

Seeing Nature as Creation

How Anti-Cartesian
Philosophy of Mind and
Perception Reshapes
Natural Theology

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To my Father Åke

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Preface

I want to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Arne Rasmusson. It was his inspiring undergraduate courses that made me want to write a dissertation in the first place.

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This book would not have been written had not the Church of Sweden offered me a four year scholarship. I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Church of Sweden for having given me this opportunity.

Finally, I want to thank my mother Lena and my father Åke, my sisters Maria and Margareta, and my brothers Åke and Jan, for their support, encouragement and love. At this moment, my thoughts are with my father who is seriously ill and receives treatment at the intensive care unit at Akademiska sjukhuset in Uppsala. My greatest aspiration is to become as good a person as my father. I know that I will never succeed. This book is dedicated to him.

Introduction

Sometimes when I happen to see a moose running across a bog in the woods, a flock of birds landing in an autumn coloured tree, a lion ripping apart a gazelle on some TV channel or when I, in a meditative mood, simply observe the movements and sounds of the people around me in the seminar room, it can seem obvious to me that the organisms that I perceive are *created*. I cannot but believe that they, in some sense, are the results of intent and intelligence.

This is a subjective report. It describes my spontaneous reaction to certain complex biological phenomena. A conversation that the Duke of Argyll reports having with Darwin the year before Darwin's death reveals that my reaction is not unique:

In the course of that conversation I said to Mr. Darwin, with reference to some of his own remarkable works on the *Fertilisation of Orchids*, and upon *The Earth-worms*, and various other observations he made of the wonderful contrivances for certain purposes in nature – I said it was impossible to look at these without seeing that they were the effect and the expression of Mind. I shall never forget Mr. Darwin's answer. He looked at me very hard and said, "Well, that often comes over me with overwhelming force; but at other times," and he shook his head vaguely, adding, "it seems to go away."¹

Perhaps similar experiences of "overwhelming force" caused John Calvin to say: "In attestation of [God's] wondrous wisdom, both the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs ... which force themselves on the notice of the most illiterate peasant." God has been pleased, Calvin goes on, "so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot but open our eyes without being compelled to behold him."²

The received view today, however, is that spontaneous reactions to nature of the type Darwin, Calvin, and I seem to share must be seen as mistaken or at least rationally unjustified. They must be viewed, according to a common understanding, as pure projections of religious ideas onto a nature that provides no rational basis for them. If there really is some *evidence* for a creator to be found in nature, it is not of a type that "forces itself on the notice of the most illiterate peasant." It is, at best, evidence of a very recondite sort, such as facts suggesting that the basic physical parameters of the universe are "fine-tuned" so as to make the

¹ George Argyll, "What is Science?," *Good Words* (April 1885): 236-245, 244. Quoted in Darwin 1887, 316.

² Calvin 1989, 51.

emergence of life possible. After Darwin, nobody can seriously claim that it is possible to know or justifiably believe, just by observing complex biological organisms, that a creator exists.

The role that Darwin usually plays in the dismissal of the kind of reactions I have reported reveals that those reactions are presumed to arise in something like the following way: A person ignorant of, or hostile to, evolutionary theory sees a complex, highly organised natural structure and quickly arrives at the conclusion that a Mind must have designed that structure. The tacit inference that such a person performs turns out, when made explicit, to be either an analogical inference (revealed as weak by Hume), or an inference to the best explanation (refuted by Darwin). So the reason why I react to complex organisms in the way I do is that I tacitly pursue a line of reasoning similar to the kind William Paley pursued when he constructed his famous watch-argument.³ The only difference is that *my* reasoning is performed much quicker and sloppier.

But is the only possible role that observations of biological organisms can play for the justification of belief in a creator the role of being premises in a Paley-style inference?⁴ In this dissertation, I will argue that it is not. I will suggest that biological nature could make knowledge of a creator *perceptually* (rather than inferentially) available. Knowledge of a creator is perceptually available if nature has some perceivable properties the instantiation of which logically entails the existence of a creator. Consider, as an analogy, the property of *being an artwork*. If this is a perceivable property (so that we can *see* that X is an artwork rather than merely *infer* that it is an artwork from seeing that X has some other properties), then there exists a perceivable property the instantiation of which logically entails the existence of a creator (an artist). If one knows that X is an artwork by seeing that it is, one thereby knows that an artist exists.

Anyone acquainted with the philosophy of perception knows, however, that the claim that it is possible to *perceive* properties of the type exemplified by the property of *being an artwork* – properties that entail the existence of a minded agent – faces some philosophical difficulties. Were this not the case, the so-called “problem of other minds” would never have reached philosophy journals. This dissertation argues that the difficulties in question, as well as other difficulties connected with the idea that nature could make knowledge of a creator perceptually available, can be overcome. The difficulties are, I will argue, mainly caused

³ Even though Paley’s argument is usually seen as an argument from analogy, it is more properly conceived as an “inference to the best explanation,” see Ruse 2004, 19.

⁴ The “intelligent design” movement attempts to construct inferences of basically the same kind as Paley. The author of this dissertation has no sympathy for this movement.

by certain deeply entrenched but non-necessary assumptions about the relationship between mind and world, and about perceptual experience – assumptions that can properly be called “Cartesian.”

The philosopher John McDowell has argued that some of the central problems of modern philosophy are generated by a Cartesian picture of the mind/world-relationship, a picture that still tends to hold us captive.⁵ He has laboured to show that it is possible to move out of the Cartesian picture and replace it with a conception of the mind and the world as “interpenetrating.” This dissertation argues that following McDowell’s lead, in this respect, dissolves the above-mentioned difficulties, and opens the way to understanding how nature could make knowledge of a creator perceptually available. We will shortly return to McDowell and the relevance of his anti-Cartesian philosophy for the argument of this dissertation. First, however, I will give a brief and impressionistic sketch of what that argument aims to establish.

Natural structures could, I will suggest, instantiate *expressive properties*. “To express something,” according to Charles Taylor, “is to make it manifest in a given medium. I express my feelings in my face; I express my thoughts in the words I speak or write. I express my vision of things in some work of art.”⁶ A state of mind, such as a feeling or an intention, is expressed

when it is embodied in such a way as to be made manifest. And “manifest” must be taken here in the strong sense. Something is manifest when it is directly available for all to see. It is not manifest when there are just signs of its presence, from which we can infer that it is there, such as when I “see” that you are in your office because of your car being parked outside.⁷

What do we *perceive* when we look at the face of another person who is in pain? We only perceive facial contortions, according to a common view. From our perceptions of such contortions, we then tacitly infer that the person is in pain. The inferences we perform are usually (when reconstructed by philosophers) conceived as either analogical inferences, or arguments-to-the-best-explanation.

Inferential accounts of knowledge of other minds (which presuppose that behaviour is not expressive in Taylor’s sense) are, however, extremely strained and often viewed as problematic. So suppose that human behaviour is like it appears to be, *viz.*, genuinely expressive. Then what

⁵ This picture does not, in its contemporary versions, include substance dualism as one of its features. This aspect of Descartes’ thought has long been out of favour.

⁶ Taylor 1989, 374.

⁷ Taylor 1985, 219.

we see in another person's face may be something more than mere contortions of physical features. We may see *expressions of pain*. The property of *being an expression of pain* is not identical to any "bodily" or "behavioural" property (such as *being a certain type of facial contortion*), but is essentially such that it makes the person's pain *manifest* ("directly available for all to see"). An expression of pain makes, in other words, the fact that the person is in pain directly knowable for others.

Artworks are also, on a common and attractive understanding, capable of making mental properties, such as feelings, manifest. According to Aaron Riddley, "[a]rtworks must be understood as having expressive properties capable of revealing and being explained by the feelings of the artist."⁸ Art is sometimes, if Riddley is right, expressive in the same sense as behaviour. Or why not say, with R.G. Collingwood, that "[e]very utterance and every gesture that each one of us does is a work of art"?⁹

My suggestion, as we have seen, is that not only human behaviour and art but also the natural world could instantiate expressive properties. This suggestion has a clear resonance in the Christian tradition. It is a commonplace within the tradition that the world *testifies* to its creator. "The world itself ... proclaims," according to St. Augustine,

by a kind of silent testimony of its own both that it has been created, and also that it could not have been made other than by a God ineffable and invisible in greatness, and ineffable and invisible in beauty.

The most common way of cashing out the metaphor of the world's testimony, of course, has been in terms of *symptoms* or *effects* of the divine hand. From those effects, it has been said, we may infer (by analogy or by an argument-to-the-best-explanation) that the world has been created. My suggestion is that a better explication of the traditional idea of the world's testimony is available. It could be possible to *perceive* the world (or a certain aspect of it, *viz.* biological nature) as *creation*, in much the same way that we seem to be able to perceive lumps of tissue as *human beings* and blobs of paint on canvas as *art*.

The least serious difficulty that my proposal – which focuses on the expressivity of *biological* nature – faces is the question of its compatibility with evolution. I will argue that the fact that biological species have emerged through a long process of evolution by natural selection does not constitute a problem for the proposal, since evolution is compatible

⁸ Riddley 2003, 221-222.

⁹ Collingwood 1938, 285.

with divine creation. Natural structures could be, as I will argue, expressive of divine intent and intelligence in virtue of being created in the sense of “created” that is embraced by “evolutionary theism.”

A more serious difficulty for my proposal is posed by the fact that people can fake being in pain. People can display behaviour that *seems* to be the result of pain even though it is not. If this is the case, how can we say that behaviour can *manifest* pain, making the fact that a person is in pain available for all to see? Must we not say that what other people *really* are in a position to see is just the “bodily” behaviour of the person, which is the same whether the person *is* in pain or merely fakes being in pain? The possibility of pretence seems to entail that behaviour cannot really be expressive in Charles Taylor’s sense. This conclusion also applies, *a fortiori*, to art and nature.

The most serious difficulty encountering my proposal, however, may be the following. The idea is, as we have seen, that reactions to nature of the kind I have reported could be something *more* than unjustified projections of religious categories. My suggestion is that those reactions could be based on *perceptions* of expressive properties instantiated by biological nature, perceptions that could constitute *evidence* that satisfactorily justifies belief in a creator. However, even if nature *is* expressive of the mind of a creator in the way suggested, and if my spontaneous reactions to complex organisms are in fact caused by perceptions of expressive properties, how can we *know* that this is so? Must we not, as a condition for being rationally entitled to regard them as something more than mere projections, have some evidence for the *reliability* of the kind of experiences that purport to reveal expressive properties in nature?

In order to address and resolve these and other problems, we must turn to the philosophy of mind and perception. Above I hinted that certain Cartesian assumptions about the nature of mind and perception constitute obstacles in the way of understanding how nature could be directly perceived as creation. In order for the latter idea to be viable, we must move out of the Cartesian picture.

John McDowell is probably the most profound contemporary critic of Cartesian conceptions of mind and perception, but he is certainly not the only one. Philosophers such as Hilary Putnam, Charles Taylor, John Haldane, Gregory McCulloch, and Timothy Williamson share some of McDowell’s anti-Cartesian concerns. In this dissertation, I will formulate a very broad, general outlook on mind and perception whose main features are drawn from McDowell’s work. This outlook also receives support, however, from the other above-mentioned philosophers.

Since the outlook that I will formulate emphasises the “interpenetration” of mind and world and construes perception as a direct openness to the world, I cannot resist the temptation of calling it “open-mindedness.”

I will attempt to show that the outlook of open-mindedness allows us to explicate the traditional Christian idea that nature testifies to its creator in the way briefly sketched above.

The argument of this dissertation will end in the following conclusion: If the way that open-mindedness pictures our cognitive relation to the world is correct, then it is possible that people like me – people who spontaneously react to nature in the way described above – actually *know* that a creator of biological structures exists. The evidence that supports this knowledge is, then, perceptions of expressive properties in nature.

The important role that the anti-Cartesian outlook of open-mindedness plays for the argument of this dissertation means that we cannot immediately engage with the central, theological aspect of the argument. Before we can see whether open-mindedness makes the idea of perceptual knowledge of a creator feasible, we must equip ourselves with a good understanding of what open-mindedness amounts to, which problems it is intended to solve (or rather dissolve), and why a number of prominent philosophers have found all or some of the outlook's features attractive. This means that we must enter what has been called the “inner sanctum” of contemporary analytical philosophy – the conflict-ridden and intellectually demanding domain of the philosophy of mind and perception.

In **Chapters 1 and 2** we lift the veil and enter the sanctum. The chapters put a spotlight on the features of the Cartesian picture of the mind/world-relation that underlie much contemporary thinking. Those features are contrasted with the corresponding features of open-mindedness. It is suggested that picturing our cognitive relation to the world in the way recommended by open-mindedness looks like a promising way out of some central philosophical problems. Chapter 1 focuses on the relation between mind and world in general. Chapter 2 focuses on issues about perception.

Most contemporary theories of perception conceive perceptual experiences as “interfaces” between our cognitive powers and the world. In chapter 2, the interface view is contrasted with the view (constitutive of open-mindedness) that perception is openness to the world. The openness-view portrays perceptual experiences as (when all goes well) direct cognitive relations to objective facts. The claim that perceptual experiences are direct cognitive relations to objective facts is equivalent to the claim that *seeing that p* can make knowledge of *p* directly available. The latter claim is, arguably, congruent with common sense. But can the openness-view accommodate the possibility of misleading experiences (illusions, hallucinations)? It can by means of a disjunctive construal of perceptual appearances. Two subjectively indistinguishable experiences (one veridical, the other illusory) do not need to be thought of as being of

the same, basic mental nature. An experience in which it appears to one as if p can be *either* a case of having a direct cognitive relation to the objective fact that p , *or* a case of merely having a subjective appearance presented to one's consciousness.

Chapter 3 starts with a summary of the main argument of the dissertation. The rest of the chapter is devoted to sorting out the epistemological consequences of the view that perception is openness to the world. This is necessary in order to understand what the argument of the dissertation can reasonably be expected to establish and not. An important purpose of chapter 3 is, therefore, to clarify the dialectical situation.

Chapter 3 reveals that the view that perception is openness to the world has, despite its commonsensical character, very interesting implications for our conception of epistemic rationality. The idea that *seeing that p* can make knowledge of p directly available (this is what perception as openness means) entails that rationality is not transparent. We are not always – even when we are fully alert, sufficiently conceptually sophisticated, and actively engaged in reflecting about the matter – in a position to know whether a particular perceptual belief that we have is epistemically justified or not. We are therefore, if open-mindedness is correct, dependent on “favours from the world” at the very level of rationality. Accepting this type of dependence is the price we have to pay if we are to avoid picturing ourselves as being “out of touch” with the objective world (which is the classical Cartesian predicament). I will, at the end of the chapter, conclude that whether we are *justified* in believing in a creator or not on the basis of perceptual experiences of nature can depend (if open-mindedness is right) on whether the world does us the favour of *being* the way it *appears* to be (i.e., created). At this point, we will hopefully have achieved an understanding of what the rest of the dissertation needs (and does not need) to establish. We will also have understood why I have talked in terms of possibilities (“nature *could* make knowledge of a creator available”).

Chapter 4 describes and defends McDowell's construal of knowledge of other minds. Human behaviour appears to us as expressive of mind. It seems to us as if we perceive people acting and expressing feelings, not just bodies moving and emitting sounds. The common sense view is that we really *perceive* such psychologically loaded facts. Mainstream philosophy has taught us, however, that there are serious problems with taking the common-sense picture of our epistemic relations to each other's mental lives seriously. McDowell, I argue, has overcome these problems, mainly by means of his disjunctive construal of perceptual appearances (mentioned above). The disjunctive construal makes it possible to resist the “argument from pretence” (a version of the “argument from illusion,” which has been a constant obsession of modern epistemology)

and allows us to embrace the commonsensical idea that human behaviour is intrinsically expressive of mind.

Chapter 5 argues that the philosophical moves that McDowell makes in connection with the problem of knowledge of other minds can also be used to overcome the problems confronting the idea that knowledge of a creator is perceptually available from nature. I present the latter idea as a reasonable explication of what St. Paul says in Romans 1:20: “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” I argue that the idea that we can literally perceive nature as *creation* (i.e., as expressive of the mind of a creator) is no less reasonable than the idea that we can perceive material objects as *human beings*. If we can perceive nature as creation, we thereby know that at least one creator of natural structures exists. This knowledge, of course, is not equivalent to knowledge that the God of classical theism exists, but it is knowledge that strongly supports belief in the Creator-God of theistic religions. In this chapter, I also address various possible objections, such as arguments from the fact of evolution.

Chapter 6 is a brief reflection on the consequences of the dissertation’s argument for Christian theology. I argue that the proposal defended, and the anti-Cartesian view of mind, perception, and rationality on which the defence builds, have interesting implications for the debate between “revisionists” and “postliberal” (or “postsecular”) theologians about the “public character of theology.”

Before we begin, I would like to prevent a possible misunderstanding. In recent years, theologians interested in analytical philosophy have often been attracted by “coherentist” models of epistemic justification.¹⁰ It has become a commonplace in many theological circles that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief,”¹¹ or that “nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.”¹² Readers unacquainted with McDowell’s philosophy and sympathetic to coherentist views of this kind may wonder whether the frequent talk about “perceptual evidence” in this Introduction indicates that this dissertation will ignore Wilfrid Sellars’ critique of the “Myth of the Given”¹³ and work with a classical “foundationalist” model of epistemic justification.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Marshall 2000; Thiemann 1985.

¹¹ Davidson 1983, 310.

¹² Rorty 1979, 178.

¹³ DeVries, Triplett, and Sellars 2000.

This is, I can assure you, not at all the case. Sellars' critique is fundamental for McDowell's whole approach to epistemology, and thereby fundamental for the argument of this dissertation. One of McDowell's central ideas is that we do not need to choose between a foundationalism that succumbs to the Myth of the Given and an "unconstrained coherentism" of the kind proposed by Davidson and Rorty. A third position is available, one that allows the world itself to play a part in the justification of our empirical beliefs. Opting for this position requires, however, that we picture the world's impingements on our senses as always already imbued with conceptually structured contents. McDowell's critique of the "unconstrained coherentisms" of Quine, Davidson, and Rorty points out the Cartesian consequences of conceiving epistemic justification as something that merely pertains to relations *within* our "web of beliefs." "Coherentist rhetoric suggests," McDowell observes, "images of confinement within the sphere of thinking, as opposed to being in touch with something outside it" (cf. the above quote from Rorty: "there is no way to get *outside* our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence"). Being confined within the sphere of thinking is, of course, the classical Cartesian predicament (a predicament that ultimately, McDowell argues, threatens to make the very idea of world-directed thought unintelligible). I believe that readers sympathetic to coherentist perspectives in epistemology will find McDowell's criticism illuminating.

Further methodological remarks will be made as we proceed.