

Religious experience and desire

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Abstract: I offer a new approach to the old question of the epistemic value of religious experience. According to this approach, religious experience is a species of desire, desire in this context involving a kind of experience which is cognitive and unmediated. The account is inspired by Levinas and Heidegger, and it involves a conception of experience which is shared by a disjunctivist account of perception. Perceptual disjunctivism is my starting point, and it provides the ground for the ensuing discussion of desire. In the final section of the article I argue that the parallel between perceptual disjunctivism and a Levinasian conception of desire points to a further strength in the account of desire here presented, namely, by suggesting the possibility of a disjunctive style response to scepticism about religious experience.

Introduction

My aim in what follows is to offer a new approach to the old question of the epistemic value of religious experience. The case I construct involves taking seriously the idea that religious experience is a species of desire.¹ This does not mean that it is a form of wishful thinking, although such a position is forced upon us if we assume certain prevalent ways of thinking about desire. These approaches can be questioned, and there are good reasons for challenging the restrictions they impose upon the concept of desire even if our sympathies tend towards atheism. I defend the conception of desire articulated by Levinas and pre-empted in Heidegger's notion of 'thinking'. This conception offers an alternative to the approach which dominates analytic discussions, for it involves rejecting a dichotomy of reason and desire so as to allow that desire itself can be a mode of cognition.

Desire thus understood provides the central conceptual groundwork for my interpretation of what it could mean for there to be experience of God. So I am concerned with a God-involving religious experience, but although the notion of

God with which I operate encompasses notable varieties of theism, it does not aspire to be wholly equivalent to the God of classical theism, and the thinkers with which I engage take issue with this framework in any case. Perhaps for this reason the position I defend will be of interest to those who prefer to tackle the issue in non-theistic terms, whether those terms be atheistic or apophatic – and it will bring into focus the problems to be faced when determining what it means for an experience to be religious.

Levinas takes seriously the idea that God is revealed *directly* at the level of desire. There is a question of what this means, and whether it can be defended, and I tackle these issues by trading upon the structure of John McDowell's disjunctivist approach as it applies to sensory experience of the physical world.² I am suggesting then that there is a parallel between the two cases which can help us to understand what it could mean for religious experience to be understood in these Levinasian terms. The emphasis here is upon structure rather than content, for there are huge and familiar disanalogies between sensory experience and experience of God – disanalogies which, I suggest, are better accommodated on a desire-involving approach. So I agree with the editors of a recent collection that disjunctivism comes in several forms and applies to various philosophical issues. I agree also that its defining mark is 'a conception of the inner and outer as suffused',³ albeit with the caveat that this spatial language is not to be interpreted literally in the theistic case.⁴

McDowell says of the position that it allows us to 'take seriously the idea of an unmediated openness of the experiencing subject to "external" reality' (rather than) 'pictur[ing] an interface between them'.⁵ Talk of *unmediated* openness does not mean that the subject's cognitive or perceptual apparatus plays no role in the process. The point of denying 'mediation' is simply to rule out saying that the subject's access to things is indirect, as it would be, for example, if there were mediating items standing between subject and object, or if the mind's work involved construction rather than construal.⁶

Disjunctivism involves a commitment to direct realism, and the conception of experience it involves – as cognitive and unmediated – is going to feed into an analogous conception of desire. However, it is also intended to be a defence of direct realism, and it is in this context that we can appreciate the point of the disjunctivist label. To return to the case of perception, it involves denying that there is a common conscious experience to veridical and non-veridical perception; instead, how things appear to someone is analysed in terms of the subject's being in *either* one *or* the other (hence, 'disjunctivism') of two distinct mental states, one of which (the veridical) involves reality being open or directly accessible to the subject, while the other (the non-veridical) does not. The relevant context here is the challenge to direct realism posed by hallucination when it is assumed that the same kind of experience occurs in both cases. It will be a final task of the article to explore the possibility of a disjunctivist style response to scepticism about religious experience.

My approach to religious experience is different from that which has predominated in analytic philosophy of religion,⁷ for I take inspiration from the Continental philosophical tradition, give a key role to the concept of desire, and trade upon recent moves in the epistemology of perception. The ‘Continental’ dimension of my position is justified on the ground that I am an ‘active bridge-builder’ as far as the distinction between analytic and Continental philosophy is concerned, ‘pursuing philosophical insights wherever they are to be found’ as Dan Zahavi sums up the approach.⁸ One such insight is to be found in the Levinasian conception of desire, and – active bridge-building again – the reason/desire dualism it calls into question has been undermined on independent grounds by various moral philosophers, McDowell included.⁹ This is a further reason for taking seriously the proposed model, and there is a knife-edge in any case between Levinas’s theism and McDowell’s moral realism.¹⁰

The concepts with which I deal elude precise definition, and a Levinasian-style discourse seems appropriate to the religious themes at issue. This rules out knock-down arguments and decisive refutations, and the approach is intended, rather, to be exploratory and open-ended. Analytic and Continental philosophical discourses resist combination in *this* sense. However, this does not mean that they stand irreducibly opposed, for analytic philosophy exceeds this narrow paradigm, and it can do so without forsaking the careful argument and scholarly caution which is lost when the two discourses stand dualistically opposed. It is in the spirit of this reconciliatory approach that the present article is offered.

Disjunctivism: the basics

It is a mark of disjunctivism that inner and outer are ‘suffused’, and, as applied to veridical perceptual experience (henceforth perceptual experience), the claim is that it involves direct awareness of mind-independent, physical things. This position is opposed to one in which there is an interface between inner and outer, and there is an interface between the two when the outer is inaccessible to the inner. McDowell associates such a framework with a ‘veil of ideas’ scepticism,¹¹ although a commitment to the relevant interface does not require the postulation of mental intermediaries, and the point can be expressed equally well with reference to an experience’s representational content.¹² Thus understood, the claim is that there is an interface between how experience represents things as being, and how they really are.

McDowell seeks to defend direct realism via a form of disjunctivism, and his initial move is to clarify what motivates the aforementioned interface. His diagnosis is inspired by J. M. Hinton’s work on experience,¹³ the starting point of the argument being that there are cases of hallucination where the way things appear to the subject is indiscernible from how they would appear if the experience were veridical – hallucinating a cat as opposed to seeing the real thing. So there is a similarity at the level of how things appear, and it would be absurd to deny this. According to

the offending line of thought, however, it is concluded on this basis that the two experiences (the hallucinatory experience and the veridical experience) just *are* the same.¹⁴ The notion of experience here is understood in terms of what the two cases have in common, and what they have in common is how they represent things as being: they both represent a cat as being in front of me. So experience is relegated to the ‘inner’ side of the interface, and the difference between the veridical and non-veridical case is accommodated by reference to an ‘outer’, worldly, component which must be added to experience if it is to count as veridical.

The decisive move is from the claim that the two experiences *seem* the same to the conclusion that they *are* the same, where *being* the same rules out the possibility of saying that one of these experientially indistinguishable cases provides experiential access to a mind-independent thing. This latter way of putting the matter entitles us to say that the two experiences are different rather than the same, and, most significantly, that perceptual experience *qua* experience involves mind-independent things. It is in this sense that, ‘[i]f we adopt the disjunctive conception of appearances, we have to take seriously the idea of an unmediated openness of the experiencing subject to “external” reality’.¹⁵

McDowell is concerned with the epistemological implications of these rival conceptions of experience. The inference to be rejected is that ‘neither of the admittedly indistinguishable experiences could have higher epistemic worth than that of the inferior case’,¹⁶ and hence, that ‘even in the best possible case, the most that perceptual experience can yield falls short of a subject’s having an environmental state of affairs directly available to her’.¹⁷ This is the conception of experience that McDowell rejects, and he spells out its consequences as follows:

We cannot now see the inner and outer realms as interpenetrating; the correlate of this picture of our access to the inner is that subjectivity is confined to a tract of reality whose layout could be exactly as it is however things stood outside it, and the common-sense notion of a vantage point on the external world is now fundamentally problematic . . . [our] problem is not now that our contact with the external world seems too *shaky* to count as knowledgeable, but that our picture seems to represent us as out of touch with the world altogether.¹⁸

To sum up: the disjunctivist denies that perceptual experience has the same epistemic value as that of the non-veridical case. Rather, it puts us in direct touch with mind-independent things, and this grants us the right to say that I can know, for example, that my cat is on the table by virtue of seeing her there. This does not mean that my claim to knowledge is infallible, for I can be mistaken, when, for example, I am under the influence of a psychedelic drug. Such fallibility is built into the very definition of the disjunctivist position, for the relevant disjuncts correspond to the different kinds of experience at issue depending upon whether I am seeing or hallucinating: *either* I see a cat *or* my visual experience is misleading me in some way. So we can say that my ability to recognize cats is fallible, and hence, that I can be wrong in thinking that I have an experiential warrant for supposing that my cat is on the table. What does not follow is that I can never be so warranted,

and the objection in effect raised by McDowell is that a proponent of the disputed conception of experience has a difficulty in accommodating this.¹⁹ That is to say, she has a difficulty making sense of the idea that we can tell something by looking. By contrast, disjunctivism grants us the right to say that even if there are hallucinations, and even if they are indistinguishable from perception, this does not show that we are cut off from the external world.

What follows? Not that the problem of our knowledge of the external world has been put to rest: there can be no watertight refutation of the radical sceptic who insists that we are out of touch with the world on the basis of the undeniable fact that appearances can deceive. The disjunctivist is not seeking to mount an impossible proof of the external world. Rather, she is doing something akin to what Heidegger suggests when, in response to Kant, he says:

The 'scandal of philosophy' is not that this proof [of an external world] has yet to be given, but that *such proofs are expected and attempted again and again*. Such expectations, aims, and demands arise from an ontologically inadequate way of starting with *something* of such a character that independently *of it* and 'outside' *of it* a 'world' is to be proved.²⁰

The point here is to question the framework which leads us to suppose that the world is irredeemably external to experience, and hence, that our task is the impossible one of explaining how we can traverse an insurmountable gap. This framework is not mandatory, the arguments in its favour are inconclusive, and it is certainly not required as a result of the fact that we can be mistaken about the nature of the state we are in.

Introducing God

We have a conception of experience as cognitive and unmediated, and I want now to build upon this approach in my discussion of what it could mean to experience God. Nobody seriously doubts that we are experientially open to a reality which is not of our making. By contrast, it seems rather less compelling to suppose that we are experientially open to God, for God does not appear in the world, or at least, if He does appear, then it is in a manner quite different from that of cats, tables, and the like.²¹

The idea that God does not appear in the world is familiar grist to the atheist's mill: witness Bertrand Russell's anticipated response to a post-mortem encounter with God: 'God, you gave us insufficient evidence'. Russell's expectations in this context can be contested.²² However, his response raises the question of what it could mean for God to appear in the world, if indeed it makes any sense at all. The difficulty we face here is that there is no clear and agreed-upon sense of what it means to bring God into the equation or to leave Him out, although it is a common enough assumption that leaving Him out is a matter of dispensing with a problematic and superfluous presence which can be removed from our ontology at no cost. This is the response of a certain kind of atheist, and it

implies that any putative experience of God is on a level with experiencing fairies at the bottom of the garden – the kind of thing one experiences when one is ‘seeing things’ in the hallucinatory sense.

Talk of hallucination calls to mind our earlier objection to the idea that experience *per se* cannot involve things because one can have the same kind of experience in the absence of such things. The disjunctivist responds that the fact that the two experiences *seem* the same shows at most that we can be mistaken with respect to what we are experiencing, and that this does not rule out saying that experience puts us in touch with mind-independent things. God’s seeming absence from the world makes it difficult to see how one could defend the possibility of there being a direct experiential relation here – at least prior to an examination of what it could mean for God to be present. The temptation, however, is to take this supposed absence at face value, and conclude that there can be no experience of God. To revert to the terms of our previous discussion, there is an experience/God interface.

We have yet to establish what divine presence could mean, but it seems unlikely that experience of God is appropriately modelled on experience of visible things.²³ This does not exclude the possibility of there being some kind of relation between experience of God and experience of visible things. The point is simply that there is a distinction between God and such things – which is one of the reasons why atheism attracts such widespread support. Our question then is what it could mean for there to be an unmediated openness to God given that (1) God is not present in the world in the way that physical things are present, and yet (2) there is a sense in which God can be said to be present nonetheless.

Introducing desire: Heidegger and Levinas

The question raised at the end of the previous section has preoccupied some recent phenomenologists who, in considering how phenomenology might be of service to theology, have concluded that it must be freed from the constraints which are imposed when experience is limited to the horizon of objectivity as determined by Husserl’s constituting subject.²⁴ Heidegger is applauded for taking the initial, post-Husserlian, step in *Being and Time*, although it is in his later work that we find more explicit evidence of the relevant shift, for example, his *Discourse on Thinking* (1966). He here introduces Eckhart’s notion of *Gelassenheit* to illustrate the kind of self-surrender required for true receptivity to reality. This ‘releasement’ is said to involve a suppression of will, will being active when we think in the representational terms which make everything ‘an object that stands opposite us within a horizon’ (Heidegger (1966), 67). The opposing state of mind is described as a mode of thinking – thinking that ‘is no longer representing’ (*ibid.*) – and it is an intrinsic feature of such thinking that it is directed towards and determined by something other than the thinking subject: it is ‘determined solely by that which it is related to’, and we are to suppose that there is a

contrast here with ordinary, representational, thinking, which latter is determined as much, if not more, by the representing subject (*ibid.*, 73). Heidegger refers here to a 'waiting' which 'really has no object', which 'leaves open what we are waiting for', and which involves being released 'into openness' (*ibid.*, 68). So there is an element of passivity involved in this state of mind, for the subject 'receives' something outside herself, albeit something which exceeds her powers of representation. However, there is activity too, for the 'mysterious region' to which she is related at this level of thought precipitates a movement or attraction towards itself: we 'receive from it movement towards it' to be 'released to it in [our] being' (*ibid.*, 73). This 'higher acting' is distinguished from action within the world (*ibid.*, 61), and releasement is said to involve a 'path' (*ibid.*, 70).

It seems appropriate to describe what we have here as an unmediated openness of the subject to external reality, and there is a clear sense in which inner and outer are 'suffused': hence Heidegger's talk of the relevant reality transmitting something of itself to the subject. However, there are two worries at this stage. First, it is unclear how Heidegger's position could be remotely relevant to a subject's unmediated openness to *God*. After all, there is no mention of God in his account, and he goes out of his way here and elsewhere to distance himself from theism and theology.²⁵ Second, I indicated at the start of the article that one of my aims was to build up to the idea that religious experience is a species of desire, and there is likewise no mention made by Heidegger of desire.

Heidegger certainly has no time for the God of many philosophers and theologians, and objects to the overly theoretical approach they adopt – as if God could be reduced to 'an object that stands opposite us within a horizon', and as if our relation to God could be adequately captured in these terms. Hence his refusal to put God's name to the mysterious region and activity with which he is concerned. To revert to the terms of our previous discussion, he is seeking to clarify what it could mean to relate to something which is not present in the world in the way that physical things are present, yet which is present nonetheless. The state of mind relevant to the mysterious region of which Heidegger speaks is said to involve movement and attraction – from its source to the subject and back again. What this seems to mean, when taken in conjunction with the previous point, is that we are attracted to something which exceeds our powers of representation – something revealed to us through this attractive pull.

Heidegger distinguishes such activity from action within the world, and we could be forgiven for thinking that this 'higher' activity is sealed off from the world – the world including beings like ourselves who, according to this picture, are purely will-driven. Heidegger makes clear here and elsewhere that he stands opposed to this dualistic framework.²⁶ We are to suppose then that we ourselves are receptive to the relevant pull, and that the limits of worldly activity are transformed accordingly. This openness is said to bring a suppression of self-will, and although it is tempting to suppose that the self is obliterated here by a superior force, it is compatible with what has been said that it comes to acknowledge

and to accept the relevant pull and to be transformed in the process. Heidegger's reference to a path or a way captures the dynamic and open-ended nature of the journey this attraction calls forth, although its overall shape is left unclear, as is the nature of the authority it exerts.

The word 'desire' is absent from this account, and seemingly irrelevant to an understanding of the state of mind at issue if it is assumed that desire is a non-cognitive state which is simply about wanting to get things for oneself. These assumptions can be contested, and it will be a task of the following sections to make that good. We can begin to get a sense of the relevant dialectic by turning to Levinas. Levinas agrees with Heidegger that we must move beyond the limits of self-will if we are to appreciate all that there is. He grants also that there is a level of cognition which is non-representational, which relates the subject to something external,²⁷ and which involves movement and attraction from its source to the subject and back again. It involves 'an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its "object"; it is revelation'. This aspiration is described by Levinas as a mode of desire, and the dimension of reality it reveals is 'the infinite':

The idea of the infinite, in which being overflows idea, in which the Other overflows the Same, breaks with the inward play of the soul and alone deserves the name experience, a relationship with the exterior. It is then more *cognitive* than cognition itself. (Levinas (1993), 112)

The infinite is not the object of a contemplation, that is, is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of the infinite is a thought which at every moment *thinks more than it thinks*. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire 'measures' the infinity of the infinite. (*ibid.*, 113)

The general idea is familiar: we have a state of mind which is cognitive in the sense that it involves being open to external reality – 'being overflows idea' to 'break [] with the inward play of the soul' – and the claim that it is more cognitive than cognition itself gives expression to the complaint that ordinary cognition involves distortion. It is for this reason that the mode of cognition under present consideration 'alone deserves the name experience'. Levinas also describes it as a species of desire, and offers his own version of Heidegger's distinction between self-interested activity and activity appropriate to the state of mind at issue, distinguishing between need and desire to this end. Need has its origin in the subject, it is self-interested, and it is all about wanting things for oneself. Desire, by contrast, has its origin in something beyond the subject, and it involves being attracted to something independently desirable.

Levinas leaves us in no doubt about the theistic significance of such desire, although he makes clear that its source and object must elude our attempts to comprehend it – 'it is not the object of a contemplation'. He insists, however, that we relate to it authentically at the level of desire, and it is in this context that he tells us that '[t]he infinite is not "in front of me" '; It is I who express it' (Levinas (1998), 75). I am said to express the infinite in my moral interactions with others, and it is in so interacting that I give expression to my desire for

God – this desire that God animates. Levinas agrees with Heidegger that the subject is embarked upon a path in this context. However, he parts company with him by insisting that this path is to be found only in our moral interactions with others, and that it is at this level that we can aspire to a knowledge of God. Hence: ‘everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression’ (Levinas (1990), 17).

Desire: some clarifications

I shall return to the question of whether this detour through ethics compromises the idea that our openness to God is unmediated. First, though, I want to bring out the implications of our discussion for an understanding of the nature of desire and its relation to experience. We began with a (disjunctivist) model of what it could mean for experience to be cognitive and unmediated, and this led to the question of whether such a model could be appropriate to the case of experience of God given that (1) God is not present in the world in the way that physical things are present, and (2) there is a sense in which God is present nonetheless. Heidegger and Levinas postulate a state of mind which takes us beyond the perception of physical things, but which involves being open to external reality. Levinas describes its object in theistic terms, even whilst denying that it is something we could properly comprehend. Indeed, he goes so far as to deny that the infinite ‘is in front of me’, echoing Heidegger’s talk of a state of mind ‘which has no object’. He claims also that this state of mind is a mode of experience, cognition, and desire. I want to suggest that, properly understood, what we have here is an account of desire as a kind of experience which is cognitive and unmediated.

The idea that it is a mode of experience captures the sense in which the subject is open to something in external reality – it breaks with ‘the inward play of the soul’ in this respect, and counts equally as a mode of cognition for this reason. The contrast here is with ordinary experience and cognition – which remain irredeemably ‘inner’ we are to suppose. It is a familiar enough thought – in the analytic tradition at least – that cognition aims at truth, and that it is to be distinguished from desire in this respect, which latter aims at the realization of whatever outcome serves to satisfy it (I want to finish this article, drink this wine, unite with my beloved). As far as the link with cognition and truth is concerned, it will be remembered that we are talking about a conception of cognition which exceeds our ordinary understanding thereof, and although the limits of the supposedly ‘ordinary’ can be debated and contested, it is not ruled out that, in this new context, the link between cognition and truth is broken, or alternatively, that it is preserved, albeit in a manner which is compatible with the idea that we are concerned equally with a mode of desire. This is Levinas’s position, and it involves treating desire as involving an attraction to something independently desirable – something which elicits the desire and draws us towards itself. On this way of thinking, God is metaphysically necessary for desire, or to put it in contemporary philosophical jargon, desire is to be

comprehended in externalist terms – ‘externalist’ in the sense that it is individuated with reference to its object (compare the disjunctivist’s externalist conception of experience).

An externalist conception of desire makes no sense if desire is to be comprehended in the aforementioned non-cognitivist terms. According to this (neo-Humean) model, cognition ranges over what there is, it has nothing to do with being attracted to things, and attraction comes into the picture only at the level of will or desire. Desire has nothing to do with cognition because it has nothing to do with tracking what there is, there being nothing in the world which is intrinsically attractive or desirable. The desirable is determined rather by our desires, and more specifically, by whatever has the potential to satisfy them.²⁸

Heidegger has this picture in mind when he complains that ‘thinking in values [in this sense] involves the greatest blasphemy imaginable against Being’ (Heidegger (1978), 251), and it can be contested. It can be contested because although there are desires which seem to conform to this paradigm, it has not been shown that it is exhaustive, and it is certainly not established with the claim that the world is motivationally inert (question-begging) or that value has its origin in us (ditto). Such criticisms have surfaced in analytic philosophy, giving further credence to the proposed remodelling of desire.²⁹ Nevertheless, the disputed picture has captivated philosophers and others, and the prevailing treatment of desire is compatible with it. According to this treatment, there are appetitive desires which we share with other animals, and our non-appetitive desires are to be understood as propositional attitudes, namely, that of wanting to be true the proposition which specifies the content of the desire (I want that I finish this article).³⁰

Clearly, there are desires which fall into these categories – after all, I want nothing more than that I finish this article, and I was pretty hungry an hour ago. However, the state of mind with which we are concerned is not an appetitive desire, and it is not easy to see how it could be comprehended in propositional terms. For a start, its object cannot be identified and pinned down, and it is not in any case a matter of wanting some proposition to be true. Talbot Brewer has challenged the propositional account on precisely these lines, arguing likewise that there are desires it fails to accommodate.³¹ He takes it to go hand in hand with a crude naturalistic vision in which human agency is reduced to a throwing around of our causal weight in response to the desires we seek to satisfy – I want that I finish this article, go for a swim, get drunk, make the world in my own image. We are returned to ‘thinking in values’ in Heidegger’s pejorative sense.

Brewer’s objection to this conception of human agency is that it leaves no room for the ideals and values which orientate our projects, and our ongoing attraction to which gives our lives a unity and narrative as we struggle to bring these values into view and to embody them. This talk of attraction is familiar, and Brewer describes it likewise as a species of desire – one whose content involves ‘an inchoate picture of some species or aspect of goodness’ (Brewer (2006), 272). He takes

such desire to be presupposed in our more 'production-oriented' desires, and that without it they would be unintelligible.³² The further claim – implicit in the idea that we are embarked upon a path in this context – is that desire thus understood is to be comprehended in dynamic terms. Thus understood, it is the ever-present and unifying backdrop to our lives and projects as they unfold in their various ways. Brewer traces this approach back to the Platonist, Neo-Platonist, and Christian mystical tradition – a tradition in which 'the human encounter with Goodness or God is not a passionless intellectual exercise but rather the responsiveness of reason to something that mightily attracts it' (*ibid.*, 276).

It is familiar from Heidegger and (more explicitly) Levinas that desire takes the subject outside herself – the movement is 'ecstatic' in this sense – and this leads Brewer to expose a further defect of the propositional account. This is what he says in the context of discussing the position of the fourth century Platonist Gregory of Nyssa:

If the love of the Good, or of God, is mistaken for the desire that one be good, or possess the good, or be worthy of the love of God, this would be tantamount to reversing the 'direction of gaze' of the desire. What presents itself as an attraction to something *other*, longing for which might have the *indirect effect* on the desirer of making the desirer good, is misconstrued as a desire for its own indirect effect. This cannot be the desire in question, since one could have any one of these self-oriented propositional desires (i.e. that one be good, or possess the good, or be worthy of the love of God) without feeling the overwhelming and unmediated attraction to the good, or God, that Gregory is trying to characterise. (*ibid.*, 274)

Religious experience

We have a conception of desire which calls into question some existing paradigms and assumptions and which deserves to be taken seriously. The positions used to illustrate this conception can be distinguished, and we are in a position now to clarify these distinctions in the context of tackling head on the questions which have been beckoning, namely, what is the nature of the relation between desire thus understood and experience? What does it mean to describe this experience as religious? And in what sense, if any, is it unmediated?

Levinas uses the term 'experience' to capture the idea that the relevant state of mind involves being open to something in external reality, and he uses the term 'cognition' to similar effect. This is perfectly reasonable, although there is a question of how this spatial language is to be interpreted.³³ The relation between experience and desire seems more complex. After all, we are not used to thinking of desire as a cognitive or an experiential state, schooled as we are on the assumption that it stands opposed to such things. This assumption has been questioned, but it lurks in what seems to be an obvious objection to the position at hand, namely, that the correct way of comprehending the relation between experience and desire is to say that desire is a *consequence* of the experience, when, for example, my attraction to goodness makes me want to do good things.³⁴ It is

certainly true that I can be motivated in this manner, but the objection involves a failure to distinguish between the desires which are operative in this latter context, and those expressed when we feel the relevant attraction. On the position at issue, feeling the relevant attraction is just what it *is* to have the desire – one whose content involves this kind of attraction, and which can motivate other desires, such as, for example, the desire to be a virtuous person. This is not to deny – as per the above quotation – that this latter desire can exist without such attraction, and it makes sense to suppose also that the motivation can go in the other direction – that wanting to be virtuous can augment a desire-involving attraction to the good.³⁵

Heidegger's account mentions neither morality nor God, but his inspiration is the *Gott-betrunkene* Eckhart; he insists that we are on a pilgrimage here, and his antipathy to 'thinking in values' is determined to a large extent by the crude instrumentalist framework he associates with it. Should a properly religious experience be articulated with reference to God? Perhaps not. Should it involve God? The conditions for involvement are unclear. Should it involve morality? The connection between God and good seems clear, but it seems contentious to say that religious experience is reducible to moral experience, or indeed, that I can relate to God only by standing in moral relations to others.

When Levinas makes this latter claim it is in the context of denying that the infinite is 'in front of me' so as to allow instead that 'it is I who express it'. His point here is that the infinite – i.e. God – cannot be reduced to a represented object, and that engaging with God requires that one partakes in His goodness. What of the 'overwhelming and unmediated attraction to the good' which is so important to Brewer's account? Is Levinas discounting such experience? And what are we to make of Anselm Min's insistence that, for Levinas, '[t]here is no unmediated, direct access to the Good', that 'we can move to the Good only by going through the movement to the other' (Min (2006), 102)?

Our openness to God would be mediated in a sense which precludes openness if there were some mediating item between self and God which imposes an insurmountable gap between the two (compare the claim that ideas or sense-data mediate our experience of things), or if our mode of relating to God – in this case, desire – involved distortion rather than revelation. Mediation in these senses is not to be confused with the kind which is compatible with openness, and indeed, a condition upon its possibility (compare: a perceptual apparatus is that without which we would be unable to perceive things). Understood in this latter way, mediation offers a route to God, and according to the position at hand, this route is to be found at the level of desire, desire being that which reveals God and which moves us towards Him. On this picture then, God is *what* we desire, and God is expressed *in* our desire – 'it is I who express [the infinite]'.

If God is expressed in our desire, and we are capable of partaking in this movement, then we are open to Him in this respect, and our attraction counts as

unmediated in this sense. Now it is fundamental to Levinas's account that there is a distinction between self and God, the first of these terms guaranteeing that *we* do God's work, and the second that the desire in which we partake is infinite and hence inexhaustible. So attraction is mediated to this degree at least, and given that God cannot be represented to ourselves, then it cannot be modelled on attraction to such an object. Rather, the appropriate model is the desire-involving trajectory in which we are caught up – one which turns us in a moral direction given that the desire at issue here is God's self-giving and outpouring love. On this way of thinking then, I am only truly attracted to God when I am caught up in this movement. It is in this context that I 'express the infinite'.

It would be absurd to say that being good to others imposes an interface between self and goodness, and it is therefore unclear what we are to make of Min's claim that our relation to Good is indirect if we can move to it 'only by going through the movement to the other'. But what of our relation to God? It is a familiar enough thought that God is veiled from our sight, and it would be an obvious extension of this idea that we can relate to Him only indirectly, e.g. through our moral relations with others. But if God just *is* the movement which directs us towards the other, then it makes no sense to say that our relation to Him in this context is indirect. It would be like saying that our relation to necessity is indirect because it involves reference to causally related objects. Does this not compromise the idea that God is veiled from our sight? Well the emphasis here could be that God is veiled from our *sight*, taking us beyond a sensory perceptual model. Alternatively, it could be a way of insisting that revelation and hiddenness are inseparable in our encounter with God, and hence, that the relevant apophatic dimension must be accommodated from within the very experience of desire.³⁶ This does not mean that God's real essence transcends the life of desire, but it does allow us to say that, even at this level of interaction, there are limits, one fundamental limit coming from the fact that we are distinct from God, and human all too human in one clear enough sense – 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways' (Isaiah 55:8).

Disjunctivism, again

I have presented a model in terms of which to comprehend what it could mean for a subject to stand in an unmediated experiential relation to God, given that God is not present in the world in the way that physical things are present, and given that there is a sense in which He is present nonetheless. Thus understood, God is experienced in desire, desire involving an attraction which has its source in God and which sets the subject on a journey towards Him. I have noted that Levinas lends emphasis to the moral dimension of this journey, and he is adamant that this is the *only* way of giving authentic expression to such desire.

The atheist has ample room for rejecting such an account given the nature of the case. So, for example, she can deny that there is any such thing as desire thus

understood, lending justice to this denial by noting that there are disagreements about its nature, and that its supposedly theistic dimension can be disputed. According to the most extreme version of this response, desire is wholly and adequately comprehended in appetitive and/or propositional terms. Alternatively, and more plausibly, the atheist can concede that there is more to desire than this, whilst denying that it has anything to do with God. This is one way of interpreting Heidegger's position, although *his* real target seems to be a certain kind of theology, and, more generally, any approach which stands in the way of what is truly valuable. The position of the secular moral realist can be similarly interpreted, albeit minus the mystical overtones which pervade Heidegger's account, and with a greater attunement to Levinas given the focus upon morality.

The obvious reason for denying that desire has anything to do with God is that God is not a clearly identifiable ingredient in desire, but the theist's familiar response is that any such ingredient would not be God. The sensible atheist will concede this point. She can insist, however, that there is nothing within the trajectory of desire which invites or demands a theistic interpretation, and that what really matters, namely, our attraction to value, can be described in entirely non-theistic terms. The assumption here is that God is irrelevant to desire, and hence, that there is a desire/God interface.

Such a putative response by the atheist is reminiscent of the experience/world interface which is presupposed by one who resists direct realism in a perceptual context, and I want now to return to the parallel I have sought to defend and push it even further by suggesting the possibility of a disjunctivist style response to scepticism about religious experience. We have seen that there is a question to be raised about what motivates the imposition of an interface between experience and world, and whether it is justified. The point in its favour is that there are hallucinations which are subjectively indiscernible from veridical experience, and it is concluded on this basis that there is no difference between the two cases, and hence, that there is no more to experience than what we have at the level of hallucination. But the direct realist denies that it follows from this that the two experiences *are* the same, and defends this stance by offering a disjunctivist analysis of the relevant difference – one which grants us the right to deny that there is an experience/world interface.

Now given that God is conspicuous by His absence in one clear enough sense, it is easy enough to say of any desire which purports to involve Him that it seems no different from one that does not, and to conclude on this basis that it does not involve God. This is the decisive move, and it is analogous to that which is made by one who trades upon the case of hallucination to conclude that experience does not involve things. That is to say that in both cases we have a state of mind which is supposedly compatible with openness, whilst also appearing to be indiscernible from one which is not. Direct realism in a theistic context grants us the right to say that desire can be God-involving, and the essence of a disjunctive strategy here is to challenge the sceptic's reasoning from

indistinguishability between a veridical and non-veridical experience of God to a denial that any experience of God is real.

It is granted therefore that desire can be God-involving, and that God's presence can seem like a form of absence. The justification for permitting such a move here is that God is not present in the manner of ordinary things.

Does it follow that there is unmediated openness to God? Of course not if this is tantamount to saying that God's existence has been established. What we can say, however, is that there is a case for saying that such openness exists at the level of desire, and that the atheist's objections in this context are open to question. I leave for another occasion the further important questions which can and should be addressed to this interpretation.³⁷

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Notes

1. There is a question of whether it wouldn't be better to talk of religious experience being 'intertwined' with desire rather than saying that it just *is* a species of desire. It will become clear that there are good reasons for preferring this second formulation, but it wouldn't affect the overall argument if the first mode of expression was used.
2. See McDowell (1998b).
3. Haddock & MacPherson (2008), 22. See also Dorsch (2011), 314.
4. I take inspiration here from what Moses Maimonides says of the frequent talk of our 'approaching' and 'touching' God as it occurs in the Scriptures. He claims that this spatial language must be interpreted metaphorically to mean cognitive proximity – an “approach by means of knowledge,” or “contact by comprehension,” not in reference to space’. This for the reason that God ‘is incorporeal, and consequently He does not approach or draw near a thing, nor can aught approach or touch Him’ (Maimonides (1928), 27–28). I shall be suggesting then that this spatial language refers to a mode of cognition in which the object is directly revealed – which is exactly how Levinas conceives of desire.
5. McDowell (1998b), 392.

6. I thank Merold Westphal for encouraging me to clarify this point.
7. The traditional line on religious experience in analytic philosophy of religion is familiar from the work of William P. Alston (1991) and Richard Swinburne (1979). Swinburne is committed to rejecting my own preferred externalist conception of religious experience, describing the relevant experiences as 'private' and 'internal' (Swinburne (1979), 244–245). Alston, by contrast, is a direct realist about experience, and grants the possibility of there being direct experience of God (Alston (1991), 4). He does not, however, defend direct realism in disjunctivist terms, and he operates with a conception of divine experience which, in his 1991 work, is very different from my own. He announces there that his topic is 'the function of the experience of God in providing information about God and our relations to Him' (*ibid.*, 2), and he distinguishes the epistemic value of such experience from its religious value, namely, that it enables us to enter into personal relationship with God (*ibid.*, 2). It is the latter focus with which I am concerned, and which will explain why the notion of desire is so important to my account. Alston concedes something to the focus I am adopting, and this concession becomes more visible in his second Taylor Lecture where the discussion centres upon the discipline of 'contemplative prayer'. Sarah Coakley (2009, 280–311) takes issue with Alston and Swinburne on some of these scores.
8. Zahavi (2016), 91.
9. These philosophers have sought to defend the idea that our response to value is both cognitive and affective, albeit minus the implication that the cognitive and the appetitive are 'distinct existences' – as if 'a state that presents itself as cognitive but entails an appetitive state must be, after all, only impurely cognitive, and contain the appetitive as a part' (McDowell (1998a), 82). Similar positions are to be found in Griffin (1996) and Wiggins (1998). Wiggins claims explicitly that desire is that by virtue of which we engage with goodness. As he puts it: 'such desiring by human beings directed in this way is one part of what is required for there to be such a thing as the *perspective* [my italics] from which the non-instrumental goodness of *x* is there to be perceived' (Wiggins (1998), 106). Desire comes in at the epistemological level in Wiggins's account, and it performs a similar epistemological role in the present Levinasian context. There is a metaphysical claim lurking in the position, namely, that God Himself *is* desire. My focus in this article is upon the epistemological claim, and I do not argue for the metaphysical claim here, although it will surface at various points. The idea that God is desire is familiar from the mystical tradition, one figure from which – Eckhart – will be important to my discussion.
10. For more on this see Ellis (2014), chs 3 & 6.
11. McDowell (1998a), 386 n. 31.
12. This is an important point given that the typical opponent of disjunctivism agrees that we should be avoiding reference to mediating entities like sense data or ideas. Compare Overgaard (2011, 14): 'The important thing is not whether a theory posits intermediate entities, but whether it makes room for objects and facts in the external environment being directly available to experience'.
13. See Hinton (1967), 226; and (1973).
14. Hinton (1967, 226) objects that 'it is no more allowable to twist subjectively indistinguishable events into indistinguishable subjective events than to twist subjectively indistinguishable girls into indistinguishable subjective girls'.
15. McDowell (1998a), 392.
16. McDowell (2008), 381.
17. *Ibid.*, 378.
18. McDowell (1998c), 241.
19. McDowell (1998a), 385–387. This is not to deny that the anti-disjunctivist has room for manoeuvre. She can say, for example, that experience indirectly informs us about how things are in external reality ('external' in the aforementioned problematic sense), or she can purport to close this problematic gap by rejecting its second term and building up to a notion of external reality from purely phenomenalist resources. See Overgaard (2011, 12). The disjunctivist will point to the sceptical difficulties thrown up by these responses, question the assumption that the framework which dictates them is mandatory, and insist that *she* has a way of avoiding them.
20. Heidegger (1962), 249.
21. Hence John 1:18: 'No one has seen God at any time'. Of course, the matter is rather more complex – hence my caveat. Thus, we are told at Exodus 33:20 that God's face cannot be seen, but it is then added that we shall see God's back (Exodus 33:23).

22. Hence Paul Moser's apt riposte: 'Insufficient for *what?* For Russell's highly questionable expectations of God' (Moser (2008), 37).
23. Zangwill (2004, 3) argues that religious perceptual experience is impossible on the ground that God cannot be reduced to something within the world. Compare Sarah Coakley: 'God, being God, is unlike *any* Other, and thus by definition is not to be "perceived" in a way straightforwardly akin to any other item in the universe (which is his own creation, after all).' (Coakley (2009), 306). Coakley footnotes the 'persistent biblical reminders of the mortal danger, if not impossibility, of seeing God face to face' (*ibid.*, n. 77).
24. Jean-Luc Marion is a key player in this dialectic, and the relevant ideas are to be found in Marion (1998) and (2002). I shall be using the example of Emmanuel Levinas in due course. Westphal (2006) provides an excellent summary and discussion of the relevant ideas. Zahavi (2003, ch. 2) offers a compelling account of Husserl's position. On his interpretation, Husserl is a realist, and the notion of constitution has nothing to do with creating or distorting things.
25. See, for example, Heidegger (1969), 71–72, where the notion of 'onto-theology' is introduced and criticized; see also Heidegger (1978). I discuss Heidegger's criticisms of onto-theology in Ellis (2014), ch. 5, and conclude tentatively that his criticisms are more properly understood to be directed at faulty conceptions of God, theism, and theology. For an attempt to narrow the distance between Heidegger and theology see Wolfe (2013).
26. Compare:

[I]n the name of 'being-in-the-world', 'world' does not in any way imply earthly as opposed to heavenly being, nor the 'worldly' as opposed to the 'spiritual'. For us 'world' does not at all signify beings or any realm of beings but the openness of Being. Man is, and is man, insofar as he is the ek-sisting one. He stands out into the openness of Being. Being itself . . . is as this openness. (Heidegger (1978), 252).

27. This focus is reflected in the full title of his first major work (Levinas (1969)): *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*.
28. Hampton (1992, 333–353) gives an excellent account of the motivations behind this way of thinking, and Smith (1994) offers a sophisticated defence of a Neo-Humean picture. For objections see McDowell (1998b, 82–83), Goldstick (2006, 153–160), and Brewer (2009, esp. 16–19, 13–26).
29. See McDowell (1998b), 82–83.
30. See Alvarez (2010, ch. 3) and Platts (1991, pt I) for an overview of these kinds of desires and the distinction and relation between them. Crane (2001) offers some good reasons for rejecting the understanding of mental states as propositional attitudes in general.
31. See Brewer (2006) and (2009), ch. 1.
32. Hence:

The main point here is that there is a little-noticed difference between being drawn to an intrinsically valuable activity out of appreciation for it – that is, being appealed to by the activity, finding it appealing – and being inclined to bring it about that one engages in the activity (or even that one engage in the activity while finding it appealing). There is a phenomenological dimension to finding an activity appealing that need not be present in a desire that one engage in the activity. The propositionalist can capture this phenomenological element only as an additional modification of the propositionally specified state of affairs that one desires to bring about and not as part of the phenomenological character of certain desires themselves. Yes this phenomenological element is often essential to the rationalizing explanation of what might otherwise be a pointless and obsessive effort to alter the world so that it answers to a proposition of the form 'I engage in activity X'. (Brewer (2009), 45–46)

33. I suggested previously that we interpret it in terms of cognitive proximity (note 4). This accords with Levinas's cognitive framework, although there is a complication given his additional claim that we relate to God only by standing in moral relations to others. The complication is that we stand in spatial relations to others, although Levinas would be quick to point out that the theistic significance of this relation introduces a dimension which cannot be wholly captured in spatial terms.

34. Wright (1988, 11) expresses a structurally similar objection in the context of criticizing the idea that value is perceived, objecting that any affective response in this context is to be viewed as a consequence of the perception rather than being intrinsic to it.
35. I have used a moral example to illustrate the point at hand, and it is notable that a version of the position can be read into the work of some of the moral philosophers I mentioned previously. Thus, David Wiggins, in the context of elucidating the notion of a motivating moral thought, identifies it with the state of 'valuing x as having value v ' (Wiggins (1990–1991), 83). He grants that a thought along these lines can elicit desire – a desire to act in a particular way – and that it must operate 'from the right *general* basis of affect (desire etc)' (*ibid.*, 83). However, he is more inclined to describe it as a state of *belief*, insisting nonetheless that it be 'the right sort of belief with the right sort of content' (*ibid.*, 81). The cognitive dimension of the state is familiar from Heidegger and Levinas, and Wiggins's insistence that we treat it as the right sort of belief is intended to guarantee that its motivating force be accommodated – it is a motivating belief in this respect, and to be distinguished from those ('mere beliefs') which are motivationally inert. Brewer is reluctant to make this move on the ground that desire and practical judgement can be in conflict – when, for example, we are attracted to something we judge to be morally dubious, or believe something to be good whilst being indifferent to it. The second case is covered with the claim that not all beliefs are motivating, although there is a question of what philosophical difference it makes to describe the matter in these belief-involving terms rather than insisting that desire is what makes the difference. Very little perhaps if 'desire' in this context already incorporates a cognitive dimension, and Brewer himself grants the close connection between desire and judgement, understandably so given that they both occupy the space of moral reasoning (Brewer (2009), 29). Being attracted to something we judge to be morally dubious offers a more persuasive reason for distinguishing desire from belief, and there are independent reasons for taking the distinction seriously if there is a level of such attraction whose content is not clearly articulable, and which, at the limit, is wholly ineffable.
36. Williams (2002) offers a brilliant discussion of how this aim might be met.
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