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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Desire, dissatisfaction, dispersal: The oddness of desiring God

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Abstract

An account of human subjectivity is built up from an analysis of the fundamental human desire for God. In conversation with Karl Rahner and Blaise Pascal, it is argued that this desire does not have any conceivable conditions of satisfiability. This leads to an account of human beings as fundamentally distractible, fragmented, opaque to themselves and non-self-identical; however, none of these are viewed as essentially problematic, arising instead out of the basic human–God relation rather than from a fallen condition. A range of implications for ethics and social criticism are briefly suggested.

Keywords: desire; fragmentation; Karl Rahner; Kathryn Tanner; Blaise Pascal; theological anthropology

In *Christ the Key*, Kathryn Tanner argues that if humans are to share in God's own life, then humans must be a strange sort of creature.[1] One can infer backwards, that is, from the sort of relationship in which humans stand to God to certain qualities of human nature. A sense of the strangeness of this relationship pervades the argument: the peculiar way humans may be united to God leads Tanner to infer correspondingly peculiar characteristics of humans.

In this paper, I make a parallel argument from the oddness involved in desiring God (compared to any 'normal' object of human desire) to correspondingly odd characteristics of human subjectivity. If human consciousness is fundamentally shaped by its orientation towards God, then what should we expect the first-personal experience of that consciousness to be like? Where Tanner's argument leads to an account of the plasticity, malleability and incomprehensibility of human nature, the description here emphasises incoherence, dissatisfaction, distractibility and fragmentation.[2]

[1]Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), ch.1 (see, e.g., pp. viii, 28, 37).

[2]For Tanner, the argument hinges on the way that human beings are supposed to be radically reworked through their attachment to God, implying that they must have some capacity to become other than what they are (*Christ the Key*, pp. 39–41). Like Tanner, I assume a strong view of theosis ('sharing God's own life'

These qualities, I claim, should be understood as intrinsic to human subjectivity – and not to be merely effects of sin or contingent on the particular forms of finitude and embodiment humans experience now. This argument would give us the strongest reasons possible to resist spiritual fantasies of self-identity and self-presence.

Humans cannot help but desire God as we would any other object of desire: as a particular object of attention and love (for example, in practices of religious devotion). As a corollary, every other object of desire must not be what we most deeply desire, and so our relationship to these objects must be tinged with dissatisfaction. On the other hand, God is fundamentally unlike any other object of desire, precisely in not being a finite object at all. God is not simply a better, more desirable or more comprehensive version of another object. Not only does the infinite desirability of God not imply the straightforwardly undesirable character of finite objects, but in some cases, the desirability of God can be mediated through the desirability of finite objects. And because God is not just another object, God is also not to be found in any particular place we might turn our attention; God is always more, always beyond, and even, to push the spatial metaphor, always *elsewhere,* from the perspective of finite human attention. Satisfying the human desire for God thus cannot be a matter of simply looking in the right place, or even somehow of looking in all places at once and acquiring some mystical view of the whole that comprehends all things in God. The desire for God does not admit of the prospect of closure in this way.

So God 'competes' (due to the requirements of religious practice and the finitude of human attention) with other desiderata enough to give all finite desire a tinge of dissatisfaction, but not so much (due to the nature of divine transcendence) as either to offer alternative means of satisfaction and self-return or to imply that we can simply turn away from finite desire. Instead, I contend that the result of the basic human desire for God is a constant tendency towards the splitting of the attention, which is always directed simultaneously towards God and towards objects; an experience of movement within spaces marked by ambivalence; and a resulting dispersal of the desiring self.[3] The human subject is theorised not just as constitutively in motion, but also as tending towards dissatisfaction, dispersal and fragmentation. Conversely, these experiences of dispersal and fragmentation are re-conceived as part of the basic human Godward orientation. One need not be saved from these experiences in each case, as if they were always and only symptoms of the fall; perhaps, indeed, they persist in some form as valences of an eternal progress into God.[4]

and not just 'a created version'); however, since I'm interested in phenomenology (which Tanner does not spend much time on), I am not especially concerned with the nature-grace relations central to what she is doing there.

[3]Contemporary discourse on attention is most popularly associated with the effects of technology and social media. The term 'attention economy' originates with Michael H. Goldhaber, 'The Attention Economy on the Net', *First Monday,* 2/4 (1997), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519. For a more recent treatment stressing resistance to this sort of attention fragmentation, see James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018). More generally, discourse around a non-unitary self has been characteristic of modernity in various ways at least since Nietzsche; see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 462–3. Recent theological work on attention has tended to focus on its moral and contemplative dimensions; for example, Rowan Williams, 'Attending to Attention', *Zygon* 58/4 (2023), pp. 1099–111, https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12920.

[4]The classic text for eternal progress is Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* 2.219–2.277, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 111–125. I do not suggest that Nyssa would support the description of dissatisfaction and fragmentation given here.

The position espoused here can be contrasted with two alternative views on the relationship between desiring God and desiring creatures. On the one hand, perhaps some stability can be found inasmuch as God can be loved in and through finite things; in cases like these, the attention need not be split and the human need not be fragmented (think of perceiving God's beauty in a sunset). On the other hand, perhaps instability and fragmentation are indeed inevitable, but they are the consequences of sin rather than qualities of human nature per se. In each case, an interlocutor would suggest that I am making a category mistake of sorts, blurring some conceptual line that leads to this confused account of human subjectivity. From the one side, I would be viewed as improperly assuming that possessing God would be much like possessing any other object. From the other side, I would be viewed as forgetting that our current separation from God is not morally neutral and that our failure to constantly abide in God is simply the fact of human sin.

I will respond to these objections in more detail in the course of developing my own position. For now, I want only to note that each of these views involve taking a particular approach to certain problems raised by Augustine's *Confessions* – in particular, by the interplay of theological and experiential-pastoral concerns in that work. The first position, for instance, objects to Augustine's tendency to direct our attention away from creatures towards the creator, as if the two could be exclusive.[5] Augustine got the participatory metaphysics more or less correct, the argument would go, but his contemplative imagination seems to have failed him here. The second position reads Augustinian restlessness as a result of human estrangement from God; Augustine's heart rests in God when he converts to the Christian faith, making allowances for the continuing effects of sin in his life.

Naturally, each of these readings of Augustine is contestable. Regarding the first, perhaps Augustine's worries about idolatry are practically rather than metaphysically determined, and they are not so much the result of a troubled scrupulosity as of Augustine's attention to the functioning of the worshipping mind. The attention seems to want to dwell on God as it dwells on other things, as a particular object of devotion and love in religious worship, and not simply as the abstract exemplar of the sunset's beauty – hence the need for attention to be channeled one way or the other.[6] As for the latter objection, Rowan Williams has argued that Augustine does not simply find the 'rest' he suggests humans are looking for in the act of conversion, but continues to wrestle through the ways human life is plagued by a lack of clarity, finality and resolution.[7] For Williams, the *Confessions* shows how 'The questioning self itself is also unknowable and uncontainable', 'not a determinate, fully self-present substance whose needs and desires can be catalogued and negotiated with finality', but rather 'incomplete and temporal, formed in loss and absence' – and that this is simply to describe the human condition of dependence on God.[8]

[5]See for instance the argument in John Hare, *Unity and the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 2023), p. 25.

[6]For example, 'If sensuous beauty delights you, praise God for the beauty of corporeal things, and channel the love you feel for them onto their Maker, lest the things that please you lead you to displease Him'. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.12.18, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 2012), p. 103.

[7]Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), p. 3.

[8]Ibid., pp. 4, 6–7.

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If I may be permitted a third comparison, Kierkegaard's account of the tensions internal to human subjectivity in *The Concept of Anxiety* is also a helpful touchpoint.[9] Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is the way in which spirit 'relate[s] itself to itself and to its conditionality', especially seeing as spirit cannot 'lay hold of itself' 'as long as it has itself outside of itself'.[10] Since Kierkegaard argues elsewhere that the human spirit is unable 'to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation',[11] anxiety can be taken as a corollary of the ontological human orientation towards God. Although Kierkegaard's account uses the language of fear, which I do not, his phenomenological description of anxiety nevertheless overlaps considerably with what I mean by fragmentation and dispersal, as anxiety involves an energetic ambivalence towards finite objects ('*a sympathetic antipathy* and *an antipathetic sympathy*', where the object is often both loved and feared) and a feeling of being outside oneself that leads to 'dizziness' and uncertainty.[12] Moreover, anxiety is for Kierkegaard not sin yet, but a psychological state that makes sin possible – though sin's actuality is still a qualitative leap beyond anxiety.[13] Similarly, I will argue below that sin can be understood as a problematic response to the state (which is, while uncomfortable, not intrinsically problematic) of fragmentation and dispersal: one that clutches idolatrously at finite objects in an attempt to steady itself.[14]

For Kierkegaard, anxiety can be 'through faith absolutely educative, because it consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness'; it can thus bring one to 'rest in providence'.[15] The tension produced in the subject by anxiety is edifying and pushes one towards God by pushing them away from finite things; the 'infinite' educative power of anxiety stems from the infinitude of possibility and the way anxiety (rightly used) 'torments everything finite and petty out of' one.[16] In these particular passages, infinity primarily plays the role of exhausting and negating the finite, whereas my account qualifies this negative moment more immediately than Kierkegaard does here with the language of non-competition and analogy (and so I take myself to be a bit more optimistic – perhaps naïvely so! – than Kierkegaard that God can be loved in and through creatures). Phenomenologically, this means that Kierkegaard holds out the possibility, or at least the regulative ideal, of turning from anxiety to rest, even if he never quite says that the believer will stop being anxious (perhaps, after all, one never ceases learning 'to be anxious in the right way'[17]). My account, on the other hand, is designed to question just this paradigm of turning from one thing to another; it views fragmentation and dispersal as necessarily internal to any understanding of what 'rest' in God might be

[9]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin,* ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the fecundity of this comparison and to John Hare for a very helpful conversation on the interpretation of Kierkegaard.

[10]Ibid., p. 44.

[11]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 14.

[12]Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, pp. 42, 61.

[13]Ibid., pp. 21–22, 41.

[14]Compare Kierkegaard's language of "laying hold of finiteness to support itself," in ibid, p. 61.

[15]Ibid., pp. 155, 161.

[16]Ibid., p. 159.

[17]Ibid., p. 155.

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like and not just as a necessary complement to or motor towards such rest. It is desiring God *per se*, and not simply the dizzying effect of tarrying with creaturely possibilities, that fragments and disperses the human subject.

By distinguishing these archetypal positions in this way, I hope, first, to simply increase the available space of possible solutions to the theological questions at play here. The account here is about as optimistic a view of distraction and fragmentation as is possible (and conversely, as skeptical as possible about rest, self-identity and coherence). Second, I want to situate my arguments at this intersection of theological and experiential concerns; I hope that any conceptual tensions I seem to introduce are not only theologically motivated but practically and pastorally generative. Third, by noting the ongoing Augustinian debates, I want to highlight the complex and recurring nature of the anthropological questions involved and gesture towards the sorts of debates that this project could be related to.[18]

I now want to offer a constructive account that maximally dramatises the tension produced by this dual orientation and describes the implied experiential condition of the human subject. I will develop this account in dialogue with Karl Rahner and Blaise Pascal, both of whom may be considered idiosyncratic, one-sided, or even inconsistent on some of the points under review. I argue, however, that these idiosyncrasies stem not from the foibles of the individual authors but from the rich and deeply lodged nature of the question. In particular, the 'problem' is not an artifact of their idiosyncratic metaphysical systems; for Augustine, these tensions emerge in the most basic practices of his Christian life, in dialogue with fundamental commitments about the nature of God and the prohibition on idolatry. The experience of dissatisfaction and dispersal is not so easily explained away.

Mediation and movement

To build this account, I want to start with Rahner's description of the *Vorgriff* and the analogy of being in *Hearer of the Word*. Rahner argues that, in order to know any particular object, one must know it as determined in its whatness; that is, as a being that is *limited* in certain ways.[19] This limitation, Rahner thinks, must be perceived by way of a contrast, which suggests the simultaneous implicit perception of a limitlessness that is the horizon of infinite being.[20] All knowledge thus takes place against this horizon.

[18]Probably the most interesting current debate to compare the present argument with is that concerning the Christologies of Rowan Williams and Ian McFarland, where an interest in metaphysical non-competition is thought by some to keep God from interacting with this world in desirable ways. See Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018); Ian McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019); and the responses in Christopher A. Beeley, 'Christological Non-Competition and the Return to Chalcedon: A Response to Rowan Williams and Ian McFarland', in *Modern Theology* 38/3 (2022), pp. 592–617, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12763; and Katherine Sonderegger, 'Christ as Infinite and Finite: Rowan Williams' *Christ the Heart of Creation*', in *Pro Ecclesia* 30/1 (2021), pp. 98–113, https://doi.org/10.1177/1063851220954433.

[19]Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word,* trans. Joseph Donceel, ed. Andrew Tallon (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 45–49.

[20]Karen Kilby has suggested that Rahner's argument for the *Vorgriff* is either circular or equivocal in its use of the idea of limitation (Karen Kilby, *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* [New York: Routledge, 2004], pp. 29–31). Since I am interested in what she calls the 'non-foundationalist' Rahner, I don't believe this issue poses a problem for my use of the *Vorgriff* idea.

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The ability to simultaneously perceive both the object and (prethematically) the horizon is explained by the *Vorgriff,* which is 'the dynamic movement of the spirit toward the absolute range of all possible object [sic]'.[21] By constantly moving beyond the object towards the horizon, both object and horizon are kept simultaneously in view. And since for Rahner, God is absolute being, the *Vorgriff* reflects the fundamental human movement towards God.

Three properties of this *Vorgriff* in particular concern us: first, it is a sort of movement towards something (the horizon); second, its '"whither" ... cannot be an object of the same kind as the one whose abstraction and objective knowledge make it possible';[22] and third, it always and only attends the knowledge of a finite object, rather than being an independent faculty with its own significance or end.[23] In other words, Rahner explains the basic human orientation towards God by fundamentally refusing to treat God as one particular object of attention among other such objects. Just for this reason, the orientation to God does not conflict with an orientation towards finite things, but rather is mediated by this orientation. Rahner's particular model of the *Vorgriff* thus illustrates a fundamental tradeoff remarked on earlier: that God does not compete with finite objects in terms of desirability precisely to the extent that it is impossible for God to become a particular object of attention.

Rahner highlights this impermeable boundary between horizon and object in a number of ways.[24] He strenuously denies that the *Vorgriff* can simply be directed at the horizon itself, without the mediation of a finite object – denies, in other words, that one could infer the possibility of the beatific vision from the *Vorgriff* itself.[25] The horizon cannot be converted into an object for attention in any straightforward way. Instead, the division between horizon and object is sharp enough that one could adopt radically different attitudes towards the same metaphysical object when viewed alternately as an object or as a horizon, a possibility Rahner explores in his discussion of human willing. He takes love for oneself and for God to be transcendental conditions of all willing. This is because any willing involves a minimal affirmation of the finite, and the affirmation of the finite in its contingency is also the affirmation of the finite's source in absolute being.[26] However, empirically we see that people sometimes hate God or themselves, when these are considered as thematised objects of attention. Rahner writes that, even in the case of such hatred, nevertheless '... implicitly we continue to affirm ourselves and the absolute value [God] as the conditions of the possibility of our negative attitude with respect to our own existence and to the absolute value. As *objects* they are not the conditions of possibility and that is why we can be free with respect to them'.[27] That is, from the perspective of finite human attention, God-qua-object and God-qua-horizon are different objects, towards which we may take different stances, even though metaphysically they are identical. And there can be no constraining inference from one qua-object to its counterpart.

[21]Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, p. 47.

[22]Ibid., p. 48.

[23]Ibid., pp. 48, 63.

[24]The distinction is not absolute, as the discussion of the way any decision reflects upon one's relation to the absolute value shows. Perhaps, then, revelation can be identified as such by the way in which it seems to open one to absolute being. However, this still proves the relative and ambiguous relationship that any particular revelation must have to the human openness for revelation.

[25]Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, pp. 62–63.

[26]Ibid., pp. 68–70, 81–82.

[27]Ibid., p. 85.

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Rahner develops the idea of the *Vorgriff* to explain humanity's intrinsic openness to revelation. This openness corresponds to the pre-thematic limitlessness of the horizon. However, any divine revelation, especially any divine revelation that happens in history or attached to specific religious practices, will involve a particular thematisable object of human attention. The non-identity and incommensurability of God-qua-object and God-qua-horizon thus creates a problem of fit between openness and revelation. No object can correspond unequivocally to the horizon, and so the question asked by human nature exceeds any possible answer. Human nature is in a posture of listening in such a way as to relativise any possible response – and so makes it impossible to be sure that it heard what it was looking for. While Rahner denies that this leaves humanity fundamentally dissatisfied, he still sets us in motion without providing a possible place to land.[28] Will not the movement of the human being beyond all concrete objects towards the horizon also mean 'transcending' the concrete data of revelation themselves? Might the religious consciousness find itself in the odd position of trying to move beyond God (as thematised object) to find God (as unthematisable horizon)?[29]

Rahner thus shows how a fairly standard view of the analogy of being and the natural orientation of human beings towards God can develop into a position where the human subject is constitutively in motion and stripped of all prospects for closure. One might even say that a consciousness oriented towards God is, in a sense, *aimless*, at least for any sense of aim recognisable to the human faculties that are trained by their interactions with finite creatures. Among these, God can, in some sense, be found anywhere, known and loved in and through each of God's creatures – but God also cannot be found anywhere, at least under the description by which humans most deeply desire God. Even when, say, in a moment of gratitude or wonder, one feels that they can love God in and through God's creatures, when God's beauty seems directly present in a sunset or in the love of another human being – the *Vorgriff* itself destabilises any such identification, contrasting any this-ness of the experience with the movement towards the pure horizon. It is thus not just sin, weakness or embodiment, therefore, that limit moments of mystical experience, but the desire for God itself. The anxiety, the raw waiting, the lack of clarity and of self-presence that characterise Christian experience in some of Rahner's spiritual writings can be read as following from just this phenomenon.[30] The Godward orientation of the human faculties, while perhaps 'natural', is also the root of much of their strangeness and instability.

Dissatisfaction, distraction and sin

This strangeness and instability of the human Godward movement is described by Pascal with particular vividness. Though Pascal attributes these dynamics to human sinfulness rather than to the nature of desire for God, I suggest that his accounts of God's

[28]Note that Kilby argues that Rahner is inconsistent exactly here: by suggesting that the *Vorgriff* is not a desire that can be left unsatisfied, Rahner ties the idea to a position on the separability of considerations of nature and grace that his later work on the supernatural existential is to reject. Kilby, *Karl Rahner*, pp. 60, 67–69.

[29]Compare the words of Meister Eckhart: 'Therefore I pray to God that he may make me free of "God"', from 'Sermon 52', in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense,* trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 20. One possible rendering of my position might be that something like mystical apophaticism structures all human desires, rather than being only a particular or highest stage on a certain kind of spiritual path.

[30]For example, Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence,* trans. James M. Demske, S.J. (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), p. 24.

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infinity and finite desire are sufficient to explain them and problematise his own view of the possibility of Christian satisfaction. Pascal's account in fact helps show how dissatisfaction, distraction and fragmentation cannot be the effects of sin in any straightforward sense.

In Pascal's universe, as in Rahner's, God's infinity serves as the backdrop for all creaturely realities, and once again divine infinity grounds a sense of creaturely movement – but for Pascal this makes creatures intrinsically unstable and uncertain: 'All things have come out of nothingness and are carried onwards to infinity . . . . We are floating in a medium of vast extent, always drifting uncertainly, blown to and fro . . . nothing stands still for us'.[31] This infinite motion characterises not just the external cosmos but also the internal condition of the desiring subject not immediately joined to God:[32]

> There was once a man in true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace[.] This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself. God alone is man's true good, and since man abandoned him it is a strange fact that nothing in nature has been found to take his place . . . [33]

Finding nothing to take God's place, human beings take up an endless, restless, doomed search for satisfaction. As for Rahner, God's infinitude conditions the basic movements of the human soul, and this movement takes us beyond each finite thing. What Pascal sees is that this moving-beyond is also a kind of dissatisfaction, a perennial disappointment. If, for Rahner, we can see and will finite things by comparing them with the infinite horizon, for Pascal this comparison is always at least partially to the detriment of the finite creature, which is always judged implicitly as not-God and thus also as not-satisfying. Rahner shows how God *cannot* be desired or obtained like any other object; Pascal shows how God *must* be desired and sought like any other object.

[31]Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* §199, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 61–3.

[32]On Pascal's protology, this separation is itself a symptom of the fall, though for many other theologians (including Rahner) it need not be. Interesting in this connection (given the similarities between our arguments) is the way Kathryn Tanner equates the condition of total depravity with the state of human nature in this separation, without God's immediate presence in grace (Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p. 67).

Another possible way to deal with the question of sin here would be to understand original sin in terms of the 'natural' propensity of human beings caught in a fluctuating universe to look for stability in the close at hand and thus to mis-order their loves based on the proximity of objects rather than on their true value with respect to the enjoyment of God. In this model, the tendency towards the splitting of the attention (where it is directed simultaneously towards creatures and towards God-as-object) would come first, based on the basic features of finite creation by an infinite God, with all the qualities of human subjectivity highlighted here. This splitting would cause, second, the perceived need for stability. Lastly, the sinful ways of responding to this need, involving the mis-ordering of loves based on proximity, would arise and constitute the fallen state of humanity. These responses, however, would remain subsequent to and distinct from the splitting of attention, and conversely (*pace* Pascal), holiness would not be identical with wholeness, self-presence or satisfaction.

[33]Pascal, *Pensées* §148, p. 45.

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Pascal thinks that humans can end this fruitless searching by simply submitting their wills to God. Once one has made this decisive commitment, Pascal argues that Christianity is then characterised by closure, rest and satisfaction. People can be divided into 'those who have found God and serve him; those who are busy seeking him and have not found him; those who live without either seeking or finding him. The first are reasonable and happy, the last are foolish and unhappy, those in the middle are unhappy and reasonable'.[34] Christians are those who have *arrived*, and so Pascal can say even in this world that 'No one is so happy as a true Christian'.[35] Here Pascal might seem to be faithful to his Augustinian roots, where the predicament of human restlessness is merely the prelude to finding true rest in God.

However, if the problem of human satisfaction is truly tied to God's infinity, as Pascal suggests, then it is unclear how the decision involved in conversion can really provide rest and happiness. Either the 'infinite abyss' in the human heart is filled by an immediate, deifying union with God upon conversion (and one suspects that Christian testimony on such a mystical experience would be mixed at best), or Pascal is asking his readers to find satisfaction in the human experience of obedience itself – which would be one more case of trying to fill a God-sized hole with something other than God. The only way one could *simply decide* to look in the 'right place' for happiness, so to speak, is if God is simply one object of attention like any other.

Instead, one should imagine even those sincerely seeking after God to be in the same basic position of separation, dissatisfaction and uncertainty that Pascal imagines for fallen humans; and this is not because of any sinful failing of their own, but simply as the nature of human subjectivity not immediately joined to God. While the details of religious and unreligious tendencies towards diversion and fragmentation may differ, one should expect Pascal's basic descriptions to apply to both. Unconsciously knowing that there is no rest to be found, human beings continually defer disappointment by keeping on the move – by keeping themselves occupied by trivial pursuits.[36] Finite desires themselves become shot through with contradiction, not being actually designed to be satisfied: humans 'think they genuinely want rest when all they really want is activity' – not that the chase is all that happy either.[37] In a passage that presages the pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, Pascal writes that 'All our life passes in this way: we seek rest by struggling against certain obstacles, and once they are overcome, rest proves intolerable because of the boredom it produces. We must get away from it and crave excitement'.[38] This description fits not just the unspiritual hedonist but also the believing mystic who cannot decide whether to throw all their spiritual yearning against the blank wall of one prayer practice or to diffract it through several. In each case, the human being is pulled onward without a promise of closure, and this onward pull is transmuted into an outward pull in several directions at once – none of which is identical with God and none of which is devoid of God.

This many-directioned pull involves an occlusion of self-knowledge.[39] In not knowing their end, human beings fail to know themselves, instead becoming an internal

[34]Ibid., §160, p. 52.
[35]Ibid., §357, p. 106.
[36]Ibid., §136, pp. 38–9.
[37]Ibid., §136, p. 39.
[38]Ibid., §136, p. 40.
[39]Compare the argument that self-deception (self-misperception?) is a key Pascalian theme; William Wood, *Blaise Pascal on Duplicity, Sin and the Fall: The Secret Instinct* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

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contradiction. 'Man does not know the place he should occupy .... He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness'.[40] The infinity of the universe encourages in human beings a sense of lostness and nothingness;[41] by being thus unable to know their surroundings, they are kept also from knowing themselves.[42] In each thing that fails to stand still for human beings, in each thing that cannot be known or that cannot satisfy, one more possible construction of human place and identity is tried and found wanting. Dissatisfaction and distraction thus both become reflexively textured as self-fragmentation and dispersal; in both cases, the integrity and wholeness of the self remains constitutively out of reach. The deepest problem, in other words, for Pascal as for Rahner, is not a particular construction of sin as rebellion, self-deception or something else; it is simply the condition of desiring, of being on-the-way-towards, an infinite God.

Conclusion

What, then, does my account suggest that we should expect from human subjectivity insofar as is constituted by the desire for God? There is some sense in which we may be able to love God in and through God's creatures; there is some positive significance to finite desire. However, this is only possible because human faculties seem to be oriented towards multiple levels of reality at once, and this multiple orientation is best understood as a kind of moving-beyond rather than a simultaneous perception of the whole – a movement without any obvious sort of closure or rest attached to it. It thus implies the possibility for conflict: if, for example, religious practices are to be intelligible, then God must in some sense be a particular object of attention, and this would then seem to exclude other objects of attention for finitely-minded creatures. Finite desires are thus always ambivalent: they point us both towards and away from God at the same time, being dissatisfying while drawing out our desire further. This ambivalence and lack of closure lead to an urge to find stability in the close at hand, leading to more restless distraction rather than fulfillment.

Without needing to refer to an independent doctrine of sin, this articulation of movement and competition without rest or closure suggests a conflictual and fragmented model of human subjectivity: that humans are constitutively dissatisfied, prone to distraction, oriented in multiple directions at once with a tendency to mix them up and likely to reach for the close-at-hand as a bid for stability amidst a feeling of being at sea in the world. In terms of their self-understanding, humans can find themselves partially anywhere and entirely nowhere, and thus are fragmented and opaque to themselves. They are not self-identical or self-enclosed; rather, personal identity is determined *as indeterminate*, where each re-making on the way to God involves at least as much loss as new gain – where each moment of partial and temporary self-return is perceived as a restriction the next, with the synthesis remaining just out of reach. Growth or progress in the Christian life is not identical in any straightforward sense with perceptions of wholeness, self-presence or the clearer articulation of a uniquely true

[40]Pascal, *Pensées* §400, p. 118. In the ellipsis I omit: 'He has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again.' The account I am putting forward suggests that the idea of 'one true place' is faulty and so, once again, does not attribute this situation to 'going astray'.

[41]Ibid., §199, pp. 60–61.

[42]Compare: 'I consider it as impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole as to know the whole without knowing the individual parts', Ibid., §199, p. 64.

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personal identity, and in fact this model suggests that such growth may more often mean learning to habitually relinquish such options of self-articulation.[43]

Of course, neither are human beings totally alienated. Dissatisfaction coexists with the goodness of all creatures and the positive relationship between finite desires and the desire for God. Fragmented identity coexists with the frequency of partial recognition, as one's own unsettled movement towards God is shared by each other creatures, and the movement towards fellow creatures is always also a movement towards God. Ambivalence and the possibility of multiple conflicting descriptions might be the most fundamental characterisations of such a life.

The whole model lives within a fundamental Godward orientation. The same movement that gives rise to dispersal is, in some sense ('prethematically', if one sticks to the *Vorgriff* construction), always towards God by definition. Each moment of disappointment or fragmentation, no less than each moment of self-unity or perceived wholeness, is an expression of the way the human mind and will are constitutively and positively turned towards God. But even this should not be overstated as a sort of enclosure. *Contra* Pascal, I have argued the implausibility of any kind of simple satisfaction of the desire for God in this life; and if we are to believe Gregory of Nyssa's account of the eschaton, the satisfaction of this desire is unlike that of any other in that it is not characterised by rest, closure or finality – ever.[44] The goal is not to land, but to be sustained in the right sort of motion, accompanied by God.

What goods does such an account provide? Most basically, I argue that it can help theologians view the incoherence, dissatisfaction, distractibility and even the fragmentation of the subject, not as a mark of sin, failure or even a part of our finitude or embodiment to be transcended, but as an intrinsic part of the movement towards the strange sort of 'object' of desire that God is. I don't claim that dissatisfaction or fragmentation should be thought of as virtues in their own right (though perhaps sometimes they will need to be cultivated) or that they should be embraced and viewed as holiness in each case – there may well be better or worse sorts of incoherence and fragmentation. My account offers a way to evaluate this range of experiences with more flexibility and nuance by suggesting that, at least in some cases, dissatisfaction and fragmentation might be a constitutive part of the movement towards God. On some readings, the narratives articulated by Pascal and Augustine would seem to foreclose this possibility. Even if, for example, Pascal were to admit that there were unhappy Christians, then *sin* would seem to be the primary available mechanism for explaining this dissatisfaction. I argue instead that it is constitutive of the sort of desire that the human desire for God is.

This account of human desire and subjectivity could support derivative accounts of Christian life and practice across a range of loci. The running thread would be a nuanced

[43]Tanner's account of the malleability of human nature is a helpful comparison point here: obviously only a malleable subject can go through this repeated gain and loss, and my phrasing of 'determined as indeterminate' is quite close to her formulation that humans have a distinct nature only in the sense of having 'no particular nature to be true to' (*Christ the Key*, p. 48). Her description of a 'character-destroying character' also resonates here (Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism,* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019], p. 59), though this involves not only her account of human nature but also a wary view of the 'progress' in holiness a Christian can hope to make in this life. My framing in terms of the tension between proximate and ultimate objects of attention and my texturing of these experiences in terms of fragmentation, dissatisfaction and questions of one's 'sense of self' take my account in a different direction from the ways she develops hers.

[44]Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* §2.219–2.277, pp. 111–125.

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view of various 'negative' dimensions of human subjectivity combined with a certain optimism about the corresponding deferral of identity and closure. Senses of self-fragmentation, dissatisfaction and the like would be met neither with a demand that they be 'fixed' (often with an injunction to 'try harder') nor by being labeled as simply desirable or be accepted as such (which would fail to treat our constitutive desire for God as desire). Instead, they would be viewed as active sites for articulating the dynamic contours of human Godwardness.

For example, since this account challenges models of holiness that assume the self-identity of the subject, one might ask whether ideas such as habituation, formation and virtue ethics can be formulated without a regulative image of stability that this model eschews. Similarly, one could work towards an analysis of prayer and the interplay between distraction, intercession and contemplation on this basis. The senses of incoherence and fragmentation highlighted here resonate with numerous postmodern accounts of the self and various descriptions of present cultural phenomena;[45] these resonances could serve as a starting point for thinking through (for example) what sorts or aspects of geographic, cultural or social dislocation provide fodder for fruitful meditation on the pilgrim nature of the Christian life and what sorts or aspects are inimical to a dislocation oriented towards God. Perhaps one could work towards a discussion of the role of fragmentary recognition in a contemporary ecclesial setting: as alternately serving to partially anchor and partially alienate the Christian subject in search of an 'interrogative mode of being'.[46] This discussion would resist both identitarian accounts of Christian community and fully conceding to the atomisation of such community precisely by viewing the conjuncture of dispersal and arrival as potentially articulating Godwardness.

In each case, the oddness and even incoherence of human identity and subjectivity – especially its always-fragmentary self-understanding and its tendency to repeated dispersal and self-loss – are played up, in ways organised by internal theological commitments and not framed as concessions to sin or to external psychoanalytic insights. This, I argue, must be the nature of a being shaped by a restless desire to share the life of an infinite God.[47]

[45]The account given by Judith Butler in *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) has influenced the aspects of human subjectivity I have chosen to dwell on here, though even in cases of overlap my account foregrounds an independent theological derivation and interpretation.

[46]The phrase is Judith Butler's (*Subjects of Desire*, p. 9), but compare Rowan Williams' reflections on a community 'dispossessed of its own self-definition' in his 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', *Modern Theology* 11/1 (1995), p. 19; https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1995.tb00050.x.

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