

Renewing the senses: conversion experience and the phenomenology of the spiritual life

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Abstract In his discussion of conversion experience, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James draws attention to a variety of experience which has not been much investigated in the philosophy of religion literature, but which seems to be of some importance religiously—namely, an experience which consists in a re-vivification of the sensory world as a whole. In this paper, I develop four accounts of the nature of this kind of experience, and I show how the experience can inform our conception of the spiritual life, considered as a world-directed mode of experience and practice.

Keywords Phenomenology · Religion · Spiritual life · Spirituality · Emotion · Conversion · William James

Introduction

In his 1901–1902 Gifford Lectures, subsequently published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James cites various first-hand reports of conversion experience. Strikingly, these experiences seem to involve not simply a transformation in the subject's feelings and attitudes, or a renewed sense of proximity to God or some supernatural realm, but also a pervasive shift in the appearance of the sensory world. It is an implication of these experiences, I am going to suggest, that religious thoughts and attitudes can contribute to the structure and felt quality of our experience of the sensory world not only under the special conditions of the conversion experience, but more generally. My aim in this paper is to show how this can be so.

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Drawing on James's text, I shall begin by noting some examples of the convert's condition before conversion, paying particular attention to the case of Leo Tolstoy. I shall then consider two questions. How are we to understand the condition of Tolstoy and others like him before conversion? And how might we understand the role of spiritual re-orientation or religious conversion in effecting a resolution of this condition? By addressing these questions, I hope to reach a clearer understanding of a kind of experience which seems to be of some importance for 'the spiritual life'.

At the outset, I should say a little about what I shall mean by the expression 'the spiritual life'. Imagine someone whose assent to certain ideas and values is sincere but purely intellectual; or again, imagine someone who affiliates themselves with a religious institution, and participates in various rituals on this basis, but whose practical and experiential relationship to the world is not as a consequence touched in any fundamental respect. The 'spiritual' person is to be distinguished from individuals such as these, I propose, on the grounds that her beliefs and values are folded into her experience of the sensory world, so that they carry action-guiding force. The central question for this paper will be: how is the spiritual life, so understood, possible? I shall give two related kinds of answer: first an answer which concerns the capacity of the mind and body to shape the character of the experienced world; I shall then extend this answer, at the close of the paper, by considering how a particular spiritual practice can help to inculcate certain qualities of mind and body.

The conversion experience: a Jamesian perspective

Characteristically, James's discussion of conversion is grounded in a review of particular real-life examples of the condition that he is investigating. One of his primary examples concerns Leo Tolstoy's experience of a state of 'arrest'—of life having lost its usual flow and directedness—at around the age of 50.¹ James comments that for Tolstoy: 'Life had been enchanting, it was now flat sober, more than sober, dead.'² This 'arrest' in the flow of life was not brought on by any obvious change in Tolstoy's condition in the world. As Tolstoy himself says: 'All this took place at a time when so far as all my outer circumstances went, I ought to have been completely happy.'³ The shift in Tolstoy's sense of himself and the world is engendered, then, not fundamentally by a change in the world, considered in itself; nor is it brought about by his acquisition of some new piece of empirical information about the world. Instead, it derives from his growing sense that not only would he die—he had known this for many years—but that death would rob the defining commitments of his life, and his day-to-day activities, of their point. Tolstoy asks insistently: 'What will be the outcome of what I do today? Of what I shall do to-morrow? What will be the outcome of my life? Why should I live? Why should I do anything? Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?'⁴

¹ Cited in James (1911, p. 152).

² James (1911, p. 152).

³ James (1911, p. 155).

⁴ James (1911, p. 155).

So Tolstoy suffers from a kind of mental or spiritual un-ease which leaves him incapacitated in the face of the world; and this incapacity is bound up with a pervasive change in his experience of the world, since the world in his experience has now become, as James says, ‘flat sober, more than sober, dead’. So it is implied in James’s account that Tolstoy’s condition is not a matter of some purely mental turmoil or dis-orientation, though something of that kind is clearly involved. Instead, his condition is also caught up in a change in the appearance of the sensory world. In particular, we might suppose, the patterns of salience which had formerly lit up the world and sustained his interest in it have now fallen away, so that everything has the appearance of being ‘flat’. This same sense of the world, as divested of significance, or as monochrome or lacking in relief, is evident in a number of other testimonies cited by James. One of these sources reads: ‘I see everything through a cloud ... things are not as they were, and I am changed’. And another: ‘I touch, but the things do not come near me, a thick veil alters the hue and look of everything.’ And another notes that: ‘Persons move like shadows, and sounds seem to come from a distant world’; and ‘I weep false tears, I have unreal hands: the things I see are not real things.’⁵ And James comments that for melancholiacs: ‘The world now looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its color is gone, its breath is cold, there is no speculation in the eyes it glares with.’⁶ These reports are not obviously of precisely the same condition, but they have in common a kind of un-ease which consists in a sense of having lost touch with the outer world, which no longer comes into clear focus, or whose reality seems to have been in some way diminished.

Unsurprisingly then, the resolution of Tolstoy’s predicament, and of other predicaments of broadly this kind, will require new life to be breathed into the sensory world. Tolstoy’s own malaise is resolved, of course, when he undergoes an experience of religious conversion. And James observes that a revitalisation in the appearance of the sensory world is, in fact, a common theme of conversion narratives.⁷ ‘When we come to study the phenomenon of conversion or religious regeneration,’ he notes, ‘we ... see that a not infrequent consequence of the change operated in the subject is a transfiguration of the face of nature in his eyes. A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth.’⁸ Again, James gives various examples of the phenomenon. A particularly striking case concerns Jonathan Edwards, the American divine, who reports that at his conversion: ‘The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind.’⁹ In a similar mode, another convert writes of his experience: ‘I remember this, that everything looked new to me,

⁵ James (1911, p. 152).

⁶ James (1911, p. 151).

⁷ James quotes from Tolstoy’s account of his conversion in (1911, p. 185). See also his comment that: ‘This sense of clean and beautiful newness within and without is one of the commonest entries in conversion records’ (1911, p. 248).

⁸ James (1911, p. 151).

⁹ James (1911, p. 249).

the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees. I was like a new man in a new world.’ And another says: ‘Natural objects were glorified, my spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe...’ Another convert remarks: ‘how I was changed, and everything became new. My horses and hogs and even everybody seemed changed.’¹⁰

So there is a kind of mental or existential un-ease which consists in part in a deflated or flattened appearance of the sensory world, and which in some cases anyway, can be brought to an end in the experience of religious conversion, which issues in, or perhaps in part just consists in, a revitalisation of the appearances. My aim in the remainder of this paper is to reach a clearer understanding of the nature of this malaise, and how it might be addressed by religious or spiritual means. Let’s begin with James’s own account of the issues.

The role of the emotions in structuring the perceptual world

We might take the phenomena described by James to suggest that in general the appearance of the sensory world owes something to the state of mind of the subject of experience, whether or not she is conscious of this, and whether or not she has ever undergone a transformation of the kind that is reported in James’s sources. Certainly, this is what James himself thinks. He remarks:

Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it *as it exists*, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective. Whatever of value, interest, or meaning our respective worlds appear endowed with are thus pure gifts of the spectator’s mind.¹¹

So according to James, the emotions help to constitute the world as experienced. This account of the emotions implies that in certain cases, a bundle of emotions, or an emotion or ‘mood’ of particularly broad compass, such as a generalised apprehensiveness of things, will be able to contribute pervasively to the appearance of the world. And if that is so, then we might understand the global shift in the appearances of things which seems to be experienced by Tolstoy and like figures who appear in James’s discussion to be the product of a shift in emotional commitments of this far-reaching kind. On this approach, we should not think of the emotions as simply attitudes towards some perceived content; instead, they enter into that content, by structuring the appearance of the sensory world.¹²

¹⁰ James (1911, pp. 249–250).

¹¹ James (1911, p. 150).

¹² For a contemporary defence of the view that emotional feelings can be world-directed in their own right, see Goldie (2000, pp. 59–60). It is worth noting that one standard reading of James associates him with the

This account can be filled out straightforwardly by supposing that, in standard cases, the emotions constitute patterns of salience. To be afraid of a large, fast-advancing dog is among other things, under normal circumstances, to have the dog assume a degree of salience within one's perceptual field, so that it 'stands out', while various other items are consigned to the periphery of one's awareness.¹³ This perspective on the contribution of the emotions to our experience fits very directly with James's account of Tolstoy's predicament. The world in Tolstoy's experience is 'flat', James says, and we could put this point by saying that it lacks structure or salience. And on this construal of the emotions, lack of salience can in turn be understood as a consequence of, or a dimension of, emotional disengagement from the world. So in response to our first question, concerning the nature of conditions such as that of Tolstoy, which involve some generalised shift in the appearance of the world, so that it becomes flat or monochrome, we might say: at least in part, these conditions may be brought on by, or in some respects perhaps they simply consist in, a loss of affective engagement with the world.

Turning to our second question, we might ask how religious commitments in particular might contribute to the structure of the experienced world, granted this understanding of the emotions. Most simply, we might suppose that some world-directed emotions have their roots in religiously informed beliefs and values; and if such an emotion, or bundle of emotions, is of broad compass, then these beliefs or values will then be able to contribute pervasively to the structure of the experienced world. To take a simple example, if the believer supposes that God has condemned or, equally, commended certain activities or objects, then her emotional response to these activities and objects may be shaped accordingly, so that her experience in this domain comes to acquire a correlative structure.

It is also possible for the hedonic tone of the believer's experience to be changed in this way, as when my experience of a thing is shot through with revulsion once I come to understand it as the object of a divine prohibition. Compare the case where I am told that what I am chewing is meat which derives from Shuttlecock, my pet rabbit. In this case, the meat will, presumably, assume new salience in my experience, as I become focally aware of what I have been chewing. But my experience of the meat will also change in terms of its intrinsic phenomenal quality—the meat will now be experienced as revolting. For ease of exposition, I am not going to say more about this case, and I will concentrate instead on the case of salience. But it should be understood throughout that a shift in the patterns of salience which structure the perceptual field may be associated with (and in standard cases will be associated with) a shift in the intrinsic phenomenal quality of various items in the perceptual field.

Given his comments on the role of the emotions in constituting the world as experienced, I take it that James would be content with an account of broadly this kind.

Footnote 12 continued

rather different view that emotional feelings are simply ways of registering changes in bodily condition. This interpretation of James is inspired by his earlier writings, and especially by James (1981).

¹³ Compare James's account of 'fields of consciousness'. He notes: 'As our mental fields succeed one another, each has its centre of interest, around which the objects of which we are less and less attentively conscious fade to a margin so faint that its limits are unassignable...' (1911, p. 231).

On this view, we can understand the capacity of a religious conversion to effect a transformation in the world as experienced, or we can understand conversion to consist, at least in part, in such a transformation, by supposing that the convert takes on a new set of religiously informed, world-directed emotions, with the result that her experience of the sensory world is re-structured pervasively. Let's call this perspective on religious conversion, and the role of the emotions in conversion, the 'simple picture'.

The simple version of the Jamesian approach, as I have just presented it, invites us to suppose that we experience the world as having been carved up in various ways, so that it is taken to include dogs, for example, and that a degree of emotional significance is then attached to the things and activities which have been picked out in this way, with the result that these things acquire a corresponding salience in the perceptual field. I take it that James himself would find this rendering of the simple picture rather too simple. For on his view, it is not possible to disentangle the emotional contribution to experience, so as to arrive at an emotion-independent ordering of the world which the emotions then latch onto.¹⁴ On this account, the emotions help to explain why we have a particular set of general concepts, and not only why we assign a certain significance to the various objects that emerge in the perceptual field granted some such conceptual scheme.¹⁵

So far, we have defined one perspective on the nature of conversion experience. In the remainder of the paper, I want to elaborate on this picture in three respects.

Concept application and experience of the world

On the simple picture, what matters in conversion is the religiously informed emotional attitude which the convert adopts towards various things or activities, which in turn shapes the degree of salience which those things or activities are afforded in the perceptual field. But in addition to the contribution of religious attitudes, we should also note the capacity of religious concepts to shape the perceptual field, where the resulting structure can then be further shaped according to the nature of our emotional engagement with its parts.

As an example of this possibility, consider Roger Scruton's comments on how the appearance of a Gothic church can be ordered according to the interpretive thoughts which a person brings to bear in her experience of the church. He notes:

... it is clear from Abbot Suger's account of the building of St Denis ... that the architects of the Gothic churches were motivated by a perceived relationship between the finished church and the Heavenly City of Christian speculation. Sir

¹⁴ James notes that: 'the practically real world for each one of us, the effective world of the individual, is the compound world, the physical facts and emotional values in indistinguishable combination' (1911, p. 151). However, as we have seen, James does think of the experience of melancholia in terms of a withdrawal of emotional engagement, rather than as a sort of negative engagement, and to this extent he is open to the thought that we can, in principle, apprehend what the world would look like when stripped of our emotionally involved contribution to its appearance.

¹⁵ Compare Sapir (1949, pp. 90–92).

John Summerson has further suggested that the Gothic style aims at a certain effect of accumulation. Each great church can be considered as a concatenation of smaller structures, of aedicules, fitted together as arches, chapels, windows and spires, and so can be seen as an assembled city, rather than as a single entity minutely subdivided. ... But the ‘interpretation’ here is not a ‘thought’ that is separable from the experience—it is there *in* the experience, as when I see the dots of a puzzle picture as a face, or the man in the moon.¹⁶

We have seen how the emotions can enter into the ordering of the perceptual field, so that those things in which we have the greatest emotional investment come to be assigned a relatively high degree of salience. In the case which Scruton describes in this passage, we are dealing once more with the question of how the perceptual field is ordered, but the key to his example is, I take it, the application of a concept, rather than, in any direct way, the nature of our emotional engagement with the constituent parts of the perceptual field.¹⁷ As Scruton notes, a religious thought, here the thought of the heavenly Jerusalem, can enter into the appearance of a Gothic church, so that the thought comes to be not just illustrated by but rendered in that appearance. And what results is a perceptual gestalt which images the heavenly city. To put the point otherwise, on Scruton’s approach, the distinction between understanding a church as a single entity minutely divided, and understanding it as built up from parts, has a phenomenological counterpart, since these varying conceptions of the building can be inscribed in its appearance.

It may be that Jonathan Edwards’s account of his conversion experience can be interpreted in broadly these terms. As we have seen, Edwards writes that following his conversion: ‘God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature.’ In this passage, Edwards is not evidently supposing, or presupposing, that he has taken on a new, emotionally informed attitude towards these natural phenomena, with the result that they have now acquired a different appearance; if anything, it is rather that the new appearance of these things leads him to evaluate them differently. So we might do better to understand his experience as a matter of his thought of God’s wisdom, purity and love coming to be rendered in the appearance of the natural world, so as to produce a perceptual gestalt which images God’s nature in these respects. If read in these terms, then Edwards’s experience of the world as an image of the divine wisdom and love is formally like that of the person who comes to see a Gothic church as an image of the heavenly city, once the thought of the heavenly city has been inscribed in the appearance of the church.

However hard it may be to understand this idea, the thought that the world in some sense presents an image of the divine nature is stubbornly rooted in various strands of the major theistic traditions.¹⁸ No doubt, Edwards subscribed to this thought before his

¹⁶ Scruton (1979, pp. 74–75).

¹⁷ As I have already intimated, there are some concepts whose character and application is bound up with an emotional commitment of some kind. But I take it that not all concepts have this character, and Scruton’s example does not seem to be of this nature.

¹⁸ See for example Aquinas (1989, 1a.47.1).

conversion. What happens in his conversion, we might suppose, following the reading of his remarks that I have just proposed, is that he is now able, in principle, to see how this thought, of the world as an image of God, can be rendered in experience. This way of understanding the matter helps to bring into focus another of James's remarks concerning the nature of the conversion experience. James notes that when a person is converted, 'religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place...' ¹⁹ Following this account of Jonathan Edwards's experience, we might suppose that a religious idea can assume a central place in a person's consciousness when it comes to inhabit the appearance of sensory things. And once it has been rendered in experience, the idea is likely to gain a new hold on the person's affections and motivations, given various familiar truths concerning the power of images, as distinct from verbal abstractions, to engage the will. ²⁰

We have been considering the possibility that the thought of the divine nature can be inscribed in the appearance of sensory things. While I do not have the space to undertake the task here, it would not be difficult, I suggest, to generate further examples of how religious thoughts can inhabit our experience of the sensory world, so as to effect a pervasive transformation in its appearance. ²¹

So here is a first point at which we might extend the simple picture of conversion with which we began. The human mind can indeed contribute to a re-ordering of the realm of appearances, and this may have to do with our acquiring a new pattern of interests or a new set of emotional engagements, which in turn comes to be written into the appearance of the sensory world; but it may also have to do with our deployment of relevant concepts, with the result that the appearances of sensory things hang together in a new way. And in turn, these concepts may then acquire a new purchase on the imagination, and a new capacity to motivate action. These accounts are not in simple opposition to one another. The first begins with an attitudinal shift, and supposes that this shift can be written into the appearances. The second begins with a person's new-found capacity to inscribe a concept in the appearances, and this development may in turn engender an attitudinal shift, and vice versa. For example, the person who comes to 'see', in Scruton's thought-infused sense of 'seeing', how the world images God may acquire thereby a deepened appreciation of it.

Kinaesthetic feeling and experience of the world

I am going to move now to a second respect in which we might seek to extend what I have called the simple picture. So far we have been concerned with the case of

¹⁹ James (1911, p. 196).

²⁰ Compare John Henry Newman's suggestion that the deeper kind of religious faith is rooted in a 'real image' of, that is, an experientially grounded understanding of, various doctrinal claims, such as the claim that God is our judge. See Newman (1979, p. 108).

²¹ Scruton gives some examples of how relatively abstract religious ideas can inhabit the appearances of sensory things. See for instance his suggestion that our experience of a cloister can be informed by the thought of the charisma or ideal of life of the religious order which made it (1979, p. 109). See too the suggestion that the idea of design in nature can be registered not only inferentially but also directly, in perceptual terms. This point is explored in Ratzsch (2003, Chap. 6).

visual perception: we have considered the experience of a fast-advancing dog and the experience of a Gothic church as an assembled entity rather than a single thing sub-divided, and both of these examples suggest that the visual field can be variously organised, according to differing patterns of salience. No doubt, we could make a similar sort of case for other sensory modalities. For example, a person's auditory field can presumably be structured according to various patterns of salience. Whatever sensory modality it involves, any such ordering of the perceptual field will take the form of a snapshot of the sensory world at a particular time: its constituent parts, in our experience of them, will be organised according to a particular pattern of salience at that time. This way of expressing the matter puts the accent on the spatial ordering of the various elements of the perceptual field in the present. But of course this ordering will also be keyed to the person's sense of the passage of time: it is because it has been approaching fast, and because it poses the threat of future harm, that the dog is assigned a certain degree of salience in the perceptual field.

There are other ways too in which the content of current experience can register our sense of the world's potentialities. Most obviously, the expressive posture of the body in a particular context can involve a judgement about the practical potentialities which are afforded by the situation; and this posture, in so far as it involves the tensing of various muscles, for example, can in turn be registered in states of feeling. So to return to our well worn example, the judgement that the fast approaching dog is dangerous can be registered experientially both in a certain organisation of the perceptual field and also in the felt recognition of the body's making itself ready for self-protective action in this context.²² In such cases, we might suppose, bodily feelings are not simply brute sensations, but participate in the world-directedness that is implied in the body's practical stance. So kinaesthetic feelings, the feelings by means of which we keep track of the body's movement and its orientation in a given space, provide a further way of understanding how the content of current experience may partake in an assessment of the possible course of future experience.

In this way, we can understand, from a further perspective, how two objects which present exactly the same sensory profile from our current vantage point may nonetheless be differently experienced. For example, a table and a balsa replica of a table may look exactly alike, in terms of their dimensions, colour, and so on. But our experience of them may be very different even so, in so far as they are associated with different sets of practical potentialities, which in turn are registered in differing organisations of the perceptual field, and differing kinaesthetic feelings.

Returning to the predicament of Tolstoy, it is striking that his experience of the world as flat and lifeless seems to be connected with a new assessment of its future potentialities. He asks himself insistently: 'What will be the outcome of what I do today? Of what I shall do to-morrow?' So Tolstoy comes to a new sense of the limits upon his capacity to shape the world enduringly. And this new sense of the world's potentialities, or its lack of certain potentialities, comes to be inscribed, we might say, in his current experience, in so far as that experience is 'flat' and lifeless. In this way, we can understand how Tolstoy and a fellow nineteenth century Russian could be

²² For further exploration of a perspective of this kind, see Robert Solomon's account of feelings as 'activities' in (2003, pp. 1–18). See also Pickard (2003, pp. 87–103).

presented with the same world, from a purely sensory point of view, but experience it very differently even so, given their different conceptions of its future.

Matthew Ratcliffe has suggested that if we lose our grip on the practical potentialities which are afforded by an object, then the object may come to seem in some way unreal. He comments: ‘Consider experiencing a table without co-included possibilities like seeing it from another angle, moving it or sitting on a chair in front of it. Without the possibilities of its being accessed from different perspectives or acted upon, it would appear strangely distant, intangible and incomplete.’²³ We might suppose similarly that the world can come to seem unreal or ‘distant’ and ‘incomplete’ in the experience of the person who suffers from some generalised sense that things have surrendered their practical potentialities. This case seems to fit a number of the examples that James presents in *The Varieties*. As we have seen, James cites experiences in which: ‘Persons move like shadows, and sounds seem to come from a distant world’; or again, he records this comment: ‘I weep false tears, I have unreal hands: the things I see are not real things.’²⁴ Perhaps, then, we can understand experiences of the diminished reality of the sensory world as a generalised case of what happens when I lose my grip upon the practical potentialities of a particular object, where this shift is registered in, for example, a change in kinaesthetic feeling.²⁵

Once again, we might wonder whether the experience of religious conversion in particular might be understood in similar terms. Some forms of religious belief do seem to involve an expanded or, in some cases, a contracted sense of the world’s potentialities. To take an example which is directly relevant to Tolstoy’s account of his predicament, some faiths suppose that the life of the person does not after all end with the demise of the body. We might ask ourselves: might this expanded sense of our practical possibilities be registered in the appearances of things, with the result that new life is breathed into the experienced world? We might wonder, for example, whether our experience of inter-personal relationships might be infused by the belief that our relationship to other human beings will endure post-mortem.

To this, it might be objected that it is hard to see how a belief concerning the post-mortem future of another person could make any difference to my kinaesthetic experience of the person in the present. My belief that another human being is, for example, a potential conversation partner can, no doubt, make a very direct difference to my bodily interactions with them in the present, but it seems much harder to associate, for example, the belief that he or she is potentially a companion in some post-mortem state with a particular practical stance in the world here and now. Even so, some theologians have maintained that a belief in the capacity of the human person to survive physical death should condition quite profoundly our assessment of the kinds of inter-human interaction that are appropriate in the present.²⁶ Similarly, some have thought that differences of view about the ultimate fate of the material

²³ Ratcliffe (2008, p. 156).

²⁴ James also notes this case: ‘There is no longer any past for me; people appear so strange; it is as if I could not see any reality...’ (1911, p. 152). Here it seems to be a sense of the past’s loss of its potentiality, or a diminished sense of the past’s reality, which is associated with, or perhaps realised in, such experience.

²⁵ Compare Ratcliffe’s discussion of the Cotard Delusion (2008, Chap. 6).

²⁶ See for example John Paul II (1995, Sect. 37).

world, following varying pictures of divine providence, ought to make a substantive difference to our sense of the practical relationship to the natural order that human beings are permitted or mandated to adopt here and now.²⁷ It is partly for this reason that eco-theology is such a contested field. Given the liveliness of such debates, there is, I suggest, some prospect of our being able to understand the experience of religious conversion, at least in part, in these terms—that is, as a matter of registering in kinaesthetic feeling a new appreciation of the practical potentialities of material things, where this experience affords a heightened (or diminished) sense of the reality of the sensory world.

It is sometimes supposed that the characteristic gait or gestures or, in general, the bodily demeanour of a person can reveal their feeling for the world considered as a domain of humanly meaningful activity. As Raimond Gaita's work in moral philosophy has shown, this idea can be developed with considerable sophistication.²⁸ If a person's bodily demeanour can indeed communicate their sense of things to another human being, then we might suppose that it should be possible for the person themselves to register this same sense of things 'internally', in kinaesthetic feeling. Here is one way in which we might develop the idea that such feelings can participate in a far-reaching assessment of the world's potentialities.

What I have been calling the 'simple picture' of conversion, or of human experience more generally, holds that the sensory world's appearance acquires structure or salience on account of our emotional engagement with it. So far, I have extended this picture on two points. First, I have suggested that we should take stock of the capacity of concepts, as well as of evaluations or emotional commitments, to inhabit the appearances of things; and secondly, we have seen that the simple picture can also be expanded by allowing for the role of kinaesthetic experience in registering the practical potentialities which are afforded by a thing. I have also offered some comment on how these extensions of the Jamesian picture may be worked out in the case of religious conversion in particular, by considering how certain religious concepts, or a certain sense of the world's practical potentialities from a religious point of view, may contribute pervasively to the appearance of the sensory world.

'Existential feelings' and experience of the world

I am going to mention just one further respect in which the simple picture might be extended. In his book *Feelings of Being*, Matthew Ratcliffe has argued that in addition to those emotional feelings which are directed at particular objects in the world, there are others which constitute a person's 'sense of reality'.²⁹ Ratcliffe gives various examples of such feelings, which he terms 'existential feelings'. 'For all of us', he writes, 'there are times when the world can *feel unfamiliar, unreal, unusually real, homely, distant or close*. It can be something that one feels apart from or at one with. One can feel like a participant in the world or like a detached, estranged observer,

²⁷ See for example Horrell et al. (2010).

²⁸ See for example his account of the witness of a nun in Gaita (2000, pp. 17–22).

²⁹ Ratcliffe (2008, p. 3).

staring at objects that do not seem to be quite *there*. All experiences', he continues, 'have, as a background, a changeable sense of one's relationship with the world.'³⁰

Let me give an example drawn from my own experience. As I write these words I am feeling the effects of a trip I have just made from Australia. It is not that my jet lagged state has led me to acquire any new beliefs about the objects in my immediate environment; but because of my condition, these things do, even so, strike me differently in certain respects, and this difference is registered, it seems plausible to say, in various kinaesthetic and visceral experiences, rather than simply in terms of a re-ordering of the items in my perceptual field according to some new pattern of salience.³¹ Moreover, in keeping with Ratcliffe's account, this feeling appears to involve a kind of all-encompassing sense of my material context, one which conditions the way in which objects in general present themselves or could present themselves, and the kinds of desire or emotion or practical engagement which they are able to elicit. For this reason, we might say that my feeling involves a sense of reality, rather than concerning simply some narrowly delimited swathe of experience. On Ratcliffe's account, all of us have all of the time some such sense, mediated in bodily terms, of our being in the world; but often enough, we are not conscious of such background feelings, and it may only be when we undergo some change of existential feeling (as for example when we experience jet lag) that we become aware of the sense of being that is presupposed in our ordinary, everyday dealings with the world.

This account suggests a further respect in which we might elaborate upon the 'simple picture'. We can agree with James that the world is structured or 'lit up' by our emotional engagement with particular things. But we can now add that this sort of emotional engagement presupposes an already established orientation within the world, by virtue of which we feel at home in the world, or estranged from it, or whatever it might be, where this orientation is given in bodily feeling. It is, we might say, only in the light of this background orientation that our emotional engagement with particular objects of experience can take shape, since how those objects strike us—the practical opportunities we take them to afford, and our attitude towards those opportunities, for example—will depend upon this pre-established orientation.

Given this account, we can present a further perspective on the experiences which James records in the *Varieties*. As we have seen, James characterises the experience of melancholiacs in these terms: 'The world now looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. Its color is gone, its breath is cold, there is no speculation in the eyes it glares with.' And feelings of reality as 'remote', or 'sinister' or 'strange' or 'uncanny' all seem to be, potentially, cases of existential feeling in the technical sense that Ratcliffe has defined. So as Ratcliffe himself has noted, the notion of existential feeling can be applied to James's discussion of melancholy very directly.³² Similarly, if a person finds that the world is flat, or distant, or in some way unreal, in some all-encompassing way, we might conclude that their condition is rooted not so much in an emotion which has its object a particular object or circumstance, but in some broader sense of

³⁰ Ratcliffe (2008, p. 7).

³¹ Ratcliffe notes the role of kinaesthetic and visceral experience in (2008, p. 123).

³² See Ratcliffe (2008, pp. 228–229).

reality, which is realised in an existential feeling. Drawing on our earlier discussion, we might add that if a particular existential feeling is bound up with a contracted sense of the practical possibilities afforded by the world, then it may involve a diminished sense of the world's reality.

The notion of existential feelings seems to lend itself fairly readily to theological application. Indeed, on some conceptions of God, it could be supposed that existential feelings amount to something like an experience of God. After all, theologians commonly suppose that God is to be conceived not so much as an individual entity or being, but as being or reality without restriction.³³ And it is striking that rather than giving us access simply to the reality of this or that individual thing, existential feelings seem to consist in a sense of what reality itself is like. So providing that a given sense of being, realised in a given existential feeling, is broadly appropriate in theological terms, might we not take it to involve a kind of apprehension of God? Ratcliffe's own examples are concerned more exactly with the reality of the material world, but so far as I can see, there is nothing in his view which would prohibit this further reading of the import of a particular existential feeling.

More cautiously, we may note that faith traditions typically offer a generalised assessment of the nature of reality, and of the place of the human person within it. And if some such sense of the significance of the human person in their material context could be made experientially accessible, in the form of an existential feeling, then that would be of considerable interest from a theological point of view. So for this reason too, a shift in existential feeling, and a correlative shift in the phenomenology of the sensory world, may lend itself fairly readily to theological interpretation; and when this shift has the right shape from a theological point of view, it may well be appropriate to think of it as a case of, or as in some way caught up in, a religious conversion.

We have been considering how we might extend the 'simple picture' of human experience with which we began. That picture supposes that the appearance of the world is a function of our emotional commitments, in so far as these commitments introduce varying patterns of salience into the perceptual field or, in part perhaps, just consist in such patterns of salience. We have noted three ways of building upon this picture. In brief, the world as experienced can also be shaped by the concepts which we bring to bear, where those concepts inhabit the perceptual field, and by our expectations concerning the future course of experience, where these expectations are registered kinaesthetically, and by those 'existential feelings' which constitute a background sense of the world's reality. These various proposals are also applicable, we have seen, to the question of how religious thoughts or commitments, in particular, may enter into the appearance of the sensory world. And in turn, therefore, they can be applied to the question of how we might understand the shift in the appearances of things which is characteristic of experiences of religious conversion. There is no incompatibility between these perspectives: the appearance of the world at a given juncture could reflect the combined contribution of these various sources. We have also seen that the sources need not operate independently of one another, but can interact—as when an existential feeling conditions the kind of emotional significance which we

³³ This perspective is commonly favoured by writers who have been influenced by Aquinas's suggestion that God does not belong to any genus. See [Aquinas \(1989, 1a.3.5\)](#).

can assign to particular objects, or when the application of a concept engenders a new, emotionally informed appreciation of some material context.

The nature of the spiritual life

This picture of the mind's contribution to our experience of the sensory world suggests a correlative picture of the spiritual life, and of spiritual formation. At the outset of this discussion, I suggested that when people speak of 'spirituality', they typically have in mind a commitment to certain beliefs and ideals which is not reducible to the giving of verbal assent to those beliefs and ideals, or to some form of institutional affiliation. We might suppose, then, that the 'spiritual person' is distinctive because her commitments have taken root in her practical and experiential relationship to the world. The account which we have been developing provides one perspective on how this could be. The spiritual person, we can say, is the person whose creedal affirmations and ideals are rendered in her experience—by virtue of her emotional engagement, by virtue of her capacity to inscribe certain thoughts in the appearances of things, by virtue of her practical stance in the world, where this stance is registered kinaesthetically, and by virtue of the background feeling of reality which provides the context for these more particular commitments. I do not say, of course, that this is all that is involved in the leading of a 'spiritual life', but from a phenomenological point of view, this seems to be, to say no more, one central part of what is involved.

In turn, this account lends itself to a certain view of the nature of spiritual formation. Spiritual formation, we might say, is a matter of cultivating relevant emotions, thoughts, practical dispositions and background feelings, so that these emotions and thoughts and practical commitments come to be inscribed in the person's lived relationship to the sensory world. It would be interesting to consider how the practices which are embedded in varying traditions of spiritual formation might be understood in these terms—that is, as engendering various patterns of emotional engagement which are to be realised in our experience of the world, or as enabling certain ideas to become 'real' by inscribing them in the appearances of sensory things, or by shaping a person's practical stance in the world, or by helping to reform their background sense of reality. There is no space to undertake such a task in any detail here, but I will mention just one example of a religious practice which suggests the potential fruitfulness of such an account.

Most faith traditions have been committed to the idea that certain places have a special or 'sacred' significance. The literature in the phenomenology of religion suggests that these sites exhibit a number of features which recur across cultures. Typically, sacred sites are hard to access: they may, for example, be set on an island or mountainside. And even when the pilgrim arrives at the site, they may find that they have to negotiate various thresholds which pose a degree of physical challenge. For example, the site may be surrounded by a threshold wall, or it may be dimly lit. Moreover, there is a common tradition of supposing that such sites provide a kind of *imago mundi*—so that the site serves as a kind of paradigmatic instance of the nature of reality.³⁴

³⁴ This picture of the nature of the sacred site can be found in [Barrie \(1996, pp. 56–64\)](#) and, in more sophisticated form, in [Jones \(2000, Parts I–III\)](#).

Given their role in engendering experiences of religious transformation, we might suppose that traditions of venerating sacred sites count as one example of a spiritual practice. And we might ask, therefore, whether the efficacy of this practice can be understood in terms of the account that we have been developing here. First of all, it is clear that such sites are not available for casual inspection. Getting to the site requires a certain seriousness of purpose—given the demands that are imposed by their remoteness or inaccessibility, for example. So the design or location of such sites suggests that if the believer is to grasp their meaning aright, then she will need to approach them with the right emotional demeanour. And given our account, we can say that this is exactly as we should expect, because only the person who approaches the site with the right emotional cast of mind will be able to experience the place in terms of the right framework of salience: the casual observer will not have access to the same experiential world as the person who approaches the site in a spirit of focused reverential seriousness.

Moreover, the physical challenges of the site also demand a certain response of the body: the dim lighting or the overwhelming scale of a building, for example, require the body to adopt a stance of caution, or to crouch in recognition of its own smallness, and so on. And when they are registered in kinaesthetic feeling, these responses will also be folded into the experiential recognition of the significance of the place. And if the believer conceives of the site as an *imago mundi*, or thinks of it on other grounds as bodying forth the nature of things, then she has a reason to treat her experiential acknowledgement of the character of this place as a recognition of the nature of reality as such. And her felt response to the place will assume, to this extent, the status of an existential feeling. Moreover, in so far as much of her sense of the place is registered in the brute impact of the space on the body, by virtue of the physical challenges which it presents, then we could suppose that the place is designed to shape an existential feeling in the more precise sense that Ratcliffe has identified. Finally, the point of the sacred site is presumably to afford a setting within which the believer's adherence to various doctrines and teachings can be cast in experiential form. The site is not typically a space for formal doctrinal instruction; it is, rather, a place where already formed doctrinal commitments can be rendered in experience, so that they move to the centre of the believer's consciousness. In these ways, I suggest, the analytical categories that we have been developing in the course of this essay can help to bring a relatively familiar practice of spiritual formation into clearer focus.

The pilgrim whose experience of the world is shaped enduringly in these ways will be, from the vantage point of her tradition, in a better state of mental and spiritual health. For her tradition's assessment of what is important in a human life will now be inscribed in her experience of the world, and her experience will count as well ordered in this sense. We might conclude that the task of the spiritual life is to save us from Tolstoy's predicament, and to restore us to a state of health or sanity, by giving us access to an experiential world that is ordered rather than 'flat', and that is structured and enlivened by the right kind of salience and the right kind of kinaesthetic and existential feeling.

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