

## Perceiving God: Epistemic Direct Realism and Religious Belief

Justin P. McBrayer  
The University of Missouri

I believe that my computer is in front of me because I see it. I believe that my son is upstairs because I hear him playing. I believe that my candle is lit because I can smell it. All of these beliefs are perceptual, and all of them are justified for me. In virtue of what are they justified? Some accounts of the justification of perceptual beliefs appeal to external factors such as reliability. For example, my belief that my computer is in front of me is justified because it was produced by a reliable belief-forming process (e.g. Goldman 1976). Other accounts of the justification of perceptual beliefs appeal to an inference from other beliefs about what I seem to see or seem to hear. My belief that my computer is in front of me is justified because of an inference that I have performed from a belief about what *seems* to be the case to what is *in fact* the case. Call this the indirect realist account of perceptual justification (Bonjour 2003, 2004). In contrast to externalist and indirect realist accounts, an internalist, direct realist account (hereafter DR) of perceptual justification grounds the justification of a perceptual belief in something that is internal to the agent (i.e. something that is available to the agent upon reflection) and yet not an inference from other beliefs about seeming states.

If tenable, DR would be preferable to either alternative sketched above. Externalist accounts have difficulty accounting for justification in cases such as the new evil demon problem (Cohen 1984). My belief that my computer is in front of me is justified (though false) even if I am the victim of a Cartesian demon, and my belief-forming process is unreliable. Reliability and justification come apart. Indirect realist accounts, on the other hand, have difficulty accounting for the fact that most human agents have a great many justified perceptual beliefs. Very few of us base our perceptual beliefs on an abductive inference from what seems to be the case to what is actually the case. While indirect realism can explain how perceptual beliefs are *justifiable*, it does not explain how many of our actual perceptual beliefs are *justified*.

All of these considerations provide a *pro tanto* case for DR. It has the conceptual wherewithal to handle the new evil demon problem and to explain how actual perceptual beliefs are justified. However, while it has not been

recognized in the literature, DR accounts of perceptual justification allow a great many beliefs to be characterized as justified perceptual beliefs. In specific, DR allows for human agents to have justified perceptual beliefs of a religious nature (e.g. that God is present). In this paper I shall examine John Pollock's (2005) recent account of DR and show that his account implies that some religious beliefs are both *perceptual* and *justified*. Whether or not this is a virtue or vice of DR will depend on one's religious epistemology. I shall close by dismissing a number of objections to the expansion of DR to religious beliefs.

### I. Direct Realism

First, a quick characterization of DR is in order. DR is often presented as a thesis concerning both the metaphysics of perception and the epistemology of perception. This robust form of DR makes a claim about the objects of perception (the metaphysical thesis) and the justification of perceptual beliefs (the epistemological thesis). For example, Michael Huemer (2001) characterizes DR as the view "that we are directly aware of real, physical objects in perception and that this explains how we know about the nature of those objects" (p. 3). Bonjour (2004) also conceives of DR as a view about both *what* we perceive and *how* perceptual beliefs are justified.<sup>1</sup>

For my purposes in this essay I will treat a weaker form of DR that makes no claims about the metaphysics of perception but only concerns the epistemology of perceptual beliefs. I will consider an account of perceptual justification a version of DR only if it accepts the following:

(1) Perceptual beliefs are justified non-doxastically.

(2) Perceptual beliefs are justified internally.

Additionally, I will restrict the scope of our investigation to accounts of DR that are consistent with the following non-normative claim:

(3) Normal human agents have many justified perceptual beliefs.

Concerning (1), non-doxastic justification is a positive epistemic status that is conferred independently of other beliefs. In other words, perceptual beliefs are justified, but the justification is not dependent (in a certain way) on other beliefs held by the subject. Instead, the perceptual beliefs are based on some non-doxastic element, e.g. an experience. The conveyance of justification from the experience to the belief may be evidential or causal. The important point for now is that the justification is not a function of other beliefs held by the agent in question. (2) is the requirement that the

justification be broadly internalist in nature. This requirement is vague, but it is meant to rule out externalist views of perceptual justification like process reliabilism. Whatever factors serve to justify a particular belief, all of those factors must be internal to the subject's mind (or, alternatively, accessible on reflection). Finally, (3) is a non-normative requirement that is meant to limit the scope of acceptable explanations to those that can account for the contingent fact that most normal humans have a great many justified perceptual beliefs. If an account cannot explain why a great many of the average human's perceptual beliefs are justified, then it is not an account of perceptual justification that I'm interested in here.

## II. Pollock's Direct Realism

John Pollock (2005) characterizes his view as a species of DR (p. 310). And it appears that his position meets both of the necessary stipulations that I made on any account that purports to be a DR account. Additionally, his view yields the result that normal people have justified perceptual beliefs. A perceptual belief on Pollock's account is any belief formed as a direct response to visual input (p. 309). A very rough sketch of his argument for DR proceeds as follows: most people have justified perceptual beliefs (thesis 3), but most people also lack beliefs about how things appear to them.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the justification must not be the result of appealing to other beliefs (thesis 1). Instead, "what makes perceptual beliefs justified in the absence of inferential support from other beliefs is that they *are* perceptual beliefs" (p. 311). Pollock endorses the following principle:

(DR) For appropriate P's, if S believes P on the basis of being appeared to as if P, S is defeasibly justified in doing so.

By appealing only to the appearance states of an individual, this account is clearly internalist, and thus Pollock accepts (2). Pollock is a direct realist.

At first glance Pollock's account looks like a form of phenomenal conservatism in which being appeared to that *P* or it seeming to one that *P* is sufficient to justify one's belief that *P*. This, however, would imply that anytime the appearance or seeming were the result of wishful thinking, etc. the resultant belief would be justified. Pollock avoids this result by A) restricting seeming to cover only literal appearance seemings<sup>3</sup> and B) qualifying the scope of (DR) to range only over *appropriate* beliefs:

Appropriate P's are simply those that can either result from a direct encoding or for which the cognizer can learn a P-detector. We will thus

understand direct realism as embracing both direct encoding and visual detection. (p. 338)

So on Pollock's account there are two sources of beliefs that (DR) allows as candidates for being justified by the perceptual seeming state. First, perceptual beliefs can be the result of information that is directly encoded in the visual image. Pollock calls this phenomenon "directly seeing-that." Directly seeing-that is limited to properties that are representable in the visual field. Call these properties perceptual properties. Among perceptual properties, Pollock lists convexity, concavity, spatial relation, etc. (p. 323). A perceptual property has a characteristic "look" to it that allows it to be encoded in the visual field. It is this information that justifies perceptual beliefs concerning the perceptual properties of objects.

Now, if Pollock were to leave his account of DR with directly seeing-that as the only source of perceptual justification, most of our perceptual beliefs would be unjustified. This is because the range of perceptual properties is so narrow. In order to show how perceptual beliefs like "there is a computer in front of me" are justified, Pollock needs more. This is accomplished with the introduction of a second source of perceptual beliefs: visual detection. While he is purposefully vague on the details (p. 335), Pollock suggests that humans have P-detectors that are sensitive to data presented in the visual image. For example, a computer-detector "fires" when certain data are present in my visual field producing the belief "there is a computer." This connection is both epistemic and causal—there is no inference from what I *seem* to see to what is there. Instead, a perceptual module yields the thought "there is a computer" when my visual field is in such and such a state.

Both directly seeing-that and recognizing-that are direct in the sense that both are processes that start with input from the visual field and end with thoughts (or beliefs) without any intervening inferences, etc. The difference between them is twofold. First, directly seeing-that produces beliefs with content that is already "encoded" in the visual field while in a case of recognizing-that, "the visual system merely provides the evidence on the basis of which we come to ascribe a property that we think about in some other way" (p. 322).<sup>4</sup> Second, the capability to directly see-that is hardwired into our perceptual systems while at least many of the capabilities for recognizing-that are learned (p. 336).

The conclusion is that on Pollock's DR an agent can have a justified perceptual belief "by directly encoding some of the contents of the image into thoughts" (i.e. directly seeing-that) or "by acquiring visual detectors through learning and using them to attribute non-perceptible properties to

the things we see" (i.e. recognizing-that, pp. 336-337).

### III. Direct Realism and Religious Beliefs

In this section I will argue that Pollock's account allows for justified perceptual beliefs of a religious nature. Recall that a perceptual belief on Pollock's account is any belief formed as a direct response to visual input (p. 309). So if an agent forms a religious belief (e.g. God is present) as a direct response to perceptual input, this belief qualifies as a perceptual belief. Furthermore, justification for perceptual beliefs is accomplished via a seeming state concerning a belief produced either by directly seeing-that or by recognizing-that. Directly seeing-that can only justify beliefs with content that is embedded in the visual field. But, for example, God doesn't have a characteristic "look." And so directly seeing-that won't ever be able to justify religious beliefs.

However, "recognizing-that" is capable of justifying a much broader range of perceptual beliefs. Recognizing-that is a process that occurs when the visual field triggers a P-detector. The logical structure of a visual detector is compared to a statistical syllogism: visual fields of such and such a character usually indicate a P, so when there is a visual field of such and such a character, form the thought that P. Pollock suggests that it is likely that P-detectors are learned. For example, after having my visual field in state  $\Phi$  many times and finding that a cat was present in each case, my perceptual system creates a cat-detector that forms the belief "there's a cat" in response to input  $\Phi$ .

The same goes for religious beliefs. After having my visual field in state  $\psi$  many times and finding out that God was present in each case, my perceptual system creates a God-detector that forms the belief "God is here" in response to future fields of similar quality. Since visual recognition can be a learned process, there is no *principled* reason to restrict the range of possible P-detectors to mere physical objects. In particular it seems to nicely capture the reports of many religious believers who claim that they can perceive God in nature, etc.<sup>5</sup>

### IV. Objections and Replies

Objection #1: Religious beliefs are always non-perceptual. Pollock defines a perceptual belief as any belief that is formed as a direct response to visual input (p. 309). If an agent forms a belief that God is there as a direct result of input from his visual field, then, *ex hypothesi*, this belief is perceptual. If this account of perceptual belief is faulty in some way, it's up to the critic to produce another. I am skeptical that any account of a perceptual belief will be rich enough to capture the many types of beliefs

that we want to characterize as perceptual while leaving out religious beliefs. Think of Dretske's gas tank case: I believe that the tank is empty because I see the needle on E (Dretske 1988). Upon looking at the gauge, I form the belief. Is this a perceptual belief? If not, it's hard to see how my belief that my wife is happy is a perceptual belief. If so, it's hard to see how religious beliefs can be excluded.<sup>6</sup>

Objection #2: Well, even if religious beliefs can be perceptual in some loose sense, you never actually *see* God. This objection is a confusion between metaphysical DR and epistemic DR. Recall that robust DR includes a metaphysical thesis about the objects of perception while the weaker DR that I've been concerned with here doesn't make any metaphysical claims. So complaints about what we actually *see* are misguided: I've argued only that religious beliefs might be both perceptual and justified under one contemporary version of DR.

Objection #3: These P-detectors depend upon one actually finding out whether or not God is present. But since no one actually does so, no one is ever in a position to associate some visual field with God's presence. This objection can be read in two ways. First, the complaint may be that since God doesn't exist, one cannot associate some perceptual experiences with him since he's never there in the first place. This is a bad objection because we want to allow for justified, false beliefs. Pollock's account does not require that a state of affairs actually obtain, and this is why it can account for the justification of the demon-worlders' perceptual beliefs.

The second way of reading the objection is more plausible.<sup>7</sup> It appears that finding out that God is present would require one to form the justified belief that God is present. But if that's so, what is the justification for this initial belief? In other words, the justified belief that God is present appears to be a pre-condition for one to form a P-detector that would correlate perceptual input with the content 'God is present'. This objection fails for two reasons. First, one might gain the justified belief that God is present in any number of ways (e.g. testimony). Think of the child who is told by his mother that God is present as they gaze at a sunset. Just as the child learns what visual fields to associate with cats, dogs, and sheep, he might learn to associate certain visual fields with God's presence. Second, the demand for justification at this step is irrelevant. The belief that is associated with the perceptual input need not be initially justified. All that need happen on Pollock's account is that the subject learn to associate some given perceptual data with some given propositional information.

Objection #4: This account of DR not only allows for religious beliefs to count as both justified and perceptual but all kinds of extraordinary

beliefs as well.<sup>8</sup> It looks like one can have a justified perceptual belief that the Great Pumpkin has visited (Plantinga 1981) or that Santa Clause might be nearby. While I grant that this is the most serious objection that can be levied against the view, I think that accepting this result doesn't amount to any serious bullet-biting. It seems perfectly natural to say that a child could have a perceptual belief about the Great Pumpkin, for example. If he learns to associate certain visual fields with the propositional content "the Great Pumpkin is here," then this should count as a perceptual belief.

What's the take-away lesson? I think there are two. First of all, the allowance of religious beliefs as both perceptual and justified is not a quirk of Pollock's account. Instead, it is endemic to all plausible versions of DR—that is to say all versions of DR that accept the 3 theses outlined earlier (for another example, see Markie 2006). These accounts must allow that perceptual beliefs are justified without recourse to other beliefs while at the same time maintaining that a great many of our actual perceptual beliefs are justified. This seems difficult to do while excluding things like religious beliefs.

The second lesson depends on one's religious epistemology. If the case that I've made is a good one, this could serve as the grounds for a *reductio* against DR. The argument would be that DR *can't* be true because it implies that we can have justified perceptual beliefs about God. But since we can't, we ought to abandon DR. In this case my essay will have highlighted a weakness in DR. If, however, one finds that it makes sense to speak of an agent perceiving that God is present, etc. then it is a virtue of DR that it explains how such beliefs could be justified without recourse to external factors or an inference from seeming states.<sup>9</sup>

### References

- Alston, William. (1993) *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Bonjour, Laurence and Sosa, Ernest. (2003) *Epistemic Justification: Internalist vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
- (2004) "In Search of Direct Realism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 69:2, pp. 349-367.
- Cohen, Stewart. (1984). "Justification and Truth." *Philosophical Studies* 46, 279-95.
- Dretske, Fred. (1988) *Explaining Behavior* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press).
- Goldman, Alvin. (1976) "What is Justified Belief?" in *Justification and Knowledge* (Dordrecht: D Reidel), pp. 1-23.
- Huemer, Michael. (2001) *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield).

Markie, Peter. (2006) "Epistemically Appropriate Perceptual Belief," *Nous*, 40:1, pp. 118-142.

Plantinga, Alvin (1981) "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15:1, pp. 41-52.

----- (2000) *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).

Pollock, John L. (2005) "Vision, Knowledge, and the Mystery Link," *Philosophical Perspectives*, 19, pp. 309-351.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Bonjour (2004), direct realism claims "(a) that in normal cases of perception, physical or material objects are, in a sense admittedly still in need of clarification, directly or immediately perceived; and (b) that the justification for beliefs about such objects that results from perception does *not* depend on the sort of inference from the subjective character of perceptual experience to which the representationalist appeals..." (p. 351).

<sup>2</sup> "...perceptual beliefs, as the first beliefs the agent forms on the basis of perception, are not generally about appearances. It is rare to have any beliefs at all about how things appear to you. You normally just form beliefs about ordinary physical objects" (p. 311).

<sup>3</sup> Some seemings are not experiential or phenomenal in nature but are metaphorical seemings. For example, that it seems to you that the war in Iraq is unjust is **not** an appearance-seeming.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the talk of evidence, the move from the visual field to the thought is **not** inferential in either case.

<sup>5</sup> As an aside, notice that Pollock leaves open the question as to whether or not any of a normal human's P-detectors are innate. In other words, he leaves it an open question whether or not all P-detectors are learned (pp. 341-5). This ambivalence connects nicely with the insistence of some theists that humans are equipped with a *sensus divinitatus*. This view has been defended in contemporary religious epistemology by those who are convinced that God has designed humans with an innate capacity to perceive him (Alston 1993, Plantinga 2000). Perhaps the belief that God exists is properly basic in precisely this sense: the belief is a justified perceptual belief that results from an innate capacity of the perceptual system to form the belief that God exists in response to certain perceptual fields.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hartsoc has objected that in Dretske's case the needle is a natural indicator in the way that a smile is not. This objection has no force for two reasons. One, it is clear that the needle is less "natural" than the smile as the needle is merely a convention that is established and smiling seems to bear a genuine biological correlation with emotion. Second, it shouldn't matter if the indication is natural or conventional. Pollock's representing-that is designed exclusively to account for contingent indication, and so the gas tank case should qualify as a case of recognizing-that one's tank is empty.



<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Peter Markie for raising this objection.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Michael Hartsock (the great pumpkin) and Peter Markie (Santa) for raising this objection.

<sup>9</sup> I'd like to thank both Michael Hartsock and Peter Markie for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I'd also like to thank Tom Senor for his very helpful comments and criticisms presented at the 2006 SWPS conference.