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Spiritual Experience: Its Scope, Its Phenomenology, and Its Source

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Abstract

This paper looks first at the *scope* of religious experience, offering some representative examples of phenomena that typically give rise to spiritual experiences. This leads on a consideration of the *phenomenology* of such experiences – the particular way in which they present themselves to the conscious subject. Lastly, the paper tackles the vexed question of the *source* of such experiences, and suggests that this is best understood in terms of a (certain kind of) theistic framework.

Keywords

awe, Kant, Aquinas, personalism, panentheism

Introduction

The phenomena called 'spiritual' are often interpreted through the lens of a particular faith tradition. But responsiveness to a spiritual dimension to our existence – or at the very least the search for such a dimension – is not confined to any one tradition; on the contrary, it seems to be universal, or at least very widespread, arising from something deep in our human nature, and also perhaps from the nature of the reality we inhabit. Spiritual experience, in short, may well be endemic to humanity, even though the specific modalities of such experience may vary from culture to culture.

In what follows, I shall first look at the *scope* of religious experience, offering some representative examples of phenomena that typically give rise to spiritual experiences. This will immediately lead me on to consider the *phenomenology* of such experiences – the particular way in which they present themselves to the conscious subject. And finally I shall consider the vexed question of the *source* of such experiences, and will suggest that this is best understood in terms of a (certain kind of) theistic framework.

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The Scope of Spiritual Experience

To draw up an inventory of all the various types of spiritual experience would be a monumental task, so let me start instead with two examples, which I take to be both representative and illuminating. These are invoked by Immanuel Kant in one of his most famous observations, which can still be seen inscribed on his tombstone in Königsberg:[1]

> Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.[2]

The remark comes at the end of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and Kant here groups together two very different phenomena that fill the mind with awe and wonder. The majestic display of stars in the night sky is far less accessible today than it once was because of widespread light pollution; but perhaps many of us will have had the chance, perhaps in parts of Africa, or Australia or the sparsely populated plains of North America, to have witnessed the overwhelming splendour of the starry heavens that used to be the nightly experience of countless human beings since time immemorial. The pallid modern philosophical term 'aesthetic' is wholly inadequate to describe this kind of experience, as we gaze upwards at night, and our meagre human existence seems utterly swamped by the infinite vastness and shimmering radiance of the celestial vault; the sight is not just 'aesthetically impressive' but a paradigm case of an overwhelming spiritual experience.

Kant's coupling of this awesome sight with our inner awareness of the moral law may seem an odd conjunction. Indeed at first sight, our grasp of the moral law does not seem much like a spiritual experience, but more like a piece of abstract intellectual cognition. Earlier on in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant had spoken of respect [*Achtung*] for the moral law as 'a feeling that is produced by an intellectual ground and which alone we can cognize apriori, and whose necessity we can intuit'.[3] Yet in the passage where he makes the link with the starry heavens, we find Kant using rather stronger and more emotionally charged terms to characterise our attitude to the law, namely 'wonder and awe' (*Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht*). *Ehrfurcht,* fearful awe, is a quasi-religious feeling, a feeling of being overwhelmed by something higher and greater; and it thus seems to have more resonant

[1] Now known as Kaliningrad and lying within an enclave of the Russian Federation.

[2] *Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht, je öfter und anhaltender sich das Nachdenken damit beschäftigt: Der bestirnte Himmel über mir, und das moralische Gesetz in mir.* Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* [*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1788], Conclusion (antepenultimate paragraph).

[3] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (AK 5:73) (AK refers by volume and page number to the standard Akademie edition of Kant (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–), reference to which will be found in the margins of most modern English editions of Kant's works.)

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connotations than those which attach to mere intellectual respect. The sense here is of the moral law as something to be looked up to and honoured, something fearful and wonderful, like the brilliant stars in the limitless vault of the night sky. And in several other places in the *Critique of Practical Reason* we also find language that is quasi-religious in tone, as when Kant says that the 'sublime and mighty name' of duty commands 'reverence' [*Verehrung*], 'elevates a human being above himself (as part of the natural world)', and relates to a moral law that is 'holy [*heilig*], inviolable [*unverletzlich*]'.[4]

The linking of the starry heavens and the moral law as sources of awe and wonder was very far from being Kant's own invention (though this is seldom, so far as I know, noted by commentators). The link is expressly made in the Hebrew Bible, in Psalm 19 (or Psalm 18 in the Latin Vulgate numbering), *Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei*:

> The heavens declare the glory [*kavod*] of God [*El*]: and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
> Day unto day uttereth speech: and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
> There is no speech nor language: where their voice is not heard.
> Their sound is gone out into all lands: and their words to the ends of the earth.
> In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun: which cometh forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a giant to run his course …
> The law [*Torah*] of the LORD [JHWH] is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
> The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, and giveth light unto the eyes …
> More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

The first half of this Psalm is a kind of paeon of praise to the wonders of the firmament – both the night sky and the daily course of the sun (another spiritually potent image since time immemorial, though it has perhaps lost some of its ancient power with the advent of the arrogant modern fantasy of human autonomy and self-sufficiency). The heavens declare the *glory* of God – and the Hebrew word for 'glory' here is *kavod*, used in many places in the Old Testament to convey the beauty and radiance of the divine. The sense here is of something mysterious and uplifting, which rejoices the heart and inspires awe and wonder. And what follows in the second half of the Psalm is an attribution to the law, the *Torah*, of exactly the same exalted and uplifting quality – something recognized as more precious than gold, sweeter and more delightful than honey and the honeycomb.

[4] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (AK 5: 86-7)

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Here, then, in our responses to the wonders of the heavens and the majesty and preciousness of the moral law, we have two paradigm cases of what can be called spiritual experience. The introduction of the label 'spiritual' here need not necessarily be construed in an explicitly metaphysical way, for example as implying reference to a supernatural realm; the point, rather, is to convey that what is involved is something of extraordinary significance and majestic power, something that exalts the mind, lifting us above the mundane elements of our routine existence towards what is worthy of special reverence.

Before looking at the phenomenology of such experiences in a bit more detail, let me offer two more paradigmatic cases of spiritual experience, different in kind from either of the first two examples just mentioned. The third category I have in mind concerns our responses to great art, perhaps the most obvious example here being the way in which we are affected by sublime works of music, which many writers, secular as well as religious, have characterised as having a profound spiritual significance. Roger Scruton wrote eloquently on this theme in several of his works, including his 2010 Gifford lectures, where he argued that experiencing a musical masterpiece (for example Wagner's Ring cycle) provides us with 'sacred' moments, moments 'outside time, in which the deep loneliness and anxiety of the human condition is overcome', and 'the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it'.[5]

The fourth category I have in mind arises in the context of loving relationships.[6] In some verses written by the nineteenth-century Irish poet Samuel Ferguson, and often heard set to a traditional Irish folk tune, we find the opening lines:

> Dear thoughts are in my mind,
> and my soul soars enchanted
> as I hear the sweet lark sing
> in the clear air of the day.
> For a tender beaming smile
> to my hope has been granted,
> and tomorrow she shall hear
> all my fond heart longs to say.[7]

The soaring lark is an expression of the poet's joy at being accepted by his beloved. But it is not just that the protagonist feels very pleased about what has happened. The idea of the soul soaring upwards like the lark in the 'clear air' expresses a peculiar upwelling of joyful

[5] Roger Scruton, 'The Sacred and the Human' [2010], http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/gifford/2010/the-sacred-and-the-human.

[6] The discussion that follows of the examples from Ferguson and Shakespeare draws on John Cottingham, *In Search of the Soul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), Ch. 1.

[7] Samuel Ferguson (1810–86).

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exaltation; and it is important for conveying this meaning that the term *soul* is employed. For what is suggested by putting it in terms of soul, as opposed to, say, the mind or the feelings, is that the event has a *spiritual significance* for the life of the subject: it involves his whole sense of self, of who he is, of the meaning of his existence. Like Othello in Shakespeare's play, when he greets Desdemona with the words 'O my Soul's joy!', the feeling is not merely one of pleasure or delight, but involves a complete outpouring of spirit:

> It gives me wonder great as my content
> To see you here before me. Oh my soul's joy,
> If after every tempest comes such calm
> Let the winds blow till they have wakened death …[8]

Once we start to reflect on the kind of human experience referred to here, we realize that breaking it down into component parts – belief, desire, cognition, emotion – would involve a kind of distortion. Important though the components are, the use of the term 'soul' alerts us to a deeper significance that has to be understood holistically: the cliché that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts is here quite true. We are dealing with something that impinges on the whole person; it affects people's entire conception of themselves and their lives at many levels of significance, not all of them perhaps accessed by the conscious mind. For example, in Othello's joy, there is a wonder at having earned the love and devotion of his spouse, an elation and sense of completion at being reunited with her, the sense of calm after the tempest of separation, but also a fragile sense of foreboding, a fear that the joy cannot last:

> If t'were now to die,
> 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
> My soul hath her content so absolute
> That not another comfort like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate.[9]

The peculiar resonance of Shakespeare's lines seems somehow linked to a wider sense of the significance of love in human life – how it can give meaning and purpose to someone's existence, and how the yearning that it engenders is bound up with awareness of love's precariousness, and the ever-present risk of loss.

All this is bound up with the experience of love as having a *spiritual* significance, a significance that goes far beyond the biological imperatives of reproduction, or the urge for sensual or emotional gratification. The yearning for love, and the 'soul's joy' that it brings when requited, are connected with the longing for what Simon May has aptly called

[8] William Shakespeare, Othello [c. 1604], act 2, scene 1.
[9] Shakespeare, Othello, act 2, scene 1.

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'ontological rootedness' – a longing for that which will ground and validate our existence, and give us a sense of being at home in the world, instead of alienated from it and alone.[10]

The Phenomenology of Spiritual Experience

From this brief survey of four representative examples of spiritual experience, something of the phenomenology of such experiences will already have emerged. In all four cases – when we marvel at the majestic wonders of the cosmos, when we contemplate with awe the authority of the moral law, when our whole being is irradiated by the uplifting power of music and other great art, and when our soul 'soars enchanted' with the exaltation of love for another human being – in all these cases the phenomenology involves, as I have said, a sense of something of deep significance for the meaning of our existence. But it is important that the dynamic here is not merely self-referential. On the contrary, it involves a sense of being *taken out of ourselves*. We lose for a time our self-absorbed preoccupations, and have a strong sense of being called to reach out to something that draws us forward and invites our allegiance. Even in the phrasing of Immanuel Kant, when he speaks of the moral law as something 'within us', there is no suggestion that it is a merely subjective or endogenous phenomenon. On the contrary, Kant stresses that it appears as something wholly distinct from the internally generated drives and inclinations that belong to us in virtue of our purely animal or biological nature: our reverence for the law is a sign of something necessary and universal, whose power over us we may resist, but which we must acknowledge.

Kant's term for such reverence, *Ehrfurcht*, is etymologically connected to the German verb *fürchten*, meaning to *fear*; and the English word 'awe' has a parallel etymology (the root being connected with the old Icelandic and Danish words for terror and dread). And indeed, even when we are focusing on the first of our categories of spiritual experience, our response to the glory and beauty of the cosmos, there is something there of trembling wonderment that is akin to a certain fear or dread; as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke famously put it, 'beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror'.[11] So the phenomenology of spiritual experience is of a fearful exaltation of spirit, and the 'fearful' element, I would suggest, derives in part from a sense of strangeness or *otherness* – the sense that the relevant feelings, though they well up deep within us, are *not* wholly endogenous but seem to constrain us

[10] Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 7.

[11] *Denn das Schöne ist nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang/ den wir noch grade ertragen.* (For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror/ that we are still just able to endure.) Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* [*Duineser Elegien,* 1933], First Elegy.

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from without, as we respond to something we cannot encompass or control, in the presence of which we are in a certain way helpless. It was this, I think, that the theologian John Henry Newman had in mind when he spoke of our awareness of the moral law, manifest in the deliverances of conscience, as being attended by a 'peculiarity of feeling', which 'carries the mind out of itself and beyond itself';[12] or which led another Victorian, Matthew Arnold, to speak of 'the Eternal not ourselves that makes for righteousness';[13] or which led a somewhat earlier writer, William Wordsworth, reflecting on the spiritual experiences of his childhood, to describe them as follows

> Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
> Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear.[14]

So, unlike the routine experiences of our lives, those episodes that are set apart from the ordinary by the use of the label 'spiritual' always carry a charge of mystery and fearful wonder. And although there is perhaps something ineffable about all human experience – it being impossible fully to capture in words the character of 'what it is like' for the experiencing subject (as Thomas Nagel famously put it)[15] – spiritual experience seems to have a special kind of ineffability, deriving from the fact that the subject is drawn forward towards something beyond themselves that they will never fully encompass. This clearly applies to what has been called (by Rudolf Otto[16] and others) the sense of the *numinous* – of the sublime and mysterious power that is a significant component in many accounts of spiritual experience. But it also applies, I think, even to what might seem a quite prosaic and unmysterious case, when we are responding to the moral law of respect for persons. For, as Emmanuel Levinas suggested, the unbounded, unencompassable quality of the face of the other alerts us to something holy, something we cannot fully analyse or define, but which we are required to acknowledge as *inviolable* (a thought that picks up Kant's term *unverletzlich*).[17]

[12] John Henry Newman, *The Philosophical Notebook* [*c.* 1859], ed. E. Sillem (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1970), p. 53.

[13] Matthew Arnold, *God and the Bible* [1875] (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1886), Preface, p. xxvii.

[14] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* [1798], Book 1.

[15] Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' [1974], in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.), Ch. 12.

[16] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* [*Das Heilige*, 1917], trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 2nd ed., 1950).

[17] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Desacralization and Disenchantment', from Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*. ed. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

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The Source of Spiritual Experience

I think it is clear from these examples that spiritual experience has a significance in our lives that is out of all proportion to its frequency, or to its role in relation to the basic necessities of our biological existence. We could perhaps survive without it, yet without it our lives would be immeasurably impoverished; and indeed without the moral dimension of respect and reverence for what is sacred or holy[18] in the world and in our fellow creatures, life would indeed be nasty, brutish and short – it would be less than human.

So what can be said about its *source*? The language of Psalm 19 which I quoted earlier might seem plain enough: the author both of the starry firmament and of the moral law is God, so it would follow that in our responses to these things – in the experiences we have been calling spiritual – we are responding to God. But of course such an 'answer' to the problem of the source of spiritual experience raises a host of further questions. The Judaic tradition is clear that God is not directly perceptible to humans – no man can see God and live, Moses is told in the book of Exodus (33:20). And even when God is manifest in a relatively direct manner to a particular human subject (to Moses on Mount Horeb, for example, or to Elijah in the wilderness) – it is in a *mediated* way – through the burning bush in the case of Moses, or the 'still small voice' in the case of Elijah (variously translated as 'a whisper', or 'a gentle wind', or 'a light, silent sound').[19]

So it would be a colossal mistake to anthropomorphize here. Not for nothing are the references to God in Psalm 19 and so many other places in the Bible shrouded in mystery. At the start of our Psalm, God is the mysterious *El* (strangely found in the plural form *Elohim* in the first verse of Genesis); and in the second half of the Psalm this becomes the unpronounceable tetragrammaton JHWH, sometimes crassly voiced out as 'Jehovah' or 'Yahweh', but in fact representing the sacred name of God that must not be spoken (its occurrence being tactfully indicated by the circumlocution 'the LORD' (in capitals) in the King James bible). We are dealing with something like Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*,[20] something that is said to be manifest in the glories of the natural world or in the sanctity of the moral law, but which is not to be regarded as a separate item to be listed alongside these things, yet which somehow remains more than the mere aggregate of things.

It may be helpful here to return for a moment to the poet William Wordsworth. The way Wordsworth speaks of the natural world is often called pantheistic – quite wrongly in my view, for it is much better

[18] Note that Levinas prefers 'holy' rather than 'sacred' ; see Jonathan Weidenbaum, 'The Holy Versus the Sacred', *Open Theology* 2017 (3), pp. 134–143.

[19] Exodus 3:4; 1 Kings 19:12.

[20] Otto, *The Idea of the Holy.*

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interpreted as pan**en**theistic. So construed, it can been seen to capture with great power and eloquence the way (or at least one important way) in which we have spiritual experience of the divine – not as identical with nature, but as present in and through all of the natural and the human world, as expressed for example in the famous lines written near Tintern Abbey, where the poet declares

> I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought
> And rolls through all things.[21]

The lines are majestic; but a philosophical critic may be disposed to object that the poetic talk of 'rolling through all things' fudges the crucial question of just what it is that is being referred to. Do we or do we not believe that the ultimate source of such spiritual experience is the God of traditional theism – a loving and just creator who enters into personal relationship with humanity?

Well, it is undeniable that the God of the Hebrew bible and the New Testament is often addressed in personal terms, and this is particularly so in moral contexts, both comforting and admonitory. God is the merciful 'thou' addressed in the famous lines of the twenty-third Psalm – 'surely thy loving kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life'; and God is addressed in the second person as the stern judge before whom the psalmist fears to be punished – *Domine ne in furore*: 'O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure' (Psalm 6). Taking their cue from this and a host of similar passages, many Christians, including prominent philosophers of religion, such as Richard Swinburne,[22] think of God as a person to be addressed: they subscribe to what has been called 'theistic personalism'. But there is another conception of God, taking its cue from Aquinas, and defended by the contemporary Dominican philosopher, Brian Davies, which wholly rejects theistic personalism. Davies persuasively argues that the God of the classical theism of Aquinas, and of Scripture, 'is not presented as a person subject to a moral code'; God is 'not a moral agent as we are'. Not even once in Scripture, Davies adds, do we find the formula 'God is a person', nor is there a single biblical text that can be translated 'God is morally good'. Rather, God is, on the

[21] William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* [1798].
[22] See R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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Thomistic conception, being itself, *ipsum esse* (and we find a perhaps somewhat similar conception in the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, who called God the 'ground of being').[23] In Aquinas, for whom being and goodness are interconvertible, God is also to be identified with *goodness itself*,[24] and appears in Scripture as the ultimate source goodness and of moral codes. This points us towards what Davies calls 'the mystery of God's goodness': we cannot comprehend what goodness in God amounts to, but we can recognize that all creatures naturally tend towards their good, and that the nature and tendencies of creatures are caused by God working in them.[25] Again, this need not be personalistic in any direct or literal sense; the essential content, rather, is that the created order is at some deep level a manifestation of goodness. And this again finds an echo in Wordsworthian panentheism, when the poet speaks of 'the cheerful faith that all that we behold/ is full of blessings'.[26]

Conclusion: Towards a Theistic Metaphysics

So where does all this leave us as regards the source of spiritual experience? Can we reasonably conclude that it has a divine source, or that the spiritual experiences we have discussed give us intimations of God? More specifically, can we move from the insights found in the nature poetry of Wordsworth, or the Kantian thoughts about the twin sources of reverence and wonder, all of which will resonate with many readers irrespective of their doctrinal commitments – can we move from such insights to a conclusion that is recognisably theistic in something like the Judaeo-Christian sense?

In order to do so, a first prerequisite would be to reconcile the elements in Judaism and Christianity that treat God in personal terms with the non-personal conception of the kind defended by Brian Davies and traceable to Aquinas. On the face of it, this is a difficult task, since notions like 'being itself' or the 'ground of being' seem more closely akin to an abstract conception of the Platonic type, and it begins to look as if personifying them as a 'thou' is a piece of naivety. This, I take it, was the kind of thing Iris Murdoch might have had in mind when she observed, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, that 'the good is the

[23] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Part I, qu. 4, art. 2; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 [1951]. Tillich published his magnum opus in English, having emigrated from Germany to the United States in the 1930s, but the idea of the 'ground of being' (= *der Seinsgrund*) bears the conceptual stamp of his mother tongue.

[24] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Part I, qu. 6, art. 2.

[25] Brian Davies, in Brian Davies and Michael Ruse, *Taking God Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 54-58. See also B. Davies, 'Comment: Is God a Person?', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 103, Issue 1106, (July 2022), pp. 433-435.

[26] Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*.

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reality of which God is the dream'.[27] Along the same lines, and in the spirit of Murdoch, one might add '*Being itself* is the reality of which God (construed as *a personal being*) is the dream'.

One answer to the dilemma has been suggested by Eleonore Stump in terms of what she calls 'quantum metaphysics'.[28] Her thought here is that since we are prepared to allow physicists to use two incompatible models, those of the wave and the particle, to describe *physical* reality at the quantum level, why should it not be equally acceptable to have a theology that describes ultimate *metaphysical* reality using two irreconcilable models, the impersonal model of 'being itself, and the model of a conscious personal divine agent? This is an intricately argued move, the subtle details of which there is no space to explore here, but one concern is that it may in the end come down to a 'partners in crime' strategy. In other words, why suppose that an unresolved paradox at the heart of theology can be alleviated by pointing to a similar unresolved paradox at the heart of physics?

Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition at least, it seems that the main driving force for holding on to a personalistic conception of God derives not from abstract theology, nor from the nature of spiritual experience (which on the face of it might not always seem particularly personalistic, judging by some of the examples considered in this paper), but rather from the nature of spiritual *praxis*. It is often suggested that it is a psychological imperative for the human soul in direst need to address itself to a 'thou', as witnessed in the maxim that there are no atheists in shell holes; or as Montaigne put it, there are 'few men so obstinate in their atheism that a pressing danger will not reduce to an acknowledgement of the divine power'.[29] And when a long line of Christian spiritual writers, from Paul to Augustine to Thomas à Kempis,[30] tell us to pray without ceasing, this is widely construed as involving a direct personal address to a personal God (though this is not to deny that there are other forms of spiritual praxis, for instance in the Buddhist tradition, which have a more impersonalist character).

Metaphysically, the implication of the personalistic flavour of much Judaeo-Christian spiritual praxis is that at the heart of reality there is, to use a phrase of Roger Scruton, a 'primordial "I"'.[31] If this encourages

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

[28] Eleonore Stump, 'The Nature of a Simple God', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 87 (2013), pp. 33-42, and 'Simplicity and Aquinas's Quantum Metaphysics' in Gerhard Krieger (ed.), *Die Metaphysik des Aristoteles im Mittelalter: Rezeption und Transformation* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 191–210.

[29] Michel de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond* [*Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, 1580], ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 8 (Montaigne attributes the saying to Plato).

[30] Paul, 1 Thessalonians 5: 17; Augustine, *Commentary on the Psalms* [392-418], on Psalm 37; Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ* [*De imitatione Christi, c.*1420], Ch. 9.

[31] Roger Scruton, *The Face of God* (London: Continuum, 2012), Ch. 6, p. 169.

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us to think we can grasp the nature of God by thinking of him as a sort of grand cosmic person, then the warnings of Brian Davies and other Thomistic thinkers about the dangers of anthropmorphizing God seem all too apt. God is not an additional item in the universe, let alone a person among other persons. But while conceding the force of this objection, it may still be possible to countenance the idea of a 'primordial "I"' at least in the following sense, namely, that our own human understanding of the first-person perspective of a conscious subject may be seen as providing some kind of analogy in terms of which we may think of God.

A further consideration here is that meaning, or significance, is a notion that is only really at home in the domain of consciousness or intelligence. Now our discussion so far has suggested that when we contemplate the starry heavens that filled Kant with awe, or when we recognize the power and authority of the moral law which inspired a similar Kantian reaction, or when our souls are lifted up in exaltation at the beauty of great music or art, or when we are taken beyond the prison of the ego by the power of love for another – in all these cases we respond as we do because these experiences put us in touch with something objective that has *ultimate significance*. And if our experience discloses an ultimate significance at the heart of things, then the argument for positing something analogous to a primordial 'I' would be that the only way we can understand such ultimate meaning (just as it is the only way we can understand any meaning at all) is in terms of something that is at least analogous to a conscious mind.

So putting the personal at a metaphysically deeper level than the impersonal might turn out in the end to be *not* a piece of naivety, or a mere 'dream' (as Iris Murdoch's phrase scathingly suggests), but something urged upon us by the nature of the phenomena disclosed in spiritual experience. The anthropomorphic mistake or piece of naivety would be exactly the opposite of the one alleged by Murdoch, namely to think that it is we alone, simply our own puny minds, that confer ultimate meaning. But if (as our analysis of spiritual experience has been consistently indicating) the significance of these phenomena is something we *respond to* but do not confer or invent, then we are left with the supposition that the reason they have the meaning and the value that they manifestly do is that they are taken up and enfolded and cherished by a primordial subject – the '*I am*' that corresponds to the sacred name of God.[32]

The resulting account of spiritual experience would be unashamedly theistic in something like the sense that was sketched out by Roger Scruton, albeit in the guise of a promised land that he felt himself

[32] See Exodus 3:14.

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unable to enter because of Kantian scruples about the limits of knowledge. In *The Face of God*, Scruton put it as follows:

> For the religious being … [there is] an attempt to see our relation to the world as we see our relation to each other – as *reaching through* the tissue of objects to *the thing that they mean* … [W]e extend this way of relating beyond the society of our fellows to the whole of nature, finding *subjectivity enfolded, as it were, in the world around us*. **If** there is such a thing as the real presence of God among us, that is how his presence must be understood: not as an abstract system of law, but as *a subjective view* that takes in the world as a whole.[33]

The eloquence of the account is tempered by its conditionality – the Scrutonian sceptic feels obliged to qualify this magnificent picture by bracketing it all within a giant 'if'. But if the scruples are derived from philosophical qualms of a Murdochian kind, they seem misplaced. If we start from a wholly abstract or impersonalist view of being, then the step to a primordial divine subject looks impossibly wide; it looks like elevating an accidental, emergent, late-coming feature of reality, namely consciousness, to the undeserved status of being the source of all things. And to borrow David Hume's acid remark, one might then well ask 'what peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call thought, that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe?'[34] But if we start from the other direction, from something like the idea of a primordial subject, then things become much easier; for if we start with the divine mind or intelligence, there is no insuperable difficulty in this also functioning as the ground of being – in its holding within its enfolding consciousness all that there is.[35] Or if the idea still seems unpalatable to those who are wedded to the dogma that in the origins and development of the cosmos *matter comes first*, it is certainly no more unpalatable that the fashionable 'panpsychism' that is solemnly debated in today's analytic philosophy of mind seminars – the bizarre idea that consciousness is an intrinsic micro-property of matter – despite the fact that everything we know about it indicates that it is a large-scale, holistic phenomenon attributable to entire organisms or beings as a whole.[36]

If we settle for God as personal, not in the anthropomorphic sense of 'an individual person', but in the more nuanced sense just explored that implies something like a primordial subject of consciousness, then we

[33] Scruton, *The Face of God,* Ch. 6, p. 156, emphasis supplied.

[34] David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* [*c.* 1755].

[35] So on this conception, Aquinas's *ipsum esse* would not perhaps be as far removed as might be supposed from Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, or even from the panentheism of Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura,* though it would require a separate paper to explore either of these suggestions. For Spinoza's panentheism, see Clare Carlisle, *Spinoza's Religion: A New Reading of the* Ethics (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[36] See further Cottingham, *In Search of the Soul,* Ch. 3.

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have a conception that is at least compatible with the traditional theistic hope that personal (consciousness-implying) qualities like compassion and loving kindness lie at the heart of reality. Such a conception of God would 'meet our needs' (to borrow a phrase from the letter to the Hebrews);[37] that is, it would meet the needs expressed in spiritual practices such as worship and prayer, by offering the hope of assuaging the longings of the human spirit in direst need.

Such a conception would also provide a metaphysical picture consistent with what is revealed in the range of spiritual experience we have been examining: no mere facile panacea or Murdochian 'dream', but something numinous and awful; a quasi-personal presence that *disturbs us* (in Wordsworth's significant choice of verb) with the 'joy of elevated thoughts', whose power embraces 'all thinking things, all objects of all thought';[38] the God in whom, as Paul put it, 'we live and move and have our being'.[39] Given the scope and phenomenology of the spiritual experiences we have been looking at, this does not look like an irrational Kierkegaardian leap of faith – any more than it qualifies, at the other extreme, as a settled piece of discursive knowledge. Instead, to give the last word to Immanuel Kant, with whom we began, it emerges as a coherent object of belief, for which there may be good reason to make room.[40]

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[37] Hebrews 7: 26.

[38] Wordsworth, see note 21, above.

[39] Acts 17: 28.

[40] 'I found it necessary to go beyond knowledge in order to make room for belief'. (*Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen*). Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft,* 2nd edn, 1787], B xxx (the small roman numerals refer to the original pagination of Kant's introduction to this second edition, known as 'B'). I am grateful for helpful comments when I presented a version of this paper in April 2022 at the online seminar series on S*pirituality and Experience*, held by the University of Roehampton/ Università Roma Tre *Centre for Practical Philosophy, Theology and Religion.*

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