Desire for the Good

Keywords

Desire, reason, Platonism, McDowell, Levinas, goodness, categorical requirement, appetite, God.

1. Introduction

According to a prevalent line of thought, there is no intrinsic goodness fixed in the nature of things to which we are responsive at the level of reason and desire, and which motivates us to act morally. Those who insist upon this negative claim take it to be deeply problematic to think of reality in these terms,and one response has been to say that goodnesshas its source in the desiring subject. Desire in this context is no longer an intrinsically normative state which involves being attracted to an external source of value. Rather, it is a mental tendency or disposition by virtue of which we are attracted to whatever promises to satisfy the relevant desire. These are the things we call 'good' (or 'bad' if they fail to deliver on this score), and any supposition to the effect that goodness (or badness) belong to the things themselves is a phenomenological illusion.[1]The position can be discerned in Hume's claim that 'when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your own nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from contemplation of it',[2] and it is exemplified in the following words of Hobbes:

> Whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire, that is it, which he for his part callethGood. And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*, And of his contempt, *Vile* and *Inconsiderable.* For these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of Good or Evill to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves.[3]

We are left with a picture according to which the world is, in itself, 'motivationally inert'.[4]That is to say, there is no 'magnetic' goodness to attract the desires of those who apprehend it.[5]This motivationally inert world is the proper and exclusive object of cognition, and cognition has nothing to do with being attracted to things. Attraction comes in only at the level of desire, and desire has nothing to do with cognition, being concerned, rather, with one's affective response to what there is, what there is being comprehended in the aforementioned motivationally inert terms. This picture goes hand in hand with the (equally prevalent) idea that an agent's reasons for action are to be analysed as a conjunction of a cognitive state of mind (ranging over the non-evaluative facts) and a separate desire which supplies the motivating force for a moral reason for action. On this way of thinking, desire is what makes the action *attractive* to the desirer, the role of reason being simply to inform us about the things and actions which will get us what we want. Reason is 'the slave of the passions' in this respect, and has no further role to play.

This position can be disputed at various levels, and there is a serious question of how such desire could motivate a subject in the first place.[6]John McDowell objects to it on the ground that there are no non-question-begging reasons for insisting that reason and desire must be dualistically opposed in this manner – as if they are entirely separate faculties within the subject.[7]The idea that the world is motivationally inert is simply the metaphysical counterpart of this dualism, and there is no independent argument for ruling out the possibility of an alternative position in which this dualism of reason and desire is surmounted – one in which a cognitive state could suffice on its own to explain an action precisely because it involves being suitably receptive to the relevant values and the normative demands they impose.As for the complaint that such a world is too 'queer' to be taken seriously, the usual motive for insisting upon this point involves a form of scientific naturalism which is philosophically and scientifically unsupported, and McDowell is keen to

distance himself from the kind of Platonism which more properly invites such an objection, when, for example, the relevant values are divorced from anything to which we could intelligibly relate.[8]

McDowell's positive approachis shared and developed by other like-minded philosophers.[9]It also maps onto some analogous themes in Levinas, and in what follows I want to clarify the relevant points of agreement, spelling out the implications for an understanding of the desire for the good, and its relation to reason and to desire more generally. There will be a question of whether such a position is defensible, and I shall grant with McDowell that some standard objections are inconclusive, although it will become clear that there are points of detail which demand further elucidation. Levinasian desire is articulated from within a theistic framework, and I shall conclude by considering whether this distinguishing feature yieldsa more serious difficulty.

2. Rethinking reason and desire

The context for McDowell's discussion of the relation between reason and desire is Philippa Foot's critique of the Kantian idea that moral requirements are categorical[10] – a critique which, in Wiggins' words, aroused a new interest in the possibility of an intelligible conception of the categorical*ought*.[11]Foot objects to the (Kantian) idea that it is irrational to question the requirements of morality, claiming that their rational influence on the will is hypothetical rather than categorical. It is hypothetical in the sense that their influence is conditional upon the presence of desires that are lacking in those who question whether they have reason to conform to them. Foot makes clear that hypothetical imperatives are incredibly diverse, and that desire as she understands it exceeds the limits of egoism. She blames Kant's hedonistic conception of human nature for his failure to see that moral virtue might be compatible with a rejection of the categorical imperative, granting that, quite apart from thoughts of duty, one might 'care about the suffering of others, having a sense of identification with them, wanting to help them'.[12]She concludes that desire in this broad sense can

give one reason to act morally, agreeing with the Kantian that a moral person cannot be indifferent to matters such as suffering and justice. What she objects to is the idea that morality has an independent 'binding force'which somehow bypasses our 'interests or desires' – as if it is enough simply to say 'You should'. She denies also that the immoral person is deficient in rationality. As she puts it, the immoral man is to be accused of villainy rather than inconsistency.[13]

McDowell agrees that it would be inappropriate to describe the immoral person as inconsistent. He grants also that 'You should' is not enough to give someone a reason for acting,[14]and that recognition of the binding force of morality comes via a perspective which is coloured by our desires and interests.[15]So he accepts that morality is important to us, and that doing one's duty can be a matter of doing what one wants. What he objects to is the idea that desire must function as 'an *independent extra component* [my italics]in a full specification of [a subject's reason for action],[16]as if reason is irredeemably inert, and desire is 'needed in order to account for the capacity of the cited reason to influence the agent's will'.[17]The complaint is familiar from what has been said previously, for McDowell's main objection is to the idea that reason and desire must be dualistically opposed in this manner – as if cognition must be confined to the facts as neutrally conceived, and desire is the further, non-cognitive, component which moves the agent to action.[18]This is what it would mean for a moral requirement to be hypothetical in the sense McDowell wishes to reject.

McDowell wishes to break this dualism so as to defend a conception of reason which already presupposes the desire-involving dimension from which it is separated on the disputed position. That is to say, he is claiming that neither of these notions can be properly understood without presupposing reference to the other. This has important implications for both reason and desire, for it means that reason itself can motivate (as opposed to being irredeemably inert), and that there are desires which, rather than being blind impulses in the subject, involve a recognition of the

good.[19]It means also that we must reject the picture according to which ‘man is a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a person will’, as Iris Murdoch describes the disputed picture, so as to allow that ‘[m]an is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees’.[20] This is what McDowell is getting at when he says of the relevant (‘intrinsically moral’) desires that they are not intelligible independently of the moral conception of things which, according to his position, provides a moral reason for action. They are ‘consequentially ascribed’ in this respect, or as Thomas Nagel puts it:‘[t]hat I have the desire simply *follows* from the fact that these considerations motivate me’, to which he adds that ‘nothing follows about the role of the desire as a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of those considerations’.[21]

McDowell claims finally that ‘consequentially ascribed desires are indeed desires’, and that this grants us the right to say that acting for a certain sort of reason – when, for example, one is doing what is morally required – can be a case of doing what one wants.[22] By contrast, the desires which figure in the rejected position are ‘feelings’ or ‘passions’ which are ‘over and above one’s view of the facts’.[23] McDowell adds that it was Kant’s fundamental aim to ‘deny that the motivating capacity of moral considerations needs explaining from outside, in terms of desires that are not intrinsically moral’.[24]

3. Interlude

McDowell and Foot agree on the important points. They insist that morality has an irreducibly normative dimension, that its appreciation involvesa certain kind of affective response, and that there is a way of conceiving of the relation between reason and desire which precludes the possibility of accommodating these features. For Foot the error occurs when reason is divorced from anything that could matter to us, and she reinstates the missing dimension with a conception of desire/interest which, on the face of it, involvesjust the kind of cognition which is so important to

McDowell. As she puts it, one might 'care about the suffering of others, having a sense of identification with them, wanting to help them'. McDowell would surely agree that being motivated in this moral sense does not require additional 'thoughts of duty'.

Much of the dispute here is terminological, but it raises important and unresolved questions about the nature and limits of reason and desire, their respective roles in the context of morality, and the implications for an understanding of desire for the good. Are there good reasons for downplaying the role of reason in a moral context? How exactly does desire motivate? And where does cognition come into the equation? If the relevant cognitive states 'are not so much possessed except by those whose wills are influenced appropriately',[25] then does this mean that they are themselves desires?And if they *are* desires, then why isn't it overkill to insist upon the presence of consequentially ascribed desires too? We can begin to tackle thesequestions in more depth by turning to Emmanuel Levinas.

4. Levinas on reason and desire

Levinasgrants a distinction between desires which are intrinsically moral and those which are not, treating as prime examples of the latter the appetitive desires which are operative when we strive for food, drink, and sex. He classifies them as 'needs',[26]and claims that they stem from a determinate lack in the subject which is filled by consuming or 'assimilating' and object that satisfies the desire: 'in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other'.[27]The terminology has a pejorative tone, but the picture is not entirely negative, for we are said to 'thriv[e] on our needs', and are 'happy' for them'. Need is therefore 'a happy dependence', happiness is 'the satisfaction of all needs',[28] and the search for such happiness is that by which the self begins to establish itself as such. It is 'the egoism of life...the very pulsation of the I',[29] or as AdriaanPeperzak puts it, the 'spontaneous egoism' of animal life'. [30]

McDowell agrees that a proper account of humanity must give due weight to our animality, and he would have no difficulty with the idea that such desires form an important part of the picture.[31] He would doubtless treat them as tendencies or dispositions – like the 'feelings' or 'passions' to which he refers. Levinas takes the relevant tendencies to involve (human) nature seeking to fill a lack.[32] He insists, however, that the most significant category of desire is irreducible to disposition and tendency, and cannot be viewed in these lack-involving terms. As he puts it, it is 'not an appeal to food',[33]it 'desires beyond everything that can simply complete it',[34] and it has its source in something independently valuable which attracts and 'animates' the desire, and towards which it is directed. This 'something' is referred to as 'the Desirable',[35]'the Other',[36] 'the Most High',[37] 'the Invisible'[38], 'the Transcendent',[39] 'Infinity'[40,] 'God', [41]; it has a moral and metaphysical significance which puts it on a level with Plato's goodness,[42]and we are told that desire [in this sense] is 'revelation'.[43]It counts as 'metaphysical' in these respects,[44] and it is a form of cognition, albeit one which exceeds the limits of ordinary thought to provide a more appropriate measure of its (infinite) object:

> 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. (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. (1993, 113).

Talk of desire's *measuring* the infinite does not mean that it involves cognition in a theoretical sense, and Levinasmakes clear that its source and object must elude our attempts to comprehend it – 'it is not the object of a contemplation'. So we relate to the infinite at the level of desire, albeit not as subject to contemplated object. As Levinas puts it elsewhere, 't]he infinite is not "in front of me".[45] He adds immediately and more positively that 'it is I who express [the infinite]', and that I do so in my moral interactions with others. This is a difficult thought to grasp, but it is part and parcel of his antipathy to cataphatictheology (as if desire's 'object' can be pinned down and objectified), his rejection of the idea that such desire is acquisitive (as if its object is there to be 'assimilated'), and his insistence that any knowledge we acquire in this context is practical rather than theoretical.[46]As Paul Fiddesputs it, the focus is upon '*participation in* the transcendent and not observation or objectification of it'.[47]Fiddestakes this to mean that God 'is not the *object* of desire but the one *in whom* we desire the good'.[48]Levinas would surely grant both of these claims, albeit with the caveat that desire's object meets the aforementioned negative conditions.

Metaphysical desire is 'not an appeal to food', and 'desires beyond everything that can simply complete it'.[49]Levinas spells this out further by saying that its object 'does not fulfill it, but deepens it',[50] and that 'the true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy, but hollows out'.[51]His aim here is to capture what it is that keeps desire alive – what makes it 'insatiable' to use his preferred terminology.[52]It is insatiable not because its subject fails to 'assimilate' the desired object – as if it is a matter of desiring an ever elusive object. This would be to revert to the 'lack' model, and would imply that insatiability is a deficiency,desire's extinction being the aim. Rather, it is insatiable by virtue of being animatedby its desirable object. As Levinas puts it, it is 'an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its "object"'.

All of this puts reason and desire in the closest relationship, but what more can be said about reason in particular? Andhow does it feed into Levinas's understanding of a moral requirement? At

one level, Levinas stands opposed to the idea that morality could be grounded in reason, andhe rehearses some familiar anti-Kantian objections. ‘What could a being entirely rational speak of with another entirely rational being?’ he asks. ‘How could numerous reasons be distinguished? How could the Kantian kingdom of ends be possible had not the rational beings that composed it retained, as the principle of individuation, their exigency for happiness, miraculously saved from the shipwreck of sensible nature?’[53]We are reminded of Foot’s worry that Kantian morality is divorced from anything remotely human.

The disparaging reference to Kant’s kingdom of ends calls to mind the objections of the typical anti-Platonist – who is likewise concerned to bring morality back down to earth. We know also, however, that Levinas takes inspiration from Plato, and that he is comparable to McDowell in this respect. He grants also with McDowell that there is a conception of reason which escapes the relevant objections, and which has a pivotal role to play in any viable moral framework. Reason in the relevant sense is rescued from any Kantian (or Platonist) noumenal realm,[54]it is to be distinguished from that which is operative when we theorize in a non-moral context,[55] and it involves being responsive to a source of value which makes normative demands upon us. Crucially however – and this is part and parcel of Levinas’s anti-Kantian return to ‘sensible nature’ – it is ‘founded’ and enacted in the face-to-face ethical relation with the human other.[56]

The human other, we are told, exists ‘outside of the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches, and the senses one allays’,[57] and when I relate to her in moral terms ‘I *am no longer able to have power*’.[58] I am able to have power in the sense that I *can* treat her as a means to my own satisfactions, or refrain from doing so simply because ‘conquest is beyond my too weak powers’.[59]However, a moral relationship has the effect of calling into question and silencing such egoistic impulses, albeit not in the manner of a rival coercive power. As Levinas puts it, there is established ‘a relationship not with a very great resistance but with the absolute Other, with the

resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance'.[60]In such a context, 'I have access to an exterior being, to what one absolutely can neither take in nor possess'.[61]

Levinascan be understood to be describing and defending what McDowell calls a 'clear perception of a silencing requirement'.[62]The difference, however, is that the relevant 'moral summons' is revealed*only* in the 'sensible appearance of [the human other's] face,[63]and – second difference –there is a revelation of infinity in this interaction: 'infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers'.[64]This does not mean that infinity is objectified in the other's face – as if thought is finally adequate to its object, and morality can be left behind. The point is rather thatit is revealed in this very relationship: I *express* the infinite rather than having it in front of me.[65]

Levinas talks of being 'fill[ed] with high thoughts'[66]in this context, andinsists that the idea of infinity remains within the limits of rationalism, even whilst 'implying a content overflowing the container'. How so? Because:

> far from violating the mind...it establishes ethics. The other is not for reason a scandal...but the first teaching. A being *receiving* the idea of Infinity, *receiving* since it cannot derive it from itself, is a being taught in a non-maieutic fashion...To think is to have the idea of infinity or to be taught. Rational thought refers to this teaching.[67]

Another expression of the crucial idea that we are responsive to an external source of value in this context. And assuming that a 'thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire', we are to suppose that, at this level of apprehension, the reason/desire distinction breaks down.

5. Clarifications

It is assumedon all sides that desire has a motivating force, but there is disagreement concerning its relation to reason, obscurity surrounding its nature, and a basic question of what legitimates this assumption in the first place. The crucial distinction for McDowell and Levinasis between desires which are moral and those which are not. Appetitive desires are paradigms of the non-moral as far as Levinas is concerned, whereas McDowell focuses upon theself-standing mental tendencies – 'passions'/'feelings' – which are 'over and above' any moral cognition on the part of the desiring subject. McDowell distinguishes such tendencies from desires which are *intrinsically* moral. They count as such in the sense that they involve being attracted to an external source of value, and cannot be understood independently of such cognition. Levinasoperates likewise with a cognitive conception of moral desire, and concedes – with McDowell – to the wisdom of Plato. He is also a theist, parting company with McDowell in this respect.

Levinas's theism feeds into his response to the question of how moral desire's motivational force is to be accommodated, for he tells us that it is 'animated' by, and 'originates' from its (desirable) object, leaving us in no doubt about this object's religious significance.[68]He claims also that there are desires which are purely *self*-animated or which have their origin in the subject, as he puts it.[69] These are the appetitive desires he prefers to classify as 'needs', they are *felt* by the subject, and their distinctive phenomenology is sufficient to explain how they motivate the desiring subject, when, for example, the feeling of hunger leads me to stuff my face with crisps. By contrast, the motivational force of the relevant moral desires is said to be explained with reference to their independently desirable objects. This is an important point, particularly in the light of the Hobbesian idea that the object's desirability is determined solely by the subject's act of desiring, for it suggests that a desire which is self-animating in this Hobbesian sense does not, after all, have motivational force.[70]*If* this is so, then there is good reason for granting with McDowell that the desires which figure in moral reason-giving explanations must be intrinsically moral in his sense.

Butare we remotely clear about what it means to talk of desire's object in this context? And where does any of this leave Foot's example of the person who wants to help someone because she cares about the suffering of others or McDowell's desires which are 'consequentially ascribed'? Analytic discussions have tended to focus upon the idea that desires have a logical content: one desires *that p*; and this has gone hand in hand with the idea that it should be possible to rewrite any sentence of the form 'A wants B' as 'A wants that *p*'.[71] On this approach desire is a propositional attitude, its object is a proposition, and the relevant attitude is that of wanting the proposition to be true.[72]

There are cases for which such an approach seems plausible – for example, I want that I finish this paper by the end of the week. We might even suppose that Foot's case of wanting to help those in need is amenable to such treatment, although there is surely a difference between wanting it to be true that I help such people and wanting to do it,[73] and Foot makes clear that this latter desire must involve a sense of the worth of so acting if it is to count as properly moral.This brings us to the intrinsically moral desires with which McDowell and Levinas are concerned, and it is wholly unclear how they could be comprehended propositionally given that they involve being attracted to something independently valuable, a response for which there is no obvious or even intelligible propositional equivalent.[74]Mark Plattsimplies that no such problem exists when, in the context of pressing the question of desire's motivational force, he offers a defence of the propositional account before moving to the category of desire with which we are concerned. As he puts it, 'desires....have a logical content, and desires motivate an agent because of his view of the objects of his desires *as desirable*'.[75]He adds that the thing to be acknowledged 'is that we have many non-appetitive desires in our having which beliefs are involved in complex ways. For us, desires frequently require an appropriate belief about the independent desirability of the object of desire'.[76]

I shall return to the question of whether desire's cognitive content is best viewed in belief-involving terms. The more pressing issueconcerns how the position described by Platts is to be squared with the aforementioned propositional account, which latter is all about wanting the world to be a certain way (paper finished, people helped etc). A clue is to be found in the idea that these latter desires already presuppose a conception of the value of doing the relevant things – I want to finish the paper because August is for hanging out in the sun or because I value the idea of finally getting to the bottom of these things; and I want to help this woman in distress because her suffering matters to me.McDowell's 'consequentially ascribed' desires can perhaps be accommodated along these lines, althoughthere is equal reason to suppose that they are more appropriately aligned with the relevant (will-involving) cognitive states.

This leaves some scope for the propositional account, albeit from within a framework which gives explanatory priority to the evaluative conceptions such desires presuppose and without which it would be entirely mysterious whythey occurred in the first place. This explanatory point is familiar from our protagonists, but there is a question of what follows for an understanding of the reason/desire distinction once it is granted that desire has an irreducibly cognitive dimension. A further, and more intractable,problem concerns the nature of the goodness to which we are attracted in this respect.

McDowell and Levinas are keen to distance themselves from a conception of reason which is either narrowly theoretical or divorced from anything which could engage our interests, and they reject the idea that desire could only ever be viewed in non-cognitive terms. So it is denied that the distinction between reason and desire maps onto that between the cognitive and the non-cognitive, and both of them grant that desire and cognition can stand in the closest connection. McDowell insists upon a distinction between the two given his belief that reasons themselves can motivate. On

his position then, there can be motivating reasons, and it is wrong to suppose that only desires can perform this role.

Reason and desire are to be distinguished in this respect, but the desires to be rejected in this latter context are the 'feelings' or 'passions' which figure in the disputed position, and are to be opposed therefore to Levinasian desire and to the 'consequentially ascribed' desires which figure in McDowell's account. I have suggested that one way of dealing with these latter desires is to identify them with those we acquire on the basis of our motivating attraction to the good. Butthis still leaves the question of whether it makes sense to impose a reason/desire distinction at the level of the attraction itself, even whilst granting that such attraction is irreducibly cognitive.

Talbot Brewer has done some important work in this context, taking as his starting point the idea that desire *qua* motivating attraction to the good operates within the space of moral reasoning. Thus understood, it is a dimension of our rational capacity to apprehend the good, presenting us with 'an inchoate sense of how or why it would count as good to act as [the relevant desires] incline us to act'.[77]More specifically, desires are 'vivid and/or persistent *appearances* [my italics] of goods or reasons'.[78] Not just any such appearance constitutes a desire, for something can seem good and it can seem to us that we have reason to do something even when there is no corresponding desire.[79]Desires, by contrast, are 'appearances with respect to which we are in some significant measure passive.Their occurrence is not wholly dependent upon our active efforts to bring into view the appearances of goodness in which they consist'.[80]Such efforts involve practical judgement, and desires can conflict with judgement, when, for example, we see goods or reasons whilst judging there to be none, and treat the relevant desires as misguided or foolish.[81] The appearances in this latter context turn out to bedeceptive, and describing these desires as misguided rather than false makes clear that they are not to be confused with beliefs. It cannot be ruled out either that such desires will persist in the face of opposing moral reflection. Appearances of goodness are not bound

to be deceptive, and desire in this context serves to inform and even bolster our judgements. It should be clear from what has been said that there is an equal and opposite influence from judgement to desire, although this is not to deny that there will be difficult and sometimes intractable questions concerning how best to reconcile thesedifferent levels of response.[82]

All of this gives desire a central cognitive role, whilst lending emphasis to features which distinguish it from other modes of evaluative cognition. The attraction it involves is peculiarly 'vivid' and 'persistent', we remain to some degree passive with respect to its operations, and it provides us with an 'inchoate sense of how or why it would count as good to act as [it] inclines us to act'. This inchoate sense can be influenced and refined by moral reflection – to the point where doing what is required can come perfectly naturally. Thus understood, reason is no longer an alien presence which remains severed from anything we could remotely value (Foot's concern). On the contrary, it is something to which we are already responsive by virtue of being desiring and reflective beings.

Thinking is central to Levinas's conception of the desiring being, but he identifies it with desire, distinguishes it from ordinary thought and reflection, and takes it to involve the revelation of a moral/theistic dimension of reality to which we become properly receptive only in our moral interactions with others. Such a position flies in the face of the propositional conception of desire, and it would be problematic byMcDowell's lights given the clear theistic overtones. He would presumably take his own position to be a panacea to such excesses – a platonism in which goodness is brought back down to earth. We know, of course, that Levinas has similar earthly ambitions, and it is no part of his position that goodness inhabits some second, supernatural, realm. On the contrary, it is embodied in our moral relations with others, such encounters providing the only way of relating authentically to God. I have argued elsewhere that there is a knife-edge between their respective positions, and that McDowell has good reason to take seriously this brand of theism.[83]

Given Levinas'sinsistence that desire's object must elude our attempts to comprehend it, he can agree with Brewer that theintimations of goodness it provides are 'inchoate'. He agrees also that we are passive with respect to desire's movement – we *receive* something which we cannot produce from our own resources – and that the relevant intimations have a striking phenomenology. As he puts it, my powers are 'paralysed', and he talks elsewhere of a 'dazzling, where the eye takes more than it can hold'.[84]Finally, it is crucial to his position that we are 'taught' in this context – a 'rational teaching' which concedes something to the idea – endorsed by McDowell and Brewer – that moral progress is possible. The difference, of course, is that this is all articulated from within the framework of theism, but I have said already that Levinasian theism is unorthodox, the crucial defining claim being that there is an external source of value to which we are receptive in our moral relations with others. McDowell and Brewer would not take issue with this, and Foot herself has no obvious ground for resistance once it is made clear that it is our status as desiring human beings that puts us in a position to appreciate such value and to be motivated (fallibly and not invariably) by the requirements it imposes.

6. Conclusions

I have identified some points of agreement between McDowell and Levinason the nature of the desire for the good, and have used their work as a starting point from which to explore what I take to be an eminently defensible position. The position in question is a form of Platonism, and it has clear theistic potential. However, it raises the question of what it could really mean to bring God into the equation, and how the desire for God might be understood once we have moved beyond the disputed objectifying approaches. Levinas imposes strict limits upon what can be said about desire's object in this context, but his apophaticismis not complete, and we end up learning quite a lot about what it could be to relate authentically to a God who does not appear in the manner of anything else.

We learn for a start that morality is fundamental, and that aspiring 'knowers' of God must abandon theory in favour of praxis. Hence the knife-edge with McDowell.

McDowell's brand of moral realism is itself contentious, and the Hobbesian/Neo-Humean position with which I began has a point for those naturalists who look askance at the very idea that there could be an external source of value. I agree with McDowell that the relevant objections are inconclusive, and would second Platts' diagnosis that the queerest thing about such arguments – to the effect that an external source of value is too queer to be part of our ontology, and too queer to be known – is that they are *arguments*. As he puts it, '[t]he world *is* a queer place', and 'we discover moral truths in the way that we discover most (if not all) truths: by attention, perception, and reflection'.[85] It has been crucial to the position I have sought to defend that these capacities are in place, and that they are operative not simply when we are in the business of affirming moral truths, but when we are striving to be good. It is in this latter context that desire assumes a pivotal role.[86]

Bibliography

Alvarez, Maria. *Kinds of Reason: An Essay on the Philosophy of Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Bilgrami, Akeel. 'The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay'. In *Naturalism and Normativity*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, 23-54. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Brewer, Talbot. *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

– 'Three Dogmas of Desire', in *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*, ed. Timothy Chappell, 257-284. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Broackes, Justin. *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Ellis, Fiona. *God, Value, and Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

– 'The Quest for God: Rethinking Desire', in *Emotions and Passions*, Royal Institute of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Fiddes, Paul. 'The quest for a place which is 'not-a-place': the hiddenness of God and the presence of God'. In*Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, edited by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, 35-60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Foot, Philippa. 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives', *The Philosophical Review*, Vol 81, No.3 (Jul.,1972), pp. 305-316.

Griffin, James. *Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Beliefs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan* (1651). London: Wordsworth, 2014.

Levinas, Emmanuel.*Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

– ‘God and Philosophy’, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
– ‘A Religion for Adults’, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand, 11-23. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
– ‘Loving the Torah More Than God’. In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 142-145.
– ‘Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite’. In *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.* West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993.
McDowell, John. ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’. In *Mind, Value, and Reality*, 77-94. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.
– *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.
Milbank, John. ‘Plato versus Levinas: Gift, Relation, and Participation’. In*Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy, Theology, Politics*, edited by Adam Lipszye. Warsaw: Adam Mickiewickz Institute, 2006.
Morgan, Michael. *Discovering Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*(1970). London: Routledge,1985.
– *Vision and Choice in Morality* (with R.W. Hepburn, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes,* Vol 30, Dreams and Self-Knowledge (1956), pp.32-58.
Platts. Mark. ‘Moral reality and the end of desire’. In *Reference, Truth, and Reality*, edited by Mark Platts, 69-82. London: Routledge, 1980.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1956.
Scanlon, Thomas M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
Stampe, Dennis. ‘The Authority of Desire’, *Philosophical Review* 96/2 (1987), 335-82.
Weil, Simone. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, Volume 2, trans. Arthur Wills. London: Routledge, 1956).
Wiggins, David. *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
– ‘Categorical Requirements: Kant and Hume on the Idea of Duty’, in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, edited by Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn, 297-330. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
– ‘Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life’. In *Needs, Values, Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

[1]The relevant line of thought is well spelled out and criticised by AkeelBilgrami in his excellent paper ‘The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay’, in *Naturalism and Normativity*, eds. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
[2]*Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Brigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.469.
[3]*Leviathan* (1651), book 1, ch 6 (London: Wordsworth, 2014), p.43.
[4] This is how John McDowell describes the position in his ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.83.
[5] I borrow these terms of description from Iris Murdoch’s *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge,1985 (1970)), p.75.

[6] Mark Platts presses this important question in his ‘Moral reality and the end of desire’, in *Reference, Truth, and Reality*, ed. Mark Platts (London: Routledge, 1980), pp. 74-78.
[7]*Mind, Value, and Reality*, p. 82. Iris Murdoch has a similar position in mind when she objects to the idea that ‘man is a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will’, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.40.
[8] See *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.77.
[9] The most significant figure for my work – other than McDowell – has been David Wiggins (*Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)), but I have also taken inspiration from James Griffin (*Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Beliefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)), and Mark Platts (*op. cit.*). See my *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for more details. The position takes much of its inspiration from the work of Iris Murdoch. Murdoch’s position is spelled out in her *The Sovereignty of Good*, and can be seen to emerge in her much earlier contribution to the Symposium *Vision and Choice in Morality* (with R.W. Hepburn, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes,* Vol 30, Dreams and Self-Knowledge (1956), pp.32-58. See Justin Broackes’ excellent introductory essay in his *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.1-92 for some relevant details concerning Murdoch’s influence on McDowell and others.
[10] ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives’, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol 81, No.3 (Jul.,1972), pp. 305-316.
[11] ‘Categorical Requirements: Kant and Hume on the Idea of Duty’, in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, eds Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.297.
[12] ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives’, p.313.
[13] ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives’, p.310.
[14] ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’pp.78-79
[15]For more on this point see AkeelBilgrami’s ‘The Wider Significance of Naturalism: A Genealogical Essay’, in *Naturalism and Normativity*, eds. Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p.33; Mark Platts, ‘Moral Reality and the End of Desire’, p.77, and David Wiggins, ‘Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life’, in *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.106.
[16] ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, p.79.
[17] ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, p.80.Foot herself comes to reject her earlier position, claiming that she endorsed it because she ‘held a more or less Humean theory of reasons for action, taking it for granted that reasons had to be based on an agent’s desires’, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p.10
[18]ThisHumean/Hobbesian picture has tended to prevail in analytic discussions of reason and desire, one motive being to avoid the supposed difficulties which arise when it is granted that there is a goodness fixed in the nature of things to which we are responsive at the level of reason and desire. McDowell objects rightly that this narrowly naturalistic vision is eminently contestable, and that the considerations in its favour tend to be question-begging (see especially ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, pp. 82-83).
[19] This is all clearly spelled out by James Griffin in his *Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Beliefs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp.32-35.
[20]*The Sovereignty of Good*, p.40.
[21]*The Possibility of Altruism* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970), pp.29-30.
[22] ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, p.89.
[23] ‘Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?’, p.86.

[24] 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?', p.90.
[25] 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?', p.87.
[26] Such desires can be described as needs in the sense that they demand satisfaction, and also in the sense that the things desired are needed by the desirer. For more on the nature of appetitive desire see Maria Alvarez, *Kinds of Reason: An Essay on the Philosophy of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.72-80.
[27]*Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.117.
[28]*Totality and Infinity*, p.114-115.
[29]*Totality and Infinity*, pp.113-114.
[30] 'A Key to Totality and Infinity', in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*(West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), p.137.
[31] See Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.167-169 for a helpful discussion of Levinas's relation to McDowell in this context.
[32] There are philosophers who generalise this 'lack' model to cover desire across the board. Sartre is an obvious case in point, and his position is spelled out in *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956). I discuss the relation between Sartre and Levinas on the question of desire in my 'The Quest for God: Rethinking Desire', in *Emotions and Passions*, Royal Institute of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[33]*Totality and Infinity*, p.63.
[34]*Totality and Infinity*, p.33.
[35]*Totality and Infinity*, p.35.
[36]*Totality and Infinity*, p.35.
[37]*Totality and Infinity*, p.35.
[38]*Totality and Infinity*, p.35.
[39]*Totality and Infinity*, p.78.
[40]*Totality and Infinity*, p.78.
[41]*Totality and Infinity*, p.78.
[42] See *Totality and Infinity*, pp.34, 38, 218.
[43]*Totality and Infinity*, p.62.
[44]*Totality and Infinity*, p.179.
[45] 'God and Philosophy', in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.75.
[46] Hence: 'Everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression'.'A Religion for Adults', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.17.
[47] 'The quest for a place which is 'not-a-place': the hiddenness of God and the presence of God', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.47. We should note that Levinas himself explicitly rejects the notion of participation in this context, claiming that 'participation is a denial of the divine' (*Totality and Infinity*, p.78). Levinas seems to think that talk of participation is bound to compromise God's reality and our relation to Him, but this is because he is building questionable assumptions into the term's meaning – as if it could only ever involve the objectification of God and the disappearance of man. I take it to involve whatever Levinas is talking about when he talks about our giving expression to the infinite. For more on this – and some important criticisms of Levinas's position – see John Milbank's 'Plato versus Levinas: Gift, Relation, and Participation', in *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy, Theology, Politics*, ed. Adam Lipszye (Warsaw: Adam Mickiewickz Institute, 2006).

[48] 'The quest for a place which is 'not-a-place', p.55.
[49]*Totality and Infinity*, p.33.
[50]*Totality and Infinity*, p.33.
[51] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', p.114.
[52]*Totality and Infinity*, p.63.
[53]*Totality and Infinity*, p.119.
[54]Levinas talks of a good 'beyond being', but this is no invitation to ascend to some mysterious noumenal realm. The point is, rather, to insist upon the irreducibility of the moral in the face of those strategies which aim to reduce value to some non-evaluative matter. See my *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 121-124.
[55]*Totality and Infinity*, p.131.
[56]*Totality and Infinity*, p.203.
[57] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', in AdriaanPeperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*(West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), p.114.
[58] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', p.110.
[59] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', p.110.
[60] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', p.110.
[61] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', p.111.
[62] 'Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?', p.93.
[63]*Totality and Infinity*, pp.196-198.
[64]*Totality and Infinity*, p.199.
[65]Compare Simone Weil: 'God has got to be on the side of the subject and not on that of the object during all those intervals of time when, forsaking the contemplation of the light, we imitate the descending movement of God so as to turn ourselves towards the world', *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, Volume 2, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1956), p.358.
[66] 'Loving the Torah More Than God', p.145.
[67]*Totality and Infinity*, p.204.
[68]*Totality and Infinity*, p.62.
[69]*Totality and Infinity*, p.62.
[70] See Platts
[71] See Platts, 'Moral reality and the end of desire', p.77.
[72] The position is well summed up and criticised by Talbot Brewer in his 'Three Dogmas of Desire', in *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics*, ed. Timothy Chappell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 257-284, and *The Retrieval of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. I am hugely indebted to Brewer's ground-breaking work in this context.
[73] See Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, pp.20-21.
[74] One might suppose that there is an intelligible propositional equivalent along the lines of 'I want that I get closer to, or align myself with, the independently valuable object'. At one level this seems to capture what is essential to the relevant attraction, but wanting that one is attracted is not the same as being attracted, and one can have the relevant propositional desire without feeling anything at all. See Brewer's *The Retrieval of Ethics*, p.57 for more on this.
[75] 'Moral reality and the end of desire', p.77.
[76] 'Moral reality and the end of desire', pp.79-80.
[77]*The Retrieval of Ethics*, p.29.
[78]*The Retrieval of Ethics*, p.32. Versions of this position are to be found in Thomas M. Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.33-55, and Dennis Stampe's 'The Authority of Desire', *Philosophical Review* 96/2 (1987), pp.335-82.

[79] Brewer uses the example of a depressed person.
[80]*The Retrieval of Ethics*, p.34.
[81]*The Retrieval of Ethics*, p.29.
[82]*The Retrieval of Ethics*, p.30.
[83]*God, Value, and Nature*, ch 6.
[84] 'God and Philosophy', in *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1998),p.163.
[85] 'Moral reality and the end of desire', p. 72.
[86] I thank John Cottinghamand Tal Brewer for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and for more general discussion of these matters. Iam indebted at a more general level to Sarah Coakley, Eddie Howells, and Clare Carlisle.