Constructive Realism, Incarnation
& Experience of God

Jeffrey S. Privette

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The University of Edinburgh
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I, Jeffrey S. Privette, hereby declare that I have composed the following thesis and that it is my own work.

1 October 2001
Abstract

This dissertation works at the borderlands of philosophy and theology. It represents an attempt to think theologically about epistemology and ecclesiology, both within the context of the realism/antirealism debate and with sustained reference to the logic of the Incarnation.

PART I (The Ethics of Experience) and PART II (The Epistemology of Experience) deal with the role of language and interpretation in experience generally, as well as with some of the curious philosophical problems that foreshadows. I acknowledge that experience is largely a function of language, that there is, owing to one’s past, one’s present context, and one’s embodied existence in the world, interpretation in experience, not only discovery but creation as well. It is not possible to escape the limitations of flesh and finitude. But thinking incarnationally throughout, I explore the extent to which experience of God is, providentially, both incarnate and decisively shaped by the Incarnation; experience (of God) is not only in the flesh and concerned with the flesh, but also indissolubly related to the flesh of God in Christ.

In PART III (The Ecclesiology of Experience) I unpack the logic of the Incarnation within the context of the life of incarnate Christian community, and so consider the complex relation of Christian language and language-related activities to Christian experience. How do the ecclesial practices of prayer, proclamation and eucharist affect (and effect) Christian experiences of God, and how, further, does sharing interpretive burdens prevent experience from becoming private or incommunicable? To what extent is Christian experience a function of the language and concepts of Christian community? In what way(s) does Christian experience depend for its possibility and intelligibility on the community’s gospel, enacted and embodied in the community’s worship, catechesis, and practice? In what sense is it true, Christianly speaking, that to experience is to embody and to embody is to experience? How does Christian experience shape the community’s identity and sustain its worship and witness? Thus, naturally, the ecclesial community shifts from the background to the foreground, and the vital function it performs in distilling Christian concepts, developing interpretive aptitudes, and nurturing Christian experience is outlined.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point of equilibrium beyond realism and idealism?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive realism and mediated reality</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART I: THE ETHICS OF EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kant’s Philosophical Bequest</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two stems of knowledge</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A finder of reality</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Kant epistemologically</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bumping up against human finitude</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant’s fabled confession</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Husserl’s Return to the Object?</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological concerns, common and uncommon</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading a perpetual beginner</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracketing the world</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracketing and ‘bracketing’: a clarification</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionality</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A crude ego cogito</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitution</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The transcendental spectator</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tryst with idealism</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Glimpses of Realism</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogy and direct experiential awareness</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two caveats</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alston’s naive realism</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varieties of conceiving</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hick’s epistemically negligible realism</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft conceptualism</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On seeing different things and the same thing differently</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To recapitulate</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART II: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE</strong></td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Presentations &amp; the Given</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few distinctions</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature and necessity of the object</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemic and non-epistemic realism</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performative incoherence and proper basicality</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant’s discursivity thesis</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kant’s principle of perspective</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The realist implication of Kant’s transcendalism</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husserl’s denial of the Kantian distinction</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alston’s realist theory of appearing</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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The controversy around the subject of the epistemology of religious experience has thickened in recent days, perhaps especially among philosophers of religion and theologians with developed philosophical awarenesses. And the sides in this irritable debate are well demarcated and jealously protected. Typically, the supporters of religious experience (experience here loosely defined as a human encounter with God that has religious significance)\(^1\) concern themselves with establishing the existence of God, as a distinct plausibility, if not a proof, on the basis of experience of God – experience of God allegedly serving as a truth conducive, evidential source of belief and knowledge about God.\(^2\) Another common approach, which appears to be a subtle (or subtly circular) version of the former, is to presume or bracket the reality of God, a reality which (it is supposed) cannot be compressed or captured in a syllogism, and then proceed to defend the rationality of forming (and retaining) beliefs in the light of experiences of God, or religious experiences, occasionally returning to the initial presumption to suggest that it is more than presumption.\(^3\) There are others who are just as deeply committed to the possibility of experiential awareness of God, but who ‘sanctify’ themselves by being more boisterous and more radical in their denial that God is a item in the universe to be discovered, digested

\(^1\) William Alston, one of the primary interlocutors of this thesis, prefers the following definition: ‘I will term “mystical” any experience that is taken by the subject to be a direct awareness of (what is taken to be) Ultimate Reality or (what is taken to be) an object of religious worship’ (‘Literal and Nonliteral in Reports of Mystical Experience’, in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 80).


and domesticated; and, in the spirit of that denial, they are more interested in clarifying, say, the Christianness of the community’s witness and experience than in defending that witness and experience against irrationality or according to extrinsic rational standards. Religious experience, construed in such ways, will always have animadverters.

It will become obvious that I have more in common with the radical (some would say, radically sectarian) philosophers/theologians. But the approach I take is more integrative, and the fact that it pursues a radical modesty is no accident. I shall not foolishly try to argue God into existence, as if God were an irresistible inference from some profound experience or the necessary conclusion of a powerful argument. Nor shall I be especially bothered to show that beliefs formed in the fray or aftermath of ‘religious’ experience are justified, or justifiable, or rationally acceptable, or not irrational, or whatever; I happen to believe that some such case can be made with force and cogency, but as far as it is sustained in this discussion it is only adventitious. I shall concern myself instead with experience of the Christian God, or Christian experience of God: with what it looks like from within (so to

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1 See George Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (London: SPCK, 1984); Charles M. Wood, The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); William C. Placher, The Domestication of Transcendence (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996); see also Nicholas Lash, Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); and Bruce D. Marshall, Trinity and Truth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Quite naturally, Bruce Marshall, along with Placher, Wood, and others, has (having studied with Frei and Lindbeck) been shaped by the postliberalism of the so-called Yale school. But in his recent book, Trinity and Truth, Marshall is concerned to address, overtly and with both seriousness and a high degree of philosophical acuity, questions of truth, meaning, and justification, and he does just this by engaging such influential (but among theologians, he says, often neglected) analytic philosophers as Quine, Davidson, and Dummett. Hence his attempt ‘to bridge the gap between theology and analytic philosophy’ (xi). Marshall is thus, according to Sue Patterson, an important participant in what she dubs a hybridizing movement in theology (Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 5).


3 Kierkegaard reminds us that proofs are either foolish or futile: for if God exists, no argument is needed; but if God does not exist, no argument, however subtle and sophisticated, can bring it about that he does.
speak) and *how* it is occasioned, nurtured, regulated. To what extent is Christian experience a function of the language and concepts of Christian community? In what way(s) does Christian experience depend for its possibility and intelligibility on the community's gospel, enacted and embodied in the community's worship, catechesis, practice, and so on? In what sense is it true, Christianly speaking, that to experience is to embody and to embody is to experience? How does Christian experience shape the community's identity and sustain its worship and witness? And what sort of universal potential do the very particular Christian claims and experiences possess or portend? I shall be addressing these questions, especially in Chapters 6-8. Very simply, I hope to interpret, or provide a theology of, interpretation in (Christian) experience.

There are corollaries. If language determines what experiences one may have, as well as the warp and woof of those experiences, must one concede that language constructs (eclipses) reality? I shall argue, in protracted fashion, that interpretation in experience is unavoidable: But does that imply that God, and with him reality, is either unreal or permanently out of reach? And what if every experience is (because interpreted) diminished, defiled, tainted, marred in some nontrivial way? Does such an 'interpretive predicament' require epistemological antirealism? Both nature and nurture have conspired to make us interpretive creatures, so naturally we cannot escape the world we inhabit and the traditions which influence and shape us. There is no *direct* access to reality: all experience – of oneself, of others, of the world of which both are a part, of God who is not of this world – is mediated; there is, if you will, a socio-linguistic shape and structure to human experience and identity. I have no interest in denying this set of facts. Rather, acknowledging this (un)happy scenario, I contend that reality, from the ordinary to the sublime, does not automatically thereby exceed the human
interpretive grasp (glimpse); from the fact that there is no unmediated access to reality it will not follow that there is no access.

I confess that it is not in my nature to be hyper-sceptical about the objective otherness of the external world; hard as I try – and as an intellectual exercise I have tried – I am unable to force myself to doubt what is impossible to doubt, consistently at any rate; and anyway, questioning the world in which we are thoroughly immersed, which is always already with us and we with it, strikes me as a perfectly dotty thing to do.¹ I do, however, find a sort of scepticism (read: provisionality) about what may be known of this world and God both more natural and more compelling. For hard as I try – and as an intellectual exercise I have tried – I am unable to escape the compelling ubiquitous evidence that human beings are human beings, after all: limited, biased, prone to paint partial pictures, prone also to shut their eyes to what is around them. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s scornful remarks press the point:

The owlet, Atheism,
Sailing on obscene wings across the moon,
Drops his blue-fringed lids, and shuts them close,
And hooting at the glorious sun in heaven,
Cries out, ‘Where is it?’

I am not a metaphysical idealist: the world – imposing, multifaceted, elusive – does not quite depend upon a subject’s perceptions or mental operations for its objective existence or the depth and richness of its being. (Presumably if there were no humans on the scene what is left of the world, however meager, would remain for a time.) This position, as is well-known, is sometimes blamed on Kant. I shall argue in Chapter 2 that the criticism does not stick; in dialogue with Kant and Husserl, I

¹ So Karl Popper: ‘[T]he greatest scandal of philosophy is that, while all around us the world of nature perishes – and not the world of nature alone – philosophers continue to talk, sometimes cleverly and sometimes not, about the question of whether this world exists’ (Objective Knowledge [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 32).
shall try to show that metaphysical idealism, at least in some of its bombastic forms, is awkward and counter-intuitive. My overriding concerns are epistemological, however. How do human beings (I want to ask), constrained as they are by prejudice, conditioned as they are by time, place and the presence of others, experience reality? I am a constructive realist: the world does depend upon a subject’s involvement for its being known and engaged, so experiencing reality will naturally be sloppy at times and very human. In this thesis I try to spell out a cautious critical realism, according to which both the prejudices of language and the presence or otherness of the world influence experience. In the end, human beings are human beings, and interpretive moments are an essential part of any human experience whatever: so I also anticipate a hermeneutical (ecclesial) programme which may help us both get involved with reality and know when we have failed to interpret well (Chapter 8).

There are other volatile queries to consider. If different languages or engagements with reality delimit different ranges of human experience, how does one avoid some sort of pandemic relativism or irreducible pluralism. Reality is always seen from a particular perspective, a conditioned and necessarily partial point of view, and every glimpse of something other, the frontier beyond, simultaneously discloses a boundary in the face of which one has to reckon with one’s own limitations.¹ So if one is going to slip the grip of relativism, must one finally propose an adjudication between perspectives or ways of life – or, at least, criteria for adjudication? But whose purported experience of God is to be privileged, one might ask? Whose perspective or way of life? For if all rational inquiry is in some sense ‘tradition-constituted inquiry’ (as MacIntyre claims), how is adjudication or even

meaningful comparison manageable?\textsuperscript{1} I agree that these are important questions; and this thesis touches on them, but in a quite irrevocably partial and unsystematic way. For here I am not offering a comparison of religions and religious languages, worlds and worldviews. I am considering the Christian religion: I am asking how its experiences of God are fecundated by a Christian way of life (and vice-versa), and how uniquely Christian identity is developed and sustained through such experiences of God.

It is true, a variety of linguistic contexts may, if entered, open the possibility of some kind of experience of God; I shall keep such ‘wounds of possibility’ open. But the linguistic construct with which I am ultimately dealing is the Christian gospel, embedded in the context of the life and bustle of the community for whom that gospel is the normative authority. How do the gospel (text) and the gospel community (context) together function in creating and supporting experience of God? PART I (The Ethics of Experience) and PART II (The Epistemology of Experience) deal with the role of language and interpretation in experience generally, as well as with some of the curious philosophical problems that foreshadows. In PART III (The Ecclesiology of Experience) I shall be considering the implications all this has for Christian experience – exploring how, for example, interpretive practices affect (and effect) Christian experiences of God, and how sharing interpretive burdens prevents experience from becoming merely private and unassailably self-enclosed. If all experiences are shaped and structured by language and language-related activities,\textsuperscript{2} then some sort of linguistic/interpretive context will

\textsuperscript{1} Alastair MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

\textsuperscript{2} I shall be using this phrase frequently in this thesis, especially in Chapter 8 where I try to connect learning the Christian language and developing Christian identity to the language-related activities of the Christian community, particularly prayer, proclamation and eucharist. I am using the ‘language-related activities’ category to circumscribe the central Christian practices that both create the conditions for acquiring the relevant linguistic habits and constitute the relevant linguistic habits, and that (therefore) serve a crucial identity-sustaining function.
be both ineluctable and indispensable in establishing boundaries for personal encounter and interpretation.

I distinguish three distinct but commonly overlapping contexts/constructs within which interpretation of experience invariably takes place – the congenital, the cultural, and the communal (Christian). The *congenital context* is just the natural condition in which all men and women experience the world, that which is logically prior to any experience you please. There are, it would seem, concepts which are with us from birth, categories (or categorial dispositions) which make certain basic experiences possible, including, for example, the 'before/after' category, variously construed in spatial, temporal, causal and logical terms; I shall argue that there are no experiences whatever without such quite rudimentary concepts/categories. The *cultural context* broadens, or provides natural environment for, the congenital; it is developed around the concepts, ideas, beliefs and habits one acquires and forms, both unwittingly and wittingly, in ordinary living and learning and interacting in the world rather than those with which one is endowed from birth. And, finally, the *communal context* encompasses the concepts, beliefs, practices and dispositions one owns and learns in more localised settings, in religious traditions, for example, or, more specifically, sects or churches; and I shall argue that these distinctive and typically well-bred ideas, practices, and so on, transform not only the way one views the world and one's place in it, but also the meaning and significance of almost any experience you like.

I shall suggest that an ecclesial community is an example of a relevant communal context; and I shall try to show that distinctively Christian experiences of God depend for their intelligibility upon just such contexts (if you will: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Indeed it is the ecclesial community which provides narrative structure and structural accountability for Christian experience. In short, an ecclesial context, with its narrative vision of reality and its many interpretive resources, makes
possible peculiarly Christian awarenesses of God and creates unity and intelligibility in experience. Thus in PART III the ecclesial community shifts from the background to the foreground, and the vital function the church performs in distilling Christian categories, developing interpretive aptitudes, and nurturing Christian experience is outlined.

A few additional comments on context are needed. In this dissertation I enter discussions that are wide and varied, in one way or another contiguous to a great many vexing and longstanding debates in philosophy and theology alike; and that is as it should be in a thesis which depends as heavily as mine does on the conviction that language constitutes, or significantly shapes, human identity and activity, and determines in large measure both what one says and how one sees. (We shall see that it is also the case that human identity and activity stretch – and therefore continually constitute and shape – language.)\(^1\) The thesis should therefore work on different levels. For there are a number of perennially important questions on which it encroaches, and therefore a number of contemporary debates for which it has more than paltry relevance: the multifaceted debates between liberals and postliberals, foundationalists and nonfoundationalists, realists and antirealists, moderns and postmoderns, to name a few. Of course, each discussion is its own discussion, playing host to its own subtly different aims and assumptions, promising its own contribution to the larger public discourse – and I do not want uncharitably to deny or define away the differences. Indeed, in the context of the thesis as I have drawn it, it is appropriate to sustain, or at any rate seek, a balance between universal and particular. But it can be said, fairly I think, that each debate, intramural though it is, is attempting to deal with fundamental and fundamentally important questions – questions of language and thought, truth and rationality, knowledge and justification, individual (identity) and community, objectivism and relativism, the one and the

many, sin and salvation, and so on. I too address many of these questions, with varying degrees of depth and explicitness; and I confess that I do so not from no point of view (nor from every relevant point of view) but with reference to the many points of view these debates and movements recommend, and this in the hope of encouraging more genuine openness in dialogue, the sort of openness that makes genuine exchanges between philosophers and theologians, and therefore change and reconciliation, possible.
1

Introduction

Any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one – Hilary Putnam

Caught in a web of words, and making some contribution to the clarification and healing of our discourse, it is not surprising that philosophy makes such progress as it does through criticism and disciplined disagreement – Nicholas Lash

One of the most intractable problems of philosophy is the precise nature of the exchange between the knower and the known in a moment of experience. How can one know that one’s putative experiences of the world (or God) have a footing in reality, or that one’s impressions of things external to the mind more or less correspond to the way things are – or, for that matter, that there even are things in the world to which the mind fortuitously corresponds? For, indeed, experience of the world may well just be a beguiling phantasm, a sinister hoax, an optical illusion, on a par with seeing a mirage in a desert. Maybe nothing exists beyond the grey matter of one’s mind, and the resilient doctrine of solipsism is true after all; or maybe the world is just too vast to be experienced, so vast and variegated that, even when it is encountered, it is never experienced with sufficient clarity – rather like seeing a magician’s act in a dark room.

As for experience of God, there is a chance it is merely psychical, a mental aberration, a potent delusion drummed up by feelings of inadequacy and trepidation.4

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2 I am not using the word ‘precise’ precisely: for in the penumbra of experience precision either is not present or is hard to perceive.
3 For a brief discussion, see Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For a brisk and imaginative treatment, see Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). I admit this knower/known language is unnatural and somewhat old-fashioned, so I shall try to use it sparingly, and only, I trust, when the context seems to call for it.
4 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1951). Freud, for example, in one of his more congenial moments, remarks: ‘These [religious ideas], which are given out as
Perhaps, analogously, experience of God closely resembles some peculiar and peculiarly hazy feeling, say the feeling of awe, or transcendence,\(^1\) or otherness,\(^2\) or utter dependence\(^3\) – arouses or is aroused, willy-nilly, by the relevant feeling. These are possibilities. But it is also possible that experience of God really reaches and reflects the real; but what is the real, and how would one reach or be reached by it? God may exist; and if God exists, and one actually experiences God, then, clearly, one experiences (I have not said ‘one clearly experiences’) more than one’s demented imagination.\(^4\)

It is not obvious, at first blush, how one would sort out one suspicion from any other. For if God is more than a ‘fiction fabricated’ (in Rescher’s phrase), then there is a nontrivial difference between veridical and non-veridical experience; and it will follow that veridical experience of God is more than delusion and more than feeling – though, presumably, a genuinely human experience of God would involve feeling (and delusion too, no doubt), a sense of peace, awe, ambivalence, (false) comfort, or whatever.\(^5\) But if God does not exist, and that too is a possibility, an experience of God is simply an experience of oneself, one of those notorious

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5 For a treatment of experience and ambivalence, in addition to Otto’s classic account, see Merold Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 24-68.
projections, or an experience of someone or something else, immensity, or otherness, or a bewitching sense of purpose. In experience of God – if he exists – one has to do, obviously, not with anything like normal sensory experience; presumably experience of God, whatever it happens to be, will be something else, something other, abnormal sensory experience, perhaps, or non-sensory or extra-sensory or supra-sensory experience; and this is not at all to beg the question but simply to acknowledge at the outset a recalcitrant fact that complicates any discussion of God and/in human experience.

A point of equilibrium beyond realism and idealism?

Another way of broaching these issues is to ask whether there is a future for religious epistemology, some point of equilibrium beyond the seemingly insoluble tension between realism and idealism. Is there any way of advancing the discussion, contributing to the debate, overcoming the impasse? The question is significant and involved; indeed even the simplest questions about realism and idealism are labyrinthine. So the simple questions – What is realism? What is idealism? – cannot be answered simply. For there are many views and versions of each. There are popular views and views that no longer enjoy popularity, flourishing views and languishing views – to say nothing of views that simply dwell in obscurity; and then there are numerous nuances, compressions, and amendments of each. Some versions share a basic outlook; others look more like different species than distantly related theories.

Broadly speaking, realism’s central thrust is that the physical objects which inhabit (or constitute) the world really exist, that the world, with its kaleidoscope features, its complexes of events and states of affairs, exists apart from all
perceptual/conceptual activity.\(^1\) Idealism – again, broadly speaking – affirms that all that exists is in the mind, is mind (or is reducible to the mental), or is inseparable from the mind’s (or a mind’s) operations.\(^2\) The first two variations in the trio are principally metaphysical; the third is essentially epistemological. If all is in the mind, like a fecund dream or an irrational fear, then maybe solipsism is true; if, on the other hand, all is mind/mental, then perhaps absolute idealism or some other sort of metaphysical monism is true; but if everything that is experienced is precisely thereby inseparable from (but not obviously reducible to) the mind/mental, then

\(^1\) So Alston: ‘[W]hatever there is is what it is regardless of how we think of it’ (‘Yes, Virginia, There Is a Real World’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 52, 6 [1979], 779-780). In his most recent book, which has just come into my possession, Alston qualifies his position in the following way: ‘I will be thinking of metaphysical realism as holding that large stretches of reality do not depend on our conceptual and theoretical choices for existing and being what they are’ (*A Sensible Metaphysical Realism* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001], 10). This is an austere non-epistemic realism, combining the supposition that there are realities that exist independently of human cognition, with the corollary that those realities are what they are independent of human apprehension, regardless of what or how anyone thinks of them (truth outruns justification). To get a thoroughly epistemic realism, just conflate truth value and epistemic status: stipulate that what one thinks, under just the right conditions, more or less matches the way things are, such that truth and justification share a common fate (truth just is justification); epistemic realism fully accepts that one cannot jump out of one’s skin to view the world, but also assumes that it is wildly implausible that most of our beliefs about the world could turn out to be false or radically mistaken. It is worth noting that not every realist is a realist concerning the existence of physical objects; indeed one can be realist (or non-realist) about all sorts of entities or phenomena other than physical objects – objective moral principles, propositions, numbers, universals, paranormal forces, textual meaning, and such like; Alston calls these ‘departmental realisms’. (See Michael Dummett, *The Seas of Language* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997], especially Chapter 11; for a realist account of textual meaning (‘critical hermeneutic realism’), see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 300-303; and for an intriguing openness to the possibility of paranormal cognition, see H. H. Price, *Essay in the Philosophy of Religion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972], 21-36). One may be a realist about mental states, about the privileged access one has to the contents of one’s own consciousness, but a non-realist (a skeptic, perhaps) or anti-realist with regard to the ontologically distinct existence of the world; one may be both a commonsense realist and an anti-scientific-realist, as it were simultaneously affirming the existence of observable entities and denying the existence of unobservable entities (see Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 137-153); one may, with alacrity, affirm the reality of the mind-independent world, as well as the reality of other minds, but deny (or doubt) that one has the conceptual wherewithal to experience the world reliably or the language potential to represent the world truthfully to oneself and others – in which case one is both a simple metaphysical realist and an epistemological anti-realist (see C. Stephen Evans, ‘Realism and antirealism in Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 154-176).

\(^2\) ‘We shall understand by [idealism] the doctrine that whatever exists, or at any rate whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental’ (Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 37).
assuredly something like critical realism or critical idealism tells the truer story.¹ These are just approximations, of course; for each theory is pliable and pregnant, pretty easily complicated or simplified, supplemented or stripped down to the bare essentials.²

On the simpler side, for example, there is naive or direct realism, a controversial view with nearly as many detractors as defenders. According to naive realism – and this is the controversy – external things, such as trees, sand dunes, cow dung, people in swirling motion, are directly perceived, or directly perceivable, without breach or interposition between the percipient and the external world; since, then, no masquerading sense data or mental images interfere, the way it seems will match or track the way it is, or largely the way it is. Similarly, there is common-sense realism which, like naive realism, takes for granted that external things are neither conditioned nor created by their being perceived. And then there is critical realism, which, depending on the spin, may be as close to simple idealism as to naive realism; its impressive (or dubious) achievement is that it integrates, or tries to integrate, elements from both realism and idealism into one coherent theory, tries, that is to say, to combine points of view without compromising the integrity of either. It is realist inasmuch as it affirms the reality of the world, sees the world as something (or rather many things) independent of perception, as something that does not depend for its existence on its being perceived; and it is loosely idealist inasmuch as it claims that objects – when they are perceived – are, in effect, mediated to, by and for the percipient, and for that reason cannot be divorced from the percipient’s biases, language, situation in life, history, and so on. On this view, mind-independent reality cannot be experienced mind-independently: one does enjoy

¹ Russell contends that, despite an otherwise exasperating number of real disagreements, most philosophers (including idealists) agree that tables and chairs and other common objects are real in some sense. 'In fact, almost all philosophers seem to be agreed that there is a real table' (The Problems of Philosophy, 15).

² And each theory will look subtly different when applied in different disciplines and viewed from different perspectives.
access to reality, but not direct, immediate, unencumbered access. And this is not meant to be trivially true, a truism. As for idealism, the views, metaphysical and epistemological, vary enormously, sprawl out in quite dizzying array, ranging from Kant’s transcendental (‘critical’) idealism to Hegel’s (‘absolute’) idealism, and along the continuum in between Berkeley’s (‘dogmatic’) idealism, Descartes’ (‘problematic’) idealism, and countless others fall. I shall say precious little about Hegel; but I shall discuss Berkeley and Descartes, and some of the ways in which their views can be shaded, when I get into the primeval forest of Kant’s transcendentalism.¹

In the end, accessing reality may be as straightforward as some versions of realism imply; but such nice and easy contact leaves one wondering how the panoply of conflicting beliefs about reality is to be explained. Suppose that what is presented in experience is there, available, stable; and suppose that human perceptions are responsive, reliable, and largely unhindered: should one not expect to find more euphony among claims of knowledge and belief? On the other hand, if accessing reality is as cumbrous as some versions of idealism imply, then perhaps one has good reason to wonder how one could ever know – and know with any confidence whatsoever – that one knows more than the shouts and rustlings of one’s own consciousness. Indeed, there are countless rival conceptions of the world and humanity’s place in it, not all of which are companionable. On the simple realist model this seems a little odd and hard to figure; on the idealist model the dissonance may be depressing but is certainly not surprising. Suppose there is a gap between what is presented – the ‘given’ – and what is perceived (or, worse, a gap between

what is and what is presented); and suppose one discovers in the gap only the representations of objects in one’s mind; suppose, further, that a real and profound chasm permanently disjoins presentations from perceptions, that one cannot, despite one’s earnestness, connect up one’s perception of things to things in the real world: Is it reasonable for one to expect eventually to know (an item or segment of) reality as it is, or nearly as it is, or should one rather learn to be sanguine about not knowing whether one knows anything at all – happy and content with knowing (?) reality (?) only as one reads it?

The basic objectives of PART I are relatively modest. First, and primarily, I seek to acquaint the reader with some of the ethical and epistemological issues which figure centrally in this thesis. Naturally I am concerned not just with common issues – or the issues as they are commonly discussed – but also with the truth and with the

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1 This is a false dilemma, of course: for the options are not either classical foundationalism or antirealist relativism. In between, there is fallibilism (and a garrison of related options) according to which one may know truly and contextually without knowing exhaustively or apodictically. As Hilary Putnam puts it: ‘The dichotomy: either ahistorical unchanging canons of rationality or cultural relativism is a dichotomy that I regard as outdated’ (Reason, Truth and History [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], x). According to Kierkegaard, for example, all (historical) knowledge is approximative (Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], 21-49). In the immediacy of experience there is no deception; but as soon as one moves from immediacy to reflection, the object of experience becomes an object of thought and therefore an incertitude – in other words, when a physical object (being) is thought, it, in effect, ceases to exist in actuality, or rather comes to exist in possibility and, therefore, in radical uncertainty. So Kierkegaard: ‘Immediate sensation and immediate cognition cannot deceive. This alone indicates that the historical cannot become the object of sense perception or of immediate cognition, because the historical has in itself that very illusiveness that is the illusiveness of coming into existence.... For example, when the perceiver sees a star, the star becomes dubious for him the moment he seeks to become aware that it has come into existence. It is just as if reflection removed the star from his senses’ (Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, 81). C. Stephen Evans sums up the pressing point: ‘In claiming that historical knowledge can never be more than approximative, Kierkegaard is not denying the independence of the object of knowledge. On the contrary, he is presupposing it. Even the best and most exact human knowledge is subject to error, because existing objects have an “illusiveness” that is grounded in their independence of us and our concepts and methods of knowing’ (C. Stephen Evans, ‘Realism and antirealism in Kierkegaard’s Postscript’, 166). For a development of Kierkegaard’s fallibilism, see Myron Penner, ‘Kierkegaard’s Post-Enlightenment Subject: The Grammar and Goal of Belief’ (Ph.D. Diss. University of Edinburgh, 2001). There are also balanced hermeneutic positions that both welcome the demise of foundationalism and resist the claims of relativism, and in this way sustain a viable middle way. See Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983); Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and David Tracy, On Naming the Present (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 131-139.
implications those issues hold for the truth as I see it; the truth matters (to me), and I will endeavour to write and argue in ways that serve the truth about God, humanity and world, the truth that is at once immanent and transcendent, simultaneously within and beyond our grasp; **PART I**, then, is both descriptive and polemic, exegetical and argumentative. This dissertation's fundamental interest is (Christian) experience (of God); and since the baleful shadow of the realism/idealism debate always seems to stalk such discussions, I also, secondly, begin to suggest a way to mediate the long-standing opposition and move beyond impasse.¹ My hope is that the way I adumbrate shall prove salutary and illuminating as we continue to ask irksome questions about the possibility and intelligibility of Christian experience of God.

To satisfy the first objective I enter conversation with two **idealists**, Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl, both of whom remain massively influential philosophers.² I shall suggest that Kant is a mediating philosopher, at least more

¹ Fergus Kerr remarks: 'But the realist versus anti-realist dispute now begins to seem so profound that one cannot help remembering what Renford Bambrough has called Ramsey’s maxim: when a dispute between two parties is chronic there must be some false assumption that is common to the two parties, the denial of which will lead to the resolution of the dispute' (‘Idealism and realism: an old controversy dissolved’, in Christ, Ethics and Tragedy: Essays in Honor of Donald MacKinnon, ed. Kenneth Surin [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 21). Kerr will argue, following Wittgenstein (and Heidegger), that the false assumption is ‘the subject-object problem to which realism and idealism offer themselves as rival solutions’ (25). To sunder language from reality, the subject who uses language from the world he inhabits, is to create the portentous gap that creates the problem of representation – the very problem which sustains the realism/idealism debate (24-26). Kerr seems to be suggesting that the way to dissolve the debate – or break its seductive spell – is to deny the gap by affirming the place of the subject in the always already inhabited world. I shall make a similar suggestion.

² It is important to show (especially as I try to develop an identity for my own position) that influential philosophers of past generations, still exercising almost hypnotic influence in the present, have grappled with the same or similar issues, and have elaborated positions that, in myriad and surprising ways, inspire, refine and chasten my own. No one contests that Kant has been influential; but precisely what his epistemic views were – and how everything in his critical philosophy hangs together – is a matter of lively debate. I read Kant as espousing a version of constructivism that is compatible with realism; and so in the course of things I curiously explore what a **realist** religious epistemology might look like from a broadly neo/Kantian perspective. Husserl’s influence has also been wide-spread and enduring. But it seems to me (and I shall make this point in Chapter 3) that Husserl defends a version of subjective idealism that is uncongenial to realism; and so in the course of this thesis I explore some of the deficiencies of a religious epistemology from a Husserlian perspective, and some of the ways in which Husserl could be modified/abandoned to revitalise a moribund realism.
mediating than is usually supposed: his sober-minded epistemological *via media* invites us to dodge both the seductive embrace of dogmatism and the final descent into scepticism in epistemology, and this *by* making it hard to be either naive or depressed about the world and our experience of it; and even if Kant did not go far enough (some will insist that he went too far), there is much in him to aid those who wish to go farther. Husserl, on the other hand, is essentially a radical philosopher: his cloying and undisguised Cartesian project reveals just how easy it is for a stubborn preoccupation – the possibility of finding an absolute foundation for knowledge – to sustain the suspicion that (for example) perception, because incomplete, is unreliable; this in turn convinces many, as it did Husserl, that reality is not (knowable) outside the contents of the original consciousness of the Ego.¹ To simplify, I shall argue that Kant’s critical philosophy provides some of the resources out of which we can construct an improved critical realism, and in so doing enables us to see through and beyond some of the current and apparently fashionable hurly-burly in epistemology – if only for a moment and if only in part; by contrast, Husserl’s philosophical project clearly chronicles the dangers of realism disillusioned and lost (= radical idealism).

My initial suggestions for advancing the epistemological discussion are cultivated in dialogue with two professing realists, William Alston and John Hick. Both Alston and Hick have attempted constructively to relieve the perennial tension in religious epistemology, and so their proposals deserve critical scrutiny. Alston is a philosopher in the tradition of Reid; accordingly he is *at times* unduly optimistic about the possibility of unfettered perceptual experience of God and world. I have no intention of disparaging his contributions in epistemology; from him there is indeed much to learn. But for all his dexterity and fairness, I do not see that Alston actually provides a satisfactory answer or alternative to Kant; in other words, Alston

¹ The inherent instability of the senses, of sense perception, has worried others as well, notably Plato and Descartes.
does not adequately account for the subject's categorial involvements and impositions, those devious but ubiquitous moment(s) of conception and interpretation in all experience. Hick, by contrast, is an inconsistent Kantian, or rather a theologian self-consciously working in the tradition of Kant. But for all his noble trying – and with all his talk of tolerance and intellectual humility one must take his nobility for granted – he creates more confusion than he dispels. In making room for conception, interpretation, judgement in experience, Hick effectively exiles God from the realm of experience; and in the end one wonders whether Hick's proposal can be rescued from incoherence. Now I hope to learn from both the insights and oversights of Alston and Hick, with an eye on Kant and Husserl at all times; so, mediating along the way, I shall try to develop an integrative religious epistemology that makes the most of the interests and insights of both realism and idealism, objectivism and subjectivism, without facilely and fatally absorbing the one into the other.

**Constructive realism and mediated reality**

The position this thesis proposes is a nuanced critical realism, what I shall call *constructive realism*. I am not sceptical about the world around me; I believe it is real, and I do not believe that this fundamental belief needs justification (certainly not verification). Of course, I also believe that the world is vast, uncontrollable, mysterious, too vast and too mysterious to be controlled; and for this reason (and for other reasons I shall soon disclose) I shudder to think that when I see I see without obscurity or bias, that I actually know a fair amount of what can be known. The

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1 What J. Wentzel van Huyssteen says about his critical realism applies well enough to the constructive realism I shall be developing in this thesis: "'Realism' in 'critical realism' thus refers to the attempt at reliable cognitive claims about domains of reality that lie beyond our experience, but to which interpreted experience is our only epistemic access' (Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 44). I should not want to limit contact to the cognitive; but I am happy enough with the articulation.
world is complex, textured, inexhaustibly rich, fascinating; I am too frail to take it all in, too personally attached to take any of it in without error, prejudice or fragmentation; and I cannot see the world of which I am a part from every perspective any more than I can see it (or myself) from no point of view in particular.¹

This is not the place to elaborate constructive realism – that, after all, is a part of the larger movement of the thesis; but I should briefly comment on the qualifier constructive. Human experience is the realm with which we are concerned, and perception is the paradigmatic mode of experience on which we focus throughout. The qualifier, then, points to the nature of all human experience and, by extension, all perceptual activity: perception is active, predatory, constructive, I shall argue. It creates even when it discovers; it typically gives as much as it takes; with the help of concepts, it imposes – ordering, structuring, closing and creating gaps in experience. But the qualifier is also meant to suggest that constructing in experience is not always pernicious (and therefore not always lamentable): when one thinks about or otherwise senses reality, it is thereby mediated; and, what is more, precisely because reality is mediated, it may be humanly experienced – experienced in a way that is appropriate for human beings. I shall of course be saying more about these contentions as the thesis finds its stride. For now, suffice it to say that constructive realism – particularly as regards experience of God – is itself created/discovered in the context of a thesis that wrestles with the legacy of Kant, avoids the excess(es) of Husserl, nuances the naive realism of Alston, and modifies the quasi-realism of Hick.

¹ I prefer Merold Westphal’s way of expressing the matter: ‘Now that the search for truth “after Babel” has replaced the presumption of “the view from nowhere,” we can be more honest and less guilty about the fact that our transcendental egos are quite concrete, quite particular, quite laden with presuppositions derived from our belonging to various traditions’ (‘Taking Plantinga Seriously’, Faith and Philosophy April [1999], 175).
PART I: THE ETHICS OF EXPERIENCE
Kant’s Philosophical Bequest

Is it then mind that makes the world? No.... The appearances integrated through the categories are appearances of 'things in themselves', 'things' to which, however, we have no access as they are in themselves, but only as they appear to us – Marjorie Grene

'[W]e can know a priori of things only what we ourselves put into them.' Thus announces Kant, but his words are both ambiguous and controversial (or perhaps controversial only if the ambiguity goes unnoticed). Does he mean that in all knowing one knows only oneself – that is, that reality is from first to last a human construction, a human invention? Or does he mean, rather, that in all human knowing one never knows apart from oneself, never knows the objective apart from the subjective?

Two stems of knowledge

A condensed examination of Kant’s critical philosophy will suffice to reveal that this first rendition is grossly simplistic and hopelessly sceptical. In Kant’s critical philosophy, there are two branches or stems of human knowledge: the first, sensibility, concerns the givenness of objects to the senses, and the second, understanding, concerns the conception (thinking) of objects antecedent to, independent of, or in conjunction with their being given. For Kant sensibility and

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understanding are not interchangeable, and one cannot have knowledge of
determinate objects without both stems working in conjunction; in other words,
sensibility and understanding are complementary moments or activities, together
accounting for empirical human knowledge.¹ Kant’s own words are illuminating
here:

*Understanding and sensibility, with us, can determine objects only when they are employed in conjunction. When
we separate them, we have intuitions without concepts, or
concepts without intuitions — in both cases, representations
which we are not in a position to apply to any determinate
object.*

There is, it is true, a sense in which objects may be conceived independent of their
being given (mermaids no less than meadows); it does not follow, of course, that
such objects necessarily exist and certainly not that they are created *ex nihilo* — that
in being conceived or thought an object, as it were, pops into existence and apart
from its being so conceived it vanishes, flickers out of existence. As Paul Guyer
observes: ‘To think that our pure concepts literally caused their objects would be to
think of ourselves as, like the *intellectus archetypus*, creating objects simply by
conceiving of them, and that would be as baseless as it was heretical.’³ Soon we
shall see that this way of expressing things may be intimated on a tenable reading of
Husserl’s theory of constitution;⁴ but I shall argue, here as well as at crucial points
along the way, that there is a sense in which Kant *is not* (merely) a constructivist, an
important sense in which Kant’s constructivism is distinguishable from Husserl’s.
To be sure, as we shall see, (possible) objects of experience do not appear (to exist)

¹ See, for example, P. F. Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966).
² *CPR*, 274 (B314).
⁴ Paul Ricoeur’s remarks anticipate my own: ‘To put it positively, the “reduction” becomes the
“constitution” of the world for and in the subjective life of consciousness...nothing is except as a sense
in consciousness’ (Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology [Evanston: Northwestern University
Press, 1967], 177).
apart from the framework the mind imposes upon those objects, a framework through which the *existence* of objects is discerned and within which the *nature* of objects is determined. So both the forms of intuition and the forms of conception are required in order to account for the possibility and intelligibility of experience; but, I shall attempt to show, there is still a sense in which, for Kant, the world of experienced objects is at once really real and yet not the only, or ultimately, real thing.¹

A series of quotations from Kant both complicates and — ironically — clarifies the matter. Consider his appeal to Thales: ‘The true method, so he found, was not to inspect what he discerned either in the figure, or in the bare concept of it, and from this, as it were, to read off its properties; but to bring out what was necessarily implied in the concepts that he had himself formed *a priori*, and had put into the figure in the construction by which he presented it to himself.’² Recall also Kant’s well-worn reference to Galileo and others: ‘They learned that reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own, and that it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature’s leading-strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, *constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason’s own determining.*³

This latter quotation affords us some insight into Kant’s understanding of the nature of the interchange between the knower and the known in a moment of experience.⁴ There is no knowledge without a knower, not simply as passive/receptive but also, and chiefly, as active/productive. (I shall develop a concept of active receptivity from this in Chapter 7.) With a shift to the *synthetic a priori*, and to man’s productive contribution in knowing, Kant effectively and brilliantly moves beyond Plato and Aristotle, or perhaps reconciles them into a new

¹ Grene argues, provocatively and convincingly, that ‘Kant’s critical arguments were intended to elucidate, never to obscure or cast doubt on, the order and harmony of God’s creation’ (*The Knower and the Known*, 123).
² *CPR*, 19 (Bxii).
³ *CPR*, 20 (Bxiii). Emphasis mine.
⁴ There’s that arcane knower/known language again: but we are in conversation with Kant just now.
framework of sorts. The world, the universe, nature is, for Kant, no longer to be regarded as having inherent rational structures and therefore complete independent intelligibility; intelligibility is, if you will, projected rather than provided from within, is contingent on human categories and is therefore largely conferred. In the interests of clarity and brevity, it is better not to rehearse too much history of philosophy here. It should be enough, for our purposes, to recall that for both Plato and Aristotle, rational structure and symmetry inhere in nature and in the nature of things: this is true, for Plato, not because the sensible realm is ultimate but precisely because, though thick with shadows, it reflects the superstructures of the Forms, and can therefore be seen only through the right sort of reflection in which the knower re-establishes contact with, remembers, the ultimate reality (of the Forms) of which the lower realm partakes; but Aristotle, Plato’s most gifted student, departs from his teacher and overcomes Plato’s superstition, demythologises Plato, by condensing complete intelligibility to the rational structures of concrete particulars, thereby rendering appeal to the Forms redundant. Interestingly, however, on both models the truth of the matter, whatever the matter, is essentially discovery and correspondence (adaequatio): the knower conforms himself or is conformed to independent reality, and in that way acquires objective knowledge.

For Kant, on the other hand, simple seeing is not a matter a simple discovery; one does not see simply by looking, any more than one exercises simply by getting out of bed. One must make a contribution, force one’s presence and potential upon

1 ‘With Kant,’ Hilary Putnam claims, ‘a new view emerges: the view that truth is radically mind-dependent. It is not that the thinking mind makes up the world on Kant’s view; but it doesn’t just mirror it either’ (Meaning and Moral Science [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979], 1).

2 Stephen Palmquist presses the point: ‘Thus, for example, whereas Descartes’ metaphysics...assumes both Plato and Aristotle are wrong, Kant assumes both are right.... Plato was right to say that objects of experience are mere appearances of a thing in itself; for in saying this, he was adopting Kant’s “transcendental” perspective. Likewise, Aristotle was right to say appearances are the true objects of science (i.e., knowledge); for in saying this, he was adopting Kant’s “empirical” perspective. In both cases their mistakes were caused by the fact that they had not yet recognized their ignorance of the thing in itself’ (The Tree of Philosophy [Hong Kong: Philopsyychy Press, 1995], 41). The picture is more textured than this of course.

3 Stanley Hauerwas makes a similar point in The Peaceable Kingdom (Notre Dame: University of
the world. For Kant, indeed, there is no simple seeing: What one sees depends upon both what one creates and what questions one creatively asks – to put it adverbially, how one sees. ‘Nature will answer only such questions as we ask her. True, we must not invent the answers; these nature must provide. But she can provide nothing certain and stable except in terms of the questions we set and the conceptual scheme we provide to contain the answers.’ There is, evidently, a gap between the knower and the known which cannot be denied or arbitrarily closed. Kant, for his part, does not close the gap between the one who knows, the subject, and what is known, the object, by locating the object evenly or only in the mind, as I shall argue Husserl does; nor does he deny the gap by equating (or too closely aligning) the object with the categories, as I shall suggest Hick’s radical constructivism implies. Kant bridges the yawning chasm by introducing a ‘necessary’ distinction between objects of experience and those same objects as they exist beyond the space-time enclosure, beyond the realm of what may be properly experienced. With this move Kant hints that the world of experienced objects is at one and the same time really real and not the only, or ultimately, real thing. Here I shall have occasion only briefly to discuss how this distinction might be interpreted and what its implications are for a critically realist epistemology. (These questions receive much fuller attention in Chapters 5 and 6.)

_A finder of reality_

It would be difficult and no doubt careless, following these somewhat puzzling quotations, to ignore Kant’s emphasis on the subject’s involvement in all experience and knowing: the subject, it seems, is unmistakably and indissolubly caught in the

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Greene, _The Knower and the Known_, 129.
commotion of experience, and evidently Kant thinks this is to be celebrated; indeed just this insight is central to the logic of the Copernican revolution, as Kant himself fashions it. The question, at once daunting and tricky, is whether such categorial engagement precludes a subject’s finding reality or whether in fact, perhaps ironically, such engagement plays a pivotal role in facilitating the discovery of real dimensions and features of the world? Alternatively expressed, is Kant to be interpreted as a dogmatic idealist, in the fashion of Berkeley, or perhaps more charitably as a sceptical idealist, in the imago of Descartes; or is it possible that Kant’s idealism actually enables him to be, in the words of Donald MacKinnon, a finder of reality?

Some of Kant’s influential interpreters have accused him, inequitably I think, of having closet Berkeleian sympathies. According to Peter Strawson (and others), in equating appearances with ‘mere representations’ Kant infelicitously implies that when one knows an appearance, one knows only the correlates of one’s consciousness. This position is truly indiscreet, but I am not convinced that it is, upon close inspection, clearly Kantian; it is, if anything, more Husserlian than Kantian. After all, it was Husserl who, in distinguishing acts of experience (noeses)

1 ‘The dogmatic idealist would be one who denies the existence of matter, the sceptical idealist one who doubts its existence, because holding it to be incapable of proof’ (CPR, 350 [A377]).
2 See CPR, 344-352 (A367-380).
3 ‘[I]t is fundamental to his whole argument that neither understanding nor imagination creates its own objects. For Kant, to come to know what is the case is a finding, not a fashioning’ (Donald MacKinnon, The Problem of Metaphysics [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974], 7). Kant certainly understood how slippery the finding can sometimes be. Thus MacKinnon: ‘For all this he never abandons his underlying loyalty to the common-sense conviction that in coming to know we do not construct a world of our own fashioning, but compel that which is given to us to yield its secrets in ways admitting of our assimilation’ (The Problem of Metaphysics, 7). Correspondingly, MacKinnon suggests: ‘Kant’s refutation [of idealism] is interesting in itself; but in his work it is a necessary part of his subtle and strenuous effort to have the best of both worlds, to hold together a view which treated learning about the world as a finding, with one that regarded such learning as a constructive act’ (Explorations in Theology 5 [London: SCM Press, 1979], 138).
4 Peter Strawson’s comment is representative: ‘Kant, as transcendental idealist, is closer to Berkeley than he acknowledges’ (The Bounds of Sense, 22). According to Milton Munitz, Strawson’s reading of Kant is, on this score at least, ‘deflationary’ (The Question of Reality [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990], 72-75).
from objects of experience (noemata), intimated that objects are in the end only contents of and in the mind, not objects seen, as it were, with and through the mind's eye. Husserl admits as much: 'As a phenomenologist, I should therefore describe objects as correlata of intentional acts of consciousness, and in exact correlation with the latter.'

An act, according to Husserl, always entails (= intends) an object, a noema; thus consciousness is always consciousness of something. So far, so good. It soon becomes evident, however, that this something is not really a thing so much as a thought, the content of a thing enclosed in pure consciousness. Admittedly, what Husserl says, on the surface, bears some resemblance to what Kant says in his refutation of idealism, which shall be discussed in greater detail momentarily. But there is a vital difference. R. A. Mall, writing on the programmatic similarity between Hume and Husserl, remarks: 'The character of "immediate given" consists in its being given completely and bodily... Phenomenology strives to get at the "things themselves" (zu den Sachen selbst). These "things" are neither entities out there in the external world nor are they psychological activities of a psychophysiological ego-consciousness; they are the things in the sense of whatever is "given", that which we "see" in consciousness... The question whether this given is true or false, reality or appearance, is immaterial for phenomenological method'.

Mall further contends that 'The whole direction of the phenomenological philosophy is towards the objective in the sense of being "a given" as a correlate to the diverse acts of intentions. The method analyses and studies that which is loved in the act of loving, hated in the act of hating, imagined in the act of imagining and so forth'.

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2 See CPR, 244-252 (B275-287). It is noteworthy that Ricoeur considers Kant's refutation 'a definition of intentionality before its time' (Husserl, 184). Henry Allison suggests that the similarities between Kant and Husserl on intentionality are superficial (Idealism and Freedom [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 77-79).
4 Mall, Experience and Reason, 11.
The given, for Husserl, is not to be simply equated with a *sense-datum*, nor is the seeing to be strictly equated with the *sensible*; we shall have another opportunity to discuss Husserl and 'the given' in Chapter 5. It is somewhat ironic, I think, that Husserl censured Descartes for confusing acts of thought with objects of thinking, and thus for failing to recognise the 'intentional-relational' nature of all thinking and experiencing.\(^1\) Emmanuel Levinas asks a probing question in this regard: 'If consciousness is essentially intentionality and “presence in front of being,” rather than a reflection of being, how can we speak of a correspondence between the course of thought and the course of things?'\(^2\)

So there is, for Husserl, a natural correlative relationship between acts of experience and objects of experience, which he casts in terms of intentionality. It is not the most uncomplicated of relationships (an afternoon reading Chapter 4 of *Ideas* would suffice to show this), and of course there are more than a few ways to nuance it – and therefore more than a few ways to misunderstand it (no doubt, ‘involuntary misunderstandings’, in Maritain’s charitable phrase). Mall has succinctly described this noetic-noematic correlativity: ‘All experiences as they appear within our consciousness are necessarily referred to the objects experienced. Every thought is a thought of, for there is no such thing as thought, fear, imagination as such.’\(^3\) This seems, in passing, like a rewarding notion, a helpful way of keeping separate, instead of confusing, things which should always be kept separate. Husserl’s notion of intentionality, that is to say, urges a distinction between acts of experience and objects of experience: ‘Such a character of intentionality of all our “cogitations” leads us to distinguish sharply between the act of [noesis] thinking, remembering, fearing, imagining and the object [noema] thought of, remembered, feared and

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\(^1\) Mall, *Experience and Reason*, 12.


\(^3\) Mall, *Experience and Reason*, 13.
imagined.¹ But a sharp distinction is dubious and fragile, for both act and object are finally \textit{immanent} in consciousness; I shall make this objection explicit in Chapter 3. And the chasm swells between Husserl and Kant. For Kant argues, in his \textit{refutation of idealism}, that consciousness of self in time actually presupposes that not all is self – or, alternatively, that not all is immanent within the space of subjectivity. Kant puts it this way:

Thus perception of this permanent is possible only through a \textit{thing} outside me and not through the mere \textit{representation} of a thing outside me; and consequently the determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me.... In other words, the consciousness of my existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me.²

There is a reality – namely the world, ‘the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me’ – in a sense external to consciousness which may be accessed or \textit{interrogated} through consciousness;³ a more abstruse way of putting this is to say,

¹ Mall, \textit{Experience and Reason}, 12.
² \textit{CPR}, 245 (B276). Inner experience, along the lines of what Descartes was looking for, is possible only on the assumption of outer experience.
³ This interpretation makes a little more sense, according to Palmquist, when one appreciates the distinction in Kant between the transcendental and the empirical perspective (Stephen Palmquist, \textit{Kant's System of Perspectives} [Lanham: University Press of America, 1993], 27-55). So there are times in Kant when ‘objects’ are uncompromisingly considered real: ‘The transcendental idealist is, therefore, an empirical realist, and allows to matter, as appearance, a reality which does not permit of being inferred, but is immediately perceived’; ‘All outer perception, therefore, yields immediate proof of something real in space, or rather is the real itself. In this sense empirical realism is beyond question: that is, there corresponds to our outer intuitions something real in space’ (\textit{CPR}, 347 [A371]; 349 [A375]). Sometimes, however, objects seems more tenuous: ‘There can be no question that I am conscious of my representations; these representations, and I myself, who have the representations, therefore exist. External objects (bodies), however, are mere appearances, and are therefore nothing but a species of my representations, the objects of which are something only through these representations. Apart from them they are nothing’ (\textit{CPR}, 346 [A371]). With the distinction between transcendental and empirical object in place – and consistently maintained – the discrepancies can be revolved: ‘The transcendental object is equally unknown in respect to inner and to outer intuition. But it is not of this that we are here speaking, but of the empirical object, which is called an \textit{external} object if it is represented \textit{in space}, and an \textit{inner} object if it is represented only \textit{in its time-relations}. Neither space nor time, however, is to be found save \textit{in us}.... The expression ‘outside us’ is thus unavoidably ambiguous in meaning, sometimes signifying what as \textit{thing in itself} exists apart from us, and sometimes what belongs solely to outer \textit{appearance}. In order, therefore, to make this concept, in the latter sense...quite unambiguous, we shall distinguish \textit{empirically external} objects from those
following Jaspers, that for Kant ‘the subject-object relationship is not the absolute being that precedes all else... it comes not first but second’.¹ Husserl, on the other hand, implies that a *cogito*, an act, a thinking, *intends a cogitatum*, an object, a thought; and since the *cogitatum* is an immediate given of and in the fabric of consciousness, it cannot really or, at any rate, easily be extricated from consciousness itself. In the end, Husserl is an idealist – he will say a transcendental-phenomenological idealist – of the most noteworthy kind, and is accordingly vulnerable to charges of scepticism and solipsism. (I return to this argument in Chapter 3, and develop it in much greater detail.) But Husserl does not resist being thus labelled:

Carried out with this systematic concreteness, phenomenology is *eo ipso* ‘transcendental idealism’, though in a fundamentally and essentially new sense. It is not psychological idealism, and most certainly not such an idealism as sensualistic psychologism proposes, an idealism that would derive a senseful world from senseless sensuous data. Nor is it a Kantian idealism, which believes it can keep open, at least as limiting concept, the possibility of a world of things in themselves. On the contrary, we have here a transcendental idealism that is nothing more than a consequentially executed self-explication in the form of a systematic egological science, an explication of my ego as subject of every possible cognition, and indeed with respect to every sense of what exists, wherewith the latter might be able to have a sense for me, the ego.... *The proof of this idealism is therefore phenomenology itself*. Only someone who misunderstands either the deepest sense of intentional method, or that of transcendental reduction, or perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism.²

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Kant* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1962), 17. He elucidates: ‘But if we succeed in illuminating the fundamental relation of our subjectivity to objects in such a way as to become truly aware of the special nature of the Encompassing in which we are, then, in examining our consciousness, that is, our thinking, we shall become aware, not only of its limits but also of the presence of the Other’ (18).

Reading Kant epistemologically

A prosaic way of interpreting Kant has him moving from dogmatic idealism to scepticism (and this places him among the likes of Husserl and Berkeley). Buried in this interpretation, it might appear rather near the surface, is an objection (and a fear). Henry Allison summarises:

> The most basic and prevalent objection stemming from the standard picture is that by limiting knowledge to appearance, that is, to the subjective realm of representations, Kant effectively undermines the possibility of any genuine knowledge at all. In short, far from providing an antidote to Humean skepticism, as was his intent, Kant is seen as a Cartesian skeptic *malgré lui*.

Kant was of course an idealist, and not just in name; that was the position he defended and meant to defend. My contention – here I side with Allison – is just that when Kant is read epistemologically, that is, when one sees that Kant’s transcendental approach does not evacuate the world of things, but rather attempts to make the world of things intelligible, then Kant’s deep realist commitment is more readily discernible.

The prosaic interpretation is in conflict with a good portion of the textual evidence, as I shall attempt to show here and elsewhere, and is therefore not textured enough; but this is significant only if Kant’s own declarations and distinctions are relevant. Kant tells us that the ‘main purpose’ of his critique of pure reason is to ‘alter the procedure which has hitherto prevailed in metaphysics’. The prevailing

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2 Milton Munitz argues that, even in the overriding idealist context of Kant’s philosophy, there remains an ‘attenuated and residual realism’ (*The Question of Reality*, 72). Maritain is more rigid (and prophetic): ‘[R]ealism and idealism are not transcended.... A choice must be made between the two, as between the true and the false. Every realism that comes to terms with Descartes and Kant shall see one day that it belies its name’ (*Distinguish to Unite; or The Degrees of Knowledge* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959], 100).
3 *CPR*, 25 (Bxxii).
procedure required knowledge to conform to objects; in the new Kantian experiment, and that is how he viewed it,¹ a daring inversion is introduced: now ‘objects must conform to our knowledge’; or, what comes to the same thing, experience must conform to concepts, or categorial patterns of thinking, not the other way around.² Thus Kant’s rather conceited claim to have prepared the way for a Copernican Revolution in philosophy. Intellectuals and scholars have reacted diversely to Kant’s claim, some taking it to be simply hyperbolic, others taking it to be odd, or inexplicable, or almost laughably untenable. I feel no compulsion to settle that particular debate here. Dewey once remarked that Kant’s revolution consisted merely in making explicit what was implicit in the fonts, the sources of the tradition.³ I would say more, if an argument on the subject were necessary or likely to bear fruit; indeed a good bit more would have to be said to illuminate the depth and richness of Kant’s adjustment. But perhaps Dewey has provisionally said enough to account for its basic revolutionary character.⁴ Kant clarifies the power and function of the Copernican insight: ‘For the new point of view enables us to explain how there can be knowledge a priori; and, in addition, to furnish satisfactory proofs of the laws which form the a priori basis of nature, regarded as the sum of the objects of experience.’⁵

In Kant’s Transcendental Idealism (and in slightly modified form in Idealism and Freedom), Henry Allison argues for a epistemological rather than a metaphysical interpretation of Kant’s idealism: his idealism has more to do with how one knows

¹ CPR, 22-23 (Bxvii-xix).
² CPR, 22 (Bxvi).
⁴ It may be that ‘making explicit’ is a necessary condition for a new or nuanced philosophical movement to achieve relevance; and ‘making explicit’ would also be sufficient, provided it was Kant’s aim not to subvert or abandon the tradition but to draw upon its rich and diverse resources for a unified (or potentially unifying) critical philosophy. Kant does not reject Plato and Aristotle, Leibniz and Locke, Descartes and Hume, he tries to reconcile them: so a genuine revolution, tinged with reserve rather than radical autonomy, would fit the spirit of Kant.
⁵ CPR, 23 (Bxix).
than with *what* one knows.\textsuperscript{1} To explicate his view, Allison introduces the notion of ‘epistemic conditions’. An epistemic condition, he tells us, is something ‘without which our representations would not relate to objects or, equivalently, possess “objective reality”’.\textsuperscript{2} Things in the empirical world are, so to speak, mediated by human mental re-presentations, but this need not obscure what lies beyond and functions as the basis of the mental re-presentations,\textsuperscript{3} nor need it, contrary to William Alston’s recent claim,\textsuperscript{4} require or imply a fatal reduction of nonmental entities to mental processes. Certainly, a perception of a presentation effectively amounts to a re-presentation, since perception for Kant has to do with the differentiation of subject

\textsuperscript{1} But this is uneven: the first *Critique* was no doubt concerned not just with procedures of knowing but with knowing itself.

\textsuperscript{2} Allison, *Idealism and Freedom*, 4.

\textsuperscript{3} I have said that Kant’s idealism must be interpreted from within the context of – or with continual reference to – *sensibility*. ‘The term ‘idealist’ is not, therefore, to be understood as applying to those who deny the existence of external objects of the senses, but only to those who do not admit that their existence is known through immediate perception...we must necessarily distinguish two types of idealism, the transcendent and the empirical. By *transcendental idealism* I mean the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves, and that time and space are therefore only sensible forms of our intuition, not determinations given as existing by themselves, nor conditions of objects viewed as things in themselves. To this idealism is opposed a *transcendental realism* which regards time and space as something given in themselves, independently of our sensibility... The transcendent idealist, on the other hand, may be an empirical realist or, as he is called, a *dualist*; that is, he may admit the existence of matter without going outside his mere self-consciousness, or assuming anything more than the certainty of his representations, that is, the *cogito, ergo sum*. For he considers this matter and even its inner possibility to be appearance merely; and appearance, if separated from our sensibility, is nothing’ (*CPR*, 345-346 [A369]).

Appearances are *something* only in relation to sensibility, in relation to experiencing subjects; they cannot be equated with things in themselves, since things in themselves by definition fall beyond the domain of the sensible (A378). Yet, it is the transcendental object (and by extension, the thing in itself) which, so to speak, *causes* and provides the *basis* for appearances in reality: ‘Neither the *transcendental object* which underlies outer appearances nor that which underlies inner intuition, is in itself either matter or a thinking being, but a ground (to us unknown) of the appearances which supply to us the empirical concept of the former as well as of the latter mode of existence’ (*CPR*, 352 [A380]). So if appearances are in fact *grounded* in the unknown which lies beyond them, we may think of appearances as revealing in (approximate) accordance with what cannot be experienced (see Chapter 5). Kant implies as much elsewhere (*CPR*, 134-137 [A104-110]). Graham Bird adopts the metaphor of a bridge to elucidate how the transcendental object serves as hinge (to use a similar metaphor) between the thing in itself and the knowing subject (*Kant’s Theory of Knowledge* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965], 73-74); Palmquist takes the transcendental object to be the *doorway* between the thing in itself and the subject which grounds appearance in that which lies beyond appearance, and thus in reality (*Kant’s System of Perspectives*, 171-172); bridge, hinge, doorway, the salient point remains the same.

\textsuperscript{4} ‘It will be clear that what I have just been calling a ‘constitutive’ dependence of the nonmental on mind belongs under the heading of reduction; it is the reduction of the nonmental to the mental’ (Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth*, 74; see also Alston, *A Sensible Metaphysical Realism*, 11-23).
from the world of objects, and objects in the world, without categorial perceptions, are and remain undifferentiated and unschematised; in being perceived an object is presented to the subject, in effect, by the subject and for the subject.¹ But we must be very careful here: this is not to say that the presentation and the re-presentation are indistinguishable (identical) or that the re-presentation is all there is. Such a move would, according to Kant, land one in ‘the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears’.² Consider the following quotation from Kant.

It would be unjust to ascribe to us that long-decried empirical idealism, which, while it admits the genuine reality of space, denies the existence of the extended beings in it, or at least considers their existence doubtful, and so does not in this regard allow of any properly demonstrable distinction between truth and dreams.... Our transcendental idealism, on the contrary, admits the reality of the objects of outer intuition, as intuited in space, and of all changes in time, as represented by inner sense. For since space is a form of that intuition which we entitle outer, and since without objects in space there would be no empirical representation whatsoever, we can and must regard the extended beings in it as real.³

The epistemic conditions of which Allison speaks help us avoid the fatal collapse of objective into subjective in the knowing process – of world, or God, into the abyss of self; and it is notoriously difficult to wrest the objective from the closed fist of the subjective. These conditions have both a subjective and an objective reference or dimension: as subjective ‘they reflect the structure and operations of the human mind’; as objective ‘they condition the objectivity of our representations of

¹ John Macmurray has rendered Kant accessible on this point: ‘Intuition is discriminated into imagination and perception. So I perceive the world, and distinguish between the world and myself. I am the Subject; the world is the Object. My imaginings are subjective; but what I think is objective. This dichotomy of Subject and Object is the abstract form of all our knowledge. Subject and Object are correlative, or polar opposites which depend upon one another, and the principle of their correlation is that the form of thought is the form of the object’ (The Self as Agent [London: Faber and Faber, 1995], 51).
² CPR, 27 (Bxxvii).
things rather than the very existence of the things themselves’.1 Thus Kant’s idealism denies neither the subjective nor the objective, but rather seeks to hold them in delicate tension by making some sense of how they work creatively and necessarily in tandem. Allison’s words concisely reveal the durable conviction that Kant’s idealism, in addition to being more modest than is often supposed, is both subtly epistemological and congenial to realism: the world, I have said, does not depend upon a subject for its being, but it does depend upon a subject for its being known.

Now to suppose that Allison’s account is without shortcoming or critic would be gullible. According to one cordial critic, in laying so much stress on the epistemological import of Kant’s idealism, Allison tends to ignore its strong metaphysical undercurrents. Kenneth Westphal is the critic, and he has a good point; and under just the right conditions, I might be inclined to make the stronger argument that Kant’s epistemology presupposes a metaphysics, in which the subject-object dialectic is not the absolute or final reality, and that, in focusing on the epistemological tenor and tone of Kant’s idealism, Allison downplays or fails to appreciate its metaphysical underpinnings.2 Nevertheless, Allison’s position does offer an interesting, constructive and attentive re-reading of Kant which is appreciative of the sensitive balance, the equilibrium, Kant himself sought to discover/create for his epistemological idealism: ‘On this reading, to say that objects must “conform to our knowledge” is just to say that they must conform to the conditions (whatever they may be) for the representation of objects; it is not to say

1 Allison, Idealism and Freedom, 5.
2 Kenneth R. Westphal discusses this forgetfulness: ‘When Allison summarizes Kant’s view and attempts either to avoid or to respond to criticisms of Kant’s idealism, he tends to disregard the ontological aspect of Kant’s forms of intuition and to reduce Kant’s distinction between things in themselves and appearances to a “methodological” matter of different descriptions, empirical and non-empirical, of one set of things’ (‘Noumenal Causality Reconsidered: Affection, Agency, and Meaning in Kant’, Canadian Journal of Philosophy 27 [1997], 215).
that they exist in the mind in the manner of Berkeleian ideas or the sense data of phenomenalists.\(^1\)

If an account like Allison’s is plausible, Kant cannot be curtly considered a dogmatic idealist, especially where dogmatism signals a failure to recognise the limits of reason.\(^2\) Nor can Kant be justly labelled a sceptical (‘problematic’)\(^3\) idealist: there are things of and about the real world that human beings may be said to access – things, it should be said, that are distinguishable from the categories themselves.\(^4\) It is well established that Kant reproached the notion that sensibility is coextensive with, or exhausts the limits of, reality, and for good reason: clearly, he thinks, what one sees is not all there is; the limits of human knowing do exhaust the limits of reality.\(^5\) Thus his often bewildering and infuriating distinction between objects of experience, appearances, and things in themselves,\(^6\) and thus, I would argue, the second and third Critique as well as, perhaps, the Religion book and the Conflict of the Faculties.\(^7\) Henry Allison (and others)\(^8\) offers a somewhat peripheral

\(^1\) Allison, Idealism and Freedom, 5.

\(^2\) Kant distinguishes dogmatic procedure from dogmatism: ‘This critique is not opposed to the dogmatic procedure of reason in its pure knowledge, as science, for that must always be dogmatic, that is, yield strict proof from sure principles a priori. It is opposed only to dogmatism, that is, to the presumption that it is possible to make progress with pure knowledge, according to principles, from concepts alone (those that are philosophical), as reason has long been in the habit of doing; and that it is possible to do this without having first investigated in what way and by what right reason has come into possession of these concepts. Dogmatism is thus the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, without previous criticism of its own powers’ (CPR, 32 [Bxxxv]). Westphal’s reading of Kant is similar: ‘Kant’s account of space and time as forms of intuition affords him both an empirical realism and a metaphysical realism unavailable to Leibniz. This allows Kant to repudiate both of the standard senses of idealism current, though not always distinguished, in his day, according to which idealism is the denial of a material spatio-temporal world or the denial of an immaterial world ‘corresponding’ to the represented material world’ (‘Noumenal Causality Reconsidered’, 242).

\(^3\) CPR, 244 (B274-275).

\(^4\) CPR, 350 (A377).

\(^5\) CPR, 26-27 (Bxxiv-xxv).

\(^6\) CPR, 25-27 (Bxxiii-xxvii).


interpretation of Kant at this point.¹ His view is that the now standard ‘two-object’ understanding of Kant’s transcendental idealism, sustained so effectively by Peter Strawson and until quite recently the dominant interpretation, is in fact a misconstrual, not quite the whole story.² The division, we shall discover, is not one (primarily) between what is and what is not, between the real and the unreal, between one sort of entity and another.³ Rather, according to Allison, ‘Kant’s transcendental distinction is primarily between two ways in which things (empirical objects) can be “considered” at the metalevel of philosophical reflection (transcendental reflection) rather than between the kinds of thing that are considered’.⁴ This, evidently, is Kant’s suggestion:

In dealing with those concepts and principles which we adopt a priori, all that we can do is to contrive that they be used for viewing objects from two different points of view – on the one hand, in connection with experience, as objects of the senses and of the understanding, and on the other hand, for the isolated reason that strives to transcend all limits of experience, as objects which are thought merely. If, when things are viewed from this two-fold standpoint, we find that there is agreement with the principle of pure reason, but that when we regard them only from a single point of view reason is involved in unavoidable self-conflict, the experiment decides in favour of the correctness of this distinction.⁵

More succinctly – and less ambiguously:

¹ For an appreciative but sober appraisal of Allison’s interpretation, see Palmquist, Kant’s System of Perspectives, 32.
² Allison, Kant’s Transcendental Idealism, 3-6. A modification, or perhaps ramification, of Allison’s position can be found in his recent collection of essays, Idealism and Freedom, 3-26. Ironically, Michael Devitt – no Kant sympathiser – concedes this interesting reading of Kant: ‘Nevertheless, scholars seem generally agreed – and have convinced me – that this two-worlds interpretation is wrong’ (Realism and Truth, 72).
³ Palmquist, with Allison and Devitt, finds the ‘two-object’ – or two-world – view deficient and misleading: ‘Since Kant’s theory is couched in these ‘radically epistemological’ terms, his discussion of ‘different objects’ should be interpreted as referring not so much to ontological distinctions as to ‘different perspectives’ on one object, encountered in ordinary (immediate) experience’ (Kant’s System of Perspectives, 163).
⁴ Allison, Idealism and Freedom, 3.
⁵ CPR, 23 (Bxvii, note).
The distinction, which our Critique has shown necessary, [is] between things as objects of experience and those same things as things in themselves.¹

The general transcendental distinction can be illuminated via Kant’s discursivity thesis. The discursivity of human cognition is what Kant has in view when he says, in these oft-cited words: ‘Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.’² ‘To claim that human knowledge is discursive,’ according to Allison, ‘is to claim that it requires both concepts and sensible intuition.’³ Thus, Allison concludes: ‘By viewing the transcendental distinction in light of the discursivity thesis, we not only confirm the view that this distinction is one between two ways of considering objects, we also see that these two ways of considering are defined in terms of the two sets of epistemic conditions required by the discursivity of human cognition. And this leads us back to the initial claim that Kant’s idealism is fundamentally epistemological in nature.’⁴ Perhaps Allison is right.

Things in themselves are real for Kant, beyond complete comprehension but not beyond consideration:

[W]e must leave the thing in itself as indeed real per se, but as not known by us.⁵

This is a necessary distinction, Kant wants to say, otherwise (for example) all things become determined by the principle of causality; in other words, without the distinction in place, it becomes impossible without contradiction to say that the

¹ CPR, 27-28 (Bxxvi-xxviii).
² CPR, 93 (A51).
⁵ CPR, 24 (Bxx).
human will is free yet subject to natural necessity.\textsuperscript{1} Since reality cannot be totally circumscribed by what one experiences sensuously, \textit{by what appears}, 'there must be an absolutely necessary \textit{practical} employment of pure reason – the \textit{moral} – in which it inevitably goes beyond the limits of sensibility.'\textsuperscript{2} Indeed there are other employments of reason; but it is enough for our purposes to remain within the logic of the \textit{first} Critique.

I admit that this exposition of Kant is loose and no doubt inadequately condensed, but I hope it has shown that the initial rendition – ‘in human knowing all one knows is oneself’ – is a misreading. Kant is suggesting, on the contrary, something like the following: \textit{in human knowing one never knows apart from oneself}, apart from both intuitions and categories. There is no knowledge without a knower, but the knower is as much a finder as a fashioner of reality. In a footnote to his modified \textit{refutation of idealism}, for instance, Kant is very careful to distance himself from the clumsy versions of idealism which would either deny mind independent reality or consider it dubious – dogmatic and sceptical, Berkeleian and Cartesian, respectively – contending that when one is conscious of one’s time conditioned existence, one is also, at the same time, conscious of more than one’s inner representation of things.\textsuperscript{3} Thus Kant:

\begin{quote}
It is identical with the \textit{empirical consciousness of my existence}, which is determinable only through relation to something which, while bound up with my existence, is outside of me. This consciousness of my existence in time is bound up in the way of identity with the consciousness of a relation to something outside me, and it is therefore experience not invention, sense not imagination, which inseparably connects this outside something with my inner sense. For outer sense is already in itself a relation of intuition to something actual outside me, and the reality of outer sense, in its \textit{distinction} from imagination, rests simply on that which is here found to take place, namely, its being
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{CPR}, 28 (Bxxviii).
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{CPR}, 26-27 (Bxxv).
\textsuperscript{3} See \textit{CPR}, 244 (B275).
inseparably bound up with inner experience, as the condition of its possibility.¹

The existence of the external world is implied in sensuous experience, for where there is no world there can be no experience; and consciousness of self in time implies that not all is self.²

**Bumping up against human finitude**

Kant was not an omniscient philosopher, nor was he aspiring to omniscience; and if, at points, he was sceptical, he had his reasons. For there are some things the truth of which reason (with its limits) can grasp, and some things it is neither given nor proper to know. The former have to do with sensible things, objects in the real world conditioned by time and space, which human beings are able to view, in a moment of creative imagination, in accordance with the fixed and native concepts of the human mind.³ The latter have to do with unconditioned things, those same objects (as Kant himself phrases it), as transcendent to the world of time and space. The unconditioned things may be considered (thought) as well as hoped for, but they may not be comprehended fully, or known empirically; with them, in a sense, one wanders beyond the security and comfort of the phenomenal realm into the perils of the noumenal, but these are realms not quite of different kinds of entity but of different kinds consideration and different degrees of certainty. With Kant’s doctrine of the categories we do not discover unqualified human ingenuity; we discover human facility by bumping up against human finitude. ‘So far from being a

¹ CPR, 34-35 (B1).
² ‘As a particular individual I am only one object in the world which is determined by thought. My thinking itself...is part of the process of events in the world. The world that I know contains me as a part of it, determined by the categories, and if I exist then in the same sense the world exists, outside me’ (Macmurray, The Self as Agent, 52).
³ ‘But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience’ (CPR, 41 [B1]).
rationalistic justification of a claim to intuitive penetration behind the veil of sense, it is rather an attempt to set out the peculiarly limited character of human knowledge.'

Nor in his doctrine of the categories do we find an unambiguously radical constructivist epistemology. Michael Devitt calls constructivism 'the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendency'. On this score he may or may not be right; but his claim that constructivism is 'a relativistic Kantian anti-realism', 'a combination of two Kantian ideas with twentieth-century relativism', is misleading, for it is credible only on a vulnerable reading of Kant, a reading against which I have provisionally contended, namely that Kant 'makes the known world by imposing concepts'. I suggest that Kant must be read with more nuance. Kant's epistemology is constructivist in the sense that there is no experience which does not depend for its possibility and intelligibility upon human concepts or categories: the world, if you will, is indeed made known by imposing concepts. But Kant's epistemology is not (radically) constructivist, and this because the experiences which the intuitions and categories make possible and intelligible are real human experiences: the known world is not made by imposing categories. Thus the simple difference between empirical realism and empirical anti-realism, respectively; and the evidence warrants the provisional conclusion that Kant was at the very least an empirical realist.

The transcendental idealist is, therefore, an empirical realist, and allows to matter, as appearance, a reality which does not permit of being inferred, but is immediately perceived.  

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2 Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, viii.
4 Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, ix. He is more temperate in a later consideration: 'Kant is a Weak Realist. External objects exist objectively...only as things-in-themselves. As we know them – that is as familiar objects – they exist partly in virtue of our imposition of concepts and a spatio-temporal setting. To a degree, we create the world we live in' (72).
5 Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, ix.
Perhaps it is more accurate to say of the Kantian man that, in knowing, he knows more than self, even if he cannot know everything – and even if he never knows anything apart from self-involvement. It is precisely the merits and demerits of this nuanced reading of Kant that I aim more cautiously to consider in Chapters 5 and 7. And even if the renarration here sketched extends beyond or transgresses the actual intentions of Kant’s philosophy, it may still promise a way forward in epistemology, religious and theoretical, and it may still provide an illuminating way of interpreting or appropriating Kant. After considering the nature of the interface of noumenal and phenomenal in the empirical domain (Chapter 5), I shall turn in Chapter 6 to entertain the following expressly theological queries. To what extent, in the Incarnation, do we have an example (or analogy) of noumenal breaking into, or becoming, phenomenal? And what might this imply for human experience and human knowledge of God?

**Kant’s fabled confession**

It is banal these days to say that Kant’s philosophical posture has been much maligned, in his own day as well as in ours. This owes largely to its dual negative insinuation: man is no longer the measure of all things, and God perchance has slipped forever from man’s grasp. Yet there is a positive up-shot, a deeply human and liberating insight, and it remains to be enthusiastically embraced: philosophical discourse, in recognising, even celebrating, its limits, frees itself from the illusion of omniscience and thereby encourages itself to assume a posture of humility and hope, of faith.¹ It may perchance create the epistemic space necessary for human being to

¹ No doubt, Ricoeur is correct: the recognition of limits is ‘the soul of the Kantian philosophy’ (Husserl, 176).
see that he has not slipped from God’s gracious grasp even if God has slipped from his grasp.

It would be grossly uncharitable to deny to Kant the beneficent legacy of bringing into sharper relief the limits of what one may claim to know. And far from precluding hope, these sober limits, always shrinking and shifting, inspire it; some things, it is true, fall outside the compass not (necessarily) of what is reasonable but of what pure reason can demonstrate. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in his work on the ‘post-Hegelian Kantian’ philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, likewise reasons that ‘the limit does not close the philosophical discourse, but breaks it open by denying the claim of objective knowledge to close it off at the level of spatio-temporal objects’.1 Professor MacKinnon has said that ‘the vision with which at least part of Kant’s first Critique leaves us is of a man desperately trying to scale mountains with ropes which will only serve on the foothills. For when he is on the foothills, the Kantian man is dealing only with what is conditioned; but it is the summits, the unconditioned with which he is most deeply concerned.’2 But the summits, Kant conceded, cannot be scaled by reason alone. Thus Kant’s fabled confession:

I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.3

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1 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 40.
2 MacKinnon, Borderlands, 208-209.
3 CPR, 29 (Bxxx).
Husserl’s Return to the Object?

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us our fill of terror. We have paid dearly for our nostalgia for the all and the one, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, for a transparent and communicable experience. Beneath the general demand for relaxation and appeasement, we hear the murmurings of the desire to reinstitute terror and fulfill the phantasm of taking possession of reality. The answer is this: war on totality — Jean-Francois Lyotard

In this chapter I inquire into the limits and excesses, problems and promises, of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. I shall suggest that the sleepless search for ultimate foundations, which inspires the reduction, is misguided and that the reduction itself is at once too reductive: it submerges the world; not reductive enough: it cannot reduce itself but it must if all presumption is to be bracketed; and beyond human kin: it is a possibility that does not genuinely exist for humans. At the outset let me say that I have semi-overt form/content concerns. Again and again I shall be saying that Husserl is a perpetual beginner, and that (therefore) a certain tedious repetitiveness marks his philosophy and the style with which he develops and communicates it. Here I, in effect, seek to mirror that recapitulative style, often repeating myself and summing up along the way. The beginner approach has much to commend it, of course; but by beginning and beginning again, the sort of continuity Husserl desires is hard to achieve or maintain, for with every new beginning there is as much negation as affirmation – so discontinuity is inevitable; but I shall try, quite elliptically I suppose, to show that there is nevertheless development and ruthless consistency in Husserl’s philosophy. In short, the

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1 Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Explained (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 16.
2 There are actually many reductions: or, from another point of view, several stages or movements within the larger reduction.
3 This continuity is exhibited in the juxtaposition of two brief essays, one early and one late, together
developmental approach, punctuated by repudiation (epoché), retreat (eidetic reduction), and retrieval (constitution), so characteristic of Husserl’s spirit, shall also be reflected in the way I interact with him. Though I subject Husserl to vigorous critique, I am far from suggesting that, for instance, phenomenology is a worthless enterprise, or that the intentionality structure of consciousness is without instructiveness. There is indeed directedness in consciousness, aiming at, seeing, meaning, intending. But because consciousness is, as I shall argue, always already conditioned by the world and its involvement in the world, a fact the late Husserl superficially accepts, it cannot intend purely: it both intends and is implicated, is implicated in its intending, and so reveals itself not as isolated and pure but as incarnated.¹ This is a way of saying that what consciousness sees, expects, hopes for, or rather what is seen, expected, hoped for, and so on, in consciousness, is, with consciousness itself, situated and incurably drenched in prejudice: thus no pure phenomenology, no pure consciousness, no pure description, no simple seeing, no incontestable or absolute given, no foundation of the strong sort Husserl seeks. But there is appreciation in this critique. I shall indicate along the way some of the peerless achievements of Husserl, and some of the ways in which certain of his insights can be accepted with careful modification. It may be possible, for example, both to agree with Husserl that acts constitute objects and at the same time avoid some of the peculiar problems that position portends — by adding, say, that objects/states of affairs also condition acts and awarenesses. So I shall be making a

¹ By implication I mean that the subject is, in effect, both entailed and exposed: one is always already involved with others, the world, and others in the world. The encounter of experience is, if you will, dialogical, or the experience is like an encounter in which there already are exchanges between experiencer, experience, and experienced, including the interests of the experiencer, the integrity of the experienced and everything in the background and foreground that constitutes the history between experiencer and experienced that is always presupposed. In experience, then, one’s identity is revealed and revised, the latter in so far as one encounters another and reciprocates, thus providing new horizons for becoming (other). See Calvin O. Schrag, Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 301-317.

cumulative argument that acts determine objects, objects determine acts, and forms of life determine both acts and objects.\footnote{1} With this dialectic it may be possible to preserve both spontaneity and accountability for the subject, simultaneously recover the world and appropriately relativise subjectivity, and in this way develop a more resourceful holism with respect to subject and object.\footnote{2}

\textit{Phenomenological concerns, common and uncommon}

Edmund Husserl was a fearless philosopher in search of a firm place to stand. In the spirit of Descartes,\footnote{3} the father of phenomenology went restively roaming for that firm footing in a retreat from the world into consciousness—a move that comes to mark the phenomenological reduction.\footnote{4} But phenomenology is not an immutable philosophy or methodology; it is surprisingly adaptable, applicable in a number of contexts and disciplines, as subtly different as the thinkers who define it.\footnote{5} So we

\footnote{1} Thus—if you will—Husserl’s \textit{Lebenswelt} will give way to Wittgenstein’s \textit{Lebensformen}.

\footnote{2} I am sympathetic with Putnam’s internal realism (holism), especially its aim to avoid both reductions and dichotomies. “[P]hilosophers often take perfectly sensible continua and get in trouble by trying to convert them into dichotomies”; after all, “the idea of a “point at which” subjectivity ceases and Objectivity-with-a-capital-O begins has proved chimerical” (\textit{The Many Faces of Realism} [La Salle: Open Court, 1989], 27, 28).

\footnote{3} Husserl calls Descartes a ‘genuine patriarch’ in his \textit{Paris Lectures}, 3. Henceforth, \textit{PL}. Accordingly, Husserl’s project goes in quest of the furtive genius of Descartes’ \textit{ego cogito}, ‘the path that led to transcendental philosophy’ (\textit{PL}, 5).

\footnote{4} In the hands of Husserl ‘the Cartesian method transforms itself into a method of the transcendental \textit{epoche} and becomes that of the phenomenological reduction to the transcendental ego (Ego)’ (\textit{PL}, 48-49). Positive science, Husserl tells us, is realist in orientation. But he wants to practice an \textit{epoche} in which this realism about the external is bracketed, doubted, suspended. External reality, the world, in the \textit{epoche} ceases to function as a foundation. Yet Husserl is emphatic that something remains after this procedure: ‘[B]ehind the being of the world is revealed...the being of experience itself, the being of the subject, of his meditative life, of the other forms of his absolute life’ (\textit{PL}, 47-48). It was Husserl’s cloying conviction that the primary task of transcendental philosophy is the continuation of the Cartesian enterprise, for it is ‘the only way in which philosophy can escape the state of decadence and the morass in which it has been plunged since the middle of the Nineteenth Century. This is precisely the goal which phenomenology proposes’ (\textit{PL}, 46). Husserl seems to be saying that the being of the subject is the condition for the possibility of the being of the world. Finally, for Husserl, only transcendental subjectivity matters: ‘With the universal \textit{epoche} and the transfer of attention [from the world given in experience] to this experience itself, in which [only] the world possesses a meaning and being for me, the transcendental subjectivity appears, which apprehends itself as the absolute and final premise of all that which, in general, is [for it]’ (\textit{PL}, 48).

\footnote{5} For reception (or application) of Husserl in other fields of inquiry, see, for example, Herbert...
must be careful not to make the avoidable mistake of confusing Husserl’s phenomenology with just any that vaunts the name.

For Husserl, phenomenology is *philosophia perennis,*\(^1\) the *geheime Sehnsucht* (‘secret longing’), the very *telos,* of philosophy. This claim seems prodigal to me, but it does fit with Husserl’s ultimate aim for his philosophical enterprise. Speaking generally, phenomenology is devoted to the study or description of *eidoi,* essences which emerge from or reveal themselves in a punctilious examination of phenomena, the sure and absolute *givens* of original consciousness.\(^2\) ‘Phenomenology: this denotes a science, a system of scientific disciplines. But it also and above all denotes a method and an attitude of mind, the specifically philosophical attitude of mind, the specifically philosophical method.’\(^3\) In the ponderous *Phenomenology of Perception,* Maurice Merleau-Ponty delimits phenomenology in similar, simplified fashion, but admits that even a ‘half century after the first works of Husserl’ phenomenology is still determining its achievement.\(^4\)

One of phenomenology’s common convictions is that essences can be discovered, examined and described independent of, or prior to, language, that is, without convoluting concepts and prejudices; the realm of meaning (so it goes) is

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\(^1\) Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations,* 87. Henceforth, *CM.*

\(^2\) See Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology,* trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), §§ 33-34. Herbert Spiegelberg condenses phenomenology to the following: (1) freedom from presupposition; (2) the subject matter is comprised of ‘the general essences of the phenomena of consciousness’ – both act and object in correlation; (3) a phenomenological reduction, involving the dual movement of suspension of natural attitude and retreat into the constituting acts of pure (irreducible) consciousness; and (4) the objective of verifying and falsifying beliefs, the justification of claims by evidence (*The Context of the Phenomenological Movement* [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981], 51-52).


\(^4\) M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), vii. Paul Ricoeur concisely makes this point: ‘All of phenomenology is not Husserl, even though he is more or less its center’ (*Husserl,* 3).
prelinguistic and prepredicative, and language merely serves to elucidate, transmit or encode thought.¹ This is certainly the case with Husserl, who gives experience 'logical and ontological primacy...over language' – and this sustains a dichotomy, and not just a distinction, between experience and language.² Husserl is confident that language can be easily conformed to the seen, the pure data: ‘We inspect them, and while inspecting them we can observe their essence, their constitution, their intrinsic character, and we can make our speech conform in a pure measure to what is “seen” in its full clarity.’³ We shall soon see that this sharp disjunction is overwrought and highly suspect. (I shall be hinting at a more temperate reading of the reciprocity of language and experience in this thesis: indeed, as Husserl might say, language reflects experience, but it is also indisputably the case that experience responds to and is structured by language.) But not all that is common in phenomenology is equally conspicuous in Husserl; in fact, some of phenomenology’s salient features are actually counter-acted, or lost, or, at any rate, pushed to the periphery in Husserl. It is central to most versions of phenomenology, for example, that 'the world is always “already there” before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status'.⁴ There is a sense in which this is true for Husserl; eventually, however, this ‘inalienable presence’ collapses into an excessively interiorist notion of consciousness – and in the end the inalienable presence feels more like attenuated or irrelevant presence. I can accept an attenuated presence, a presence that is never fully condensed because always also absent, vanishing; but I find problematic any

¹ See Edmund Husserl, Experience and Judgment (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Henceforth, EJ. ‘In order to attain the truly ultimate and original self-evidence of prepredicative experience, we must go back from these founded experiences to the simplest, and thus leave all expression out of play’ (56).
² See Koestenbaum’s ‘Introductory Essay’, in PL, xii.
³ IP, 24.
⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, vii.
essentialism in which the presumption of fully realised (interior) presence amounts to an annulment of what is other – an annulment which itself amounts to a denial of the radical contingency of consciousness.

**Reading a perpetual beginner**

Husserl was 'a perpetual beginner'\(^1\) – committed to new starts, always rethinking his philosophy, capitulating and recapitulating, and this in an attempt to push farther back into original consciousness for more secure foundations. This is his own estimation: 'The author's convictions on such lines have become increasingly self-evident as his work progressed. If he has been obliged, on practical grounds, to lower the ideal of the philosopher to that of a downright beginner, he has at least in his old age reached for himself the complete certainty that he should thus call himself a beginner. He could almost hope, were Methuselah's span of days allotted him, to be still able to become a philosopher.'\(^2\) For this reason one should not expect to find a complete and thorough system in Husserl, some static, fully mature philosophy which, at every turn, from start to finish, on this point and that, displays perfection and defies change.\(^3\) One must bear this in mind when interpreting Husserl. The basic **hermeneutic assumption** which constrains my reading is this: despite the unfinished nature of Husserl's philosophy, precisely because he was not a careless and double-minded thinker – now a mathematician, now a philosopher – he may be responsibly read as one who, failings and occasional inconsistencies notwithstanding,

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1. Merleau-Ponty, xiv.
2. Husserl, *Ideas*, 28. Interestingly, two late significant works, *Cartesian Meditations* (1931) and *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1934-37), are subtitled 'Introductions' by Husserl.
3. See R. A. Mall, *Experience and Reason*, 8. According to Calvin Schrag, Husserl 'abhorred system-building as much as did Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. He was always a beginner, reexamining the foundations of his investigations, resisting all fixed formulations and final conclusions' ('Introduction' to *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964], 11).
was striving to achieve continuity in his philosophy. It is just this consistent and committed restiveness that helps illuminate Husserl’s turn to idealism.¹ His finally yielding to idealism, though understandable enough, was avoidable; if he had been willing simply to modify his search, if he had been looking for something other than indubitables, perhaps he could have learned to live with vanishing certainty in knowledge. Instead, with a penchant for suspicion and a distaste for incompleteness, he continued to search for consolation in consciousness, and in so doing effectively closed himself off from the natural world and from the possibility of recovering reality. Husserl was a painstakingly thorough philosopher, and as such his early philosophical patterns, centrifugally so to speak, set the course for future further exploration and indeed are developed rather than supplanted by those mature insights.² Of course this is not to say that none of his hunches were ever banished into the oblivion they so richly deserved: So in Logical Investigations (1900-1901), Husserl repudiates the psychologism he favoured in The Philosophy of Arithmetic (1891); and in Ideas (1913), and elsewhere, the latent realism of Logical Investigations is gradually effaced, and so on. Thus I shall focus primarily on the later, more mature Husserl, but with continual reference back to the early programmatic The Idea of Phenomenology. After my provisional critique of Husserl has been offered, and it is provisional, it should be obvious that I think Kant’s epistemology is more realist and more resourceful than Husserl’s.

Husserl could not have anticipated in the Göttingen lectures of 1905³ or 1907¹ every turn his phenomenology would take over the next 30 years. (Even this

¹ Paul Ricoeur seems to agree that Husserl’s phenomenological method was not always applied consistently in his writings, and this perhaps in spite of his sober intentions: ‘As for the parts of his work where the method is applied effectively...they do not constitute one homogeneous body of work with a single direction of orientation. Husserl abandoned along the way as many routes as he took’ (Husserl, 4).

² According to Ervin Laszlo, Husserl’s idealism is not a novelty of his late(r) philosophy, but is rather the product of ‘a consistent thinker arguing according to the basic assumptions of scepticism’ (Beyond Scepticism and Realism: A Constructive Exploration of Husserlian and Whiteheadian Methods of Inquiry [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966], 38).

³ The 1905 Göttingen lectures, supplemented by other lectures offered from 1905-1910, were
early, however, his fundamental assumptions, as well as the major themes of phenomenology, were fairly stable: so *The Idea of Phenomenology* [1907], for example, programmatically introduces the reduction, *epoché*, eidetic abstraction, constitution, intentionality, and so on, and develops them in familiar ways. And one certainly does not find in the early drafts of his *Logical Investigations* the embellished story as it is told in the twilight *Cartesian Meditations* or its abbreviated harbinger, *The Paris Lectures*. The obvious explanation for this is Husserl’s finitude: no human being, hard as he tries, can see the end from the beginning, or the depth from the surface. It should also be recalled that Husserl’s basic philosophical instinct — inherited from Descartes, his ‘spiritual mentor’ — was to begin, begin again, and so on, resisting arbitrary or premature conclusions. According to R. A. Mall, ‘Husserl’s way of doing philosophical research was to start again and again in order to go beyond the “already reached” in search of a still deeper level of experience’. A final relevant consideration is Husserl’s technical, almost shorthand style of writing. Husserl is serious and seriously cumbrous reading, but not because he is careless or inattentive or insufficiently adroit; the real problem, from this reader’s point of view, is rather that Husserl sometimes says too little, assumes too much, to be comprehensible. Thus, even if one were to discover in Husserl’s corpus the resources for a complete system, splicing the pieces together in an intelligible and

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1 Published as *The Idea of Phenomenology*.
3 But Husserl: ‘From the superficial...one is led into the depths’ (*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997]). Henceforth, *The Crisis*.
5 Thus Peter Koestenbaum: ‘Difficult style, typical of Husserl, exists because of his proclivity for the pithy rather than the proverbial German love for the prolix.... Also, much obscurity exists because Husserl presupposes, in effect, familiarity with his views, language, and mode of expression’ (‘Introductory Essay’, *PL*, ix). In David Carr’s opinion: ‘There is no concealing the fact that [Husserl] is simply not a careful writer; he has little thought for literary niceties or for the capacity of his readers to take in innumerable and complex sentences, and little thought, it must be said, even for terminological exactness and consistency’ (‘Translator’s Introduction’, *The Crisis*, xxii).
comprehensive way, free from ambiguity and contradiction, would demand an almost other-worldly ingenuity.  

Those radical beginnings of Husserl’s were directed toward (establishing) a neutral, unbiased foundation for philosophical science, a foundation both above and beyond all presupposition and bias; in a sweeping phenomenological reduction, Husserl set off, with a dubious companion, to find that scientific, immovable and poreless foundation. One scholar has concisely described this as ‘the guiding unitary thread of his whole thought’. There can be little doubt that Husserl found philosophical motivation in the dizzying prospect of unearthing, in the depths of consciousness, a foundation which would serve as both a firm point of reference and, if necessary, a final resting place; it is a thoroughly modern impulse, and Husserl will follow the impulse and remain loyal to the metaphor of foundations to the very end. But was he misguided? Was he looking for something that cannot be found? Is the ground, and for that matter the goal, of Husserl’s quest not just plain fantastical, a bleary-eyed illusion (Dewey: ‘an all-absorbing dream’) conjured up by a philosopher aspiring to omniscience? In wanting a foundation which could not be shaken, a foundation which would produce knowledge about which one could not be mistaken, was Husserl’s project doomed to failure before it ever set out on its sojourn? My suspicion is that the phenomenological reduction is too reductive, not reductive enough, and beyond human kin; let’s tease this out to see if there is more here than suspicion. To make any sense of the reduction, and therefore to make the case, we shall need to take a close look at Husserl’s twin-peaks, the wedded

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2 *Mall, Experience and Reason*, 9.
3 So Husserl: ‘A philosophy with problematic foundations, with paradoxes which arise from the obscurity of the fundamental concepts, is no philosophy, it contradicts its very meaning as philosophy’ (*Ideas, 27*). For a critique of Husserl’s foundationalism, see Schrag, *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences*, 1-27.
doctrines of intentionality and constitution. But, as Husserl would have it, the reduction itself is a good place to begin.

Bracketing the world

Husserl’s phenomenological project can be viewed as an obstinate attempt to overcome the baleful Kantian dichotomy between appearances and things-in-themselves, a gap which, Husserl thinks, only frustrates or occludes knowledge. In fact, the first move of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, a most Humean move, aims at tracing the essence of things in the things as they appear – with attention to the experienceable properties of objects, that is, to the objects as they are ‘absolutely given’ in consciousness; thus things in themselves are, if you will, buried in appearances, and appearances are imprisoned in consciousness. ‘For “things to be given” is for them to be exhibited (represented) as so and so in such phenomena. And this is not to say that the things once more exist in themselves.... Instead, the things are and are given in appearance and in virtue of the appearance itself; though they are, or are taken as, individually separable from the appearance, they are essentially inseparable from it insofar as the single appearance (the consciousness of the given) is not in question.’¹ So in a Humean move Husserl hopes he obviates the Humean sceptical problem – by seeing in appearances the pure phenomena sufficient for absolute knowledge, a knowledge not of existence (of things external to consciousness) but of essence (of things as they appear in consciousness). ‘[I]t is obvious that the only one who can argue in this way against the sceptic is the man who “sees” the ultimate basis of knowledge, who is willing to assign a significance to “seeing,” inspecting evidence.’² Phenomenology, then, is the science of essences, and the reduction, the suspension of every wayward impulse that threatens that

¹ _IP_, 10.
² _IP_, 49.
science, is the means by which essences are constituted. Husserl implies as much in the *Cartesian Meditations*:

> Therefore, if we think of a *phenomenology* developed as an intuitively apriori science *purely according to the eidetic method*, all its eidetic researches are nothing else but uncoverings of the / all-embracing eidos, transcendental ego as such, which comprises all pure possibility-variants of my de facto ego and this ego itself qua possibility.¹

The short-hand for this procedure is *bracketing*: in the eidetic reduction, a reduction which locates, constitutes and explores the essences of original consciousness, the natural world – along with the natural attitude of credulity toward it – must be bracketed, held in *indefinite suspension* or disbelief.² ‘It is a field of absolute cognitions, within which the ego and the world and God and the mathematical manifolds and whatever else may be a scientifically objective matter are held in abeyance, cognitions which are, therefore, also not dependent on these matters, which are valid in their own right, whether we are sceptics with regard to the others or not.’³ But bracketing is not, or does not in the beginning intend to be, a simple form of denial, as is the case with Descartes’ meditations; it is a (dubious) quest for certainty, a way of arresting or neutralising belief in the existence of the natural world in order to overcome obstructive habits/biases of mind. Husserl stiffly contests the view that the world is primary and apodictic:

> It cannot be accepted as apodictic without question and qualification.... Has not the coherent and unified totality of our experience been at times debased as a mere dream?⁴

¹ *CM*, 71.
² ‘For Husserl everything rises slowly from below, is formed and reformed, and remains subject always to discreditation, to what he called, in an uncanny experiment, the possibility of the deconstruction of the world’ (Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 5).
³ *IP*, 7.
⁴ *PL*, 6.
Bracketing amounts to a brisk and committed step toward the elimination of the ‘habitual natural attitude...in order that the uncritically presupposed certainties and objectivities of the natural attitude may now be referred back to a constituting transcendental consciousness as its original accomplishment’. Bracketing, then, is the appointed means by which Husserl retrieves transcendental subjectivity through retreat from the world, and thereby finds the foundation and source, unpolluted and presuppositionless, of all knowledge.

But a nagging problem makes it presence felt here, perhaps inclining us to think Husserl too optimistic. Even if a total suspension of the natural attitude, with its beliefs/biases, were desirable (suppose for the moment it is), I fail to see how it is a possibility which genuinely exists for humans. ‘How can one ever be sure that one has screened out all one’s presuppositions on any subject? Or how can one be quite certain where description ends and inference and interpretation begins?’ As a starting point, the reduction is sure to leave almost anyone dejected and mystified; for to begin in scepticism, however provisional or pertinacious, under the assumption that blindness and bias can be bracketed, held in complete abeyance, in fact overcome, is misguided. It is a little like entering marriage in the dotty conviction that one can have bliss without boredom: unfounded optimism tends to leave one either permanently addled or blind to the fact that one has blind spots. So even if it were desirable, it would not be possible; but I am also inclined to think that even if it were possible, it would not be particularly desirable.

**Bracketing and ‘bracketing’: a clarification**

I want to be careful here: I am not saying that one cannot learn that one has biases, or that one cannot expose one’s biases and beliefs to correction, or that one should not

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wean oneself from every bias that conceals the truth. Of course one can, in effect, distance oneself from (some of) one’s beliefs: just imagine a scenario in which some or many of those beliefs or natural ways of thinking are false or irrelevant. Indeed, most of our beliefs (and some of our belief-dispositions) are radically contingent, so they should be held with due provisionality. So of course there is a sense in which the natural habits of mind can and should be bracketed. But one cannot bracket all beliefs and biases any more than one can think without thinking: to suppose that the reduction rids one of all biasing beliefs (the ‘natural attitude’) is precisely to hold a belief that cannot be verified, a bias that needs to undergo reduction; but that is self-stultifying. Husserl’s reduction, in its extreme form, is a procedural mistake, sanctioned by incautious (because unacknowledged or uncritically held) presuppositions. Ironically, Husserl discloses the presence of presuppositions in his system just where he affirms their absence: the claim that a system is without presuppositions is perhaps the most extravagant and pernicious presupposition of all. One could apply Kierkegaard’s derisive, anti-Hegelian words to Husserl’s alleged reduction: ‘The system presupposes faith as given (a system that has no presuppositions!).’

Husserl’s phenomenological *epoché* assumes, with Descartes, that a certain epistemological distance, from the world and its contingency, is required for the proper analysis of experience. (It is not clear whether analysis includes explanation, for Husserl, since interpretation [bias] creeps in when explanations are offered – Husserl uses the ambiguous term ‘elucidatory analysis’.\(^2\) Phenomenology, we must remember, is principally concerned with examining or describing phenomena, and a phenomenon is anything – literally anything – that gives itself, appears, or is apprehended in consciousness; such *givens* are the relevant phenomenological data.\(^3\)

\(^1\) Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 14.

\(^2\) *IP*, 10.

\(^3\) Peter Koestenbaum comments: ‘[A]nything whatever can serve as datum or as the epistemologically given. Every being, every aspect of experience, every event, all things are given in experience’ (*PL*,...
But can one distance oneself from oneself? Can the pure ego achieve sufficient distance from the empirical ego to achieve purity in analysis? One wonders whether Husserl is inviting the impossible. By bracketing, says Peter Koestenbaum, ‘Husserl manages to focus solely on the presentational structure of phenomena, that is, on phenomena as they appear prior to any interpretations or beliefs attached to them’.¹

So Husserl: ‘But while I am perceiving I can also look, by way of purely “seeing,” at the perception, at it itself as it is there, and ignore its relation to the ego, or at least abstract from it.’² This, doubtless, is difficult to perform.

Now there is a perfectly legitimate sense in which experience is temporally prior to interpretive activity, certainly temporally prior to reflective or deliberative interpretation. But I shall argue that experience which remains uninterpreted is just experience which has not come to consciousness; when experience comes to consciousness, it precisely ceases being uninterpreted. (Actually I shall argue that there is no uninterpreted experience, precisely because there is no relevant experience without consciousness.) As Kant has it, time and space are the forms in which any actually possible and possibly actual experience comes, the passive forms of intuition, thus temporality is itself, loosely speaking, an interpretive activity. Now if this line of reasoning is correct, and a good deal more will have to be said to improve its cogency, I do not see how it will be possible to focus on phenomena without at the same time subjecting them to interpretation, human bias and all: to focus on, to give attention to, an experience is (this is analytically obvious) to interpret it. Interpretation will prove to be fundamental even to description of experience, to ‘simple seeing’ (in Husserl’s idiom), such that a subsequent, sophisticated evaluation or assessment of an experience often adds nothing, or very little, to the description – which is just a way of saying that every description, and

¹ PL, xvi.
² IP, 34.
not just every evaluation, is bias-impregnated, tendentious to one degree or another. Husserl would say that all experience is conscious experience, is a property of or is proper to consciousness, that there is no genuine experience which is not conscious(ness); and I shall argue that all conscious experience is interpretive experience. In other words, consciousness itself (because inextricably tied to one’s surroundings) is structured by beliefs and shaped by one’s many complex, partially determinative, and commonly unreflective relations to/in the world. Thus if all conscious experience is interpretive experience, then uninterpretive conscious experience is a contradiction in terms. This seems to imply two things that are relevant to this discussion: that Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, purged of impeding beliefs and belief dispositions, is a possibility that does not genuinely exist for humans; and that the reduction is insufficiently reductive.

Experience must be cleansed of unwanted biases and bents, according to Husserl: thus one must engage in phenomenological reduction. ‘At the outset of the critique of cognition the entire world of nature, physical and psychological, as well as one’s own human self together with all the sciences which have to do with these objective matters, are put in question.’ This is the epochal adjustment Husserl introduces in his search for the foundation in philosophy that cannot be overturned, the pure ego which is ‘the only apodictically certain being’. But the reduction, as Husserl conceives it, assuming it can be initiated, involves abstraction, disengagement, reflection at a certain level, which Husserl admits. Perhaps then he

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1 I want to say, loosely following Kant, that all our experience, and certainly all our outer experience, is essentially, fundamentally (Kant might say, inherently and permanently) spatio-temporally organised – those are the passive forms of intuition, coming, as it were, from the other, outer side of experience; if one adds to the spatio-temporal the logical (=causal), one is in the neighbourhood of the congenital context of which I have spoken. But I also want to make a further move, a neo-Kantian or broadly Wittgensteinian move, according to which all experience, and not just outer experience, is also socio-linguistic, structured not just by forms (and native categories) but by countless concepts which are acquired and revised, often unreflectively, in practical participation in global and local communities, cultural transactions and communal practices, rituals: this move introduces both cultural contexts and communal contexts of human experience.

2 IP, 22.

3 PL, 4.
should also admit the inescapability of interpretation and the loss of both absolute certainty and absolute objectivity. For in bracketing 'I' distance myself (from myself) in order to see more clearly, without obstruction. 'But,' as Husserl claims, 'while I am perceiving I can also look, by way of purely "seeing," at the perception, at it itself as it is there, and ignore its relation to the ego, or at least abstract from it.'

Yet it is always an 'I' which focuses on the phenomena, who filters and reflects upon what is given; to put it more technically, the experiencer, the experience, and the experienced, together with the commitments of the experiencer in the foreground and the running conversation between the experiencer and experienced which supplies the background, is irreducibly the given; or if one prefers, the pure 'I' and the empirical 'I' are fatally and inseparably conjoined, so that the pure 'I', whatever else it is, is what it is in complex, irreducible relation to its history as well as its many other empirical connections. Thus I am inclined to ask how, as a matter of practice, the ego's involvement, presupposed in every reduction, can ever be wholly overcome or purified?

**Intentionality**

Bracketing avails much, insists Husserl: it helps one overcome vain credulity, and it creates the context in which the world is (re)constituted immanently and certainty recovered, all within the space of transcendental subjectivity. Accordingly it reveals that intentionality is the vitality, the vital condition, of all consciousness, the most basic characteristic of experience, encompassing acts (noeses) as well as objects of thought (noemata) – and some Husserl scholars would add, not just the noeses with the noemata, but also the objects themselves; simply, 'intentionality is just the

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1 *IP*, 34.
2 Jaakko Hintikka, for example, 'The phenomenological dimension', in *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, eds Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78-105. But according to Dummett, 'Husserl's introduction of noemata, with the
characteristic of “aboutness” or “directedness” possessed by various kinds of cognitive acts.\(^1\) Consider one of Husserl’s simpler formulations: ‘Cognitive mental processes (and this belongs to their essence) have an *intentio*, they refer to something, they are related in this or that way to an object.’\(^2\) The question, of course, is in what way? What is the connection of act to object? And if act connects to object on account of the intentionality structure of consciousness, with what sort of new object are we dealing? This is a hugely important question, quite inseparable from the question of the relation of intentionality to ‘the riddle’ of transcendence.

Husserl, it is true, rigorously explored and ramified intentionality, from quite early on in his authorship, but its life did not begin (or end) with him: its roots may be uncovered in the rich soil of Scholasticism, indeed even as far back as Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas, for example, and Duns Scotus before him, made much of intentionality; St Thomas, for his part, took *intentio* to mean a ‘striving’ or ‘aiming’ at, an intention to do something, a purpose, a telos.\(^3\) In fact, St Thomas’ understanding accords with (perhaps accounts for) the primary scholastic force of *intentio* as something practical, non-theoretical. However, in Brentano and Husserl (and perhaps also Frege), the extra-practical, prelinguistic import of intention comes into prominence, denoting meaning (*Bedeutung*), sense (*Sinn*); thus intentional reference becomes more fundamental than linguistic reference.

According to Herbert Spiegelberg, Husserl’s understanding of *intentio* resists clear interpretation, and he is undoubtedly right. Perhaps it is a problem of equivocation: Husserl speaks both of ‘verbal-intention’ (*Wortintention*) and of

\(^2\) *IP*, 43.
\(^3\) According to Jacques Maritain, Husserl did not discover intentionality: ‘That discovery was made, actually, more than seven centuries ago (nor was St. Thomas the one who invented it)’ (*The Degrees of Knowledge*, 103).
‘experiential intention’ (Erlebnisintention). Concerning the former: ‘This intention is by no means identical with the word itself. However, it has the closest relationship with what is designated as the meaning of a word, insofar as this is not understood as the object meant. The intention, like the meaning, is something that belongs to the word, it is something that is directed from the word to an object...the non-real pointer beam emanating from the word (as from a sign post).’¹ The latter has reference to acts of experience, ‘mental directedness’;² it is ‘something pertaining to an act, not the act itself’.³ Experiential intention is the ‘character’ of an act, a component, that which directs an act, naturally, to an object. Spiegelberg elucidates: ‘Intention is like the central thread woven into every act, aiming at the object belonging to each act.’⁴ This is a live candidate for what Husserl means by constituting an object. The relation between verbal-intention and experiential intention may be summed up thus: ‘A common feature of both is, above all, the fact that the carrier of the intention (word or act) points to an object as well as the fact that these intentions are dependent upon their carriers.’⁵ If we collate this sense of intention with Husserl’s conviction that externally existing objects are transcendent to (= outside) perception, then we are left with the irresistible hint that reality, unwieldy and in so many obvious ways beyond one’s control, has lost both its objectivity and its function of regulating knowledge.

But phenomenology has to do not with externally existing objects but with essential objects; and since universals, or transcendencies, are fully distilled in essences, they are not transcendent to (= outside) consciousness; they are genuinely immanent within consciousness and are therefore absolutely given, universally valid, indubitable.⁶ So if, for example, one is thinking of the universal redness, one can

⁵ Spiegelberg, The Context of the Phenomenological Movement, 11.
⁶ Paul MacDonald puts it this way: ‘To continue to think of transcendence as pertaining to whatever it
‘stick’ to ‘pure immanence’, ‘perform’ the reduction, dissociate (‘snip off’) redness from something transcendent, such as a ‘piece of blotting paper / on my table’, and then ‘fully grasp in pure “seeing” the meaning of the concept of redness in general, redness in specie, the universal “seen” as identical in this and that.’ So to “see”, say, redness, as a universal (the universal that it is, Husserl would say)\(^1\) is to see without particularity, to see a universal that is neither a particular nor uniquely tied to a particular. (In a moment we shall see that Husserl makes a distinction between simple seeing [seeing a particular] and seeing that [propositional seeing], a distinction that shall prove indispensable for understanding Husserl’s view of perception). This is Husserl’s conclusion: ‘We truly “see” it; there it is, the very object of our intellect, this species of redness. Could a deity, an infinite intellect, do more to lay hold of the essence of redness than to “see” it as a universal?’\(^2\) I wonder in passing whether this appeal to a deity, an infinite intellect, is telling. Would everyone have to be a genius on Husserl’s view: if one does not ‘see’ the ultimate basis of knowledge, has not found the foundation, is s/he culpable, culpably gullible, without justified belief or knowledge? There is at least a hint of epistemic imperialism in Husserl.

In the area of intentionality, Husserl was indelibly influenced by Brentano (and Bolzano, along similar lines). One could elaborate here on the problem of objectless presentations, and the subtle differences between Brentano and Husserl on real versus ideal objects, mental versus physical acts, intentional inexistence versus actual existence, but all that would take us too far afield.\(^3\) Perhaps the contrast and
indebtedness can be outlined simply by saying that Brentano, on the one hand, understood the ‘intentional’ to ‘refer to the property of an object which is immanent in consciousness...’ – hence ‘intentional inexistence’ – while continuing to hold a traditional (i.e., external) view of transcendence: so objects of mental acts possess mental inexistence – and they also represent, or connect up with, external objects, if such external objects are real rather than illusory. What is problematic about this, of course, is that if the ‘intentional’ is understood strictly immanently, then, as Spiegelberg notes, ‘intention and real existence would be mutually exclusive’ – and that leaves us with the linkage problem Husserl’s whole discussion of intentionality and transcendence was designed to obviate. Thus Husserl (according to Spiegelberg), on the other hand, inspired by but at the same time dissatisfied with Brentano, ‘was the first to separate the concept of intentionality from the notion of immanent inexistence and interpreted it, or, speaking more precisely, re-interpreted it, as relatedness to, direction toward, the object’. This is a fine and appropriate distinction, and it seems a rewarding way in which to understand, or redirect, intentionality, a way of finally rescuing the objective world from the interior sea of consciousness. But an object, bare in mind (the pun is important), is intentional for Husserl only in the sense that an act, with the subject as its carrier, intends it; and an intentional object, a noema, is just whatever is being intended, whatever is being meant (what, if you will, mediates act and object), but this intended or meant thing is not (necessarily tied to) something external to consciousness that is actually perceived or apprehended; something external to consciousness, the real or actually existing object, what Husserl calls the Objective, is not a phenomenological datum and is therefore no concern for phenomenology. ‘The phenomenological data are the

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apprehensions of time.... One cannot discover the least trace of Objective time through phenomenological analysis.\textsuperscript{1}

So from Brentano Husserl is made aware of the intentional character of acts of consciousness, and that helps Husserl immeasurably toward overcoming the Kantian dichotomy of noumenal/phenomenal. But against Brentano, Husserl insisted that through essence transcendence becomes genuine immanence - essences, or universals, are immanent in their transcendence and transcendent in their immanence; as for natural objects, there is a sense in which they are 'transcendent' to, or at any rate are not immanent in, consciousness, and thus are no concern of phenomenology. But the objective world, the world beyond consciousness, is, in either case, cut adrift, banished, effaced - especially the more consciousness is separated (or insulated) from and made a stranger to its surroundings, its Umwelt, its situatedness.\textsuperscript{2} It is the reduction of objectivity to subjectivity, to genuine (ideal) immanence (\textit{reellen Immanenz}): consciousness will now have to do not with real objects but with correlates of objects, with the essences (universals, transcendencies) of things, with objects as they are intended in consciousness, and hence (Husserl thinks) with pure phenomena and absolute knowledge.\textsuperscript{3} 'Thus at this point we speak of such absolute data; even if these data are related to objective actuality via their intentions, their intrinsic character is \textit{within} them; nothing is assumed concerning the existence or non-existence of actuality. And so we have dropped anchor on the shore of phenomenology, the existence of the objects of which is assured, as the objects of scientific investigation should be; not, however, in a manner of components of the

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{PIT}, 24. And a few pages later: 'We do not classify lived experiences according to any particular form of reality. We are concerned with reality only insofar as it is intended, represented, intuited, or conceptual thought' (28).

\textsuperscript{2} See \textit{CM}, 80-88. Husserl laboriously criticises Brentano, with whom he agrees on so many other points, for 'not distinguish[ing] between act and content, or between act, content of apprehension, and the object apprehended' (\textit{PIT}, 37).

\textsuperscript{3} For a brief account of the connection between Brentano (and Bolzano) and Husserl, see Quentin Lauer's 'Introduction' to Husserl, \textit{Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy}, 20-22.
ego or of the temporal world, but rather as absolute data grasped in purely immanent "seeing".1

Intentionality 'refers to all acts and does not stand for a thing or entity'2 – in this respect it throws light on the unmistakably human contribution in experience. Husserl maintained that intentionality is an inherently social activity: no consciousness ever stands totally alone, empty; after all, all consciousness is consciousness of something. In consciousness, the cogito and the cogitation, the thinking and the thought, the act and the object, exist in a sort of irreducible and essential relation.3 In other words, consciousness mediates subject and object – or, better, is the mediation of subjective and objective poles in experience.4 But Husserl, almost certainly, has more in mind than that all consciousness has content: '[T]he object of my consciousness...is something meant, constructed, projected, constituted, in short, intended by me.'5 Husserl comments, tellingly: 'I am the ego in whose stream of consciousness the world itself – including myself as an object in it, a man who exists in the world – first acquires meaning and reality.'6 A quotation more illuminating for its repetition appears in Cartesian Meditations:

The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me – this world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, from me as the transcendental Ego, the Ego who comes to the fore only with transcendental-phenomenological epoché.7

1 IP, 35.
2 Mall, Experience and Reason, 12.
3 So Mall: ‘The deeper import of intentionality is rather the destruction of the very notion of a ‘reality in itself’ or of an absolute object’ (Experience and Reasou, 13).
4 In the words of Peter Koestenbaum: ‘Consciousness is not restricted to subjectivity...but arises through subject-object interaction’ (PL, xxvii-xxviii). See also David Woodruff Smith, ‘Mind and body’, in The Cambridge Companion to Husserl, 341.
5 Koestenbaum, PL, xxvii.
6 PL, 8.
7 CM, 26.
It seems that reality, or the reality with which Husserl has to do, exists in rather than for or through consciousness; whether anything exists beyond one's own mental pulse is quite immaterial, at least from phenomenology's standpoint. This 'whether anything exists beyond' is relevant: for Husserl's phenomenology does not impartially deny or doubt existence as such, but only existence beyond consciousness; consciousness thus acquires a sort of absolute existence of which to boast. Clearly, there is partiality here, favouritism toward consciousness. Indeed Husserl is pleased that everything depends in the end upon the transcendental ego, the ego that does not itself depend upon anything else: 'Once I have banished from my sphere of judgments the world, as one which receives its being from me and within me, then I, as the transcendental ego which is prior to the world, am the sole source and object capable of judgment.' The époche reveals that

I and my life remain – in my sense of reality – untouched by whichever way we decide the issue of whether the world is or is not.

And Husserl will not decide the issue, not in those terms; he will ignore it, deny its continuing validity to the phenomenological enterprise. We have seen that through reduction, Husserl hopes to trace his steps back to original consciousness, a core of experience about which one cannot be mistaken; and with the trenchant turn to transcendental subjectivity, the typical questions of realism and idealism – the very questions one might expect a project like Husserl's to raise and, if possible, unravel – prove to have very little charm or relevance for Husserl. Thus Koestenbaum and

1 'The use of the method of bracketing implies that such attention involves no concern for whether these objects really exist.... The phenomenologist can apply his method to the things of fiction or mythology as well as to the things of physics, to the things of imagination as well as to the things of perception and memory, the devil as well as the deep blue sea' ('Introduction', in The Cambridge Companion to Husserl, 11-12).

2 PL, 11.

3 PL, 9. See, also, IP, Lecture V, 52-60.

4 'From a strictly descriptive point of view, intentionality avoids the alternatives of realism and idealism. Insofar as it appears to a consciousness, one can say that the object transcends that
others have claimed that Husserl simply transcends that particular metaphysical problem.¹

**A crude ego cogito**

Effectively, then, what one intentionally experiences is just what one sees or projects in the nether region of consciousness, and discussions of reality and unreality, at least as they are traditionally framed, are redundant. But if the world does not actually exist, the world in which consciousness is thickly enmeshed, whence comes Husserl’s consciousness of...?

The issues are both complex and complicated. For why – Husserl might retort – should the world as an independently existing universe of pluralities be considered real and primary? For I can be wrong about these surroundings – whether this patch of wetness is a pond or a mud puddle, or whether the patch of wetness is anything more than an optical illusion caused by the angle of the sun’s rays. Indeed, I am often wrong about this or that visual stimulus; but I cannot be wrong that I am having or failing to have this experience. Thus the rational person is obliged – moral and intellectual rectitude depend on it – both to believe just what he cannot doubt, namely his own self-consciousness as well as the matters of which his consciousness assures him, and to abstain from believing what can and must be doubted, namely those many things about which he can surely be mistaken. ‘Without doubt,’ Husserl says, ‘there is cogitatio.... The cogitationes are the first absolute data.’²

There are, according to *Cartesian Meditations* (§6), three principal ‘differentiations’ of evidence with reference to which belief must be regulated:

consciousness and likewise that the object is in that consciousness; but it is there specifically by virtue of being intentional and not by virtue of being a really inherent part of consciousness’ (Ricoeur, *Husserl*, 8). See MacDonald, *Descartes and Husserl*, 217.

¹ See Koestenbaum, *PL*, xxix; Mall, 1-2. This is also Gadamer’s opinion (Truth and Method [New York: Seabury, 1975], 248-249).

² *IP*, 2.
certain evidence, apodictic evidence, and adequate evidence. Husserl admits, that is, that evidences are 'more or less perfect': but the aim is perfect(ed) evidence. A certain evidence 'excludes every doubt', but it does not exclude the 'conceivability that what is evident could subsequently become doubtful, or the conceivability that being could prove to be illusion'. So normal sensuous experience, perception for example, is commonly certain in this sense, but it is easily thrown into a tailspin of uncertainty. 'An apodictic evidence, however, is not merely certainty of the affairs or affair complexes (states-of-affairs) evident in it; rather it discloses itself, to critical reflection, as having the signal peculiarity of being at the same time the absolute unimaginableness (inconceivability) of their non-being, and thus excluding in advance every doubt.' The evidence for the factual existence of the world is, naturally, not apodictic, says Husserl; one's consciousness, however, is experienced with perfect, apodictic certainty.¹ Adequate evidence differentiates itself by being the ideal of fully perfect, fully complete evidence in which experience is not 'infected' with 'unfulfilled components, with expectant and attending meanings'.² Now, obviously, an experience can be certain without being apodictic or adequate; and Husserl intimates that an experience can be certain and apodictic without being fully adequate. But of the divers sorts of intuition, perception, phenomenological reflection, empathy, and so on, only phenomenological reflection (or introspection) is, according to Husserl, certain as well as apodictic and adequate.³ Thus Husserl: 'Reflecting on the multifarious possibilities of error and deception, I might reach such a degree of sceptical despair that I finally say: Nothing is certain, everything is doubtful. But it is at once evident that not everything is doubtful, for while I am judging that everything is doubtful, it is indubitable that I am so judging.... And in

¹ See CM, 17-18.
² See CM, 14-16.
every case of definite doubt, it is indubitably certain that I have this doubt. And likewise with every cogitatio.¹

So goes a crude version of Descartes’ *ego cogito*. But even if the distinctions were a little tidier and the examples purer and more plentiful – and finer distinctions and better examples are always within someone’s clever reach – I do not see that the argument’s appeal would be significantly improved. The argument is vulnerable as long as one insists on playing the game in which absolute certainty is the goal: for when I see, for example, the row of manicured shrubs outside my office window, that the ‘I’ is permanent, rather than vaporous, the same ‘I’ now as before, continuous with the ‘I’ of yesterday, last week, and so on, is not a certainty, no more certain than the shrubs or anything else in the immediate environment, it seems to me. Nietzsche is right: ‘[I]t is a *perversion* of the facts of the case to say that the subject “I” is the condition of the predicate “think.” One thinks; but that this “one” is precisely the famous old “ego,” is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an “immediate certainty”’.² The *cogito*, then, is not infallible, an apodictic first principle, an infallibly certain foundation – not in the way the Cartesian/Husserlian epistemological project requires.³

**Constitution**

It may be true that Husserl’s supreme (seminal) achievement was the development of noetic-noematic correlativity.⁴ But Husserl’s theory of constitution – the corollary of intentionality – may well be one of his notable shortcomings: for it leans toward

¹ *IP*, 23.
³ Consider Karl Popper’s measured assessment: ‘I admit that the belief in one’s own existence is very strong. But I do not admit that it can bear the weight of anything resembling the Cartesian edifice’ (*Objective Knowledge*, 35).
⁴ Mall, *Experience and Reason*, 3.
solipsism (radical subjectivism) and accordingly compromises intersubjectivity. According to Ricoeur, ‘Phenomenology was born under the menace of a true solipsism, a true subjectivism’ – and it is debatable whether Husserl ever convincingly put the spectre of solipsism to rest.\(^1\) To move from a solipsistically-tinged subjectivity to a social (inter-) subjectivity, as Husserl apparently does from *Ideas* to *Cartesian Meditations* and *The Crisis*, is neither completely to overcome solipsism nor completely to embrace sociality. Husserl was keenly aware of the problem and thus introduced the *Lebenswelt* to effect the transition. But the fact is that, although the range of phenomena encompassed in intuition/intuitive seeing is broadened with the notion of the life-world to include others, transcendental subjectivity remains central; everything other first and finally depends on and is, so to speak, reduced to (by) transcendental subjectivity.\(^2\) Thus the problematic of intersubjectivity: when, according to transcendental phenomenology, only that which is constituted subjectively in consciousness is truly known, then others can be known only as they become subjectively constituted objects of cognition.\(^3\) The Husserlian idea of constitution is at the very heart of the epistemological predicament. In experience, in knowing, both of others and of other things, do human beings discover, or do they create, or do they both create and discover – and if they both create and discover, do they ever experience purely or know anything incontrovertibly? I argued in Chapter 2 that Kant ingeniously made room for both creation and discovery in his epistemology: Kant (if you will) created a way of discovering reality, or, to put it another way, discovered just how essential creativity, human activity, is to finding reality.\(^4\) Now I am trying to ascertain whether Husserl’s

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\(^1\) Ricoeur, *Husserl*, 31.


\(^3\) Quentin Lauer makes a similar point in his ‘Introduction’ to Husserl’s *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, 1-68.

\(^4\) I shall develop this dialectic of creation/discovery in an expressly theological fashion in Chapter 6. Theologically speaking, the world, as God’s creation, depends entirely and continually on God, the world’s creator, for its reality; and it is in complex involvement with that world that we discover what God creates (including ourselves presumably) and with God create what we discover, through
view of constitution implies something like the creation of an ‘objective world purely idealistically from out of the sheer activities of consciousness’. After all, Husserl does say, more than once, something very much like the following: ‘Every imaginable sense, every imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being.’ Does such a view create a lopsided dependence of objectivity (object) on subjectivity (subject), and thereby imply the relative (or absolute) independence of subjectivity? We can frame the question differently: Would such a view leave objectivity open to exploitation from subjectivity and subjectivity closed to accountability from objectivity? On my view, subjectivity needs objectivity for accountability and objectivity no doubt needs subjectivity for accessibility: that is but one of many ways to understand the constructive realism I am elaborating, one of many ways to avoid separation on the one hand and sublation on the other. But we shall have to modify Husserl to achieve the relevant balance.

In every intentional experience, the constitutional, meaning-giving consciousness is primary; consciousness gives, or creates, or projects meaning, avers Husserl, and this while existing concepts, beliefs and belief dispositions about the world are bracketed. This is as interesting as it is problematic. Husserl’s consuming phenomenological pursuit was ‘To work out the field of an “original experience” through a phenomenological reduction; and, according to Mall, ‘a transcendental

procreation and recreation, naming and building, connecting and communing. Through participation with/response to God, then, we discover how God has fashioned reality to include human response and creativity: discover ourselves as created, fallen and, in God’s grace, free through faith and obedience, faithful obedience, to recreate and be recreated, to be redeemed and to share in the redemption of the world. In sum, we create/recreate only because God has created and is (re)creating (Phil 2.12-13), and we create well and wisely only when we are responsive to God’s creative word in Christ, only when our activity not only replicates God’s activity but extends it through creative fidelity, constrained creativity. But we also mis-create when we deviate from God’s pattern of creation/redemption, centred on Christ. So Christ shall prove to be both the pattern and the critical principle in human experience.

1 Mall, Experience and Reason.
2 CM, 84. See, also, IP, 56-57; Ideas, 153; The Crisis, 168; EJ, 50-51.
original experience must mean a transcendental seeing, which consists in self-experience of our intentionality, being nothing else than our meaning-giving consciousness.\(^1\) How is a consciousness ‘meaning-giving’ when it operates without a conceptual web, a dense and distortive web (I have intimated) supplied, at least in part, by one’s surroundings, encompassing the language and language-related activities in which one is, nearly literally, entangled? The phenomenological reduction is a procedure which is simply not possible to perform, much less complete, in practice.\(^2\) In a word, the meaning-giving consciousness is absorbed in the natural world: Husserl’s philosophical/phenomenological attitude, far from wholly transcending the natural attitude, is irrevocably soaked in and conditioned by it. It is just this fact which Husserl steadily comes to acknowledge and which he tries to accommodate with notions of the primacy of the life-world\(^3\) and prepredicative experience.\(^4\)

So Husserl wants to find an indubitable core in experience, and he looks within consciousness to find it. When he gazes within, he discovers intentionality, the noetic-noematic correlative structure of consciousness. What we have seen is that this intentionality is, or constitutes, the process of projection or construction of the contents, the noemata, of consciousness; and it is important to remember that intentionality, as the structure of consciousness and all cognitive acts, provides access to correlates of objects, true essences, but not access to objects as they are ‘independent’ of the mind’s impression of them.

\(^1\) Mall, *Experience and Reason*, 3.

\(^2\) Michael Purcell comments on the inherent instability of reduction and the consciousness it wounds: ‘Now, by progressing the reduction further beyond the subject [as Purcell thinks Levinas does], the *ego cogito* is itself rendered vulnerable, for the point at which the noematico-noetic correlation breaks down, the transcendental reduction reveals a consciousness already wounded and compromised by what is other than consciousness. The essential openness of phenomenology renders phenomenology itself vulnerable’ (*Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner and Levinas* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998], 15).

\(^3\) See *The Crisis*, 103-189.

\(^4\) For the distinction between prepredicative experience and predicative judgement, see especially *Experience and Judgment*.
The transcendental spectator

If one constructs in intentional experience (as Husserl understands this), that is, if intentionality entails constitution, then one might suppose that either all experience is fallible experience, something about which one can be mistaken, or external reality is indeed forever closed off from the human knower. And if bracketing aims both to purge away error and to retrieve reality, to retrieve reality by purging away error, and intentionality does not prevent us from erring (at least on what exists outside the contents of consciousness), it would seem that intentionality itself must be bracketed if the world is to be recovered and the infallible reached. But that would introduce a change into the very nature of experience and Husserl’s project would encounter stormy weather: for if intentionality is bracketed out, the reduction miscarries. Husserl finally neither finds the infallible nor recovers the world in his phenomenological reduction; and in the end the sceptical and solipsistic tendencies of Husserl’s project are not completely curbed. But this is, as it stands, more an aspersion than an assessment. For Husserl declares: ‘I hold every form of current philosophical realism to be in principle absurd, as no less every idealism to which in its own arguments that realism stands contrasted, and which in fact it refutes.’ Indeed Husserl’s transcendental-phenomenological idealism is, he says, ‘as far as can be from being one of the usual balancings between Idealism and Realism’. True, Husserl’s idealism does not operate on an inside/outside view of immanence and transcendence, so the issue of how one connects something in himself, a representation, to something ‘out there’ is not really the issue for Husserl.

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1 Sartre’s estimation is that Husserl strains against but does not escape solipsism (Being and Nothingness [New York: Philosophical Library, 1956], 233-235).
2 Ideas, 19.
3 Ideas, 20.
4 For Husserl’s discussion of immanence/transcendence, see IP, 24-32. ‘[T]ranscendence is both the initial and the central problem of the critique of cognition’ (28).
is concerned, in the idiom of *The Idea of Phenomenology*, with pure cognition, with the possibilities of cognition, that is, with cognition of the possibilities of cognition. How does cognition accomplish the oblique task of reaching the object? That is the question, and the natural attitude that takes that for granted is unphilosophical. In other words, Husserl’s query is subtly different, concerned as he was with genuine immanence [*reellen Immanenz*], with cognition and object cognized both within consciousness. So: ‘The objects cognized stand over and against the cognition. But how can we be certain of the correspondence between cognition and the object cognized?’¹ We have seen that he finds a solution in intentionality, in the act-object structure of consciousness: ‘The existence of the *cogitatio*, more precisely the phenomenon of cognition itself, is beyond question; and it is free from the riddle of transcendence…. In the “seeing” pure phenomena the object is not outside cognition or outside “consciousness,” while being given in the sense of the absolute self-givenness of something which is simply “seen”.’² All the same, his position is essentially idealist and remains vulnerable to the charge of virtual solipsism (or vitiated sociality), of being remote from life and therefore compromised in relevance, an unflattering charge which he combated, not entirely convincingly, more than once, most vigorously in his last great publication, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Husserl’s position does not come, in the end, to solipsism (that would be ironic), and he is never reluctant to deny the suspicious implication; nevertheless, the suspicion shows that his doctrine of intersubjectivity is insufficiently robust. But we shall get more into the oddities of Husserl’s idealism a little later.

R. A. Mall, a sympathetic interpreter of Husserl, tries to obviate these criticisms by explaining how an eidetic reduction works:

¹ *IP*, 15.
² *IP*, 33.
My perception of this mango tree in my natural attitude corroborates my belief in its real existence.... Now I perform the phenomenological reduction. What I really do is to refrain from believing in the existence of the mango tree. What actually happens is this: The mango tree perceived remains outside the bracketing; but the perception as an act is doubtless an element of our reduced sphere. And, thanks to the Husserlian concept of intentionality, this perception is not 'perception as such', without any reference. The intentional-referential perception remains a perception of.... What I now do is that I am abstaining from attaching to this perception any judgment whether this mango tree really exists or not. It is now not the corporeal thing, the mango tree, to which my perception refers, but the intentional correlate of the preserved act of perception is the mango tree as I perceive it. ¹

This is all rather convoluted. Presumably the consciousness which is analysing (in an effort to find) universal ‘original consciousness’ is not itself original consciousness, and thus is itself the prisoner of marauding habits of mind. ² But the pure (‘transcendental’) ego discloses itself, according to Husserl, rises up out of the mire of world-immersion, when the neutral (philosophical) attitude replaces, or rather displaces, the natural (pedestrian) attitude:

The phenomenological reduction thus tends to split the ego. The transcendental spectator places himself above himself, watches himself, and sees himself also as the previously world-immersed ego. ³

One would have as much success defying gravity under normal conditions. Indeed, the notion of an ego that is something other than world-drenched, a pure ego without empirical connection or baggage, is quite literally strange, other-worldly –

¹ Mall, *Experience and Reason*, 15.
² Ricoeur makes the brilliant but analytically obvious point: ‘To examine and describe the cogito, is this not to treat it as a phenomenon, hence as an object in nature and no longer as the condition for the possibility of phenomena.... So then, how will ‘transcendental experience’ escape from this dilemma: either I am ‘conscious’ of the ‘I think’ but it is not knowledge, or I ‘know’ the ego but it is a phenomenon in nature’ (Husserl, 180; cf. 185)?
³ PL, 15.
intelligible, perhaps, only to an ego that has learned to transcend the limits and conditions of time and place.

We see then that Husserl’s notion of ‘constitution’ has led some to charge him with radical idealism. According to Mall, however, the criticism is short on charity: by constitution Husserl has something other than ‘creation’ in mind. Mall claims: ‘The term “constitution” means that all that is transcendent must be explained, understood immanently as the accomplishment of an intentional consciousness.’ It is well here not to forget Husserl’s understanding of ‘givenness’. Every sensible object possesses an essence which can be seen (= ‘experienced as acts’). Husserl stresses the function of imagination in seeing the essence of things; the method of eidetic variation (eidetische Variation), for example, ‘consists in our freely imagining an infinite number of possibilities in which an object, say a cube, may exist’. ‘This freely varying the object in my fancy helps me to discover what really belongs to the invariant structures of this object.’

What tells against Mall’s interpretation is not that it is charitable but that it is too uncritical. From only a cursory reading of Logical Investigations, it seems clear that Husserl’s early leanings were realist – that is to say, where the phenomenology remained more descriptive than transcendental, a definite realist potential can be discerned. With the publication of The Idea of Phenomenology (1907) and Ideas (1913), a new phase was inaugurated. We see in those works, luminously, that Husserl was moving decidedly (many Husserl scholars would say naturally and unavoidably) in a more radical and idealist direction. The first edition of Ideas met with an ambivalent reception, and some of Husserl’s disciples/students were

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2 Mall, Experience and Reason, 16-17.

3 Mall, Experience and Reason, 17.

4 Mall, Experience and Reason, 17.

concerned with the surprising new direction. In the Preface to the English edition, Husserl confesses that the idealism of the *Ideas* suffers from lack of completeness; but he bluntly denies that his position is assailable or in any way new or arbitrary.\(^1\) The most consistent and radical defence he produced for this idealism emerged in *Cartesian Meditations* – and he remained faithful to transcendental idealism in *The Crisis*;\(^2\) some Husserl scholars remain unconvinced by it.\(^3\) So Roman Ingarden, both friend and student, has claimed that Husserl’s stubborn (pre)commitments eventually drove him to embrace a sort of subjective idealism, as is evidenced in his theory of constitution.

We have examined a variety of evidence, a good portion of which suggests that Husserl’s idealism and his theory of intentionality/constitution are mutually defining, stand or stumble together. The ego, it seems, does not exist in the world and for the world, the world exists in and for the ego – that is, to say, the transcendental ego, as the maker of all meaning and source of all sense, is

\(^1\) *Ideas*, 18.
\(^2\) ‘The *Cartesian Meditations* are the most radical expression of this new idealism for which the world is not only “for me” but draws all its being-status “from me.” The world becomes the “world-perceived-in-the-reflective life.” Constitution becomes a gigantic project of progressively composing the signification “world” without an ontological remainder’ (Ricoeur, *Husserl*, 10).
\(^3\) Herbert Spiegelberg is one, and M. Merleau-Ponty another. According to Merleau-Ponty, the great lesson of the phenomenological reduction, as Husserl conceived it, is the ‘impossibility of completing it’. According to Spiegelberg, the unresolved problems of Husserl’s reduction are grave. In his publications over the years Husserl, eager to clarify the reduction, introduced a panoply of nuances, where, for example, *epoche* is increasingly distinguished from reduction. This had the effect of confusing rather than clarifying the matter. It is not harsh to say, consequently, that his phenomenological reduction suffocates itself through qualifications (Spiegelberg, *The Context of the Phenomenological Movement*, 65-66). Spiegelberg asks, rhetorically: ‘How can one reasonably expect such a blind leap into a reduction whose real sense cannot be explained beforehand, let alone be justified as necessary, and for which no clear instructions can be formulated’ (69-70)? He summarises the phenomenological reduction as a ‘highly complex operation’ involving ‘two distinctive steps’: the ‘epoche or suspension of belief’ and ‘the leading back of the suspended world phenomena to their origin in conscious subjectivity’ (71). This assumes both that ‘all phenomena have origins’ and that ‘these origins lie in conscious subjectivity’ (71). Spiegelberg’s criticism is poignant: ‘Husserl did not succeed in giving a sufficiently clear idea of the way back from the phenomena to their origins in subjectivity and particularly to the discovery of the “hidden achievements” of this subjectivity in constituting the phenomena’ (71). He asks: ‘Why could the phenomena not have their origin equally well in “objectivity,” or in a combination of both, or even have no “origin” at all’ (79-80)?
the unquestioned given. Thus the meanings intrinsic to consciousness determine the meanings of all things: acts determine objects. So Husserl:

Manifestly the conscious execution of phenomenological reduction is needed, in order to attain that Ego and conscious life by which transcendental questions...can be asked. But as soon as...one sets to work, attempting in a systematic self-investigation and as the pure ego to uncover this ego's whole field of consciousness, one recognizes that all that / exists for the pure ego becomes constituted in him himself; furthermore, that every kind of being – including every kind characterized as, in any sense, 'transcendent' – has its own particular constitution. Transcendency in every form is an immanent existential characteristic, constituted within the ego. Every imaginable sense, ever imaginable being, whether the latter is called immanent or transcendent, falls within the domain of transcendental subjectivity, as the subjectivity that constitutes sense and being. The attempt to conceive the universe of true being as something lying outside the universe of possible consciousness, possible knowledge, possible evidence, the two being related to one another merely externally be rigid law, is nonsensical. They belong together essentially; and, as belonging together essentially, they are also concretely one, one in the only absolute concretion: transcendental subjectivity. If transcendental subjectivity is the universe of possible sense, then an outside is precisely – nonsense.¹

Let's consider an obvious objection here, toward which we have been stumbling all along: if meaning, all meaning, may be said (first and finally) to reside in consciousness, and is determined by consciousness, the world as a bearer of some meaning vanishes, becomes superfluous, and one wonders to what extent, if any, the existing world conditions one's interaction and awareness. When meaning is not at least partially governed or informed by objects – world and God – it is hard to see how meaning could be anything more than human contrivance. Acts determine objects, and not quite the other way around, according to Husserl: meanings are in the head, so to speak, in the thoughts or intentions of a faceless, worldless subject. But that cannot be quite right: for, clearly, even if (external) objects do not determine

¹ CM, 84.
acts, something or someone does; presumably acts are not self-determining but are rather, I should like to say, being determined by forms of life, language communities, the presence of others, and countless other commitments and prejudices. I wish to argue that both linguistic and extra-linguistic realities, forms of life and other realities, condition thinking, experiencing, knowing. *Acts determine objects, objects determine acts, and forms of life determine both acts and objects: perhaps it is not simpler than this.* This dialectic integrates both the prejudices of language and the presence/otherness of the world in experience; both one’s context and the ways things really are, however they are, shape what one sees. (I shall be making just this point again and again, here and throughout this thesis, though not always with just these glosses.) Perhaps it would be more modest to say that at least the possibility of something external breaking into one’s context is intriguingly plausible, I should think at least as plausible as its denial, and can therefore be held open, in good faith, as a possibility that is more than merely, remotely possible. There will of course be no apprehension of the way things really are in the world which is perspective or prejudice free, as I have tried consistently to maintain: ‘One can only compare one world picture with other world pictures, not with something that is not a world picture.’¹ Or as Fergus Kerr puts it: ‘[W]e cannot get outside our skins to compare our relationship to the world with some alternative.’² And limiting oneself, as Husserl wants to do, to “pure” phenomena, and hence to essences, will do nothing to free one from one’s prejudices. Charles Taylor expresses the point thus: ‘Our language is always more than we can encompass; it is in a sense inexhaustible. The aspiration to be in no degree at all a prisoner of language, so dear to Hobbes and Locke, is in principle unrealizable.’³ Countless others make the same compelling observation.⁴ But, note, as long as we are thoroughly immersed in the world, the

¹ Milton Munitz, *The Question of Reality*, 118.
² Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 133.
⁴ A good (Wittgensteinian) example is Stanley Cavell, *The claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
world which is not shy about imposing itself, sharing with us and seducing us, we will at least occasionally have more than our perspective and prejudice in experience, even if we cannot have the more without the conditioned perspective, and even if we cannot always (or ever) easily separate the one from the other. Or in Hilary Putnam’s expression: ‘Contrary to the doctrine that has been with us since the seventeenth century, meanings just aren’t in the head’.¹

Husserl’s idealism, according to Ingarden, implies that

what is real is nothing but a constituted noematic unity (individual) of a special kind of sense which in its being and quality (Sosein) results from a set of experiences of a special kind and is quite impossible without them. Entities of this kind exist only for the pure transcendental ego which experiences such a set of perceptions. The existence of what is perceived (of the perceived as such) is nothing ‘in itself’ (an sich) but only something ‘for somebody,’ for the experiencing ego.²

In Husserl the world of meaning is substantially created out of the nearly illimitable resources of consciousness; the perversion is to think that one can do this sort of creating purely, without impediment. We are all in the world, the natural world, the world of partial perspective and blinding passion, the world of flesh and blood: and being in the world will shade and structure our experience, willy-nilly, with or without our permission. So being in the world, it is true, is something of a predicament, a limit and limiting situation; but being in the world is also the promise of experience, the conditio sine qua non of experience. I have been insinuating,

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² Ingarden, *On the Motives*, 21. "Thereby the main thesis of transcendental idealism presents itself, that the being of the real world, given to us in an experiential way is dependent on the being and process of the pure constituting consciousness without which it would not exist at all and, secondly, that it is generally awkward even to ask about the existence of the world "in itself" as it transcends the real sense of transcendental constitution whose results create the basis for every inquiry and determine the sense of our questions" (21).

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1979). ‘We look for “absolute simples” (and, I will add, absolute anythings: responsibilities, actions, meanings, certainties, see-ables) when we try (or have, or come) to speak absolutely, that is, outside language games’ (226).
sometimes subtly sometimes quite clumsily, that there has to be more reciprocity than this between consciousness and creation: for there is a sense in which one’s surroundings also create one’s consciousness, one’s awareness as well as one’s sense of self; but with Husserl consciousness returns the favour and then forgets that it owes the world or anyone else anything.

**A tryst with idealism**

I should like to bring this chapter to a point of equilibrium by drawing attention to three salient factors, all of which I have addressed, which help clarify Husserl’s decisive move away from salvageable realism to idealism. The first concerns Husserl’s well-documented insatiable desire to establish philosophy as a ‘rigorous science’ and to find the ‘universal unity of knowledge’.\(^1\) Husserl realised that his musings in *Logical Investigations* were wide of the mark: if an unassailable foundation were to be established, he would have to reject the final reliability of outer perception, as it is prone to deceive. To accept the postulation of the existence of the world, based upon one’s perceptions of it, is strictly impermissible, ‘an unacceptably naive belief’;\(^2\) that belief, and the belief disposition that occasions it, must be bracketed before it can be justified – an impossible and unnecessarily stern requirement, I have argued. The solution Husserl proposed, a clever amalgam of Brentano, Hume, Kant and Descartes, was a turn to appearances, to inner consciousness, a Cartesian residue by means of which ‘a cognition was to be gained which could not be doubted’.\(^3\) This initial sceptical move is justified (Husserl thinks) since the world is an ‘hypothesis that needs verification’;\(^4\) and perception cannot, hard as it works, produce incontrovertible verification, not at any rate concerning the

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1 *PL*, 3.
4 *PL*, 7.
real world ‘in itself’ and certainly not concerning its existence. Ingarden summarises: ‘In that way the purely methodological ideal of philosophy as rigorous science whose result would be indubitable and undoubted prepared the ground for a transition to an essentially metaphysical solution, to transcendental idealism.’ The evidence from Husserl, as I see it and as we have considered it, seems to confirm Ingarden’s supposition.

The second factor concerns the logic of Husserl’s renovated epistemology, an epistemology which stresses the priority of pure consciousness in a defiant – I have argued futile – effort to avoid the error of petitio principii. The only sure way of guarding against begging the question is to entangle oneself in a phenomenological reduction, the whole point of which is to retreat back into the inner sanctum of consciousness: ‘[T]his “priority” of pure consciousness begins to assume a metaphysical character in the form even of a thesis of the absolute existence of pure consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of an existential dependence of all other being, and, above all, of the real world, on pure consciousness.’ I have argued that to retreat into consciousness is effectively to abandon the surroundings on which consciousness depends, at least in this case: that is, with the retreat Husserl abandons the possibility of recovering the world in any really objective way, and indeed abandons consciousness itself, leaves it vulnerable. Admittedly, the world does not actually or completely disappear in the reduction, a point Husserl insists on reiterating; but by being submerged with the reduction, it loses any independent integrity and difference it might have, and with them its ability to impose, its privilege to interrogate, and its power to challenge and correct our impressions of it; for the world remains only as it appears in and as the contents of consciousness – thus there is nothing on which consciousness itself depends and to which, therefore, it is ultimately and continually accountable. Husserl admits: ‘With the loss of other

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1 Ingarden, On the Motives, 11.
2 Ingarden, On the Motives, 12.
minds, I lose, of course, all forms of sociability and culture. In short, the entire concrete world ceases to have reality for me and becomes instead mere appearance.\(^1\)

And of the reduction and its redolent significance, he says: 'It is the methodology through which I come to understand myself as the ego and life of consciousness in which and through which the entire objective world exists for me, and is for me precisely as it is.'\(^2\) This is Husserl's position, so when he comes to consider the pressing issues of the life-world and the reality of a community of knowers (intersubjectivity), the logic of his position, and his disciplined commitment to it, leave him short on resources.

The final motive which played a role in delivering Husserl over to idealism, related to the first, was the incorrigible incompleteness of perception. Husserl came to argue that objects given in sense perception do not enter the experience of perception itself; on the contrary, they are "transcendent" in relation to it.\(^3\) It seems to have dawned on Husserl at this time, in the fashion of an epiphany, that sense perception is never better than 'partial', and partial perception is never good enough; in a moment of givenness one is involved with, at best, only several facets of an object, and even then a seeing is not necessarily explicit, diaphanous, precise. So he says: 'External perception is a constant pretension to accomplish something that, by its very nature, it is not in a position to accomplish. Thus, it harbors an essential contradiction, as it were.'\(^4\) 'No matter how completely we may perceive a thing,' in other words, 'it is never given in perception with the characteristics that qualify it and make it up as a sensuous thing from all sides at once.'\(^5\) Ingarden states the problem succinctly: 'Only in the further course of the experience (encounter), i.e. in other perceptions of "the same" thing can the back become the front and then it is

\(^1\) PL, 7.
\(^2\) PL, 8.
\(^3\) Ingarden, On the Motives, 14.
\(^5\) Husserl, 'Horizons and the Genesis of Perception', 221.
given effectively, explicitly. We can also in certain cases "peep" into the interior – by cutting or making the thing transparent.¹ So it seems that Husserl initially acknowledged that perceptions can be improved when they are multiplied. But this iterative perceptual procedure never completes perception; perception cannot prove itself reliable by appealing to its own deliverances, as that creates an unhappy circularity. The problem, as Husserl came to see it, was that outer perception never exhausts the horizons of an object in experience, even if it can multiply the angles from which an object is seen; and for this reason, so he reckoned, outer perception is something in which it would be untimely and ultimately foolish to confide. In short, there is always more to an object than what is seen in outer perception. In Chapter 7 I shall attempt to show that Husserl's reason for moving from incompleteness in perception to unreliability is questionable and finally unconvincing; for now, suffice it to say that there are other ways of establishing the reliability of sense (outer) perception, and other ways to justify human confidence in the information conveyed in and beliefs derived from such perceptions – namely by not being uptight about completion and absolute certainty and by permitting human beings to live and interact in all their bodiliness in the world.

A cluster of quotations from Ingarden should dispel some of the lingering confusion. 'If, however, we suppose that there may be changes in the perceived object in the period of time which divides one perception from others, then the verification of an actual perception of a certain thing with the help of other perceptions becomes very difficult if not entirely impossible.'² Again: '[K]nowledge gained with the help of outer perception becomes not only one-sided and inadequate but, further, of necessity characterized by an uncertainty which cannot be removed by referring to other perceptions of the same thing.'³ Finally: 'Because of the nature

¹ Ingarden, On the Motives, 14.
² Ingarden, On the Motives, 16.
³ Ingarden, On the Motives, 17.
of outer perception...we have to bear in mind that new perceptions not yet experienced may introduce some modification in the thing's previous determination, a modification which could not only supplement its determination but at the same time alter the determination of the object arising from "previous" experience.¹ Thus perceptions multiplied, far from securing reliability, are likely to contradict one another. So it was that Edmund Husserl, believing that all seeing is both one-sided (or limited) and subject to correction and change, turned to the apodicticity of consciousness for sanctuary, and made his tryst with transcendental idealism complete.

4

Glimpses of Realism

We are only the interpreters of interpretations – Montaigne

William Alston is a formidable proponent of the possibility and epistemic value of ‘religious’ experience indeed, and he has spent, he tells us, the better part of fifty years coming to terms with and defending direct, non-sensory, uninterpreted awareness of God. The maturest expression of his position appears in his *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, in which he stresses that real awareness, of world or God, must finally be more than awareness of self. ‘Whatever my state of consciousness, so far as that is wholly within my head, I can’t be truly said to be aware of an external object, X, or to have perceived X, unless X exists and unless I stand in whatever relation to X is required for this.’ I shall heartily agree. Crucial to his argument is that men and women are congenitally able – designed, if you will – to probe the real world. Furthermore (and this is a contiguous point) they may be on the receiving end of clear, unencumbered experiences of God.

But we are in danger of getting ahead of ourselves. So let us briefly and broadly sketch the contours of Alston’s project, and intimate some of the subtle moves he makes, before we get into detailed commentary and critique. Alston’s aim is to discover a tolerably strong analogy between sense perception (SP) and mystical perception (MP) in order to show that the epistemic credentials (and shortcomings) of SP can by parity of reasoning by distributed to MP; this he does by developing a

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1 George Steiner attributes the quotation to Montaigne – and he is a good interpreter of interpretations (*Antigones* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996], 1).
perceptual model (the theory of appearing) according to which something's being given, X's presenting itself to S as \( \phi \), justifies, notwithstanding odd circumstances and defeaters, S's belief that X is \( \phi \); one is rationally justified in engaging in SP (and therefore MP), and well within one's epistemic rights to form beliefs in that standard, socially established way, despite the circularity to which arguments for reliability ultimately succumb.\(^1\) With exceptional care Alston demonstrates that SP cannot be shown to be reliable, not at any rate without overt circularity: SP's reliability cannot be demonstrated, and yet, he contends, it seems practically demonstrable. That all normal human beings engage in SP, that SP seems to have a good track record, that we can predict and in a measure control the future on account of SP: all of this is true. The trouble is that these facts cannot even be discerned, much less demonstrated, apart from SP. But that will not prevent anyone from engaging in SP, and with good reason: for one thing, it is a universal socially established practice, which all of us inherit from birth; besides, the practice defies other alternatives and is not obviously unreliable (it does not suffer obvious massive internal inconsistency, for instance). Alston puts it this way:

> Our basic doxastic practices are firmly entrenched long before the age of reflection. Thus they are a much more ineluctable part of our lives than habits, dispositions, and practices that are acquired by deliberate effort later in life. Even if it were possible to abandon or alter them, it would be a very arduous task. Hence, in the absence of extremely good reason to do so, the effort would be ill advised.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The theory of appearing gives us a way of construing all direct perceptual belief formation (where there are no other beliefs in the input) as exhibiting a single function that goes from an experience as of X's appearing \( \phi \) to S to the belief that X is \( \phi \). This even extends over direct M-belief formation' (Perceiving God, 156). Similarly: 'The fact that it is for all the world as if X is given to my experience as \( \phi \) at least creates a strong presumption that X is \( \phi \), even though the experience itself does not guarantee that this is so' (80). And a slightly different articulation: '[W]hat I take to be definitive of perceptual consciousness is that something (or so it seems to the subject) presents itself to the subject's awareness as so-and-so – as red, round, loving, or whatever' (36).

\(^2\) Perceiving God, 169.
Of course it is also undeniably true that MP is vulnerable, as every attempt to prove its reliability, no matter how inept or ingenious, falls prey to the same epistemic circularity that infects SP. Fortunately, a strong analogy holds between SP and MP, so MP fares no worse in principle than SP. 'Provided that MP is firmly rooted in its devotees from early in life, interconnected with other practices in a form of life, and socially established, there will be the same argument against abandoning it as there is for more widely distributed practices.'\(^1\) But these are very broad strokes, and Alston’s arguments are rigorous and subtle, so we must get a little more into most of this.

Here I shall take issue with Alston’s perceptual model, the notion of givenness/directness on which it depends, the strong analogy between SP and MP, and thus the credentials of MP (as Alston depicts them). But I want it to be clear at the outset that I do not deny veracity or veridicality to perception; I also admit that there are degrees of (in)directness in experience, just as there are honest similarities between SP and MP. Instead, I shall challenge Alston on two basic fronts. I argue that there is no unmediated or purely direct experience, and therefore no perception without conception; and I try to show that there are crucial disparities between SP and MP (on account, for example, of the nature of God and the nature of man: the qualitative chasm tied to finitude and sin), and that MP is accordingly compromised. (I shall argue, selectively here but in more sustained fashion in Chapters 7 and 8, that it is perilous for experience to presume to be its own norm; that is, I shall argue that experience is pretext, and should be correspondingly viewed with healthy suspicion, normed by text [Scripture] and context [church]. In fact, I shall attempt to show, in response to Alston, that sin and Christ, man’s enfeebled condition and God’s enfleshment, are decisively relevant epistemological categories; and that will witness to a noteworthy difference between my project and Alston’s.)

\(^1\) *Perceiving God*, 169.
Of course, it may be in one's disposition to disagree with Alston; but the care and modesty with which he makes his case should be sufficient to prevent rash dismissal. The following is illustrative: 'I have no intention of claiming that every time someone supposes himself to perceive God he is actually doing so. I take it to be tolerably obvious that not every such supposition is correct, any more than that every supposed perception of, for example, a lake is the genuine article.... The most I will be seeking to support (indirectly) is that sometimes people who suppose themselves to be perceiving God are actually doing so.' And, what is more, there is no denying that Alston's account is brilliant, and that he succeeds in bringing illumination to a web of otherwise tangled issues. Since Alston's book is so widely influential, easily the most persuasive of a burgeoning number of kindred treatments, it is appropriate that we wrestle with its contribution.

**Analogy and direct experiential awareness**

Alston makes a plausible case for the possibility of (something like) direct experiential awareness of God. In brief, God as other can and presumably does present himself to be experienced as loving, awesome, gracious and so on, thus such beliefs as God is loving, awesome, gracious (M-beliefs), when appropriately based on the relevant experiences, have high epistemic credentials; in the absence of reasons for treating an experience as dubious, that is, where no defeaters are malevolently roaming about, frustrating one's impressions and inclinations, misleading one to wrong conclusions, Alston thinks it is perfectly rational to form beliefs in the light of putative experiences of God. There is no compelling reason

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2 See, for example, Wainwright, *Mysticism*; Mavrodides, *Belief in God*; Swinburne, *The Existence of God*. 
why the possibility of experiential awareness of God should be ruled out \textit{a priori}. According to Alston:

We have to learn from experience what we can be experientially aware of.... The only empirical data we have that are relevant to the issue at all, namely, the claim by many people to have directly experienced God, obviously count in favor of supposition. Therefore, I would say that the possibility in question is prima facie credible; to deny it we would need strong negative arguments.\footnote{Alston, \textit{Perceiving God}, 59. ‘More generally, we should not suppose that we can identify a priori any limits on what objective features can manifest themselves in patterns of phenomenal qualia. Apart from (sense) experience we would not have been able to anticipate that trees are, generally, recognizable by their look, while physicists are not. In mystical perception, too, one can learn only from experience what features and activities of God can be recognizable by the way God presents Himself to one’s experience. And as we have seen from our sample, the testimony of experience is that the features we have listed are so identifiable’ (47; cf. 95).}

Alston’s position is unmistakably realist, indeed ‘full-bloodedly’ realist, and it assumes both that human beings can make untrammelled non-sensory contact with (non-sensory) reality, and that non-sensory reality can share its presence with fully sensory creatures. This complex contention is bolstered by the suggestion that sense perception and ‘mystical’ perception are analogous activities; and it is \textit{presentation} or givenness in experience that creates this strong analogy.\footnote{‘Any argument from analogy depends on certain points of resemblance and not on others. The analogies between CMP and SP that are needed to yield the conclusion that CMP is rationally engaged in and rationally taken to be reliable if SP is, are the ones just noted: being a full-fledged socially established doxastic practice with distinctive input-output functions, having a functioning overrider system, the lack of sufficient reasons to take the practice as unreliable, and a significant degree of self-support \textit{(Perceiving God}, 224).} Things are presented in the world, given to the senses to be perceived, and those presentations are generally or fundamentally unencumbered, unaffected by bias and interpretation; thus one is justified in basing beliefs on those experiences and, further, one may console oneself that one is perceiving objects as they really are, or nearly as they are, consider one’s doxastic stance prima facie, perhaps unqualifiedly, justified.\footnote{‘That point is that even if perceptual beliefs misrepresent the environment in ways like these, they can still be highly useful guides to that environment. The real facts of the matter can be in a systematic correspondence with the real colors and the unbroken surfaces that the perceiver mistakenly attributes to the things in themselves; so that what we believe on the basis of perception}
question: Are beliefs based on experiences, or are experiences based on beliefs? It is a mischievously misleading question.) Alston is keenly aware that there is something odd about this way of speaking. It is not as if one could actually resist forming beliefs in this way, since all of us are thoroughly immersed in SP from the start and none of us has sufficient voluntary control over this belief-disposition to do otherwise. This just is the way normal human beings do in fact form beliefs in sense experience. Alston’s point, if I may risk simplification, is that, even if we could do otherwise, it would be unwarranted (and unwise, Alston thinks) to adopt an alternative to SP; so it is practically rational (to continue) to participate in SP, and hence rational to judge the practice reliable.

To say that SP is in fact reliable is just to say that most of the beliefs it generates are, or are likely to be, true; but even without conclusive noncircular reasons for believing SP reliable, one can rationally engage in it and accordingly believe that one’s beliefs are prima facie justified. In such circumstances one can believe that one’s beliefs are justified. Interestingly, one need not believe that one’s beliefs are justified, or know quite how to think or speak of their justification, in order for those beliefs to be justified; if their ground is truth conducive, that is, reliable, the beliefs are at least prima facie justified.1 Thus if one is appeared to in a big-brick-housish sort of way, one will have sufficient reason to suppose one is perceiving a big brick house – unless, perhaps, one has a sordid history of seeing brick houses that do not exist, or one is suffering the perverse effects of LSD or extreme dehydration, or one is aware of something untoward in the circumstances.2

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1 'And since I am working with a “truth-conducive” notion of justification, this will involve asking whether the practice is reliable, whether it can be relied on to produce mostly true beliefs' (Perceiving God, 101).

2 Alston distinguishes between rebutters and underminers: ’Any support that an experience gives to a belief about what is putatively experienced is subject to being overridden [sic] either by sufficient reasons to think the belief false (a rebutter), or by sufficient reasons to think that in this instance the ground of the belief does not wield its usual justificatory force (an underminer). The flower looks
This is just to say, of course, that sense perception is defeasible: any initial perception can be defeated, dismantled, or rendered suspect, if, say, on double take one fails to see a big brick house or the other passengers in the car, who are otherwise normal perceivers, subject to no cognitive dysfunction, see no such edifice. Alston's theory of appearing has the advantage of being both breathtakingly simple and intellectually satisfying; and with its resources at hand, he makes the following distinctions:

Thus I cannot agree that to perceive a house is to interpret our experience as manifesting a house, or to take what is experienced as being a house. To perceive a house is for a house to be directly presented to one's experiences, to look a certain way to one if it is visual perception. And any sort of interpretation is something over and above that.

But this, we shall see, is not quite to the point. I shall be arguing, here and throughout, that looking a certain way to one presupposes an acquaintance of sorts, a first blush categorisation, tied to the congenital, and this concerns the (pre-reflective) operation and deployment of basic categories and concepts in any experience whatever; no given, no presentation, is innocent of interpretation; indeed we shall see purple to me; but if I have overwhelmingly strong evidence that there are no purple flowers in this garden, or if I know that there is something about the lighting that makes white flowers look purple, I am not, overall, justified in believing the flower to be purple just on the basis of that experience. The purple look is sufficient to render me prima facie justified in believing the flower to be purple, but in this case that prima facie status (initial credibility) is overridden [sic] by other things I know or justifiably believe' (Perceiving God, 79). He puts the matter more simply elsewhere: 'By virtue of having the experience the subject is in a position such that she will be adequately justified in the belief unless there are strong enough reasons to the contrary, unless there are defeaters of sufficient strength' ('Christian Experience and Christian Belief', in Faith and Rationality, eds Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff [Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983], 112). I argue below, as well as in Chapters 6 and 7, that sin is, epistemically speaking, not a negligible factor in experience (of God), or as it emerges in Chapter 7, that sin is a central enough belief in the Christian overrider (background) system to contest any isolated putative perception or experience of God, that is, sufficient reason to be provisional (or at any rate, provisionally sceptical) about one's experience (of God). Alston agrees that beliefs about the nature and ways of God are often used to override M-beliefs' – so God obviously would not tell Alston, or anyone else, to kill all the Wittgensteinians ('Christian Experience and Christian Belief', 112). All the same, I shall be asking whether sin is, Christianly speaking, pervasive enough to shake almost any certainty in experience (of God) that you please.

Alston, Perceiving God, 28. Emphasis mine.
in Chapter 5 that the given is rather more organic, encompassing everything that enters into experience, including experiencer, experience, and experienced. Thus it shall emerge that only some sort of interpretation is over and above perception, to wit, reflective interpretation; but that is not quite right either, for ways of seeing, systems of description, frameworks within which experiences are enjoyed, easily become reflexive, second-nature, virtually congenital, just as much a part of a percipient’s identity as finger prints. Another sort of interpretation is primitive, always at the outset of perception, getting perceptual experience going in the first place.¹

There are no convincing reasons, according to Alston, why God (if he exists) could not (in similar fashion) present himself to be perceived directly. Presentation, something’s being given, improves the reliability of perception: barring such misfortunes as sickness or drowsiness or intoxication or drug induced hallucination, together with unusual circumstances, the standard perceptual impediments, which prevent one from perceiving simply and clearly, perceptions are largely reliable – or at any rate, Alston contends, it is practically rational to engage in sense perceptual practice (SP) and so commit oneself to the reliability of perception.² In a word, the ‘presentational’ character of sensory as well as non-sensory experience is seen in the fact that ‘it all involves something’s being “given” to the subject as bearing certain qualities’.³ If the strong analogy holds, mystical perception (MP), Alston’s misleading name for experiential awareness of God, will find itself in the same

¹ As Karl Popper says: ‘It is all decoding or interpretation.... We learn to decode so well that everything becomes very “direct” or “immediate” to us; but so it is with the man who has learned the Morse Code.... [W]e know that there is a complicated process of decoding going on; the apparent directness and immediacy are the result of training, just as in piano-playing or car-driving’ (Objective Knowledge, 36).
² So Alston: ‘I believe that in showing it to be rational to engage in SP I have thereby not shown SP to be reliable, but shown it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable.... In judging SP to be rational I am thereby committing myself to the rationality of judging SP to be reliable’ (Perceiving God, 178). But Aldous Huxley makes a case for the use of hallucinogens in enriching perception and creativity (Doors of Perception [HarperCollins, 1990]).
³ Alston, Perceiving God, 166.
(leaky) epistemological boat as sense perception: and if sense perception is not unreliable, or should not be regarded unreliable, just because its reliability cannot be shown or established noncircularly, then mystical perception is not unreliable, or, more to the point, can rationally be engaged in and thus regarded as reliable, despite the fact that every attempt to discover its reliability gets caught up in nontrivial epistemic circularity. ‘Our sources take it that something, namely, God, has been presented or given to their consciousness, in generically the same way as that in which objects in the environment are (apparently) presented to one’s consciousness in sense perception.’

Two caveats

Two caveats are in order here, one concerning the nature of the given, to which Alston refers incessantly, the other concerning directness in perception and how that applies to God. First, it is not entirely clear to me what Alston means by givenness, or how his understanding connects up to the long-standing debates about the ‘given’, made a part of the very fabric of twentieth century philosophy by such luminaries as C. I. Lewis, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and H. H. Price. It is probably a modified version of the object theory, with sense datum concerns and concomitant problems, but his view may also be compatible with a version of the immediate experience theory. It looks like givens are, for Alston, uninterpreted data, or sensory patterns of phenomenal qualities, or something analogous to those settled patterns (as in the case of MP) – the stable elements in simple seeing. Even so, it is diaphanously obvious that Alston’s appeal to the given is intended to sustain

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1 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 14; cf. 55-63.
2 In at least one place Alston mentions the sense-datum theory in passing, but he does not discuss it or his connection with it in any detail – though he clearly takes his theory of appearing to be an alternative (see ‘Literal and Nonliteral Reports of Mystical Experience’, 84).
something like the no longer tenable fact/value (scheme/content) disjunction, separating a simple perception (or perceptual description) from a subversive interpretation (or evaluation) – and, what is more, it reveals and sanctions, perhaps tacitly, a clear metaphysical picture.¹ I shall have plenty more to say about ‘the given’ in Chapter 5.

Second, whatever the credentials of Alston’s theory of appearing, and the notions of directness and givenness on which it depends, there are still problems applying his theory in the mystical realm, grave problems thinking of God as a directly perceivable object and hence a simply given phenomenon. This way of framing the objection is, I admit, too crass. For nowhere is Alston so careless as to claim explicitly that God is ordinary, at the upper limit of, but still on the same continuum with, ordinary being, sufficiently like other phenomenal objects to be a simple given in mystical experience; indeed he affirms, in quite unambiguous language, that God is not an object, and that perception of God accordingly suffers an inherent weakness. ‘God does not passively sit for His portrait; we cannot just stare at Him, not in this life at any rate. If we come to know God through experience at all, it is through His work, pre-eminently, His work in human lives.’² MP is, by its own lights and rights, more precarious than SP, not because it lacks universality, and certainly not because it has been shown to be unreliable; Alston goes to great lengths to show that MP is not – or not obviously – unreliable, and that its narrower distribution among the population does not automatically count against it.³ On the

¹ But note that Alston conscientiously strives to avoid doing theology or importing theological premises into his epistemology (Perceiving God, 257, n.1).
³ I see no real reason for supposing that the partiality of participation derogates from the epistemic claims of a doxastic practice.... Moreover, quite apart from the religious case, we can see many belief-forming practices, universally regarded as rational, that are practiced by only a small minority.... Only the connoisseur can perceptually discriminate the taste and smell of wines so finely as to be able to tell by tasting a wine from what Burgundy commune or Bordeaux chateau it originated. Relatively few persons can follow inner voices in complex orchestral performances. But such belief-forming practices are not denied epistemic credentials on the ground of narrow distribution’ (Perceiving God, 198).
contrary, there are good reasons, internal to MP, to expect this less than supremely favourable situation. ‘God is too different from created beings,’ Alston admits with no hesitation, ‘too “wholly other,” for us to be able to grasp any regularities in His behavior.’ Further: ‘We can only attain the faintest, sketchiest, and most insecure grasp of what God is like.’ And the Christian mystical practice (CMP) itself teaches its adherents that, in addition, ‘certain special and difficult conditions’ must be ‘satisfied’ for awareness of God.¹

True; but then the trouble with thinking of God as a given, as something (or someone) who can be perceived (directly), as if God were sufficiently like other perceivable objects to warrant the strong analogy, becomes obvious.² Equally obvious is that no experiential awareness of God is (ordinarily) possible without special concepts and conditions – and so no pure, virtually pure, or even relatively pure experience of God is possible. These factors converge to suggest that experience (of God) is as volatile as it is limited in justificatory efficacy. I am not denying that God is, or can be, experienced, nor do I mean to insinuate that experience (of God) is wholly bereft of justificatory force; but I am suggesting that no single experience or network of experiences is self-sufficient, ultimate or incorrigible, and that (Christian) experience must therefore be normed by something else, namely (I wish to argue) God’s own witness in Christ and its

¹ Alston, ‘Christian Experience and Christian Belief’, 129. Elsewhere: ‘Moreover, the belief-system ingredient in CMP provides explanation for the partial distribution.... [I]t is generally acknowledged in the tradition that an excessive preoccupation and concern with worldly goods, certain kinds of immorality – particularly self-centeredness and unconcern with one’s fellows – and a mind that is closed to the possibility of communion with God, are all antithetical to an awareness of God’s presence. This being the case, and given well-known facts about human predilections, it is the reverse of unexpected that not all people should participate in mystical perception’ (Perceiving God, 198-199). This way of putting things is too taciturn. (NB: Alston does not quite develop sin into an epistemological category here.) Still, he has said enough, it seems, to confute his own case for direct experiential awareness of God.

² Thus Barth: ‘God is not God if He is considered and conceived as one in a series of like objects.... There can be no doubt about this point. Just as He who in the Bible encounters man in the objectivity of the divine He is not identical with any human subject who knows Him, so also He is not one object in the series of other objects of man’s cognisance’ (Church Dogmatic, III/1 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957], 15).
attestation/interpretation in Scripture and community. The normative interpreter of experience (of God), in other words, is not experience itself: it is God, God in Christ, the Incarnation, the Christ-event, and the beliefs/concepts conditioned upon and condensed in it. Of course the Christ-event did not occur in the ecclesia – it creates the ecclesia – but it is witnessed, perhaps as Hauerwas might say even extended, in the community, without being confined to or controlled by the community: so the Christ-event is both internal and external to the Christian community, as I shall reiterate in Chapter 7. Let the following suffice until then. The Christ-event is witnessed in community, precisely where the appropriate responses of faith and obedience to the Christ-event are determined and regulated, and where the proper/peculiarly Christian concepts of faith, hope, love, sin, grace are learned. But the Christ-event is witnessed in Scripture/tradition (text) and not just present community (context). Thus through proclamation in and by the community (ambiguously: 'the community’s proclamation’) the power of the Christ-event to subvert the community in its straying times, critique it of its complacency and provincialism, is unleashed: and so the community exists perpetually in grace when it exists perpetually under God’s judgement. Although the Christ-event is in, indeed provisionally providentially tied to, the community’s witness in word and sacrament, the Christ-event is never possessed by the community or captive to it precisely because it is God’s gift and as such remains always vital and vibrant. Thus the Christ-event is internal and external to community: as internal, the complex of Christian concepts and Gospel-practices, and the concomitant beliefs and dispositions, interpret experience; but those provisionally normative notions are, along with the experiences they govern and fecundate, themselves normed, that is,

\[1\] I shall detail and defend this claim in Chapters 6-8. For now, consider Alasdair MacIntyre’s relevant remarks: ‘But if we accept the possibility of genuine visions and voices from God we still need a standard to discriminate between genuine and illusory experiences of this kind. That is, we require some more ultimate test by mean of which to pass judgment upon our experiences. And thus the experiences themselves cannot be the ultimate ground of our belief’ (Difficulties in Christian Belief [London: SCM Press, 1959], 73).
dynamically governed, chastened, corrected by that which is normatively normative:
God’s self-bestowal/Christ-event. Thus the difference between provisional and
normative normativity.

Still, Alston’s stress on presentation, or the presentational dimension, in MP
is understandable – lose the stress, he thinks, and the objective will not survive the
mercenaries and miscreants who seek to deny or mystify it; an experience (of ‘God’)
will just not be worth talking about if it ultimately has only to do with the subject and
his fertile, undisciplined imagination. I do not disagree that there is a real objective
aspect in experience. The heart of my dispute with Alston is over the nature of the
subject(ive), the extent to which to the subject sees only what he can say, sees, that is
to say, from within and with reference to a conceptual framework.

We have seen that Alston sketches several parallels between SP and MP: they
both have to do with givenness, in both cases there is a simple seeing shy of
subversive seeing, there’s no avoiding serious circularity in either social practice, and
so on; I have a hard time seeing that the parallels are this neat and tidy. According to
Alston, there are no reasons why God, if he exists, would not or could not present
himself as he is to be perceived by men and women, especially if human beings have
been created by and for God. Fair enough, perhaps; but nothing, including God, can
be experienced without mediation, without or apart from a medium, and, further,
there is at least one good reason for supposing human spiritual (mystical) perceptions
are not as reliable, as unencumbered, as ordinary sense perceptions: sin, much like
intoxication, obscures man’s spiritual vision. Thus, if sin is a hideous fact with
which at least most average human beings have to contend, then experiencing God,
whatever it is, will be like probing the sensible world while under the blinding
influence of strong medication or stupefying drink, and perhaps not very like sober
seeing in the clear light of day; there is certainly analogy here, but the analogy is a
tenuous one. If this train of thought is correct, then with regard to MP we shall never
be without a strong potential defeater, just the sort of thing one needs to be suspicious of the deliverances of SP or MP. On my view, sin is a central enough belief in the overrider (background) system of Christianity to contest any supposed perception of God, sufficient reason to be provisional about one’s experience. Alston, of course, agrees that ‘beliefs about the nature and ways of God are often used to override M-beliefs’¹ — so, for example, God would not instruct Alston to kill D. Z. Phillips. But is not sin, Christianly speaking, pervasive enough to shake, to speak not for but against, almost any presumed certainty in experience (of God)? So the Christian, I shall argue, has compelling reason to believe that the habit of straying from God’s promise in Christ is not truth-conducive, is likely simply to confirm rather than confront and supplant one’s misapprehensions of God; and the Christian community’s central liturgy-structured-practices (Word and Sacrament) will press the same point about God’s witness to himself in Christ, as those practices norm not only the community’s identification of God but also the community’s own identity (Chapter 8). Human beings, however, are, Christianly speaking, separated from God on account not just of sin but of finitude, a point Alston generously concedes. Even if sin were not an issue (and it is), God would still be essentially incomprehensible, and human beings, the unexceptional as much as the clever and mature, would still depend upon divine self-bestowal to think and speak of God appropriately. On the face of it SP seems to be not just more universal but also more reliable than MP: Christianly understood, one is always a sinner but only occasionally a drunk. (I shall soon be considering the extent to which the presence of sin also affects or damages sense perception.) Now Alston is happy to admit that SP is universal and MP is not, and he is apprehensively happy to extend to MP a weaker reliability; but MP is not less credentialed because of its restricted scope. However, Alston does not develop sin as an epistemically relevant category,² nor does he seem to think that the

¹ Alston, ‘Christian Experience and Christian Belief’, 112.
qualitative chasm between finitude and infinitude creates especially tenacious or insuperable problems for MP. I shall attempt to show that this amounts to a deficiency in his position concerning God and direct perception.

One of the redeeming virtues of MP is that it is socially established: it is a human inheritance, an unavoidable social practice. But this appeal to socially established practices actually disguises a deficient sociality, communality. The experiences of which Alston speaks are not shared in the most relevant sense; they are more private than public, and so it seems they lack the relevant constraints of Christian community. M-beliefs, in other words, are individual, related to individuals, and therefore fundamentally private. Given that the viability of MP depends on the reliability of the practice, the soundness of the source, the problem is this: the isolated percipient is not in an unassailable or even favourable epistemic position because basing beliefs about God on one’s private experience is presumably not basically reliable (to be basically reliable it would have to guide us faithfully far more often than it misleads us) – and is certainly not, according to Scripture and Tradition, the primary way God has purposed to reveal himself and incorporate many into his mystery. Mind you, Alston appeals to background beliefs, the overrider system of Christianity, to set up constraints on experience. I do not wish to get into the thick of all of this just yet, but I should make the following points. I agree with Alston that truth is to be preferred to falsehood, that therefore reliable sources – i.e., truth-conducive ones – should be relied on, and that beliefs formed in unreliable ways, for example, reading crystal balls or just stupidly guessing, even if they occasionally happen to be true, are unjustified, dubious, faulty. I do not agree with Alston, however, that MP is a largely reliable source that puts one into possession of

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1 Cornelius Plantinga suggests that we think of sin in terms of both act and disposition, lawlessness and faithlessness, together amounting to a ‘culpable disturbance of shalom’ (Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 16). He also makes an important distinction between sin and finitude: ‘Nor should we confuse sin with finiteness, let alone with mere awareness of finiteness. We are not to blame for being human instead of divine, and we are to be credited, not debited, for knowing the difference’ (20).
the truth of God most of the time – that is to say, Christianly speaking, we have a
defeator for thinking MP suspect, shaky, unsound. God is not an object and man’s
faculties, dispositions and volitions are compromised, after all. There are, in other
words, two basic beliefs quite central\(^1\) to the Christian overrider system that militate
against MP, that vitiate MP and that give us good reason for viewing MP with
suspicion: namely, God is God, incomprehensible, mysterious and radically free, and
man is man, not only created (finite) but fallen (sinful), now naturally disinclined to
reverence God and embrace his truth when it is revealed. So Alston, in his theory of
appearing, supposes one is immediately, that is, prima facie justified in believing..., 
provided God really is presenting himself, or provided it seems to the percipient that
God is presenting himself, in such a wise: that belief, Alston admits, can be
challenged, perhaps defeated, and so under certain circumstances mediate
justification is necessary. One may well be right, I want to say; but given God’s
nature and man’s nature – or given the convictions about God and man central to the
Christian overrider system – one is probably wrong, or should at any rate not
presume to be right. So mediate justification of private experience of God is always
desirable and necessary: in sum, the pretext of experience is accountable to the text
of Scripture and the context of the Christian community. One is driven to mediate
justification when the circumstances are untoward in SP; just so, mediate
justification in MP is always required – because one is always a sinner and the
circumstances are always untoward.

But, before we continue, let me be more direct about my cavils with Alston’s
notion of directness in perception, and about my concerns that he (mistakenly it
seems to me) moves from directness in SP to directness in MP with too little
adjustment. Bear in mind that Alston has set up the discussion of MP by comparing
it favourably with, and so illuminating it with reference to, SP: MP will prove to be

\(^{1}\) I shall call these basic and central convictions ‘conceptual governors’ in Chapter 7.
in the same (leaky) epistemological boat as SP, and only epistemic hypocrisy or imperialism will deny to MP what it happily and unreservedly gives to SP. Bear in mind, on the other hand, that Alston agrees that SP and MP differ in some important respects, that God is not an object awaiting classification and inviting scrutiny, and that MP suffers a weaker reliability than SP. ‘Awareness of God’, Alston intones, ‘is usually a dim, elusive matter, lacking in detail and vividness and eminently subject to doubt. It is like seeing something in a dense fog or, in a more traditional phrase, through a glass darkly. All this is in sharp contrast to the clarity, detail, persistence, and irresistible convincingness of sense perception.’1 This is a sober admission, and true as far as it goes: but there are other reasons it does not go quite as well with MP. I have mentioned two in passing (we shall have occasion to discuss them more thoroughly a little later): one is that God is, \emph{qua} God, essentially beyond human reach, which Alston freely admits; the other is that man is man, or that man is, \emph{qua} man, essentially ill-fitted, at any rate in his present fallen condition, to apprehend God, to speak or think well of him, to worship him in spirit and truth. I am of course clumsily gesturing in the direction of sin. I am arguing that sin must be taken seriously as an epistemological category, and that taking sin seriously vitiates the MP project – without altogether nullifying it; and this, as we shall see, also humbles Alston’s project.

Earlier I said that nothing, including God, can be humanly experienced without mediation, without or apart from a medium. Now I wish to tease this out a bit. I am taking mediation and (in)directness to be mutually illuminating. Thus, in one sense, all (human) experience is indirect just in case, and precisely to the extent, it is mediated: nothing is seen, felt, touched, sensed, celebrated without background beliefs, a conceptual framework that sets the mood and creates the context in which one encounters and is encountered by others and other things. Alston does not quite

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1 Alston, ‘Christian Experience and Christian Belief’, 123.
agree (or agrees, but only to a point), as we shall see. Now an experience is indirect in Alston’s view when one experiences something, in effect, by experiencing something else, as when one, seeing an image of Tony Blair on TV, sees Tony Blair, or when one sees an image reflected in a mirror (or hears God speak to one in what a friend says or does);\(^1\) accordingly, an experience is direct when what one experiences does not hinge on an experience of something else, as when, for example, one sees the Pope in person, with one’s own eyes, rather than on a postcard (or hears God speak to one in God’s own voice). When I say that perception is indirect, I do not mean to imply that sense-data intrude into the space/time between perception and external objects: that may or may not be the case; the positions are many and the arguments, for and against, forbiddingly complex. I mean rather, no matter how one decides the sense-data question (and I, for one, think it has little persuasive power), that the world is mediated to perception by one’s historical situation, biases, network of beliefs, expectations,\(^2\) and those ‘intermediaries’ (if you will) make perception not fully direct, or indirectly direct, or just plain indirect. Directness admittedly comes in degrees.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) On experiencing God indirectly, in conjunction with some other item, event or object, see Mavrodes, *Belief in God*, 68-69. In fact, Mavrodes says: ‘The directness of a direct experience is a psychological directness, the immediacy of such an experience is a psychological immediacy. The directness and immediacy do not belong to the process through which the experienced object affects the experiencer’ (65). Thus any object or state of affairs, Mavrodes thinks, could mediate God: I am saying that God’s presence is, in effect, always mediated, but, because directness comes in degrees, it may be more or less direct. ‘It follows that whenever anyone is experiencing anything he might be experiencing God. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that whenever anyone is experiencing anything he is experiencing God’ (69).


\(^3\) I want to be ambiguously clear – i.e., clearly ambiguous – about my position on directness in perception. The sense datum theory is, it seems to me, untenable; but direct (naive) realism is only a little more persuasive. My own position is constructive realism, and I shall continue to gloss it in different ways. One such (formulaic) gloss might go as follows (and this is where the much needed clarity/ambiguity comes in). I am neither an indirect realist nor a direct realist; I am rather an (in)direct realist.
Now I am not operating on the dubious scheme/content disjunction here. But, as I see it, a *distinction* is entirely in order. Perhaps the way to maintain the distinction – and avoid the disjunction – is to intimate that language is tied to the world and ties us, language users, to the world. Thus there is contact with the world, just not unmediated contact; and it is as direct as such contact can be for humans. In other words, the world in which we are truly immersed, the world which is therefore not altogether distant from us, is both sufficiently (in)direct and mediated: because language is tied to the world and ties us to the world. As Charles Taylor puts it: ‘What comes about through the development of language in the broadest sense is the coming to be of expressive power, the power to make things manifest. It is not unambiguously clear that this ought to be considered as a self-expression realiziation. What is made manifest is not exclusively, not even mainly, the self, but the world.’

Besides, reality is enormously rich, and no single experience is exhaustive. So even when there is presence (or presentation) in experience, there is also absence, much that remains hidden or elusive; it goes without saying, perhaps, that neither the rich panoply of human experience, nor the aggregate of all human experience, possible or actual, exhausts created reality. Presumably that will be true of God *a fortiori*, and not just because God is intangible and transcends the space/time with which human beings have to do. Thus I wish to argue not only that no-thing can be perceived with exquisite directness (even indirectness and misdirection infect the ‘directness’ of which Alston speaks), but that God is not a thing and certainly cannot be perceived directly: only in Christ, I shall argue, does one see or experience God face to face, and therefore encounter God’s face.

All else is (at best) hind parts, the past that was never present, veiled vision, indirect glimpsing. But even in the Incarnation, the mystery of God is protected, intensified; the incarnate sphere of God’s activity constantly confounds us, frustrates

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1 Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 238.
expectation, defies prejudice. In other words, central to the Christian religion is the conviction that God cannot be seen - not directly, at any rate, not without a gifted self-bestowal on God’s part, and not without faith on man’s part. Equally central is the epistemically primary conviction that God has given himself decisively and normatively to the human condition in Christ, and this to delimit himself and to both condition and constrain, free up and provide accountability for, human experience of and response to God, all the while overcoming human estrangement from him. Thus the importance of text and context, canon and community, in which one learns through participation to share fellowship, worship truly and refer properly to God (and, moreover, rightly be suspicious of one’s own views, concerns, notions of God, truth, peace, and so on). In my programme - and this is conspicuously over against Alston’s - both faith and promise, human response and divine commitment to be unconditionally for the world in Christ, are central to experience of God. To see God as he in himself, and so know him truly, is fundamentally a matter of faith and not mystical perception; it is to repose in his promise to be for us in Jesus Christ, and to submit to the discipline of calibrating our faith and obedience, speech and service, worship and witness to that promise concretely fulfilled in Christ. With God, then - or with experience of God - it is never simply a matter of perception.1

The inadequacy of perception vis-à-vis God can be further brought out in the following way. When one considers the problem of recognising the Christ in his resurrected body, in his post-resurrection appearances, of discerning his identity (Luke 24.13-49), and the possibility of being in Christ’s presence and still doubting (Matt 28.17), one wonders how Alston’s account of perception measures up. This is Sarah Coakley’s insight: ‘[T]he apprehension of the risen Christ (then and now) requires some responsive recognition “deeper” than normal cognition or visual perception.’2 I agree; and in Chapter 8 I accordingly develop a concept of faith, or

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1 See Plantinga’s cordial critique of Alston on just this point in Warranted Christian Belief, 286-289.
2 Sarah Coakley’s ‘Response’ to Alston’s ‘Biblical Criticism and Resurrection’ (148-183), in The
responsive fidelity, which accounts for the deeper recognition that is ingredient in experience of God. So there is something intuitively attractive about Alston’s notion of God presenting himself, giving himself directly to human experience: for if God is God, then presumably any experience of God will depend on God’s initiative, on God’s willingness not to be found but to find his way to human beings. God is not found in heaven but on earth in the humiliation of Jesus Christ; in fact, God is not found at all, but finds his way to sinners; that, at any rate, is my contention. ‘Apart from the access to himself which he himself affords, no thinking will ever find its way to him.’ That is Jüngel’s insight, though not of course unique to him. But the sense in which God presents himself will have to be subjected to deeper reflection and more careful articulation than this. I shall further explore the relation of (in)directness to perception, in both sensual matters and spiritual matters, in Chapters 7 and 8.

**Alston’s naive realism**

So much for long-winded caveats, anticipations of coming attractions. To get to the heart of the matter, let’s inquire more specifically into Alston’s realism. We have seen that Alston is convinced that one can have direct contact with both sensory and non-sensory reality without any perverse moment of interpretation, that there is a core in experience that is (because insulated from interpretation) innocent. Because one cannot prove sensible experience really touches reality, one cannot disprove super-sensible experience touches God; mystical perception, that is to say, is neither

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1 Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 158.
more nor less reliable than ordinary mundane perception, unless, of course, as I have suggested, sin is to spiritual perception what sickness and intoxication are to sense perception. There is nothing unnatural or inherently quixotic in a realist commitment, nor is it odd to suppose that one cannot disprove (super-sensible) experience of God. "Realism is neither demonstrable nor refutable.... But it is arguable, and the weight of the arguments is overwhelmingly in its favour.... Thus idealism is irrefutable; and this means, of course, that realism is indemonstrable.... Thus there will be in this issue, as in so many, no conclusive argument." So my worry is not that Alston is committed to realism; it is that his realism is naive, that it works on a questionable disjunction between perception and interpretation, and that he seems to think that interpretive activity is commonly both pernicious and perverse. I share Alston's realist resonance, although not at quite so high a pitch, but I find the disjunction almost unthinkable and the attending suspicion of interpretation per se unnecessary. But Alston's account would seem to improve mystical perception's credibility since very few people, philosophers or otherwise, want to deny the reality of experience of the external world. (Alston calls the few who doubt or deny the external world 'outlandish'.) So, for example, even someone as unsympathetic to theism as John Dewey realised the importance of holding experience and nature in close proximity:

[Experience...] is no infinitesimally thin layer or foreground of nature, but it penetrates into it, reaching down into its depths, and in such a way that its grasp is capable of expansion; it tunnels in all directions and in so doing brings to the surface things at first hidden - as miners pile high on the surface of the earth treasures brought from below."

Perhaps Alston would say that experience of God, conceived in realist terms, is decisively a matter of perception (not proof): either one sees God or one does not –

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and seeing God in the givenness with which he gives himself is sufficient to prima facie justify experiential beliefs.

There are differences between MP and SP – and Alston delineates some of them. But he takes for granted that both MP and SP are interpretation-free; he seems to think, in other words, that a realism in which interpretation plays a prominent role is fundamentally compromised and therefore cannot be sustained; my constructive realism would suggest a counterexample. But why does Alston resist the suggestion that all experience is, at least in some sense, interpretive experience? If something is presented in experience, when one develops an awareness of the thing, it is something of which one has direct awareness, Alston contends. He does not wish to be misinterpreted, so he avoids ambiguity: ‘And this is something that is distinguishable from any elements of conceptualization, judgment, belief, or other forms of “interpretation.”’

Alston imagines that one can have awareness of God and world without an initial interpretive moment: the presentation of an object to an experiencing subject is a presentation of that object simply as it is, he would say – or at any rate we have no strong reason to think otherwise; this is a naturally appealing notion, as it possesses the much sought-after beatitude of assurance or certainty.

I do not want to be rash or rude in my criticism of Alston’s realism. He is a trenchant and honest philosopher, and his work in philosophical theology is probing. But Alston sees the issues with too much clarity and not enough cloudiness, it seems to me; that is, his position at times seems to lack in texture. What would it take for one ever to perceive a thing, even when it is presented, simply or purely as it is, without interpretation and judgement? Would it take a disembodied experience, an

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1 Alston, Perceiving God, 27. Elsewhere he is more perspicuous: ‘So far as I can see, there is such a phenomenon as the presentation or givenness of something to one’s awareness…. I would say that all that is required for my seeing something (my being aware of it in a distinctively visual way) is that I “visually discriminate” it from it background, that it stands out for me visually, and therefore looks a certain way to me (red, round, lumpy, or whatever). It is arguable that this mere presentation never exists alone, but is always accompanied by conceptualization (or even by judgment, though this is a further step), but I am not convinced by such arguments’ (A Realist Conception of Truth, 90).
experience in which one is temporally severed from one’s history and one’s body? Would one have to see or perceive without the medium of language – but then what would one see, and who would be seeing? Alvin Plantinga has argued, in protracted fashion, that one’s perceptions, and the beliefs which accompany them, are to be regarded as reliable, warranted, if and when one’s cognitive faculties are functioning properly, that is, without obvious impediment, according to their design plan in a clean and conducive epistemic environment.¹ Such occasions can be found. Even in these instances, however, one is never seeing or experiencing a thing simply as it is, without impediments or distortions: no environment is ever wholly congenial and no cognitive faculty ever functions without glitch and with enviable neutrality – precisely because human beings are bodily and social; and that is fine, for even if one cannot experience purely one may nevertheless experience reliably (and learn to be comfortable with uncertainty). So the resolution is not quite right from where I stand, my angle of vision is less than ideal, I am too distant from or too close to the object to see with perfect clarity, and, besides, I am colour-blind, drowsy and not particularly astute, or whatever: still I do see something(s) – precisely because I am bodily and social. Perhaps Popper is in the neighbourhood of correct: ‘[W]hat can be absorbed (and reacted to) as relevant input and what is ignored as irrelevant depends completely upon the innate structure (the “programme”) of the organism.’² To avoid untenable extremes, we need to offer one subtraction and one addition: perhaps, to subtract, not quite completely; and, to add, both upon innate structures (or congenital capacities, as I dub them) and upon the education one has had into the world through language, that is, both upon innate structures and social structures, congenital and cultural conditions. And there is no experience in which all of this is not always already presupposed.

² Popper, Objective Knowledge, 72.
Thus perceptions invariably involve taking presentations as such and such, but the taking does not have to be meditative or premeditative. In contradistinction to John Hick, Alston claims that perceptions do not initially or intrinsically involve judgements, even if they (occasionally) eventually involve them; in fact, Alston freely admits, judgement, the application of concepts, and interpretation are common in normal adult experience. Whereas Hick insists that a certain interpretive state or stance (which takes something otherwise ambiguous as the medium for revealing a particular thing) is the necessary condition of all perception, Alston urges that perception precedes, and is to be starkly distinguished from, interpretation, judgement and conceptualisation.

There is concord and discord between my position and Alston's; but I think that in vigorously defending a sort of naive realism, Alston is too quick to bracket interpretation out of the experience equation. At the very least, a moment of recognition is ingredient in every apprehension of a thing in experience, even if appearings themselves condition interpretations without being perversely conditioned by them. (I am speaking concessively for the sake of argument.) A tree is a tree, I suppose; even though a visual perception of a tree involves a naming (Hick: a taking as), it is still a perception with determinate content. The proper perceptual state no more creates the object than dancing brings down the rain, but it does play an important role in the recognition of the object, if nothing else. We shall see, after careful consideration, that Alston is not prepared to go this far.

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2. Adult perception is typically shot through with conceptualization and belief, but that is a further development; it goes beyond the minimal requirement for there being a case of perception (Perceiving God, 187).
Varieties of conceiving

In a sustained attempt to negotiate between Hick and Alston, I am arguing not that perception, considered in isolation, is 'a mediated form of awareness', as Hick asserts, but that perception, seeing for example, is always also a conceptual activity, always already conceptual. Now it is important, for purposes of clarity, to see that in 'religious' experience, experience of God, there is a sense in which conceptual activity is a condition and activity both anterior and posterior to perception itself. Perception is no doubt affected (and effected) by levels of conceiving, seeing or taking as. Let me be more precise. Certainly, every actual perception is first filtered or differentiated, as this not that, here not there, and so on; I think Kant is right about this if he is right about nothing else. Any presentation that one perceives becomes, at that point, something of which one is aware. If a tree in one's frontal field of vision is something one sees (in virtue, say, of having one's eyes open and one's attention properly directed), then it is perceived categorially. What I mean is that the tree, in coming to one's awareness, is in that moment differentiated from its landscape, otherwise, presumably, it would be a perception not of something in particular – a tree – but of everything or nothing in a jumbled manifold; for even at a pre-reflective stage, before one deliberately sets out to interpret, the tree is categorised as, say, near or far, before or after (temporally, spatially, causally, logically), same or other: it is that variety of interpretation or conceiving which in fact begins the project of experience, that without which human beings just do not experience. Call this a moment of anterior conceiving, a moment of which one need not be aware; presumably one is not usually aware of experiencing the world by means of a conceptual scheme or construct, in the sense that one does not experience one's

1 Hick, Faith and Knowledge, 96.
experiencing the world in and with a conceptual scheme. As John Dewey has said: 
'We primarily observe things, not observations.'\(^1\) It is also important to stress that no developed perception exists which is not interpreted, re-interpreted, re-organised and so on. Call this a moment of *posterior conceiving*, a moment in which an already initially differentiated perceptual experience is ruminated over, interpreted, interrogated, up-played or, perhaps, down-played, incorporated into a larger narrative, denied as unlikely or dismissed as irrelevant, and so on. So there is a level of interpretation or conceiving that comes before (it is certainly more complex than this), or at the outset of, experience, making it possible and initially intelligible; and there is a level of interpretation or conceiving that comes after, or in the aftermath of, experience, making it both intelligible and more fecund. But we must be careful here: the sort of interpretation one gives in reflection is usually also present, or implied, in pre-reflective interpretation, especially as systems of description, developed categorial ways of seeing, become second-nature and determine the way things are differentiated and catalogued initially, before one consciously decides to interpret; so the anterior/posterior distinction will prove to be a salutary but fluid one.

For the moment I mean to call attention to that phase of interpretation which inaugurates perceptual experience, and this in order to problematise both (a) the interpretive phenomenon itself and (b) the nature and extent of the subject’s involvement in experience. Presumably even initial, largely pre-reflective interpretations are predisposed by one’s environment and one’s doxastic states: if one is intoxicated, the congenital categories will be skewed – the ‘before and after’ category, for example, may perilously misjudge, and things may seem closer or farther away or bigger or smaller or, perhaps, even other than they really are (as when one correlates skin colour with character). It is important, then, not to ignore the layer of categorial imposition that logically precedes (or coincides with)

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perception. Perhaps the same could be said about the congenital spiritual condition in which one encounters the presence of God (the sensus divinitatis, as Calvin put it): like intoxication, sin distorts whatever spiritual vision one has, such that the congenital categories with which one experiences God (whatever they are) circumscribe what as well as how one sees. So it is not that everyone, regardless of culture or creed, really experiences God, just not (because of culture and creed) so purely. Sin is not just a regulative notion or perfunctory admission but a reality at the heart of humanity; thus, Christianly understood, not everyone experiences God, at least not in the same sense or to the same effect, and even those who do experience God experience God vaguely, impurely, fallibly – in short, among those who do as well as those who do not experience God, there is (because of a very active idol-making proclivity) blindness, misapprehension, suppression of truth, and idolatry. (In Chapter 8, then, we shall need to confront sin, ask, that is, how sin is confronted in Christ and, through the Body of Christ, dealt with. We shall recall there that Alston wants to justify (perceptual) beliefs, to evaluate them favourably, to confer upon them a positive, indeed commendable epistemic status. I want, in contrast, to invite sin out of the cold, retrieve its relevance not only for ethics and epistemology but also for ecclesiology. Thus we shall also think about believings, not just about beliefs, about the condition of the one who experiences (epistemic agent) and his need for justification, the reality of which is inextricably linked to consciousness of sin and faith. So if one, and not just one’s belief, is justified, or being justified, one will be losing the impulse (or admirably fighting it) to assert oneself, think highly of one’s achievements, epistemic or otherwise – will be losing confidence in one’s own first-person, perspectival (perceptual) beliefs and experiences and therefore finding renewed confidence in God, in God’s normative self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.)

Hick’s caricature of Kant is transparent on just the point. When Kant discusses the categories he of course has in mind that which is constitutive of human
minds, all human minds, something universal (and presumably immutable). The Kantian categories are not relative to one’s time and place, and are therefore not cultural in the sense of being subject to change. They represent what I have been calling the congenital condition in which every human being experiences, sees, organises the world, that which is logically prior to all actual experience. And since human beings are extended in space and time, are, that is, both bodily and social, the cultural will be nearly as primitive as the congenital; in other words, the congenital is, from the start, situated in the context of the cultural and will thus be isolable from the cultural only in the abstract. Whether mystical or mundane, then, no perception will be free from this anterior sort of conceiving.

But there is also a sense in which conceiving is posterior to perception: the experienced thing must be(come) recognised, identified, interpreted, perhaps reinterpreted and certainly interrogated and opened to correction. In the case of an interpretation that follows on the heels of a perception, an interpretation that one sets out to proffer, it seems that the operative concepts and categories are more cultural than congenital; Alston, appropriately I think, talks of overrider systems and background beliefs in this regard. This is a way of saying that the traditions, circumstances and authorities which have exercised the profoundest influences on percipients in turn influence, shape, inform not just how one sees but also what one makes of the moment and meaning of any experience whatever. Providing an

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1. Says Kant: ‘All knowledge demands a concept, though that concept may, indeed, be quite imperfect or obscure. But a concept is always, as regards its form, something universal which serves as a rule’ (CPR, 135 [A106]). Emphasis mine.
2. So it is not the case that one can be in the congenital but not in the cultural, or in the cultural but not in the congenital: indeed they are contexts as well as constructs, supplying not only position but perspective, not only situation but the vision with which to see. Each, in other words, is encompassing, that is, encompasses subject and object, experiencer, experience and experienced – and add to that everything that provides foreground (active intentions of subjects as well as saliencies of objects) and background (prejudices and hidden expectations beneath the surface as well as the fields to which figure/event/object belongs and from which it can be distinguished) for experience. So the congenital is everything with which one is born into the world as well as the world into which one is born; the cultural is everything one learns in interaction with the world as well as everything in the surrounding world that plays into that interactive learning; and so on.
account of *levels* or *layers* of categorial involvement in experience is one way of avoiding being (too) reductionistic.¹ For of course we appeal to theories, paradigms, and other linguistic constructs for explanations, but those theories and linguistic constructs, also very often tacitly (without our knowing it or controlling it), shape our expectations, conditions what we say and hence what we see.

Even in the simplest sensory experience conceiving, deploying concepts, is significant and ineluctable. Consider the following extended example from Keith Yandell.

Suppose Ralph sees a red apple on the table, and not unreasonably therefore believes the proposition *There is a red apple on the table*. Ralph ascribes the property *being red* to the apple; he also ascribes the property *falling under the concept ‘apple’* to the item on the table. The former property is observable; determinate colors are proper objects of a sensory modality. The latter property is not an observable property; falling under a determinate concept is not proper to any sensory modality.... Further, apples are substances; they endure through time, have dispositional properties, and *have* (as opposed to *being merely sets of*) properties. In *The apple is red*, ‘is’ is the ‘is of predication’ rather than the ‘is of class membership’; a quality is ascribed to an owner rather than an item being included in a set, and even implicitly coming to know that this is so is not merely a matter of coming to know that an object has an observable quality. Thus the rather ordinary sensory experience in which one comes to know that a red apple is in view... is a rather more complex affair than one might suppose. It involves having a set of intimately entangled concepts (*substance, observational property, dispositional property, enduring object*, etc.), though of course it does not require that one be conscious of having them in such a manner that one has sorted them out and noted their connection.²

¹ This anticipates the discussion of Chapter 7. There I examine, in some detail, the distinct but overlapping interpretive contexts/constructs which inevitably shape and structure human experience of God: congenital, cultural, communal. My hope is that an understanding of these distinct constructs will assist us in making constructive realism both intelligible and coherent. The cultural and communal conceptual constructs, of which I have spoken, broaden and deepen the congenital; each becomes more specific, and in becoming more specific, changes and contextualises the range of possible perceptions. The congenital may be broadly defined as that, whatever it is, that facilitates having and making some sense of experiences, mundane and religious; presumably the human subject is able to have and reflect upon experiences precisely because the human subject has and reflects upon experiences.

While Alston does offer an important corrective to Hick's position, namely that there is a sense in which one's perception of a thing is both less and more than a superadded conception, he stops shy of admitting that conceptual activity is inescapable in human experience, from beginning to end. Maybe Alston is right that something is presented in perception that is not itself constructed or determined by the perception. A 'bald' object may not depend upon concepts and prior beliefs for its presentation; even so, a bald object's recognition certainly does, and, at any rate, there is no non-conceptual cognitive access to reality and so no cognitive access to the unconceptualised in experience: all developed perception at some point and in various ways includes conception. This position is to be distinguished from Hick's.

I do not mean that perception and conception are rough equivalents; I am suggesting, rather, that perceptual experience involves seeing, and seeing involves conceiving. Perception and conception, that is, always go together in experience, are in fact mutually enriching and reinforcing; they are, to use a hackneyed metaphor, two sides of the same coin: what is 'seen' must be processed, differentiated (and nothing is seen which is not differentiated), and it must further be(come) 'recognised'. Of course, differentiation, even at a low-level, is a form of recognition; a better way to put this is to say that there are degrees of awareness and comprehension in initial seeing: where an object or state of affairs is strange, not easy, at least initially, to recognise, the capacity to identify or individuate remains (not that, other than this: not a dog, other than the tree in which it is perched); where an object or state of affairs registers, as it were, immediately, one not only identifies but also specifies an identity (a cat, David's cat, David's cat Shnoogums in the tree). In other words, every differentiation involves recognition, at least at a low level; typically, however, one's conceptual resources are sufficiently stable and varied to recognise and assimilate at a much higher level, to specify identities and to spell out connections,
often without great effort, reflection, or inference. If one is going to make any sense of one’s perceptual experiences, one must see; and one cannot see without conceiving.

**Hick’s epistemically negligible realism**

This brings us to a dubious implication of Hick’s *moderate nonrealism*, to which I have already alluded.¹ Hick insists that ‘it is not apart from the course of mundane life, but in it and through it, that the ordinary religious believer claims to experience, however imperfectly and fragmentarily, the divine presence and activity’.² This is, in one sense at least, utterly uncontroversial. However – and this is the tenacious problem – because Hick believes that all ‘religious’ experience is mediated by the phenomenal world, and, further, because he believes that the Real is fundamentally transcendent to the phenomenal world, he must admit not only that human access is mediated but also that that access is *epistemically negligible*. The Real, in and of itself, utterly ineffable, unknowable, radically transcendent, is such that no positive, nonformal human concepts apply to it; but the only experience one has of the Real is mediated through human concepts (and other cultural conventions, ceremonies, etc.); hence, one can never know or experience the Real as it really is.³ Here I shall only briefly trace out this logic; I return to these issues in Chapter 6, where I, in connection with Hick’s program, consider the relevance of the Incarnation for both constructive realism and constructive Christian theology.

In Hick’s scheme, all religiously significant interpretations are valid human responses to the Real. But if those interpretations do not give human beings epistemic access to this Real, a real though admittedly partial glimpse, with what sort

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¹ ‘Moderate nonrealism’ is Alston’s label for Hick’s position; see his ‘Realism and the Christian Faith’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995), 42.
of realism are we left? How should Hick’s realism be characterised, and what are its adequacies and inadequacies? Hick adopts the Kantian (or apophatic) approach according to which God is the supreme noumenon, essentially ineffable, beyond the realm of experience, beyond the kin of men and women. Thus it cannot be said that the noumenal Real is worshipped or experienced.

But of course we don’t worship the noumenal Real in itself. We worship one or other of its personae... Or we orient ourselves in meditation towards one of its impersonae... But in doing so we are responding to the Real which, so to speak, lies behind its different manifestations to humankind.¹

If Hick is right, we must finally remain agnostic about what the Real as noumenal is really like; for, on a certain construal of Hick’s position, the phenomenal is, as mere appearance, something of a subterfuge, and accordingly tells us nothing literally true, or at any rate nothing we can know to be true, of God. So it seems that, epistemologically speaking, Hick’s realism is negligible – or perhaps too eschatological: perhaps one may come to know something positive of the ground of being in the eschaton; but anything one presumes to know in the here and now must be regarded as shadowy insubstantia.² And with regard to ontology, we may think of Hick as a hopeful realist: perhaps something does exist above, beyond and behind the cacophony of human conceptions (Hick is not an atheist). Nevertheless, if Hick is not able to speak of God, or whatever It is, in at least analogously truthful terms, one wonders what significant advantages Hick’s realism promises, or for that matter in what sense his position remains essentially realist? Curious indeed is the religious realism which must keep silent about ultimate ‘reality’ and which must assess religious beliefs not in terms of truth or falsity but in terms of ‘appropriate

dispositional attitude'.

We shall see in Chapter 6 that there is something entirely appropriate about Hick's reticence; but this notion of appropriate dispositional attitude is puzzling and problematic, and indeed renders Hick's reticence suspect—if you will, disingenuous. For how would one determine what counts as an appropriate attitude, cognitive, dispositional, or otherwise, toward something about which one knows nothing? If Hick is right, God, perhaps really existing out there (what would it mean to say that God exists?), is by conceptualisation driven beyond the pale of that which may be experienced; consequently, God as a factor in human experience is never more than human conceptualisation, or so I shall soon contend. Throughout this thesis I shall be trying to strike what amounts to a delicate balance between Alston and Hick: a constructive realism which neither rigidly separates nor carelessly conflates perception and conception.

**Soft conceptualism**

Interpreted experiences are the only experiences to which we have access; no experience is sufficiently isolated, sufficiently pure to be unaffected by countless other experiences, expectations, beliefs. There is, in other words, no experience without mediation: every experience bears a relation, an irreducible and informative relation, to other experiences, actions, beliefs, expectations. Experience is shared, a necessarily social achievement: thus every single percipient is, so to speak, also collective, every one also many. So the justification of (perceptual) beliefs will have much to do with the credibility, assimilative power, coherence of the scheme/community to which the belief is related, within which it is interpreted; indeed simply having an experience in the first place will be complexly related to a

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1 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 348.
host of conceptual resources and various aptitudes and tendencies, epistemic as well as dispositional, and will accordingly be only as pure and straightforward as that complex allows. Does one have access to anything real apart from some mental and social operations, apart from media? Does one ever begin think (or talk) about any segment or stretch of reality without at the same time also thinking (or talking) about the reality that is possible for one, given one’s baggage, conceptual skills, and imagination, to think? It is one thing to have an experience, which is, in a sense, both logically and, I suppose, chronologically prior to a certain sort of interpretation, and quite another thing to think and talk about that experience, part and parcel of which is valuation and interpretation. Joseph Runzo puts it this way: ‘In effect, the nature of perception thus restricts what one can perceive to entities in those possible worlds which are possible relative to one’s own schema. And ‘the world’ which one in fact perceives is that world which is (thereby) actual with respect to one’s own schema.’

The moment an experience comes to (the proper sort of) consciousness, it ceases being a mere perception and becomes an interpreted perception — if you prefer, a conception; when an experience comes to consciousness, one becomes aware of something as something, and this seems to entail taking it as this, not that; that is to say, every moment of actual awareness involves discrimination or, alternatively, interpretation. Runzo makes the relevant point:

Yet whether or not one is aware of other entities composing a definite and contrasting environmental field, some X is discriminated. And to discriminate X is to discriminate X as something — however indefinite or amorphous. Hence, to perceive X is to perceive X as something. However to perceive as is to categorize (even if unconsciously and unreflectively).


2 Runzo, Reason, Relativism and God, 96. ‘I usually see tomatoes as things to eat, and tables as things to eat them on; not tables qua tables and tomatoes qua tomatoes’ (88).
I accept a soft or weak conceptualism, but it must be distinguished from a more strident conceptualism. Wayne Proudfoot’s conceptual model, an example of the latter, approaches religious experience in bold subjectivist terms: an experience of ‘God’ is simply a feeling of something on top of which an interpretation – or as he says, an extraneous explanation – is added, dragging God into the picture.1 'Proudfoot’s view of religious experience,' according to René Van Woudenberg, 'can easily be cast in terms of the ‘something as something’ structure: in religious experience, something, viz. a subjective feeling sensation, is seen as something, viz. as being due to God.'2 Alston’s rebuttal of Proudfoot’s position is relevant, but it does not decisively countervail soft conceptualism. Alston says:

In Proudfoot...we find some interesting confusions that undoubtedly contribute to the failure to recognize the essentially nonconceptual, nonjudgmental character of appearance or presentation, both in SP and MP, and contribute to the supposition that these putative experiential presentations really involve an interpretation of an essentially subjective experience.... From the fact that we use concepts to identify something as of a certain type (How else?!), it does not follow that what we are identifying ‘involves’ concepts and judgments. If it did, we would be unable to classify anything but cognitive psychological states.3

Alston has a point: but in admitting that concepts belong to the ‘identificational element’4 in experience, has he made room for something like a counter-example to his own position – or, alternatively, created a context in which a softer conceptualism might flourish?

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3 Alston, Perceiving God, 40-41.
4 For an intriguing discussion of how the typically reflective ‘identificational aspect’ of experience can migrate into the pre-reflective, and thus become something that is not over and above but rather in, with and under – a ubiquitous part of – perception, see Nelson Pike, Mystic Union, 140-141.
Far from entailing that reality cannot be experienced, or that nothing at all can be known of God in experience, soft conceptualism simply contends that no experience is subject and interpretation free, that interpretation and judgement, and therefore concepts and biases, are pervasive in experience; and (constructive) realism is secure as long as constructing, or the presence of interpretation, does not itself entail that everything is fiction or illusion; we create and discover, I have argued, and while much human creating, by reason of sin, is subversive, not all creative activity destroys or wholly distorts reality. On a theological account of creation/discovery, about which I shall say more later, we would have to remember how human beings are, as created in the God's image, co-creators, and how, as fallen from that image, they often take leave of the creator by creating others, including God, in their own image. I am not particularly attracted to anti-realism in epistemology – most of its unqualified articulations are, though intriguing, ultimately unconvincing. I am in search of a realism more critical than what I have discerned in Alston, one which takes seriously that experiencing reality, including divine reality, can never be sharply sundered from an experiencing subject, with his or her concepts, biases, cherished beliefs (and sinful predilections); now these are real not illusory impediments, so even if realism survives it cannot survive in any naive version. Perception and conception are not equivalents, I have said; but one never has one without the other, perhaps especially if conception, or interpretation, is understood in minimal terms as that which differentiates, individuates (or recognises) in experience. And in spiritual affairs, I shall labour to show in Chapter 8, one can identify or individuate properly only as one's identity is being made and sufficiently sustained. Van Woudenberg remarks on the 'something as something' structure of perception:

*Identifying* something as something is possible only when I am directly aware of something presenting itself to me. 'Interpretation' in the sense of 'identifying' does not deny
or neglect or take away the object presentation. On the contrary, it presupposes that. If this is true, then interpretation is not something 'over and above' perception, it is immersed in it.¹

Alston acknowledges that one's 'conceptual scheme and beliefs can affect the way in which an object presents itself to him.'² But the concession is carefully modified:

Although I recognize the subject's conceptual scheme and belief tendencies can affect the way something appears to her, I do not acknowledge that it can affect what it is that appears to her.... It is essential not to confuse what object(s) is appearing to my experience and what it appears as.... It is frequently maintained that our conceptualization and judgments determine what we are aware of (perceive) as well as how it appears to us. This seems to me to fly in the face of facts.³

If one's conceptual scheme determines what or how one sees, then the cumbrous moment(s) of interpretation cannot be avoided. Perhaps Alston's is a distinction without a difference. Surely what one sees can only be addressed in terms of the way it is seen, the perspective from which it is seen, which Alston freely admits; practically speaking, then, what something is cannot be (easily) untangled from the way it is seen. This is just the way it goes with human access to reality: if we ever experience mind-independent reality, we experience it mind-dependently – that is, in a context, from some perspective, through the field of expectations, beliefs and biases that context imposes and nurtures, and so on; and so one has no access to something unconceptualised with which to compare one's conceptualisations. It matters both who one is and where one is, how one sees and whence one sees, the shape of one's consciousness and one's social context; and as far as I can tell, there is

¹ Van Woudenberg, 'Alston on direct perception and interpretation', 121.
² Alston, Perceiving God, 38; see also Alston's 'Realism and the Christian Faith', 37-39.
³ Alston, Perceiving God, 39.
a reciprocal influence between the existential and the situational, a necessary, quite irremediable mutuality that holds for everyone. So Kierkegaard:

[W]hat a man sees depends on how he sees it.¹

**On seeing different things and the same thing differently**

Two (or more) people commonly have the same visual experience. But it is not always the case that they see the same thing (much less that they recognise they have seen the same thing). It does not follow of necessity that when two perceptions are conditioned to the same presentation, to the same stimuli, they turn out to be the same or equivalent perceptions.

A friend of mine from Haiti is on sabbatical in the states; he spends evenings with my family regularly, and we regularly take nature walks after dinner. On one memorable occasion, we stumble on a devilish looking snake. I see a harmless black snake (I have seen this snake and others like it before, in the woods adjacent to my neighbourhood and in *National Geographic*); perhaps my Haitian friend sees an (evil) spirit (a serpent). The presentation and the first moments of perception may be the same for both of us, but the recognition or identification is arguably different. Or imagine a ‘jungle language’² (call it *Standish*) in which some approximations for translation have been worked out. Suppose that *daxi* in *Standish* refers to devils, apparitions, evil spirits; now suppose that dark slithering snakes, among many other things, are considered *daxi* by native *Standish* speakers. What happens if I share with a *Standish* speaker a perception conditioned to the same presentation – a *daxi*? I will have perceived a snake, I suppose, and the native will have perceived an

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apparition or evil spirit; but we will not have had the same perception or the same perceptual experience.\footnote{Putnam imagines a similar scenario in his \textit{Realism with a Human Face}, 275-276.} What is seen will, in a measure, depend upon how one sees it – and seeing and merely looking at are quite different activities – with what sort of biases and concepts one sees, how one has been educated into experience, not just whence one stands spatially but whence one stands culturally, with what world picture one sees; this suggests that the thing that is seen and the seeing itself, the presentation and the perception, though distinguishable in principle, cannot be so easily untangled in practice.

I suppose Alston would retort that in neither case have the percipients actually seen different things: without naming or labelling we could both presumably describe the slithering thing’s colour(s), shape, swiftness, size and so on. That is probably right. Perhaps the same object has been seen, but the fact that the thing has been seen at all, I say, proves that it has been differentiated and categorised: for it is not the dusty ground on which it slithers, nor is it the horizon that sets the stage or backdrop on which it slithers and hisses. And that initial perception is possible only because both I and my Haitian friend (as well as the native \textit{Standish} speaker) see or perceive with the categories of near and far, before and after, same and other, and so on. These categories, I have said, are congenital, with us from birth, with us before we have had any proper experience, with us to make experiences possible in the first place. Further, because of the way in which we identify through the employment of varying cultural categories (I was not raised to be superstitious), categories that, owing to our insertion in space and time, are virtually as primitive as those with which we begin our worldly experience, we have reached different conclusions about the perception, interpreted the perception differently. Even if the \textit{existence} of what is presented is unaffected by one’s beliefs and concepts, does not owe its existence to anyone’s beliefs and concepts, still the \textit{seeing}, the moment(s) of differentiation and
recognition, the way in which one incorporates a perception into a larger narrative, is not so unaffected. Sometimes, of course, the data of perception are construed differently by different perciipients; sometimes, indeed, the same object looks different and signifies differently among perciipients. Naturally not all experiences are intelligible, or subject to the same pure and simple intelligibility, for we do, perhaps especially in religious matters, interpret evidence and all the rest differently, with reference to interpretive schemes and the patterns, connections and subtle gradations different schemes encourage; not all experiences are possible, in other words, given that there are so many genuinely different ways of seeing — that is, that interpretive schemes make certain experiences possible that previously were impossible, create new awarenesses, develop skills and capacities for seeing connections. Thus there are different ways of seeing/interpreting the same or similar facts as well as similar ways of seeing different facts; and, naturally, therefore different facts, angles, depths, things to see. Does this mean that we are dealing not with perception pure and simple but with perception structured, that is to say, aided and impeded, by concepts and categories? Peter Donovan puts it this way: 'We have already noted how holding a certain belief or set of beliefs about what is possible may totally alter the way one experiences things. What is also altered is the range of things one is capable of learning from these experiences.'

There is one final point I should like to make concerning interpretation and the tension it creates in Alston's realism. The soft conceptualism I have proffered may actually be unwittingly present in, or sanctioned by, Alston's programme. Consider his claim:

I have already alluded to the point that our criterion will not pick out all members of the category of direct perception of God, since one may in fact be perceiving God without realising that it is God one is perceiving or even, perhaps,

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1 Peter Donovan, 'Interpretation and Rational Belief', in Contemporary Classics in Philosophy of Religion, eds Ann Loades and Loyal Rue (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), 165.
that one is perceiving anything at all.... Suppose that a personal deity is the being that is perceived in certain forms of experience not only in theistic religions but also in nontheistic religions. In that case devotees [of] the latter religions would be directly aware of God, even though they wouldn't be thinking of the perceived object in theistic terms as a personal agent.

A point Alston makes elsewhere is illuminating. In *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, Alston insists that in doxastic practices, ways of forming beliefs, 'a given psyche at a given time has a number of relatively fixed dispositions to go from a certain input (beliefs or experiences or a combination thereof) to a belief output with a content that is a more or less determinate of relevant characteristics of the input'.

What is given in experience will be (approximately) received from experience. His examples are clear and uncontroversial:

Thus if the input is the belief pair [John is a philosopher/Philosophers are likely to be unathletic], a familiar function will yield a belief with the content [John is likely to be unathletic]. If the input is a sense experience that is an apparent visual display of a red vase-shaped object, then, assuming that there is no input of background indicating anything untoward in the situation, a familiar function will yield a belief of the form [That's a red vase] or [A red vase is in front of me].

Perhaps then in an experience of an omnipotent personal God, X – especially if MP is free of those menacing interpretive moments – one would expect the input [X is personal; X is powerful] to be substantially reflected in the belief output [roughly: The X I am experiencing is personal; The X I am experiencing is powerful]. In the example Alston cites, however, different identifications, belief formations, construals of the data spring from perceptions of the same object, a personal and powerful God. The presentation is given (God gives himself), and the

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2 Alston, *Reliability*, 4-5.
perceptions receive the presentation: why then do the percipients reach different conclusions about what they have experienced? The distinction Alston makes between theistic and nontheistic, personal and nonpersonal, betrays that his mystical experience is conditioned, or at least partially informed, by a particular conceptual scheme, with its concept of a personal, intelligent and supreme being, which makes the experience intelligible as an experience of a personal God.

To the question how one mitigates such a criticism, I offer these brief remarks. Suppose Alston revises his claim: what if he argues that (in fact) those who do not come to roughly the belief output [This X is God; God is personal], whatever they happen to perceive, simply are not perceiving the same thing; God is not (in) the presentation they behold. With this modification, Hick’s position would need an overhaul: perhaps more than an interpretive problem is at issue. With Keith Yandell, and at odds with Hick, I shall argue that phenomenological discrepancies in ‘religious experience’ occasionally imply real ontological discrepancies. Yandell’s contention is that ‘The evidence suggests that there is no one thing that is the object of all religious experience’. He remarks:

A phenomenological description of an experience says how things look, so to speak, from within the experience; an accurate phenomenological description of an experience expresses its content and reflects its structure. Subjects of religious experiences offer very different phenomenological descriptions of those experiences. It would be extremely high-handed to suppose that the descriptions offered by the subjects of religious experience are not phenomenologically accurate.... There is good reason, given their structure and content, to doubt that these kinds of experiences have a single object.3

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1 See Yandell, The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 20f.
3 Yandell, The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 24. See also Westphal, God, Guilt, and Death, 3.
The point, for present purposes, is not that phenomenological descriptions do in fact precisely correspond to noumenal realities; I shall argue in Chapter 5 that it is not unreasonable (quite the contrary!) to behave and speak as if at least glimpses of noumena may be seen, revealed, in phenomena. The relevant point, rather, is that it is uncharitable not to take phenomenological descriptions, at least initially, at face value, for what they are and what they claim to be; although phenomenological descriptions may eventually be dubious or absurd for a host of reasons — and in the Christian overrider system the pervasiveness of sin speaks against uncritically trusting phenomenological descriptions — it does not seem appropriate to dismiss them before they have had a hearing. So it may not be simply that percipients see differently (that, of course, will often be the case); it may also be that percipients occasionally see different things. Yandell (generally) defines religious experience as ‘an experience doctrinally or soteriologically central to a religious tradition’.¹ The central ‘features’ of religious experience, more specifically, reveal that, in addition to possessing a ‘significant psychological component’, religious experiences are cognitive. In other words, Yandell argues, ‘the subject of the experience receives a reliable and accurate view of what, religiously considered, are the most important features of things’.² This is possible only if the experiencing subject is aware of what is experienced, and if the experience is intelligible to the experiencing subject, a point I later elaborate. Provisionally, then, one could operate on the dual assumption that phenomenological descriptions are credible until shown dubious, and that (apparently) some experiences are veridical and some are not, interpretation notwithstanding. Alston’s account is congenial to these qualifications. When sin makes it entrance on the scene, however, we shall have to provisionally modify this provisional assumption by supposing that experiences of God, and phenomenological

descriptions of them, are guilty until proved innocent; and Alston does not appear to be quite as amenable to this qualification.

To recapitulate

I have not said everything that could have been said in these opening chapters. However, I have tried to say at least enough to set the stage for subsequent amendments and applications. To recapitulate, I found in Husserl a philosopher who failed to provide a satisfactory, balanced account of the nature of the exchange between the knower and the known, perception and presentation, in experience. Wanting absolute certainty, he became disillusioned with the prospects of sense perception, that is, with the ability of perception to exhaust the vistas, or horizons, of objects, as no object is entirely what is seen in a single perception, from a single perspective; objects are incorrigibly many-sided, multi-featured things. And that is true enough. But Husserl is always, it seems, just a short step from the sceptical fallacy: one knows nothing unless one knows everything. Or as Putnam has put it:

That everything we say is false because everything we say falls short of being everything that could be said is an adolescent sort of error.¹

In other words, if perceptions do not tell us all there is to know about the world of things, what they tell us is always and everywhere to be viewed with suspicion, less because they are intrinsically flawed and more because the world is simply too expansive to be circumscribed.

I have sought, in simple terms, to show that Kant’s recognition of a subject’s categorial involvement in experience is at once more realist and more promising than Husserl’s transcendental subjectivity: whereas Kant’s critical admission enabled him

¹ Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, 120.
- and enables us - to recognise and not despair about the limits of human knowledge, carving a space for humility and faith, Husserl’s impervious assumption encouraged him feverishly to rummage consciousness (‘the enormous inborn a priori’)\(^1\) in search of omniscience (or at least infallibility). If the aspiration is omniscience or apodicticity, perhaps a lingering scepticism is unavoidable. All of this has been preparatory; in what follows I seek to put a new spin on Kant’s most significant insight: even if one cannot know and experience exhaustively, one may both experience partially and believe reasonably.

Reading Alston in light of Kant, it appears that we are confronted with an interpretive tension which is not easily abated. I suggested that Alston’s problem is one not just of interpretation but of inconsistency; I need not belabour that point here. But I want to be clear about the twin contention this chapter sought to corroborate: failing to accommodate the subject’s categorial involvements in experience, Alston marginalises the role of interpretation in human experience of God; and insisting on the ubiquity of interpretation in experience, Hick drives God, as he really is, forever from the realm and range of human experience. The remainder of this thesis concerns itself with mediating these extremes, with acknowledging the inescapability of interpretation and determining its all-important role in human experience of God and world. And my abiding hope is that we shall not lose God and world in the process. Interpretation may indeed be unavoidable, but I do not for a moment believe that it spells the demise of religious epistemology.

The chapters of **PART II** flow naturally from all of this, as they amplify themes to which **PART I** could only allude: in Chapter 5, for example, I launch into a lengthy exposition of the nature and reliability of presentation – the ‘objective’ portion in experience; and in Chapters 7, I explore the nature and reliability of perception – the ‘subjective’ portion in experience. I shall argue there that the way

\(^1\) Husserl, *PL*, 28.
to (re)connect perception to presentation, the subject to the object, is to give the subject a body – or acknowledge that his having a body means that he is always already considerably entangled with the world. Thus I shall turn in Chapter 6 to the Incarnation to consider the relevance of God’s taking upon himself flesh and thereby entangling himself with the world. **PART III**, consisting of just Chapter 8, shall, relevantly, consider Christ’s Body, the Church, the sacramental body, the eucharist, which creates the Church’s identity and thereby sustains its life, and the physical body of each of us which, through the eucharistic body, is incorporated into the ecclesial body. And that shall establish a palpable connection between experience of God and concrete participation in ecclesial doxastic practices.
PART II: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE
The usual meaning of “experience” is the certainty about an external object that we acquire through external sensation or the certainty about an internal object that we acquire through the internal senses.... But the concept of empiricism need not be connected to such notions or exclusively to them; it does not need to be limited to the sense-world. A freely acting intelligence, for example, does not fall within the sense-world, and yet he is to be known only empirically. Thus, also, a free intelligence beyond the world will be knowable only through Thatsachen [facts]. Consequently, there is an empiricism that is supra-sensible and nevertheless is empiricism, a metaphysical [empiricism] that is not merely sense-empiricism – Søren Kierkegaard

When one sees a pine tree, what does one see? Does one simply see the tree, as it is and not other than it is, in a manner that mirrors or comports with the quiddity of the tree, or does one see only an exterior, a shell, just bark, behind or beneath or above which exists something other that can at best be imagined? The essence of a pine tree may or may not be its bark, needles, sap, and so on; the question is whether its essence, whatever precisely that is, can be seen in or through them? Such questions border on the outlandish; and no doubt most stable people would find this line of inquiry patience-trying and a little short of intuitive appeal. Naturally. But there is far more here than meets the eye, something neither trivial nor juvenile in all of this. It concerns the connection of appearance to reality, or the correlation of appearance and reality, an issue that has intrigued and puzzled philosophers from the very beginning:

Do appearances conceal, point to, or constitute reality?

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This chapter addresses this compound question. Along the way, I also try to offer an orientation within which to explore some of the more important collateral questions: So I shall examine whether it is natural\(^1\) to believe that appearances (reliably) manifest real things in the real world – and whether, if natural, sufficiently reasonable. Of course it may be that good sense and sustained reflection recommend the admission that appearances are too ephemeral to count as reality and too illusive to have any connection to reality.

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**A few distinctions**

A few distinctions are in order here. The notion of reliability must be drawn into the discussion. With reference to general reliability, I shall argue that appearances need not be wholly reliable – generally reliable appearances will do: obviously an appearance need not reveal everything to reveal something. I shall also suggest that in many cases a thing’s appearance conveys something non-trivial about the thing in question. In other words, what an object, item or thing appears to be will, in the usual cases, under normal conditions, have something to do with the relevant object, item or thing (where there is one).

Of course there are circumstances in which appearances are fraudulent and beguiling: a stretch of road, under certain conditions of heat and sun, appears moist; the sun itself appears to march from east to west, finally slipping under the earth; the earth, as the ground under foot, appears relatively flat; morose feelings are easily cloaked with smiles and other pleasantries; with a little effort homeliness can be hidden beneath shadows, shades and masks of beauty; and it would be hard to forget the weary wolf in sheep’s clothing, the straight stick part-the-way submerged in

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\(^1\) I am not referring here to what is natural in the sociological sense, to what most or many people do; what I have in mind, following Plantinga, is that it accords with one’s ‘design plan’ to believe that things are more or less as they seem. In Plantinga’s words: ‘[C]redulity is part of our design plan’ (*Warrant and Proper Function*, 34).
water, the bemusing mirage in the desert, and so on. These are anomalies, and sometimes they tease us; but the truth is, experience teaches us so well that these potential periodic deceptions almost never really deceive anyone. Indeed, ‘plain’ and ordinary folk are not plainly or ordinarily deceived in the anomalous cases. Thus J. L. Austin:

The cases, again, in which a plain man might say he was ‘deceived by his senses’ are not at all common. In particular, he would not say this when confronted with ordinary cases of perspective, with ordinary mirror-images, or with dreams; in fact, when he dreams, looks down a straight road, or at his face in the mirror, he is not, or at least is hardly ever, deceived at all.¹

So the question of reliability will have to be discussed further; and, what is more, we must qualify the forgoing in this obvious way: not everything that is natural is desirable, or even defensible. So when we ask the question about what is natural (or more natural) to believe regarding appearances and realities and so on, we must proceed with caution. Indeed, not everything that is natural is desirable. Define the natural in terms of the instinctual, for example, and this becomes uncomfortably obvious: the instinct in the rapist to rape is reprehensible, the instinct in the politician to fudge is wayward, the instinct in nearly every human being to be self-seeking and self-serving, especially when that is tied to the demoralisation of the other, is unwholesome, and so on. Clearly, then, some, perhaps many, instincts are not good and are better overcome than cultivated. This, however, will not quite be the case with the virtually incorrigible instinct in virtually every human being to believe that, under normal conditions, things are largely as they seem; perhaps only the philosopher is clever enough to suppress it. Descartes was keenly aware of it but disciplined himself to doubt it; Hume learned in reflection to discredit it; Reid, for his part, achieved for it a respectable philosophical status.

Each philosopher has a point, though. Thus I wish to adopt a defensibly modest mediating position. In other words, I wish to combine charity (submission) with suspicion, realism with sensible scepticism, as I have attempted throughout: simply, we can sensibly take much of what we experience for granted, just as we can sensibly take for granted that there is much in experience about which we are oblivious or else simply mistaken.\footnote{I agree with Nicholas Rescher: ‘Despite the deficiencies, scepticism does serve one eminently useful function: it reminds us of the inherent riskiness of claims to certainty, knowledge, definitive truth’ (Rationality: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988], 72).} Maritain says: ‘[N]aiveté and the superstitious fear of being naive are the two foes of a sound critique.’\footnote{Jacques Maritain, Distinguish to Unite, 82.} It will not be simply that we are predominantly right, as the realist suspects, nor simply that we are predominantly wrong, as the sceptic fears. It will be the case that we are right and wrong, wrong (on some levels) even when we are right (on other levels).

So maybe, with respect to the natural world, we should say not that things are unqualifiedly largely as they seem, but rather that something fundamentally important about the way things seem is largely reliable, so one will both enjoy some clarity and encounter blooming, buzzing confusion. With Alston, in opposition to Husserl, then I favour a little more charity toward the ‘natural attitude’ (Reid’s ‘credulity’);\footnote{Alston is right: ‘In the absence of special reasons for doubt, we do accept the deliverances of sense and memory willy-nilly, whatever our reflective philosophical views’ (‘Christian Experience and Christian Belief’, 119-120).} with Kant, in opposition to Alston, I favour incredulity toward experience of God, incredulity toward, if you will, the ‘natural’ supernatural attitude; with Hick, in opposition to Husserl, I favour incredulity toward the naive separation between the natural attitude and the philosophical/religious attitude, a separation that assumes the latter but not the former is context-free and therefore neutral. We can sensibly be suspicious, I am saying, not just of the natural as well as natural...
supernatural attitude, but also of our suspicions, the credentials of the reduction, or whatever method one uses, to sort out and develop awareness of suspicion.¹

Clearly, then, appealing to what is natural, without introducing many subtleties and distinctions, is not nearly sufficient; we must say a good deal more if we are going to lend a little credence to the claim that it is both natural and adequately reasonable to suppose that appearances are generally – i.e., typically and for the most part – reliable depictions/instances of real things, that appearances usually (in part) constitute, or are fundamentally correlated to, reality. The central question this chapter explores, then, is tripartite (adopting Kantian terminology): Do phenomena reflect noumena? in what measure? and how? In the following brief chapter (Incarnation as Sensible Intuition), I shall be asking if and how the Incarnation changes, or conditions, or clarifies the way one should understand the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, especially as distributed to God, and if and how this changes, or conditions, or clarifies the nature of God as well as experience of God.

The nature and necessity of the object

Every conscious experience that presupposes a self likewise presupposes an-other, a not-self, either in the form of an aspect of the experiencing subject which, together with other aspects, is not the aggregate of the subject, or in the form of an object, figure or state of affairs external to the experiencing subject that is logically and physically distinct from the subject. I follow Keith Yandell in dubbing the former subject/aspect experiences and the latter subject/consciousness/object experiences.²

A subject/aspect experience is one in which a subject experiences something that

² Yandell, The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 43. See also Westphal, God, Guilt, and Death, 37-45.
depends for its existence on the existence of the one who experiences it; so my experience of an itch on my elbow is a subject/aspect experience, for the relevant itch is existentially dependent upon me. A subject/consciousness/object experience is one in which a subject experiences something that presumably does not existentially depend on the one who experiences it; so a perceptual experience, say, in which I see a bird perched on the windowsill of my office is a subject/consciousness/object experience, for the bird’s existence does not oscillate with my awareness. Clearly, I cannot have the experience of seeing a bird in my window if I am deceased; but presumably the bird’s ability to perch in someone else’s visual field does not die with me.

Strictly speaking, of course, solipsism is neither falsifiable nor verifiable (perhaps the reality that you are reading this is all the proof one needs to reject solipsism), and as such cannot be ruled out as a broadly logical possibility. But its impotence to discover, or uncover, in experience a sense which transcends the constructions of the human mind may give those more restively optimistic members of the human race a good reason to explore other ways of understanding the nature of human experience and reality. It is no concession to solipsism to say that not every experience which has a subject necessarily has a proper object (recall Brentano’s ‘objectless presentations’, to which we alluded in Chapter 3). Obviously, there are genuine experiences which involve aspects, or psychological states, or feelings of a subject: a subject may experience nausea or intense hunger or excruciating pain or anxiety or apprehension or relief or profound exhaustion or paranoia, and countless other things besides. Perhaps such experiences do supply information about and insight into subjective states or feelings; but they do not seem to reveal facts about mind independent realities, objects – at least not directly.¹ I may, for example,

¹ So Yandell: ‘Religious experiences certainly do not all appear to be of the same thing. Not all of them are subject/consciousness/object in structure. Some of them do not even seem to be experiences of anything that exists independently of the experience’s subject. Some of them seem to be experiences in which some aspect of the subject is discovered or discerned. Others of them plainly do
sporadically suffer from vertigo, the sensation of dizziness that is tied to the sensation of swirling surroundings. Vertigo comes on unpredictably, without warning, and it is almost never causally connected to changes in the physical environment. Vertigo is also related to anxiety, but anxiety is not always related to tense moments or chance encounters or unfamiliar circumstances; one’s dizziness and dread, in such cases, tell us next to nothing about one’s environment or about one’s experience of one’s environment. But there are also scenarios in which one experiences dizziness because of changes in the physical environment. It is not uncommon, for example, for otherwise stable folk to lose their equilibrium when they are towering at great heights. Perhaps in such cases the dread that accompanies the dizziness and the dizziness itself are inextricably connected to the environment and accordingly tell us something (albeit vague) about the environment.

By way of contrast, an object simpliciter is, at least at a certain level of abstraction, a mind independent thing rather than merely a ‘bundle of impressions’ or perceptions immanent in the mind – although as Hilary Putnam has shown, how one defines an object, and therefore what counts as an object, is a mind-dependent exercise. In other words, thinking or speaking of objects pure and simple is already a scheme dependent practice, but that does not make objects mere fictions or conventions. ‘How we go about answering the question, “How many objects are there?” – the method of “counting”, or the notion of what constitutes an “object” – depends on our choice (call this a “convention”); but the answer does not thereby become a matter of convention.’ Of course there is a sense in which real and

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1 The allusion here is to David Hume’s ‘bundle theory.’ For an interesting discussion of Hume’s position as well as other options on the nature of objects, see Robert Stern, Hegel, Kant and the Structure of the Object (London: Routledge, 1990).

2 Putnam, The Many Faces of Realism, 32-33. Again: “Objects” do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects and the signs are alike internal to the scheme of description, it is
independently existing objects are, in being perceived, instantiated in (for) the mind, but presumably at least some of those objects also have corresponding physical instantiations outside of and apart from the percipient’s awareness or consciousness. Indeed there are countless things that do not depend on human perception or consciousness for their existence.¹ This is not to deny, however, that ‘Our conceptual scheme restricts the “space” of descriptions available to us’.² The point is that it is sensible enough to accept the existence of (stretches of) mind independent reality without, say, decisive proof or positivist-like verification; and Kierkegaard and others have argued, with cogency and profundity, that unqualified scepticism is, strictly speaking, a choice rather than a forced cognitive conclusion, an expression of will just as much as an example of knowledge, a failure of nerve and not of evidence.³ Thus Wittgenstein: ‘From its seeming to me – or to everyone – to be so, it possible to say what matches what’ (Reason, Truth and History, 52).

¹ Yandell states the matter succinctly: ‘If my door exists, it does so independently of my perceiving it. Anything that exists independent of me, let us say, is an object with respect to me’ (The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 35). This definition of an object is controversial. Kant, for example, is disconcertingly subtle in his discussions of the nature of objects, distinguishing between empirical objects (objects conditioned by space and time and observable or perceptible under just those conditions) and transcendental objects, phenomenon and noumenon, appearance and thing in itself. Some scholars think that it is logical rigor that accounts for the complexity of Kant’s philosophy; others have seen in Kant more confusion than clarity. So Plantinga: ‘The British philosopher David Hume writes with a certain surface clarity that disappointingly disappears on closer inspection. With Kant, there is good news and bad news; the good news is that we don’t suffer that same disappointment; the bad news is that it’s because there isn’t any surface clarity to begin with’ (Warranted Christian Belief, 9). And Husserl, following Meinong, almost exclusively focuses on intentional objects, rendering the question of real, independent existence moot.

² See Søren Kierkegaard, Works of Love, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 225-245, in which he discusses opposite possibilities, belief and disbelief or mistrust, held in equilibrium or extending equally far: ‘The deception is that from knowledge (the pretense and the falsity are that it is by virtue of knowledge) mistrust concludes, assumes, and believes by virtue of the disbelief inherent in mistrust, whereas from the same knowledge, by virtue of belief, one can conclude, assume, and believe the very opposite’ (227). For Kierkegaard it is the fear of making a mistake, of falling into error, that constitutes this attitude of mistrust, that gives scepticism its abrasiveness; ironically, according to Kierkegaard, it is the proper fear of falling into error that underwrites the stance of trust, charity, belief. Thus Kierkegaard: ‘But here in the world it is not “stupid” to believe ill of a good person; after all, it is an arrogance by which one gets rid of the good in a convenient way. But it is “stupid” to believe well of an evil person; so one safeguards oneself – since what one so greatly fears is being in error. On the other hand, the loving person truly fears being in error; therefore he believes in all things’ (Works Of Love, 232; cf. Philosophical Fragments, 81-86). Franz Kafka’s interesting little vignette ‘Decisions’ (in Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony and Other Stories [New York: Simon & Schuster,
doesn’t follow that it is so. What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it.¹ In fact, certainty is, or is a part of, a form of life² – thus, fittingly, ‘knowledge is related to a decision’.³

Now if one is prepared to go this far, perhaps it is not a stretch to suppose that when someone claims to experience, or claims to be involved in an experience with, an object, event, or state of affairs, one may actually experience, or be involved in an experience with, more than oneself, one’s ramified expectations.⁴ Perhaps, as John Dewey has said:

[W]hen experience does occur, no matter at what limited portion of time and space, it enters into possession of some portion of nature and in such a manner as to render other of its precincts accessible.⁵

1995) poignantly expresses this hypnotic fear of erring, which prevents one from venturing or living or believing ['But even if I can manage like that, any mistake – and mistakes are inevitable – will bring everything, light or heavy, to a halt, and I will have to twist back into my circle again,... Hence the best course is to put up with everything, behave like a heavy mass...in short, push down with your own hands any ghost of life surviving in you, increase, that is, the final gravelike rest and let nothing else exist' (31)]. See Stanley Cavell’s rich discussion of the epistemological concern of failing to read/interpret someone or something correctly (The Claim of Reason [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979]); see also Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953) and On Certainty. Also relevant is Plantinga’s claim that such things as belief in other minds are properly basic, neither provable nor needing proof for justification or, for that matter, warrant (see his God and Other Minds [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967]). In his case against radical scepticism, Rescher says: ‘The sceptic’s mistake is one of omission – he fails to see that the fundamental issue we face is not just that of particular acceptances, but that of a choice between policies of acceptance’ (Rationality, 63).

¹ Wittgenstein, On Certainty, 2.
² On Certainty, 357.
³ On Certainty, 362.
⁴ Following Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations), Hilary Putnam has argued for a kind of externalism according to which thoughts about objects in the external world depend not only on intrinsic properties or states of thinkers but on the relation those thinkers bear to objects and states of affairs external to them; such thoughts, it is said, gain purchase in virtue (in part, at least) of the connections they enjoy vis-à-vis the world of external objects. The thesis is not uncontroversial (what good thesis is?) but if externalism, or something like it, is correct, if a thinking agent can entertain thoughts about objects, towering trees and icebergs and cups of coffee and so on, generally only when and as she is standing in proper (causal?) relation to those objects, then perhaps it follows that the mere having of thoughts about such objects implies that solipsism is false. Of course sometimes there are no objects, one is dreaming, or hallucinating, or squinting; but it is fallacious to suppose, as the sense-datum theorists did, that what one is immediately aware of must therefore be mental. For a discussion of externalism and its connection to Putnam and Wittgenstein, see John Heil, The Nature of True Minds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 30-35.
But this anticipates only the first step in ascertaining whether an object, being experienced, is experienced as it is, or nearly as it is, or in accordance with what and how it is; that is, to continue with Kant's idiom, whether phenomena in some measure reveal noumena. This query may be answered affirmatively only if one admits that, just as subject/aspect experiences disclose genuine information about subjective feelings or states, so subject/consciousness/object experiences tend to disclose genuine information about the kaleidoscope features and textures of the real world. '[E]xperience is of as well as in nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced.'\(^1\) Or as Rescher puts it: 'Our experience is inevitably an experience of nature. (That after all is what “experience” is – our intelligence-mediated reaction to the world’s stimulating impacts upon us).\(^2\) One can sensibly be open to the possibility – a possibility it would be dotty to deny – that phenomenological descriptions of ‘objective’ experiences are credible unless shown dubious, that they are, potentially, more or less what they seem to be: descriptions of ‘objective’ horizons in experiences. But as Putnam observes: ‘It is amazing how hard it is to get back to the idea that we do, after all, normally perceive what is out there, not something “in here.”’\(^3\)

This is not to suggest that in experience one has only to do with clear and clean objective horizons; experience involves subjects, and this, I have said, makes experience a somewhat turbid affair. However, it does seem appropriate to think that in experience (which is of a subject/consciousness/object structure) one has at least something to do with objective horizons that are not aspects, or illusions, or

\(^3\) Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, 251.
delusions of subjects; in other words, experience also presumably involves objects, fields of objects, events, and other saliencies distinct from subjects. This chapter concentrates on the latter – I am calling them presentations; and I do not mean to insinuate that a presentation, if it comes into the range of experience, ever exists apart from the company of a perceiver. It is for the sake of making a little progress in our understanding of the nature of presentations that I momentarily bracket percipients and their perceptions; they take centre stage in the discussion in Chapter 7.

(Parenthetically, let me here try to forestall a potential objection concerning the suspicious (suspiciously dualist) language of this chapter to this point. I have for some time been speaking quite freely, perhaps insouciantly, about subject and object, subjective and objective, and so on; but I have been involved with Kant and Husserl, after all. In Chapter 3 I introduced Husserl’s concept of Lebenswelt, and in effect used it against him in order to expose the subject and object in their mutual vulnerability, prior entanglements, and hence irreducible relatedness. The Lebenswelt, however, is not an afterthought or, as it were, an emergent property in or upon experience between subject and object. It is, as Husserl began to see in The Crisis, the already antecedent; the always prior situatedness of subject and object; the always already enacted situation in which subject and object are related organically; the foreground and background in which subject and object, experiencer and experienced, interpenetrate willy-nilly. In this way the Lebenswelt invites us to think more holistically – i.e., less dichotomously – about experience. So we start in the abstract – a certain degree of abstraction is unavoidable – and move into the concrete, move into the realisation that the concrete is with us (and we with it) before we are aware of it: we centre experience, in other words, on a subject only to see that the subject is simultaneously centred and de-centred, intentioning in and implicated by experience. Thus the ‘given’ is, it might be said, neither subject nor object,
neither the subject’s subjectivity nor the object’s objectivity; it is the whole sticky affair, including subject and object in all their connectedness and contextuality – and the whole affair is, if you will, the (transcendental) condition of experience. Or as Wittgenstein has remarked, in his preferred philosophical genre, the passing remark: ‘What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life.’\(^1\) I shall say more along these lines in a moment.

The sort of charity (Reid: ‘credulity’) I prefer concerning the objective, the other, is not unwarranted. When a subject says she feels nauseous one does not ordinarily insist she is mistaken, nor, all things being equal, should one. An impatient detractor might protest: describing one’s nausea and attempting to describe one’s experience of God are two quite different enterprises, and this is worth noting. (Many others would be happy with the telling comparison between God and nausea.) Perhaps then it is more to the point, here, to move from subject/aspect experiences to subject/consciousness/object experiences, that class or category of experience to which experience of God presumably belongs. One should not in haste tell a subject she is deluded when she claims to have seen something external, a blue bird, say, eating from the feeder in her back yard; and (further) her description of the blue bird can be taken \textit{prima facie} to furnish partial as well as accurate information about the bird, its size, shape, colour, movements, sounds and so on.\(^2\) I think Alston’s notion of input-output correlation is a fine way to understand this arrangement. The input [e.g., X appears in S’s visual field; X is eating from S’s bird feeder; X appears in a blue-birdish sort of way to S] – except in relatively rare cases when one’s perceptions may be malfunctioning, as when one has just awoken from a deep slumber or had his and his wife’s share of drink – will yield approximate output [e.g.,

\(^1\) \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, IIxi, 226.

\(^2\) Rescher calls this rational presumption. ‘Presumption is the epistemic analogue of “innocent until proven guilty”’ (\textit{Rationality}, 50).
S sees X; S sees X eating from a bird feeder; X looks to S like a blue bird; S believes X is a blue bird].

Of course there are circumstances in which one’s perceptual claims will at first blush seem quite odd or outlandish (‘I saw the Pope this morning in my local Burger King’), and will need to be probed and scrutinised further, and afterwards, perhaps when new information comes to light, challenged and corrected (‘The Pope either was or was not in my local Burger King; I’ve just learned that the Pope is on a good will tour of Greece this week; therefore the Pope could not have been the one I saw in my Burger King early today’). But these cases by no means account for most cases; presumably one is justified in both allowing perceptual reports a chance to speak for themselves and assuming that not all of them are *prima facie* ridiculous, implausible or false, and that most or many of them, in fact, approximate the truth of the matter. I am not saying, of course, that any ‘perceptual report’ is ever free from a subject who sees and speaks it, who sees and speaks it, that is, from a point of view; I am saying, rather, that a perceptual report presumably also involves more than a subject and her interpretation(s), and that her report may perchance really say something about ‘objective’ features or horizons in her experience.

**Epistemic and non-epistemic realism**

I have quoted Putnam several times in the foregoing, so let me say a few words about the relevance of Putnam’s internal realism to the matters at hand. Interpretation is a system specific endeavour: every description is, to be sure, internal to a system, a way of seeing, a language game, research program, or whatever; but that does not preclude/occlude contact with reality. The clever thing about a realism like Putnam’s is that it inclines one, from within so to speak, to assume both that one really makes contact with reality, i.e., that things are often as they seem, and that reality
exceeds/outruns any one’s linguistic capacities, i.e., that appearance/reality is variable, depending on one’s context, so multifaceted that it cannot be subdued or hegemonically controlled. But Putnam’s realism – a ‘demythologized Kantianism’ – is deprived of the things in themselves.\(^1\) And with the aid of this neutered Kantianism, Putnam goes virtually epistemic with his realism. This is problematic to the extent that epistemic realism threatens to make reality too tame, not elusive or fleeting enough. Both my nuanced reading of Kant, about which I shall say more momentarily, and the way I situate and spell out the significance of the Incarnation with reference to that reading, qualify Putnam’s realism.\(^2\)

What we need is a realism in which the external breaks into and inhabits the internal without being domesticated by it: something like this is the potential of constructive realism.\(^3\) So reality cannot be divorced from the media through which it is accessed; but not every medium is a distorting one, not every intermediary that mediates pulls apart/separates. Perhaps then reality regularly inhabits the various media through which it is accessed, stretching them, purifying them, drawing them, as it were, beyond themselves.

Earlier I said that I wanted to combine realism with scepticism. I stand by that claim, and I think that constructive realism anticipates just that sort of equipoise, by being neither simply epistemic nor austerely non-epistemic. It is sometimes thought that the acceptance of Kantian noumena portends sceptical trouble for the realist: if noumena remain not just barely but completely beyond our reach, it follows that reality could be radically other than it seems and most of us take it to be.

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\(^1\) Putnam, *Meaning and Moral Sciences*, 6. ‘Of course the adoption of internal realism is the renunciation of the notion of the “thing in itself”’ (*The Many Faces of Realism*, 36.).

\(^2\) Putnam has been qualifying his own internal realism over the years, and in his most recent book he develops a position he calls ‘natural realism’ (see *The Threefold Cord* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1999], 3-20).

\(^3\) Sue Patterson comments: ‘It seems that to be coherently cultural-linguistic, while at the same time monotheist in the classical divine transcendence-requiring sense, demands a peculiarly Christian doctrine of incarnation which becomes the lynchpin linking internal and theistic realist perspectives’ (*Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, 40).
Naturally then a good many thinkers, like Putnam, have given up the thing-in-itself as a quixotic and pernicious idea. But now relativism rather than scepticism becomes the worry. In this scenario, if relativism worries one – i.e., if one is unsatisfied with constructivism and wishes to remain fundamentally realist – one must, it seems, go epistemic, affirming that, with noumena bracketed, it is unimaginable that reality could be wildly different from what we take it to be.

The double-aspect model of the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, which I foreshadowed in Chapter 2 and which I develop in greater detail here, should show that there is a sort of middle distance position between epistemic and non-epistemic realism. If noumenal and phenomenal may be taken to refer not to separate realms but to separate considerations of the same realm, then we shall have reason to construe continuity between phenomenal and noumenal, between the world as it is in relation to sensibility or sensible subjects and that same world as it is, or would be, considered apart from sensibility. In this event, it is true both that the world exceeds our grasp of it, and presumably always will, and that we obviously have succeeded and presumably will continue to succeed in deepening and expanding our knowledge and understanding of the real world. Thus, to put it simply, we know in part but in truth; in other words, it is probably the case both that our picture of the world is not massively errant and that we err even in what we truly know – we do not know everything or know everything we know fully. This achieves a balance of sorts between charity and suspicion to which I referred at the outset, and likewise avoids both the extreme of epistemic realism and the extreme of non-epistemic realism: we are right and wrong, right much of the time and wrong at least as often, indeed wrong (on many levels) even when we are right (on others).
Performative incoherence and proper basicality

Nevertheless, giving perceptual reports a hearing is the charitable thing to do, and it is what most of us do even when we do not set out to be charitable; furthermore, it is incoherent, performatively speaking, to deny the other in ordinary mundane experience. But the external world cannot be properly – i.e., logically – demonstrated, even if it is practically demonstrable. How, then, should we engage with a reality external to us which, at all times and in various ways, seems to threaten, surprise, impinge upon, and shape us? Is it reasonable to presume the other in experience even when the other’s existence lies beyond the reach of sly argumentation? What amount or quality of evidence would be necessary or (nearly) sufficient to justify such a presumption? Further, is it necessary, performatively speaking, to presume the other, and this even in the absence of a certain kind or degree of evidence? ‘The validity of a presumption is not pre-established by some prior process of rational deliberation,’ according to Rescher, ‘but emerges ex post facto through the utility (both cognitive and practical) of the results of yields.’¹ One must presume in order to get started; so even if one ends with scepticism of a fairly rapacious sort, one does well to begin with ‘presumable presumption’ (Jüngel), charitable suspicion.

I favour the simple logic, perhaps short on ingenuity but not on intuitive appeal, that just as it is reasonable to presume the actual existence of a mind independent reality, without being in a position to prove it (but perhaps being in the perfect position – the world – to take it for granted), it is likewise reasonable to presume that phenomena, the appearances of things, give us (at least) partial glimpses of reality, the way things truly are. (Whether appearances merely correlate to reality or in fact constitute reality is an open question.) Taking things at face value is in fact what we naturally do without reasoning to the conclusion that it is the

¹ Rescher, Rationality, 53.
reasonable thing to do; this is the way it goes for humans. Thus a sharp disjunction between appearance and reality need not be drawn. It is also a practical necessity without proof to think and speak and behave as if the world around us is real—otherwise we would lose all sociality and sanity; and it is a practical necessity without proof to think and speak and live as if what is real is, in a measure, revealed in appearings, presentations—otherwise, for example, by refusing to believe the frenzied traffic we see is really traffic and really in swift and dangerous motion, we would literally lose our heads. In a world where appearances do not at the very least approximate realities, it is hard to account for such things as knowledge, communication and communion; but, as Plantinga has shown, loosely following Reid, we not only know many things (though not all things without exception, and not all things equally well), we also commonly achieve stable communication and enjoy both depth and freedom in communion with our fellows as a result. I shall now consider how these presumptions shake out in conversation with Kant and Husserl, on the one hand, and Alston and Hick, on the other.

Kant’s discursivity thesis

I argued in Chapter 2 that Kant’s discursivity thesis is a fruitful way of exploring the nature of the exchange between the knower and the known in a moment of experience; both intuitions and concepts are necessary conditions for knowledge, must intersect in order to account for knowledge. Now I wish to expand that discussion a little as we consider the nature of appearances or presentations, with particular reference to Kant and Husserl. A familiar and illuminating quotation from Kant should get us moving in the right direction.

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our senses
partly of themselves produce representations, partly arouse the activity of our understanding to compare these representations, and, by combining or separating them, work upon the raw material of the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is entitled experience. In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge begins.... But though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience. For it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions and of what our own faculty of knowledge (sensible impressions serving merely as the occasion) supplies from itself. If our faculty of knowledge makes any such addition, it may be that we are not in a position to distinguish it from the raw material, until with long practice of attention we have become skilled in separating it.1

It appears that something must be present(ed) in order for empirical knowledge to be occasioned. But presentations are not enough; empirical knowledge is enabled only when both what is given – presentations – and what the human faculty of knowledge supplies – categorial perceptions – connect under the right conditions. Thus a Kantian formula for understanding knowledge (conceived empirically) emerges: presentations plus categorial perceptions potentiate knowledge.2 I say potentiate rather than produce, because knowledge does not come simply as a matter of course: it is a discovery as well as a creative achievement, inasmuch as comparing, combining and separating representations is a skill, a competence, which is sharpened only with long practice of attention.

1 CPR, 41-42 (B1-2).
2 'Now the data of intuition have their own form, which is spatio-temporal. So when thought determines objects, the form of thought combines with the spatio-temporal form of intuition to produce a schema, or a schematic system, and this schematic system is the form of the world which we perceive' (John MacMurray, The Self as Agent [London: Faber and Faber, 1995], 50). And Calvin O. Schrag: 'Kant’s doctrine of the unity of apperception, framed as a synthesis of perception, imagination, and conception, places considerations of time and space very much in the foreground. Time and space, defined by Kant as a priori “forms of intuition” (Anschauungsorten), provide the elemental structures of the world as experienced. All experience, from which knowledge begins but does not arise, occurs within a manifold of appearances that are temporalized by virtue of being either simultaneous or successive and spatialized by the dint of their separateness from each other. Although time and space are themselves not experienced – there is no direct experiential access to either time or space – they are necessary conditions for experience to occur' (The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992], 159).
In this chapter we are principally considering the first half of that equation: presentations. What are presentations? Of what do they consist? Do they offer glimpses of or refract reality? This is just another way of asking whether what is given in experience is real, on the one hand, and whether in perceiving what is given, a presentation, one is also, in some way and to some extent, perceiving a thing in accordance with its own reality, on the other hand. In accordance with – that will prove to be an important qualification. In Chapter 7 we shall consider the last half of the equation: perceptions. There I admit that perceptions are categorial; all perceptions involve conceptions, interpretations, the imposition of concepts, an argument I have been anticipating since Chapter 1. If, however, experience requires both a subject and an object, not to mention the foreground and background in which they are primordially situated, that is, if all experience which has an object also has a subject, perceptions never dance alone, nor do they in some mysterious and miraculous fashion constitute presentations; presentations and perceptions are not co-extensive, so they cannot be equated. If the known thing proves to be both less and more than the knower, then even if the knower is condemned always and everywhere to interpret, there is reason to believe that that which is other than the knower may at least partially disclose itself and its contours to the knower; and if this is true in the empirical world of inanimate objects, the world of dust and caverns, desks and books, how much more with animate, personal objects or subjects who have the capacity as well as the proclivity to open themselves to be experienced and known, to co-inhabit space and time, so to speak. But that is all for a later, more sustained discussion. For now let us grapple with the daunting issue of presentation. I hope here to improve the plausibility of the suggestion that through phenomena or presentations reality, whatever reality is, may be (partially but truly) experienced and known; I shall not imperil this defensibly modest claim by attempting to say everything.
I shall not here challenge Kant's transcendental distinction; something like it is admissible, definitionally at least. This section's intention, rather, is to confute a particular construal of that distinction – the distinction strictly *metaphysically* conceived. The metaphysical interpretation is not the only interpretation offered in the marketplace of Kant studies, nor is it the only sustainable interpretation. What if noumenal and phenomenal prove to refer to separate considerations of the same reality rather than to separate spheres of separate realities? Perhaps this would imply that when one has experienced the phenomenal, whatever it is, conditioned as it is by space and time, one has ample reason to believe that she has experienced the phenomenal *in accordance with* the noumenal.¹

When I say that phenomena reveal noumena, I do not quite mean that noumena are experienced *in or through* phenomena; I mean that when one experiences phenomenal realities one has experienced those realities *in accordance with* noumenal realities; I wonder if it would be too wide of the mark to say that human beings experience noumena *as* phenomena? This moves in the direction of an answer to the third portion of the tripartite question with which this chapter opened: how do phenomena reveal or reflect noumena?

**Kant's principle of perspective**

Stephen Palmquist has constructed an architectonic interpretation of Kant on the insight that his critical philosophy may be properly understood only when one discerns in it the pervasive employment of a principle of *perspective*. There are two principal perspectives, the transcendental and the empirical, which are always under consideration in Kant first *Critique*, according to Palmquist, and it is the failure

¹ See Bird, *Kant's Theory of Knowledge*: 'Such phrases [e.g., 'transcendental objects and empirical objects'] should be understood to refer not to two different kinds of entity, but instead to two different ways of talking about one and the same things' (37).
consistently to respect these peculiar perspectives that inclines some interpreters to think Kant either incoherent or insufferably obscure.\(^1\) Perhaps such a failure also (in part) explains why Kant has been charged with advocating radical constructivism. It is vital that Kant’s distinction be kept, but more vital that it be properly understood. There is profuse evidence in the first *Critique* to support an epistemological rather than a merely metaphysical construal of the transcendental distinction. If, however, Kant’s frequent use of perspectival language is not acknowledged and accounted for (and we need not go the whole way with Palmquist to go this far), a clear and convincing interpretation of Kant’s ‘object terms’ (thing in itself, transcendental object, appearance, positive noumenon, and so on) becomes particularly painstaking.

The object term which is of particular concern to us is *appearance*. It would appear from the evidence that Kant, at times, accepts the reality of ‘objects’ as appearances.

The transcendental idealist is, therefore, an empirical realist, and allows to matter, as appearance, a reality which does not permit of being inferred, but is immediately perceived.\(^2\)

And even less ambiguous:

All outer perception, therefore, yields immediate proof of something real in space, or rather is the real itself. In this sense empirical realism is beyond question; that is, there corresponds to our outer intuitions something real in space.\(^3\)

At other times the reality of objects in the form of appearances is a matter of serious dispute.

There can be no question that I am conscious of my representations; these representations, and I myself, who have the representations, therefore exist. External objects

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\(^1\) Palmquist, *Kant’s System of Perspectives*, 27-55; cf. 174-175.

\(^2\) *CPR*, 347 (A371).

\(^3\) *CPR*, 349 (A375).
(bodies), however, are mere appearances, and are therefore *nothing* but a species of my representations, the objects of which are *something only* through these representations. *Apart from them they are nothing.*

Now these quotations, interestingly, share a context. Thus, without something like the aforesaid perspectival variation on the object as transcendental and/or empirical, it is easy to be swayed by the suspicion that Kant has contradicted himself, or left himself without clear witness. The following reference, situated coincidentally or intentionally (it is hard to know intentions) in this same context, introduces the distinction, and in so doing provides the reader with a hermeneutical key for understanding the surface semantic tensions in Kant.\(^2\)

The transcendental object is equally unknown in respect to inner and to outer intuition. But it is not of this that we are here speaking, but of the empirical object, which is called an *external* object if it is represented in space, and an *inner* object if it is represented only in its time-relations. Neither space nor time, however, is to be found save in *us*.... The expression *outside us* is thus unavoidably ambiguous in meaning, sometimes signifying what as *thing in itself* exists apart from us, and sometimes what belongs solely to outer appearance. In order, therefore, to make this concept, in the latter sense...quite unambiguous, we shall distinguish *empirically external* objects from those which may be said to be external in the transcendental sense, by explicitly entitling the former *things which are to be found in space.*\(^3\)

**The realist implication of Kant’s transcendentalism**

In Chapter 2 I argued that Kant’s idealism cannot be fairly interpreted in either Berkeleian or Cartesian terms. When his idealism is interpreted in the context of his own philosophical programme, that is, with reference to the stem of knowing he calls *sensibility*, a more realist Kant begins to emerge. For a transcendental idealist is also

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2. According to Plantinga, Kant is tedious to read and difficult to interpret (*Warranted Christian Belief*, 9).
The term ‘idealist’ [in Kant’s sense] is not, therefore, to be understood as applying to those who deny the existence of external objects of the senses, but only to those who do not admit that their existence is known through immediate perception.... We must necessarily distinguish two types of idealism, the transcendental and the empirical. By *transcendental idealism* I mean the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves, and that time and space are therefore only sensible forms of our intuition, not determinations given as existing by themselves, nor conditions of objects viewed as things in themselves. To this idealism is opposed a *transcendental realism* which regards time and space as something given in themselves, independently of our sensibility.... The transcendental idealist, on the other hand, may be an empirical realist or, as he is called, a *dualist*; that is, he may admit the existence of matter without going outside his mere self-consciousness, or assuming anything more than the certainty of his representations, that is, the *cogito, ergo sum*. For he considers this matter and even its inner possibility to be appearance merely; and appearance, if separated from our sensibility, is nothing.¹

This should clarify some of the common confusion concerning Kant’s understanding of the nature (and function) of appearances in human experience and knowing. Appearances, *as mere representations*, are *something* only in relation to sensibility, in relation to experiencing subjects; that is what they are as a matter of definition. It is, therefore, inaccurate to equate appearances with things in themselves, since things in themselves, having no corresponding sensible intuitions, cannot be accordingly represented.² Such isomorphism does obtain, however, when the distinction between phenomena and noumena is blurred, as in Husserl; or, alternatively, when one, with the transcendental realists, insists on making time and space and outer appearances absolute and therefore absolutely independent of sensibility.³ Now appearances are

¹ *CPR*, 345-346 (A369).
² *CPR*, 350-351 (A378).
³ So Kant: ‘To this idealism there is opposed a *transcendental realism* which regards time and space as something given in themselves, independently of our sensibility. The transcendental realist thus interprets outer appearances (their reality being taken for granted) as things-in-themselves, which exist
representations, and as such function only in relation to sensibility; but that does not, according to Kant, extirpate them from reality. On the contrary, there is a sense in which it can be said that the transcendental object (and by extension, the thing in itself) provides the basis for the appearance. So insinuates Kant: 'Neither the transcendental object which underlies outer appearances nor that which underlies inner intuition, is in itself either matter or a thinking being, but a ground (to us unknown) of the appearances which supply to us the empirical concept of the former as well as of the latter mode of existence.'

Put differently:

The non-sensible cause of these representations is completely unknown to us, and cannot therefore be intuited by us as object. For such an object would have to be represented as neither in space nor in time (these being merely conditions of sensible representation), and apart from such conditions we cannot think any intuition. We may, however, entitle the purely intelligible cause of appearances in general the transcendental object....

Simply, appearances are those things which are known only in experience; they do not exist in themselves, they exist only in relation to experiencing subjects; perhaps better, they exist as the relation of object perceived to one perceiving. This much accords with conventional interpretations of Kant. Further, phenomena and noumena have to do with 'sides', obverse and reverse, of the same thing (to paraphrase Herbert Spencer): phenomena constitute the aspect of experience, the conditioned by time and space, that which is toward, or in relation to, experiencing subjects; noumena constitute the aspect beyond or above experience, the unconditioned by time and space, that which is only toward, or in relation to, itself.

\[\text{CPR, 345-346 [A369].}\]
\[\text{\textit{CPR,}\ 352 (A380). Emphasis mine.}\]
\[\text{\textit{CPR,}\ 441 (A494). Emphasis mine.}\]
\[\text{\textit{A percipient, according to Palmquist, cannot know a thing in itself because 'its original representation must stand in some relation to the person perceiving it; that is, a thing in general, regarded from the transcendental perspective, must become an object of experience in order for it to be known by a subject' (Kant’s System of Perspectives, 168). Milton Munitz puts it this way: 'If one wishes to know the truth about objects as they exist wholly independently of and antecedently to}\]
\[\text{\textit{CPR,}\ 352 (A380). Emphasis mine.}\]
\[\text{\textit{CPR,}\ 441 (A494). Emphasis mine.}\]
\[\text{\textit{A percipient, according to Palmquist, cannot know a thing in itself because 'its original representation must stand in some relation to the person perceiving it; that is, a thing in general, regarded from the transcendental perspective, must become an object of experience in order for it to be known by a subject' (Kant’s System of Perspectives, 168). Milton Munitz puts it this way: 'If one wishes to know the truth about objects as they exist wholly independently of and antecedently to}\]

\[\text{\textit{CPR,}\ 352 (A380). Emphasis mine.}\]
\[\text{\textit{CPR,}\ 441 (A494). Emphasis mine.}\]
‘The visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped.’\(^1\) It is important to see that these ‘realms’ are realms of reflection rather than realms of being (or perhaps realms of reflection and not merely realms of being): one can think about things as they are experienced and represented under the conditions of time and space, and/or one can think about things, those same things and other things besides, altogether apart from their being presented and experienced.

So Kant:

\[\text{[T]he distinction, which our Critique has shown necessary,} \]
\[\text{[is] between things as objects of experience and these same} \]
\[\text{things as things in themselves.}\]  

If this rendition is plausible, that is, if phenomena and noumena constitute not different entities but different ways of thinking and speaking about the same (empirical) entity; and if appearances, as Kant claims, are so to speak grounded in the unknown which lies beyond them, then it is quite natural to think of appearances as disclosing in accordance with that which cannot be experienced. I do not pretend that this simple conclusion accords perfectly precisely with Kant’s own understanding or agenda. He may not have wanted to go this far or use these terms, and he almost certainly would have disapproved of the way I put these findings to work in Chapter 6, where I consider the Incarnation as sensible intuition. I am rather trying to show that there is a plausible way of re-reading, or appropriating, Kant on

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2. *CPR*, 27 (Bxxvi-xxviii). Emphasis mine. ‘But if our Critique is not in error in teaching that the object is to be taken in a two-fold sense, namely as appearance and as thing in itself; if the deduction of the concepts of understanding is valid, and the principle of causality therefore applies only to things taken in the former sense, namely, in so far as they are objects of experience – these same objects, taken in the other sense, not being subject to the principle – then there is no contradiction in supposing that one and the same will is, in the appearance, that is, in its visible acts, necessarily subject to the law of nature, and so far not free, while yet, as belonging to a thing in itself, it is not subject to that law, and is therefore free’ (*CPR*, 28 [Bxxviii]).
the noumenal/phenomenal distinction which encourages – or at least does not
discourage – an unhesitating move in a realist (and distinctively Christian) direction:
on a particular reading of Kant, that is to say, one can hold a fairly sturdy realism
without at the same time needing to prove that Kant himself would have done so. It
is enough for now to stress that Kant seems to sanction this realist implication. He
says:

At this point we must make clear to ourselves what we
mean by the expression 'an object of representations'. We
have stated above that appearances are themselves nothing
but sensible representations, which, as such and in
themselves, must not be taken as objects capable of existing
outside our power of representation. What, then, is to be
understood when we speak of an object corresponding to,
and consequently also distinct from, our knowledge? It is
easily seen that this object must be thought only as
something in general = x, since outside our knowledge we
have nothing which we could set over against this
knowledge as corresponding to it.... Now we find that our
thought of the relation of all knowledge to its object carries
with it an element of necessity; the object is viewed as that
which prevents our modes of knowledge from being
haphazard or arbitrary, and which determines them a priori
in some definite fashion. For in so far as they are to relate
to an object, they must necessarily agree with one another;
that is, must possess that unity which constitutes the concept
of an object.... All necessity, without exception, is grounded
in a transcendental condition. There must, therefore, be a
transcendental ground of the unity of consciousness in the
synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions, and
consequently also of the concepts of objects in general, and
so of all objects of experience, a ground without which it
would be impossible to think any object for our intuitions;
for this object is no more than that something, the concept
of which expresses such a necessity of synthesis.... Now,
also, we are in a position to determine more adequately our
concept of an object in general. All representations have, as
representations, their object, and can themselves in turn
become objects of other representations. Appearances are
the sole objects which can be given to us immediately, and
that in them which relates immediately to the object is
called intuition. But these appearances are not things in
themselves; they are only representations, which in turn
have their object – an object which cannot itself be intuited
by us, and which may, therefore, be named the non-
empirical, that is, transcendental object = x.... The pure
concept of this transcendental object, which in reality
throughout all our knowledge is always one and the same, is
Human knowledge avoids being arbitrary precisely because experienceable objects (appearances), objects of possible or actual experience, are, in a sense, anchored beyond experience. This permits the following realist way of thinking: when one experiences a 'real' object in the real world – an object, first, presented, separated out, then compared and arranged – what one experiences comports with the ground of that object, thereby grounding experience, and the human knowledge that results from it, in objective reality.

But if, according to Kant, appearances as mere representations are something only in relation to sensibility; if they cannot be equated with things in themselves; and if they do not exist apart from experiencing subjects, does this imply a constructivism that frustrates the possibility of real empirical knowledge? It is true, 'real' objects as appearances (by definition) exist not in themselves but only relationally, specifically in relation to knowing subjects, and this does seem to entail that they are nothing apart from this relation. Kant says as much. But the reading I have been proffering takes this to mean that objects as appearances are real in and as part of the fabric of experience, they are just not things in themselves; one may talk about appearances only in experience. This can be said in another way. An object as appearance is an object phenomenally considered, within the context of sensible experience, while a thing in itself is an object noumenally considered, apart from experience. Naturally, then, an object as appearance cannot be simultaneously and in the same sense an appearance and a thing in itself. When objects as appearances are considered apart from the context in which they are known and experienced, they necessarily cease either to provide empirical knowledge (which is rooted in

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1 CPR, 134-137 (A104-110).
experience) or to be appearances. Thus it is proper to speak of appearances only in connection with actual spatio-temporal human experience.¹

Empirical knowledge, then, has its anchorage in the real objects of sensible intuition; and real objects of experience (so to speak) have their anchorage both in themselves and beyond themselves. Thus even when one cannot believe that sensibility is co-extensive with reality; when, that is, one dare not completely collapse things in themselves into appearances; when it is sensible to maintain the distinction, still it may be said that one experiences in part but in truth. And that move will, as anticipated, strike a balance between realism and scepticism, a middle distance position between epistemic and non-epistemic realism. This little formula suggests an answer to the second part of the tripartite question with which this chapter began: in what measure do phenomena reflect noumena? Stephen Palmquist elucidates: 'When Kant denies the knowability of the thing in itself, he is not denying empirical knowledge, for the thing in itself does not ‘affect’ the senses: the affection of a subject’s sensibility by an object occurs only in immediate experience.... For the unknowability of the thing in itself simply means nothing can be known about empirical objects if they are considered apart from all relation to the forms by which a knowing subject experiences them.'² Again, however, if the transcendental object provides a basis for appearances in reality – if appearances find a grounding in what cannot be experienced – then perhaps some continuity (not: confusion) between appearances and things in themselves can be claimed and maintained. It therefore becomes permissible, perhaps practically necessary, to think of appearances as disclosing in accordance with what is not subject to the conditions of human empirical knowing.

For Kant, ‘presentations’ are roughly synonymous with ‘appearances’, with the givens of experience, with those things with which experiencing subjects stand in

¹ CPR, 354-355 (A384-385).
² Palmquist, Kant’s System of Perspectives, 170.
a peculiar relation. These presentations not only reveal themselves, with their own distinctive features and qualities, they also reveal (so to speak) what lies beyond themselves; they reveal in a manner that is the complement rather than the contradiction of what exceeds experience. This means that, on a certain reading of Kant, a thing in relation to an experiencing subject corresponds more or less to what it is in itself, and this in spite of the fact that a thing in itself, because it is not subject to the conditions of empirical knowing, is not and cannot be humanly experienced. Kant accomplishes this promising synthesis by avoiding the temptation to confuse what ought not be confused, a temptation to which Husserl appears to succumb: he accomplishes it by demonstrating that phenomena have a necessary and stable grounding in noumena, and as such are, in effect, both transcendent and immanent, beyond and within human reach. That is the *via media*.

There is a place for faith in all this, faith which bridges the gap that reason alone is ill-fit to bridge. This reading also provides justification for the claim that it is *reasonable* to speak and behave as if what one experiences in phenomena is consonant with what exceeds experience. To be more precise: it is reasonable to believe that an object as it is experienced in relation to human subjects is what that object would be if it were not in relation to human subjects. Thus there is (reason to accept) *fundamental continuity* between what a thing is toward human subjects and what *that* thing is or would be *an sich*.

**Husserl’s denial of the Kantian distinction**

Husserl’s position on the relation of phenomena and noumena differs noticeably from Kant’s. Recall that all of Husserl’s capitulations were directed toward finding a neutral, secure and bias-free *foundation* for philosophical science, a foundation on the basis of which one could invest knowledge claims with requisite certainty.
Husserl clearly found philosophical inducement in the prospect of finding, deep in the recesses of consciousness, an invulnerable point of departure (or termination). In Chapter 3 I argued that he was misguided, that he was looking for something that cannot and need not be found, that the ground and the goal of Husserl’s phenomenology was, to paraphrase Dewey, an ‘all-absorbing dream’ contrived by a philosopher aspiring to infallibility if not to omniscience.

Husserl’s phenomenological project may be understood as an attempt to revision (by collapsing or denying) the sharp Kantian dichotomy between appearances and ‘things in themselves’. In fact, the phenomenological reduction’s first move aims at discovering the essence of things in the things as they appear and are given in consciousness. Now it is important to flesh out, in brief and sketchy terms, what I take to be a constitutional disagreement between Kant and Husserl. Kant maintains the distinction precisely because he realises that we must be able, ultimately, to protect reality from reduction to pure subjectivity and in that way recover the world in the most relevant sense, and he does this by showing that we are not forever confined or consigned to consciousness. As Kant insists, consciousness of self in time supplies evidence for one’s surroundings, the other than self dimension to which consciousness of self attests. We know in consciousness, consciousness is knowing, or is tied to knowing, or is the conditio sine qua non of knowing: on an axiom such as this Kant and Husserl agree. For Kant, this is the case only because what is known in consciousness is not consciousness itself, nor known only as consciousness; rather in experiencing (and knowing) in consciousness one experiences (and knows) something real that, if you will, transcends consciousness. This has the effect of grounding experience and knowledge in the interplay of subject and object, in the fluid give and take between the one who experiences and the world in which s/he is situated. By contrast, Husserl strains to retrieve and retain the

\[1\text{ CPR, 244-247 (B275-279).}\]
objective world, but his many ingenious efforts are finally and decisively unsuccessful, primarily because he locates both subject and object in consciousness—and because he takes consciousness to be a private mental activity, cut off from its surroundings and estranged from its body. This has the effect of grounding experience in an intentional world not quite beyond consciousness. This preoccupation with subjectivity is nurtured until the world is annihilated. In Husserl’s words:

Therefore, if we think of a phenomenology developed as an intuitively apriori science purely according to the eidetic method, all its eidetic researches are nothing else but uncoverings of the all-embracing eidos, transcendental ego as such, which comprises all pure possibility-variants of my de facto ego and this ego itself qua possibility.¹

For both Kant and Husserl, then, presentations or appearances have to do with given, those things with which human beings have to do in experience. In contradistinction to Kant, Husserl locates presentations in, and in no relevant sense beyond, consciousness, and in so doing fails to recover any real objectivity in experience; and if my interpretation of Husserl’s theory of constitution in Chapter 4 is not too wide of the mark, it is tricky to understand how a presentation could amount to much more than an idea, or representation, in the mind. There is a subtle discernible similarity between Kant and Husserl on this point: when Kant’s idealism is defined by his notion of representation, there is a sense in which ‘objects’ for Kant seem more ideal than real, existing in but not apart from the mind’s representation; but only, I have argued, when ‘object’ is defined as appearance— which exists only in relation to experiencing subjects. Like a flesh wound, the similarity is superficial. For Husserl, the pure transcendental ego is the supreme essence (‘the all-embracing eidos’), the master of all pure possibility-variants of the de facto ego: so the point of

¹ Husserl, CM, 71.
reference is (within) consciousness itself, ultimately accountable only to itself. There is no grounding beyond the mind or the mind’s representations; the grounding appears rather to be rooted in the acts of the mind, in the activity of consciousness. In Husserl’s theory of presentations, then, no actual thing will be found which encroaches upon a given (re)presentation or item of experience.

**Alston’s realist theory of appearing**

At the heart of Alston’s understanding of ‘presentation’ is a realist theory of appearing, briefly discussed in Chapter 4. Its governing assumption is that appearances constitute the presentational form of external objects, and as such manifest phenomenal qualities in accordance with the (independent) reality of those external objects; objects present themselves, or are presented, as they really are – or more or less as they really are; so the theory of appearing concerns not the way or manner of one’s sensing (that would be an adverbial view) but more simply ‘the way in which the object one is directly aware of appears to one’.¹ (I have argued that the way of one’s sensing and the way in which an object appears are indissoluble; the latter is severely affected by the former.) And Alston is inclined to move from premises like these to the conclusion that when one reads off the phenomenal properties of an object from the inside of experience, one’s reading matches reality. Simply, a presentation ‘involves something’s being “given” to the subject as bearing certain qualities’.²

Alston’s realist theory of appearing is less about what is or may be given in experience, and more about the mode or manner in which reality comes to be experienced; as such it applies to mystical experience as well as sense experience,

¹ Alston, ‘Literal and Nonliteral in Reports of Mystical Experience’, 84.
² Alston, Perceiving God, 166.
just as much to the reality of God as to the world’s native and wonderfully assorted sounds, sights, textures.

Our sources take it that something, namely, God, has been presented or given to their consciousness, in generically the same way as that in which objects in the environment are (apparently) presented to one’s consciousness in some perception.¹

The passive dimension in experience is primary in Alston’s construal of presentations. This implies that perceptions, in an ironic reversal of Kant’s Copernican revolution, are required to conform to presentations, to what is given, not presentations to perceptions, as if a given can be isolated, divorced from a system of description, and used as a certitude against which to measure perception and thereby achieve, in H. H. Price’s phrase, ‘perceptual certification’.² Alston’s theory ‘holds that any case of sensory experience, whether veridical or not, has an “act-object” structure. Sensory experience is essentially a matter of something’s “appearing” or “presenting itself” to a subject, S, as bearing certain phenomenal qualities.’³ These are interesting echoes of Husserl.

Notice the closeness between Alston and Kant on this point, suggesting at once both similarities and dissimilarities. Both agree, for example, that in order for something to be experienced empirically or perceived, it must be given or presented. This is no doubt what Kant is after when he emphasises that concepts without corresponding sensible intuitions are empty; in this respect, at least, Kant’s notion of sensible intuition can absorb Alston’s understanding of presentations. The differences are easier to discern but quite a bit harder to reconcile when we turn with focused attention to perception. Alston’s view of perception is largely passive, failing as it does to strike a balance between passive and active elements in human

¹ Alston, Perceiving God, 14.
³ Alston, Perceiving God, 56.
perception. Contrastively, Kant's theory of perception is not only more active, but also more realistic, for it both acknowledges that perception is productive and illuminates how this productivity may be seen to open up rather than occlude reality; there is no discovery without creativity, creative participation. A perception for Alston need only receive and repose in a presentation in order to read whatever object you please reliably; perhaps, indeed, this is just what perceptions were designed to do.¹ For Kant a perception involves activity as well as appropriation, and appropriation is performed reliably only when it plays an active part in rendering the presentation intelligible; perhaps this is just what perceptions are fitted to do – sensible intuitions without concepts are blind. But this infringes upon the discussion of Chapter 7.

To return to the issue immediately at hand: there is an apparent similarity between Kant and Alston on the nature of presentations; in experience things are given or presented. But there are also deeper tensions, primary among which is the possibility and place of God as a presentation in human experience. It is arbitrary, says Alston, to decide a priori the limits of experience (of which he thinks Kant is guilty). Experience alone has the prerogative to teach one what is and is not beyond experience. If this be the case with sensory experience, and it seems to be (after all, in a sense that is what the transcendental method is all about), it may also be the case with non-sensory experience. Alston remarks:

We have to learn from sense experience and theories based on that in what ways physical objects can appear to us, and we have to learn from mystical experience and theories based at least in part on that in what ways God can appear to us.²

¹ I shall not dispute Alston’s claim that perceptions (generally) access reality reliably. But I shall contend that Alston has not fully accounted for how this is done; though we reach a similar conclusion – sense perceptions function with basic reliability – Alston gets there by focusing (almost) exclusively on the passive role of the subject in perception, and I get there by carving a space for the active role of the subject in experience.
² Alston, Perceiving God, 96.
It should be evident from this that Alston is shifting the parameters of experience, or at least the connotation of the empirical, to include everything, not just sensible things, that may be said in some way to constitute or count as experience. Thus Alston finds no impressive reason on a priori grounds to exclude the possibility of experiential awareness of God:

I don’t see any general a priori constraints on what can appear to our experience. We have to learn from experience what we can be experientially aware of. What a priori considerations could have led us to anticipate that stars but not electro-magnetic fields can occupy a place in a visual field? Therefore, if it is a question of whether it is possible that an entity of certain type can present itself to our experience, we have to say that apart from empirical considerations, including our ascertaining by experience that this possibility is realized, we have nothing to go on and so no reason to deem it impossible. In the mystical case it is tolerably obvious that there are no empirical considerations that count against the possibility. The only empirical data we have that are relevant to the issue at all, namely, the claim by many people to have directly experienced God, obviously count in favor of supposition. Therefore, I would say that the possibility in question is prima facie credible; to deny it we would need strong negative arguments.1

If it be true that neither reality nor one’s experience of reality is exhausted by what appears to (presentations) or what is perceived by the ordinary senses, then the

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1 Alston, *Perceiving God*, 59. ‘More generally, we should not suppose that we can identify a priori any limits on what objective features can manifest themselves in patterns of phenomenal qualia. Apart from (sense) experience we would not have been able to anticipate that trees are, generally, recognizable by their look, while physicists are not. In mystical perception, too, one can learn only from experience what features and activities of God can be recognizable by the way God presents Himself to one’s experience. And as we have seen from our sample, the testimony of experience is that the features we have listed are so identifiable’ (47; cf. 95). Yandell expresses a cognate point: ‘We can tell what the limits of our cognitive powers may be only by using them, and who knows what we may discover’ (The Epistemology of Religious Experience, 3)? But, as we shall see in Chapter 6, ‘God was in Christ’ changes everything; most assuredly one’s concept of God. What one learns in God’s revelation of himself in Christ is that one’s concepts (of God, merit, mercy, love, forgiveness) and expectations are radically distorted and distorting and must therefore be confronted, radically revised, and that one cannot know or experience God apart from God’s giving himself to be experienced.
possibility of a non-sensory experience of God cannot be ruled out before it is given serious consideration.

A queer transcendental method

The above diffuse citation divulges that Alston’s procedure, like Kant’s, is transcendental – but in a queer or qualified sense. Kant, recall, was interested in understanding the conditions of the possibility of empirical (immediate) experience; and his method, as transcendental, proceeded not by way of postulation but by way of deduction. In other word, Kant asked, given the universal actuality of empirical experience, what the conditions of the possibility of this actuality are: what must be the case in order for this particular phenomenon to be the case? Alston approaches the subject of experience of God in a similar fashion. (‘The only empirical data we have that are relevant to the issue at all, namely, the claim by many people to have directly experienced God, obviously count in favor of supposition.’) Such an approach urges him to assume that such experiences occur; but then, obviously, Alston’s procedure is not transcendental in the Kantian sense.

Kant did not defend the actuality of experience of God for a reason: such a supposition would require that God, necessarily unconditioned by space and time, be, or become, an object of immediate experience. Clearly, however, experience of God is not a phenomenon, or not a phenomenon in the eligible sense, since it crucially lacks universal attestation. At the moment one admits that God cannot be considered an object, an empirical thing, as he cannot be subject to the conditions of space and time, one has denied the legitimacy of deducing the conditions of the possibility of experience of God from its universally attested actuality. When one discusses conditions in the queer transcendental way in which Alston does, one is proceeding by postulation rather than deduction.
But this should not dispose one to look with derision upon Alston’s approach, or one like it; it may be appreciated as long as one does not make a genre or methodological mistake when interpreting it. It is an especially promising way of treating the subject of experience of God if the assumption, that God may be experienced in non-sensory, non-empirical ways, is not prima facie disallowed. Perhaps this assumption requires a theory of preformation (Chapter 7). If God cannot be confined to or even loosely identified with the empirical realm (as Kant understood this), that is, if God is transcendent to space and time, then presumably in order to have an experience of God, one must have a non-sensory or extra-sensory experience (or perhaps an out-of-body experience). But in order to have a non-sensory or extra-sensory experience of God, presumably one would need a capacity for such experience. One cannot enjoy visual experience without vision, the capacity of sight. Similarly, one cannot see God without divine vision, an analogous spiritual capacity. So one may be inclined to say that, just as the proper functioning of the ordinary human senses fecundates sensory experience, the proper functioning of extra-ordinary spiritual senses, if they exist, creates the possibility of non-sensory experiences.

These *spiritual* endowments, of course, are adduced (as an hypothesis, perhaps) in an attempt to account for peculiar and otherwise inexplicable data; they can no more be proved than one can prove that other minds exist, that quarks and positrons really exist, or that there is a universal moral faculty. And as far as I can tell, to try to prove them is to miss the point. Many people claim to experience God, and Alston’s point is that, without strong arguments to the contrary (he does not think that the typical *a priori* arguments are compelling), such claims are prima facie credible, and accordingly should be provisionally accepted. However, I have said that such claims, on account of sin, are in fact prima facie in-credible. The presumption, where experience of God is concerned, must rest in favour of guilt.
rather than innocence. Nevertheless, an appeal to preformation is just an illuminating way of explaining how such non-sensory experience might be possible; and if the initial claims are going to be provisionally accepted, such appeal cannot be hastily and dismissively judged illegitimate – though it can be judged weak, or uninteresting, or unilluminating, or counter-intuitive, or something along those lines. The move is abductive, not deductive; and it is at least as legitimate as proposing an evolutionary theory to accommodate peculiarly complex and stubborn physical and biological phenomena. Unsurprisingly, Kant expressly rejected preformation, and this sheds light on why he could not countenance talk of God as presentation in human experience.1

Is anything strictly scientific?

Construing experience of God as Alston does, governed and guided by the assumption that human beings are designed reliably to have experience of God, is a perfectly sensible thing to do. But if one chooses to adopt Alston's approach, perhaps sooner or later one must admit that one is dealing with a species of experience that should be characterised by a different (but not necessarily unwholesome or inferior) degree or quality of certainty, the product of which is a different species of knowledge. When one turns from sensory experience to non-sensory experience, perhaps one is no longer dealing with something strictly scientific, at least not in the sense in which Kant understood this. But why be anxious about this? Is anything strictly scientific in the relevant sense? Perhaps God, in the light of alleged supra-sensible experience, can be worshipped, and therefore truly known, even if he cannot be proved or known in the way in which one knows empirical things.

1 CPR, 174-175 (B167-168).
I can think of no unassailable reasons to suppose that anything can (or must) be known with Cartesian certainty. I believe I own and frequently drive a Green Volkswagen; I believe that I hit golf balls at the driving range earlier today; I believe that I had pasta for lunch yesterday and today (and on a student’s budget that is not surprising); I believe I was born in South Carolina, and I believe that South Carolina is smaller in population and territory than California; I believe, further, that $7 + 3 = 10$, that six inches is shorter than a foot, that six inches plus six inches equal a foot, that I, whatever precisely I am, am identical to myself; and so on. I hold these beliefs with confidence. In fact, I believe I know these things, and many other things, some of which I believe with far less confidence, even if I do not know them with requisite Cartesian certainty. Obviously, I can be mistaken about any of these beliefs (perhaps mistaken that ‘I’ have beliefs at all). So I cannot see that lacking Cartesian certainty is especially problematic for experience of God or the many Christian beliefs that presuppose experience of God.

But suppose for the moment that our epistemic situation, with respect to at least some propositions, is one of Cartesian certainty: what of interest follows? What if (some) empirical things can be known indubitably? And what if God is not an empirical thing, an item in the world of space and time, and therefore does not enter causal transactions with the many other things of space and time? Does it follow that God cannot be known, or that the knowledge one may have of God in non-sensory experience is bogus, inherently second-rate? Not automatically: on the assumption of Cartesian certainty, it only follows that that knowledge, whatever it is, is different or perhaps just differently acquired. ‘If the vaunted standard is such that knowledge claims cannot possibly meet it, the moral is not “too bad for the knowledge claim”, but “too bad for the standard”’.¹

¹Rescher, Rationality, 70.
Kant wanted to establish the limits of the theoretical, and in order to do this he argued that some things – e.g., God – cannot be scientifically and empirically known. One need not lose sleep conceding this much to Kant. If one accepts Kant’s contention (and there are ways of re-defining the issue so as to avoid embracing it), consistency requires one to grant that ‘knowledge’ of God, whatever it is, at least contrasts with knowledge of empirical things. But one should not be lured into thinking that such knowledge (whatever it is) is unreasonable or qualitatively inferior or intellectually farcical. Kant, it is true, did not think that one could know God in the same way that one knows $2 + 2 = 4$, or with the same certainty with which one knows the reality of one’s own (time-conditioned) existence. Some philosophers think Kant was right; some think he was wrong. I, for my part, think the terms are a little skewed. To be content indefinitely to pause here is to run the risk of becoming mired in a conversation the culmination of which (finding consensus or resolution) is probably beyond humans to reach or realise; it is to have one’s attention diverted from a more important and interesting question.

Let us for the moment concede all of this to Kant, and let us ask the more important question: Is it nevertheless possible reasonably to believe (in) God, and have good and appropriate reasons for this belief (if it is reasons one desires), and perhaps even call this belief knowledge in some qualified sense? My hunch is that it is not only possible, but permissible. But only as this thesis develops shall I have opportunity to suggest what faith with appropriate reasons consists in, and why this variety of faith is viable and commendable. I shall also have occasion, here and there in the few chapters that follow, to suggest how one might sensibly move from faith to qualified knowledge.

So what if Alston cannot strictly work from the actuality of experience of God to the conditions for its possibility; he may still proceed hypothetically, as if experience of God were (possibly) actual, and ask what such (veridical) experiences
might look like, what shape they might take under certain conditions, and how to account for their possibility. It remains the case that multitudes of men and women, dead and living, have claimed to experience of God. With charity we might examine some of these experiences, in the hope of discerning whether at least some such experiences could be veridical; and in order to do this we would have to allow the experiences under consideration to speak for themselves.¹ What might such experiences tell us about the nature of God or the nature of experience of God? Alston adopts a procedure similar to this.

**Mediated immediacy**

Alston draws together a mosaic of confessions and reported experience. After careful observation and initial assessment, he conjectures that most or many of the reports he considers — ‘Christian’ reports — imply, at the very least, that ‘God Himself directly presents Himself to the consciousness of the subject.’² This he takes for confirmation of his suspicion that presentations, of both a sensory and a non-sensory sort, are at bottom and centrally concerned with the simple phenomenological giving of something, X, to someone, S, as it is. He makes the point clearly:

What distinguishes perception from abstract thought is that the object is *directly presented or immediately present* to the subject so that ‘indirect presentation’ would be a contradiction in terms.³

¹ Alston agrees: ‘I will be concerned only to argue that if God exists it is a real possibility that experiences like the ones under consideration constitute genuine perceptions of Him’ (*Perceiving God*, 54).
² *Perceiving God*, 287.
³ *Perceiving God*, 20-21. Again: ‘Our own states of consciousness are *given* to us with maximum immediacy, not given to us *through* anything. Whereas in direct perception of external objects, though the object is not presented through the *perception* of anything else, it is presented through a state of consciousness that is distinct from the object of experience and of which we can become explicitly aware in the more direct way’ (21).
This spotlights Alston’s advocacy of a rather stout view of direct perception. His preference, he tells us, is for ‘mediated immediacy’ rather than ‘absolute immediacy’ or ‘mediated perception’: ‘One is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived.’ We also see implied in his notion of mediated immediacy a very carefully delimited view of mediation. Simply, a thing – God, for example – is experienced by a subject, and that subject, with her perception, must be distinguished from the object that is experienced. This contrasts with a more spirited and extreme view of mediation in which a perception of something else by a subject becomes the thing from which is inferred something back of or beyond that thing.

At this juncture, Hick and Alston part company.

### The really Real and the encountered reals

Hick, by contrast, adopts a thorough-going mediated view of perception, where something like a perception of the world effectively amounts to a perception of God. Now Hick’s conception of perception has to do with perceiving God not as he is but as he appears; and on a ‘two-object’ reading of the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, which I shall soon suggest is Hick’s favoured reading (Chapter 6), appearances (as illimitable reals) have a kind of independent existence from the Real itself. I think this can be shown to imply that it is precisely (or more probably) the

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1 *Perceiving God*, 22; cf. 51.
2 See John E. Smith, *Experience and God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); cf. John E. Smith, *The Analogy of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Smith’s interesting position may be seen to represent something of a via media between Hick and Alston. Like Alston, Smith insists that one may perceive or experience God directly; and like Hick he thinks that one cannot experience God immediately. ‘In maintaining that the encounter with God is direct but not immediate, the aim is to provide for the fact that all initial encounter with God is mediated, in the precise sense that there is no experience of God that is not at the same time experience of something else. That is to say, the presence of God is always mediated by signs or comes through a medium, even though the presence itself is genuine and the experience direct’ (*Experience and God*, 150).
world or human conception, and not God, that is perceived when one encounters these diminutive reals. Further, a theory of religion that maintains that the really Real is fundamentally distinct from the encountered reals, and that the encountered reals are the only reals that are ever really encountered, is better described as a theory of deism or polytheism. Hick of course does agree that the really Real is fundamentally distinct from the encountered reals, and that the encountered reals are the only reals human beings ever encounter. In sharply sundering the Real from the reals, and in insisting that those reals are appearances of the Real, appearances conditioned by one's concepts and categories, Hick commits himself to radical constructivism.

I suggested early on that there is a way of tracking continuity in Kant between the way a thing appears and what a thing is in itself: what a thing (empirically conceived) appears to be may be reasonably believed to disclose in accordance with what that thing (transcendentally conceived) is. Hick's tweaked Kantian project requires – or rather presupposes – a hermeneutic of discontinuity, however: what a thing appears to be cannot be said in any meaningful measure to reflect what a thing really is. This hermeneutic of discontinuity applies especially to God. In Hick's project the reals that are towards us in appearances are utterly different from the Real itself. Surely this presupposition needs to be defended, or at least shown to be a little less arbitrary. Hick would have us believe that what mediates the presence of the Real, the world or perception or something else, can reveal nothing of God, and cannot be God. But we need reasons better than the ones adduced, I think, to abandon the belief that God, if he exists, could create human being with capacity to experience him, and that he might desire to enter into real redemptive relationship with his creatures. Hick might object that suspiciously orthodox convictions are here flexing their muscles, blinding one to the fact that God cannot be experienced as he is.
A thought experiment should show that Hick’s objection is not without its own heterodox commitments. Soberly and with a little trepidation, let us make an effort to think and talk about God. We will probably agree that it is arrogance akin to insanity (assuming God is not a human invention) to insist that human creatures know as much about God as God knows about himself, or that God’s power is only a fraction beyond man’s. I suppose most of us see it this way because it is intuitively obvious that God is God, not man, and must accordingly be greater—perhaps infinitely greater—than any human creature’s capacities for thinking, experiencing, or imagining. But notice that, in strikingly short shrift, we have begun to say (and believe) rather substantial things about the reality of God.

‘Infinite greatness’—let us focus for a moment on that redolent concept. This, of course, is where Anselm began his meditations, and many philosophers and theologians have followed him in thinking of God in terms of maximal greatness or perfection.\(^1\) I am not aware of anyone, professional or pedestrian, who believes that Anselm succeeded in proving God—and I am not convinced that such was his intention anyway. But many have believed that if one moves not from proof to God but from the conviction of God as infinitely great to entailment, almost the whole leaven of traditional attributes will follow. The point is not that human ingenuity can demonstrate or invent God—that would be hubris; it is rather that if one begins with the idea of an infinitely great God, and then proceeds to think analytically about such a being, an inspiring range of non-trivial and reasonable conclusions suggest themselves.

Perhaps God is maximally great, a being than which nothing greater can be conceived: and if maximally great, so the argument goes, God exists necessarily, that is, could not have failed to exist, could never cease to exist and in fact exists in every possible world;\(^1\) if maximally great, then God obviously co-exemplifies such great-making properties as power, wisdom, goodness, and truth; if maximally great, that is, then God is not frail, inept, indifferent, mischievous; in short, if maximally great, then God would not lack any genuine virtue or perfection, but lacks only impotence, ignorance, wickedness, sin and the like. More than a few thinkers have considered these suspicions, and others besides, analytic (or analytically obvious) to the notion of infinite greatness.\(^2\)

So what if the majority of those, including Hick, who participate in discussions about experience of God accept that God, whatever else s/he may be, is infinitely great? At the very least, this suggests that Hick’s hermeneutic of discontinuity is intuitively inadequate, inconsistent, or at any rate not intuitively compelling; and it might further show that his agnosticism is itself sustained by \textit{a priori} commitments which dismissively reject that God could (or would) choose to be truly experienced in and through human perceptions and conceptions, in and through human form. When considered in terms of what most theists – and for now I include Hick – think fundamentally true of God, Hick’s deep and abiding agnosticism does not carry conviction. If one begins with an infinite and infinitely great being, it is hard to see how incorrigible agnosticism recommends itself. Presumably such a God, if s/he is God, is, as far as we can tell, able and willing to reveal and love and save and bless and be enjoyed. Presumably it would be a divine imperfection if God could not at least lisp to reveal (or share) himself. Hick’s agnosticism is also, it


seems, inconsonant with the aims of his own project: if nothing can be experienced or known of the Real as it is, then it cannot be known that the Real cannot be known and experienced. But that is self-stultifying. Of course this claim is central to Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis; and I think this leaves Hick’s pluralism forlorn, less than compelling. (I shall have more to say about both Hick’s pluralism and his agnosticism in Chapter 6.)

Perhaps Hick would say that people who are not agnostic about God, who find themselves believing that an infinitely great God could, and just might, condescend to reveal himself, are sorely mistaken – and maybe Hick is right, maybe they are mistaken. But if beginning with an infinitely great God is not adjudged impermissible, then the believing soul could think about God and the world and religions in a way that jibes with that frame of reference. Besides, the policy Hick prefers for God-think-and-talk involves a faith commitment which is not resourceful enough to rival or replace other faith commitments. If he would say of the Real at least that it is infinitely great, and in the end I think he would be tempted to say something very like this, then it is hard to see how his agnosticism amounts to a coherent posture or compelling conclusion vis-à-vis his initial conviction; and if he is prepared to say at least this – that the God, the Real, is infinitely great – he would undermine his project in yet another disconcerting way: by saying something determinate concerning the Real about whom he has assured us nothing determinate can be said.

Of course, there is no honest way of avoiding the clash of faith commitments. But perhaps one can at least discover that some faith commitments are better, or more reasonable, or more coherent, or more attuned to life and life’s concerns, than others, and in this way do a provisional work of adjudication. Admittedly: ‘Only for someone who has no scheme or framework at all – who is located wholly outside the realm of linguistic and epistemic and cognitive commitments – is there an open and
uncommitted choice among alternatives. But of course none of us do or can find ourselves in *that* position.¹ Nevertheless, one can ask whether a faith commitment that begins with a being of infinite greatness is better, more beautiful, more credible (whence one stands), more consistent with what one values in life and wants out of life, than one that does not. That is a perplexing and perplexingly difficult question, a question whose answer depends a great deal on a great many other personal concerns, known and unknown. Is it coherent to think that an infinitely great God could (and would) allow himself to be experienced truly – is it coherent to think that such a God is without exception and in every respect beyond experience? Can one reasonably believe that an infinitely great God is (because accordingly almighty, all-seeing, loving) able and willing to give himself in love and grace, on the one hand, and able and willing to create as well as recreate human beings, his creatures whom he lovingly created, to rest in and reciprocate that self-giving, on the other? Perhaps then it is not incoherent to suppose further that that God has come into the range of human experience.

*A different sort of appeal to infinite greatness*

It is a real and pervasive temptation to think that God cannot be experienced because human beings are all too human, intrinsically and permanently prone to (mis)interpret; it is also, ironically, a very human temptation to think that perceived human limits, including interpretive ones, can be stretched, broken open, transcended. Human beings, it is true, are limited, they do interpret, they do see with, or fail to see clearly because of, the concepts, desires, suspicions encouraged by their contexts. But it would be an egregious *non sequitur* to suppose that therefore

¹Rescher, *Rationality*, 140.
God cannot be experienced, or that God cannot share in the human situation and so share himself. Consider the following loose bit of argumentation.

(1) If human beings are interpretive creatures;
(2) If human beings are interpretive creatures by design;
(3) And if God is infinitely great;
(4) Then God may be experienced by interpretive creatures.

There are three stated premises here, and a couple of unstated premises besides. (1) asserts – or concedes – that human beings are creatures who do and must, in the nature of the case, interpret; this is not a particularly controversial premise. (2) is more intrepid and more controversial, asserting as it does that human beings were designed to interpret, to be, in at least one respect, precisely what they are. It should not require more than a moment’s reflection to see that the assertion ‘human beings were designed to interpret’ itself contains or cloaks several other premises: (a) it presupposes, for one thing, that human beings were made purposively, since design itself presupposes intentionality; (b) in that way it implies that a personal agent of some description was responsible for the purposive design, since intentionality is, presumably, a function of intelligence and agency; (c) that presupposes that a personal agent, fitting the relevant description, exists or, at any rate, once existed; (d) further it presupposes that the personal agent in question was powerful enough to create human beings and intelligent enough to create them with such an elaborate and efficacious capacity; (e) it presupposes that at least one human being could find out that s/he was designed by some such competent being rather than simply fitted thus by circumstance or ‘the original hand of nature’ (as Hume put it); and so on. Interestingly, the last of these presuppositions makes the argument very nearly viciously circular, for it assumes the conclusion which it seeks to demonstrate.

Clearly it is impossible to prove by impeccable logical demonstration that human beings are ‘designed to be interpretive creatures’ without beginning with
(properly) basic premises, ones that are themselves unproved and, perhaps, unprovable – but not for that reason unreasonable or rationally suspect. Perhaps then if one is going to gain any leverage from premise (2), one must find at least one premise that is reasonably agreeable, even if not demonstrable. The only premise that has the potential to deliver is, as far as I can see, (3), or something like it – an infinitely great being; and I can think of no argument that tells decisively against regarding the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as infinitely great.¹

Because an infinitely great God cannot be proved, or proved beyond all possible reasonable doubt, conjecture or dispute, presumption (or presupposition) is inevitable. But this is not necessarily problematic: it may be, for example, that an adequate proof would need only show that the existence of an infinitely great being is at least as plausible as its denial, given what we presume to know.² Hick, as we have seen, believes that God is radically unknowable and thus irremediably beyond the pale of human experience. In Chapter 6, I shall argue that there is something entirely appropriate about Hick’s commitment to the radical unknowability of God, and that in fact such a commitment is compatible with Christian commitment. Recurrently, Hick assumes, wrongly I shall argue, that from unknowability it follows that God could not reveal himself as he is and therefore has not revealed himself in more than a loose and metaphorical fashion in Jesus Christ. But that sort of imbalance, or resistance to counterpoints of balance, renders Hick’s position deficient and ultimately lacking in persuasiveness. Even so, many traditional theists, Christians, Muslims and Jews alike, believe that God is knowable, at least in some sense, and has chosen, at different times and in various ways, to come into the range of human experience. Christians, of course, make the astonishing and audacious

¹ See Morris, ‘The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm’, in Anselmian Explorations, 10-25. ‘A priori and a posteriori elements can thus both enter into an articulation of the nature of deity. And neither should be ignored’ (25).
claim that God is both radically unknowable and radically knowable, not exhaustively but at once truly, salvifically, and mysteriously in Jesus Christ – that is, really known in his unknowability and also unknown in his knowability. If I may express it differently (and I shall return to this point): An equilibrium between apophaticism and cataphaticism is achieved in Incarnation. Karl Barth is typically eloquent on just this point: ‘It is thus of the very nature of this God to be inscrutable to man. In saying this we naturally mean that in His revealed nature He is thus inscrutable. It is the Deus revelatus who is the Deus absconditus, the God to whom there is no path nor bridge, concerning whom we could not say nor have to say a single word if He did not of His own initiative meet us as the Deus revelatus.’

I am a theist, a Christian theist, to be more specific; and I accordingly believe that God is infinitely great, that great-making properties are true of him, and that he not only can break into human experience but has, in the fullness of time, in the perfect kairotic moment, come among human beings as a human being for the sake of revealing himself and redeeming sinners. No doubt this is a conviction born and nurtured in faith; and it is certainly fallible, moreover. I am aware that I could be very nearly right, dreadfully mistaken, or somewhere in between. But it does not follow from the fallibility of the conviction that the conviction is childish, or childishly naive, or irrational, or humbug. There is a certain banality in saying that the claims of traditional theism, and in particular the claims of Christian theism, could not possibly qualify as knowledge, indeed enjoy a less than favourable epistemic status. If the epistemic standard is the absolute, unassailable, indubitable, then naturally Christian claims are illegitimate. But where the unassailable is the unqualified standard or criterion, no knowledge claim has a hope of measuring up. (Perhaps it is more sensible – and more constructive – to talk not about faith that is

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1 Church Dogmatics, 1/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 321.
irreproachable but about faith that is well-formed, coherent, reliable, liveable, and so on.)

An adequate discussion of faith thus conceived would require an excursus, an excursus that would no doubt be fruitful, but that would distract us from the central concerns of this thesis. So perhaps the following, and a smattering of incidental comments here and there, shall suffice. True, no particular religious faith is an obligation, though some sort of faith regarding religious concerns is unavoidable. But if a person is going to believe in a supreme being, then I have no reluctance recommending the God of whom great-making properties, like omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence, are true. Such faith can be lived with integrity, and such faith – or rather faith embodied in devotion to this God – helps makes sense of otherwise inexplicable features of human existence and experience; it is a faith which is at least as plausible as its denial; and it is a faith which may be generated by a reliable \textit{epistemic process}, a central component of which is a reliable \textit{epistemic context} (Chapter 8). These things, together, make it sufficiently reasonable to think of some faith-claims in terms of qualified, good, reliable knowledge. Now perhaps there are people who fear I have permitted too much. Perhaps I have; but perhaps, just perhaps, this sort of stance is necessary if one hopes faithfully to envisage some of the strangely wonderful possibilities that accord well with the conviction of an infinitely great God, especially as this is considered in the broader context of Incarnation (Chapter 6). This is a way of avoiding closing off possibilities for God and man arbitrarily; when one does so, one becomes guilty of either deflating his conception of God or inflating his self-conception. Peter van Inwagen’s comments on a similar matter, situated in a discussion of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, are worth considering: ‘But I am sure of one thing. Anyone who believes in God, in a being of literally infinite knowledge and power and wisdom, and who believes that human beings require salvation, and who thinks he can see that God would not have
used such methods [as the Christian Church] to procure our salvation, has a very high opinion of his own powers of a priori reason.¹

**One more lacuna**

Before I engage more frankly in the exercise of envisaging possibilities of divine/human interaction (with reference to Incarnation), and before I examine the implications of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis with a little greater care, I need to mention one more lacuna in the way Alston approaches the question of God as presentation. We saw in Chapter 4 that Alston counteracts all attempts to collapse or blur experience and conceptualisation, and this by forwarding a breathtakingly simple account of presentations: ‘This fact of X’s appearing to S as φ is, in principle, independent of any conceptualization or judgment, independent of S’s taking X to be φ or believing or judging X to be φ, or even thinking of X as φ.’² It is hard to suppress the suspicion that Alston’s reluctance to accommodate conceptualisation and interpretation is a disclosure of his philosophical prejudices; the two are not the same, of course, but the hard distinction is, and should be, a vanishing one. Dewey may be right: ‘What is averred to be implicit reliance upon what is given in common experience is likely to be merely an appeal to prejudice to gain support for some fanaticism or defence for some relic of conservative tradition which is beginning to be questioned.’³

A little trepidation in this area is appropriate. It is true, if experience and interpretation are not at all distinguishable, then reality, the world, God, may slip from recoverable grasp; certainly this is a danger against which to guard. But the fact that the phenomena are *inseparable* in no way implies that they are

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indistinguishable: in fact, to say that experience and interpretation are inseparable is already to have meaningfully distinguished them. Heretofore, I have been at pains to show that, sometimes for better sometimes for worse, experience and interpretation are fatefully intertwined; but I have also tried to show that they can be distinguished. I do not want to lose reality to oblivion any more than Alston does. And this, to be sure, is possible only if one avoids being charmed by some sly notion of conception that would deny a genuine moment of intrusion in experience, a moment in which something real and other presses in upon and gives itself to an experiencing subject. But one can protect this moment of intrusion, and so affirm reality and truth, without denying that all experiences, from start to finish, are subject to interpretation. (The Incarnation, God’s sharing in the circumstances and conditions of humanity and thereby truly sharing himself with humanity and the world, is the moment of intrusion I consider in Chapter 6. But we shall see there that God’s taking up residence within the finitude of the world in the body is never innocent of interpretation, but rather creates reality as well as the categories with which to interpret it.)

Alston believes that God, much like a tree or tornado or hummingbird, can be or become an object of experience, something which gives itself or is given to an experiencing subject to be experienced and known. God, however, almost everyone will agree, is not a tree or tornado or hummingbird, not another object or item in the world to be discovered or experienced or catalogued. Whatever else may be said of him, he cannot be confined to or circumscribed by time and space, cannot be compacted into an ordinary syllogism, and so presumably cannot be perceived in the ordinary way in which such things as trees and hummingbirds are perceived – seen with the eyes, touched with the hands, heard with the ears. Thus common sense says that experience of God would have to be non-sensory or extra-sensory – or if sensory, quite unconventionally so. So claims Alston:
It seems clear that a non-sensory appearance of a purely spiritual deity has a greater chance of presenting Him as He is than any sensory presentation. If God appears to one, non-sensorily, as loving, powerful, or good, the appearance, so far as it goes, could correspond fairly closely with the way God is Himself. While if we experience God as looking or sounding a certain way, that can’t be the way He is, not even approximately.1

God is spirit, incorporeal, non-physical, almost everyone will agree; but the claim that God may be presented and perceived as a matter of course is a matter of perennial quarrel.

For Kant, of course, that for which there is no corresponding sensible intuition is, by definition, beyond (sensible) experience; and as God is not of or in the world, and so without sensible intuition, God cannot be experienced. For Alston, who incidentally agrees that there is no sensible intuition of God in the world, God may be experienced precisely because there is in human beings, by God’s design, the capacity (Plantinga: a design plan) to enjoy something like non-sensory perceptions. God, that is, may be experienced by human beings because God has made them with the ability and aptitude to experience God. Now it appears that we have come upon an gaping chasm between Kant and Alston. Ironically, the similarity earlier discerned in their respective transcendental procedures reveals this fundamental and enduring dissimilarity. While Kant does not allow himself to move beyond the sensible, as that would require him to move beyond the universal and so beyond the strictly knowable, Alston believes that it is just such a move that is required in order to account for much ‘experiential’ data and religious phenomena. Interestingly, however, Alston, whose project is Christian,2 makes less than one might expect of the Christ-event for understanding ‘Christian’ experience of God; he simply neglects

1 Alston, Perceiving God, 20.
2 Alston, Perceiving God, 2.
to spell out how the Incarnation (Kierkegaard: ‘the God in time’)$^1$ is pivotal for explicating how as well as what God may be in relation to human beings. He says this much:

To be sure, this issue is complicated in Christianity by the fact that according to Christian doctrine Jesus of Nazareth is both man and God; so that to see him, even in human form, is to see God. This means that the doctrine that God is a purely spiritual being is qualified in Christianity. Nevertheless, even here the fact remains that God in His essential nature is purely spiritual. In the case of Christ there is a distinction between the divine and the human nature, and only the latter is physical and directly sensorily perceived. Hence it remains true that a non-sensory experience gives us a better chance of grasping what God is like in Himself than does any sensory experience.$^2$

Why being reticent about the Incarnation (as Alston is) and radically revisionist (as Hick is) is problematic, we shall now see, and this with sustained reference to a modified double-aspect rendition of Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction. We shall discover that Kant’s distinction can be interpreted latitudinally, and given a strangely Christian application.

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In the Incarnation, I shall argue, God freely chooses to condition himself by time and space; whether those conditions circumscribe him is another matter. This means that Jesus Christ — as Word become flesh and God become man — may well provide an example, or at least an analogy, par excellence of noumenal become phenomenal, and so may shed light on both the nature of the given and the moment of intrusion which we were examining in Chapter 5. Now it may seem awkward to speak thus of noumenal and phenomenal, as I have agreed that ‘noumenal’ points to that which by definition is not and cannot be conditioned by time and space. So let me offer a clarification and a qualification.

First a clarification. I can think of no reason that would require us at this point to discard, or even radically re-define, Kant’s ‘necessary’ distinction. Indeed, one can work with(in) the distinction without effacing reality or, for that matter, emasculating God: in much the same way that reasoned empirical faith (and that is what it is) permits us to believe that a thing towards us in the empirical world is/exists, loosely speaking, in accordance with that thing as it is/exists in itself,

1 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 198.
Christian faith permits us to say that in the face and flesh of Jesus Christ, the spatio-temporal one, God may be seen (John 14.9); commitment is the relevant certainty. The centrality of the Incarnation in the Christian faith supports the conviction that only in the face of Christ is God seen; and, as Chapter 8 is intended to demonstrate, God is seen in the faces of others precisely because he is truly seen only in the face of Christ, as those Christian faces reflect Christ’s face and turn themselves in love and humility towards one another.\(^1\) If Christ was and is in his very nature God, consubstantial with the Father, very God of very God, begotten not made, and so on, the faith which hinges on the conviction that noumenal realities, at least in this one case, break in upon, are condensed in, and therefore coincide with phenomenal realities, is also in some sense fact. It is at the heart of the Christian faith that God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself. Thus the Incarnation constitutes faith (faith should have a factual or decisive historical point of departure). But inasmuch as the Incarnation is impossible to appreciate, especially in its eschatological fullness, unless and until it is seen with the contemporaneity of faith, it also presupposes faith.\(^2\) This is a puzzle.

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\(^1\) See David Ford’s discussion of ‘communities of the face’ (Self and Salvation [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 23-24, 130-131).

\(^2\) Kierkegaard’s disdain for proofs and other appeals to ‘the eighteen hundred years’ of Christianity as evidence for Christianity’s veracity is legendary. His understanding of faith does not allow proofs to substantiate absolute paradox, the object of faith, Jesus Christ, for while the idea of philosophy is mediation, the supreme and superior idea of Christianity is the paradox. He asks, with rhetorical flourish: ‘Can one prove from history that Christ was God? Let me first put another question: Is it possible to conceive of a more foolish contradiction than that of wanting to PROVE (no matter for the present purpose whether it be from history or from anything else in the wide world one wants to prove it) that a definite individual man is God?... [I]t is sure enough that His name is proclaimed in all the world – whether it is believed on I will not decide. It is sure enough that Christianity has changed the face of the world.... But what does this prove? At most it might prove that Jesus Christ was a great man, perhaps the greatest of all; but that He was...God – nay, stop there. The conclusion shall by God’s help never be drawn... If, in order to lead up to this conclusion, one begins with the assumption that Jesus Christ was a man, and then considers the history of the 1,800 years (the consequences of His life), one may conclude, with an ascending superlative scale: great, greater, greatest, exceedingly and astonishingly the greatest man that ever lived. If on the contrary one begins with the assumption (the assumption of faith) that He was God, one has thereby canceled, annulled, the 1,800 years as having nothing to do with the case, proving nothing pro nor contra, inasmuch as the certitude of faith is something infinitely higher. And it is in one or the other of these ways one must begin. If one begins in the latter way, everything is as it should be’ (Søren Kierkegaard, Training in Christianity [Princeton: Princeton University Press 1941], 26-27; see also The Book on Adler [New York: Alfred...
This anticipates a qualification. When we apply or appropriate Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction to the Incarnation, or speak of the Christ-event with reference to that distinction, we are probably in the area of analogy rather than exemplification. After all, Jesus is neither a Kantian nor a Kantian accretion. To use reduplicatives, God as noumenal is not just another level of reflection, another way of thinking about mundanity, and God as phenomenal is not merely an unstable appearance – that would be intolerably docetic. Accordingly Kant’s terms must undergo purification and transformation. The Kant connection, as I have developed it, can be viewed as an interesting way of affirming the astonishing Christian claim concerning Incarnation in the context of the realist/anti-realist debate, a debate, it is sometimes argued, over which the spectre of Kant looms: God is towards us in Jesus Christ what he is in himself. On the modified double-aspect reading of Kant I have suggested, noumenal conditions phenomenal, while at the same time being conditioned to/by the subject’s categories. Perhaps, analogously, it could be argued that God both conditions his relation to the world and constitutes his own reality in

A. Knopf, 1994], 160-169). I begin in the assumption of faith; and if one must begin somewhere (if indeed all beginnings presuppose some commitment), it is prima facie as reasonable to begin in this faith as it is to begin in suspicion; and this faith assumption elevates Christ’s actually living, dying and ascending to the right hand of the Father to the status of fact, brings the Christ-event, that is to say, into peculiarly Christian perspective. The Incarnation, according to Kierkegaard, is the Christian fact which protects Christianity’s offence and demands the radically decisive response of faith. Thus Kierkegaard’s fittingly paradoxical claim: ‘The Christian fact has no history, for it is the paradox that God once came into existence in time. This is the offence, but also it is the point of departure’ (The Book on Adler, 163).

H. Maldwyn Hughes’ words are instructive: ‘It may be said that the Incarnation is not so much an historical fact as a theory adduced in explanation of a fact. Jesus Christ is accepted as a fact on historical evidence, but when we say that God was incarnate in Him we have passed (it is contended) out of the sphere of fact into that of theory. But the explanation of a fact, if brought home to the consciousness as true, itself becomes a fact. If, however, it fail to carry conviction to any given person, then for him it is not a fact, but an unverified hypothesis. The historicity of Jesus is accepted as a fact by all except a few extremists; the Incarnation is a fact only to those who believe that Jesus was “God manifest in the flesh,” but to them it is as much a fact as His historical existence. The Person and Work of Jesus Christ are inexplicable to them, except on the theory that God was in Him in a unique sense. They believe that the truth of this theory is evidenced not simply by the writers of the New Testament, but by His redeeming power and by their experience of living fellowship with Him.... Christianity does not rest upon the foundation of doctrine or theory, but upon the fact of a stupendous act of God in the field of human history’ (The Theology of Experience [London: Charles H. Kelly, 1915], 32-33). For a nimble philosophical, loosely Chalcedonian defence of the Incarnation, see Thomas V. Morris, The Logic of God Incarnate (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
human form, but that God’s self-giving, God’s appearing/dwelling among men and women as a man, is also, by God’s unconditional grace, conditioned or fundamentally connected to Christian categories. Of course an important difference is that these Christian categories (and concepts) are not innate but graciously given, not with us from birth but inculcated in and through re-birth, not congenital but communal/canonical: the very categories condensed in the Incarnation and developed, through incarnate practices, within Christian community (Chapter 8). In this way, the Incarnation’s unique and permanent correlation to the central Christian categories of grace, sin, forgiveness, love, faith and so on (the categories with which Christians experience God, the world and others) establishes a unique and concrete correlation between God’s own reality and the reality of the world. A concrete – and irreducible – relation between God’s faithfulness and man’s faith, God’s self-revelation and man’s response, the reality of God and the reality of man, is established in the Incarnation.¹

God cannot be conceptualised as a matter of course. God is God, not man, and man is man, finite and fallen, not God; God is, noumenally speaking, essentially beyond the reach of human reason and experience. Were it not for God’s loving condescension in Christ, his free willingness to descend into the abysmal chasm that separates man from God and God from man and, through obedience in life unto death, to span the chasm, we could say not only nothing true of God but nothing at all. One might follow Jüngel in radically distinguishing God from man and man from God, neither reducing man to a function of the divine nor reducing God to a function of the human. ‘In that God interprets himself in his word there is nevertheless an enduring distinction between God and man. God as God differentiates himself from man as man precisely where he reveals himself to man.

¹ By ‘Incarnation’ I mean the entire context in which Jesus lived, loved, died and rose from the dead, the whole span of time from birth to death-resurrection-ascension. C. Stephen Evans, similarly, appeals to the ‘incarnational narrative’ (see The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], 2).
Faith as the knowledge of God is the acknowledgement of this distinction between God and man which takes place when God comes to be expressed in human speech.\(^1\) But whether one follows Jüngel, or someone else, it is important to protect the integrity and reality of both God and man, an integrity and reality that are what they are, in both cases, in virtue of God’s decision to be for the world in Jesus Christ. It will follow that God must give himself as well as the conditions/categories for making conceptual and existential contact with him (this obviously needs to be qualified), else he remains unknown, hidden. In principle, God’s radical freedom is not incriminated, nor is it nullified, in his freely choosing to condition himself and thus be conditioned. Indeed, the very beauty and mystery of the Christian faith is that God, who is essentially free, freely chose to create equality with man and to overcome estrangement between God and man by becoming the particular man Jesus of Nazareth while remaining God. Murray Rae makes the point: ‘[T]he incarnation is itself a confession that existence and the concept of God are brought together in a particular human being.’\(^2\) Paradoxically, then, the Incarnation protects God’s mystery and mysteriously transmogrifies man’s reality.

We shall get to the undergrowth of this chapter momentarily. But let me pause just now to encapsulate the argument of the thesis to this point, and spell out, in brief, how the thrust of this chapter will advance that larger argument. With different degrees of sophistication and success, and in dialogue with quite different thinkers, I have argued that all access to reality, whether God or world, is mediated, and that both innate and learned concepts, and with them biases, beliefs and belief-dispositions, play a crucial and unavoidable role in mediating reality.\(^3\) These are

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3. I am reminded of a remark of Renford Bambrough’s (inspired by one of Wittgenstein’s enigmatic remarks): ‘Even when the perception and its mode of operation are unconscious, it still involves an unnecessary shuffle to represent it as operating without its medium and its material’ (‘Intuition and the
compelling suspicions, but they should not alarm us unduly – and they certainly should not incline us to suppose that Christian faith is correspondingly spoiled, sullied, or otherwise shipwrecked. From a Christian point of view, the situation, as I have depicted it, is just what one might expect. I am happy to concede, however, that the epistemic situation is less than ideally favourable, perhaps the sort of situation one might be naturally inclined to grieve or disown. Still, it is wholly compatible with Christian faith and the logic of the Gospel. For viewed Christianly, God is beyond direct approach and appeal, above rebuff and anthropomorphism, unimaginable and unimaginably great, not only different but, on account of man’s tragic descent into sin, also distant, constraining everything but constrained by nothing (external). The audacious logic of the Incarnation suggests, however, that this God chose to become one of his creation and one with his creation, a man for men and women, and in that way overcame both difference and distance, finitude and sin – chose, that is, to mediate himself to his creation by sharing in the condition and circumstances of humanity. God took up flesh, gave himself in human form in the person of Jesus Christ, and lisped in a language we could understand, and in this way accommodated himself to our weakness and became the one mediator between God and man; God himself confronts us in word and sacrament, language and body, parable and presence.¹ God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, giving not only himself, his presence, but also the very idiom and categories with which to speak of him and relate to him.

¹ The logic of this point – as well as the rhetoric – is reminiscent of Calvin’s ingenious doctrine of accommodation. (See Institutes, 1.13.1; for an interpretation of Calvin on this and related points, see Ronald S. Wallace, Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament [Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995], esp. 1-81).
Thinking incarnationally

If we wish to talk confidently, reasonably and non-speculatively about God as God, necessarily beyond space and time, eternal, immortal, invisible (1 Tim 1.17), something like an orthodox conception of Incarnation becomes a necessary condition – or so I shall argue in this chapter. It should be uncontroversial that God, if he is God, would necessarily remain thickly veiled if he did not in some sense condescend to reveal himself. But dare one believe that he did precisely this by choosing to take up flesh in Jesus Christ? Dare one take seriously that God’s conditioned disclosure of himself in Jesus Christ must normatively condition one’s thought and talk (one’s experience) of God? Let me express this point clumsily. If all thinking and speaking about the God beyond time and space must in the nature of the case be thinking and speaking about God within time and space – that is, if all thinking and speaking of God (other than God’s own thinking and speaking) is inveterately human thinking and speaking, and if only or fully in the Incarnation do human beings have a glimpse of God as he really is – then it will follow that all thinking and speaking of God must be conditioned by, though perhaps not limited to, Incarnation, not as myth or metaphor but as a fact decisive and epochal in nature. Jesus Christ is not only the way and the life of God but also the truth, the one in whom reunion with God is achieved, the enfleshed truth without which there would be nothing to see or say of God.

I shall retain Kant’s transcendental distinction. But in that case what kinds of theology are possible? My principal objective in this chapter is to explore the special relevance of Incarnation for theological enterprises, especially those with irrepressible realist concerns, conscious of working both within broadly Kantian confines and with regard to the problems of language and mediation I have discussed. In an attempt to show the deficiency of non-incarnational Kantian

theologies, I shall briefly examine John Hick’s earnest but tension-ridden efforts to think/speak of God;¹ as shall soon become clear, I judge those efforts odd and inconsistent. Perhaps some of my readers, both uneasy with Hick’s prevailing agnosticism and unsatisfied with the vision he casts and urges us to cultivate, shall find the incarnational alternative I proffer a promising way forward.

(Mis)applying the noumenal/phenomenal distinction

We have seen that Hick claims to possess divine reality in shards or fragments, that is, in appearances (with the help of a ‘two-object’ view of Kant’s transcendental distinction). But if Kant’s distinction is properly applied, if that which is not conditioned by time and space does necessarily fall beyond the parameters of experience, as Kant understood immediate experience, then, I shall argue, Hick cannot have even an appearance of divine reality (and hence a well formed and founded faith) — unless, that is, he accepts something like an orthodox notion of Incarnation. This he is resolutely not prepared to do, for reasons that are not at all mysterious. For one thing, the Incarnation traditionally understood contradicts his pluralistic hypothesis, but the detail of that discussion is for another day.

Hick is a revisionist, and this is evident not just in his forays into Christology but also in his development of Kant: God as an object of appearance can be experienced in ordinary, first-hand empirical experience, and this, we shall see, effectively amounts to an equation of immediate experience and religious experience. Hick accepts Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction, but equivocates in his

¹ We all now know that Hick regards the incarnation, traditionally interpreted, as a ‘mystery’ — that is, a ‘mythological idea’ — that (because contradictory, ‘without content’) is not literally true. ‘Thus the truth of a myth is a kind of practical truth consisting in the appropriateness of the attitude to its object’ (‘Jesus and the World Religions’, in The Myth of God Incarnate, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 178. In this regard see Hick, ‘An Inspiration Christology for a Religiously Plural World’, in Encountering Jesus: A Debate on Christology, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 5-22.
On those occasions when Hick's relies on the standard 'two-object' interpretation, he is able to avoid finally confusing immediate experience and experience of God, but only at the expense of banishing God from the realm of meaningful human experience. To recapitulate, in the briefest terms, the 'two-object' interpretation takes noumenal/phenomenal to refer to distinct domains of distinct objects. Thus, on this construal, when Hick speaks of phenomenal Reals, he implies that they have a sort of independent existence, less as *shadows* or semblances of the Real and more as *substances* with their own reality, distinct from the noumenal Real. Hence it is not, and undoubtedly cannot be, the noumenal Real that is experienced since God, as noumenal reality, is an object utterly beyond the precinct of the empirical objects or realities which are said in some sense to reveal him.\(^2\)

Conflating these two theses one can say that the Real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, according to Kant, we experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorial scheme and thus coming to consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience. All that we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of this information is that it is the reality whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience.\(^3\)

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1 Evidently, Hick's first significant religious use of the noumenal/phenomenal analogy is in *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 105. Accordingly: '[T]he divine reality, the Eternal One, is infinite and is in its fullness beyond the scope of human thought and language and experience; and yet...it impinges upon mankind and is encountered and conceptualized and expressed and responded to in the limited ways which are possible to our finite human nature' (42). But this is misleading.

2 Mavrodes argues that, in the end, the realness of the phenomenal reals is really quite dubious on Hick's view: 'Despite his professed Kantianism, Hick may really think of the gods of all the religions as much more like fictional characters, illusions, etc., than like Kantian phenomena. And what he is poly about is this whole group of shadowy insubstantial' ('A Response to John Hick', *Faith and Philosophy* 14 [1997], 290).

Here and elsewhere, Hick undermines his project by saying what its guarded presuppositions do not permit him to say: something determinate about the Real about which he has assured us nothing determinate can be said or known. And I think he would have to give us some strong reasons to believe that one can legitimately say that the Real produces the world of phenomenal experience but not that the product tells us anything positive about the Producer: Why is it reasonable to believe the former and compulsory to reject the latter? I have argued, recall, that on a double-aspect interpretation one may say something like the latter precisely because the former can be said. The contention can be invigorated: there is a sense in which saying that God produces the world of phenomenal experience encourages one to believe that the product reveals something non-trivial about the Producer; but I do not want to press the point too far.

Hick also occasionally, though less commonly, relies on a kind of 'double-aspect' rendition of the Kantian distinction, according to which noumenal/phenomenal refer not to separate spheres of reality but to separate epistemological scenarios, that is, considerations of the same reality under different conditions. Thus when one experiences the Real phenomenally, one (so to speak) experiences the noumenal Real. Hick claims:

And so Kant distinguished between noumenon and phenomenon, or between a Ding an sich and that thing as it appears to human consciousness...the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness. The world as it appears is thus entirely real.... Analogously, I want to say that the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine personae and metaphysical impersonae, as I shall call them, are not

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1 Philip Quinn has also explored Hick’s (inconsistent) application of the noumenal/phenomenal distinction ('Towards Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious Diversity', International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 38 [1995], 145-164).
illsory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real.¹

But Hick’s understanding of this double-aspect theory rests upon a questionable assumption, namely, that the noumenal/phenomenal distinction may be applied to God empirically — if you will, that God is in, or has a counter-part in, the empirical world. This generates an awkward identification of immediate experience and religious experience.²

The relation between these two very different ways of conceiving and experiencing the Real, as personal and as non-personal, is perhaps a complementarity analogous to that between the two ways of conceiving and experiencing light, namely as waves and as particles. The reality itself is such that it is able to be validly conceived and observed in both of these ways. Analogously the divine reality is not directly known an sich. But when human beings relate themselves to it in the mode of I-Thou encounter they experience it as personal. Indeed in the context of that relationship it is personal, not it but He or She. When human beings relate themselves to the Real in the mode of non-personal awareness they experience it as non-personal, and in the context of this relationship it is non-personal.³

Like yeast, a little confusion works through the whole loaf. Does Hick’s quasi-Kantian take on theoretical experience suggest a loosely pantheistic or panentheistic conception of God? Perhaps, but only when the noumenal/phenomenal distinction is being understood in double-aspect terms; when the distinction is interpreted in ‘two-object’ terms, however, the up-shot is not pantheism but deism or polytheism or something else. I argued earlier that when one talks noumenal/phenomenal one is talking not about different entities but about different conceptions or considerations of the same entity. Thus on Hick’s double-aspect rendition, presumably only if something of or in God is in the world (or in one’s concepts and conceptions) would

² Several conversations with Chris Firestone, former colleague and Kant scholar, helped to clarify this point.
³ Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 245.
one be permitted to call an experience of world (or one’s conceptions) an appearance of God; God, that is to say, may be discerned in the empirical realm only if something or some things in our immediate sensory experience correspond to God as noumenal. Put simply, there must be a counter-part of God in the empirical world in order to justify one’s talk about God as that to which things in the phenomenal world correspond – or point. However, if the distinction concerns divergent considerations rather than divergent entities, as I have claimed, then we might say that when one experiences an appearance one is experiencing a thing in accordance with its nature, that is, experiencing a thing truly but not exhaustively. On this interpretation it would seem inappropriate to apply the distinction to God; for if the distinction is for objects perceived (or perceptible) in space and time, objects of sensible intuition, then God, in being beyond space and time, is in effect beyond this distinction. I shall address the problem of God on the double-aspect model later.

The world mediates the appearance, or rather appearances, of the Real, Hick wants to say. But the claim that experiences of appearances are experiences, or virtual experiences, of God works only if the world is, in some sense, an extension or concomitant of the being of God. If it is the world that mediates the presence of God’s appearance, but the world is neither of nor part of nor in its entirety God, then what one has in such an experience is not an experience of God but an experience of the world. Now Hick may wish to subvert or circumvent this logic – by maintaining, for example, that God is nevertheless in some sense empirical, experienced by human beings in and by the world; but then it would be curious to see how he evaded a version of pantheism or panentheism.

The blossom of pantheism has long since shrivelled. If it is true, world and God are indistinguishable and interchangeable, and one could just as easily and just as reasonably think of one’s experiences (of ‘God’) as merely experiences of the world. It does not seem to matter much which stance one takes, which way one
decides, theism or animism, nor is it close to clear why one would continue to talk about something so peculiar as experience of God. The real trouble with pantheism, from the point of view of Christian experience of God, is that it has no view of sin, that which accounts for the infinite qualitative difference/distance between God and man, a difference neither reason nor virtue can dissolve, and hence no profound need for experience of God. If one embraces pantheism – it remains an option – projects like Hick’s and Alston’s and mine, in short, projects concerned with experience of God, projects concerned with redemption, in however an attenuated sense, become redundant, odd, contrived. Clearly, panentheism is more subtle, and accordingly more difficult to dismiss; I do not wish to discuss, much less dismiss, panentheism here.

But suppose one is, for whatever reason, uncomfortable with pantheism or panentheism; suppose, that is to say, that one chooses to go on thinking something determinate about God (say, that he embodies light, love, compassion, not their contraries, that he is personal and personally concerned rather than impersonal and complacent): when alleged experiences and conceptions of this Real come into unmitigated conflict, one has the challenge of disentangling the authentic from the inauthentic, the wholesome from the subversive, the veridical from the fraudulent. For the person who incorrigibly believes that God is something or someone in particular, not all things without distinction, determinate rather than indeterminate, a being about whom not everything that can be said or thought should be said or thought, it seems to me that the more honest and natural inclination, when such disparate and seemingly contradictory experiences are encountered, is to suppose that not all experiences and conceptions share an object or qualify as experiences of God; to paraphrase Nicholas Lash, not every experience of God constitutes a ‘religious’ experience and not every religious experience constitutes an experience of God.¹

¹ Lash, Easter in Ordinary: ‘I propose, in due course, to argue, on the one hand, that it is not the case that all experience of God is necessarily religious in form or content and, on the other hand, that not
And when one factors in sin as a relevant epistemological category, there will be no surprise that not everyone claims to experience God and that, moreover, there is enormous range and discrepancy among those who do make such claims.

**Radical constructivism**

But if one takes the categories to be partial, cultural, rather than universal, then perhaps objections like this are easy to blunt. This is Hick's impulse. People and peoples see the Real not in accordance with what the Real is, but in accordance with what the culturally conditioned categories in question dictate. 'To recognise or identify is to be experiencing-as in terms of a concept; and our concepts are social products having their life within a particular linguistic environment.' Commenting on Kant's empirical realism, Hick says:

> Analogously, I want to say that the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports.... We quickly realise that the same thing appears in either slightly or considerably different ways to different people owing both to their varying spatial locations in relation to it and to differences in their sensory and mental equipment and interpretive habits.

These differences are connected to culturally derived and culturally conditioned beliefs, concepts and interpretive strategies; and these differences, sometimes stark and sometimes subtle, explain why Ultimate Reality is experienced with raging dissidence and dissonance. But what if, as I have argued, an object, owing to its fundamental integrity and objectivity, is both more and less than the categories that everything which it would be appropriate to characterize, on psychological or sociological grounds, as "religious" experience would thereby necessarily constitute experience of God' (7). I have consistently found Lash a source of insight.

1 Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 141.
potentiate experience of it? Does one not have reason to expect that what is experienced may, to some extent, reveal itself and shape both the one who experiences and the beliefs she takes from experience?

This reveals what I take to be a fundamental problem with Hick’s radical constructivism. Hick is not able to make room for the strong and compelling voice of the other in experience; in a sense, the other is experienced (only in appearance of course), but the other cannot be said really or meaningfully to impinge upon the one who experiences. It is the moment of intrusion of which I have already spoken (Chapter 5); and this moment, together with a moment of humble receptivity, will in large measure determine whether reality is seen or missed, found or merely fabricated. Hick’s knower, the subject, because her seeing is (wholly) determined by her culture, effectively only experiences her own categories. If radical constructivism is true, one may have access to one’s categories, but one never quite accesses the Real beyond one’s categories. The following quotation is suggestive:

The ‘presence’ of the Real consists in the availability, from a transcendent source, of information that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience. And, as in the case of our awareness of the physical world, the environing divine reality is brought to consciousness in terms of certain basic concepts or categories.¹

On a two-object reading the transcendent Real is removed and distinct from the phenomenal reals. Thus it would seem that the Real, because it is not the phenomenal reals and the phenomenal reals are all we have, is driven by conceptualisation and interpretation beyond the purview of human experience. On a double-aspect reading the transcendent Real goes incognito as the phenomenal reals; and as the phenomenal reals amount to little more than the world or one’s categories,

¹ Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, 244-245.
the Real at best becomes inextricable from the world or one's conceptions of it. Either way, God slips into obscurity.

Of course, Hick's position could be revised to overcome this telling implication. He could, for example, entertain the possibility that God has created human beings to experience God reliably, and this not in spite of but in light of their faculties, concepts and proclivities. The hazard in denying to human beings the capacity, innate and God-given, to behold God, to receive and repose in the disclosure God gives of himself, to reciprocate his love, is this: when one has oneself, one's concepts, one's beliefs, in the strong sense in which Hick understands this, one evidently never has God in, with and under (and certainly not above and beyond) those concepts and beliefs. There are resources for dealing with this epistemic misfortune. One might propose a hearty theory of preformation. If God has created us to enter into experience and fellowship with God and neighbour, and designed (and accordingly animated) our rational and relational aptitudes to this end, what we are as categorial creatures may facilitate rather than undermine experience of God.

If God exists, then the Christian story according to which human beings are created in the image of God, and so naturally endowed with both faculty and disposition to know God, may well be true. Of course this is a help and a hindrance: for if the Christian story is true, human beings are also corrupt (a corruption that extends to all of those wondrous native endowments), radically compromised as image-bearers, and accordingly now naturally inclined to create God in their own image (Romans 1). So along with preformation (sensus divinitatis), we shall have to reckon, so to speak, with deformation, the noetic effects of sin. Perhaps, then, we can find some commonality with Hick's radical constructivism, a possibility I anticipated in Chapter 5. But there are many differences, most notably that God must reveal himself, consecrate old categories and impart new, disruptive categories:
that is, God must rescue us from our predicament, find his way to us, save us from
sin and reconcile us to himself. Thus another difference: we create/construct in
experience (as Hick says), and not all constructing is inimical (as I have said), but
sometimes men and women construct in sin, create sinfully, by not being creatively
responsive to God in Christ. Not all human categories/beliefs are good, godly, true,
befitting God: God in Christ – or as I am saying, Incarnation – must condition,
chasten, clarify our categories, congenital and cultural, and he does so chiefly in the
community he is (con)forming to the icon of his Son, through Word and Sacrament.
Further, God must give us not only the categories but the creative fidelity to live and
improvise in light of that revelation. So Hick has a weak view of creation
(preformation), fall (deformation), and redemption (transformation). For what were
we created, from whom have we fallen, and to whom/what are we reconciled?
Hick’s answers are inadequate.¹

Redeemed constructivism

It would be indiscreet to deny that one’s faculties, proclivities, cherished beliefs
often obscure experience of God; I have no wish to be indiscreet here. Sin, whatever
precisely it is, has perverted these capacities and proclivities, made them imperfect,
rendered them feeble, preventing human beings not only from seeing God (clearly)
but from seeing God truly. As a relevant epistemological category, sin helps to
explain both why not everyone experiences God and why not everyone who claims
to experience God experiences God as God is; sin, that is, blinds us to who God is
and, at the same time, inclines us to make of God what God is not, empowers the

¹ So see Hick’s ‘The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity’, in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness:
Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, eds John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis
enterprise of self-assertion and self-projection (Mark 4.12). Rowan Williams, interpreting St Augustine’s view of evil as privation, says this:

What Augustine is talking about is the capacity simultaneously to grasp the nature of evil as the perversion of my capacity to see or know and to become open in love and knowledge to the reality of God. To see evil as privation is to see it as something that affects my own perception of what is good for me: if evil is the absence of good, it is precisely that misreading of the world which skews my desires; so that to read the world accurately (in its relation to God the Creator) is also to repent.¹

It would also, however, be hasty to deny that who and what human beings are, as created in God’s image and for his glory, may also illuminate experience of God. According to one version of preformation, in other words, it is possible for human beings to experience, through their fallen human nature, more than their fallen human nature, through their very human categories, more than their very human categories: it is just in the design of man to experience in this mediated (human) way; indeed on such a view, an object, an-other, in experience is permitted to impinge upon one and meaningfully and substantially shape one’s understanding of the other as well as one’s self-understanding. Christianly speaking, however, sin is an impediment, and something presumably will have to be done about it before man’s spiritual capacities are restored. So the concepts of preformation and deformation anticipate another: transformation. Tom Morris’ comments are instructive:

If there is an innate human capacity which, when properly functioning, allows us to recognize God when we see him, then if Jesus is God Incarnate, it is clear that there are widespread and deeply rooted impediments to this capacity’s functioning. It seems likely, in light of what has just been adumbrated, that a reasonable belief that Jesus is God Incarnate will arise and flourish only with the removal of some of these impediments from the life of a person. And this is just the insight we can derive from the original

Nicodemus story when we see that Jesus’ response to Nicodemus’ simple modus tollens argument whose conclusion fell well short of the mark, is not the glaring non sequitur it can initially appear, but instead is a profound indication of the truth, or rather of the only way to come to the truth about who he is.1

Jesus’ remarks to Nicodemus, to which Morris alludes, are immortalised in these strange words: ‘Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew he cannot see the kingdom of God”’ (John 3.3). Christianly understood, this is a work of the Holy Spirit – accomplished in human beings: we are enabled to see by being given a perspective, not which is non-human but which is genuinely human; it is not non- or sub-human faculties and capacities that enable reliable experience and vision of God, but human faculties renewed, capacities restored, again made reliable by the grace of God; that will involve, it seems, clarifying and supplanting old concepts and dispositions as well as supplying new concepts and dispositions: so in the new birth, what is old is transformed and what is lacking is given. And if something beyond one’s established patterns of thinking, speaking and living can break through and, where necessary, break those set and settled patterns, then there is a chance one’s previous concepts, instincts, beliefs, even those passionately and obdurately held, may be challenged or confirmed, perhaps, by the miracle of grace, displaced. Something like this happens, Christians believe, in an experience of conversion. Murray Rae makes the relevant point, but with explicit reference to the paradox of Incarnation, that is, with reference to the ‘life-view’ of the Gospel:

The “paradoxical” co-presence of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ simply cannot be accounted for within the prevailing estimations of what is and what is not possible for God. Instead, the appearance of Jesus among us is only recognized as the divine presence through a

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1 Morris, The Logic of God Incarnate, 203.
cognitive revolution which transforms the way we understand both God and the world.¹

This position's promise is far-reaching: not only does it offer a sensible account of how one can know more than oneself in experience, it also throws light on why human beings do not always automatically report or enjoy *identical* (or compatible) experiences of the same thing. On this view, realism is not compromised by admitting discrepancies; realism and fallibilism are mutually enriching, and the realism that emerges is constructive. But the fact that human beings do not have precisely identical experiences of God does not mean that (because of the discrepancies) those experiences are automatically incompatible. Of course, some experiences, phenomenologically speaking, will *seem* incompatible—and some of those, on closer inspection, will stubbornly remain incompatible. Others that seem initially incompatible may prove to be complementary—if one takes the time to look more closely and carefully. And if reports can be considered generally reliable, credible as long as nothing decisive speaks against their credibility, then the following can be provisionally concluded: not all putative experiences of God have a reality in common; not every putative experience of God is veridical or otherwise probative; and perhaps some differentiation is desirable in order to separate the wheat from the weeds.

**A theological test — Incarnation as critical principle**

Hick has problems on this score as well, some of which are insoluble. He does not seriously entertain the likelihood that some, perhaps many, claimants to experience of the Real are deluded or dishonest (and that is perhaps as it should be); nor does he admit that—although God *may* be experienced from different perspectives by different people—not all names and ascriptions are worthy of God; nor does he allow

that, in addition to a moral test, a responsible adjudication would require something like a theological test, a test in the light not of the elusive morally pristine but of revelation, a standard that confirms and challenges and chastens and overturns what one says about God and one’s experiences of God. The reason, of course, has to do with Hick’s agnosticism, itself unavoidable on his interpretation of Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction. A theological test or criterion is, unfortunately, impossible, even if desirable, since God, as noumenal, ultimately real, or whatever, is divorced from phenomenal realities and remains unknowable. One cannot, as it were, compare one’s picture of God and the religious life with the reality beyond pictures, and so one cannot, Hick thinks, absolutely adjudicate between pictures of God and the religious life. Hence Hick’s prevailing agnosticism. And yet he is not reluctant to deny (traditional) Christianity and so deny to Christianity the relevance (i.e., superiority) it ‘arrogates’ to itself. The theological test, as I conceive it, is not a test of how one lives (of course how one lives will be important), fruit and fruitful living; it is the test of what one thinks of God, and how one thinks of oneself in relation to God. And while some things, I argue, dispositional attitudes as well as

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2 Hick thinks that a religion’s fruitfulness is the real relevant test; and since many religions bear fruit, as much or more fruit than Christianity, it would be arbitrary – and unforgivably absolutist, he thinks – to disparage other religions that are as successful in promoting true salvation, transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. If one examines the lives of the saints of the various religions, one will find one cannot in good conscience praise some and not others; but, Christianly understood, it is not saintliness but deep sinfulness, or awareness of deep sinfulness, that nontrivially distinguishes Christianity from other religions. But I have already suggested that Hick has a deeply problematic (because weak) view of sin. Stephen T. Davis seems to be on to this, when he writes: ‘[W]hat we need is not a guru but a Savior. The classical doctrine of the incarnation, recognizing as it does that Christianity is a religion of grace, provides this. That is to me the deepest reason why it is to be preferred to all versions of minimal Christology’ (‘Jesus Christ: Savior or Guru?’, in *Encountering Jesus*, 58). I am highlighting the epistemic importance of sin, the necessity, Christianly speaking, of developing sin as an epistemologically decisive category. We might say, paraphrasing Hebrews 11: without sin (i.e., without awareness of sin), it is impossible to see God; indeed seeing God is, or is uniquely tied to, seeing oneself, seeing oneself as one is seen by God in grace and judgement. Perhaps, then, to experience God is to see that God is never closer than when he seems the most distant and never more distant than when one fails to acknowledge, at a profound level, the estrangement sin effects. With sin – i.e., with awareness of sin – God is near in the loving embrace of Christ, seen with the eyes of faith. Thus: without sin it is impossible to see God...means without faith it is impossible to see God.
doctrines, simply are not appropriate if God, the unconditioned one, has revealed of himself in Jesus Christ, since Hick highly allegorises God’s revelation in Jesus, he naturally must confine himself to moral tests, tests of fruit, practical efficacy, and such like. Hence Hick’s problematic agnosticism, and hence my willingness to rethink both Kant’s noumenal/phenomenal distinction and the Incarnation in the context of that distinction. What I am driving at is that, at least from a Christian point of view, the conditioned one must condition what one says and thinks and believes and does in the light of one’s experiences of God. In other words – and this returns us to the contention with which the chapter opened – the Incarnation alone permits one both to speak realistically of God and to live, with(out) the impediments of ignorance and sin, in the life of God.

I have been arguing that Hick is and must remain agnostic, given his aversion to Christian particularity and his sharp disjunction between noumenal/phenomenal. Hick is agnostic, of course; that is the way he sustains his pluralism. So all responses to the Real are (equally) valid, none is superior or literally true. But if we cannot talk about truth on analogy how can we discover appropriateness? And, given his Kantianism, he must remain agnostic – in fact, perhaps more agnostic than he wants to be. For Hick actually seems to know a lot about the Real: that it is real in some sense, in fact Ultimately Real and therefore superlatively out of reach, not the sort of Real that would reveal/align itself uniquely with one religion since the Real obviously wants universal salvation and universal salvation is incompatible with particularity, and so on. Since there are seemingly equally earnest and efficacious religions, adjudicating between them rationally is not only impossible but inappropriate, Hick seems to insinuate; that, however, is too agnostic. Besides, he undermines just this agnosticism by developing his hypothesis and recommending it

1 Stephen Davis asks a telling question: ‘[I]n precisely what sense is the statement, “God is loving”, appropriate or illuminating given the fact that we know that it is not true or at least do not know that it is true (if we accept Hick’s pluralism)’ (‘John Hick on Incarnation and Trinity’, in The Trinity, eds Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 272)
as the best (?) way to deal with religious diversity. So, in short, Hick is agnostic and, owing to his Kantianism and his distaste for traditional christology, must remain agnostic – more agnostic than he is, or is inclined to be, in fact. However, despite all the ambiguity in religions and religious experiences, and hence the appropriateness of reserve/provisionality (agnosticism), surely religions can be, to some degree at least, compared, assessed, and tentative conclusions reached. Let me put it succinctly: Hick is agnostic (after all, the Real is noumenal...), not agnostic enough (the Real is noumenal in just the way Hick thinks, yet he seems to know quite a lot about the Real, the Real’s intentions, what is and is not possible/praiseworthy for the Real...),¹ and too agnostic (he seems to think that rational assessment of or adjudication between religions is inherently imperialistic and therefore inappropriate or else so problematic it is pointless...).²

The claim about the epistemic efficacy of the Incarnation is a stout one, to be sure; but it has, at least provisionally, both credibility and practical consequence. The alternatives, I shall continue to suggest, are – to make fluid distinctions – silence, or radical agnosticism, or pessimism (or some similar theological mistake). Consider the following argument.

(1) Human beings cannot speak confidently, non-speculatively and realistically about that which cannot be experienced per se.

¹ Gerard Loughlin makes a similar point. ‘However in order to advance this claim – that the doctrine of the incarnation is manifestly absurd – Hick has to know a lot about God and about what it is to be a human person. But the implicit claim to so much knowledge is highly questionable’ (‘Squares and Circles: John Hick and the Doctrine of the Incarnation’, in Problems in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Harold Hewitt [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991], 197). Kierkegaard’s discussion concerning trying to think the thought that cannot be thought, and so implicating oneself, is relevant here (see Philosophical Fragments, 37-48).

² This ‘too agnostic’ points to his positivistic tendencies: certain comparisons are odious, he says, because no consensus is possible, quantification criteria are elusive, and so on. But does it follow that all religions or religious responses are (equally) valid? Only, of course, if none is (loosely literally) true, which Hick freely admits. But that sort of move seems more than a little arbitrary and imperialistic, not sufficiently agnostic, given Hick’s Kantianism. How then would one assess Hick’s hypothesis: compare it with others? I am asking whether Hick’s own position can sustain and recommend itself, since for example it cannot be verified.
(2) That which is essentially transcendent to time and space cannot be experienced \textit{per se}.

(3) God is essentially transcendent to time and space, as he is not an object, or any collection of objects, or the aggregate of all objects locatable in space and time.

(4) Thus, God cannot be experienced \textit{per se}.

(5) Thus, human beings cannot speak confidently, non speculatively and realistically about God.

The practical significance of this has to do with accounting for religious knowledge—and perhaps with making some passing sense of the religious devotion of believing souls. Presumably if one can have only tenuous knowledge of that which falls beyond the realm of the experienceable, one can have only tenuous knowledge of God. It should be pointed out that the realm of the experienceable, in this immediate context, applies to the realm of space and time; but we have seen that philosophers like Alston wish to broaden the realm of experience, in effect, beyond space and time in order to make room for God.

A moment’s reflection should reveal that the argument, in this clumsy articulation, is anything but insuperable. (1) and (3) are stable premises, I suppose—at least at initial glance. But (2) is clearly problematic: just figure a way to broaden or extend experience beyond the spatio-temporal divide, and the premise is obviously false; but leaving that to one side, the premise is leaky, suspicious. For how are we to take the qualifier \textit{essentially} in ‘essentially transcendent’? It suffers ambiguity; it could mean either

\begin{itemize}
  \item [(e)] ‘wholly and only’ transcendent
  \item [(e’)] ‘truly but not merely’ transcendent.
\end{itemize}
If we take \((e')\) to be the force, the argument miscarries; presumably that which is not merely transcendent is not only transcendent, and that which is not only transcendent is, or could be (in some sense), something other than transcendent, more than or less than transcendent. Thus it seems that (2), together with (1) and (3), implies (4)-(5) only if \((e)\) is taken to be the force. So let us proceed on the reading \((e)\) that improves the argument’s chances.

On this reading, a serious problem is generated for (3): Could premise (3) to be true if \((e)\) is applied to God? Let us adopt an interrogative approach that suggests an answer to this question by attending to a series of more fundamental, interconnected questions. First, is it possible, logically speaking, for something to be truly transcendent while not only or merely transcendent to time and space? The answer, I suppose, will depend in part on what one deems analytic to the notion of transcendence. In principle, at least, perhaps one may provisionally say that the existence of something truly but not merely transcendent need not involve a formal contradiction. Perhaps an analogy of sorts can be found in the claim that human beings are truly corporeal but not merely—i.e., reductively—corporeal; if you will: *finitum capax infiniti*. (The hypostatic union is the truer analogy.) Second, is it possible, logically speaking, that God, if he exists, is the kind of being of whom it could be true that he is truly but not merely transcendent? God cannot be compressed into, or out of, any syllogism, of course. But one may begin with the conviction that an infinitely great God exists, and then ask whether such an infinitely great being, as infinitely great, could be truly but not merely transcendent. One might ask, that is, whether it makes any sense to say that true but not merely transcendence involves a contradiction for an infinitely great being. Of course, one may begin with the conviction that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and then go on to resituate infinite greatness. In Chapter 5, to test a thought experiment with reference to Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, the movement was from
infinite greatness to the flesh of Jesus; here, with reference to Hick’s agnosticism, the movement is from the particular to the universal, the phenomenal to the noumenal, the finitude of Christ to the infinity of God.

I have been trying to offer a few reasons, some compelling and others only suggestive, for my suspicions of the argument (as formulated). But I have other reasons as well for judging the argument finally unsuccessful, reasons I frankly broached in Chapter 5: an infinitely great God, whom I identify as the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, alone is the kind of God who is both able and willing to (re)create human beings for communion with himself and to open himself to be loved, worshiped, and enjoyed; it is Jesus’ life and teaching that embody – and so reveal – this message. ‘Since whatever is actual is also possible, it follows that if we have good reason to believe that the incarnation has occurred, we also have good reason to believe it is possible for God almighty to become incarnate.’

Now it would be silly or short-sighted to suppose that such enormously complex matters could be settled here, and with such breeze and brevity. This has been a very brief excursion only. Perhaps it has suggested possibilities for conceiving transcendence; perhaps in it some subtle ways of thinking about the scope of experience were intimated; or perhaps more confusion was conjured up than dispersed. But I hope that these reflections have at the least convinced some of us that the argument, in its present form and ambiguity, is vulnerable in a number of places.

Certainly, the conclusions, (4)-(5), are natural if all the premises, (1)-(3), are accepted. Thus the present formulation of the argument: it is so structured for the purpose of showing, or attempting to show, that Hick’s two-object interpretation of Kant’s distinction, because it finally requires agnosticism about the Real, fails in any

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1 Evans, The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith, 124. Tertullian, similarly: ‘I answer, that to God nothing is impossible except what is against his will. So then we have to consider whether it was his will to be born: because, if it was, he both could be and was born’ (Treatise on the Incarnation, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans [London: SPCK, 1956], § 3).
For Hick, I think, would accept something like (1)-(3). We have seen that Hick, operating on a two-object model, believes that the noumenal Real, though distinct from the phenomenal Reals, may be said in some sense to produce, or lie back of, the phenomenal world of human experience; I actually argued something similar in Chapter 5 with reference to a double-aspect model. But while my interpretation encourages the suspicion that some continuity obtains between noumenal and phenomenal realities, Hick’s seems to require a sharper dichotomy between that which is experienced, phenomenal reals, and the Reality that cannot be experienced, that is necessarily beyond experience, the noumenal Real; and in rigidly disjoining noumenal and phenomenal Hick banishes God from the realm of human existence and endeavour.

There is, however, good sense in urging that God is an ‘object’ (whatever it would mean for God to be an object) not properly belonging to the empirical realm. In that case, the double-aspect interpretation would apply, it seems, only to objects which are perceptible and, in another way, conceivable beyond the conditions and limits in which they appear; this way of understanding Kant’s distinction makes the most sense when what is conceivable beyond the sensible is also experienced sensibly. And if this is right, there is at least one object, entity or item, given Hick’s assumptions, that cannot be variously considered, for in order to be considered transcendentally a thing must be encountered empirically. This is not to say that God cannot be considered apart from a corresponding sensible intuition – analytic conceptions of God in terms of infinite greatness constitute just such an effort, and may be judged to carry some conviction. It is rather to say that, without a sensible

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1 Gavin D’Costa is inclined to ask, given Hick’s notion of the absolute incomprehensibility of the Real, ‘whether such a position as Hick’s is any different from atheism or scepticism or, equivalently, a transcendental agnosticism’ (‘John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution’, in Problems in the Philosophy of Religion, 9).
intuition, God can only be considered non-empirically; and such consideration (I want to say), while permissible, is never better than speculative.

An epochal adjustment

Thus an epochal adjustment needs to be made. In the Incarnation, that which falls beyond space and time, and so beyond experience, falls within space and time, and so within experience. The Incarnation tells us that God took upon himself flesh and dwelt in and among the human race, and this for the purpose of revealing God and redeeming men and women. So it could be claimed that the Incarnation provides a kind of sensible intuition for God; on a double-aspect model, one can think about God both noumenally and phenomenally – as he is in himself, on the one hand, and as he is towards us in Jesus Christ, on the other. If the double-aspect lines along which we have been thinking are coherent, one may sensibly believe that God is in himself what he is towards us in the Incarnation.  

Experience of God requires a voluntary condescension of God if it requires nothing else, a willingness on the part of God to be known and enjoyed. This assumes that God exists and is able, if he so chooses, to open himself to be experienced; it is an assumption I have no intention of trying to prove. It also assumes, and this reiterates Morris’ point, that human finitude and sin constrain what can be known and experienced of God. Because God is God, not man, and man is man, not God, man cannot by his frail (and fallen) powers of intellect or intuition circumscribe or comprehend God – especially if God is not conditioned by space and

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1 Nicholas Lash has very nicely made the point: ‘The Christological confession does not affirm the mysterious conjunction of two “knowns”…. Christianity seeks to speak of God in terms of man, and not “man” in the abstract, but this man, who lived and died in Palestine. Similarly, Christianity seeks to speak of man in terms of God, and not “God” in the abstract, but this God, this “Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ”, whose power and transcendence are displayed in the action and suffering, the history and death, of Jesus of Nazareth’ (A Matter of Hope [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], 188).
time, subject to the conditions of being known empirically, and man, in all of his
comings and goings, is so conditioned. God must stoop low, freely, in order to be
known; he must break in upon not only time and space but the finitude of human
beings, and heal their sin-sick condition, before they can enjoy experience of God; an
experience of God will be possible only if God does in fact choose to encounter man
in the poverty and limitation of the human condition. The Incarnation provides just
that kind of evidence. It powerfully declares that God not only can but has opened
himself in love and weakness to be experienced, the unconditioned becoming
conditioned in order that human beings may enjoy him and know him, not as other
than he is but as he really is.

With the following brief remarks, let me try to clarify what I mean by
Incarnation and its abiding significance for the possibility of human experience of
God. It is not far-fetched, in the light of Incarnation, to believe both that God gives
himself to be known and that human beings, even in their finitude and sin, may
experience him. But the kenosis of God, if you will, need not imply a setting aside or
suspension of divine fullness with its concomitant prerogatives and powers.¹ It may
rather suggest a conscious willingness to work out redemption for man as God within
the reality and limitations, within the very context, of the human condition; to work
out redemption in a manner that accords with the actual life and experiences of man,
in this way (as Cyril of Alexandria might say) spurning any fraudulent reconciliation
which would smack of a sleight of hand, a disingenuous and only partial
identification with the context and condition of humanity. ‘There is nothing in him
by compulsion or necessity; everything is free: willingly he was hungry, willingly
thirsty, willingly he was frightened, and willingly he died.’²

¹ For suggestions on the rich and diverse resources of kenotic thinking, see the essays – especially
Sarah Coakley’s – in John Polkinghorne, ed., The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis (Grand Rapids:
Eerdmans, 2001).
² John of Damascus, The Orthodox Faith, 4.1.
In the Incarnation, then, God has come into the range of human experience. Perhaps he became man in Jesus without ceasing to be God, taking to himself a real rational human soul; humanity was not swallowed up by deity and deity was not sullied by humanity. This is just a simplification of Chalcedonian Christology. Perhaps he ‘emptied’ himself, in other words, not by denying himself Godhead but by denying himself the glory which was inherently his for the sake of suffering as a man for men and women (Phil 2). Perhaps he submitted himself to the human condition without in any final sense becoming subject to it; in the Incarnation God has become what he was not in order to make human beings what they could not of their own striving become (2 Cor 5.21). This is the fundamental and abiding conviction of the Christian faith.

The Incarnation, Christianly understood, is evidence that God has voluntarily chosen to come among the human race as a man in order to redeem many from the human family.\(^1\) It is not enough to say simply that he came near us; the Incarnation makes the further intrepid claim that he became one with us and one of us and one for us, entering the impoverished human condition and, by making it his own, healing it.\(^2\) Thus Gregory of Nazianzus:

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\text{He assumed the worse that He might give us the better; He became poor that we through His poverty might be rich; He took upon Him the form of a servant that we might receive back our liberty; He came down that we might be exalted; He was tempted that we may conquer; He was dishonoured that He might glorify us; He ascended that He might draw to Himself us, who were lying low in the Fall of sin. Let us give all, offer all, to Him who gave Himself a Ransom and a}
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\(^1\) Thus Cyril of Alexandria: ‘The first epoch of man’s life was holy, but sin intervened and the marks of likeness to God no longer stay bright within us. When the only-begotten word of God became man, man’s nature was created again, reformed by relation to him through hallowing and righteousness.... Man’s nature then underwent a renewal, a re-moulding as it were, in Christ, with our flesh being realigned with holy life in the Spirit’ (Lionel R. Wickham, Cyril of Alexandria: Selected Letters [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983], 195).

\(^2\) ‘By clothing himself with our flesh he made it his own, and by making it his own he made it non-sinful’ (Tertullian, Treatise on the Incarnation, §16).
Reconciliation for us...becoming for His sake all that He became for ours.¹

The Incarnation attests that God has resolved never to live apart from the human race: God in Christ bridged the communion which had been breached, bringing man again into close communion with himself and into an immortal inheritance which shall ‘never perish, spoil or fade’ (1 Pet 1.4).²

A biblical vision is committed to the belief that the human capacity to experience God has been dislocated by sin. It becomes imperative for God to recreate (or renew) man’s capacity for reception and understanding alien language and conceptualities. The Incarnation implies that the participation (communion) in the life of God which was disordered by sin is ordered, or re-ordered, in Christ. John Meyendorff declares:

The restoration of creation is a ‘new creation’, but it does not establish a new pattern, so far as man is concerned; it reinstates man in his original glory among creatures and in his original responsibility for the world. It reaffirms that man is truly human when he participates in the life of God...that true human life can never be secular. In Jesus Christ, God and man are one; in Him, therefore, God becomes accessible not by superseding or eliminating the humanum, but by realizing and manifesting humanity in its purest and most authentic form... The conformity of the humanum with the divinum in Christ is, therefore, not a diminution of humanity, but its restoration.³

This quotation hints at the cosmic ramifications of the Christ-event. The Christ-event (because cosmic) does have universal intent or relevance, but that does not entail universalism. While the possibility of experience of God is made universal by the Christ-event, its actuality need not be; in affirming that the Christ-event has cosmic

² This idea has been exquisitely expressed by Karl Barth, The Humanity of God (London: Collins, 1961), 50.
significance, one need not say that all men and women, without exception, are restored to communion with God in precisely the same sense, or experience God in precisely the same way, with the same consequence. Rather, communion with God is a possibility opened up by Christ which begins in, and is the crowning achievement of, a vital, life changing experience of God. It is not a solely rational experience (indeed humans are not solely rational); it is also relational, where men and women, brought through experience into reunion with God, are privileged not just to think well and talk reverently of God but also to participate together in divine life in the context of human existence, to become truly human in communion with God (2 Pet 1.4).

**Experiencing God in accordance with God's own reality**

I have argued, with sustained reference to a double-aspect interpretation of Kant's noumenal/phenomenal distinction, that the Incarnation is the epistemological hinge upon which human access to God qua God turns; it is, if you will, a necessary condition of the possibility of experience and knowledge of God qua God; it alone offers men and women a glimpse of God as he exists in himself, the Father eternally and unchangeably Father of the Son, the Son eternally and unchangeably Son of the Father, and the Holy Spirit consummating the community of love as co-equal and co-essential with both the Father and the Son. 'What knowledge we have of God, then, is not knowledge of God simpliciter, for such a being does not exist and cannot be known. The knowledge of God that we have is knowledge of a being who is eternally truly divine and at some time or another both truly divine and truly human.'

Indeed, the particular person Jesus Christ incarnates God — and God's grace and truth — and therefore must norm all awareness of God.²

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1 Stephen T. Davis, 'Jesus Christ: Savior or Guru', 55.
Christianly understood, for God to exist at all is for God to exist as Father, Son, Holy Spirit. This suggests that God in Christ has revealed himself not as other than he is but as he really is, and he is in himself (noumenally) what he is towards us in Christ (phenomenally). *The great mystery and profundity of the Incarnation is that it is the place where noumenal and phenomenal realities most eloquently and explicitly coincide.* God cannot be exhausted or experienced exhaustively: but the Incarnation insinuates that humans may experience God humanly and truly, both within the conditions of human knowing and in accordance with God’s own reality. Thus the once for all disclosure of God in the material and sensible world creates the occasion for fallen men and women to glimpse God as God is, and to experience God’s reconciling power, in face of Jesus Christ, and is itself the inauguration of the redemption of that world, a redemption of which the church is a part and in which it participates by grace (Chapter 8).¹ ‘At the heart of the Christian faith,’ Nicholas Lash has said, ‘is the conviction that God has expressed himself concretely in our history, has becomes part of the form and meaning and texture of that history, as a man.’²

Of course, the Incarnation may be derided, denied, ignored; such responses are too common to be surprising. It may, however, be taken as a fact, astonishing to be sure; and when one, in faith, takes the Incarnation as fact, one thereby commits oneself to the belief that God is not deistic, far removed, aloof. More than this: ‘Believing the gospel (that is, the narratives which identify Jesus and the triune God), therefore, necessarily commits believers to a comprehensive view of the world centered epistemically on the gospel narrative itself.’³ In Christ, the far away one came near; or, to paraphrase St Athanasius, God came among men as a man in order

¹ I am here indebted to Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994). On the (material) world as gift and grace, as mediating God’s presence to man and aiding man’s participation in divine life, see John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 1.16.
to accomplish the redemption of humankind and the revelation of God. Thus, if I may put it simply, the dual purpose of the Incarnation: revelation and redemption. The Incarnation alone permits us to speak confidently, non-speculatively and realistically about God; in this sense it accomplishes — is — revelation. The Incarnation alone shows the way of reunion with God; in this sense it accomplishes — is — redemption. The alternatives, it seems to me, remain silence, agnosticism, or pessimism.

The meditations of this chapter anticipate an insight I shall cultivate in greater detail in Chapter 8: The Incarnation functions, or must function, as the primary critical principle and pattern against which all putatively Christian experiences of God are interpreted and assessed. Human beings, it is true, may experience God only if they are endowed with a capacity to enter into relationship and reciprocate God’s love and openness, I have claimed. If humans share in common with God both rational and relational aptitudes, if the communicability of at least one property or feature obtains between Creator and creature, God and man, then, against much conventional confusion, God, in being really transcendent, may not be merely transcendent, and therefore may be glimpsed and experienced. But men and women are not God: they do not share many or most properties (or prerogatives) in common with God — and even the shared capacities are finite and fallen. Thus one’s capacities must be rehabilitated, if one is to experience God; and one’s experiences must be chastened by God’s own self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, by the criterion of the gospel.

1 See Athanasius, De Incarnatione Verbi Dei, trans. T. Herbert Bindley (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1903). ‘[M]uch more did God, the Word of the all-good Father, not overlook the human race called into being by Him, which was utterly going to corruption; but He abolished the death they had incurred by the offering of His own body, and corrected their carelessness by His own teaching, completely restoring the whole nature of man by His power’ (X). ‘For the Saviour, through His Incarnation, in His loving-kindness effected both these things: He made death to vanish from us, and renewed us; and, being invisible and unseen, He appeared through His works and made Himself known to be the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of the whole creation’ (XVI). There are other relevant passages; but these are representative.
There is no human experience of God, or anything else for that matter, which is not, if you will, incarnated, always already conditioned by one’s bodily context and context of embodiment, under- (or, perhaps, over-) determined by the concepts, symbols, and practices of the community(es) of which one is a part. I shall argue, especially in Chapter 8, that all ostensibly Christian experiences must be tested and nurtured by Incarnation, the doctrine that makes the stupendous and audacious claim that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Traditionally conceived, that is, conceived in roughly Chalcedonian terms, the doctrine of Incarnation implies a fundamental identity between God and man in Jesus Christ, a co-inhabited space for divinity and humanity. In the terms of this chapter: in the Incarnation God is towards us as he is in himself. But the Incarnation is more than a doctrine concerning the embodiment of God’s grace and truth in Christ. It is also an invitation to experience God’s reconciling activity in Jesus Christ through the Christian community’s embodiment of God’s love, grace, truth, justice, peace. The Incarnation is, therefore, both the principle against which one’s experience of embodiment is to be measured and the pattern one’s embodiment of experience is to match.
Perception & Embodiment

In spiritual things all receptivity is productivity – Søren Kierkegaard¹

Access to the world is through our discourse and the role that discourse plays in our lives; we compare our discourse with the world as it is presented to us or constructed for us by discourse itself, making in the process new worlds out of old ones; and a psychological act of comparing our discourse with things as they are in themselves has come to have the status of a "mystery act" – Hilary Putnam²

True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world – M. Merleau-Ponty³

There are at least two sides to every inquiry, every investigation, every perception: the objective, the seen, the other, and the subjective, the seeing, the self. In Chapter 5 I explored the former, the objective side; and my primary concern was with an examination of the nature and scope of presentation. Here I shall explore the latter, the subjective side; to this end I examine the nature and scope of perception. Of what does perception consist? In what way does perception engage with reality? How does, or should, bodiliness (embodiment) figure into a theory of perception? How does bodiliness/embodiment shed light on the nature of human experience, not to mention the nature of conceptual schemes and the process of concept acquisition and revision? Is perception reliable? Such are the questions with which this chapter wrestles; and we shall draw on the concepts of narrative, being-in-the-world, belief, and practice to insinuate answers.

At the outset I should divulge that I answer the question of perceptual reliability affirmatively. But I do not mean to imply either that perceptions

² Hilary Putnam, Realism with a Human Face, 121.
³ M. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, xx.
(without exception) are equally reliable or that genuinely reliable perceptions are untainted, impeccable. The relevant point is that perceptions may be both reliable and partial, **reliable even though partial**. This is not a petty and inconsequential claim: for if perceptions can be accredited reliable **iff** they are exhaustive as well as exhaustively clean, then the predicament of percipients is abysmal indeed. No single perception is, as it were, completely undistorted and no series of perceptions – combined, arranged, rearranged just so – is exhaustive. Perhaps one can reliably probe the world through the senses and perhaps reliably experience God, without flawlessly experiencing either world or God; so it will emerge that interim confidence in the reliability of sense as well as spiritual perception is compatible with an honest fallibilism. But as I have been arguing, we shall have good reason, internal to Christian faith, to be provisionally suspicious of spiritual perception, especially when it demands its privacy and eschews accountability. The thesis of this chapter, then, has a dual thrust, a deconstructive and a constructive moment: deconstructively I shall contend that presentation and perception are never co-extensive – what one perceives and what is presented are, in the nature of the case, never identical, at best only partial and approximate, and that is reason for some reserve, some provisionality; constructively I shall argue that this scenario need not drive one to despairing scepticism, since if perceptions are on the whole – i.e., under the right conditions and for the most part – reliable, or if in the proper context and with reference to the proper texts they may become reliable, then they provide adequate\(^1\) (not exhaustive) access to reality, and that is reason for some nerve, some provisional confidence.

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1 What is *adequate* access to reality, of what does it consists, what are the criteria for determining adequacy, these are thick and tenacious questions. Perhaps adequacy could be fruitfully defined in terms of *explanatory potency* and *practical efficacy* (simplicity and symmetry, in Wittgenstein’s terms): if one’s efforts to access reality make sense of one’s experiences and fit the evidence as far as one reads it, then those efforts – and the claims which accompany them – have a degree of explanatory power; and if the same efforts enable and inspire one to get on in the world, then they have practical efficacy, or the relevant practicality. Now, in a sense, these criteria are at once formal and material: they are both standards of measurement and that which is measured. Thus they
The nature and necessity of the subject

Every experience that has an object also has a subject (and a good many other things, including foreground and background): there can be no perceived thing without a perceiver. Of course there can be a thing not, or not in the relevant moment, perceived by a perceiver, but if at the relevant moment a thing becomes an object of perception, it is, precisely in the relevant moment, inextricably conjoined to a perceiver.\(^1\) And perceivers or subjects, I suggest, have both passive and active roles to perform in experience.\(^2\)

Henceforth when I make reference to the necessity of the subject I am just spotlighting the active involvement of the subject in experience. Now, inasmuch as subject activity has to do with the existence and deployment of human concepts, both congenital and cultural, it likewise, in a rather loose sense, has to do with the nature of the subject. What I mean is this: If it belongs to the nature of the subject

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\(1\) If Berkeley is right, interestingly, then there is never a moment in which anything real and perceptible is unperceived. ‘For as to what is said of the absolute existence of the unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their esse is percipi, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them’ (George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 104).

\(2\) We could appeal to the philosophy of John Macmurray to illuminate this suggestion. Macmurray understands the subject as agent to be constituted essentially by dual moments: one more passive, the other more active. The passive moment could be characterised as the negative moment, the moment at which the (never strictly pure) agent-subject or person disengages and withdraws, recoils into reflection; the active moment could be characterised as the positive moment, the moment at which the subject or person engages, enters again deliberately into action and inter-personal communion. Simply, the basic purpose of reflection is action, and the basic purpose of action is communion, so the dual moments are reciprocal rather than disparate. Macmurray summarises the necessary ebb and flow of activity and reflection in a passage in *The Structure of Religious Experience* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936). ‘What is possible must be imagined before it can be achieved. The rhythm of human life swings to and fro between the withdrawal from action into reflection which is its negative phase, and the return from reflection to action which is its positive phase. In religion, the positive phase is the set of activities in which conscious community is expressed, enlarged, deepened, and realized. The negative phase is the reflection in which the possibilities of community are discovered in thought, imagination, and symbol. The two poles have significance only in relation to one another, and, therefore, the reality of religion consists in their living union; and religion is real only in the full rhythm which moves from one to the other and back again’ (110). These notions are ramified in his Gifford lectures: *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991); *Persons in Relation* (Faber and Faber, 1991).
to be actively involved in experiencing reality (including God), then the subject can be divorced from experience only by ceasing to be the subject – or by radically redefining experience; it is in this sense that the subject whose nature it is to be active in experience is also a necessity in experience.\(^1\) The constructive realism I have been defining and defending in this thesis is incapable of delivering what it promises – a real glimpse or experience of reality in and through human participation – unless a subject actually receives in experience, that is, unless what an object, or subject, discloses of itself creatively and meaningfully impinges upon and informs what a subject receives in or takes from experience. This is a way of stressing that an experiencing subject, a subject who experiences, must be both passive and active, receiving as well as giving, being (re)fashioned as well as fashioning. The money question is whether realism is jeopardised by the admission that subjects are always already both receptive and productive in experience.

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\(^{1}\) Thus Berkeley: ‘Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part I might as easily divide a thing from itself’ (A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, 104).

\(^{2}\) See, for example, Michael Stoeber, ‘Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision’, Religious Studies 28 (1992), 107-116; and for a realist overview, see Devitt’s Realism and Truth, 235-258.

\(^{3}\) Perhaps the realism/constructivism divide porous marks off diverging emphases in the modern and postmodern epochs, respectively. (This is not to say that modern and postmodern movements and sensibilities can be completely disjoined.) A similar hunch is explored in Richard J. Bernstein,
and relativism at all costs – that is, keeping reality from slipping forever from the human grasp – is the central realist concern. The world around us is real, or at any rate not obviously unreal, realists say; and it, or rather the truth about it, can be thought, represented, depicted, known. But that all seems a bit disingenuous, constructivists say – Isn’t it obvious that reality is wholly (or largely) what one makes of it? In the end, the realist project encourages an epistemic confidence beyond or against what the evidence warrants, constructivists say.1

One of the aims of this chapter is to determine whether realism and constructivism are, in fact, necessarily (because intrinsically) irreconcilable. I shall argue that not every form of constructivism need be opposed in order to spare reality the fate of vanishing, and not every form of realism demands that one deny

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Beyond Objectivism and Relativism. The modern quest for objectivism (ironically) anticipates both scepticism and the postmodern predilection for relativism. When the goal of the search is foundations, unassailable and fool-proof, there are two live possibilities: either one recognises that the search to view the world sub specis aeternitatis is fruitless, and becomes a disaffected sceptic (what Nancye Murphy and James McClendon call pessimistic foundationalism), or one deceives oneself into thinking she has enjoyed a God’s-eye view of the world, and becomes an imperious dogmatist (optimistic foundationalism). (For a penetrating discussion which argues that scepticism is a consequence – if you will, the underside – of objectivism, see John Heil, ‘Skepticism and Realism’, American Philosophical Quarterly 35 [1998], 57-73.) Bernstein insinuates as much: ‘There is still an underlying belief that in the final analysis the only viable alternatives open to us are either some form of objectivism, foundationalism, ultimate grounding of knowledge...or that we are ineluctably led to relativism, skepticism, historicism, and nihilism’ (2-3). I am interested in exploring ways of mediating these conflicting concerns – by modifying the goal(s) of the search. Bernstein’s suggestion intrigues me: ‘When we think and work through the most significant contemporary philosophic debates, we will discover that views which initially seem fragmentary, conflicting, and even contradictory ultimately converge and cohere’ (7). At least some such views ultimately cohere, I should think.

1 On the constructivist side of the impasse are such prominent philosophers as Hilary Putnam (Representation and Reality [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989]; Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers, vol. 2 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975]), Richard Rorty (Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989]; Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979]); on the hard-nosed realist side one finds the likes of Michael Devitt (Realism and Truth), William Alston (A Realist Conception of Truth), Alan Goldman (‘Realism’, Southern Journal of Philosophy 17 [1979], 175-192). To be sure, Putnam does defend (contra metaphysical realism) a version of realism for which he commandeers the name ‘internal realism’ or – what amounts to the same – the ‘internalist perspective’ (Reason, Truth and History, 49-50; see also ‘A Defense of Internal Realism’, in Realism with a Human Face, 30-42). However, his ‘realism’ does depend for its intelligibility on the presumption of ‘conceptual relativity’: whether this necessarily disqualifies it from being realist we shall soon consider. Putnam’s position is that a certain relativity is not incompatible with realism; for internal realism ‘is, at bottom, just the insistence that realism is not incompatible with conceptual relativity. One can be both a realist and a conceptual relativist’ (The Many Faces of Realism, 17).
that reality is in some sense what one makes of it. My hunch—and this is what I
here hope in part to work out—is that something both interesting and constructive
can be found in constructivism which will balance a religious epistemology
aspiring to be critically realist. I shall use perception as a sort of illustration to
show that there is room in the epistemological inn for both realist and constructivist
baggage. The position at which we arrive, the position this thesis has been
anticipating from the start, is constructive realism, and it shall prove to have
something important to do with the bodiliness of percipients.

All experience depends, in one degree or another, on a subject’s concepts or
categories for intelligibility—and something like that, it seems to me, is
constructivism’s constructive contribution. Now constructivism is developed,
modified, and amended in a thousand other directions; and not every version
retains a realist sensibility. Obviously, reality cannot be experienced, let alone
understood and communicated, apart from language and language-bequeathed
concepts (and capacities). It is a serious mistake to oppose language to reality, or
reality to language: language textures reality, is always already a vital part of
reality, and as such conditions human awareness and experience of reality; simply
put, reality includes language (as well as language users) and is never encountered
apart from it; on an expressivist view like Charles Taylor’s, language is no less real
than the so-called reality with which it puts language users in touch. It is not that
language merely expresses something universal; it is rather that, at least in part,
vocabulary, a pattern of speaking, creates a vision, a pattern of seeing, and
accordingly significantly shapes not only one’s expectations but also the evidence
itself. (And I wish to argue: vice-versa.) Constructivism’s minimal claim that
(language-bequeathed) concepts, or the systems of description to which those
concepts organically belong, condition or significantly determine the intelligibility
of experience will therefore be compatible with realism, at least in principle.
Now any portrait of the human subject which is to have a chance of making much sense will presumably have to account for both the influence of concepts, beliefs, prejudices, and such like in experience, and the relationship of those concepts, beliefs, and prejudices to thought and to embodied existence, practice, action. (There is a sense in which just such an ambition continues to motivate philosophical projects, modern and postmodern.) So there is never a time when entanglement with reality is less than text and context dependent: the question is whether there is anything more to reality than language, text, context?\(^1\) Milton Munitz’s remarks are appropriate: ‘[W]e cannot say what reality is in itself apart from or independently of the use of any grammatical scheme, not because we are blocked from knowing it, but because the situation being envisaged is not possible.... However, this does not mean that there is no reality other than grammar.’\(^2\)

**Narrative apperception, identity and human experience**

Since experience involves a subject if it involves an object (in the experience of breathing, for example, there is the air as well as the lungs that breathe it, to paraphrase John Dewey; and in the experience of mastication there is the food or gum chewed as well as the gums and teeth that chew it, to paraphrase Alston); since, that is, human experience is defined in part by the moment or moments when an object comes into the space of a given subject’s awareness, then, obviously, no object, if it becomes an object of experience (and not every object that is perceptible is by all people perceived), is experienced in an unhuman way – it is

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1 Sue Patterson makes a good point: ‘To argue the strong case [about a postmodern age] is not necessarily to claim that because human beings and their contexts are “language-ridden” (a basic premise of postmodernity), human forms of life are linguistically constructed and all is therefore language. It is possible to argue that a particular context is a self-contained world without holding this view of language’s scope and origins’ (*Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, 7).

after all the human subject who sees, tastes and touches the object, who
distinguishes it from (and relates it to) other things, who thinks about and responds
to it, through whose conceptual sieve it passes. This again recalls the necessity of
the agent-subject (as both receptive and productive) in any experience with which
that subject has to do, or which has to do with that subject. But it also recalls the
nature of this necessary subject: narratively fashioned, a human being is truly what
s/he is in the light of how s/he sees, how s/he engages with and experiences the
surroundings, and this includes the language, categories, biases, beliefs by which
s/he lives and with which s/he organises experiences and tells a unique story.¹
Thus Gadamer: ‘It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudgments that
constitute our being.’² Wittgenstein puts it differently: ‘We use judgments as
principles of judgment.’³

Clearly, then, a subject should not (more accurately: cannot) be violently
cleaved from her prejudices and history; after all, ‘Everyday language is a part of
the human organism and is no less complicated than it.’⁴ One’s identity is tied to

¹ I am indebted here to Calvin Schrag, The Self after Postmodernity (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1997). Schrag, in the spirit of Ricoeur (Oneself as Another [Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1992]), restitutes the ‘self’ by asking not ‘what’ is man but ‘who’ is man (12-14). He says:
‘The self is implicated in its discourse as a who that at the crossroads of speak and language
understands itself as a self that has already spoken, is now speaking, and has the power yet to speak,
suspended across the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future’ (17). And again: ‘The
transversal dynamics, effecting a convergence without coincidence, defines the unity, presence, and
identity of the self. And they are a unity, presence, and identity that are concretely manifest in
narration, in the telling of the story by the who of discourse, emplotting the multiple and changing
episodes of her or his communicative endeavors’ (33).
remarks: ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.... We cannot think what we cannot
think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either’ (5.6 - 5.61). My language-limits (I want to say)
do not quite limit or circumscribe the world – presumably there is more to reality than anyone’s reach
of it; rather my language-limits limit the world to me, my world, the world I share with many others
who share my language-limits. One’s language fecundates reality; so the better (or perhaps broader)
one’s language and concomitant conceptual capacities, potentially, at least, the better or deeper one’s
grasp of reality, the more discriminating one’s vision. Perhaps David Stern has something like this in
mind (as well as complex issues concerning the direct presentation of the contents of immediate
experience through language) when he says that ‘pure reality lies beyond language’ (Wittgenstein on
Mind and Language [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 149). Pure reality, whatever it is, just
one's history, has nearly everything to do with the span of time into which one is born and within which one is nurtured. And a subject with no history is just a subject without experiences - a subject, what is more, without identity, a selfless subject. This is a way of shaping, or at least anticipating, a transcendental unity of *narrative apperception*: there is unity in experience precisely because experiences have to do with subjects who see, feel, love, long and all the rest in intimate connection with their peculiar stories.\(^1\) The experiences I have, for instance, are (all of them) my experiences, organised by me and for me, illuminated by the categories, interests and ideals I bring to worldly interactions. As such, they narrate the story that is truly mine - constitute my story; but my experiences also, providentially, involve others, involve me in the lives of others, indeed are intrinsically interwoven with the wretched and wonderful experiences of others.\(^2\)

Thus a theory of (narrative) apperception and a theory of (narrative) perception go and grow together: one's seeing comes out of one's storied identity (narrative perception) and feeds back into that storied identity, chastening it, embellishing it, gradually changing it, and so on (narrative apperception). This points to the paradox of experience. One does not experience apart from one's story, the categories, beliefs, and expectations that story instils, and the practices and activities on which that story depends; nor does one have a story apart from one's experiences. But perhaps this is not quite right: there is the interesting possibility that one can be told a positively strange story and invited to share in its identity and experience, its identity-making-and-sustaining experiences (Chapter 8); in such

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1 Though perhaps: *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur.*

2 David Fergusson, in his evaluation of MacIntyre, puts the matter in simple terms: 'The narrative of person's life history must inevitably intersect with someone else's narrative. This results from the social dimension of the practices in which we engage and the roles we occupy. Our histories are bound up with the histories of the institutions to which we belong and in which we participate, institutions such as the family, the university, the farm, the hospital, and the church' (*Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, 113-114).
situations, of course, a disciplined imagination will prove invaluable, as one opens oneself to possibilities and perspectives other than those with which one has always been accustomed. I should like to say that, obviously, not everyone shares a story, so how does one ever change or grow?

I have just said that one can be told a story and invited to share its identity-making-and-sustaining experiences. Now I want further to argue that one most effectively and thoroughly learns a new story not just by hearing it told (that’s a second rate sort of learning) but by actually participating in the story’s identity sustaining experiences. The living is in the telling and the telling is in the living, so to speak: it is that dialectical.

There are exceptions, to be sure. One may learn the Christian story, make it one’s own story, by observing Christians participate together in the identity making and sustaining experiences with their whole being. Calvin Schrag makes the relevant point:

Narrative temporality enables the emplotment of the history of the self as a dynamic coming from a past and moving into a future in such a wise that the past and the future figure as indigenous features of the story of self as it unfolds. And the identity of the self in all this consists in the degree to which the self is able to unify its past accomplishments and its future projects. The self that has nothing to remember and nothing for which to hope is a self whose identity stands in peril.1

1 Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 36-37. Recall also Miguel De Unamuno’s memorable quotation concerning the importance of memory for self-identity – one’s being able both to recollect and to anticipate: ‘Memory is the basis of individual personality, just as tradition is the basis of the collective personality of a people’ (*Tragic Sense of Life* [New York: Dover Publications, 1954], 8-9). Relevant along these lines is Paul Kerby’s remarks on the bearing of reflection and history for understanding human life: ‘Life is inherently of a narrative structure, a structure that we make explicit when we reflect upon our past and our possible future. The actions of human agents, to be intelligible, must be seen against the background of a history, a history of causes and goals, of failures, achievements, and aspirations’ (*Narrative and the Self* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991], 40). For a frank theological account of the narrative structure of (Christian) identity, see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 17-34.
But how do stories impress, and receive impression from, categories/concepts? Or rather, what is the connection of categories/concepts to stories? Are conceptual schemes reducible to narrative schemes (or vice-versa), or are the (inter)relations rather more complex?

In his influential essay, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', Donald Davidson argues that conceptual relativism is unintelligible. According to Davidson, language and conceptual schemes, whatever precisely they are, must be associated; on this point it would seem that he agrees with Quine. Naturally, if

1 An intelligent appraisal of Davidson's theory of language, meaning and truth, can be found in Frank Farrell, Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World, 70-147. For a concise comparison of Davidson and Wittgenstein on conceptual frameworks, consult Fergus Kerr, Theology after Wittgenstein, 105-108.

2 I follow Michael Lynch and others in questioning Davidson for too closely identifying both languages with conceptual schemes and translation with truth. Are conceptual schemes interchangeable with languages? It depends on what one means by language – but if conceptual schemes are more than the sum total of declarative sentences, then conceptual schemes and languages are (however connected) not interchangeable. Davidson also, somewhat oddly, insists that the notion of truth cannot be divorced from translation. Fair enough, I suppose; but does something’s truth depend on its being taken to be true – that is, can something be true without being taken to be true? There are, presumably, many things any one will take to be true that are false, or false that are true, and perhaps many more things that are true of which one has (as yet) literally no awareness. See Michael P. Lynch, ‘Three Models of Conceptual Schemes’, Inquiry 40 (1997), 407-426. One could elaborate all of this with reference to Husserl’s notion of concepts (as perhaps inextricably tied to language but as distinct from language): concepts are not words for Husserl. But suppose we view concepts not as words but as organising principles/centres for stability or repetition in experience; thus, of course, not all words are concepts – but some words (in a sense) either are irreducibly tied to concepts or function as concepts just in case the objects (and the properties attaching to those objects) to which those words refer or point are categorised/organised/grouped by them. So the hackneyed ‘horse’ is both a word and a concept (but is not a concept in the same sense in which it is a word or simply in virtue of its being a word): the word ‘horse’, as a sign or symbol, points to the object; and if the sign or name calls to mind properties that are supposedly instantiated in the particular object and many others resembling it, the sign or name will also function as an organising principle for one’s experience, a centre of stability and repetition. Ordinarily, then, concepts function as organising principles – of course organising is not the only thing they do; but it is not necessary for a concept to organise in order to have fecundated experience. One can presumably have an experience of something one has never seen or imagined, just as one can see Bourbon Street for the first time or taste asparagus for the first time, and if the properties instantiated in the object (whatever it is) are accordingly instantiated in the experience of the percipient (whatever that means), then one, according to Husserl, has an adequate concept of the thing experienced. But suppose one never has the same experience twice, or a similar experience periodically; suppose further that, due to a head injury and the amnesia it induces, one forgets about having, for example, eaten asparagus in the first place; the concept has broken through in experience but fails to become an organising principle for subsequent similar experiences. Clearly, however, many concepts function as organising principles – but that is
conceptual schemes differ, languages likewise differ. But Davidson argues, against
a strong incommensurability thesis, that the reverse does not follow: for even if
languages differ in some sense, and of course they do (in some sense), if they at
least partially permit (partial) inter-translation, then the conceptual scheme(s) in
question may be seen as common, compatible, shared – and the surface conceptual
differences resolvable.¹ So says Davidson:

We may accept the doctrine that associates having a
language with having a conceptual scheme. The relation
may be supposed to be this: where conceptual schemes
differ, so do languages. But speakers of different languages
may share a conceptual scheme provided there is a way of
translating one language into the other.²

Interpretation is the problem as well as the promise. How does one
interpret an-other, others in other cultures, past and present, so as to maximise
agreement and intelligibility? In the arena of interpretation, Davidson tells us,

¹ Conceptual dissonance is not insuperable, according to Wittgenstein, because of common (human)
reactions and actions – ways of engaging with and experiencing the world, what I explicate in terms of
congenital constructs/capacities. It is this Wittgensteinian insight that lies behind Putnam’s remark:
‘Ways of “going on” that are natural to us, given the “forms of life” that we have inherited, are prior to...
everything that could be called “convention”’ (Realism and Reason, 174). Perhaps – on a certain
reading – Chomsky’s notion of ‘universal grammar’ is companionable to this: if, to wit, one takes this
to mean something like a universal aptitude (Chomsky: ‘language faculty’) for language and concept
acquisition (and revision), for learning and speaking language. See Noam Chomsky, Language and
Problems of Knowledge (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988). ‘The language faculty is a component
of the mind/brain, part of the human biological endowment’ (60). And: ‘A theory of the language
faculty is sometimes called universal grammar…. Universal grammar attempts to formulate the
principles that enter into the operation of the language faculty. The grammar of a particular language
is an account of the state of the language faculty after it has been presented with data of experience;
universal grammar is an account of the initial state of the language faculty before any experience’
(61). For a Wittgensteinian critique of Chomsky’s ‘general theory of language’ see Norman Malcolm,
mistakenly, it seems to me – that Chomsky’s theory of language itself operates on the false
presumption that ‘every normal human child would have to be a prodigy right from the start’ (51).
charity must norm what we think and say: when apparent differences in belief are encountered, one must assume not fundamental conceptual dissonance but fundamental commonality, otherwise communication is not possible, and one effectively strips others of their humanity.\footnote{‘The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything’ (‘Radical Interpretation’, in Inquiries, 137; see also ‘Thought and Talk’, in Inquiries, 169).} Interestingly, charity requires agnosticism with regard to conceptual disparity. He remarks:

Where does this leave the case for conceptual relativism? The answer is, I think, that we must say much the same thing about differences in conceptual scheme as we say about differences in belief: we improve the clarity and bite of declaration of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion. Indeed, no clear line between the cases can be made out. If we choose to translate some alien sentence rejected by its speaker by a sentence to which we are strongly attached on a community basis, we may be tempted to call this a difference in schemes; if we decide to accommodate the evidence in other ways, it may be more natural to speak of a difference of opinion \[=\text{explicable error}\]. But when others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts.\footnote{Davidson, Inquiries, 197.}

Finally he says: ‘For we have found no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different. It would be equally wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind – all speakers of language, at least – share a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one.’\footnote{Davidson, Inquiries, 198.}

But suppose beliefs, opinions, and other related personal commitments cannot be accounted for without concepts. Some concepts or categories are such
that without them one neither has experience nor forms beliefs. Put in other words, a conceptual scheme, whatever else it includes, will involve certain general and specific concepts that are presupposed in all or nearly all of one’s experiences and beliefs. As a matter of course, then, it will not be possible to hold some basic beliefs without certain basic concepts. Suppose, also, that beliefs, taken together (and arranged just so), constitute at least partial interpretive visions, ways of viewing the world and one’s experience in and of it — ways, if you will, of patterning and discerning pattern in one’s experience.1 What might one expect to

1Let me be more forthright about my understanding of concepts. Concepts — viewed tri-perspectivally — are, or are inextricably related to, (a) the capacities or skills with which we think and experience; (b) the signs and symbols with which we speak and name; and (c) the beliefs with which we live and act. Wittgenstein touches on each of these aspects/functions of concepts in his Philosophical Investigations: ‘But if a person has not yet got the concepts, I shall teach him to use the words by means of examples and practices’ (208); ‘Language is an instrument. Its concepts are interests’ (569); ‘Concepts lead us to make investigations; are the expressions of our interest, and direct our interest’ (570). Hans-Johann Glock has the following to say about Wittgenstein’s functional grammar of concepts: ‘It determines the network of connections between our concepts and thus constitutes our form of representation, or way of seeing things.... Such paradigms or norms of representation determine the meaning of key scientific expressions. But they do more than simply label things. They provide a way of making sense of experience, of making predictions and of dealing with recalcitrant experiences.... The result of conceptual change is not mere renaming, but a new way of speaking and theorizing about the world’ (Hans-Johann Glock, ‘Naming and normativity’, in The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein, eds Hans Sluga and David G. Stern [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 215). Compatible views on the nature and utility of concepts can be found in Vincent Brummer, Speaking of a Personal God (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 33-34; and Peter Geach, Mental Acts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 12. And for discussions on the indispensable role of concepts in organising experience, about which I have already spoken, see Sir William Hamilton, Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic; and Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, 9-11, 335. In sum, concepts are not just signs/symbols with which we label, name, point to distinct items in experience; nor are they, similarly, simply principles around which we organise or bring order to items in experience (I have argued that concepts do, at least occasionally, seem to function as organising principles) — that, according to Vincent Brümmer, represents the ‘names model’ of concepts, the dominant view from Plato to Kant and beyond. Concepts are also, quite vitally, capacities, abilities, skills (perhaps capacities, then abilities, then skills) by which we think, see/recognise, understand implications in experience — that accords well with the ‘tools model’ developed by Wittgenstein. On the tools model, one has the ability — the concept — only if one can think, see, say, perform well in experience, and it looks like that ability is ordinarily acquired and revised through practice(s), through word and deed, reiteration and ritual [ritual = routine within a religious or ceremonial context, invested with religious import]. In other words, concepts as skills, as well as concepts as signs and symbols, are acquired and revised in practice (I have try to show that all concepts are, with language, embedded in action, tied to language-related activities, acquired within forms of life) — not merely in/through verbal exchange. Thus the indispensable Christian categories, condensed in and thoroughly conditioned upon the Incarnation, are learned not just by way of talk but also, essentially, through practice, explication, reiteration — concrete example of the talk — through (I argue in Chapter 8) the central practices: Word and Sacrament, proclamation and eucharist. Concepts, then, depending on one’s perspective, are signs/symbols (Plato), organising principles (Aristotle),
happen when such differences of opinion are multiplied, hand over fist, or when certain doxastic differences become non-trivial? Is it possible that enough such differences, or perhaps just a few epochal ones, would effect an almost unrecognisably different way of approaching, organising, understanding, construing and embodying the world and human experience, give rise to a different conceptual scheme?

(I have been urging that ‘God was in Christ’ is just such an epochal fact or faith-commitment. Bruce Marshall puts it this way: '[B]elieving the gospel requires a reversal of the epistemic priorities we would otherwise have, but it does not require that we reject most of the beliefs we would otherwise have.' Thus the question: ‘How – without recourse to foundations or epistemic dependence – do we succeed in recognizing the epistemic ultimacy of Jesus the Son?’ I made an argument like this in Chapter 6; in Chapter 8 I shall apply the argument, as we

enabling conditions (Kant), and skills (Wittgenstein). It will be clear that I am partial to the tools model of concepts; but the names model and tools model may not, finally, be incompatible, and one might, for example, appeal to Kant’s distinction between categories and concepts (or Husserl’s distinction between regional concepts and generic concepts) to foreshadow the possibility of synthesis. Nevertheless, it can be said of all the categories/concepts that are not with us from birth, whether signs/symbols or skills, that they are acquired in communities, narrative-structured-practices, interpersonal interactions, and so on.

I argued in Chapter 6 that the uniquely Christian categories are condensed in and thoroughly conditioned upon the Incarnation; I shall chaste this claim, flesh it out, in Chapter 8. For now let me say that I am gently insinuating that God himself must give us the conditions with which to follow him, the idiom/language with which to speak of him (without speaking ill of him), the categories with which to experience/encounter him truly, the system of description with which to (re)present him, and so on. There is no unmediated experience, I have continually claimed: nothing is experienced, least of all God, without a medium, apart from language, categories, symbols, and so on. But, I have also claimed, there is normally more in experience that just the medium, language, symbols – and the more in experience sometimes discloses itself by entering into and reconfiguring the medium, gives itself as well as a new perspective with which to view it. Accordingly, God must freely give not only himself but also the medium, language, categories in which to experience him, make sense of his presence, respond appropriately; the scriptures serve that normative function for Christian communities. In other words, when God speaks, God creates the possibility of hearing and responding in faith – gives the conditions for proper reception. Ordinarily, however, the conditions take place and shape gradually, as one participates in the community in which God without veil encounters and is encountered by men and women. God himself must provide the conditions and categories; but it usually takes time – and practice – for those conditions and categories to develop. Hence the importance of the practices of prayer, proclamation and eucharist (of which I speak in Chapter 8), and the importance of practising the practices in the context of those who have acquired the relevant skills.

1 Marshall, Trinity and Truth, 158.
2 Marshall, Trinity and Truth, 180.
consider the connection between epistemic priorities and the ecclesial practices of prayer, proclamation, and eucharist.

Of course, it may not be that most beliefs or most belief-systems (conceptual schemes) are incommensurable from community to community: perhaps communities share a good many things, including beliefs and concepts, in common; perhaps that is the background of substantial agreement, against which disagreement makes sense, of which Davidson speaks. It may rather be epistemic priorities - that is, central beliefs which regulate and protect a scheme’s integrity, beliefs which function with unrestricted primacy - which genuinely differ among communities. This is Bruce Marshall’s suggestion. Thus with shifting epistemic priorities, priorities that shift from community to community, one can account, Marshall thinks, for both dissimilarities and similarities; in this way, that is to say, one at the same time takes Davidson’s point about charity, maximises intelligibility and agreement among peoples, and makes room for real and quite fundamental conceptual/doxastic differences among peoples and communities. In that case, it would be not just doxa (beliefs) that are different/dissonant, but also doxastic practices (belief-dispositions). If Kant is right, or nearly right, then there is a sense in which human categorial activity is universal, or (as I am saying) congenital, in that it concerns something(s) all human beings share in virtue of being human. Some ways of categorially getting on in the world are common, not only because of the shared condition of those who inhabit the world but also because of the shared world, and perhaps this sheds light on the ineradicable human ability to have and talk about shared experiences. It is also incontestable, or nearly so, a noteworthy empirical fact, that not all experiences are shared, just as not all concepts are universal and universally intelligible; and the core - or at least some of the core - of basic concepts will shift from time to time, place to place,

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1 Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*, 137, 149, 158, 238.
community to community. So the congenital is one way of being involved in experience categorially; but it is not the only way.

**Mediating opposing positions**

Is it possible to read constructivism and realism together? Are conceptual relativity and conceptual stability mutually exclusive? Can one defend a position in which the two notions, relativity and stability, live in harmonious tension? As I see it, the right tension must be found, and, when found, preserved. This is ambitious, perhaps, and no doubt the right balances will be hard to strike; ambitious, I say, but certainly not frivolous. For most of us will agree, presumably, that it matters how we think about reality and our experience of it, perhaps especially when the reality in question is God; we want straight and straightforward answer, if and when they are available. And I am not the only one who attempts a similar sort of synthesis or mediation.¹

Mediation is painstaking work, requiring finesse, mental acuity, erudition and a lot of other things a good many of us lack; but surely, with care and effort, at least some progress can be made toward accomplishing, or anticipating, mediation. The relative success of this undertaking shall depend in part on discerning varieties of conceptual schemes and conceptual imposition in experience.

Human beings are involved with the world categorically in fragile and highly complex ways. One way of respecting and reckoning with this complexity is to distinguish *layers* or *levels* of conceptual activity in experience, loosely corresponding to levels of conceptual schemes. In a provisional way I sought to do just that in Chapter 4. I distinguished two types of conceiving: one that is *anterior*

and one that is posterior to (perceptual) experience. When one understands conceiving loosely as that activity which initially organises and makes experience possible in the first place, then conceiving will be everywhere and for people logically prior to experience.\(^1\) On the other hand, when conceiving is understood as that activity which, after pause and upon reflection, interprets and re-interprets, then conceiving will be subsequent in time to experience, will differ with the application of belief-infused concepts, and will presumably not be the same everywhere, at all times and for all people(s).\(^2\) Call the former pre-reflective or protoschematised/structured experience; call the latter reflective or post-schematised experience.

There is no contradiction in this; indeed the claim that conception, variously understood, is a phenomenon which is unavoidably both prior and subsequent to perception, in the beginning as well as the aftermath of perception, may be wildly wide of the mark, but it is far from incoherent. Both varieties of conceptual activity are enormously important. For a moment I wish to bring the pre-reflective into sharper focus, not because I deny the importance of reflection, or reflective interpretation, in experience, but because pre-reflective activity, as I see it, is either

\(^1\) There is no human experience which is not at the same time schematised experience. I take it to be tolerably obvious that the congenital categories are corroborated by the fact that when one experiences anything whatsoever in the world of things, one experiences something or some things and not everything in an undifferentiated mass. More precisely, the capacity to differentiate objects (compare, contrast, separate, as Kant has it) in one’s phenomenal range is necessary if one is to perceive something rather than everything in a jumbled manifold; and since, from all appearances, we do perceive some things in particular rather than everything in nothing and nothing in everything, it is sensible to conclude that the capacities necessary for differentiating objects in the phenomenal range are ours before we have had any actual experience. ‘Phenomenally, stimulation does not yield a chaos of independent elements; perception is characterized by organization. The most basic organization is that in which figures are segregated from their backgrounds’ (William Dember, *The Psychology of Perception* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960], 192).

\(^2\) The distinction is not really a novel one, though the nomenclature varies. John Dewey, for instance, makes a comparable distinction between ‘crude’ (‘primary’) experience and ‘refined’ (‘secondary’) experience: ‘This consideration of method may suitably begin with the contrast between gross, macroscopic, crude subject-matters in primary experience and the refined, derived objects of reflection. The distinction is one between what is experienced as the result of a minimum of incidental reflection and what is experienced in consequence of continued and regulated reflective inquiry. For derived and refined products are experienced only because of the intervention of systematic thinking’ (*Experience & Nature*, 6-7).
commonly neglected or else badly misunderstood. The pre-reflective puts the stress on the front-end of the interpretive *continuum* (and that is what I believe it is) - not on interpretation which is deliberative, reflective (or just secondary), but on *interpretation which begins the project of experience*. This emphasis follows, obliquely I suppose, in the tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer: it both insists on asking ‘what interpretation is and what role it plays in human experience, prior to those occasions when we set out to interpret’¹ and seeks to understand the constructive role of ‘prejudice’ (what we might call: *doxastic bias*) in the formation of experience. The idea is roughly this: ‘We cannot lay hold of the new, we cannot even keep it before our minds, much less understand it, save by use of ideas and knowledge we already possess.’² Or as Wittgenstein has it: ‘But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false.’³

The example of the ‘apple’ is trite, but it will suffice. One might point out that ‘apple’ is a concept with which or under which experience (of it) is organised for people, say, in temperate climates, while it is conceivable that there are people removed from such contexts or climates who would not (and, presumably, could not) attach the concept ‘apple’ to the relevant experience, object, or item. Now one could say, in response, that this implies that even for folks in temperate climates, who encounter such objects on an almost quotidian basis, there must have been a time when the concept ‘apple’ was not functional, that is, a time before the concept in question had been formed, but not a time, presumably, before the item existed and such experience was appropriately schematised or filtered or differentiated in some

¹ Westphal, ‘Post-Kantian Reflections on the Importance of Hermeneutics’, 59. ‘Interpretation becomes primordial and all pervasive because all our judgments about the world, whether we think of them as interpretations or not, presuppose an interpretation or construal of the world, a seeing of the world as such and such’ (64).
way (otherwise how would one have had the experience of some determinate thing in the first place?). Perhaps this flirts with a sort of ‘linguistic idealism’ – the view that some realities are created by linguistic habits. Many concepts are creations that both begin in and arise out of experience; but does it follow that the experiences and the things to which those experiences refer are (necessarily) thereby created?¹

This is an instance of the sort of complexity surrounding conception I want to examine. Steven Katz makes the point: ‘[A]ll experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.’² It is true, all experience is initially organised (or differentiated) experience; but since the congenital conceptual scheme or equipment with which human beings engage in such organisation is not fully developed – since, that is to say, not every concept that can be had, or is had, is innate – all experience stands in need of being further organised, interpreted, re-organised, interrogated in the light not only of native concepts (or conceptual capacities) but also of concepts acquired in communities and cultures and traditions, all of which shape both what and how one gets on in the world.³ It is the difference between initially organised and re-organised experience, experience without accountability and experience with accountability: experience which is more amorphous, on the one hand, and experience which, when reflected upon and interpreted, say, in light of distinctively communal concepts, is seen with new clarity, loses its charm, becomes more significant, on the other. And in every conceptual scheme there are both fixed and fluid concepts – and the distinction between fixed and fluid is itself a fluid and shifting one.

This suggests that the conceptual construct(s) which host such concepts—whatever they turn out to be—must be understood to vary in specificity and priority: the congenital construct, as I have dubbed it, is just the condition in which all men and women experience the world, defined in narrative fashion (if you will) by one’s story telling and story building capabilities, that which is logically prior to any and every experience, and that includes experience of God; the cultural construct broadens and contextualises the congenital, encompassing the concepts, ideas and beliefs that one acquires and forms in ordinary living and learning in the world rather than those with which one is born—if you will, not a story telling capacity but the beginnings of the story itself; and the communal construct further specifies and orients the congenital as well as the cultural, and it creates a pattern for those concepts, beliefs, practices and habits one owns and learns in more localised contexts, in religious traditions, for example, or churches, and these very specific and developed ideas change not only the way one views the world and one’s experience in it, but also the meaning and significance of virtually any experience you can imagine.

These conceptual constructs can be distinguished; in most cases, however, there is significant overlap, as I have already indicated. But, in the final analysis, how one construes reality will depend a great deal on how developed these constructs are and which construct in particular, with its epistemic priorities, one gives (practical) primacy. So there is a (Christian) communal construct, for example, that is governed by the conviction that God has all the attributes traditionally ascribed to him, omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence and so on, and that just this God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Now presumably—again depending upon how serious one’s personal stock in this is—a person who adopts this view, perhaps willy-nilly, is committed to seeing all of reality as something like gracious, a gift of a good and loving God, and is
committed to living, reacting and relating accordingly. One can think of this conviction as a *conceptual governor* which regulates beliefs and belief dispositions, which simultaneously establishes and protects a conceptual scheme's parameters, and which accordingly prevents those parameters from either becoming dangerously blurred (into other schemes) or constricting too much; and it will do this, for example, by rivalling, revising, or simply repudiating the host of culturally inculcated beliefs that appear to threaten or violate the scheme's integrity. Of course this does not guarantee that the person is right, and certainly not that her outlook should automatically be privileged (or universalised).\(^1\) But it does show that various ways of organising and thinking about experience and reality—conceptual schemes, or grids, or constructs, whatever one wants to call them—really are at work and often competing furtively. And it shows that, typically, one meta-construct, or, rather, a central, unifying set of convictions within a scheme otherwise full of mystery, ambiguity and contradiction, comes to prominence and dictates the warp and woof of one's life.\(^2\) There is no need to say of one's conceptual scheme that it is fundamentally correct, or that its unifying

\(^1\) I am not, in this dissertation (at any rate), terribly interested in adjudicating communal visions, research programs, traditions, language games, or whatever; nor am I particularly interested in suggesting criteria for eventual adjudication. Perhaps one's preferring one vision to another is largely a matter of a vision's explanatory potency, dialectical ingenuity, and practical efficacy (that is, its ability to 'absorb the world' [Lindbeck]), or more a matter of a vision's ability to develop ultimate concerns, or essentially a matter of a vision's success in assuaging one's worst fears, or, perhaps, ultimately a matter of what sort of goals and ideals one incorrigibly prefers, or...—in other words, clearly not every vision or way of life is initially credible or equally plausible (or, for that matter, genuinely live), for precisely the reason that options cannot be investigated with neutral personal detachment or unpolluted open-mindedness; and yet some ways of engaging in conversation and rational justification are better (perhaps because more fecund) than others. But in such matters, as Wittgenstein says, we proceed not by justification, argument, but by missionary-like persuasion. Thus Putnam: '[A]ny superiority of our versions over other versions must be judged and claimed from within our collection of versions; there is no neutral place to stand' (*Realism and Reason*, 168).

\(^2\) The talk of meta-schemes, narratives, languages is perilously unclear. It depends, of course, on how one looks at it (from what perspective, at what level, etc.): one can think of many, perhaps countless smaller-scale schemes or narratives, competing within the same person or community, creating precisely the identity and loyalty problems of which MacIntyre and Hauerwas speak; or one can think, perhaps, of one overarching scheme or narrative with as many facets and components as you please—a single, (dis)orientating scheme consisting of all sorts of fragments, fusions and contradictions from many other stories. If the latter, Marshall's suggestion helps: still there are central epistemic priorities that guide and constrain one.
conviction is self-evident, or that it yields only or mostly true beliefs most of the time. Perhaps all that need be said is that the scheme/vision is demonstrably coherent, that the beliefs that it sanctions have a sufficient degree of warrant for that person, and that it is character-building, action-guiding and identity-making-and-sustaining – that it is rational, plausible, liveable. And the scheme/vision may be sensibly preferred if it seems to absorb the insights and anomalies of other schemes or visions.

**Conceptual governors and control beliefs**

Does this suggest that it is beliefs, and the concepts which give them purchase, and not just sentences or the totality of sentences in the form of a Language, L, in terms of which conceptual schemes are to be defined and understood – not just possible beliefs and dispositions to hold sentences true under special conditions but actual beliefs and belief dispositions in action? Obviously beliefs function to condition human involvement with the world, whether or not those beliefs are reflectively held or intelligibly formulated; and, it would seem, some beliefs are programmatic, both life-giving and life-shaping. A belief, or set of beliefs, is programmatic if it substantially alters the way persons or communities approach and interpret the phenomena they encounter.

Perhaps it is less controversial to understand these orientational beliefs as conceptual governors\(^1\) rather than the sole stuff of which various conceptual schemes are comprised, especially since conceptual schemes are not limited simply to beliefs. By conceptual governor I mean a stable and central belief (or cluster of beliefs) that at least partially determines both what and how one sees, lives, reacts,

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and so on; a central belief which supervenes\(^1\) upon, in either parasitic or a fructifying ways, the shared human conceptual equipment and its employment; a central belief which broadens, deepens, refocuses, motivates the natural endowments and categories; which determines one's priorities as well as one's vision, and therefore structures one's identity and one's involvement with the world. It can be said that cultural and communal schemes are interdependent, exist along side, or intermingle with, the categories and belief-dispositions that coincide with one's entrance into the world, the congenital capacities, in some ways clarifying and in other ways distorting, but never completely displacing them.

But with a Christian (communal) vision one, as it were, enters a new world without quite losing contact with the world into which one was born; that vision is of a story, a narrative connected to the past, directed to the future and experienced in the present, structured by the already of promise, the not yet of fulfilment and the now of faith, hope and love; more generally, in the Christian vision, as in other visions, the present envelops the past and anticipates, and so is conditioned by, the future. Perhaps it would be fitting to say that the Christian communal vision is inaugurated with baptism, nurtured in prayer and proclamation, and consummated in eucharist. Kenneth Surin has expressed the point nicely: 'The Christian is thus the person who inhabits a narrative "space" circumscribed by the gospel texts. The phenomenology of one's entry-point or "baptism" into a constituting narrative...is also one that applies in general to the Christian's entry into this gospel-shaped narrative "space" – to sacrifice oneself to these narrative texts, with their controlling metaphor of "incarnation", is (at least) to consent to be interrogated by them in such a way that we learn, slowly, laboriously and sometimes painfully, to live the way of Jesus.'\(^2\) I argue in Chapter 8 that the

\(^1\) John Heil has an excellent discussion of the 'supervenience hypothesis' in his *The Nature of True Minds*, 58-102.

church is where this gospel-shaped narrative space is created and where one learns, gradually to be sure, the way of Jesus through participation in the church’s central practices, where one acquires and revises beliefs and belief-dispositions through doxastic practices; and the central practices, as they bear witness to the gospel, create and sustain Christian epistemic priorities and thus create and sustain distinctively Christian identity.

Quite banal examples of conceptual schemes with salient conceptual governors include theism, atheism, hedonism, Marxism, and so on. In virtue of the central control belief that God exists and does all things well, for example, a theist views creation and all of life as, among other things, purposive and elegant, a supreme manifestation of the glory of its creator, a gift. An atheist, by contrast (speaking only in very unsophisticated terms), having dismissed theism as a solemn possibility, perhaps inevitably views all things within the closed system of the universe as, among other things, random, flukish, more than likely bereft of ultimate purpose. These are dominant orientational beliefs, beliefs from which one’s life takes a point of departure, beliefs in the light of which one yearns for or shrinks from the future. For better or worse, these basic beliefs (Nancey Murphy calls them ‘hard core’ beliefs) are tied to a great many other beliefs, varying in degrees of intensity and importance, and this has the effect of creating a canopy, a web or world view; and for better or worse, these central-cum-cluster beliefs decisively alter the way one views the world and one’s experiences in and of it, even if the viewing and experiencing are more or less the same for all people: congenitally, that is to say, human beings (perhaps in spite of what they believe!) have some experiences, perceptions, and the like, and they are shaped by them; culturally and communally, human beings (in light of what they believe!) interpret

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1 For a discussion of experiencing the world as gracious gift, see Brümmer, Speaking of a Personal God, 118-127.
2 See Murphy, Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 194.
the source and significance, the warp and woof, of their experiences differently (and have different experiences). But I suspect that this way of putting matters is not quite adequate.

**Conceptual relativity, preformation and modest constructivism**

Does the foregoing imply conceptual relativity? In good dialectical fashion, we must answer yes and no: yes, inasmuch as not all concepts and non-trivial beliefs are shared among peoples and idioms and communities; no, inasmuch as some concepts and ways of experiencing are (I want to say: for all we know) relatively stable and shared.¹ Some concepts, Brummer thinks (loosely following Kant), are fundamental and stable, such as identity; but because concepts are forms of thought and thus forms of life, most concepts in fact are variable, ‘subject to cultural change’.² I think he is right. Thus we need not resist the conclusion that conceptual dissonance is (on a certain level) real but (on another level) not irreducible.³

I have not quite been fair to Davidson: he has a lot to say about beliefs – or rather the disposition to hold beliefs under certain conditions – and their connection to interpretation and meaning;⁴ I can distinguish my position from his without denying that they have much in common. He is committed to a ‘shared world’, largely shared beliefs, and therefore different languages (not conceptual schemes);

¹ Putnam claims, in strikingly Davidsonian fashion: ‘We are committed by our fundamental conceptions to treating not just our present time-slices, but also our past selves, our ancestors, and members of other cultures past and present, as persons; and that means, I have argued, attributing to them shared references and shared concepts, however different the conceptions that we also attribute’ (Reason, Truth and History, 119).


³ The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability’ (Davidson, *Inquiries*, 184).

⁴ See his ‘Belief and the Basis of Meaning’, in *Inquiries* (141-154).
thus relativity is semantic rather than conceptual. The discussion of Chapter 4 on seeing different things and seeing things differently should be recalled in this regard. If that previous discussion has merit, it looks like both stability and relativity are undeniable, in other words. The constructs of which I have repeatedly spoken—congenital, cultural, communal—are overlapping, after all: perhaps then the conceptual relativity which insinuates itself has to do not with a multiplicity of competing/incompatible conceptual schemes but with compatible relativity (a la Davidson), owing to a largely shared world, many shared beliefs, innumerable shared concepts and categorial penchants. We would be dealing, in this scenario, with different, competing, incompatible control beliefs and epistemic priorities. Perhaps it is the case that we both share a world and create rival worlds within that world; that subjectivity is amenable to worldly pressure and that the world (objectivity) is liable to subjective projection; that conceptual schemes, or priorities of shared schemes, are neither simply fixed not merely fluid but rather fluidly fixed; that the world is both self-determining and under-determined and subjects, always within and with reference to conceptual schemes, are both productive and receptive.

I have at various points along the way alluded to a theological theory of preformation, the fairly straightforward thesis according to which human beings are endowed, from birth, with special (albeit initially inchoate) aptitudes for experiencing reality, the telos of which seems to be both the acquisition of true beliefs and the inauguration of inter-personal communion, with God and neighbour; and as human beings grow, evidently they continue the process of learning, through concept revision and acquisition, more creatively to participate in experience. According to the theory of preformation, these aptitudes are gifts from God and not merely accidental collocations or configurations—and perhaps they are aptitudes before they are skills, potential before they are actual. They are, in
Plantinga's terms, a vital part of man's noetic arsenal or design plan. Plantinga has quite trenchantly argued that (a certain form of) naturalism is impotent to account for the design plan of human ratiocinative aptitudes, chiefly the acquisition of true beliefs; evolution, in the shape of natural selection, leaves no room for human penchant or concern for truth (so Plantinga argues, pace Quine). From all appearances there could be no life, no encounter, no experience unless human beings were so pre-formed, purposively designed by a supremely intelligent and benevolent being to aim at true beliefs and to enter into honest and intimate personal relationships.

Human communicative activity is the cornerstone of society. But if what one gives when and as she speaks, gestures, loves and loathes is not (approximately) received and understood, presumably human societies, with the dinosaurs, would have become extinct a long time ago. Plantinga puts it simply: 'Testimony or credulity, therefore, is a crucially important part of our noetic arsenal; it is the foundation of culture and civilization.' Some basic association,

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1 Plantinga, Warrant and Proper Function, 194-237; see also Warranted Christian Belief, especially chapter 7.

2 I am making reference here to the 'preformation theory' articulated by Thomas Reid, and rejected by Kant. But Kant's doctrine of categories finally needs bolstering by some such notion of preformation; and perhaps his appeal in the Critique of Judgement to the transcendental conditions of aesthetic judgement shows - by loose analogy - that a notion like preformation could well be adduced to explain (putative) experience of God. Adina Davidovich, perhaps unintentionally, makes room for just such a move in her elliptical interpretation of Kant's third Critique. Her views are fleshed out in Religion as a Province of Meaning: The Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), a synoptic form of which appears in 'Kant's Theological Constructivism', Harvard Theological Review 86:3 (1993), 323-51. For a material critique of her program, and more besides, see Chris L. Firestone, 'Reading Kant Religiously' (Ph.D. Diss. University of Edinburgh 2001).

3 So Josef Pieper: 'Under conditions of freedom, however, human beings speak uninhibitedly to one another.... For in the face of it, we suddenly become aware of the degree of human closeness, mutual affirmation, communion, that resides in the simple fact that people listen to each other and are disposed from the start to trust and "believe" each other.... Everyone who speaks to another without falseness, even if what he says is not at all "confidential", is actually extending a hand and offering communion; and he who listens to him in good faith is accepting the offer and taking the hand' (Faith, Hope, Love [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997], 41). This connection between communication and communion is one of the common places in Pieper's work; so also see his slender Abuse of Language - Abuse of Power (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

4 Plantinga, Warrant and Proper Function, 87. Plantinga follows Reid here. According to Reid one learns (from) another by believing what the other says - the natural tendency to believe others is what
correlation, or connection (I have used the notion of continuity elsewhere) does evidently obtain between words spoken – personal disclosure – and information received as well as intimacy effected. People typically understand one another not at every level but at an important level. Of course, the preformation (or proper function/design plan) thesis need not deny that human beings are categorial and interpretive, prone to construe and misconstrue; in fact, I wish to argue, and indeed have been arguing, that the interpretive predicament from which human beings cannot, hard as they try, extricate themselves does not always preclude but also providentially occasionally, perhaps normally, fecundates experience. Thus the view that human beings are necessarily receptive and productive in experience will be compatible with realism.

It is one thing to suggest that all experience depends in varying degrees on one’s categories and concepts for intelligibility; it is another thing to insist that all one has in experience is one’s categories. This sort of radical constructivism does entail anti-realism, it seems to me; and I shall say that it has very little to commend it. For language and concepts apparently need ‘extra-linguistic’ reality in order to avoid being completely vacuous.

We must avoid both reductions and dichotomies. I can press the point, and make some necessary distinctions, again with reference to Davidson. Frank Farrell reminds us that Davidson does not accept ‘a determinate world of facts to which language can hook up causally’. I am inclined to agree: we do create or make worlds. But the issue is tricky, so let me qualify that claim to include discovery, and in that way both avoid crass constructivism and remain truly realist: we create

Reid means by credulity; and, according to Reid (according to Plantinga), what protects credulity from incredulity is sympathy, the faculty or intellectual power by means of which one develops awareness of what other people are thinking, feeling, and so on. Thomas Reid, Inquiry and Essays (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983): ‘Another first principle I take to be, That certain features of the countenance, sounds of the voice, and gestures of the body, indicate certain thoughts and dispositions of mind’ (279); cf. Plantinga, Warranted Christian Belief, 147.

1 Farrell, Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism, 78.
saliencies within the world, create worlds, if you will, within the world. Naturally how one sorts, organises, individuates, identifies, even involves oneself with the world will be under-determined by the world itself, and is therefore in some sense up to one’s conceptual scheme (without being simply up for grabs), language aptitudes, style of life, and so on.¹ So even if I accepted an austere realism (like Alston’s) according to which a ready-made world of facts exists with which language causally hooks us up, I would still want to make distinctions. Such a world would not be (completely) determinable;² such a world would still under-determine awareness of itself, would not causally compel assent to a particular sorting or construal of it; and would therefore still depend crucially on one’s conceptual scheme (and way of being in the world). Facts thus are, or at least are tied to, ways of seeing, sorting, surveying the world; it would be more accurate to say, as we shall see, that ways of being in the world (over- and under-) determine the facts, the saliencies, we see and sort; facts in a sense become artifacts of conceptual schemes. Evidently, it will also be the case that saliencies suggest themselves.³

But we do not have to accept, not uncritically at any rate, a determinate world of facts to nurture a sense of alterity, otherness, objectivity. If the other, the object (or the subject, in the case of inter-personal experience), is presumed –

¹ ‘We create our worlds by our styles of living. Because those world are ours, we are comfortable in them.... The shame of it is that the personal worlds we make never last. They exist within a wider world we did not make, and that world, in the end, overwhelms our worlds’ (Vogel, Radical Christianity and the Flesh of Jesus, 1).

² Putnam has argued that combining metaphysical realism with a causal theory of perception guarantees that we cannot refer to external things – or cannot guarantee that we ever do. For the latest on where Putnam stands on these issues, see The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 3-41.

³ Peter Donovan, loosely following John Wisdom, remarks: ‘Religious ways of speaking, similarly, may be thought of as ways of coming to see, or ways of regarding, the facts’ (‘Interpretation and Rational Belief’, 158). On a theological development of Wisdom’s notion of ‘seeing a pattern’, see William Placher, Unapologetic Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989). ‘Christian theology, I propose, makes a claim about an emerging pattern. Christians will admit that the current evidence is ambiguous. They see a pattern in their own lives and the world around them, but they can understand that others do not’ (126).
which I suggested in Chapter 5 was, for ethical as well as performative reasons, sufficiently reasonable—surely it is incumbent on an experiencing subject to allow the other to disclose itself and shape the experience and the experiencer in the process. In being encountered by an-other, in the form of a text just as much as a person, one is called to response and openness, to vulnerable dialogue, in which one hears the other as best one can, speaking through the static in her own voice and idiom; and the responsive (and responsible) way of reciprocating that openness is by being attentive and giving oneself, freely and sincerely. Among other things, then, radical constructivism is reductive as well as ethically disconcerting: it has neither the capacity nor the courtesy to permit the other to exist, speak and exercise its own influence, to chasten and challenge the a priori biasing categories by which it stubbornly interprets.

This view carries with it the ugly implication that the subject as productive exists, always and everywhere, without receptivity, wantonly fashioning rather than being fashioned by the world in which it lives and moves, laughs and mourns. But of course, both the productive and the receptive aspects of a subject's experience are indispensable, I have said—and the hope of finding some continuity between constructivism and realism is just the hope of better balancing both aspects. How are we to understand the productive and receptive elements in experience? In what sense does one create, and in what sense does one discover? We need a concept of active receptivity.

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1 I am alluding here to Gadamer's notion of understanding as 'event' and 'dialogue': 'To understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue' (Philosophical Hermeneutics, 57). The metaphor of dialogue is, like all metaphors, limited and limiting; a text is, of course, produced by an author, a person who speaks, but a text, unlike a person, does not itself speak, talk, spontaneously capitulate and re-capitulate (in the same sense). Thus Nicholas Lash: 'Texts do not talk. They stay in silence, at the mercy of the reader, incapable of interrupting the reading, of correcting it, or of suggesting that something has been overlooked' (Easter in Ordinary, 6).
Active receptivity

It is a fictitious subject which only creates; Husserl has taught us nothing if not that when meaning, the pure thinking thing's creation, is thought to reside solely and square within consciousness, the significant other in experience becomes superfluous – methodological solipsism becomes virtual solipsism. The subject that only creates stands alone, presumably happy in its epistemological solitude. Conversely, it is a fictitious subject which only discovers; Kant has taught us nothing if not that 'thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'. Instead of severing two things that cannot really or intelligibly exist apart, it is better to ask how a balance can be sustained. How are we to understand the coincidence, while avoiding the confusion, of objective and subjective? Can sense be made of the claim that in experience one both gives and receives? Is there a balanced way of understanding the nature of the exchange between the percipient and the other in encounter?

The subject is productive in experience in that it not only receives but gives; the subject must in some sense be – to change the metaphor – an eisegete. The subject is receptive in experience in that it not only gives but receives; it is not enough for a subject to be – or rather it would be too much for a subject only to be – an eisegete, it must also be an exegete. The subject must listen as much as it speaks, sit in silence as often as it soliloquises; it must seek to conform its own speaking and thinking to that which has called it into responsive conversation. The risk of that vulnerable conversation is conversion, becoming other than one is; and the risk is the reward, the conversation's proper goal.

1 CPR, 93 (A51).
2 Sue Patterson, in conversation with Werner Jeanrond and David Ford, draws a similar hermeneutical analogy, distinguishing between eisegesis and exegesis, fashioning and being fashioned (Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age, 53-60). Patterson's theistic realism complements my constructive realism. 'It may be consistent with this theistic realism to maintain that our intuitions as to the nature and shape of reality in so far as they are correct are recognized as participatory in a divine creativity transcendent yet inclusive of our own' (29).
Or think of the other in experience, to change the metaphor, as a mirror in which one sees oneself—both as one is in oneself and as one is, or may become, in response to the other. Everyone knows that a mirror is a fickle (and fragile) thing; it reveals and it distorts, and both are conditioned by one's perception, angle of vision, quality of lightening, and so on. I do not see myself in a mirror merely as I am. It may be that vanity illuminates my perception, and as such suggests that I am more handsome than I really am, while someone else, with a different history and with different issues, sees himself as fatter and less attractive than he really is. I typically see myself as I am, at least in part—but not merely as I am. But when I see myself as other than I am, let's say, never do I see myself as other apart from myself: after all, a distortion is of something, and a creation, typically, is not ex nihilo. To ask whether one projects oneself onto the other or discovers oneself in the other is therefore misleading. The answer is—both: in perception, in experience, one projects and sees, distorts and discerns, creates and is confronted by (a sometimes unwelcome) reality. Perceptions, then, point both to reality and to already existing scheme-dependent construals of reality, in much the same way that some words and word-arrangements point both to realities other than words and to linguistic conventions regulating one's awareness of reality.

So, evidently, there is receptivity and productivity in experience, exegesis and eisegesis, and these moments, though coincidental, should not be confused.

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2 I have in mind here *Cratylus*, one of Plato's dialogues concerning language, speech and truth; in it Cratylus (one of three principal participants) argues in good Heraclitean fashion that—since 'all is flux'—perhaps one should point with one's finger and avoid saying anything at all. But if speaking and pointing are (among other things) both complex ways of glimpsing reality without capturing it, then Cratylus's proposal proves either too much or too little. Presumably gestures do not capture, contain, or circumscribe reality any more than perceptions or words do—reality is too elusive (and in some cases, as Kierkegaard would say, 'illusory') for that, free to reveal and retreat—or simply remain hidden. But it certainly does not follow that gestures and perceptions and words dismally and uniformly fail to glimpse, or get tangled up in, reality.
Let us suggest that the receptive moment occurs at precisely that point when what is given in experience, something above, beyond or other than the subject, is seen in its alterity, seen in its integrity and uniqueness (in its ‘infinition’ Levinas might say);¹ and the productive or active moment (as something logically distinguishable) occurs at precisely that point when what is given is seen, from the subject’s point of view, when a seeing, with its categorial imposition, renders what is given intelligible, effectively creating an environment in which a presentation can disclose itself. I think Gadamer’s perichoretic notions of prejudice and fusion of horizons are compatible with what I am lisping to suggest. One way to prevent the fatal collapse of passive into active (extreme constructivism’s error) or active into passive (naive realism’s error) is to appreciate that categorial perceptions rarely create their presentations out of nothing: a categorial perception is not alone in an experience which presupposes both subject and object in the thickness of background and foreground. If one inevitably has oneself in experience one also, at least occasionally, has more than oneself, I have claimed. Rather, a categorial perception both discloses prejudice and creates a context in which something strange and other may be invited to share itself and chasten prejudice.²

¹ See Emmanuel Levinas, Outside the Subject (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).
² This discussion is of great consequence — and if so great, one may wonder, why is it being relegated to a footnote? Not every brand of constructivism is equally hostile to objective reality. I see no reason to think that giving to experience necessarily (wholly) obscures things, objects or persons, as they give themselves to be experienced and known; it is plainly a non sequitur to suppose that because one gives to experience one never receives in/from experience. If one receives from experience — especially when the experience is of another person — there remains the better than remote possibility that one (and one’s concepts, prejudices, beliefs and belief-dispositions) may be transformed by the experience of the other, thereby given a new vision with which to see, new categories and concepts, and new virtues with which to live more felicitously in the world. This sort of transformation in experience is hard to deny: it happens between man and man, man and woman all the time. I have more than once come to relationships with unfurled prejudice, expecting to find the prejudice embodied, and I have many times come from those encounters prejudice upset, disrupted, new categories forced upon me; I suspect that I am not alone. It should be uncomfortably obvious by now that it is impossible to encounter the other, any other, without prejudice. But it is precisely the prejudice that brings the encountered dissimilarity into sharp relief; the miracle is that, through dissimilarity, prejudice can be revised (or replaced). So Gadamer asks: Why the prejudice against prejudice? But some versions of constructivism are inimical, it seems to me. For depending on how robust one’s view of human conceptual imposition is, as well as how meagre (one’s view of) an impinging reality is, it is possible to be led, gradually perhaps but inexorably, to the unhappy
words, conceptual schemes, made cohesive by networks of concepts and beliefs, create contexts as well as dispositions in which particular awarenesses become possible. But conceptual schemes are not merely collections of bare capacities, basic concepts, regulative beliefs. They are essentially *modes of being in the world*, embodied ways of *being from* and *being toward* the world, of having, emplotting and sharing one’s experiences. They encompass one’s belief-dispositions as well as the many beliefs and disciplines that make living in the world passionate and interesting. Nicholas Lash’s remarks are helpful: ‘Wherever we start from, whatever our background, history, expertise, and interests, we have no alternative but to pattern and order our experience, to find our way around. Chaos and formlessness threaten our identity and sense of direction. We need to put plot and pattern into the confusion that surrounds and constitutes us.’

I said we need a concept of active receptivity; perhaps I should have said that we need to continue to work towards a theological account of how one participates in reality by creating, an account sufficiently rich and illuminating to sustain constructive realism. We must qualify the preformation theory to which we have referred, in other words. Christianly speaking, man is created and fallen, created to be creative, but now fallen and therefore subversively creative or else

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uncreative, both prone in arrogance to assert autonomy and poised in indolence to desert responsibility. It is not (quite) that we discover and create, discover then create; rather we creatively discover, discover by actively participating in reality, God's reality and therefore the world's reality, participate by being creatively responsive to God's self-attesting disclosure. This is constructive realism: we are created creatively and submissively to share in God's reality; now fallen, we are notoriously prone to mis-create and misconstrue; but in being redeemed we learn to be creatively responsive to God through faith and obedience.

Perception of embodiment

All this talk of history, identity and conceptual schemes will make very little sense as long as one remains oblivious to one's bodiliness. I have said that conceptual schemes ultimately are modes of being in the world – or, if one prefers, ways of being bodily and social – and that conceptual schemes shape and are shaped by identity-making-and-sustaining experiences. In other words, conceptual schemes, rife with concepts and structured by them, are thus not merely conceptual: they concern discourse and praxis, word and deed, and as such are no more abstract (non-concrete) than the lives and livings in which they are incarnated, to which they are accountable, and from which they continually derive their vitality and efficacy. This establishes a palpable connection between bodiliness and conceptual schemes. Bodiliness is an inescapable reality of being-in-the-world. It is presupposed in all experience, as much in seeing and loving as in grieving and rejoicing. It sets boundaries for one's limits and potentials; it both hinders and potentiates human encounter; it is a barrier as well as a sine qua non of shared human intimacy. Even the many pleasures that are more than physical cannot be

1 Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel calls the experience in which one moves from the awareness of 'I have a body' to the awareness of 'I am my body' a 'boundary situation' (I Am My Body: A Theology of
completely detached from the physical. I love my wife from a distance, beyond the sweet reach of sight and touch; and I can imagine future possibilities or remember warm experiences from the past in an enclosed room or with my eyes closed; but such flourishes as love, anticipation and recollection (protention and retention, to use Husserl's language) are, I have argued, thoroughly rooted in, indeed inextricable from, this life's bodily experiences.\(^1\) Objects, events, states of affairs affect (though precisely how is unclear) perceptions, but only because of the bodiliness of percipients. It is also true that related factors external to, or other than, objects, events and states of affairs affect perception, such as the location of the percipient, health and functioning of the implicated sense organs, and various other media like education, past experience, perceptual skill, expectations, prejudices, and so on. But all of that also depends crucially on the bodiliness of percipients.\(^2\) Bodiliness, then, is a transcendental reality, conditioning the very possibility of speaking, thinking, imagining, loving, laughing, striving, losing, dying.

I have just mentioned Husserl, so let me connect this train of thought with the Husserl discussion of Chapter 3. There I agreed with Husserl that subjectivity

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\(^1\) 'As embodied persons, there is no way for us to come to know one another except through glances, words, gestures, idiosyncrasies, hugs, and withdrawals, all of which we experience through the personal body' (Paula Jean Miller, 'The Theology of the Body', in *Theology Today* 57/4 [2001], 502). Thus the body is a 'primordial sacrament' (502). And Michael Polanyi says that in both subsidiary and focal awareness the body is our skilful instrument in and through which we integrate the world and integrate ourselves into the world (*Knowing and Being* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969], 183, 212). 'I shall say that we observe external objects by being subsidiarily aware of the impact they make on our body and of the responses our body makes to them. All our conscious transactions with the world involve our subsidiary use of our body' (214).

\(^2\) For more along these lines on how physiological, psychological and philosophical factors play into the phenomenon of perception, see R. J. Hirst, ed., *Perception and the External World* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
is caught up in experience, that experiencing and knowing are indeed tied to subjectivity, that object and subject are indissoluble, and so on; I also agreed that the subject is (ill)fated to construct/create in experience. Just for these reasons I could not agree that the ‘interests’ which direct the subject’s intentions and attentions are pure, or that impure and biased interests can be sufficiently purged in reduction to establish pure and universal rationality. In short, precisely because I agree that subjectivity is inescapably involved in experience, I cannot agree that knowledge/experience is ever absolutely pure or apodictic.

Husserl’s notions of the life-world (Lebenswelt) and lived body (Leib) can be modified to make the argument I have made against Husserl, the very argument I wish now to clarify. In Ideas II,¹ and in The Crisis, Husserl argues, to simplify, that perception of the body and bodiliness of perception are fundamentally connected. I have implied something similar, but I mean this in a double sense (and this helps distinguish my position from Husserl’s): human beings are not only bodily in the physical or corporeal sense; they are (because corporeal) also social, already intrinsically involved with the world and with others, and (because social) also historical, already incarnated. This (un)happily implies finitude, fallenness, fallibility and all the rest. So von Balthasar: ‘Prisons of finitude! Like every other being, man is born in many prisons. Soul, body, thought, intuition, endeavor: everything about him has a limit, is itself tangible limitation.’² Imprisonment is the human inheritance. Yet that is the promise of experience, both the condition without which there is no experience and the condition of which one becomes aware through embodiment and so, in a way, redeems.

But, I want to be clear, bodiliness is not among the lamentable results of the Fall, and is thus not to be lamented; but the Fall shows itself, makes itself felt, in

the body – in physical atrophy, in disregard for one’s own health and the health of others, in broken and estranged relationships, in discrimination, stereotype and exploitation, in posturing and pretending, in aggression, violence, war. So one must (if you will) be mindful of one’s bodiliness and the bodiliness of others: otherwise one will fail to discern the conditions and limits, and therefore the promises and prejudices, of (perceptual) experience.

**Embodiment of perception**

I have just argued that one must reckon with the profound ways in which bodiliness conditions and limits experience, in order to understand perception’s conditions and limits, and in order to learn how, through a different sort of embodiment, to see and experience more humanly. Thus we move from bodiliness to embodiment, from physical presence and mere relatedness to others and other things in the world to (inter)personal practices and enactments that presuppose and perpetuate shared human endeavours. That is the move I try to make – the turn I try to take – in Chapter 8, where I examine the way in which experiences of God, at any rate Christian experiences, are providentially provisionally tied to embodiment, to the concrete central practices of Christian community, prayer, proclamation and eucharist. Thus in the central practices, experience (*pretext*) inherits both an accountability structure (*context*) and an identifiable story, a story that shapes uniquely Christian identity (*text*). In all of this we shall see how beliefs and belief-dispositions, concepts and conceptual governors, epistemic priorities and ecclesial practices are related both to each other and to bodiliness/embodiment.
The Incarnation as principle and pattern of embodiment

I have sketched something of a Kantian conception of experience: presentations, or sensible intuitions, must be joined with categorial perceptions if experience is to flourish. But it is a Kantian conception with an epochal difference: with the fact of Incarnation, and with the supposition of preformation-cum-deformation, one may be able to carve a space for super-sensible intuitions and supply, if not content for spiritual (categorial) perceptions, at least a critical principle against which such perceptions may be interpreted and assessed (Chapter 8). We have seen, now in one way now in another, that all alleged super-sensible perceptions of God, and certainly those claiming to be Christian, are conditioned; that is an inescapable fact not only of being in the world but of being fallen in a fallen world. In every experience prior agendas, prior commitments, already made choices, are present; in that sense, if in no other, experience is, as I have said, pretext, not meaning before or without text (bias) but suggesting prior texts and biases.1 The upshot is that all such alleged (Christian) experiences of God must therefore be (re)conditioned by the Incarnation, and the concepts it bequeaths and implies, as they are mediated by the apostolic witness in Scripture and enacted by Christian community. Or if one prefers something rather more formulaic: (Christian) experience (pretext) must be given narrative structure (text) as well as structural accountability (context), and must be not only measured against but normed by them. The Incarnation must clarify and challenge putatively Christian experiences of God; and it will do that most effectively in the context of the Christian community, where Christ is

1 Steven Katz says that the interpreter/observer has no access to the experiences of mystics and believing souls apart from their writings and linguistic creations. ‘We have no access to their special experiences independently of these texts’ (“Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning”, in Mysticism and Language, ed. Steven T. Katz [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 4). The point I am making is this: nor do they. Hence experience as pretext, experience presupposing text(s) (and guarding their assumption, often unknowingly). So even if/when experience is more than, goes beyond, text/language, it still depends fundamentally upon text/language. But this ‘going beyond’ points to the possibility of chastening and learning in experience, of having odd and old prejudices upset, the possibility, Christianly speaking, of conversion.
worshipped and witnessed, his gospel proclaimed and his manner of life incarnated. In short, there is no (re)union with God without communion with Christ and Christ’s Body – if you will, no experience without mediation, without both media and a mediator: God himself must mediate between God and man in the Godman Jesus Christ; God must give himself by creating the conditions and the context in which to encounter him truly; and he has given himself in Christ, the Incarnation, and continually gives himself in Christ’s Body, the incarnate sphere of God’s saving activity.

Interestingly, and necessarily, the Incarnation establishes a point of reference both external and internal to the community’s life. Neither Christ nor the scriptures which serve Christ in witness are the community’s possession or achievement. They remain other, strange, strangely other, and as such promise an accountability for Christian experience which is at once beyond complete mastery and complete manipulation. The word of scripture is a gift of the bridegroom to his bride the church. It is destined for the church and, in this respect, belongs to her; but it is also the word of God, the word of the head, and as such it is above the church. At the same time, there is no access to Christ apart from the witness of the scriptures, and no real access to the scriptures apart from the community’s practice, performance and proclamation; at any rate the credibility of the Gospel does importantly depend upon the Church and its unity in practice. And it would seem, at least at first glance, that the world in which the Christian community is immersed has no luminous access to Christ apart from the witness of the community. I wish to argue that there is gospel in the ecclesial community’s witness just to the extent that Christ’s manner of life is incarnated (mastered) –

1 For a similar train of thought, see David Fergusson’s critique of Stanley Hauerwas’ ecclesiology (= Christology), *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, 68-72.
3 See Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*. 
proclaimed in an incarnated fashion – in the community and through the community in the world. But because interpretation and incarnation of the gospel are always intrinsically human endeavours, the striving to perform or master the scriptures, and so witness to Christ, will unavoidably involve manipulation, distortion, the promotion of something other than gospel, and will therefore always need to be carefully and decisively chastened by the witness of the Spirit, not only from within but also from without.1

The Incarnation (I want to claim) is fundamentally mysterious and inaccessible – apart from the Spirit’s ministry in the scriptures and the community. Even then, the Incarnation intensifies the mystery of God. Kierkegaard makes this point rhetorically: ‘Look, there he stands – the god. Where? There. Can you not see him? He is the god, and yet he has no place where he can lay his head.’2 But this creates room for divine/human interaction in experience, precisely as it uniquely preserves both the moment of divine intrusion and the moment of human participation. Of course one never has access to God other than parochial human access, but God has freely shared himself in Christ and shares himself – reiterates his self-disclosure – by giving himself continually to the community and the world in Word and Sacrament, proclamation and eucharist.

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1 ‘In the provisionality of human life under the condition of time,’ Reinhard Hütter claims, ‘every witness is a limited witness, every witness is an approximation, every witness is just that, a witness’ (‘Karl Barth’s “Dialectical Catholicity”: Sic Et Non’, Modern Theology 16/2 [2000], 146). This is Barth’s point; ultimately, however, Hütter will be uneasy with the inability of Barth’s ecclesiology to tie witness to the embodied practices of the Church, so he will turn to Luther’s ‘concrete pneumatology’ to supplement (or supplant) Barth (150-152). I suppose I follow both Barth and Luther: The church’s witness is an always new gift from God and as such is both contingent and approximative; on the other hand, the veracity in the church’s witness is tied to – and never exists apart from – embodiment.

2 Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, 32.
PART III: THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE
Proclamation, prayer and eucharist – prayer and eucharist as proclamation: these are the identity-making-and-sustaining experiences of the Christian life, providentially situated in Christian community and unintelligible apart from that community’s life and worship. In the previous chapter, I said that the Incarnation, not in genere but in the concrete life and death of Jesus Christ, is the principle and pattern of Christian experience, and it performs that unique double function in the context of Christian community, where Christ is worshipped and witnessed. Now I want to unpack this suggestion a bit. I shall explore the extent to which proclamation, prayer and eucharist shape community life, support community worship and witness, and accordingly sustain properly Christian experiences; one might say that proclamation, prayer and eucharist sustain Christian identity by supporting community worship and witness.

But before I proceed, I wish to draw together some of the prominent concepts I have developed throughout, weave some of the threads together to create a sense of the whole. I have repeatedly claimed that there is no experience without mediation.

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1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 622.
2 Baptism is also identity constituting, but I do not develop it in the detail it deserves here, in part because one participates in – and fulfils – one’s baptism when one shares in the practice of prayer, proclamation and eucharist.
of concepts, beliefs, bodily practices, and so on). To make this claim, or to feel the force of it, is just to discover that we are bodily, social, historical beings – that is, situated, related, connected. ‘Flesh means being born; it means growing, finding nourishment, being able to procreate; and it means dying. Flesh means being part of a chain of ancestors; through it the individual is mysteriously identified and determined. This is why two Gospels begin with the family tree of Jesus. No carnal being initiates itself. All are born into a community that has existed before them and that possesses a tradition that molds them.'¹ We are baptised, that is, into identities before we choose them and before we speak them, and they shape and structure our experiences, from the banal to the beatific. It is also true, evidently, that our experiences may either undermine or skew existing identities; or as I put in Chapter 3, to capture this mutual enrichment: subjectivity needs objectivity for accountability and objectivity needs subjectivity for accessibility. We create and are created, give to and receive from experience, it seems. This is shorthand for the active receptivity we developed in the last chapter, and it insinuates that we may be recreated, given new beliefs and belief dispositions, new language skills, new practices and habits. We may, if you will, be baptised into a new community and a new identity, together graciously given rather than anticipated, merited, or chosen.² What we give to experience in the form of concepts, beliefs, and naive (or perverse) expectations will (under- or over-) determine, or be reflected in, what we receive from experience. Since receptivity has a lot to do with productivity, it will naturally be better, all things considered, if what we give to experience is given to us as a gift with which to share (in) experience.

² For a development of the sacraments as transition and transformation from old (destructive) realities into new (liberating) realities, see Rowan Williams, ‘Sacraments of the New Society’, in *Christ: The Sacramental Word*, eds David Brown and Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1996), 89-102. ‘The central transition here, as in baptism, is a death, a death here presented as a passage (once again) into new solidarity’ (95).
Consciousness, simply, is incarnate, is a fact of human existence and experience; both existence and experience are mediated bodily and socially. With the Incarnation, however, a new humanity is promised — if you will, a new incarnate consciousness, a new way of being (incarnate) in the world, a new (Christian) identity. The Incarnation, I argued in Chapter 6, is the decisive divine gift that at once announces and accomplishes healing for incarnate life, not by elevating humanity above or lifting humanity out of the density, finitude and fleshiness of human life, but by entering into that flesh and those circumstances and making humanity, and the world in which humanity is thoroughly embedded, new, inaugurating a truly human way of being in God’s world and in relation to God, the world and others in the world. God himself enters the poverty of the human condition in order to enrich it, not by making it divine but by sharing the divine life with human life and thereby making human life truly human (2 Cor 8.9). In short, by entering the human condition in Christ, God himself supplies the categories with which to see and speak of God and the conditions in which to share in the life of God (2 Pet 1.2-4). These are the gifts (χαρίσματα) God gives to us, gifts inseparable from the Christ and therefore inseparable from the gifts and practices of the body of Christ (σώμα Χριστοῦ), so that we may in turn give them to, and so truly receive from, our shared experiences (1 Cor 12). With experience of God, to create is to discover, to be creatively responsive to God’s normative witness in Jesus Christ, enacted and embodied in Christian community. Human beings are active in experience: they must therefore be active in fidelity to the gift(s) of God in Jesus Christ.

There is no way of avoiding being human in experience. That means that there is no way of being other than doxastic, in the sense of both seeing the world with (prior) beliefs and, under certain conditions, acquiring new beliefs as well as belief-dispositions with which to see the world. It is in the nature of humanity to
have myriad biases, dispositions both to act and to believe in certain ways under certain conditions. But, Christianly speaking, what can happen is that one becomes (truly) human by being graciously given new belief-dispositions and therefore new beliefs, along with new doxastic priorities, culminating in a fully incarnate way of being in God’s world. Beliefs and belief-dispositions are connected to each other as well as irreducibly tied to conceptual schemes or ways of being embodied; and those ways of being embodied are made coherent by shared stories and shared practices (Word and Sacrament). It is appropriate, then, that both belief production and belief preservation will depend crucially upon the interdependence of epistemic priorities and ecclesial practices.

To develop an-other identity, or to improvise on an established identity, one must engage in new practices – or engage in familiar practices with new insight and renewed devotion. Thus it could be said that Christian identity is, in a sense, both an extant and an emergent reality in Christian practice. New epistemic priorities, in other words, feed into as well as flow out of the central ecclesial practices; so in the context of Christian community, one’s flesh and the flesh of this world are interpreted with reference to the flesh of Christ. In fact, the practices of prayer, proclamation and eucharist, the practices centred on and surrounding worship and witness, not only manifest existing realities of belief and identity but also create new beliefs and identities. But all of this is annoyingly abstract, and to that extent less than perfectly illuminating, so we will do well to turn to worship and witness for clarification.

Worship and witness

Worship and witness are mutually enriching activities: worship is the community’s primary shared (or shared primary) experience, but it is also, no less significantly,
the community's principal way of witnessing Christ to one another – the most important way of sharing each other's (interpretive) burdens, I shall suggest; and witness, in another way, is also the community's invitation to the world, the principal way in which the community tells the gospel-story and invites others to share its identity-making-and-sustaining experience of the presence of God (in worship). Both worship and witness call for response and responsiveness – active receptivity. If you will, worship narratively structures (text), and provides structural accountability for (context), Christian experience (pretext); and in the context of worship the uniqueness of the Incarnation is witnessed through proclamation, eucharist and prayer, the gospel text made alive and thus textured into the life of the Christian community. The eucharist, in fact, is, as we shall soon see, prayer and proclamation (1 Cor 11.26), and proclamation is prayer and eucharist, the enacting as well as the telling of the story, the community's communion with Christ as well as its daring invitation to the world to share that communion, its testimony and its great thanksgiving.¹

These are the central ecclesial practices of which I have spoken, the practices that condition the central Christian epistemic priorities, and so likewise cultivate Christian identity. They are, if you like, the practices that presuppose and sustain fellowship along loyalty and identity lines, determine boundaries for the community and protect both its identity and the integrity of its witness vis-à-vis other communities: in that sense they are central and ecclesial. But they are also doxastic, for they both imply beliefs and create belief-dispositions, along with new beliefs and dispositions. Christian identity cannot be, as it were, simply chosen, any more than it

¹ On prayer as testimony and thanksgiving, see Patrick D. Miller, 'Prayer and Worship', Calvin Theological Journal 36 (2001), 53-62. 'Praise and thanksgiving, therefore, turn prayer into proclamation. The very heart of the act of giving thanks and praise is a declaration of what I, or we, believe and have come to know about the Lord of life. It is a declaration that thus calls others to a response to that reality, to see, fear, and trust in the Lord who has taken away my fears and helped me' (62). Thanksgiving is, then, an 'act of daring testimony' (61).
can be created at will or whim; Christian identity is not possessed but graciously given, not possessed even after it has been given as a gift in the matrix of the practices of the church, inaugurated in baptism, nurtured in proclamation and prayer, and consummated in eucharist. It (dis)possesses but is never possessed. I agree with von Balthasar: ‘Experience, psychologically, is always my own, evaluated by me, pertaining to me. Faith, by contrast, goes beyond me in that I have been dispossessed of my self (and this is always a prior objective reality) by the fact of Christ.... Consequently [this fact] must exceed all reflective experience and be ready to renounce it, to make way for a deeper self-dispossession, an even wider expansion.2

It is in becoming a member (μέλος) of ecclesial community through baptism that Christian identity is born, and it is in sharing in the practices of prayer, proclamation and eucharist that the common memory necessary for Christian identity is nurtured. In that way the ἐκκλησία becomes the Christian church, the body of Christ. ‘There is no common life, no common ground, no common action, without an agreement on the shared story and the common table.’3 So in worship the members of the body together remember, reenact, and thus redeem their shared identity as Christians; living members live their memories and thereby share the salvific moment in which past faith and future hope converge in a present already/not yet of love and communion. ‘The way one becomes a member,’ William Placher has strikingly shown, ‘helps define the nature of a community. One gets into Congress by election.... One joins a symphony orchestra through audition.... One enters a country club after the approval of the membership committee.... But one enters the

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1 See Rowan Williams, ‘Sacraments of the New Society’, 90-92.
2 Von Balthasar, The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church, 299.
Christian church by being baptized, and any infant can do it.¹ A striking image indeed.

So just as we are born into this world, at a time and place (with all the constraints that imposes) we did not choose and cannot control, so in baptism we are reborn into a community (with its constraints) we could not have chosen. Humanly speaking (and Christianly speaking, as well), one is always in media via; one is always already involved in worldly interactions deep and complex, and affected just as deeply and complexly — and often involuntarily — by those interactions. Thus personal and communal interactions must be managed to create recursive familiarity, must be suitable gradually to reveal one’s identity through one’s identification with others who share stories and sacraments. In media via: naturally then it is best if our interactions, indeed our entanglements, with others provide, over time, a sense of time and continuity in which the already/not yet dialectic of Christian identity is appreciated.

Obviously something other than Christian identity is created and sustained when the central practices are diminished in importance or, worse, displaced entirely by contrivances that have little, even ostensibly, to do with the gospel. So churches in which the gospel is neither preached nor heard, where the eucharist is just a memorial and thus so infrequent that the community cannot remember the last time it was celebrated, where sin is no longer confessed in mutual vulnerability and the promise of God’s unearned pardon no longer pronounced or appropriated, such churches are not churches. For Christian identity is created not by us but in us. It is something outside us that is applied to us, something in which we partake together or not at all, a reality not quite of this world but made a part of it in Jesus Christ. It is a

¹ William Placher, Narratives of a Vulnerable God (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 143. ‘All in all, one can hardly imagine a better symbol for a community of equals and a community of grace’ (144).
reality bound to the church and its liturgy-structured practices, to which we are (ultimately) accountable.

**Word and sacrament**

I have spoken here and there of Christian community, ecclesial community, church, and so on, so let me suggest some parameters for use of these terms. I am using the terms more or less interchangeably, but for shading I sometimes prefer church, sometimes ecclesial community; the context should make the shading clear. Generally, I shall follow Calvin: ‘From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’¹ So much more could be said: indeed the church is a fellowship and an institution, both of which raise important questions; a covenant community with prophetic, priestly and kingly responsibilities (1 Pet 2.4-12); a fellowship of followers who serve one another and share one another’s burdens and sins (Matt 18.15-20; Acts 2.41-47); the body of Christ in which a diversity of gifts, shared, contribute both to the wholeness of the body and to the unity which makes that body God’s grace in the world (1 Cor 12.1-26); indeed the church cannot be understood apart from unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity; and so on. In an interest to be as ecumenical as is permissible, I shall say only as much about all this as seems necessary and constructive. I shall stick to Calvin’s definition, but let me qualify it to avoid sectarian ecclesiology: the Word of God preached and heard, and the sacraments not only administered but appropriated – or, more laconically, the Word of God preached, heard and appropriated (in sacrament).

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1.9.
This suggests a fundamental unity of Word and Sacrament. It is also meant to suggest that the Word is not appropriated short of, or apart from, the sacrament (of the Supper), narrowly as well as broadly understood. One simple way to express this unity is to say that Word clarifies Sacrament and Sacrament confirms Word. This helps us both extend and delimit active receptivity. In the church the people, or rather the people of the church, hear what is given – the Word preached, promise proclaimed – in faith, and respond responsively to the call to the altar/feast in faithful obedience. Let me put it this way. At the altar, the people are altered (for there the church becomes the church), made (one in) the Body of Christ by partaking together – one with another – of the body of Christ; the church is constituted in the eucharist, or at any rate is not properly constituted apart from it. Simply, the church is made the church in proclaiming the Word faithfully (proclamation), hearing the Word with faith (prayer/praise), and appropriating the Word in faithful obedience (eucharist); and proclaiming, praying and appropriating the gospel in Word and Sacrament will apply just as much to witness as to worship. Thus with the concept of appropriation, concerns for ecclesial discipline and discipleship appropriately move into the foreground. The church, to be concise, creates and discovers both its identity and its way of life, and with them its integrity and its vocation of witness, in eucharistic worship.

Calvin’s understanding of the marks of the church is salutary in part because it is simple: it simply holds together, with little ambiguity or accretion, the identity-making-and-sustaining practices of the church, Word and Sacrament. What the Word of God is centrally, how best to preach it, how hearing proves itself, whether one prefers immersion or affusion in baptism, how precisely one understands Christ’s presence in the Supper: these are genuine and open questions, each hotly debated. But however one resolves these issues, few will dispute that Word and Sacrament are, in an important sense, central ecclesial practices, neither of which can
be denied or displaced without doing irreparable harm to the integrity and unity of the church. The Christian church is, it might be said, fundamentally and providentially 'a sacramental community as well as a storytelling one'\(^1\). The gospel story is told in living and lived in telling; or as Barth says, the Word is 'audible sacrament' and the sacrament of the Supper is 'visible Word'.\(^2\) The Spirit is implied in all of this.

Now this should help us dialectically interpret hearing and doing (James 1.19-27), faith and obedience, word and deed, believing and bodying forth, in a way that does justice to the Christian faith as both conceptual/doxastic scheme and way of life/embodiment. Since sacraments, like sermons, are recollective, anticipatory and participatory, they dynamically (and mysteriously) connect the past and the future into a living present. This happens in many ways, but the following may be instructive. In the ecclesial practices of proclamation, prayer and eucharist, hearing and doing, word and deed, are brought together and so unify these temporal dimensions. The gospel is text (or is bound to texts determinate in shape and content, and unintelligible without disciplined reference to those texts): but read and heard and appropriated it is also deed. The gospel preached is ultimately an auditory event, an event in which faith is born and nurtured in hearing, and accordingly makes one contemporaneous with Christ, bridges the chasm between the past and the present. The gospel appropriated is not an auditory event, but it does involve *audition*: one hears the gospel in the tangle of practice, gets the point by performing it. Through repetition the past is made alive and mere (future) possibilities become (present) actualities, which in turn create other possible actualities for Christian identity.\(^3\) ‘In the eucharist,’ Gerard Loughlin claims, ‘the people do not recall to mind the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, as if they might have forgotten

\(^1\) Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 144.
\(^2\) Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 79.
\(^3\) See Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 33-76.
this, but rather remember before God that this event has not ceased to determine the
day and future.'

**Space and structure**

We need *space*, it is true, in worship and witness to be human, to express spontaneity
and enact our authentic involvement in the drama of redemption; but spontaneity will
inevitably stray without the *structure* and accountability the community and its
gospel-practices afford. Human freedom and spontaneity are (because infected with
the hubris of sin) problematic. But since both individuals and communities
(comprised of individuals) are human, communities and not just individuals need
accountability. In other words, experience (pretext) needs narrative structure (text)
and structural accountability (context) in order to flourish Christianly. Indeed, the
community is itself ultimately accountable to the gospel of Jesus Christ; and
although the community participates in the gospel and bears vital witness to the
gospel when it is actively receptive to God's disclosure in Jesus, the gospel resists
being made captive to any community. That is what I meant earlier when I said that
the Incarnation is a principle (more than a principle, of course: a reality)
paradoxically both internal and external to the Christian community's worship and
witness, and also what I meant to insinuate when I made a distinction between
*provisional normativity* and *normative normativity*. Not only are Christian
experiences accountable to Christian scriptures and Christian community, Christian
community and scriptures are ultimately also accountable to God in Christ, bound up
of course with the community's (faithful) practices as well as attested in the
scriptures, but never enslaved to them. A delicate equipoise between text and
context, God's grace attested in Scripture and that grace witnessed in community,

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canon and community/tradition, must be maintained; and even when that is precariously achieved, the freedom of God and the fallenness of humanity must not be haughtily forgotten. Bruce Marshall, in search of that balance, suggests:

To hold true at all the narratives which identify Jesus and the Trinity calls for an always ongoing communal effort by Christians to interpret and assess whatever novel claims they encounter, and whatever they think they already know, by trying to find a place for them in the world created through and for Jesus Christ, and put at peace with God by the blood or his cross.¹

Or as Sue Patterson has it: ‘Thus the Church, as user of the biblical text, and the text, as repository of the rules for its own use, together (dialectically) constitute a prophetically self-critical yardstick of truth in which we see the mutual discernment of Word and Spirit.²

Whereas structure – the structure of the gospel narrative and the liturgy-structured-practices that give it life and momentum – protects worship and witness from idolatry (or fanaticism), and so makes human participation accountable to God’s revelation of himself in Christ, space simultaneously encourages free involvement and enables that involvement to become genuinely human and therefore genuinely free – that is, responsive in faith and obedience. ‘To be initiated,’ Louis-Marie Chauvet claims, ‘is not to have learned “truths to believe” but to have received a tradition, in a way through all the pores of one’s skin.... Now liturgical space, in the sense defined above, serves as a “matrix” in which the subject is engendered as a Christian.’³ Such is freedom constrained by God’s own witness. Such is freedom in which humanity is redeemed.⁴

² Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, 65. But, Patterson wisely says, ‘more weight may need to be placed on the objective pole – the plain sense of the text – if truth is not to go soft on us’ (57).
⁴ See Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 155-158.
Incarnation and incarnate experiences

But how, more specifically, is Incarnation intrinsic to (the community’s experience of) worship? Obviously, Christianly speaking, worship is directed to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit; thus ‘God was in Christ’ (and therefore Christ’s redemptively taking up flesh) is at the very heart of the community’s story, life, and devotion – that is, at the heart of the community’s being in Christ and therefore redemptively in the flesh. In worship, in other words, one both experiences God in Christ/Incarnation and has incarnate experiences, both of which are mutually conditioned to – or ‘experienced’ in – proclamation, prayer and eucharist. Thus, again, the Incarnation functions as principle and pattern for Christian experience, at once norming the community’s experience of embodiment in worship and shaping the community’s embodiment of experience in witness. God is encountered in Christ in the primary experience of the community’s worship and that primary experience of worship is shared, supported and nurtured in the many subtle ways in which the community embodies Christ in witness.1 God is encountered in proclamation, prayer and eucharist; and it will soon be clear how interdependent these mysteries are when we see that proclamation induces prayer, prayer responds to proclamation, and eucharist both anticipates the promise intrinsic to proclamation and prayer – the promise that God will forgive and restore – and announces the promise’s partial fulfillment.

1 Christ is witnessed in, by and through the church, perhaps primarily or ordinarily – but precisely because God is free and his activity always prior to the church’s provisional representation, one might expect to discern glimpses of God’s analeptic work in the world. Thus David Fergusson: ‘The character of the world as created and redeemed by God in Jesus Christ, as the arena for the action of the Holy Spirit, and as moving towards an eschatological identity already revealed, provides a basis for explaining moral activity everywhere. What we have here is a critical standard – Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture – by which all such activity is measured.... By appeal to how we are made, what God has done for us, and the destiny that awaits us we can measure extra-ecclesial activity by the standards of Christ’ (Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics, 166-167).
Rosemary Haughton has argued, interestingly, that Christian community is constituted by an act of judgement; that is what makes it a community of and in the Spirit. '[T]he Christian community is something other than the worldly community, in that it is charged with the religious task of judging the world, but that Christian community is a worldly one, and under judgment as such.' Important as the element of judgement is, the element of grace must be introduced to draw out the dialectical richness – and mutual dependence – of both grace and judgement. The community, if you will, is a Christian one, and therefore properly constituted, also by an act of witness, by bearing witness to (the grace and judgement of God in) Christ. The Christian community, as it concretely bears witness to Christ, is a community of the Spirit and, simultaneously, a judgement on itself and the world – on the world and the worldly in itself. Only in awareness of the contingency of the community's witness, and the essential bodiliness of the community’s worship, can the community become relevantly Christian.

Texts, contexts and pretexts

Matthew 18.15-20 supplies an interesting (con)text for situating these diffuse remarks on the centrality of Christ in worship and witness; questions of grace, judgement and identity are implicated here as well. Evidently, one confronts and is confronted by Christ primarily in the church. It is the context of mutual love and mutual support, the central context in which the Spirit, through worship practices, witnesses to Christ and so provides accountability for Christian confession and communion. In this text, the culmination of which has mantra-like familiarity ('For

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1 Rosemary Haughton, *The Theology of Experience* (New York: Newman Press, 1972), 46. ‘I am concluding that the Christian community is uniquely itself and uniquely the act of God, when, knowing itself under judgement, it becomes thereby the judgement of God on this generation’ (59).

where two or three come together...'), Jesus discourses on the powers, prerogatives and privileges of the church - a community of disciples closely following Christ.1

One of the powers of the church, Jesus tells us, is discipline (vv 15-17), by means of which the brethren (σὺν ἀδικούμενοι) love, urge, admonish each other in accordance with Christian standards of discipleship - that is, where one’s embodiment of Christian experience is, in the context of the assembly (ἐκκλησία), tested, teased out, interpreted, judged, purified, and boundaries set on following Christ.2 One of the prerogatives of the church is deciding when, where and on whom to exercise discipline, a decision which of course always demands loving discernment and collective phronesis (v 18).3 It is the community’s responsibility as a whole to love and guard the loyalty of Christ’s disciples, and in this way safeguard the centrality (and, indeed, strangeness) of the Christ they lovingly and loyally follow. It is both the community’s responsibility and its shared witness to Christ, to each other, and to properly Christian experiences (v 16: ἐπὶ στάσεως...μαρτύρων).4

This text encourages us, fruitfully, to think about discipline and discipleship perichoretically. Belonging to the ecclesial community (ἐκκλησία occurs three times in Matthew: once in 16.18, twice in 18.17) imposes privileges and responsibilities. Thus in discipline, at any rate the discipline characteristic of the Jewish-Christian

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3 Nancey Murphy has developed an ‘Edwardsian theory of discernment’ – ‘communal discernment’ – around texts like these (Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990], 159-163).
4 On shared community responsibility, see J. Andrew Overman, Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996). 262-268; and Eduard Schweizer, ‘Matthew’s Church’, in The Interpretation of Matthew, ed. Graham Stanton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 149-177. ‘The fact,’ Schweizer says, ‘that the authority given to Peter at 16:19 is in 18:18 promised to all the members of the community suggests that the successor of Peter in this ministry is the community’ (160).
community of Matthew, distinctions are being made and presumably upheld; and Jesus’ own life and teaching, condensed for example in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), provide the content and parameters with reference to which those distinctions (and accordingly Christian identity) are screened. That identity will, among many other things, have to do with humility (Matt 18.1-5), awareness of sin (Matt 18.6-9), indefatigable love (Matt 18.10-14), readiness to forgive (Matt 18.21-35). It is clear from the context, then, that the notae ecclesiae (to speak anachronistically) circle in upon discipleship, as distinctions become evident not just between Jews and Christians, but also, importantly, between Christians and non-Christian pagans (‘treat the offender as you would a pagan [ἔθνικος] or tax collector [τέλωνης]’).1

Now in this same context – an ecclesial context – Jesus focuses on the privileges of a community of disciples. The first is prayer (v 19). Obviously, one may say ‘God’ or ‘for Jesus’ sake’ or ‘Amen’ before, during or as a conclusion to a collection of other words – but one may not have prayed, as Jesus makes clear here and elsewhere (Matt 6.5-8). For it is not the words with which one ‘prays’ – out of the same mouth (and with the same words) come praise and cursing (James 3.10); it is not the eloquence with which one ‘prays’ – some of the most potent and effectual prayers are loose and feverish (1 Samuel 1.10-14); it cannot be the fervor (or outrage) with which one prays – the prophets of Baal frantically cried out to Baal, slashing themselves with spear and sword, but there was no response, no answer, Baal could not hear or help (1 Kings 18.26-29); and it cannot be the longwindedness or frequency or confidence with which one prays that makes prayer true prayer – the Pharisees, undaunted, ‘prayed’ just so, with propriety and deliberation and decorum, but they did not pray, were so infinitely far from really praying (Luke 18.10-11).

Viewed against the backdrop of ecclesial concerns for discipline and discipleship, the practice of prayer becomes God’s gift and command, a gifted command to disclose oneself before God and others, to imperil oneself (or one’s reputation) by both confiding in others and confessing that one is nothing and has nothing, to enact one’s desperate reliance on God alone to make the church’s practice and proclamation, in which one with others participates, effectual (vv 17-19). Prayer, then, is neither a human achievement nor an inalienable right – it is a gift given to the community by means of which the community implores God to guide its discipline and effectuate its discipleship. Evidently, God does not lend ear to the spiritually smug; but apparently he does hear the petitions of those disciples who submit to one another in reverence for Christ, and who together abandon all things great and small that compete with Christ for loyalty, by asking in accordance with the gospel (v 19: ‘agree together...in asking’). Prayer, in other words, is divine initiative and human response, first from God and then directed toward God; it is God’s free gift in which, by God’s grace, there is perfect freedom for those who are collectively seeking God’s grace by following Christ in community, and it is collective seeking and following that gives intercessory prayer both distinction and power. So Bonhoeffer: ‘To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right that we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.’ When the community accepts the gift and heeds the command, prayer becomes a condition in which the community faithfully exists, a condition of awareness of sin and thus a condition of humility before God and before one another, without which it would appear there can be neither discipline nor discipleship – without which there can be no Christian ἐκκλησία.

1 For prayer as gift and command, see Karl Barth, Prayer (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 33-41.
2 I am thinking in this respect of Jüngel: ‘The fact that man is addressed by God makes him a fundamentally addressable being.... In this freedom of addressability he is man’ (God as the Mystery of the World, 155).
The other ecclesial privilege of which Jesus speaks is worship (v 20), which supplies the larger context for discipline, prayer and discipleship. Worship is corporate/communal (συνηγμένοι), Christ centred (εἰς τὸ ἐμὸν ὄνομα), and consummated with Christ’s presence (ἐκεῖ ἐμί ἐν μέσῳ σὺν τῶν). In other words, worship is at the heart of the community’s life (and Christ is at the heart of worship); and worship encompasses as well as regulates the community’s discipline and discipleship, the disciplines of testimony (v 16), accountability (v 17-18: δήσητε and λύσητε), and prayer (v 19). It is beautifully ironic that the superlative fulfillment of worship is Christ’s body(liness), his incarnate presence among his worshippers (‘...there I am in the middle of them’); and that is potentially enjoyed at every gathering of disciples, where in prayer and worship, the eucharist is celebrated, the presence of Christ enacted in fellowship, and the self-giving of God in the flesh of Jesus Christ witnessed in both proclamation (‘testimony’) and mutual self-giving. In the Body, the incarnate sphere of God’s saving activity, God confronts us in Christ and gives himself to our flesh and fallenness, and in that way accommodates himself to his creation and at the same time recreates it, conforms it to the icon of his son. Indeed, because we are fallen, we must be redeemed, not out of the body but in and through it. No wonder we are invited to taste and see, hear and touch.

This means that our bodily capacities, by which we ourselves have received the gifts of God, are in turn employed to mediate the gifts to others: as hearers of the Word, we now speak it; as those who have tasted the goodness of the Lord, we minister to the nourishment of others; as those who have glimpsed the glory of the Lord, we endeavor to show it to others; as those anointed with the gospel’s fragrance, we become the aroma of Christ to

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1 Interestingly, the presence of many witnesses sets up accountability for all, both those seeking and those sought; indeed the whole assembly, in some important but not altogether obvious sense, settles disputes and divisions.

2 Eduard Schweizer connects the promised presence of 18.20 (the presence that can be named: Immanuel) with the promise of 28.20 – and so with the coming and abiding Spirit (The Good News According to Matthew [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975], 375). Acts 2.41-47, which I consider later, makes this connection palpable.
others; as those touched by Christ's healing hand, we seek
to extend a blessing to others in their need.  

This is Geoffrey Wainwright's insight, and it reminds us of God's willingness not only to align himself with his creation but also to enter it and repristinate it. It is a general truth that 'sacraments' are indispensable in any religion concerned with the conditions of this world and those embedded in it. In the incarnate religion of Christianity, however, the sacrament of the eucharist not only implicates and nourishes the body but also incorporates it into the mediation of God's redeeming presence and grace in the world. It is in the Body, the church, the incarnate sphere of God's activity, that men and women in all their bodiliness are graced to partake of God's presence and, if you will, become the mediation of God's presence among others, both in the church and in the world. In Christ, God identifies himself with a provisional representation, a body which he makes his people by sharing himself. Thus worship, like witness, is an essential but created activity which depends at every moment for its fidelity and efficacy on the prior promise and activity of God in Christ.

We examined Matt 18 where Jesus himself promises to be present among his people as the centre and consummation of worship. That relatively brief discussion will be augmented by considering two other texts, both of which concern the worship of the church and in that way provide context for deepening our understanding (of the early church's understanding) of the centrality of Christ and Christ's presence in worship and witness: Acts 2.41-47; and 1 Cor 11.3-32. In Acts 2 we see that the church flourishes in proclamation, eucharist and prayer.  

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45: εἶχον ἀπαύνα κοινῶ, and such works of love are made possible by, and further promote, fidelity (προσκαρτεροῦντες) to apostolic teaching (v 42: τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων), fellowship/faithful gathering (vv 42, 46: κοινωνία), the breaking of bread (vv 42, 46: τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου), and prayer (v 42: τὰς προσευχὰς); and it is not coincidental that in verse 41 many were baptized (ἐβαπτίσθησαν), and hence inducted into this new way of life and community. What is interesting about this text, and so many others like it in Acts and elsewhere, is that the relevant Christian experiences are both shared experiences and experiences of sharing. This will be most evident in the eucharist, where fellowship in the context of a shared meal, symbolic of shared life, becomes the womb for experience of God, and experience of God further grows into renewed fellowship. Moltmann makes a similar point: '[E]xperiences of the meal shared between human beings are transferred to experience of God, and the experience of God is carried into the shared meal.' This reciprocity is implied in the sharing of everything in common (κοινῶ) and the fellowship (κοινωνία) of Acts.

Joachim Jeremias has argued that 2.42 describes, in compact fashion, a pattern for an early Christian worship service, beginning with (devotion to) apostolic teaching and (table) fellowship, and climaxing in the breaking of bread, or eucharist, and prayer/praise. This is important: sharing each other's burdens, and so realising/enacting 'fellowship', is possible because of, and permanently accountable

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to, apostolic teaching (proclamation), table fellowship/breaking of bread (eucharist),
and prayer/praise. In other words, in the context of the life of the new Spirit-formed
community – that is, in the context of the community’s worship and witness –
Christian community and Christian identity are fostered. Or as I have been saying:
prayer, proclamation and eucharist are Christian identity-making-and-sustaining
experiences.

Conspicuously – perhaps disturbingly – absent in this text is the Holy Spirit
(Acts 2.4: πνεύματος ἀγίου) that came upon the people at Pentecost, creating
Christian community, centred on apostolic teaching, the breaking of bread, and
prayer, from that auspicious moment alive in fellowship and gifted for witness in the
Spirit (Acts 1.8). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is the gift (Acts 2.38: δωρεὰν), and
comes in power bearing gifts (1 Cor 12.1: τῶν πνευματικῶν), notably the message
of the gospel, a gift not just to bear witness but to hear and appropriate the mystery
of Christ. In that way, language differences, symbolic of so much more than that,
cease to be barriers that alienate people and become diversities through which unity
is achieved and the burdens of sin shared.¹ ‘The disintegration and dispersion of
human beings, the Babylonian confusion of languages (Genesis 11), and the
connected rupture of the world are removed. But in this removal cultural, national,
and linguistic differences are not set aside, but retained.’² We see at Pentecost that
this gospel, scattered in a whirl-wind of other tongues, is simultaneously word and
event, both the medium and the message of God’s presence in Christ – the
differentiated mediation of God’s presence in the Spirit of Christ; and it forms the
community (identity) into which the estranged, Jews and Gentiles, those far off and

¹ So Moltmann: ‘The unity in this diversity is to be found in the common origin (1 Cor. 12.4-6) and in
the community which these many, in all their diversity, together constitute. This unity comes from the
one Christ and moves towards the fellowship of the Spirit. It is therefore a creative unity, in which
every created being is intended to arrive at itself and to develop its own unique character’ (The Spirit
of Life, 233).
near, are permanently reconciled (Acts 2.39), a community of Word, Spirit, and Sacrament.

There is more here both on and beneath the surface. The Spirit, poured out on the people, slaying them and thus making them alive, is the gift of God, Christ’s gift to make and sustain the church, the very fulfillment of his promise to be forever present with his people (Matt 28.20; Acts 1.4; 2.38-39). The Spirit, in this way, becomes the giver of the gifts of God, the good things of Christ to redeem the church and the world, the gifts of Christ for Christ’s sake. There is a stunning unity of Word, Spirit, and Sacrament at Pentecost. For at Pentecost both proclamation and appropriation, the power to proclaim and the power to hear, understand and respond, are equally ultimate, together constituting the unity and vitality of the church. Thus although the Spirit is not expressly mentioned in Acts 2.42-47, where the community’s worship and witness are highlighted, clearly, given what goes before and what comes after in Acts, the reality of the community presupposes the activity of the Spirit.1 ‘The Spirit,’ according to Bruce Marshall, ‘creates a community – the church – structured by specific practices, and primarily these practices have to guide any effort to fix the meaning of this community’s most central beliefs. Chief among this community’s public practices is eucharistic worship.’ I shall have more to say about this in my concluding remarks.

This connection of Christian identity to community, with invariant texts (apostolic witness to gospel) and central practices (say, eucharist), is especially pronounced in 1 Cor 11.17-34, as is the connection of the Spirit to both identity and community preservation. To be sure, in this text the sense in which Christ is present is deepened, as Christ is now not just where his name is spoken and shared (Matt 18.20), nor simply where many gather in the reality of his life in the Spirit (Acts 2),

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but also where his Supper is focally and *faithfully* celebrated and thus his death proclaimed in fulfillment and anticipation of his coming again (1 Cor 11.26). There is more than a little eschatological expectation in Paul’s account of the Supper; but in sharing (in) the Supper in remembrance and anticipation – that is, in properly discerning the body of Christ (διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα) – the church proclaims the Lord’s death and hence enacts its eschatological unity in the present. In short – and I shall say more about this in a moment – ‘in remembrance of me’ (ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν) is not mere remembrance but also, vitally, redemptive (re)enactment. ‘Thus,’ according to Richard Hays, ‘the meal acknowledges the absence of the Lord and mingles memory and hope, recalling his death and awaiting his coming again.’¹ And that present participation is real, and not at all negligible, participation. Present realities, however fleetingly present, are lived and not merely remembered. When the Supper is viewed or observed as mere memorial, it has to do with death only, and so not with gospel.²

Like Matt 18, 1 Cor 11 addresses the compromise of solidarity through sin, which accordingly accentuates divisions (v 18: σχίσματα) and differences (v 19: σφιχθεῖσι), and contributes to the deterioration of the body (v 31: πολλοὶ ὀσθενεῖς καὶ ἄρρωστοι); and like Matt 18, the solution Paul here soberly urges for re-achieving unity in the body of Christ (σῶμα Χριστοῦ) is (discernment of) the presence of the Lord, not only in name (Matt 18.20: ὄνωμα) but in body and blood (τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ κυρίου).³ Clearly sin is a pervasive ecclesial,

² So Kevin Quast remarks: ‘Paul alone describes the observance of the Lord’s supper as an ongoing proclamation of the death of Christ. In other words, the eucharist has ramification for the church’s view of the past, present, and future’ (*Reading the Corinthian Correspondence* [New York: Paulist Press, 1994], 74).
³ ‘Paul focuses his argument on the fracturing of the church, the body of Christ. His solution to the problems surrounding the Lord’s Supper is a social one: heal the fragmented body and restore unity’ (Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 194. I. Howard Marshall argues that the problem Paul addresses is theological, and not just social, a matter not of etiquette but of proper Christian reverence before God and one another (*Last Supper and Lord’s Supper*, 111).
and not just an abstract epistemic, problem, an ugly reality addressed and, over time, remedied in the context of Christian community through eucharistic practice.

The egregiously selfish way in which some of the brothers and sisters were relating to each other, manifested not only in party loyalties (‘I follow Apollos…’ [1.10-17]) but also in disunity and division when the church assembled to celebrate fellowship in the Lord’s Supper, invited Paul’s disbelief (v 18) and stern disapproval (ἐπαινέω ὑμῖν;). It is not the Lord’s Supper the church eats when it feasts, Paul declares, because gorging and sluicing oneself while others are crowded out and made to go hungry is more a kind of ferocity than feasting (vv 20-21), and could not be any farther from the spirit and substance of the Supper. It would of course be one thing for some to have more of the meal than others, but when those who know nothing of deprivation self-servingly deprive those who have nothing of their share in the shared feast, those without are shamed (v 22) and the unity of the body of Christ is undermined. Paul might not have protested so vehemently if the wealthy and respected in the church were, for the sake of the gospel, denying themselves their share in order to share the burdens of others, just the sort of thing Paul is fond of recommending elsewhere. Indeed, it was indifference to those in need, and not uneven distribution, that roused Paul’s ire; it was the hardening of distinctions along status lines, distinctions hostile to the gospel of Christ, that threatened to destroy the unity and purity of the body of Christ. ‘[T]he meal that should be the symbol and seal of their oneness has in fact become an occasion for some of them to shame others.’

Evidently, Paul viewed the Supper as either a curative or a contaminant: it heals by binding together in Christ those who partake together in Christ, and so reconciles them, or it destroys by alienating those who fail to partake together or who partake together but not together, in dangerous disregard for the body of Christ. In

1 Hays, First Corinthians, 193.
that way the body becomes oblivious to the needs of its members and undoes the unity for which Christ lived and died. Perhaps this is what Paul means when he says that those who unworthily (ἀνευτικός) partake are guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ: for they are guilty not only of mockery against the body and blood but also of interfering with the ministry of Christ. Hays puts it this way: 'By showing contempt for those who have nothing, they are acting as though his death had not decisively changed the conditions of their relationship to one another.'

Ironically, the very feast of fellowship which, by Christ's example and sacrifice, was designed to anticipate as well as achieve unity among sin-sick men and women, can also apparently make deep divisions salient and hasten the demise of the body. Properly observed, then, the Supper, not only signals but constitutes unity in Christ; observed unfittingly, it both signals and creates disunity in Christ.

It seems clear from the context that the problem Paul addresses is social, not just theological. There are divisions and differences in the church, unfortunate but inevitable and (providentially) disclosive (v 19), but at least some of these appear to be social in nature. (But as we shall see in a moment, these divisions along status lines also involve theological attitudes and absurdities.) Those who have – those with social status, with homes, with abundant provisions, with the leisure to assemble early and begin before the others arrive – are at the same time humiliating those who have not, doing harm to the fellowship, and nullifying the promise of God in its present reality (v 22).

So Paul reminds them of the eucharistic tradition which he received from the Lord and passed on to them, a relatively fixed tradition of which they were aware but which they were in the process of corrupting (vv 23-25). The eucharist centres on

1 Hays, First Corinthians, 199.
3 See Markus Barth, Rediscovering the Lord's Supper (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 30-32.
4 See Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, 187.
Christ's death, and therefore on his sacrificial obedience and humiliation for others; it centres, in other words, on the salvific death of Christ and on the sometimes more than symbolic death Christians must offer for others, simultaneously to anticipate the reality of God's already/not yet fulfilled promise in Christ's death and to share in its present reality in the life of community. Of course, it is not quite a present reality when the community fails to celebrate the Supper in remembrance and in hope and therefore in present communion. That is why Paul soberly recalls the eucharistic tradition, and why he places such emphasis not only on remembrance but also on redemptive (re)enactment. The brethren are accordingly rebuked and encouraged to discern the body — to discern, that is, the fundamental unity for which the church was created. So it would seem that the failure to discern the body, obviously tied to celebrating in an unworthy manner, concerns the unity of the church, the body of Christ, rather than the eucharistic substances of the bread and cup.¹ In this context, communion with God is bound up with Christian community. Here to experience God is to experience others, and the Other through others, to be, by God's disruptive grace, the Other in relation to one another, to be, like Christ, the one-for-others. This points up the need for a Mediator and the gift but utter inescapability of mediation in experience. To experience God is, in a sense, to be liberated both from speculation and from sin, and thus ushered into not just a new idea about God but a new way of life in which God, in virtue of Christ the Mediator, is present in the community of others.

Just as in Matt 18, sin in this text is a radical problem threatening the unity and identity of the church; and just as in Matt 18, the question of discipline (and discipleship) is raised. Ideally, one (ἀνθρώπος) would see that one's life is to be lived no longer in indulgence and selfish disregard for others, but now in sharing and

¹ According to Martin, the meaning of 'body' (σώμα) is 'multiple', principally referring to the church as the body of Christ, but also encompassing the eucharistic substances, Christ's body, and the body of the Christian (The Corinthian Body, 194-5).
mutual service (vv 28-29). The Christ-event is that epochal, and it must effect a radical change in identity and loyalty; thus the Christ-event becomes the principle and pattern to which Christian experience is permanently accountable, preserved by the dynamic interplay of the narrative structure of Scripture and the structural accountability of the central practices of ecclesial community. Since sin both weakens us and blinds us to our weakness (v 30), the community together must take part in judging itself and those within it (v 31: ei de eisoutous diekriwomev); only then does it share in grace (worship) and share grace (witness) (v 31: ouk ou ekriwometha). The members of the body discover and demonstrate the unity of the body only when they discern their unity in judgement and therefore in grace. The body, that is to say, must discern that it is judged in order not to be judged but to flourish in grace. No wonder then that eating unfittingly, according to Paul, either invites the judgement of God or else reveals that one is, in alienation, already judged.

There is a space, a freedom, in which one is invited to correct one’s own corruptions (v 28). The trouble is that human beings, in freedom, tend to grow either apathetic or antipathetic to the others for whom Christ died and with whom they share both a disease and a cure. Discord prevents the members from partaking together of the Lord’s Supper in the freedom of faith. Indeed, says Paul, there is no partaking of the Lord’s Supper without partaking together in (remembrance of) the Lord’s body and blood. Thus in order to consecrate the space in which the members freely share each other’s burdens, making themselves accountable to Christ and the discipline of the community, Paul introduces the narrative structure of the eucharist and the structural accountability of the body, the members sharing a common life. Moltmann is right: ‘To experience God is to experience freedom’ — a freedom not of autonomy but of obedience and shared life, realised in eucharist. Gerhard O. Forde puts it this way: ‘If God is free then we are dead; if we are free then God is dead.’

1 Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life, 103.
2 Gerhard O. Forde, Theology is for Proclamation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 116.
And that will prove helpful, with the qualification that we become free when we become actively receptive to God's absolute freedom to be for the world in Christ.

The eucharist is indeed the focal point of 1 Cor 11 (and in various ways the focal point of the Christian life); but proclamation, as we have seen, is also central. Proclamation, apparently, not only accompanies, or is intended to accompany, the eucharist, but also is extended and embodied in the eucharist, so that the eucharist becomes proclamation.1 For to discern the body is together to proclaim (καταγγέλλετε) the mystery and already/not yet reality of the Christ-event; it is to celebrate a vitally present reality in Christ and to renew a shared hope in the fullness of that reality to come. Proclamation, of course, is an act, a deed, and not simply an utterance, a word: indeed it works an effect. The eucharist itself, when properly celebrated, becomes proclamation, transforming not only the elements but the meagre words and deeds of the body of believers into the body and blood of Christ, his tangible and bodily grace for the world.2 In the context of the eucharist, then, proclamation announces an impinging, but still future, reality; but it also, at the same time, does 'the eschatological deed here among us in our present'.3 The proclamation becomes, if you will, interpersonal, removed from the strict form of the sermon and scattered among the people in their words and deeds, chiefly in their partaking together of the Supper and thus submitting in humility both to one another and to the accountability of the Supper. That provides context for proclamation and is itself, in a profound sense, proclamation. 'We are thinking of that unique situation in which one person bears witness in human words to another person,' Bonhoeffer says, 'bespeaking the whole consolation of God, the admonition, the kindness, and the severity of God. The speaking of that Word is beset with infinite perils. If it is

1 This captures the ambivalence of Paul's remark in 11.26.
not accompanied by worthy listening, how can it really be the right word for the other person? If it is contradicted by one's own lack of active helpfulness, how can it be a convincing and sincere word? If it issues, not from a spirit of bearing and forbearing, but from impatience and the desire to force its acceptance, how can it be the liberating and healing word?¹

Clearly, one does not discern the body simply by looking and seeing what is transparent, for Christ was crucified and the present divisions in the body, humanly speaking, seem more real than some mysterious unity in Christ. The eucharist is not that kind of experience, and one needs a different sort of vision with which to see Christ in the eucharist and eucharistic worship as the bodily presence of Christ.² These elements are the body and blood of Christ? This shared feast is the vital (not nostalgic) continuation of fellowship with Christ as well as the confident expectation of the eschatological banquet? Indeed, discerning the body is not at all like simple perception: as both proclamation and response to proclamation, it both presupposes and intends to produce faith, a deeper seeing. When Paul urges the brethren to discern the body, to partake together of Christ, and thus to proclaim together the death of Christ until he comes again in glory, he invites them to faith, hope and love into the body. He reminds them that past faith is dead without future hope and present agape, loving communion, symbolically, substantively and superlatively fulfilled in eucharist.

When I suggest that the eucharist is the consummation or superlative fulfillment of worship and the Christian life, I mean this, in short. In worship the people together grieve, confess, pray, praise, offer gifts and signs of peace, and then,

¹ Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 104.
² Of course I have questioned whether such simple, unmediated experience can be found anywhere under the sun. Louis-Marie Chauvet is right: ‘Reality is never present to us except in a mediated way, which is to say, constructed out of the symbolic network of the culture which fashions us.... Between sensation and perception there is a margin...what is perceived by humans is not only the physical reality that affects the senses but the “semiological layer” in which this event is embedded by the culture’ (Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995], 84-85).
precisely after exposing themselves in nakedness and sin and risking vulnerability with one another, they come together to the Table to extend grace, embody love and establish intimacy; in that way those far off and near become (one in) the flesh of Jesus (Eph 2-3). Embarrassment (or envy) would be the natural reaction, especially since in worship the people repent of their facades and remove all the pretenses that alienate, and so see others and are seen in all the ugliness of sin. Just then, however, the people do the strange and surprising thing: they go to the Table together to consummate their openness and intimacy, to feast in the presence of God in Christ and to be that presence to one another, simultaneously creating equality and overcoming estrangement. In coming together, the people both experience the presence of God in Christ by partaking and mediate Christ’s presence by giving and receiving one to another, by sharing one another’s burdens and relating to one another on the basis of a common condition and a common confession. And this anticipates, and so in part fulfils, if only for a fleeting moment, the consummation of all things, in which lion and lamb, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female will be estranged no longer but eternally reconciled in perfect fellowship.

That is why the loss of eucharistic celebration to infrequency or corruption (1 Cor 11.17-34) is so appalling and damaging. In the brokenness of Christ, mysteriously and grimly symbolized at the Feast, the brokenness of the world is healed. And Christ’s humility is freedom from humiliation: ‘All sham was ended in the presence of Christ.’1 Only when the people stand, kneel, pray, confess together in lowliness can they truly feast together in love: for at the Feast the people accept God’s invitation to experience his presence and, at the same time, become the embodiment of that invitation to one another – and to the world when the feast is extended to eucharistic living in and for the world. Feasting on the body of Christ (eucharist) is the communal act (of enactment) by means of which the body of Christ

1 Bonhoeffer, Life Together, 111.
(church) is constituted and nourished, in which it sustains its identity, that act without which the church just is not the body of Christ — or, what comes to the same thing, is not the church. Simply, the community, feasting on the body of Christ, becomes the body of Christ, a sacrament for the world; so again worship and witness exist in unity and for a unified purpose.¹ Placher makes the obvious observation that ‘worship shapes our identity as a community, for better or worse’.² If the community is exclusive, if the central practices of proclamation, prayer and eucharist are compromised such that they do not provide the conditions for overcoming ego, embarrassment, envy, enmity and all the rest, one may guess what sort of experiences the community will promote, and what sort of identity the community will replicate. Such a place, however, will not be distinctively Christian and will be incapable of shaping Christian identity.

This again raises the question of identity, not only of the community and the many members who constitute it, but also of the Christ in whose word and body the community exists. For in the Supper — thinking about the Lord’s Supper with reference to the Last Supper — Jesus hands himself over and thus anticipates his being handed over. Jesus’ grace is preemptive (or prevenient) here, as he betrays himself before he is betrayed. ‘This aspect of grace,’ according to Schillebeeckx, ‘is traditionally known as gratia praeveniens — a wonderful phrase which implies the grace which not only prevents our folly, but which is also always a few steps ahead of us, with the result that we are constantly learning now, at this present moment, that God’s grace was closer to us then, at that moment in the past, than we ever suspected it to be.’³ In this way he determines the identity of his fellows (followers) as well as his own identity: his betrayers become forgiven friends and he, the betrayed,

becomes the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world and the Lord whose sovereign freedom is displayed in weakness. ‘And so the sequence,’ Rowan Williams notes, ‘of transitions finally effects the transformation of the recipients of the bread and wine from betrayers to guests, whose future betrayals are always encompassed in the covenanted welcome enacted by Jesus.’¹ Thus the shape of Christian experience is, as at once discovery and creation, both determined extra nos and graciously textured inter nos into the fabric of the life and practice of the Christian community. The community accordingly graciously preveniently receives its welcome and its identity: forgiven friends, family members, followers and fellow heirs of the promise.

The eucharist indeed is the thickness and texture of God’s presence: there God becomes present to us and we become present to others and to God in God’s presence;² there God not only assures us that his promises remain in effect, but also fulfils them by being present.³ In the practice of the eucharist the people of God practice the presence of God. The eucharist is the gospel in closest – indeed bodily – proximity; it is the Christ, present to his body by faith and future (that is, still only fleetingly rather than fully, eschatologically present) to his body by hope, intensifying both his presence and his absence.

But where is the Spirit in all this? How is the gift of the Spirit bound up with the gifts of the Spirit? What role does the Spirit play not only in creating Christian

¹ Williams, ‘Sacraments of the New Society’, 97.
² Edward Schillebeeckx thinks of the presence as reciprocal – Christ’s presence to the church and the church’s presence to Christ. ‘The sacramental bread and wine are therefore not only the sign which makes Christ’s presence real to us, but also the sign bringing about the real presence of the Church (and, in the Church, of us too) to him. The eucharistic meal thus signifies both Christ’s gift of himself and the Church’s responding gift of herself, of the Church who is what she is in him and can give what she gives in and through him (The Eucharist [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968], 139).
³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, using Austin’s speech-act theory to interpret Calvin’s teaching on the sacraments, claims that when Calvin says that God signs and seals his promises towards his people to be benevolent in Christ, he means that ‘by way of offering the sacrament, God here and now assures the assembled that God’s promise to redeem them remains in effect’ (‘Sacrament as Action, not Presence’, in Christ: The Sacramental Word, 112). But this does not go far enough: God not only assures us that he is good and his benevolent promises trustworthy; in the sacraments he also fulfils his promises by being presence and creating unity.
identity but in providing the gifts with which the Christian community remains true
to that identity? Obviously the different gifts and gifted differences for which the
Spirit is responsible contribute to the unity and health of the body, but only as they
are chastened and redeemed in the eucharistic life of the community. Let me spell
this out very briefly. Hans Conzelmann has argued that Paul is addressing a
theological problem in 1 Cor 11.17-34 and not just a social one, and apparently Paul
is worried that it will destroy the very unity and health of the body. In the church,
there are dissensions, not just differences, revealing ‘theological attitudes’ (not just
‘cliquishness’), what he calls ‘individual pneumatism’.\(^1\) Paul admits, of course, that
schisms and strifes are, because of sin, unavoidable. However, they are also,
apparently, salutary, since they serve the function of keeping the community vigilant
about its identity and wholeness. Even conflict can be sanctified.\(^2\) Conzelmann’s
suggestion jibes well with what little we know about the Corinthians, apparently a
pseudo-spiritual group, or group of groups rallying around spiritual leaders (1 Cor 1-
4), with dubious opinions of their spirituality (1 Cor 10) and a hyper-realised
eschatology (1 Cor 15). So Conzelmann’s position has more credibility than mere
conjecture.

It is perfectly fitting then that Paul turns from the question of dis/unity in the
Supper to the Spirit (πνεύματι θεοῦ) and his gifts (πνευματικῶν) in 12.1-31, gifts
not whimsically disbursed but distributed to all the members of the body (vv 4-6)
(the sphere of the Spirit), variously and in different measure, by the Spirit’s
prerogative (v 11), for the common good (v 7) – for the sake, that is, not of some, the
select few, the strong, but of all, the weak and strong, the have-nots and the haves
(vv 12-25). The Spirit’s gifts to the body, the activity of the Spirit in the body

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\(^2\) ‘This means, however, that strife [Kampf] is recognized as a fundamental sociological law and
basically is sanctified. Concretely, this implies the necessity and the justification of partisanship in
every community relation. Genuine life arises only in the conflict of wills; strength unfolds only in
strife’ (Bonhoeffer, \textit{Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church
through the gifts of the members, are for the unity and health of the body of Christ.\(^1\) These gifts then become graces (χρήσιμα τα), concrete and bodily traces of God's presence among the assembly and in the world. In serving one another and sharing gifts with one another for the good of the body, God's grace becomes tangibly present and the members become the body of Christ. In the gifts shared, grace permeates the body and makes it into the one body of Christ, now not only to one another but also to the world. Thus Welker: 'The Spirit becomes manifest as “gift” in the spiritual gifts that the Spirit bestows.'\(^2\) So, fittingly, the Lord's Supper, fittingly shared, is a discovery and creation – a discovery as well as a *demonstration* – of unity and wholeness, the symbolic, substantive and superlative fulfillment of Christian worship and witness, the reality for which the church was created and in which it participates when it shares (its experience of God) together. It is, as such, the perpetually fecund discovery and creation of Christian identity, both an eschatological hope and a present reality, that without which ecclesial unity is broken and Christian identity dissolved.

**In place of a conclusion**

I have done both philosophy and theology in this thesis – or perhaps just a garden variety philosophical theology. I have made no highfalutin claims to originality. I have entertained a central question, and I have approached it from a philosophical as well as a theological angle. Philosophically, I explored the nature of concepts, the relation of concepts to language and language-related activities, and the function of concepts in potentiating and illuminating experience. (To what extent is (human) experience a function of language/concepts?) Theologically, I explored the nature of

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Christian concepts, the relation of those formative and fundamental concepts to the language and language-related activities of the Christian community, and the function of those concepts in potentiating and illuminating peculiarly Christian experience of God. (To what extent is soteriology a function of, or at any rate permanently and perichoretically connected to, ecclesiology - a Christian doctrine of salvation related to a Christian doctrine of the church?)

We have seen that concepts are not just signs/symbols with which we label, name, point to distinct items in experience. Nor are they simply principles around which we organise or bring order to items in experience. That, according to Vincent Brummer, represents the 'names model' of concepts, the dominant view from Plato to Kant and beyond. Concepts are also, quite indispensably, capacities, skills, abilities by which we think, see/recognise, understand implications, and act fittingly in experience. That accords well with the 'tools model' developed by Wittgenstein. On the tools model, one has the ability - the concept - only if one can think, see, say, perform well in experience, and it looks like that ability is ordinarily acquired and revised through practice(s), through word and deed, reiteration and ritual. In other words, those skills, as well as those signs and symbols, are acquired and revised in practice. Indeed all concepts are, with language, embedded in action, tied to language-related activities, acquired within forms of life - not merely in/through verbal exchange. Thus the indispensable Christian categories, condensed in and thoroughly conditioned upon the Incarnation, are learned not just by way of talk but also, essentially, through explication, reiteration, and concrete example of the talk, through, that is, the central practices: Word and Sacrament, proclamation, prayer and eucharist. Concepts, then, depending on one's perspective, are organising principles (Aristotle), enabling conditions (Kant), and skills (Wittgenstein). But whether signs/symbols or skills, the relevant point is that concepts are born and nurtured in
communities, narrative-structured-practices, and so on. I have tried to make this suggestion plausible.

In saying that the uniquely Christian categories – the categories of sin, grace, forgiveness, love, eucharist, and the rest – are condensed in and conditioned upon the Incarnation, I have meant to insinuate that God himself must give us the conditions with which to follow him, the idiom/language with which to speak of him (without speaking ill of him), the categories with which to experience/encounter him, the system of description with which to (re)present him, and so on. When God speaks and acts, he creates the possibility of hearing and responding in faith – if you will, gives the conditions for proper reception: God is God. Ordinarily, however, the conditions are given gradually, as one participates in the community in which God encounters and is encountered by men and women. Only God is fit to supply the conditions/categories; but those conditions/categories are typically developed over time, just as habits, dispositions, virtues, relationships are developed over time, by practicing the ecclesial practices; and in the ecclesial practices the dimensions of time are unified with the aid of eternity. In practicing the practices, the community learns the idiom of the gospel as well as what is idiosyncratic about it, develops a shared identity, deepens the skill with which to see, speak and serve Christianly. In short, the Christian practices of prayer, proclamation and eucharist are ecclesial and doxastic.

Put more concisely, I have been developing a vision, a way of seeing, as well as a vocabulary, a way of speaking, normatively conditioned upon the Incarnation. In this chapter I have taken the additional step of trying to integrate this way of seeing and this way of speaking into a way of serving/sharing, and I have done this by thinking about the Incarnation in the context of the incarnate practices of the ecclesial community. All in all, a determinate (and definitive) shape for Christian experience can be discerned in eucharistic worship and witness. That experience has
crucially and centrally to do with shared experiences and experiences of sharing, and is accordingly accountable to the community as well as the eucharist that both creates and sustains the community's life and identity. Every alleged experience of God is situated and therefore must be situated both within the provisionally normative structural accountability of the Christian community and with disciplined reference to the normatively normative narrative structure of the Christian texts, made alive in preaching, hearing and appropriating the Word in sacrament. Indeed there is no Christian experience of God apart from the body of Christ and its identity-making-and-sustaining experiences of prayer, proclamation and eucharist.

But that is just to say that there is no Christian experience of God apart from Christ.
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