

From desire to encounter: the human quest for the infinite¹

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O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly. My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Psalm 63:1-2.

Abstract: The paper begins with the journey towards knowledge of the infinite that is traced out in Descartes's Meditations. Drawing on Levinas's construal of the argument in the Third Meditation, I argue that Descartes's reflections on God as infinite can be a starting point for deepening our understanding of the religious quest – the paradoxical human search for that which, by its very nature, is incomprehensible to the human mind. The second half of the paper argues that this search is from first to last structured by desire and longing, and that something *prima facie* non-cognitive and non-epistemic, namely the desire for God, has a cognitive and epistemic role to play. Perhaps desire can be our human way, or a human way, whereby we can (in Descartes's words) 'in a certain manner attain to' the infinite perfection that is God.

Preamble: the incomprehensibility of God

God is incomprehensible. The uninitiated might suppose this is an objection to theism raised by modern secularists, but it is of course a completely mainstream theological doctrine within the Abrahamic tradition. In Judaism, God is utterly unlike the gods of the gentiles: too sacred even to be named – God is simply 'I am that I am' (Exodus 3:14), and transcends all human comprehension.³ In Islam, Allah has no less than ninety-nine names, but though we may be able to glimpse something of the attributes to which these names refer, it is held to be impossible for our limited human capacity to comprehend the essence of God.⁴ And in Christianity, as emphasised by the doctors of the Church from Augustine to Aquinas and beyond, God cannot be grasped or comprehended by the human mind – any attempt to suppose we *had* grasped God's nature would be a form of idolatry.⁵

The God of traditional theism is thus not merely unimaginable in the sense that we cannot form a mental picture of God (and of course both Judaism and Islam prohibit any pictorial representation of God), but is beyond the bounds of human comprehension. So there seems to be at least a *prima facie* problem for the theist here: we are asked to believe in something that we cannot understand or conceive of. As Descartes puts it, when discussing his arguments for God's existence, we cannot conceive of God (Latin *concipere*), since by its very nature the finite mind cannot conceive of the infinite (Descartes 1648:14).

So far from being daunted by this idea of God as infinite, Descartes embraced it – possibly influenced by the fact that the infinite in the mathematical sphere, the numerical infinite, is an object of rational inquiry. Mathematicians would be the first to admit that infinity is not imaginable or even conceivable in any straightforward sense; yet they nonetheless discuss its properties, and indeed demonstrate things about it. Admittedly, mathematical reasoning about the infinite turns out to be beset with formidable paradoxes, starting with the simplest, the so-called Galilean Paradox,

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³ In the classic Jewish theology of Maimonides, God can only be characterized negatively; no positive attributes of the divine nature can be known: *A Guide to the Perplexed* [12th century].

⁴ 'Understanding and reasoning/ and imagining besides/ may do their utmost,/ but beyond, ever beyond, remains the core, the essence/of His Being.' Abu Hurairah's *ahadith*, quoted in http://www.islam-info.ch/en/Who_is_Allah.htm, accessed 12 January 2017.

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons* [*Sermones*, early fifth century], 52:16; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], pt. 1, qu. 12.

namely that some infinite sets appear to contain fewer members than others (for example, the set of even numbers contains fewer members than the set of positive integers); and similar paradoxes, from Zeno's onwards, have been seen to arise from infinite divisibility. The resulting labyrinth of puzzles and contradictions generated by mathematical infinity may not seem a promising model for how the human mind might approach the absolute infinity that is God. Nevertheless, the idea of infinity plays a key role in Descartes's account the mind's journey towards knowledge of God in the *Meditations*, and I think his approach has something to teach us. I want to suggest that it can be a starting point for deepening our understanding of the religious quest – the paradoxical human search for that which, by its very nature, is incomprehensible to the human mind.

Descartes on infinite aspiration

'By "God"', declares Descartes in the Third Meditation, 'I understand a substance that is infinite ...' Most analytic treatments of the subsequent proof of God's existence focus on the technical terminology that is deployed – the distinction between 'formal' or intrinsic reality and 'objective' (or representative) reality, for example, or the scope of the so-called causal adequacy principle (that there must be at least as much reality or perfection in the cause of a given effect as can be found in the effect).⁶ But although Descartes was obviously interested in this logical apparatus (indeed he was subsequently persuaded by some of his readers to recast his arguments formally, in strict 'geometrical fashion'),⁷ he nevertheless stressed that the formal validity of the arguments was not the whole story. The arguments were not to be construed simply as abstract patterns of inference, to be studied on the blackboard, as it were. On the contrary. Descartes insisted that in order fully to grasp what is involved, each of us must put him or herself in the place of the meditator, take up the first person perspective, and individually tread the path from self-awareness to awareness of God.⁸ This goes at least some way to support the interpretation of the Third Meditation offered by Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas (1961) sectn I, pt A, §5), according to which what is going on is not so much a series of inferences as a direct personal *encounter* – what Levinas calls an 'interruption' of thought, when the finite mind comes up against the infinite – something it cannot include or contain (Levinas (1961)).⁹

It's important to see that the experience that Descartes's meditator undergoes here is not a matter of passive intellectual contemplation, but comes about through a conative or desiderative movement, a dynamic forward thrusting of the mind. 'When I turn my eye upon myself,' the meditator says in the Third Meditation, 'I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another, and which *aspires without limit* to ever greater and better things.' (Descartes (1641), AT VII 51: CSM II 35). The *res cogitans*, the 'thinking thing' that is me, is not merely an intellectual being with certain cognitive properties like ideas and beliefs, but also a *desiderative* being, a being with aspirations and desires – desires, moreover, that stretch forward without limit. Descartes underlines the fact that as soon as I become aware of my own existence, through the Cogito, I become aware of my imperfection; for obviously there are many things I don't know, and can't achieve, but which I should like to know and to achieve. And here Descartes's meditator dwells on how the very fact of my doubting and of my desiring presupposes that I *lack* something (AT VII 46: CSM II 31). Awareness of my deficiencies is, for Descartes, implicit awareness of my *creatureliness*, awareness of my dependence on something of which I fall short. And in an important but often overlooked passage in the Third Meditation the meditator reflects on what it would be like if he were *not* a creature, not dependent in this way: 'If I derived my existence from myself and were independent of every other being then I should neither doubt nor want, nor lack

⁶ Descartes (1641), AT VII 41: CSM II 28.

⁷ At the end of the Second set of Replies, published in the same volume as the *Meditations* in 1641.

⁸ *Meditations, Preface to the Reader*: 'I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing seriously to meditate with me' (AT VII 9: CSM II 8).

⁹ See also Hilary Putnam (1986), 42, and Cottingham (2014), ch. 1, §4.

anything at all; for I should have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea, and thus I should myself be God.’ (AT VII 48: CSM II 33).

There is a faint echo here of the temptation described in Genesis (3:5): ‘ye shall be as Gods.’ But perhaps what we have here is just an extreme form of a primal yearning that is inseparable from our human nature. To be human is to be dissatisfied – not merely to be subject to urgent specific needs and desires that need assuaging, like the other animals, nor even just to be reflectively aware of those needs and desires. To be human is to be, in a certain sense, *insatiable*: to know that that even when all those specific needs are met we will still lack something will still be incomplete, reaching forward towards something more than we now are (see Ellis (2013)).

And yet, paradoxically, that towards which we consciously reach out is something we can never fully grasp or comprehend. Descartes dealt with this apparent paradox by invoking a distinction in mathematics between the infinite and the *indefinite*. We cannot conceive of the infinite, but we can certainly conceive of a series stretching on indefinitely. If you recite the sequence of positive integers you know you could go on counting indefinitely – you would never reach the largest number. The process is, so to speak, open-ended. Similarly, as Descartes observed in an interview he gave to a young Dutchman, Frans Burman, in 1648: ‘if it were I who had given myself my nature and make-up, I would have given myself all the perfections of God, and I think I would have given myself these perfections in accordance with my *indefinite* conception of them. For example, I would have given myself greater knowledge than I now possess; and when I had that greater knowledge, I would then have given myself greater knowledge still, and so on ...’ (Descartes (1648), 4).

So as a finite and incomplete being, who knows himself or herself to be finite and incomplete, I have a sense that it would always be possible, and desirable, to add a bit more to my resources. I would like to have, a bit more knowledge, or a bit more benevolence, than I now possess; and then a bit more than that, and so on indefinitely. But behind this indefinite process, dimly grasped in its very open-endedness or incompleteness, we seem to glimpse the shadowy eminence of *infinite* perfection – or, as Descartes expresses it in the penultimate paragraph of the Third Meditation, ‘the very one of whom the idea is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which *I cannot grasp*, but in my thought *can somehow attain to*, and who is subject to no defects whatsoever’ (Descartes (1641), AT VII 52: CSM II 35).

We cannot, says Descartes in the original Latin, *grasp* or comprehend (*comprehendere*) this infinite perfection, but we can somehow reach out to it, or ‘*in a certain manner attain to it*’ (*quocunque modo attingere*). He elsewhere compares God to a mountain which you cannot ‘comprehend’, or put your arms round, but which you can approach and touch.¹⁰ This is not a paper on Cartesian interpretation, so I will not here spend more time unravelling what exactly the historical Descartes might have meant by this. What I want to do instead is to explore a thought that is perhaps hinted at in Descartes’s account of the finite mind’s open-ended aspirations to reach towards infinite perfection. The thought is this: that something *prima facie* non-cognitive and non-epistemic, namely the *desire* for God, might have a cognitive and epistemic role to play. To put it crudely, perhaps *desire* can be our human way, or *a* human way, whereby our mind can ‘in a certain manner attain to’ the infinite perfection that is God.

Insatiable desire?

Many of our desires are what one might call rationally grounded – they relate to needs that must be satisfied if we are to survive either individually or as a species (desire for food, for example, or the desire to reproduce). Others are irrational – either pathological urges for what is downright harmful to our flourishing, or else akratic lapses that make us sacrifice our true long-term welfare for

¹⁰ According to Descartes one can know something without fully grasping it: ‘In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it . . . To grasp something is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one’s thought (*pour savoir une chose, il suffit de la toucher de la pensée*)’ (Descartes (1630), 25 (AT I 152)).

specious or evanescent gratifications. Perhaps psychotherapy could help us deal with the former, and good old-fashioned training in Kantian or Aristotelian virtue help us master the latter. But as we have already noted, there are deeper, more restless, more intractable, more existential longings that seem inseparable from our very humanity. If all our rational wants were satisfied, and all our irrational urges were either cured, or else virtuously controlled or re-trained, we would still, it seems, feel the pounding of the ‘unquiet heart’, as Augustine called it,¹¹ that is our human birthright. We would still reach forward and long for that which, however far we progress, will still be just beyond our grasp.¹²

For Augustine (as emerges in the famous passage in the *Confessions* where he speaks of the ‘unquiet heart’), this insatiable desire is a function of our creatureliness, and can be assuaged or quieted only through union with our creator. Such union, by its nature, lies on the very horizon of human existence (hence in standard Christian theology the beatific vision remains a destination to be sought in faith rather than brought into view by reason or observation).¹³ And yet – though Augustine himself never explicitly put it this way – it may perhaps be that *in the very character of this strange open-ended longing we humans experience, we are able to attain to a kind of awareness of the divine.*

Before developing this thought, I want first to take a critical look at alternative, secular ways of coming to terms with the deep existential yearning that is the signature of our humanity. Friedrich Nietzsche has, for better or worse, come to be stereotyped as the prophet of the modern secularist worldview, though whether he is actually best thought of as a non-religious thinker is a mute point. What is true is that he was perhaps the first fully to realize the existential horror that awaits humankind in a world where the sun has been unchained from its moorings (as the madman’s story in *The Gay Science* puts it (Nietzsche (1882), bk III, § 125), and all hope of an ultimate divine centre or gravitational anchor for our human existence has been abandoned. This may be the meaning (or part of the meaning) of the ‘Roundelay’ in *Zarathustra*, where mankind wakes up in the deep midnight and realizes that the world is no longer a secure home for us. We are left with a pain, which is also a strange joy or longing, ‘deeper than heart’s agony’:

*Tief ist ihr Weh –
Lust – tiefer noch als Herzeleid:
Weh spricht: Vergeh!
Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit –
Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!*

Deep is her woe –
Joy – deeper than heart’s agony;
Woe says: ‘Be gone!
But all joy wants eternity
Wants deep, deep eternity.’¹⁴

And here in the final two lines is the yearning for joy that reaches on for ever, to ‘deep, deep eternity’. The late romantic period is in many ways defined by this strange, eternal longing, which is now directed not to God, but to finding an alternative source of ultimate meaning within the merely human world. Erotic love typically emerges as the prime candidate here, and what Nietzsche’s contemporary Richard Wagner depicts in *Tristan und Isolde* represents perhaps the

¹¹ Augustine *Confessions* [*Confessiones*, c. 398], bk I, ch. 1: ‘fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te.’

¹² Compare Ellis (2013).

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* pt I, qu. 12, art. 4; *Summa contra Gentiles* [1260], bk III, ch. 52. See also Carriero (2009), 176-182.

¹⁴ Nietzsche (1892), pt. IV, §12, ‘The Drunken Song’ (trans. J. C.).

most extreme version of this idea, where only death can satisfy the insatiable erotic longing of the lovers.

But of course Isolde's *Liebestod* is nothing short of insanity, however beautiful the music, however brilliantly the unresolved mounting cadences capture the ecstatic madness of an indefinitely deferred climax. For the idea of suicide as the only fit culmination of erotic longing, when looked at simply as an idea, shorn of the transfiguring power of Wagner's musical genius, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the concept of insatiable erotic longing. Eros, to be sure, is a vitally important and awesomely powerful force in human life, but (as is brilliantly explored the great literary giants from Euripides in *The Bacchae* right down to Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*) it cannot in itself provide a secure grounding for human existence. It is too unstable, too extreme, to subject to what the literary critic and translator J. B. Leishman called 'intense one-sidedness'.¹⁵ Not for nothing does Shakespeare's Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* warn the lovers:

These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which, as they kiss, consume ...
Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so.¹⁶

There is, as so often in Shakespeare, a deep ambivalence here. Part of us wants to say that the Friar is being rather staid, too cautious, too like the caricature Aristotelian, with his allegiance to the golden mean, *aurea mediocritas*, a kind of dreary mediocrity to which our 'romantic' side wants to retort, on Romeo and Juliet's behalf, 'No! Go for it!'. But at another level we also sense that the issue here goes much deeper than a the rather banal question of whether the passions need to be moderated. The key sentence is in the final line of the quotation – 'Long love doth so' – which reminds us that loving, truly loving, cannot be understood in purely episodic terms, as a crisis, as an explosion, as the earth moving, but concerns two human beings who, in order really to love each other as opposed to merely being erotically intertwined, need to learn and grow together, over time, in joy and sorrow, in conflict and reconciliation, in 'the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other' as Thomas Cranmer's resonant wording has it.¹⁷

One of the costs of deifying Eros is to ignore this vital 'diachronic' dimension of love. I say 'deifying', which is not quite the right word, since of course Eros is a god already; the danger is rather that of elevating him to the status of supreme god. The Greeks and Romans were wiser than the Wagnerian romantics by representing Eros or Cupid as an irritating little boy with bow and arrows.¹⁸ Perhaps that's going too far the other way, but the point is that Eros is a power that needs to be respected at our peril, but which cannot carry the weight of being the ultimate repository of meaning, or the best expression of our insatiable human longing.¹⁹

Some prosaic facts are in order here. Biologically speaking, erotic desire is very far from insatiable – it culminates in satisfied coition; and again, biologically speaking, the *telos* of coition is reproduction; and the *telos* of reproduction is the birth and raising of children. This reminder should not be construed in a rigidly prescriptive way: erotic passion can of course be a valid element in a flourishing human life when it is not playing its biological role as an engine of procreation. But it cannot retain this validity if it is decoupled from the wider moral context of human caring, commitment and responsibility. From the moral point of view, Eros has to be seen as but one component in the larger scheme of things; and this larger scheme of things is irreducibly *diachronic*.

¹⁵ Leishman (1961: 143). In his fine analysis of some of Shakespeare's love poetry, Leishman goes on to talk about its 'passionately hyperbolic vehemence, intransigence . . . sweepingness' (213).

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* [1595], Act II, scene 6.

¹⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* [first published 1549], The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony.

¹⁸ For the potentially painful aspect of erotic love see Perlman (2011), 182.

¹⁹ For a more positive view of *eros* from a Christian perspective, whereby, though 'ascent, renunciation and purification', it might be 'healed and restored to its true grandeur', see the Encyclical of Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), §5.

Sustaining a psychologically and physically intimate human relationship is long and complex undertaking, requiring effort and sustained sacrifice, and the ever-present risk of pain, only made possible because it is an enduring expression of love – and indeed, in the paradigm case of a spousal relationship, an *expansion* of love, so as to embrace children and, in due course, children's children.²⁰ The ideal of the *Liebestod* is the opposite of this, not an expansion of love but an introverted – albeit mutually introverted – contraction, a contraction so extreme that it ends in mutual self-annihilation.

More might be said about the need for a corrective to the destructive erotic romanticism that, in the century and a half following Wagner, has seemed so alluring to those enmeshed in our increasingly egocentric culture. But it would also be a mistake to suppose that love in its more outgoing and diachronic manifestation, as organically growing and evolving marital and family love, or perhaps as Aristotelian affection-friendship or *philia*, is qualified to serve as the ultimate vehicle for the insatiable existential longing that is so deeply ingrained in the human makeup. Noble ideals though conjugal love or close friendship at their best may be, it would equally be a mistake, a piece of idolatry, to deify them. For, as Nietzsche surely saw, the deep longing that 'wants eternity' is an expression of the search for a metaphysical grounding for our existence, a longing for 'ontological rootedness', as Simon May has aptly called it (May 2011, ch. 1); and to suppose that spouse, or family, or friends can supply *this* need is a kind of category mistake. It puts a monstrously unfair weight on the flawed and fallible and purely human recipients of our devotion, whether erotic, or familial, or friendship-based, to suppose that they can be suitable addressees for the cry heard in countless pop songs: 'you're all I'll ever need'. In effect, it places them in the false position of having to sate a longing that cannot be satisfied, so that even were they to meet all the human needs that can possibly be expected of them, they have still not done enough.

Encountering the infinite

The erotic model of infinite longing which I have just been criticising can, as we have seen, be associated with the late romanticism of Wagner. But there is another, and much older, conception which gives us, I think, a better model for understanding the strange human quest for the infinite. What I have in mind has to do with 'spiritual experience', or the experience of what is sometimes called the 'sacred'. What is characteristic of such experience, as described in many religious and literary sources, is an intense and ecstatic focusing on a *particular aspect* of the world, but in combination with a profound sense of this particular moment being as it were a window through which we can glimpse something *infinitely greater*, something eternal or transcendent. A devotional example can be seen in the fifteenth-century carol to the Virgin 'There is no rose of such virtue', where we find the lines:

for in this rose contained was
heaven and earth in little space:
res miranda.²¹

Or in less explicitly religious terms, William Blake, in his well-known poem 'Auguries of Innocence', speaks of how in such moments we are able

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

²⁰ Psalm 128:8; the verse is recapitulated in the Nuptial Blessing at the traditional Catholic wedding ceremony.

²¹ Manuscript at Trinity College Cambridge. Text in J. A. Fuller Maitland and W. S. Rockstro, *English Carols of the Fifteenth Century* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1891), Carol No. XIII, pp. 26-27, 54-55.

I have elsewhere discussed how such experiences are only very inadequately characterised by the modern jejune label ‘aesthetic’, one reason for this being that they have an inherently moral dimension.²² Blake’s poem is a good example, since the poem soon passes from extolling our awestruck responses to the beauty of the natural world to a fierce prophetic denunciation of what happens when the natural and human world is *not* properly respected:

A horse misused upon the road
 Calls to Heaven for human blood.
 Each outcry of the hunted hare
 A fibre from the brain does tear...
 The harlot’s cry from street to street
 Shall weave old England’s winding sheet ...²³

In mistreating our fellow-creatures we violate something sacred. In using others as instruments for our gratification, in our failure to respond to the ‘face of the other’, we enact a kind of desecration, a trampling on the sacred (a theme eloquently explored in Levinas – though for reasons I won’t go into here he prefers to talk not of the ‘sacred’ but the ‘holy’ (See Caruana (2006)). If we employ Kantian terminology what confronts us here is that which inspires *awe*, what Kant called *Achtung* (Kant (1788) pt 1, bk 1, ch. 3). Another way of putting the idea is to say that we have a sense of being confronted with something that *demand*s a response from us. The modern notion of ‘normativity’, beloved of professional philosophers (who nevertheless struggle to explain it in naturalistic terms) is but one way of trying to get at the notion of this kind of authoritative demand – something that exerts a pull on us, whether we like it or not. We may turn away, we may resist the pull, we may even ignore it, but the pull remains (see Cottingham (2017)).

It’s important to stress that this cannot plausibly be explained merely as a motivational pull – like an urge to eat, or to scratch an itch. For a motive, even if it is a rather exalted one, like a wish to serve others, or to contemplate a magnificent landscape, is essentially *contingent* on my subjective preference schedule. If that schedule were adjusted – for example because I am tempted or become corrupted and feel a stronger urge in another direction – the motivational force would diminish or disappear. But the type of pull we are talking about in the case of our responses to the sacred is a normative rather than a purely motivational pull. It retains its full force *even if my inclinations change*.²⁴

There is nothing in the natural world as studied by science that is remotely like this kind of normative pull. It is true that there are many forces in nature that are mysterious or that we do not fully understand: the force of gravity, familiar from physics, and from daily experience, is a classic example. But the kind of pull involved in such natural phenomena is a *causally efficacious one* – if we step over a cliff we fall to the bottom, like it or not. Human inclinations and motivations as studied in the psychological sciences fall into the same general category. It is true that they can be resisted – at least for a while – but they still exert a causal power. A thirsty man is motivated, ‘moved’, to pick up the glass of water; and scientists can study how the fluid deficiency in the body sends signals to the brain in such a way as to produce a powerful tendency to drink. So in the normal case, where there is no impediment or countervailing motivation (such as fear, as when an animal is scared to go the river because it smells a predator), then the desire is *causally efficacious*: you feel thirsty, and this moves you to drink.

²² See Cottingham (2012).

²³ William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence* [c. 1803], ed. W. H. Stevenson (New York, NY: Longman, 1971).

²⁴ So-called moral ‘internalists’ want to assimilate the normative to the psychological case; thus for Bernard Williams, a given good *G* provides a reason for my choices only if a desire for *G* is part of my ‘motivational set’ (Williams (1995), 35).

But the call of normativity is completely unlike this; and we recognize this, in part, by *the special character of the human desire or longing to respond to it*. In the case of the thirsty man there is a biological *telos* or goal, the slaking of the thirst, and an internal mechanism which generates a desire to drink, which in turn moves us towards that goal. But in the case of a normative call, there is on the part of the subject, a recognition of a good towards which we *ought* to move, which we *ought* to pursue, whether in fact we actually do so or not. We humans seem to have some ability to recognize, and to feel the pull of, genuine, objective, ‘irreducibly normative’ reasons,²⁵ which *retain their force* whether we are motivated to pursue them or not. If the naturalistic world as studied by science cannot accommodate such reasons, and if alternative non-naturalist accounts are implausible (one reason for their implausibility, being that, as Tim Mulgan puts it, they make genuine objective value an ‘isolated anomaly’ in the cosmos),²⁶ then the theistic alternative seems at the very least worthy of consideration. For theism presents a cosmic picture in which there is something ‘not of ourselves’ as Matthew Arnold puts it,²⁷ which continues to call us even though we may want to stop our ears – as in the story of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible, who tries to go back to sleep, but is constantly awakened by the insistent demand to respond, until he finally answers ‘Speak Lord, for your servant heareth’ (I Samuel 3:10).

The story could be interpreted in very straightforward terms – the young man just hears the voice. But the experience of the divine that is implied in such narratives is no mere passive reception of data, but involves a forward accepting movement of the will, a readiness to respond and to align oneself with the good that is offered. Perhaps the paradigm case of such a response in Scripture is that of Mary, as narrated in Luke.²⁸ It is equally important that the kind of ‘desire’ we are talking about is not (as we have seen) an endogenous wish, a or a mere motivational thrust, but arises out of a dynamic two-way process. As we are ‘drawn forward’, we feel an awe or longing which, quite unlike that of an ordinary motive or appetite, directs us towards something we do not fully grasp, and which exceeds our capacity to grasp. We are back with the logic of the Third Meditation in Levinas’s illuminating reading of Descartes, where the meditator’s thought is ‘interrupted’ by an infinite presence it cannot contain.²⁹ Or as Levinas expresses it,

The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite designates the mind’s contact with something intangible – a contact that does not compromise the complete integrity of that which the mind encounters. The resulting irruption of the Infinite into the finite, yet without its coming within the grasp of the finite but remaining wholly outside it, manifests itself to the subject as *desire*. Not as a desire assuaged by the possession of the Desirable, but as the perfectly disinterested desire for the Infinite, for the Good, which the desirable calls forth, but never quenches.³⁰

This brings us back to the restless human desire for the infinite, with which we began. We yearn for something beyond ourselves which we can never reach. Perhaps this is in one way reminiscent of what happens in an erotic relationship. For notwithstanding my earlier rejection of the romantic notion that eros can function as a grounding for our human existence, there is at least

²⁵ See Parfit (2011), pt. II, 464.

²⁶ See Mulgan (2015), 34.

²⁷ Matthew Arnold, *Literature and Dogma* [1873], Ch. 1.

²⁸ ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord: let it be to me according to thy will’. Luke 1:31.

²⁹ Levinas (1975), 174.

³⁰ With the addition of the notion of ‘irruption’, which is taken from the passage cited in the previous footnote, and with some other slight adaptations from the original to make the sense clearer, this is my translation of the following passage in Levinas (1961), 42 : ‘*La notion cartésienne de l’idée de l’Infini désigne une relation avec un être qui conserve son extériorité totale par rapport à celui qui le pense. Elle désigne le contact de l’intangible, contact qui ne compromet que l’intégrité de ce qui est touché... L’infini dans le fini, le plus dans le moins qui s’accomplit par l’idée de l’Infini, se produit comme Désir. Non pas comme un Désir qu’apaise la possession du Désirable, mais comme le Désir de l’Infini que le désirable suscite, au lieu de satisfaire.*’

this much analogy between erotic desire and the desire for the infinite. In desiring another person, you are desiring something irreducibly *other* – that is, an independent, autonomous subject of consciousness that you can never encompass or fully comprehend. In the same way, in our desire for the good, we recognize that the object of our desire is independent of, and wholly irreducible to, our subjective set of desires or inclinations. And that is more, we respond to it by implicitly acknowledging its authoritative power: we recognize it as something that calls us forward, requires us to change, to reach towards something better than we now are.

So what I have been calling the ‘desiderative’ movement of the mind is bound up with the recognition of an authoritative power, and hence can be described, as it is by Descartes in the (often overlooked) final paragraph of the Third Meditation,³¹ as a kind of passionate ‘adoration’ or awe. Why do I use the (in English) relatively unfamiliar adjective ‘desiderative’? This is partly to draw attention to the original Latin noun *desiderium* and its cognate verb *desiderare*, perhaps familiar from several famous choral settings of Psalm 42 – *Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum*: ‘Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O Lord.’ *Desiderare* has special connotations that are absent in the ordinary Latin words for wanting (*cupire*) or appetition (*appetere*). *Desiderium*, corresponding to the term πόθος in Classical Greek, or *Verlangen* in German, signifies not just wanting something but yearning for what is absent or just out of reach (one of its earliest uses was to refer to the painful yearning of the bereaved for a departed loved one). Iain McGilchrist has pointed out in connection with the corresponding Anglo-Saxon term *langian*, ‘to long for’, that there is something about longing that distinguishes it from mere wanting. Longing is ‘not an aim, with the ultimate goal of acquisition’, and it does not necessarily involve ‘an explicit vision of what it is that is longed for...’ (McGilchrist (2009) 208).

St Augustine is fully alive to this dimension when he describes the longing for God not as a nagging internal appetite, but as a free, expansive yearning that reaches a crescendo only after many long days of eager expectation:

The days seemed long and many, so eager was I to find the time and freedom to sing to you from my inmost self ‘My heart has said to you, I have sought your face; your face O Lord will I seek.’³²

The biblical quotation about seeking the face of the Lord in this passage is from the Psalms (Psalm 27 [26]: 8), and Augustine’s reflections on the verse in question partly prefigured in St Paul’s speech to the Athenians about the ‘unknown God’: ‘God made human beings *so that they would seek him* and perhaps reach out for him and find him, for he is not far from each of us’ (Acts 17:22).

But the search involved here is not to be conceived as if we were setting out like scientists, looking for evidence and eventually finding it. That is not at all what religious experience is like. In many of the Old Testament prophets (examples include Isaiah, Amos and Hosea),³³ the repeated message is that the task of human beings is not to satisfy themselves of the evidence for God, or to test the hypothesis that there is a God, but, rather, *earnestly to seek him*. This earnest longing, as I have been arguing, is bound up with our keen awareness of our finitude and our weakness. In our insatiable yearning to become better, in our reaching towards the infinite, we already are (in Descartes’s phrase) ‘in a certain way attaining to’ (*quodammodo attingere*) the divine, even though we cannot fully comprehend what it is we are yearning for.³⁴

³¹ See Cottingham (2008), chs. 1, 14, 15.

³² Augustine, *Confessions*, bk IX, ch. 3; freely translated, JC.

³³ Isaiah 55:6, Amos 5:4, Hosea 5:13.

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