

It's *Not* Interpretation All the Way Down: A Defense of Simple Seeing

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Abstract: Are our observations of the external world wholly filtered by our background assumptions (perspectives, worldviews, languages, conceptual schemes)? Is it interpretation all the way down? Is all seeing *seeing as*? I argue No. The notion of “simple seeing” provides an intuitively obvious perceptual ground for thinking simple seeing is true, so not all seeing is *seeing as*. Moreover, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument provides a logical ground for the falsity of the interpretation-all-the-way-down view. This is significant for theology and apologetics. Indeed, the New Testament testimony about Jesus presupposes the validity of simple seeing, and this allows us to ground our interpretation of the world—including the Good News—in the real world.

Introduction

Apparently popular today among university students (and professors) is the view that human perception of the world is wholly and inescapably interpretive. All seeing is, on this view, *seeing as*. The idea behind “seeing as” is that all seeing is filtered by the background assumptions—perspectives, worldviews, languages, conceptual schemes—which we bring to our observations and investigations. It is even alleged by some that our experience of everyday objects is completely a matter of interpretation and such interpretation varies from person to person. On this view, we cannot know the actual world. Rather, it’s interpretation all the way down.¹

In this essay I will argue—with considerable help from philosophers J. P. Moreland, R. Scott Smith, Steven B. Cowan, and James S. Spiegel—that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view should be rejected. I will do this in five steps. First, I will clarify the notion of “simple

¹ Philosopher James K. A. Smith sets out the interpretation-all-the-way-down view in chapter 2 of his popular book, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). See too James K. A. Smith, “Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? A Response to the ‘Biola School,’” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, edited by Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 218.

seeing,” which, once understood, seems very much to make the truth of simple seeing intuitively obvious, thereby rendering intuitively obvious the falsity of the all-is-interpretation (all is “seeing as”) view. Second, I will set out an argument, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, which gives logical support for thinking that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view is false. Third, I will consider a couple of objections that fuel the interpretation-all-the-way-down view, and I will show that these objections fail. Fourth, I will set out some reasons why the rejection of the interpretation-all-the-way-down view is significant for theology and apologetics, and thereby I will provide additional support for rejecting the view. Fifth, I will consider an objection that attempts to reintroduce the interpretation-all-the-way-down view whenever we attempt to *describe* and *communicate* what is simply seen, and I will show that this objection fails, too.

To be sure, background assumptions, i.e., perspectives, worldviews, languages, and conceptual schemes, play an important role when we interpret the world. But they’re not the whole story. As I will argue, simple seeing grounds our interpretation of the world—our story—in the real world.²

An Appeal to the Intuitively Obvious

The view that it’s interpretation all the way down—i.e., *all* seeing is “seeing as”—is false primarily because *simple seeing* is intuitively and obviously true. To clear away any confusion that might cloud the obviousness at hand, it is helpful to note that, as Moreland points out,

² To keep the arguments of the main body of this essay accessible to those who are not philosophers, I relegate some extended discussions of philosophical matters to the footnotes. In the footnotes I locate (philosophically classify) simple seeing as a form of knowledge by acquaintance and as a properly basic belief within a modest foundationalist/ particularist epistemology. In the footnotes I also deal with some possible objections from the philosophy of science. Though the discussions in the footnotes are important—and should be helpful to students of philosophy, theology, and apologetics—I think that presenting the footnoted discussions in the main body of the essay needlessly bogs down the flow, clarity, and cogency of the arguments in the main body. I suggest that readers read (and study) the lengthy footnotes *after* reading the main body of the essay.

philosophers make a threefold distinction concerning kinds of seeing.³ Following Moreland's lead, it is my view that in the process of clearly distinguishing these three different kinds of seeing (of which one is *simple seeing*), the reality of simple seeing—i.e., that simple seeing is in fact the case in our experience of the world—becomes readily intuitively obvious, and thus it also becomes readily intuitively obvious that not all seeing is interpretive.

1. *Simple seeing*. To clarify simple seeing, Moreland considers an ordinary case of seeing a dog, that is, a case of “having the dog directly present to you in your visual field.”⁴ According to Moreland, “You don't need to have a concept of what a dog is to see one. For example, a little child could see a dog without having a concept of what a dog is supposed to be. In fact, you don't even need to be thinking about a dog to see it.”⁵ In simple seeing, in other words, an object is visually perceived but is not classified in terms of one's conceptual scheme. This is a pre-conceptual perception/ awareness: visual sensations constitute the means whereby the mind directly sees the object itself (given properly functioning perceptual equipment, appropriate lighting, and reasonable proximity).

2. *Seeing as*. Moreland describes the act of *seeing as* as simple seeing coupled with “classifying the object of sight as an example of a mental concept.”⁶ According to Moreland, “When I see a dog as a dog, I must have some concept of what it is to be a dog and apply this concept to the object I am seeing. I could not see a dog as a dog the first time I saw one since I

³ J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*, revised and updated (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), 90. See too J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 120.

⁴ Moreland, *Love Your God*, 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

wouldn't have the relevant concept yet. Likewise, to see a dog as my neighbor's favorite pet, I need the concepts of a neighbor, a pet, and being a favorite."⁷

3. *Seeing that*. In the case of *seeing that* one judges that the conceptual classification—the *seeing as*—of the object perceived—via *simple seeing*—is correct. According to Moreland, “If I see that the dog is my neighbor's favorite pet, I judge that this belief is true of the object I am seeing.”⁸ Moreland adds: “Given the reality and nature of knowledge by acquaintance [i.e., simple seeing], it follows that knowledge [of the world] does not begin with presuppositions, language, concepts, one's cultural standpoint, worldview, or anything else. It starts with awareness of reality.”⁹

Cowan and Spiegel drive home the reality of simple seeing—and the intuitive obviousness of simple seeing—by reminding us of a hypothetical personal experience that, in actuality, is not uncommon:

Suppose during an outdoor conversation with you...a flock of geese fly overhead within my visual field, but I take no conscious notice of it and form no beliefs about it. Later you ask me, “Did you see that flock of geese?” I think for a moment and remember the flock and say, “Now that you mention it, yeah, I saw it.” This kind of common experience is easily explainable on foundationalist terms [i.e., in terms of simple seeing]. The explanation is that when the geese flew by I was “given” a nonconceptual and nonpropositional experience which I later conceptualized and propositionalized when your question jogged my memory.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁹ Ibid., 60. Moreland sometimes uses “knowledge by acquaintance” as a synonym for “simple seeing.” In addition, Moreland points out that there are three kinds of knowledge: knowledge by acquaintance (direct awareness or experience of something), propositional knowledge (knowing that a proposition is true), and know-how (practical knowledge or wisdom). (Ibid., 58.) See too Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle*, 120, 126-130. Philosopher Garrett J. DeWeese also distinguishes between knowledge by acquaintance, propositional knowledge, and know-how in *Doing Philosophy as a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 152. For Moreland and DeWeese simple seeing belongs to the category of knowledge by acquaintance.

¹⁰ Steven B. Cowan and James S. Spiegel, *The Love of Wisdom: A Christian Introduction to Philosophy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 89. Cowan and Spiegel defend a foundationalist epistemology known as modest foundationalism, of which simple seeing is a part. To understand Cowan and Spiegel's view, it is helpful to understand foundationalism in general, plus contrast modest foundationalism with classic foundationalism, plus see the weaknesses of the latter. Foundationalism in general is the theory of knowledge that there are two types of

Clearly, *seeing that* presupposes *seeing as*, and *seeing as* is dependent upon the observer's background assumptions or set of concepts used for the classification of what is simply seen. Clearly, too, *simple seeing* is not dependent upon the observer's background assumptions/ conceptual scheme. In simple seeing an object is perceived but it is not classified in terms of one's conceptual scheme. This is a non-interpreted, pre-conceptual perception/ awareness of the actual world external to the mind. In other words, as philosopher C. Stephen Evans points out, this is "a form of realism in which sensations are not the direct objects of perception but instead are the means whereby we are directly presented with objects."¹¹ In other

justified beliefs: (1) properly basic beliefs, which ground or confer justification on other beliefs but are not themselves grounded or justified by other beliefs; and (2) those other, non-basic beliefs, which derive their justification from the basic beliefs via some appropriate belief-forming relation (e.g., deductive or inductive logic). The set of basic beliefs of the classical foundationalist typically consists of and is limited to the following three: (a) self-evident beliefs, i.e., beliefs seen to be true once they are understood, e.g., $2+2=4$ (simple math), if P then Q, P, therefore Q (simple deductive logic), "bachelors are unmarried" (definitions); (b) incorrigible propositions, i.e., beliefs that deal with one's own immediate experience, e.g., I feel pain, I feel something; and (c) sense-data, i.e., whatever is evident to the senses, e.g., I seem to see black squiggles on a white background. Significantly, classical foundationalism is problematic for two major reasons: it ends up self-refuting (i.e., it doesn't satisfy its own criteria of basicity), and it fails to include other clearly reasonable-to-hold basic beliefs (i.e., those beliefs forwarded by the modest foundationalist). According to the modest foundationalist, the set of properly basic beliefs is larger than that of the classical foundationalist. It includes not only the classical foundationalist's basic beliefs (a), (b), and (c), but also some or all of the following: (d) that we're not in a matrix or dreaming (we just know this); (e) that the world has existed more than five minutes (we just know this, too); (f) memory beliefs (e.g., I ate breakfast this morning; I know this, so there is no need to cut open my stomach to check); (g) that my ordinary perceptions are veridical (i.e., I know that I am actually and accurately seeing what's in the external world when I look at the external world); (h) that there are other minds (yes, your friends have them!); (i) some moral truths (e.g., torture for fun is evil); and (j) God (of course, God is a controversial candidate for properly basic belief, especially with atheists). Also, modest foundationalism, unlike classic foundationalism, does not require certainty. Instead, in the case of modest foundationalism the foundational or basic beliefs are *prima facie* justified, i.e., an obviously true belief/ perception holds in the absence of a good reason for thinking one's senses are being misled (more on this in the next footnote when I discuss fallibilism and critical realism). All this to say that simple seeing can be classified as a bona fide member—(g)—of the set of properly basic beliefs in a modest foundationalist understanding of the structure of epistemic justification.

¹¹ C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 101. Evans is describing the commonsense epistemological view of Thomas Reid (1710-1796). Reid was reacting to the skepticism generated by the view (from René Descartes and David Hume) that we only know ideas or mental representations which stand between us and the world. Instead, we see *via* or *through* our sense impressions. Evans adds: "Reid stressed the need to begin with an attitude of trust in our human faculties (reason, perception, memory, testimony) without insisting on rational proof of their reliability" (ibid., 101). It seems, then, that we should go with what's obvious and thus the burden of proof rests with those who would deny the obvious, since the obvious has epistemic innocence and priority. It would seem too, then, that we can in fact have a direct awareness of reality when our faculties of perception are (to follow philosopher Alvin Plantinga) operating properly in contexts for which they are designed to produce true beliefs. The latter point allows for fallibility in our perception and thus critical inspection of what we perceive is real (because we sometimes have, say, poor lighting or

words (again), the fact is that sense impressions are not the *terminus* of perception, but *that through which* the mind sees and grasps the actual extra-mental reality. This means that we can know the external world/ reality to some extent directly via simple seeing, and *then* we interpret. Surely, this is sensible and fits well with our everyday ordinary experience (as pointed out by Moreland, Cowan, and Spiegel). Surely, too, because simple seeing seems obviously true, the very apparent truthfulness of simple seeing provides good philosophical grounds for thinking that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view—the view that *all* seeing is “seeing as”—is false.¹²

we are looking at an object too far away or too small to be seen by the unassisted eye). Simple seeing, then, seems to be at the (modest) foundations of a common-sense critical realist understanding of perception, which very much seems to be the way to go in our everyday and scientific investigations of the world. Moreover, simple seeing allows us to grow and refine our conceptual scheme as we explore and further come to know the actual objects of the world in such a way that we can *see that* our concepts appropriately, i.e., truly, apprehend those objects (more on this later).

¹² It should be noted that Moreland does not limit simple seeing to visual perception: “[O]ne should not limit what one can see or directly be aware of to the five senses. One can also be directly aware of one’s own soul and inner states of thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and so forth by introspective awareness of one’s inner life. One can be directly aware of God, of his speaking to one in guidance, of the Spirit’s testimony to various things, and so forth. For Plato to the present, many philosophers have believed—correctly in my view—in what is called *rational awareness*, that is, the soul’s ability to directly be aware of aesthetic and moral values, numbers and the laws of mathematics, the laws of logic, and various abstract objects such as humanness, wisdom, and so forth. *The important thing to note is that we humans have the power to ‘see,’ to be directly aware of, to directly experience a wide range of things, many of which are not subject to sensory awareness with the five senses*” (Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle*, 127; italics in original). So simple seeing, for Moreland, occurs via the senses, introspection, God’s direct revelation, and reason. In the present essay I am limiting my understanding of simple seeing to visual perception, and, following Moreland, I take the visual form of simple seeing as a species of knowledge by acquaintance.

For clarity’s sake, I should emphasize here that simple seeing as a species of knowledge by acquaintance is *not* the classic foundationalist’s basic belief based on mere sensory data which arise from visual experience and thus make it “difficult to see how beliefs so slender in content can justify the more full-bodied beliefs about the external world” (Colin Cheyne, “Foundationalism,” in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edition, edited by Thomas Mautner [London: Penguin, 2005], 229). Rather, simple seeing as a species of knowledge by acquaintance is more “full-bodied,” not requiring the classical foundationalist’s certainty for justification, but instead is justified as intuitively obvious in the absence of a defeater. That is to say, via simple seeing I actually see the tree outside the window and I know I am seeing what is actually there. I am justified in believing this in the absence of good reasons for thinking otherwise. I am not merely engaging with visual sense-data such as blotches of green and brown about which I have certainty but by which I am informed very little (if anything) of the external world.

For a refutation of four radical skepticisms about our knowledge of the external world—funky/ pop skepticism, sensory skepticism, Kantian skepticism, and linguistic skepticism—see Hendrik van der Breggen, “Reasonable Skepticism about Radical Skepticism,” *Christian Research Journal* 31, no. 5 (September-October, 2008): 30-38; <http://www.equip.org/articles/reasonable-skepticism-about-radical-skepticism/> [accessed April 25, 2014].

Reductio Ad Absurdum

In addition to pointing to the intuitive obviousness (once proper distinctions are made) of the truth of simple seeing, which immediately shows the falsity of the interpretation-all-the-way-down view, we can set out an *argument*. What follows is an argument that I have gleaned from the work of philosopher R. Scott Smith, but which I have structured more explicitly in terms of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.¹³ This *reductio ad absurdum* argument will show *again*, albeit indirectly, that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view is false.¹⁴

Let's assume, then, temporarily for the sake of argument, that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view is true. Now, consider an everyday object, say, the eating utensil we call "fork." Also, consider the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*, the story about Ariel, a little mermaid who wants to become human. (The Disney reference comes from contemporary philosopher James K. A. Smith, who defends the interpretation-all-the-way-down view by an appeal to Ariel's interpretation of a fork.¹⁵ I am going to show via *reductio ad absurdum* that the fork example backfires.) When Ariel sees a fork, she calls it a "dinglehopper" and she uses it to comb her hair, much to the surprise of the humans at the dinner table. Clearly, Ariel *interprets* the pronged metal object *as* a dinglehopper (comb), whereas we *interpret* it *as* a fork. This much is true.

¹³ See R. Scott Smith, "'Emergents,' Evangelicals, and the Importance of Truth," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement*, eds. W. D. Henard and A. W. Greenway (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 129-156; R. Scott Smith, "Reflections on McLaren and the Emerging Church," in *Passionate Conviction: Contemporary Discourses on Christian Apologetics*, eds. P. Copan and W. L. Craig (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 227-241; and R. Scott Smith, "Language, Theological Knowledge, and the Postmodern Paradigm," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 109-133.

¹⁴ In a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, we assume, temporarily for the sake of argument, that the view under investigation is true; if the logical consequences of the view's assumed truth are false or logically absurd, then it follows logically that the view under investigation is false or logically absurd, or both. For further discussion of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, see: Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Philosopher's Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 121-122; and D. J. Hill, "Reductio Ad Absurdum," in *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, edited by W. C. Campbell-Jack and Gavin McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 602-603.

¹⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 41-42. (I use James K. A. Smith's full name to distinguish him from R. Scott Smith.)

But (and this is where the *reductio ad absurdum* argument kicks in), if it's true that *it's interpretation all the way down*, then it follows, as R. Scott Smith rightly points out, that Ariel (and the rest of us) can never know the object and its properties by simple seeing (direct acquaintance).¹⁶ Remember: on the view under investigation, *all* seeing is *seeing as*. If, however, all seeing is seeing as, that is, if *all* seeing is *interpretation*, then the thing that is “seen” and interpreted would always be *an interpretation of the thing*, not the thing itself. Nor would that which is “seen” and interpreted ever be an actual property of the thing itself, because the properties themselves are also things in themselves and only the *interpretations of them* will be “seen.”

Remember (again): on the view under investigation, *all* seeing is *seeing as*. If all seeing *were* seeing as, then what we would *see as* the fork's shape, or rigidity, or metal would always be an interpretation of something else—not the fork's shape itself, not the fork's rigidity itself, not the fork's metal itself. That is, “the object” would be *something else* that would be *seen as* prong-shaped; it would be *something else* that would be *seen as* hard; it would be *something else* that would be *seen as* silver; and so on—without end. The actual prong shape, actual hardness, actual substance (etc.) would never be simply seen.¹⁷ In other words, what the actual object *is* in the first place, including *all* of its *actual properties*, would *never* be gotten to. But this means that the *actual object* of interpretation, i.e., the *actual thing* we label “fork” and Ariel labels “dinglehopper,” would forever be completely and always out of the mind's reach. R. Scott Smith astutely observes:

Essentially, though we may rightly affirm that the real world exists, with real things and real people, it seems that in [the interpretation-all-the-way-down] view, we never can get to

¹⁶ R. Scott Smith, “Reflections on McLaren and the Emerging Church,” 240-241. (I use R. Scott Smith's full name to distinguish him from James K. A. Smith.)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 240-241.

know them at all if there is no experience, or knowledge, by direct acquaintance [i.e., simple seeing]. Anything we try to know...always seems to elude our grasp.¹⁸

So, on the interpretation-all-the-way-down view, to interpret an object X requires that X is the object of interpretation and, at the same time and in the same sense, that X is not (and never is) the object of interpretation—which is logically absurd. *Reductio ad absurdum*.

It may be helpful to pause and realize that this is not an insignificant logical problem for the interpretation-all-the-way-down view. To drive home the significance of the above logical problem, consider the following. To interpret the printed words of this sentence *as words* requires that the reader first *simply see* the squiggles, i.e., simply see the actual particular shapes of the ink marks which guide the subsequent interpretation. But if one never simply sees the squiggles in any sense as they actually are, i.e., *one never simply sees their actual shapes*, then no text-based interpretation can ever occur. Rather, there would be an ongoing “seeing as” with no contact with the reality of the particular characteristics of the squiggles themselves. Hence, my squiggles could not function as symbols that communicate (not even roughly) the meanings I intend them to communicate; but we know that they can and do—as the reading of this sentence (and other well-formed sentences) attests. *Reductio ad absurdum*.

Therefore, it is reasonable to think that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view is false. The interpretation-all-the-way-down view not only is *intuitively obviously* false because of the intuitively obvious reality of simple seeing, but also is false because we have an argument—a *reductio ad absurdum* argument—for *thinking* it is false.

Objections and Replies

At this juncture, two possible objections should be considered.

¹⁸ Ibid., 241.

One might object by *insisting* that it's all interpretation because, after all, "all observation is theory-laden." In reply, we should point to Cowan and Spiegel's insightful response:

This statement [i.e., that all observation is theory-laden] presumably is an observation itself. But if all observation is theory-laden, then *this* observation is theory-laden. That is, the belief that all observation is theory-laden would simply be the belief of a person who has imposed his own conceptual grid on his observations. If that is so, then no one else need adopt his view of observation.¹⁹

Plus we should point out that the "all observation is theory-laden" view is basically the all-is-interpretation view, which falls prey to the *reductio ad absurdum* argument (see above) and competes against the intuitive obviousness of the notion of simple seeing (see above).

One might now object that, in spite of the arguments set out above, the fact of the matter is that, at the get-go, in our empirical observation of the world we *do interpret* the world through our senses: waves of energy hit our ears, photons hit our eyes, and then our senses translate the impacts of these hits into neurological messages that are subsequently sent to the brain which in turn does its magic. Clearly, or so the objection goes, it *is* interpretation all the way down—even the very *act of simple seeing* is an act of interpretation.²⁰

In reply, we should acknowledge the truth of the claim (gotten from science) that waves of energy hit our ears and photons hit our eyes and then our senses translate the impacts of these hits into neurological messages that are subsequently sent to the brain which in turn does its "magic" (mysterious work). But, we should quickly add, this truth is better understood not as *interpretation* but as an explanation or description of (what I call) the *mechanics* of simple seeing. Why "better understood"? Because of three good reasons. First, a third-person description of the mechanics (physical processes) of simple seeing, and even the very mechanics

¹⁹ Cowan and Spiegel, *Love of Wisdom*, 89. Francis J. Beckwith sets out a similar argument (if we replace Beckwith's word "fact" with the word "observation") in "A Critique of Political Correctness," in Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), 585.

²⁰ Thanks to Ryan Turnbull for drawing my attention to this important objection which seems to lurk often unnoticed behind the all-is-interpretation view.

of simple seeing, should not be confused with the first-person experience of simple seeing. These are different facts in the real world. There is no doubt a mechanics of simple seeing, but this is not simple seeing per se. There are photons hitting the retina which get transformed into electrical impulses which go to the brain, to be sure. But the retina and electrical impulses, etc., are not *interpreters* of perception; rather they are *that through which* the mind sees and grasps the actual extra-mental reality—they are the *mechanism* or *means* of perception. Second, the description of the mechanics of simple seeing, i.e., an accurate description of energy waves and photons, etc. (which has been labeled “interpretation” by the objector), seems very much to *presuppose* simple seeing in order for the description to get epistemic traction in the first place. The physical sciences involved in studying the workings of the human ear, eye, nervous system, and brain, involve observations—not all of which are conceptually “theory-laden”—so to be persuaded by the findings of these sciences requires a prior embrace of the legitimacy of simple seeing as a portal to the world, a portal that serves as a ground for our interpretative projects. Third, acknowledging the reality of simple seeing allows us to avoid the nasty infinite regress problem attached to the all-is-interpretation view.²¹

²¹ At this juncture, one might attempt to level some objections based on scientific theories and their alleged influence on observation. Although these have been dealt with in the relevant philosophical literature, it may be helpful here briefly to set out and reply to some of the major objections, since the objections seem still to be popular and influential. One might object that theories in science tell us *where to look* and thus scientific observation is theory-laden in this sense. In reply, yes, theories influence observation in this sense, but this is innocuous. Surely it is not problematic for a scientific theory to guide the scientist to where his/her observations are to be made (if you have a theory about the moons of Jupiter you’ll probably look to the sky, not in a test tube). Also, even though a theory may guide one where to look, the theory doesn’t determine *which outcome* of an experiment will actually be observed there (i.e., merely being directed by a theory to look into a test tube for the effect of adding a chemical does not tell one automatically what the effect of adding a chemical is). (Cf. Peter Kosso, *Reading the Book of Nature: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 114.) Also, often a scientific observation may be theory-laden, but not necessarily contentiously theory-laden, i.e., the world is still given the last word. An observation can be laden with (i.e., presuppose/ rely on) a theory *other than* the theory in question, and so the observation can maintain the independence that is a necessary characteristic of objectivity. For example, one might presuppose a theory of optics to look through Galileo’s telescope (i.e., one might presuppose the theory that things look closer than they actually are), but the theory of heliocentricity (sun-centeredness of our solar system) ultimately depends on the heavenly bodies observed, not the theory of optics (because the theory of optics can be confirmed by, say, looking at sailing ships that cannot be seen by the naked eye). David Papineau explains further: “If a scientific theory about the behaviour of gases, say, predicts that a pointer will be at a certain place on a

The objections, then, seem very much to fail. The truth of simple seeing remains.

Significance for Theology and Apologetics

Why am I making such a fuss about the truth of simple seeing and the falsity of the all-is-interpretation view? It very much seems to me (and others) that God has revealed truth in the actual world via simply seen objects which can be interpreted as clues or signs which communicate knowledge of Him—and such clues or signs include, most significantly, written reports arising from eye witnesses to Jesus' resurrected body. Consider the following passages from the New Testament (NIV) and notice that simple seeing undergirds them all:

1 John 1:1: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which *we have seen with our eyes*, which *we have looked at* and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.” (Italics added.)

2 Peter 1:16: “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of his majesty.” (Italics added.)

Acts 10:39-41: “We are *witnesses* of everything [Jesus] did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and *caused him to be seen*. *He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses* whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” (Italics added.)

dial, and it is observed not to be, then this decides against the theory about gases. It is not to the point to respond that, in taking the pointer reading at face value, we are making assumptions about rigid bodies and local geometry. For nothing in the debate about gases provides any reason to doubt these assumptions” (David Papineau, “Philosophy of Science,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Nicholas Bunnin and E. P. Tsui-James [Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996], 302). ; cf. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90. Or one might object that a theory in science might redefine the terms of observation (e.g., classical physics versus relativity theory) and so in that sense observation is theory-laden and, allegedly, contentiously so. In reply, the degree of theory-ladenness and corresponding contentiousness can be reduced by the fact that scientists from both paradigms can retreat from theoretical considerations to a shared observation language (see Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* [New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1974], 95-97). In other words, as Hugo Meynell points out, “Even if one admits that there is a sense in which advocates of rival paradigms [i.e., scientific theories] live within different ‘worlds,’ there is a sense in which these ‘worlds’ do have points of contact” (Hugo Meynell, “Science, the Truth, and Thomas Kuhn,” *Mind* 84 [January 1975]: 85). And sometimes those points of contact include the world itself. As Ian Hacking reminds us, the history of science shows us that “although some theory precedes some experiment, some experiment and some observation precedes [sic] theory” (Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 160). All this to say that at bottom in science, the fact of shared, theory-independent observations, i.e., simple seeing, remains—and gives us points of contact with the actual external world. Scientific theory-ladenness in some observations does not preclude this.

Acts 5:30-32: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as prince and savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. *We are witnesses of these things*, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Italics added.)

Acts 2:32: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and *we are all witnesses of the fact.*”

Acts 1:3: “After his suffering, *he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them* over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” (Italics added.)

Luke 24:36-39: “While they [the disciples] were still talking about this [Jesus’ appearance on the road to Emmaus], Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? *Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.*’” (Italics added.)

Luke 1:1-4: “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were *eyewitnesses* and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” (Italics added.)

If by simple seeing *we* can ground our interpretations of what is true of the world *in the actual world*, and if we can testify concerning that actual world—which seems to be true, according to our case for simple seeing—then *the eye witnesses to Jesus’ resurrected body* can do the same. This means that we should take the New Testament eye-witness accounts seriously as eye-witness accounts. This means that resurrection-based, Christ-centered theology and apologetics can be grounded in reality, not an interpretation.²²

²² See DeWeese, *Doing Philosophy as a Christian*, 168-169. DeWeese defends a modest foundationalist epistemology which takes the veridicality or truthfulness of perceptual beliefs as a properly basic belief. What DeWeese describes as properly basic belief I describe as belief gotten via simple seeing. DeWeese includes testimony as properly basic. I don’t disagree with DeWeese, but I think it should be noted that simple seeing undergirds testimony about what the testifier has simply seen. In addition, the credibility of testimony can be assessed by looking at the extent that simple seeing has occurred unimpeded. How? By examining the witness’s proximity to what’s seen, his/her quality of eye sight, lighting conditions, etc.

Another Objection and Reply

But now, one might object as follows: Even though we may agree with the reality of simple seeing and its giving us contact with the real world, the fact is that once we or any witness attempt to *describe* to another person and thereby communicate what was simply seen, “seeing as”—i.e., interpretation—kicks in. So, according to this objection, we are in an important sense *not* out of the interpretive woods. As missiologist Daryl Climenhaga points out, “Even so simple a statement as ‘I see a dog’ triggers associations (interpretations) both in the speaker and in the hearer.”²³

In reply, we can agree that when we attempt to describe what we are simply seeing, then interpretation—i.e., seeing as, seeing that—*may* enter the picture. But on this point of agreement, we should add some clarification. People can still communicate simple seeing via *ostensive definition*. Ostensive definition is definition by pointing.²⁴ Such pointing can be done physically (with, say, one’s index finger) or verbally (with written or spoken instructions). Via ostensive definition we can connect language to the simply seen extra-linguistic world.

For example, I could be standing outside with my friend Nate, and then I say “dog” while I point to an actual dog, and we keep doing this with various dogs until Nate gets the idea of what I mean by “dog” (which includes distinguishing the simply seen dog from whatever other associations or interpretations that might have been inadvertently added).

²³ Daryl Climenhaga, blog comment, “Apologia” by Hendrik van der Breggen, January 7, 2011: <http://apologiabyhendrikvanderbreggen.blogspot.ca/2011/01/its-all-interpretation-part-1.html> [accessed April 25, 2014].

²⁴ See: Govier, *A Practical Study of Argument*, 73-74; William Hughes and Jonathan Lavery, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction to the Basic Skills*, 4th ed. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 50-51.

Or we could be standing beside various people, and I say “live body” and point to each of those actual living people—and we keep doing this until Nate gets the idea.²⁵

Or I could direct my friend verbally as follows: “Nate, please go over to the library, find J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig’s book *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, look at page 99, look at the bold black ink squiggles near the bottom of the page. If you follow my directions (my verbal pointing), you will place yourself physically within a foot or two of an object called a book, and on page 99 you will see black ink squiggles that look very much like the following black squiggles: **particularism**. When you’ve followed my written directions (my pointing), you will simply see the squiggles, and then the squiggles’ particular shapes and sizes will guide you in your subsequent interpretation vis-à-vis the English language game whose rules you (and I) know well.”²⁶

²⁵ R. Scott Smith describes a similar situation in which his daughter learned about apples: she observed apples for what they are (via being shown apples and “hear[ing] me utter the word ‘apple’ as I pointed to these various examples”), she formed concepts about apples (“from many noticings and comparisons”), plus she tested her concepts about apples against their reality. See R. Scott Smith, “‘Emergents,’ Evangelicals, and Truth,” 141-142. For a similar situation with cats, see John S. Feinberg, *Can You Believe It’s True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 119. Following the work of philosopher of science Israel Scheffler, Feinberg also describes how a category scheme is like a filing system (not a Procrustean bed): i.e., the nature of the incoming files determines where they should be filed, plus the filing system can be reconstructed to incorporate new categories to handle new incoming files (whose particular natures are learned via, say, a parent’s use of ostensive definition). See Feinberg, *Can You Believe It’s True?*, 117-120.

It might seem that a child’s initial learning of concepts is an example of interpretation. I submit, however, that it is more accurately described as a *calibration* of the mechanism of seeing. In becoming a fully grown adolescent/ adult, there is a development and maturation of human faculties so that the faculties operate as they ought (i.e., they function properly in their intended environments in accordance with a design plan aimed at truth, per Plantinga).

²⁶ See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 99. Moreland and Craig argue that particularism is an answer to the skeptic who argues that we don’t have knowledge because we lack a criterion for what we know (and further we lack a criterion for knowing the criterion, and so on *ad infinitum*). Moreland and Craig write: “According to particularists, people start by knowing specific, clear items of knowledge: that one had eggs for breakfast this morning, that there is a tree before one or, perhaps, that one seems to see a tree, that $7 + 5 = 12$, that mercy is a virtue and so on. One can know some things directly and simply without having to have criteria for how one knows them and without having to know how or even that one knows them. People know many things without being able to prove that they do or without fully understanding the things they know. People simply identify clear instances of knowing without applying any criteria for knowledge or justification. One may reflect on these instances and go on to develop criteria for knowledge consistent with them, and then use these criteria to make judgments in borderline

Or I could write a book about the dogs that I have studied (let us assume, for argument's sake, that I am a dog expert) and in the book describe the simply seen aspects that Nate and I saw when I used ostensive definition to teach Nate all Nate knows about dogs. By making references to previously simply seen situations in which our senses have been "appeared to dogly," I could, it seems to me, tell Nate and others much of what is simply seen of dogs. In fact, books about dogs seem to do exactly that. They appeal to a common ground of what has been simply seen, and they communicate the ideas via a common ground of simply seen squiggles (print).

Similarly, I think I can communicate, via writing, certain simply seen features of the bodies of living people.

In view of the above note of clarification, I think the following point is significant for the doing of Christian apologetics and the connecting of Christian theology to the actual world: written reports arising from eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrected physical body can communicate, minimally, that which was simply seen, and this allows us subsequently to look for the best interpretation of the simply seen contents of those reports—which may be (or may not be) that which the original witnesses also communicated along with what they simply saw (I think the original witnesses' interpretation is correct).

Of course, interpretation may and often does come into the picture when communication of what was simply seen takes place. Surely, though, our knowledge of the distinction between *simple seeing* and *seeing as* will help us discern the extent of the *seeing as*—and whether that extent is legitimate or not. When it comes to reports about what was seen and heard and touched, we know that some interpretive lenses are thicker than others. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the possibility of the clear communication of what was truly and simply seen. Police

cases of knowledge. But the criteria are justified by their congruence with specific instances of knowledge, not the other way around" (ibid., 99-100). Simple seeing, then, also can be classified as part of a particularist epistemology.

interrogators and lawyers are good at distinguishing between *simple seeing* and *seeing as*—and they can and often do cut through the latter to get at the former. Surely, apologists and theologians can do the same.²⁷

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued—with much help from J. P. Moreland, R. Scott Smith, Steven B. Cowan, and James S. Spiegel—that the interpretation-all-the-way-down view should be rejected. I clarified the notion of “simple seeing,” which, once understood, provides intuitively obvious grounds (via sensory perception) for thinking simple seeing is true and thus that it is false that it’s interpretation all the way down. I also set out a *reductio ad absurdum* argument which provides additional grounds (via rational awareness) for again thinking it is false that it’s interpretation all the way down. In addition, I considered two objections that fuel the interpretation-all-the-way-down view plus showed that they fail: (1) the theory-ladenness-of-observation objection is self-defeating plus ignores our previous two arguments, and (2) the understanding-“interpretation”-to-include-the-act-of-simple-seeing objection confuses the mechanics of simple seeing with simple seeing per se. Also, I set out some reasons why the rejection of the interpretation-all-the-way-down view is significant for theology and apologetics, reasons that can be summarized as follows: the eyewitness testimony contained in the New Testament presupposes the validity of simple seeing. Finally, I considered an objection that

²⁷ See Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Pamela Binnings Ewen, “Four Honest Men? (Credibility, Character, and Consistency),” in *Faith on Trial: Analyze the Evidence for the Death and Resurrection of Jesus—Would the Testimony of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John Stand Up in Court?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2013), 83-108; J. Warner Wallace, “Test Your Witness,” in *Cold Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 69-85; John Warwick Montgomery, “A Revelational Solution,” in *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 131-160. As a preliminary clarification (as a quick antidote to the view that miracles cannot be investigated historically), I recommend Francis J. Beckwith, “History and Miracles,” in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God’s Activity in History*, edited by R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 86-98.

attempts to reintroduce the interpretation-all-the-way-down view whenever we attempt to *describe* and *communicate* what is simply seen, and I showed that this objection fails, too: there is ostensive definition, which via physical or verbal pointing gets us to, and allows us to communicate knowledge of, the extra-linguistic world.

All seeing is *not* “seeing as.” There is *simple seeing*. Simple seeing allows us to become acquainted with—to know—the real world and ground our interpretations of the world in the real world. A greatness of Christianity is that the life, death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus very much involved simply seen stuff. Via the New Testament we have been handed down testimony about this simply seen stuff, that is, we have been handed down what some people claim to have seen, heard, touched, and this (after careful assessment of credibility) allows us to ground our interpretation (and the interpretation of those who make the witness claims) in the actual world. I find this exciting—philosophically, theologically, and personally.

Surely, in view of the many competing and conflicting religious interpretations of the world, it’s philosophical good news to think that the theological Good News is an interpretation that makes contact with the real world.²⁸

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²⁸ For further reading: The New Testament.