicited by our experience. This naturally prompts the further question: can we ever be rationally entitled to regard these phenomenal seemings as more than *mere* seemings – as veridical rather than illusory? This question is accorded a decidedly secondary importance in the book – it occupies a single chapter and even here Wynn makes the issue of rational entitlement parasitic on his phenomenology. He simply relies on William P. Alston’s defense of our practical and epistemic entitlement to hold that the way things seem to us can in fact be the way they are (86).

The book’s six chapters take up the task of elaborating and defending his phenomenology. Wynn has an impressive interdisciplinary range, bringing together important figures and works on religious experience in the philosophical, theological and religious studies literature. In Chapter 1 he claims that his conception of religious shifts in the gestalt with which we perceive the material world is one way of evading the typical criticism of a Platonic spirituality. On Wynn’s reading of Grace Jantzen’s formulation of the complaint, Platonism requires us to regard the relation between the material world of “sense” and the spiritual world of “concept” as disjoined and competitive, such that a turn toward the spiritual necessitates a turn away from the material. In Chapters 2-3, Wynn appropriates William James, Peter Goldie, Matthew Ratcliffe and Roger Scruton to construct a model for the conceptual and emotional shaping of sensory experience as expressive of some scheme of valuation. In Chapter 4, he weds this

phenomenology to Alston's doxastic practice approach to epistemology. Finally, in Chapters 5-6, he uses the resulting phenomenological model to analyze a range of spiritualities, including the natural religion of Erazim Kohak and the Buddhist sensibilities of David Cooper, as well as the traditional Christian spiritualities of Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, Jonathan Edwards and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

In all this Wynn offers a phenomenological analysis highly accessible to theologians and philosophers working outside the Continental tradition – an especially welcome virtue given the relative neglect of religious phenomenology in analytic approaches to the epistemology of religious experience. He demonstrates admirable skill navigating these difficult topics and figures to marshal his advocacy for a “this-worldly” spirituality in our perceptual engagement with the material world. Moreover, he does so with a rhetorically light touch, refreshingly free of overly-technical discussions or jargon. The book is interesting enough to merit the attention of those working in the phenomenology, epistemology and/or ethics of religious experience, yet accessible enough to the disciplinary “outsider” for it to be used with profit in, e.g., an undergraduate seminar. For all these considerable strengths, however, the book displays some significant weaknesses. Two especially stood out to me, which I'll discuss for the remainder of the review. The first has to do with the rhetorical frame for his argument given in Chapter 1, and the second has to do with one problematic way in which the perceptual model of “spirituality” that he offers remains incomplete.

The foil for his phenomenological thesis is Jantzen's critique of “two-world” Platonist spiritualities, which pit the ideal world of concepts against the material world of sense as competitors for our allegiances. We can mitigate that complaint, he supposes, by holding instead to a “one-world” spirituality in which religious ideals and practices re-direct us upon (rather than away from) the material and sensory world by giving us a new “emotionally structured, thought-infused and world-encompassing perceptual gestalt” (128). But this “solution” misrepresents the nature of Jantzen's complaint. Her target is not necessarily the view that we can or should contemplate the higher world of religious concepts *instead of* the lower world of material realities, nor is it primarily that contemplation of that sort lessens the degree to which we can be practically engaged with our physical environments. On the contrary, her worry is best formulated in a way that can readily embrace Wynn's central claim – the thought that religious concepts and feelings do in fact color our experience of the material world. Her objection, as we shall see, is just that they do so in the wrong way. Likewise, she can freely grant Wynn's one-world Platonism that values and encourages practical engagements with the material world rather than advocating any contemplative detachment from it. Her worry is just that a Platonistic conception of such engagements as regulated by the non-sensory domain is of a religiously defective and morally objectionable sort.

At the outset Wynn had already rightly recognized it as a “familiar truth” that our sensory experience is shot through with conceptual construal and affective interests, including religious concepts and interests (vi). It is therefore a little puzzling for him to suppose that Jantzen's problems with Platonism can be assuaged simply by reasserting that familiar truism. In fact, it is consistent with that truism to

object to Plato's privileging of the non-sensory world over the sensory world as the primary locus of value for our spiritual lives, whether or not the material world is deemed a good or necessary vehicle for conveying that value. Wynn's one-world Platonism remains "Platonistic" just insofar as he derives the religious significance of the sensory intake given by the material world entirely from the various possible ways it can be "colored" by the non-sensory domain of thought and feeling. Accordingly, what Jantzen would find problematic is precisely Wynn's subordination of the (traditionally feminine) sensory world to the (traditionally masculine) intellectual world that colors it. That picture, she would maintain, demeans the sensory world precisely insofar as it retains its (gendered) role of submission. It remains passively receptive to the penetrating influence of the non-sensory world of thought and feeling which are required to "transform" and "redeem" it. She might even regard Wynn's view as *more* objectionable: at least the two-world view allows the possibility of a sensory and bodily resistance to or competition with the non-sensory domain!

Contrary to what the rhetoric of Wynn's first chapter suggests therefore, the claim *that* the sensory world can appear to us as bearing a religious significance isn't all that philosophically or theologically interesting of itself, and for just that reason it isn't of much use for ameliorating the anti-Platonist sensibilities of theologians like Jantzen. Fortunately, we don't require any polemic motivation to raise the two very interesting questions that Wynn goes on to address. Both questions take for granted that our experiences of the world can be religiously "colored," and ask instead how to properly analyze such experiences: (1) What is the phenomenological structure of experiences under which the world appears to hold religious value?, and (2) Under what circumstances, if any, can we be rationally entitled to take these appearances to be veridical rather than illusory? As I've indicated, Wynn attempts to answer the first question primarily in Chapters 2-3, and the second in Chapter 4.

Crucial in his answer to both of these questions is the idea that the shaping of sensory experiences by religious thoughts and feelings is "world-directed." For an experience to be "world-directed" is both for it to be "directed outwards, at the world" (23) and for its phenomenal character to be "a way of registering ... how the world impinges upon the body" (71). "World-directedness," then, is a bi-directional relation. On the one hand, an experience purports to reach out to the world by representing it to be a certain way, while, on the other hand, the world is capable of reaching into the experience to determine whether the way it seems to be is in fact the way it is (a veridical presentation of the world) or whether instead it is a *mere* seeming (an illusion or hallucination). Clearly, therefore, Wynn's answer to both of the questions above depends upon some account of what it would mean for religiously colored experiences to exemplify the relation of world-directedness. Without such an account, it is hard to know what to make of a phenomenology that characterizes such experiences as those which *seem* to direct us upon features of reality rather than merely upon our own bodily or mental states as perceivers, and equally hard to say what should count as a good reason (practical or epistemic) to regard these seemings as veridical rather than illusory. Wynn therefore owes us

some story about the kind of structured relation to reality involved for those experiences of the world which “bear the stamp of religious concerns” (vi).

What would such a story consist in? Minimally, it would seem, we need some specification of the sort of relation that he takes the phenomenal contents of a religious experience (its distinctive complex of emotions, concepts and sensations) to bear to the non-phenomenal religious realities that it purports to be *about*, both in the veridical and non-veridical case. Nor can that demand be mitigated by casting one’s account primarily (or even entirely) in phenomenological terms. There are of course phenomenological accounts which forswear any need for “metaphysical” talk of non-phenomenal objects and instead attempt to derive a notion of world-directedness entirely from the subject’s relations to phenomenal appearances. Still, all such accounts must include some phenomena-internal specification of the structure of intentionality that differentiates veridical appearances from illusory ones.

But whereas Wynn’s central claim is that the non-sensory phenomenal contents of a religious experience – religious thoughts and feelings – can be “world-directed,” I found it very difficult to discern what he takes that claim to mean. Most of the time, he seems to have in mind the idea that they are adverbial contributions to our sensory intake of the physical world – the material world can be taken in conceptually and emotionally as well as sensorily. Non-sensory religious thoughts and feelings may thus figure into (“inform”) experiences that direct us upon our physical environment as essential features in the *mode* of our world-directedness, as ineliminable characteristics of the *way* that the physical properties of the world appear to us (28). Just as ice can present itself to me as blue in virtue of its bluish appearance to me visually (via the bluish way it looks to me), so too it can present itself to me as dangerous in virtue of its appearance to me conceptually (via the concept of danger it instantiates for me) and emotionally (via the fearful way it feels to me).

Wynn often suggests that the world-directedness of concepts and emotions consists in the fact that they can be modes of experiencing the physical world. But his discussion is muddled by some confusion about how these phenomenal modes figure into the act/object structure of world-directedness. Do conceptual/emotional/sensory modes of experiencing (act) represent phenomenally integrated ways of directing ourselves on the physical world itself (object), or are conceptual and emotional modes of experiencing (act) phenomenally integrated ways of directing ourselves on sensations (object), a third phenomenal content which bears some other representational relation to the world itself? His tendency to talk about perceptual objects as “appearances of the sensory world” seems to suggest that he takes this latter view (25). This would fit with his initial description of “one and the same sensory scene” appearing in “very different ways” (vi). But it also seems patently inconsistent with his subsequent claim to follow Goldie in rejecting the “add-on” view of emotional experiences for which such changes are “not just a new attitude to the ‘same content,’ but a change in understanding of the world” (29).

Perhaps this ambiguity is of no consequence, since on either view a conceptual and emotional way of seeing the world is world-directed in the minimal

sense of being a subjective “filter” through which the material world must present itself to us. But this is an insufficient basis upon which to be a realist about the values that constitute the formal object of our concepts and emotions. To hold that “danger” is the formal object posited by my fearful way of experiencing the world (or its sensory appearance to me) underdetermines any particular ontological commitment to “dangers” as properties of the world. So it is not clear that this picture of the way in which religiously colored experiences are world-involving suffices to practically or epistemically justify beliefs in the existence of the religious realities posited by such experiences. Wynn’s suggestion seems to be that a mere *consistency* of religiously colored sense-perceptions with a religious metaphysics is enough to constitute a justification (116), but rather than offer an argument for that he seems to think his reliance on Alston vindicates it. However, whereas Alston’s own account proceeds from a detailed story about how a religious phenomenology might genuinely involve the realities it purports to be about, it isn’t clear whether that account is available to Wynn. Alston’s metaphysical story first tries to render plausible the direct perception of God *as distinct from* a religious way of perceiving the world and then goes on to show how reliable doxastic practices can form around such putative perceptions of God. Wynn similarly requires a metaphysical (rather than merely phenomenological) backstory for how a religious mode of world-directed experience could constitute a perceptual relation to God. Here Wynn gives us very little to go on as to how it is metaphysically possible for divine properties to *be* (rather than merely seem to be) perceptible properties of the material world. Without any clear sense of what could be meant by the sensory world’s bearing of divine (or otherwise religious) properties, we also lack any clear sense of how our emotionally and conceptually colored religious experiences manage to direct us on those properties. But if we don’t know whether world-directed religious experiences could actually succeed in directing us on religious objects, then we also don’t know whether our doxastic practices could justify any religious beliefs based on those experiences. Appealing to religious doxastic practices is an epistemological nonstarter unless we’ve shown that religious experiences can in fact have the religious content they purport to have.

Still, these shortcomings do not undermine the considerable value of the book for what it does do, which is to explore the complexities of grounding our analysis of “spirituality” in a perceptual model via the incorporation of recent literature in aesthetics and the emotions. Wynn succeeds admirably in provoking the advocates of that model into deeper engagements with that literature.