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ARTICLE

‘Not the God of the Philosophers…’: Can Aquinas’s Approach to God Be Reconciled with Pascal’s?

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Abstract

Pascal stressed the importance of ‘reasons of the heart’ in leading us to God, and insisted that the God to whom he turned during his ‘night of fire’ on 23 November 1654 was ‘not the God of the philosophers and scholars’, but the God of the patriarchs and of Jesus Christ. This suggests a very different approach from that of Thomas, who characterises God in seemingly abstract terms, such as ‘being itself’ and ‘goodness itself’. This paper first explores the methodological and epistemological lessons to be drawn from Pascal’s notion of ‘reasons of the heart’ and argues that we have good reason to take them seriously. The second half of the paper discusses Aquinas’s apparently more impersonal conception of the deity, as an ‘infinite ocean of substance’ (John of Damascus) on which all things depend. But it then explores Aquinas’s account of the passage in Exodus where God addresses Moses in personal terms, and argues that this account, together with what Aquinas has to say on the subject of prayer, indicates that the God of his philosophical deliberations can indeed be reconciled with the intensely personal God of Scripture to whom Pascal turned during his night of fire.

Keywords: Aquinas; being itself; Pascal; prayer; personal God; reasons of the heart

Among philosophers, few have been more passionate in their advocacy of religious belief than Blaise Pascal. That passion is particularly evident in his own famous account of the ‘night of fire’ – his intense conversion experience on the night of 23 November 1654. But philosophers today who aim to defend religious belief may be disconcerted by Pascal’s insistence that the God to whom he turned on that memorable night was ‘not the God of the philosophers and scholars’.[1] We don’t know exactly which philosophers Pascal had in mind, but one thinks immediately of Thomas Aquinas, for whom the God of religious faith is indeed the selfsame God who forms the subject of his lengthy and complex philosophical deliberations. As the great expositor of Aquinas,

[1] *Dieu d’ Abraham, Dieu d’Isaac, Dieu de Jacob, non des philosophes et savants.* From Pascal’s account of his ‘night of fire’, 23 November 1654. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1660], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 913.

Fredrick Copleston, put it: 'Aquinas believed that … for Christians, a full understanding of their faith demands a realization of the ways in which the world of finite things *discloses to the reflective mind* the God in whom they already believe with faith sustained by prayer'.[2]

Pascal's apparent rejection of philosophical approaches to the divine may not worry those who take a Kierkegaardian, purely subjectivist, route to religious belief: 'If I wish to preserve myself in faith', said Kierkegaard, 'I must constantly be intent on holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water'.[3] But without denying the deep religious insights to be found in Kierkegaard's writings, few philosophers, I suspect, will be comfortable with the idea that questions of rational support and evidence are simply irrelevant to authentic religious belief. And I think most believers, philosophers or not, will probably feel it important that their faith should not be blind, or irrational, but based at least partly on reason and evidence.

Be that as it may, I don't think Pascal was in fact a proto-Kierkegaardian. I'm inclined to agree with the verdict on Pascal offered by the late Pope Francis in his aptly titled apostolic letter, *Sublimitas et Miseria Hominis,* published in 2023 to mark the 400th anniversary of Pascal's birth. In this letter Francis sees Pascal as very much in line with the Catholic tradition which, 'from the beginning has rejected what is called fideism, which is the desire to believe against reason'.[4]

To be sure, Pascal spoke of 'reasons of the heart' as being crucial for religious belief. Yet by this he did not mean that belief in God was an entirely irrational business: the reasons of the heart are still that – reasons. So a more subtle and I think more satisfying interpretation of Pascal is that he is not bypassing reasons but is suggesting that a certain kind of emotional experience, an experience of the heart, might be able to open your eyes, to make you sensitive to evidence that might otherwise have eluded you. When it comes to God, there may be, as Pascal put it elsewhere, 'enough light for those who desire to see, but enough darkness for those of contrary disposition'.[5]

This Pascalian idea strikes me as a very fertile one. In my most recent book, *The Humane Perspective*, I draw out some of its epistemological implications that seem particularly relevant for how the philosophy of religion should be conducted. Instead of the *epistemology of detachment* that is typical of much contemporary academic philosophy of religion, we may need an *epistemology of receptivity*.[6] In other words, instead of remaining cold and impartial observers, requiring to be presented with data that can be laid out for dispassionate scrutiny, we may need to give up our status as detached

[2]Frederick Copleston, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), ch. 3, p. 114.

[3]Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [*Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*,1846], trans. D. F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 182.

[4]Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *Sublimitas et Miseria Hominis* (19 June 2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20230619-sublimitas-et-miseria-hominis.html, quoting the words of his predecessor, Pope Benedict. The title of the Apostolic Letter references Pascal's observation on the 'wretchedness' of the human condition without God, but its 'felicity' with God (*Misère de l'homme sans Dieu. Félicité de l'homme avec Dieu*). Pascal, *Pensées,* ed. Lafuma, no. 6.

[5]*Il y a assez de lumière pour ceux qui ne désirent que de voir, et assez d'obscurité pour ceux qui ont une disposition contraire*. Pascal, *Pensées,* ed. Lafuma no. 149.

[6]John Cottingham, *The Humane Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 13, 21, 140–1, and 153.

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and lordly scrutineers, and be prepared instead to give ground, to be open, to yield to the possibility that we might be transformed.

Some may object that letting one's guard down in this way is not philosophically respectable, because it risks allowing us to be swept along towards religious belief in a way that we should regard as irresponsible in any other area of inquiry. But in fact there are many areas other than religion where a certain openness and receptivity is both necessary and perfectly appropriate. In literary studies, for example, as the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, has argued, if we are to discern the properties of a great poem or novel, we have to allow ourselves to be receptive and 'porous',[7] knowing when to yield to the power of the language, instead of maintaining a constant critical detachment. Or to give another example, in cultivating a personal relationship, if we always remain at a distance, clinically scrutinizing the attributes of the person we seek to know, we may only succeed in blocking the opportunity for a closer kind of acquaintance that allows their deeper qualities to shine through.

So how *can* we show there are philosophically respectable reasons for belief in God? Such reasons do, to be sure, need to be based on evidence, but the evidence, I would suggest, has to be of a rather special kind. It cannot be what the American philosopher, Paul Moser, has called 'spectator evidence' – that is, the kind of evidence that can be gathered and evaluated by a detached and impartial observer.[8] To demand 'spectator evidence' would be to think of God as an item in the universe that might be empirically verified in the same way as any scientific hypothesis. But it is not at all clear that the existence of God is susceptible of this kind of empirical confirmation; indeed, the very idea that God can be invoked as an explanatory hypothesis seems to me radically misguided.[9] It is no accident that 'the God hypothesis' is a favourite phrase in the writings of that contemporary scourge of religion, Richard Dawkins – the very phrase being perfectly designed to set up religious belief as a target by showing it does not measure up to scientific criteria for verification.

The evidence relevant to believing in a God who is worthy of worship, and seeks our free and unconstrained love and allegiance, would surely have to be very different kind from the 'spectator evidence' demanded in scientific inquiry. It would have to be evidence of an altogether more personal and more spiritually transformative kind. What might this amount to? In somewhat similar vein to Pascal's insistence that it is the heart that leads one to awareness of God, Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote that '*life* can educate you to believing in God'; and by 'life' he explicitly included 'sufferings of various sorts'.[10] The implication here is that conversion never, or only very rarely, occurs though intellectual debate alone, but rather comes about as a result of an emotional transformation, a radical shift of perspective, that allows the world to be seen differently.

[7]Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 281–282.

[8]Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 47. See also Moser, *The Evidence for God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[9]Here I must beg to differ from the approach taken by the eminent philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne, who frequently speaks of 'God exists' as an explanatory hypothesis. See for example Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* [1978] (2nd edn, Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), ch. 5 ('The Explanatory Power of Theism').

[10]Ludwig Wittgenstein, MS of 1950, in *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 97.

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This 'seeing differently' will involve exercising not just the analytic powers of the intellect but also the more imaginative faculties of the mind, as Judith Wolfe has recently argued in her important recent book *The Theological Imagination.* For Wolfe, the religious, and more specifically the Christian, outlook is 'a mode of seeing the world which beholds in that world an unseen depth of goodness, significance, and love'.[11] Her book is subtitled 'How to Imagine the World Theologically'; but, as is soon made clear, the verb 'imagine' here does not mean to invent, or to picture unreal or fictional things. Rather, it refers to something much more pervasive, something that applies even to our most ordinary perception of the world around us, namely, the intricate interplay of responding and interpreting, of finding and making, that is involved in what Wolfe calls our 'irreducibly constructive, imaginative participation in the world'.[12]

There are, I think, important wider implications here for the nature and conduct of philosophical inquiry in general, and for its methodology. Those familiar with the way contemporary 'analytic' philosophy is taught and practised in the anglophone world will be aware that it is for the most part a very 'left brain' subject, to employ a useful shorthand that calls to mind the illuminating distinction set out by Iain McGilchrist in his groundbreaking work *The Master and his Emissary.* McGilchrist distinguishes between

> ... two ways of being in the world, both of which are essential. One is to allow things to be *present* to us in all their embodied particularity, with all their changeability and impermanence and their interconnectedness, as part of a whole which is forever in flux. In this world we, too, feel connected to what we experience, part of that whole, not confined in subjective isolation from a world that is viewed as objective. The other [way] is to step outside the flow of experience and 'experience' our experience in a special way: to *re-present* the world in a form that is less truthful, but apparently clearer, and therefore cast in a form which is more useful for manipulation of the world and one another. This world is explicitly abstracted, compartmentalised, fragmented, static (though its 'bits' can be set in motion, like a machine), essentially lifeless. From this world we feel detached, but in relation to it we are powerful.[13]

This connects with my point about the need for an epistemology of receptivity rather than of detachment. I have come to think that the detached and impersonal methods of analytic philosophy cannot be the whole story when it comes to many branches of philosophical inquiry, including moral philosophy, and, perhaps especially the philosophy of religion. For the austere and abstract argumentation typical of much analytic philosophy of religion can seem detached and isolated in exactly the way McGilchrist warns us about, and so it can end up not having very much to do with the way religion

[11]Judith Wolfe, *The Theological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), p.19

[12]Wolfe, *Theological Imagination*, p. 12.

[13]Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 93 (slightly adapted). It should be added that associating these two modes of awareness with the right and left cerebral hemispheres respectively, is something of a schematic approximation, as McGilchrist himself stresses. There is evidence to suggest that in most people the respective functions do broadly correlate with neural activity in the relevant halves of the brain, but (setting aside cases of trauma) there is always constant interaction between the halves.

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actually operates in the life of the believer. It is rather as if the philosophy of music were to confine itself to the abstract theories of musicologists, without any attention being paid to the transforming power of music in the lives of those who experience it or perform it.

If we think about the issues that arise in the lives of religious believers – the enigmas of human suffering, sin, evil, repentance, conversion and redemption, the meaning of our existence, our place in the cosmos, and our ultimate destiny – it should rapidly become clear that the very nature of the subject-matter is often going to require the use of richer resources than can be supplied by abstract intellectual analysis alone. To attempt to understand the relevant phenomena in all their emotional and psychological complexity we are going to need to bring them to life, as it were, not lay them out as specimens on the dissecting table. And to do this, we are going to need the kinds of resource that will make vivid to us the way in which these challenging puzzles are addressed and wrestled with in the lives of the human beings concerned.

So we need what I call a more 'humane' philosophical perspective. While in no way discarding the technical tools of the professional philosopher such as abstract argumentation and analysis, which in certain contexts are invaluable, this perspective is also ready to draw on the full range of resources available to the human mind, including those that depend on literary, artistic, poetic, imaginative, aesthetic, and emotional modes of awareness.

When applied to religion, none of this means that espousing a religious outlook need be a matter of uncritical acceptance. Philosophy has always prided itself on the testing and evaluation of our beliefs – as Socrates famously put it, 'the unexamined life is not worth living'.[14] Critical reason is the 'quality control department' (in Iain McGilchrist's phrase) without which our thinking would be chaotic and undisciplined, and ever liable to lead us into confusions and wrong inferences. So it should remain a vital part of the philosophy of religion to be able to scrutinize a given religious outlook, or framework of interpretation, and assess how far it coheres with other parts of our belief system – for example how far it fits with what science tells us about the workings and evolution of the cosmos, the history of the earth and of our species, and how far it accords with fundamental moral convictions about how we should live and how we should treat each other and the environment.

These wider questions are part of the broader task of philosophy, which should always, in my view, aspire to be a not just an analytic but a sy*nthetic* or *synoptic* discipline, striving to bring the different parts of our worldview together and to see how far they fit together, or clash. But having said that, I would still want to insist that the resulting outlook should never become too abstractified, or too detached from its subject matter: it always needs to be sensitive to all the wondrously rich and manifold aspects of our human experience. So in thinking about religious belief, there is every reason to move towards a more holistic and capacious model of philosophical inquiry – one that encourages that imaginative insight or 'amplitude of mind' that William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* called 'reason in its most exalted mood'.[15] In short,

[14] ὁ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (*ho anexetastos bios ou biōtos anthrōpō*); Plato, *Apology* [*c.* 390 BCE], 38a.

[15] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* [1805 version], Bk 13, in S. Gill (ed.), *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

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the role of philosophical reason is most to be respected, in my view, when it is allowed the greatest scope, allowed to range over the full spectrum of human experience, and to play its full part in the creativity and responsiveness of the human spirit. It will then not be cut off in isolation from the imaginative powers and rich emotional responses that bring our thinking alive, but will be able to draw on all these resources, so as to engage in a form of philosophizing that is conducted by, and addressed to, the whole human being.[16]

II

So much for the methodological and epistemological agenda of what I call 'humane' philosophy of religion. And I hope this makes it clear why, and in what sense, I think we need to take seriously Pascal's 'reasons of the heart'. But let me now, in the second part of this paper, turn from the methodological to the metaphysical implications of Pascal's phrase 'not the God of the philosophers'. If we assume a philosophical approach to the divine that is ready to draw on all the resources of the human spirit, affective as well as cognitive, receptive and attuned as well as thoughtful and reflective, what conception of God is going to emerge? Or perhaps I should say 'what conception *if any*', for clearly there is no guarantee that any religious answer whatever is necessarily going to emerge, as opposed to a mere blank. Perhaps, even to the most attentive, engaged, and emotionally receptive seeker, the cosmos may appear 'poker faced', as the British existentialist writer Colin Wilson once put it;[17] or perhaps, in the words of Richard Dawkins, the universe we inhabit will seem to manifest only blind 'pitiless indifference'.[18]

There are, to repeat, no guarantees here, and in my view there can be no coercive philosophical argument showing the Dawkins vision to be mistaken. But for the remainder of this paper I want to consider what kind of conception emerges for those who confront the cosmos and, as a result of what they discern there, are able to join the ranks of believers and embrace some form of theistic answer to their search. The operative words here are '*some form* of theistic answer'; for on reflection it seems that the theistic answer may take very different forms. For Pascal, as we have seen, the God disclosed in his night of fire was the God of Scripture, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And in the account of the night of fire that he wrote on a piece of parchment and had sown into his clothing, to be found on his death, he went on to it make it clear that this God of the patriarchs was for him identical with the God of the New Testament, the *God of Jesus Christ*[19] – in short, the intensely personal God that Christ taught was to be addressed as 'our Father in heaven'.[20]

So how, if at all, does this differ from the God of the philosophers? Well, on the Thomistic conception, God is referred to (both in the *Summa theologiae* and elsewhere) in very much more impersonal-sounding terms than this. Aquinas characterizes God

[16]The argument of the last few paragraphs draws on my *The Humane Perspective*, ch. 1.

[17]Colin Wilson, *Beyond the Outsider* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 27. For a more sophisticated statement of this view, see John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[18]Richard Dawkins, *Rivers out of Eden* ((New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 133.

[19]'Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ'. (*Certitude, certitude, sentiment, joie, paix. Dieu de Jésus-Christ.*) Pascal, *Pensées,* ed. Lafuma, no. 913.

[20]Matthew 6:9 (and compare Luke 11:2).

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as *ipsum esse subsistens*,[21] which has been variously rendered as 'existence itself', or 'subsisting being itself', or 'the pure act of existing'.[22] As 'existence itself', God is present in all created things,[23] the active power that makes all created things exist.[24] Elsewhere, God is described as 'existing outside the order of entities, like a cause that pours forth all being and all of its specific properties'.[25] Furthermore, given Thomas's view of the interconvertibility of being and goodness, the God who is 'being itself' is also 'goodness itself', indeed simply supreme goodness or the *summum bonum simpliciter*.[26]

This seems on the face of it very unlike the personal deity with whom human beings can have a close relationship. But perhaps the more impersonal conception at least has the advantage of avoiding the danger of a crudely anthropomorphic conception of the deity, of the kind the Dominican philosopher, Brian Davies, has warned against. 'If God does not exist in space and time', observes Davies, 'then God is not "someone" alongside us who can acknowledge requests "coming in" while consequently doing something to try to deal with them. God is not Santa Claus, or even Amazon'.[27] In contrast to this anthropomorphic kind of God, whom we expect to 'deal with' requests coming in, the God characterised by Aquinas as *ipsum esse* and the *summum bonum* sounds in a way more like a Platonic Form.[28] It rather calls to mind Plato's supreme form, the Form of the Good as described in *The Republic*,[29] than it suggests a person to be addressed as 'thou'. For whatever you make of Platonic forms, they do not seem to be the sort of thing that talks to you, or calls you, or that you can pray to or make requests to. Indeed, perhaps it was this very austerity and abstractness that drew Iris Murdoch to a kind of Platonism about the Good, and led her to dismiss the idea of a

[21]Thomas Aquinas, *On Existence and Essence* [*De ente et essentia*, 1252–6], ch. 3. Elsewhere Aquinas says that in God there is no distinction between existence and essence, and that God is 'his own existence': *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Ia, qu. 3, art. 4.

[22]This last is the rendering given by the contemporary Catholic preacher, Bishop Robert Barron https://stmarkov.com/news/september-27-what-are-the-most-common-views-of-god, accessed 11 March 2023. For God as *actus purus* (pure actuality, or pure act), see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 3, art. 2.

[23]Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 7–8.

[24]Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 25. See also Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 91–2.

[25]*extra ordinem entium existens, velut causa quaedam profundens totum ens et omnes eius differentias*. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* [*Sententiae super Peri Hermeneias*, 1270–71], I, 14.

[26]Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 6, art. 2. See also Ia, qu. 5, art. 1 (*bonum et ens sunt idem secundum rem*) and art. 3 (*omne ens, inquantum est ens, est bonum*).

[27]Brian Davies, 'Comment: The Power of Prayer', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 102, issue 1097 (January 2021), pp. 3–5, at p. 4.

[28]Though it should be noted that Aquinas did not in general accept Plato's theory of Forms, preferring the Aristotelian view that forms are not independently existing things but present *in* particular things; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 45, art. 4.

[29]'The final thing to be perceived in the intelligible region, and perceived only with difficulty, is the Form of the Good; once seen, it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, producing in the visible region light and the source of light, and being in the intelligible region itself the controlling source of truth and intelligence'. (ἐν τῷ γνωστῷ τελευταία . . ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα καί μόγις ὁρᾶσθαι, ὀφθεῖσα δὲ συλλογιστέα εἶναι ὡς ἄρα πᾶσι πάντων αὐτη ὀρθῶν τε καί καλῶν αἰτία, ἐν τε ὁρατῷ φῶς καί τὸν τούτου κύριον τεκοῦσα, ἐν τε νοητῷ αὐτὴ κυρία ἀλήθειαν καί νοῦν παρασχομένη.) Plato, *Republic* [375 BCE], Bk VII, 517, transl. D. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, rev. edn. 1957).

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personal God as a kind of naïve fantasy. 'Good', she wrote, 'represents the reality of which God is the dream'.[30]

But setting Murdoch's comment aside, may it not be possible to reconcile the two? May it not be possible to identify the austere and impersonal conception of God as existence itself and goodness itself – this very philosophical-sounding God – with Pascal's personal and biblical God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ? Eleonore Stump, in a number of papers, has insisted that the God of classical theism, as characterised in the philosophy of Aquinas as existence itself, is indeed the engaged, responsive God of the biblical stories. According to her argument, we do not have to choose between God as *being* and God as *a being* – and nor does Aquinas. Aquinas's God can be both *esse*, and also *id quod est* – both *existence* and *that which exists*. For if God was simply 'abstract being', Stump argues, he would be metaphysically more limited even than finite concrete particulars such as human beings. And she quotes Aquinas's commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*: 'in reality, being itself [*ipsum esse*] and *a* being [*id quod est*] must be one and the same'. In God they do not differ.[31]

This reconciliation project depends heavily on the Thomistic doctrine of the complete simplicity of God, which it would take us too far round to examine here. But as Stump expounds it, Aquinas's simplicity doctrine asserts that God is pure being, but it also asserts that this being is something subsisting, concrete, a particular, an individual. And indeed in the *Summa theologiae*, First Part, Question 13, article 1, Thomas says that God can sometimes be spoken of in concrete terms, and sometimes in abstract terms. So God, Stump concludes, is not *either* universal *or* particular, but both.[32]

If one objects that regarding God as *both* universal *and* particular takes us to the very edge of intelligibility, the defender of Aquinas may be inclined to reply that this only to be expected given that the finite human mind cannot comprehend the nature of God. And indeed, in the very passage in Part One, Question 13 of the *Summa theologiae* where Aquinas says that both concrete and abstract terms may be applied to God, he explicitly goes on to say that both kinds of appellation fall short of expressing God's mode of being, for in this life, our intellect cannot know God as He is.[33] Taking her cue from this, Stump suggests that the best we can do here is what she calls a 'quantum theology'. Just as the quantum physicist tells us that at the micro level our normal categories of understanding break down, so that, for example, in describing the behaviour of light we are reduced to characterizing it in seemingly contradictory ways, as *both* a wave *and*

[30]Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* [1992] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 496.

[31]Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Boetii De Hebdomadibus* [1259], ch. 2: *cum dicit, omne simplex, ostendit qualiter se habet in simplicibus; in quibus est necesse quod ipsum esse et id quod est, sit unum et idem realiter* (emphasis added).

[32]Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016); lecture version available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8wiP0rBPjI

[33]Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 13, art 1, ad 2: *Quia ... Deus simplex est, et subsistens est, attribuimus ei et nomina abstracta, ad significandam simplicitatem eius; et nomina concreta, ad significandum subsistentiam et perfectionem ipsius, quamvis utraque nomina deficiant a modo ipsius, sicut intellectus noster non cognoscit eum ut est, secundum hanc vitam*. ('As ... God is simple, and subsisting, we attribute to Him abstract names to signify His simplicity, and concrete names to signify His substance and perfection, although both these kinds of names fail to express His mode of being, forasmuch as our intellect does not know Him in this life as He is'.).

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a particle, so it is with God. Just as we can sometimes say God is love, and sometimes say God is loving, so, more generally, we may speak of God both as *being* and as *a being*. In some contexts we can say he is being, in some that he is a being.[34]

We seem here to be entering a metaphysical labyrinth from which it is hard to see a way out. So perhaps it may be more fruitful at this point to turn to a passage where Aquinas himself in effect addresses the relationship between philosophical and biblical conceptions of God, by referring directly to the Bible. I have in mind the much discussed article 11 of Question 13 of Part I of the *Summa theologiae*, where Aquinas considers the passage in Exodus Chapter 3 where God calls to Moses from the burning bush to give him his mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. In identifying himself to Moses, God employs the very phrase that Pascal was later to fasten upon, declaring, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.'[35] Moses then boldly asks, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?", what shall I tell them?' And now Aquinas, referring to the Latin Vulgate version of Exodus Chapter 3, verse 14, quotes the reply given by God: 'I am who I am. Tell the children of Israel HE WHO IS has sent me to you' (*Ego sum qui sum ... Sic dices filiis Israël: QUI EST misit me ad vos*).[36]

This name, QUI EST, Aquinas explains, is most properly applied to God for three reasons: first, because it signifies existence itself (*ipsum esse*); second, because (quoting St John of Damascus) it is an indeterminate and universal designation, 'comprehending all in itself, and containing existence in itself as *an infinite and indeterminate sea of substance*'; and third (referring to Augustine), because of its present tense, since God is eternally present, whose existence knows no past or future.[37]

It is fascinating here to see what a strongly philosophical gloss Aquinas gives to the name by which God identifies himself to Moses, and how, in so doing, he tends to draw the focus away from the intensely personal flavour of the biblical passage that had struck Pascal. Partly this arises from Aquinas's having at his disposal the Vulgate text, which changes the first-person language of the Hebrew, 'tell them that I AM [אהיה (*ehyeh*)] sent you', and renders it in the third person: 'HE WHO IS [*QUI EST*] sent you'. This makes a big difference. For the first-person phrase 'I am' carries inescapably personal connotations: as Descartes was later famously to underline, the very assertion of this proposition SUM, EXISTO is the hallmark of a *res cogitans*, a thinking being, a conscious subject of experience.[38] The change of the divine name from the first person, EGO SUM, to the third person, QUI EST, moves us away from the immediacy of

[34]Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers.*

[35]This way of referring to God occurs several times in the Old and New Testaments, but the Exodus passage is the only one where God identifies himself using this phrase.

[36]Exodus 3:14.

[37]Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 13, art. 11: hoc *nomen QUI EST triplici ratione est maxime proprium nomen Dei. Primo quidem, propter sui significationem. Non enim significat formam aliquam, sed ipsum esse ... Secundo, propter eius universalitatem ... quanto aliqua nomina sunt minus determinata, et magis communia et absoluta, tanto magis proprie dicuntur de Deo a nobis. Unde et Damascenus dicit quod principalius omnibus quae de Deo dicuntur nominibus, est QUI EST, totum enim in seipso comprehendens, habet ipsum esse velut quoddam pelagus substantiae infinitum et indeterminatum... Tertio vero, ex eius consignificatione. Significat enim esse in praesenti, et hoc maxime proprie de Deo dicitur, cuius esse non novit praeteritum vel futurum, ut dicit Augustinus in V de Trin.*

[38]René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], Second Meditation, paragraph 3: *hoc pronunciatum, EGO SUM, EGO EXISTO, quoties a me profertur vel mente concipitur, necessario* [*est*] *verum.*

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a conscious personal presence. It already distances us from the confronting 'I am' who summoned Moses, and indeed can slip imperceptibly into the even more impersonal neuter designation ID QUOD EST ('that which is'), as deployed by Aquinas in his *Commentary on Boethius*.[39] In short, the third-person locution shifts the focus off the personal being manifest to Moses in a one-to-one, I-to-thou, encounter, and towards the more indeterminate and universal characterisation which Aquinas cites from St John of Damascus: an *infinite ocean of substance—pelagus substantiae infinitum.*

This remarkable latter phrase seems almost Spinozan in its flavour, calling to mind Spinoza's dictum that 'all things are in God ... the infinite being we call God or Nature'.[40] In *Summa theologiae* Part I, Question 8, we find Aquinas, too, allowing that all things may be said to be in God, in so far as they are contained by him in the way spiritual things contain bodily things.[41] And in the same article he explicitly asserts the converse of 'all things are in God', namely, 'God is in all things'.[42] Of course there are manifold differences in the respective outlooks of Aquinas and Spinoza, but it is hard to deny some convergence here, and in both thinkers we perhaps hear an echo of St Paul's famous pronouncement in his speech to the Athenians on the Areopagus – 'God is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being'.[43] We have arrived at a conception of God as the mysterious infinite source of existence on whom we finite creatures are totally dependent in every moment of our lives. This might be thought of as the 'philosophical' conception of the deity, the 'God of the philosophers', an infinite ocean of substance on which all things depend and in which everything that exists in a certain way participates. But this very philosophical way of thinking of God still leaves open the crucial question of whether or not this mysterious source is to be somehow conceived in personal terms, as an 'I am', as one who understands and wills, as a conscious subject – as a 'primordial "I"'.[44]

Speaking for myself, I cannot see how this question could possibly be adjudicated using philosophical resources alone; and, indeed, I suspect Aquinas might be inclined to concur, given his frequent statements about our inability in this life to know God as God is.[45] (One could even say there's a proto-Kantian strand in Aquinas here, given his Aristotelian insistence that natural human knowledge arises from the senses, from the

[39]See note 31, above.

[40]Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, prop. 15; Part IV, preface.

[41]'Spiritual things contain the items in which they are, as a soul contains a body. So *God is in things* as containing them. In a similar way, *all things are said to be in God* insofar as they are contained by Him'. (*Spiritualia continent ea in quibus sunt, sicut anima continet corpus. Unde et Deus est in rebus sicut continens res. Tamen, per quandam similitudinem corporalium, dicuntur omnia esse in Deo, inquantum continentur ab ipso.*) Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 8, art. 1, ad 2, (emphasis supplied).

[42]'Existence is what is most intimately present in each things, and deeply inherent in all things... Hence it must be that God is in all things, and in an intimate way'. (*Esse ... est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius omnibus inest... Unde oportet quod Deus sit in omnibus rebus, et intime*.) Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 8, art 1.

[43]In the speech on the Areopagus in Athens reported in Acts 17:28.

[44]The phrase is Roger Scruton's: 'We receive the world as a gift, by relating it to the transcendental subjectivity, the primordial "I", in which each thing occurs as a free thought'. *The Face of God* (London: Continuum, 2012), ch. 6, p. 169.

[45]Nevertheless, Aquinas does attribute to God both the most perfect *knowledge* (as following from God's perfection—*Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 14, art. 1), and also *will* (as following from God's understanding—qu. 19, art. 1).

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phenomenal world, leaving us ill equipped to grasp the thing in itself.[46]) So perhaps it would be best here to follow Judith Wolfe's suggestion that we are in territory where what is required is what she terms a 'self-abnegating theological imagination' – one that acknowledges 'both the adequacy and the inadequacy of our ways of sense-making to the mystery of creation'. And this implies, as Wolfe puts it, that the metaphysical theories we construct about the divine must be 'light, tentative, humble, because when we construct theologically we are not building towers, we are building boats. And we trust the sea'.[47]

We are moving here not towards a philosophical conclusion, but perhaps towards an acknowledgement that Pascal's intuition during his 'night of fire' was in the end sound: our human wretchedness, our yearning for completion, cannot be put to rest by invoking the God of the philosophers. Philosophy can perhaps get as far as acknowledging our finitude, our contingency, and our total dependency on the mysterious source of being, but something more personal is required to answer our human longing for one to whom we can somehow *relate*, for one who, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, 'meets our needs',[48] for one whom we can call upon in our deepest need. And if we set aside revelation, perhaps our only resource here, when theory falters, is to turn to praxis. The old maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi* seems right here – the practical need to pray is in a certain way prior to doctrine, not the other way round. And here again Pascal seems right, when he observes that if you long to believe but cannot see the way ahead, then start going to Church and saying prayers – 'this will humble you, this will make you believe'.[49]

But before we leave the last word with Pascal, we need to come back one last time to Aquinas. For although I have tended up to now to take Aquinas as the principal expositor of the 'God of the philosophers', it is important to remember that we ignore a great deal of what Aquinas wrote about God if we confine our attention to his metaphysical writings. As Paul Murray has shown in his illuminating study of Aquinas's poetical and mystical writings, and the reflections on the biblical scriptures (including, for example, the commentaries on the Psalms, and on St Paul), Aquinas was deeply concerned with the practical dimensions of the spiritual life.[50]

In this respect, Aquinas comes strikingly close to acknowledging what Pascal was to call the 'reasons of the heart'. In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Aquinas writes that 'the doctrine of sacred scripture contains not only matters for speculation, as in geometry, but also matters to be accepted by the heart [*approbanda per affectum*].[51]

[46]*Summa theologiae*, Ia, qu. 12, art. 12: *Naturalis nostra cognitio a sensu principium sumit, unde tantum se nostra naturalis cognitio extendere potest, inquantum manuduci potest per sensibilia* ('Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go only as far as it can be led by sensible things.')

[47]Wolfe, *The Theological Imagination*, p. 16. final sentence of Ch. 1.

[48]Hebrews 7:26 (referring to Jesus as High Priest in the order of Melchisedech).

[49]'You want to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies: learn from those who were hampered like you and who now wager all they possess. These are people who know the road you would like to follow; they are cured of the malady for which you seek a cure; so follow them and begin as they did – *by acting as if they believed*, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. In the natural course of events this in itself will make you believe, this will humble you'. Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Lafuma, no. 418.

[50]Paul Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[51]Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura*, ch. 5, lect. 2; cited in Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer*, p. 9.

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And in the *Commentary on the Divine Names*, he explicitly underlines the point when he says that the reader of Scripture is 'not only learning divine things, but also experiencing [*patiens*] them, does not merely receive them as knowledge in the intellect, but becomes united with them by loving and through feeling [*per affectum*]'.[52]

This affective dimension is strongly apparent in Aquinas's account of prayer, which involves not only directing the intellect towards God but a complete *surrendering* of the mind to God: *orando tradit homo mentem suam Deo*.[53] This kind of reverential submission could perhaps theoretically be directed towards an impersonally defined 'infinite ocean of substance' – a kind of joyful surrender of the kind described in Lord Byron's lines 'Roll on thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll', where he figuratively speaks of the Ocean as a parent:

> And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
> Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be...
> For I was as it were a child of thee,
> And trusted to thy billows far and near,
> And laid my hand upon thy mane – as I do here.[54]

There is personificatory language here – the language of 'I' to 'thou'; but of course this is just that – a fanciful personification of something Byron's prosaic self knows full well is not conscious, and not able to hear or respond to his addresses. Byron reverences the sea, fears it, rejoices in it, receives good things from it, but in literal truth there can be no personal relationship here, nor would it make sense, except as a poetic piece of wishful thinking, to make requests of the ocean. This seems analogous to what is going on in Iris Murdoch's mind when she affirms the reality of the Good, and its power in our lives, but rejects the idea of a personal God as a mere dream, a fanciful case of personification that the mature and rational philosopher ought to reject.[55]

For Aquinas, by contrast, although as we have seen he is often drawn to Platonic language when he characterises God as pure being or goodness itself, it nevertheless makes perfect sense to pray to God in a fully and literally construed personalistic manner, using the language of 'I' to 'thou', and indeed making straightforward petitionary prayers for what one wants. Many philosophers other than Murdoch have looked askance at this kind of thing. Mark Johnston for example warns against what he calls 'spiritual materialism' – the superstitious attempt to gain personal advantages by supernatural means, by prevailing on the deity to intervene on one's behalf.[56] But Aquinas makes it abundantly clear that asking God for what one wants is not attempting to influence God or alter his will:

[52] *non solum discens, sed et patiens divina, idest non solum divinorum scientiam in intellectu accipiens, sed etiam diligendo, eis unitus est per affectum.* Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in librum Dionysii de divinis nominibus* [*c.* 1265], ch. 2, lectio 4. See Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer* p. 10.

[53] *Orando tradit homo mentem suam Deo quam ei per reverentiam subjicit et quodammodo presentat.* 'In prayer a human being surrenders his mind to. God, makes it subject to Him through reverence, and in a certain way presents it to him'. *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae, qu. 83, art. 3, ad 3.

[54] From Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto the Second*, CLXXIX [1812].

[56] See Mark Johnston, *Saving God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 51.

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> We pray not that we may change what is divinely decreed, but in order to obtain by our prayers what God decrees should be brought about by means of our prayers; in other words, as Gregory says, 'that by asking, human beings may deserve to receive what almighty God from eternity has determined to give us.'[57]

Here is the philosopher talking of the God of the philosophers – timeless, immutable, eternal, but whose eternally present action allows for our receiving the goods we ask for, in virtue of our asking for them. So from a philosophical point of view it makes perfect sense to pray, just as, if we want to keep warm, it makes perfect sense to light a fire, this being the necessary condition for the resulting warmth. But the God to whom this meticulous philosophical analysis of prayer relates is not simply an impersonal ocean of substance. In one sense the image of the sea is right, for God is, indeed, like the sea in which we swim, or the air we breathe, the one on whom our very existence from moment to moment depends. But in praying we pray to the personal Pascalian God, the God of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples how to pray, by giving them a list of petitions to offer up to the Father God, who knows their necessities before they ask.[58] And for Aquinas, as for the author of the Epistle of James, 'every good and every perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of Lights, in whom there is no change nor shadow of turning'.[59] So we may after all leave the last word with Aquinas, when he underlines how prayer is *good* for us – not because it changes God's mind,[60] not because it is necessary to inform God of what we desire,[61] but because it builds up our confidence in turning to God, and helps us recognize him as the author of the good things we receive.[62] It is a moving justification of prayer with which Pascal would surely have concurred.[63]

[57] *Summa theologiae*, IIaIIae, qu. 83, art. 2: *Non enim propter hoc oramus ut divinam dispositionem immutemus, sed ut id impetremus quod Deus disposuit per orationes sanctorum esse implendum; ut scilicet homines postulando mereantur accipere quod eis omnipotens Deus ante saecula disposuit donare, ut Gregorius dicit.*

[58] Matthew 6:8.

[59] James 1:17. The authorship of this letter is traditionally attributed to James the brother of Jesus.

[60] *Summa theologiae*, IIaIIae, qu. 83, art. 2, ad 1: *oratio nostra non ordinatur ad immutationem divinae dispositionis, sed ut obtineatur nostris precibus quod Deus disposuit.*

[61] IIaIIae, qu. 83, art. 2, ad 2: *non est necessarium nos Deo preces porrigere ut ei nostras indigentias vel desideria manifestemus, sed ut nosipsi consideremus in his ad divinum auxilium esse recurrendum.*

[62] IIaIIae, qu. 83, art. 2, ad 3: *quod aliqua [Deus] vult praestare nobis petentibus, hoc est propter nostram utilitatem, ut scilicet fiduciam quandam accipiamus recurrendi ad Deum, et ut recognoscamus eum esse bonorum nostrorum auctorem.*

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