

## The New Sense, the Experience of Nature, and God's Providence

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### Religious Conversion and the Experience of the Natural World

One of the more remarkable features of religious conversion—and here I want to focus specifically on Christian conversion—is that it changes one's experience of the natural world. For example, in *The Autobiography*, Saint Ignatius reports that “[t]he greatest consolation he experienced was gazing at the sky and the stars, which he often did and for long, because he thus felt within himself a very great impulse to serve Our Lord” (11). The word ‘consolation’ has a specific meaning in the Jesuit tradition; it does not mean to receive comfort but to be inflamed with the love of God. Accordingly, gazing at the sky leads Ignatius to feel a deep love for God and moves him to serve God.

Charles Sanders Peirce, who could hardly be called a saint, underwent a religious conversion in 1892. In 1906, he reports that he often walks alone at night gazing at the stars. He considers that there must be planets circling them and those planets are likely inhabited, some of them with beings more intelligent than us. He then writes,

Let a man drink in such thoughts as come to him in contemplating the physico-psychical universe without any special purpose of his own; especially the universe of mind which coincides with the universe of matter. The idea of there being a God over it all of course will be often suggested; and the more he considers it, the more he will be enwrapt with Love of this idea. He will ask himself whether or not there really is a God. If he allows instinct to speak, and searches his own heart, he will at length find that he cannot help believing it (CP 6.501).

This is a scientific man, let us recall, whose only book was about astronomy, titled *Photometric Researches*.

Finally, Jonathan Edwards reports that after undergoing religious conversion, “God’s excellency...seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature” (16.794). Whereas he was formerly terrified of thunderstorms, Edwards states the rising of a new storm “now...rejoiced me. I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm” (16.794).

Now whatever we may think of the *truth* of religious belief and the *causes* of religious conversion, there can be no doubt that people do undergo religious conversion and just as little doubt that undergoing religious conversion alters one's experience of the natural world. Nature is no longer perceived as a threat, no longer conceived of merely as atoms swerving in a void or as a series of changes with no ultimate purpose. Rather, nature itself becomes a source of wonder. One's

experience of nature stirs feelings of love and devotion to God and even generates beliefs about God, for example that God exists, that God is excellent, that God is, as Augustine says in the first book of his *Confessions*, the “Creator and Disposer of all things” (1.10.16). For the religious convert, God is somehow perceived in the natural world even if God is not part of the natural order.

Any reasonable theory of religious conversion will have to take account of this fact. By a “theory of religious conversion” here I mean not a theory of the causes of religious conversion or of the truth of beliefs that the religious convert adopts or of the stages of religious conversion or of the domains of our lives that are affected by religious conversion. Others have amply explored all these topics. What I mean by a theory of religious conversion is a theory of what differentiates a convert’s experiences from a non-convert’s experiences. I mean by a theory of religious conversion a general account of the nature of religious conversion that can explain why there are changes in the phenomenology—the “what it is like” to experience the natural world or oneself or others—of those who have undergone religious conversion. This is the question I want to answer: what has happened to the religious convert such that she *sees* herself, others, and the natural world differently?

### **Edwards’s New Sense and Affect-Laden Affordances**

In my judgment, a good place to start answering this question is with Jonathan Edwards’s masterful *Religious Affections*. In that book, Edwards identifies twelve signs or, perhaps better, indicators of when a person has been truly transformed by the saving love of God. The first of those signs and—I would vigorously argue—the one that sets the stage for the others is that the true Christian has a New Sense of spiritual things. For our present purposes, I shall set aside the question of why Edwards thinks there must be something like the New Sense and why it is *new* (rather than a result of cognitive operations on our other impressions, for example). Instead, I wish to focus on what the New Sense *is*. For Edwards provides a dizzyingly rich description of the New Sense and it is not clear how all of them can be accounted for by the standard interpretations of his basic idea.

To give just a taste of Edwards’s rich characterization of the New Sense, he states it (i) transforms the way the natural world appears to him (as already noted), (ii) alters his take on current affairs (e.g. he now reads the newspaper looking for news of the advance of Christ’s Kingdom), (iii) is a new inward idea or simple impression, (iv) waxes and wanes, (v) is a new natural habit or foundation for action and not a new faculty, and (vi) involves the affections rather than mere inclination (which unlike affections are weak) or passions (which unlike affections are fleeting).

Granted this characterization, there are at least three mistaken ways to conceive of the New Sense. First, one might think of the New Sense as a new faculty or power as sense perception is distinct from memory. Edwards, however, explicitly denies that the New Sense is a new faculty. Second, one might think of the New Sense as a new capacity to sense some property, as tactile perception is capable of sensing texture, temperature, and solidity so perhaps we are enabled to sense God. But this fails to explain how this sense is connected to the will or habituation. A

third interpretation of the New Sense is that it is a new Lockean simple idea or impression of something we have never before sensed, as if I had for the first time tasted an artichoke I now for the first time “taste” God. But this standard interpretation utterly fails to account for why the New Sense is a new habit involving the affections.

My view is that Edwards was onto something very profound but that the resources found in British Empiricism and the Scottish Enlightenment were inadequate for him to develop his theory of the New Sense. Today, though, I believe we do have those resources in the theory of affordances. In particular, my position is that we should conceive of the New Sense as being an affect-laden affordance.

Affect-laden affordances have three elements.

(1) The first is the affordance itself. An affordance is a perceived relation between an agent’s abilities and some object’s properties or an event such that the object’s properties or the event afford the agent some opportunity for action. For example, the properties of a doorknob afford me the opportunity to turn it and a pause in conversation affords me the opportunity to interject a comment. Note that I *perceive* these relations rather than making explicit judgments about them. Four points should be made here.

First, affordances typically recede into the background of our consciousness as a consequence of habituation. We are rarely conscious of that fact that some object affords us an opportunity for action. How many doors do we walk by in a day without thinking that we could pass through them? How many staircases do we ascend without thinking that the staircase affords us the opportunity to move from one floor of a building to another? That some object affords one an opportunity for action typically goes unrecognized. That, though, does not entail we do not perceive it.

Second, though, we can become conscious of affordances, and we do when they become salient. For example, if a stairwell is oddly designed, we may become aware of how it affords us an opportunity to ascend it. Also, if we do not have habits that govern our interactions with objects, then how the object affords us opportunities for action may become salient.

A third and very important point to be made here is that a person can see that events afford opportunities for others. For example, a baseball umpire may see that a pitch affords a batter an opportunity to hit the ball. If watching a video of a lion stalking a gazelle, we may see that the lion’s stumble affords the gazelle an opportunity to escape.

Fourth—and this point, too, is especially important for what follows—events may afford opportunities to make manifest to others properties about ourselves. A fallen log that blocks a pathway may afford to me an opportunity to manifest my strength. A question asked in a classroom affords a student an opportunity to make manifest her knowledge of the subject matter.

(2) The second element of affect-laden affordances is some desire to take advantage of the opportunity afforded, e.g. the desire to turn the doorknob or the desire to interject in a conversation. The perceived relation between my hand and the doorknob, the affordance itself, obtains whether I desire to use the doorknob or not. When we do have this desire, I say that the affordance is relevant.

(3) The third element of affect-laden affordances are the affections themselves, which may be either anticipatory or realizatory. Edwards distinguishes among affections, wouldings, and passions. Affections are intense and enduring feelings about courses of actions or goals. In contrast, wouldings may be enduring but they are not intense. The person who sits on a couch while she would really like it if children were not going hungry has a mere woulding. Passions are intense but not enduring. The person who is deeply moved to help the poor and does so for a day and then forgets about it has a passion to help those in need but not an affection to do it.

As noted, an affection may be either anticipatory or realizatory. An anticipatory affection is an intense and enduring feeling directed at future events or pertaining to general goals. For example, an intense and enduring longing to help impoverished persons is an anticipatory affection, as is an intense and enduring hope that they are helped. A realizatory affection is an intense and enduring feeling directed at some past event. For example, a deep and enduring gratefulness for one's upbringing is a realizatory affection.

With this in place, I think we can begin to make sense of Edwards's theory of the New Sense. First, those who have undergone religious conversion perceive a relation between themselves and the events in the world such that they can make manifest the divine attributes. Of course, some of those attributes will be the divine moral attributes such as love, justice, mercy and the like. But I also think that they may be the divine metaphysical attributes, such as God's power, manifested in acts of endurance for the sake of God's kingdom, and God's knowledge, manifested in studying the "book of nature," so to speak.

Second, the religious convert does not merely perceive these relations but desires to make the divine attributes manifest through word and deed. Even an atheist can perceive that events provide an opportunity for religious persons to manifest the divine attributes. But the atheist, presumably, has no desire to make manifest the divine attributes even if she desires to act morally. And this is an important point of difference between the religious person and the atheist. The religious person does not see events *merely* as affording the opportunity to make manifest *her own* virtues but sees the events as affording the opportunity to make manifest God's attributes *through* her. By analogy, a person who has a natural talent for baseball may perceive an at-bat as an opportunity to make manifest her own talent whereas a person who has trained hard to be a baseball player may perceive an at-bat to make manifest not only her own training but the wisdom of her coach.

Third, the religious convert also has affections about various courses of action or goals. Some of these are anticipatory affections. The religious convert longs to manifest the divine attributes and hopes for the kingdom of God on earth. Likewise, some of the affections are realizatory. For example, she rues her past sins and regrets how they inhibited the realization of God's kingdom.

We are now in a position to understand how this account satisfies Edwards's characterization of the New Sense, going in reverse from how they were presented above. (vi) Obviously, affect-laden affordances involve the affections. What is important to note for the moment is that affections are intense and enduring. Consequently, these affections will cause us to (v) establish new habits of action.

Events will occur, we will recognize them as providing an opportunity to make manifest the divine attributes, and because we desire and long to do so, we will act in that way. Of course, (iv) those affections will wax and wane, as all feelings and affections do. We may go through periods of spiritual turmoil and, as Ignatius would say, desolation.

Furthermore, because it is an affordance, the New Sense involves seeing the worldly differently. An affordance is a perceived relation between our abilities and properties of objects or events. But we likely did not perceive these relations before conversion even if we could have. We might not see, for example, that a small inheritance might be used not to gratify our own desires but to help the needy. Accordingly, (iii) the New Sense is a new simple impression.

Moreover, (ii) one who has the New Sense will now view current affairs as providing opportunities *for others* to manifest the divine attributes and will have corresponding affections depending on whether those opportunities are taken advantage of. As noted above, a person can perceive that events afford others an opportunity for action, as the umpire perceives a pitch affords a batter an opportunity to strike the ball. Similarly, in reading about current events, we can perceive that they provide world leaders, for example, an opportunity to advance the kingdom of God on earth.

This last insight provides us with a way to understand why (i) the religious convert perceives the natural world differently. That is because the religious convert does not merely perceive opportunities for herself to make the divine attributes manifest but perceives opportunities for others to make the divine attributes manifest. In particular, the religious convert can see events as providing opportunities for the divine to make *its own* attributes manifest. The very drama of creation provides an opportunity for God to manifest God's excellency, might, beauty, and wisdom in the natural world itself. Is it any wonder, then, that gazing at the sky should console Ignatius or that it should lead Peirce to be enwrapped with love or that, for Edwards, God's excellency should appear in everything? The natural world itself is seen as providing an opportunity for God to manifest God's own divine attributes.

### **May We Believe in Divine Providence on This Basis?**

The above was my little sketch of how it is that a person's experiences come to be transformed as a consequence of religious conversion. For the remainder of this presentation, I wish to gesture to how this account can be extended to defend the rational acceptability of religious beliefs formed on the basis of the New Sense. What I say here will be very brief and sketchy.

As indicated above, one key feature of the New Sense is that it will generate new judgments in a way akin to how perception generates judgments. Just as when an umpire judges that a pitch could have been hit, so those with the New Sense will judge that, for examples, such-and-such an action is the action God would have me do *or* the approaching thunderstorm manifests God's greatness. When considering the natural world itself, one with the New Sense will no doubt judge that God has providentially ordered the universe. But is it rationally acceptable for a person to

adopt these beliefs? I think so precisely because it is no different from how anyone else forms beliefs on the basis of affordances. A robust defense of this claim will, of course, be impossible in this brief section, so I will have to just gesture to how I think this view can be defended.

Crucially, the New Sense is not a new faculty or power of judgment. Much less it is a new faculty of perception. This is important because if we wish to defend the rational acceptability of adopting beliefs formed by the New Sense, that task is different from the projects that others have recently proposed for defending the rational acceptability of religious belief. We cannot appeal to some presumed faculty or unique cognitive mechanism, a *sensus divinitatus*, because the affect-laden perceptual affordances of the religious convert are no different in kind from other sorts of affect-laden affordances. Similarly, the aim here is not defend the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of religious affect-laden affordances as though forming beliefs on the basis of religious affect-laden affordances is somehow different from forming beliefs on the basis of non-religious affect-laden affordances. There are not two doxastic practices at work here but one: that of forming beliefs on the basis of our perceptions of the world and, in particular, what actions perceived relations afford.

In one sense, then, defending the rational acceptability of adopting beliefs generated by the New Sense ought to be easy. It is no different from forming beliefs generated on the basis of any other affordance. It is no different from an umpire, for example, believing that a pitch could have been hit by a batter, and we all think that beliefs formed on the basis of those judgments are rationally acceptable to adopt.

There are, though, two worries. The first is that the New Sense would seem to be abnormal. Not everyone is religious convert and we are certainly not born with the New Sense. On this score, I think that Alvin Plantinga has the right of it: the *de jure* question about the rational acceptability of religious belief is not independent of the *de facto* question of its truth. If God in fact exists and has providentially ordered the universe, then it would surely be rationally acceptable to believe that God has done so based on what one observes.

The second worry arises from a particular kind of circularity that seems to infect beliefs formed by using the New Sense. Consider, for example, Edwards after his religious conversion observing the natural world and spontaneously forming the belief that God is excellent. Or consider the person who prays for God's assistance in a particularly difficult time, has events then go well for her, and concludes that it was the work of God. The phenomenology of their experiences seem to be penetrated by their beliefs such that they believe God exists, they see events in the natural world evidencing God's power, and then take this to make it rationally acceptable to believe that God exists.

I think the right reply here is that this is not merely an objection to beliefs formed on the basis of the New Sense but beliefs formed on the basis of all sorts of cognitively penetrated experiences. For example, an umpire may believe in advance that a batter has a high strike zone, see a pitch in that strike zone, and then take this to make it rationally acceptable to believe that it was a strike. Susanna Siegel has recently brought this problem to the attention of epistemologists. As she shows, this is a pervasive problem that any theory of justification will have to countenance.

There is, I think, one more angle of approach to endorsing the rational acceptability of adopting beliefs formed on the basis of the New Sense, and that is to draw on Peirce's theories of perception and abduction. The theory is complex and so I can only sketch what such a defense would look like here.

First, in 1903 Peirce argues that if we were to represent the logical relationship between our percepts and perceptual judgments, we would have to represent it as an abductive inference. Accordingly, the question of when it is rationally acceptable to believe a perceptual judgment is equivalent to the question of when it is rationally acceptable to endorse the conclusion of an abductive inference.

Second, Peirce provides his theory as to the "goodness" of abductive inference in 1903. He writes,

What is a good abduction? ...Of course, it must explain the facts. But what other conditions ought to fulfill to be good? The question of the goodness of anything is whether that thing fulfills its end. What, then, is the end of an explanatory hypothesis? Its end is, through subjection to the test of experiment, to lead to the avoidance of all surprise and to the establishment of a habit of positive expectation that shall not be disappointed. Any hypothesis, therefore, may be admissible, in the absence of any special reasons to the contrary, provided it be capable of experimental verification, and only in so far as it is capable of such verification (EP2.235)

Peirce, then, believes that an abductive inference is "good" if and only if (1) the conclusion explains the facts, (2) the conclusion is subject to experiment verification, and (3) we have no special reasons to disbelieve the conclusion.

Do beliefs generated by the New Sense—especially belief in God's providence—satisfy these conditions? If so and if Peirce's theories of perception and abduction are correct, then it must be rationally acceptable to endorse, even if tentatively, beliefs generated by the New Sense. Of course, showing that such beliefs do satisfy these conditions and that Peirce's theories are accurate is far beyond the purview of this presentation. What I have said here is just a brief description of a road map to showing that they are rationally acceptable.