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Spiritual desire and religious practice

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Abstract: This article clarifies the relationship between spiritual desire and religious practice. I outline a philosophical account of practice, and suggest that desire is one of four cornerstones of the concept of practice. I distinguish three kinds of practice – art practice, skill practice, and spiritual practice – which are differentiated by their structures of desire. I argue that 'spiritual desire' can be understood as an 'infinite desire'', and that spiritual practices offer determinate, embodied, culturally specific ways to express this infinite desire. Within this theoretical framework, I discuss certain salient features of experiences described during my interviews with religious practitioners, showing how these first-person accounts of spiritual desire and religious practice relate to my philosophical analysis.

Introduction

During the autumn of 2016, I interviewed Benedictine monks at Douai Abbey and lay members of the Manchester Buddhist Society about their religious practices. All my interviewees could be described as experienced practitioners, having been engaged in committed religious practice for at least twenty years. My eldest interviewee was Father G, who was then eighty, and had been a monk at Douai since he was eighteen. He told me how he had discerned his vocation as a young man, and I asked him to explain the difference between wanting to do something and being called to do it. 'Probably you couldn't tell the difference until you came', he replied:

> but I think the difference was, once you arrived, if you only *wanted* it and weren't *called* to it you wouldn't last very long. I think that's the difference. And then once you realize that this is what God wants, and that you are called, and you actually fit, then you realize that all the reasons that you came drop away, because you get to the reality. It's like being attracted by the package on the present and not knowing what's inside the box. When you've got into the box you don't bother about the wrapping anymore.

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Father G was not the only interviewee to invoke an interplay between human desire and divine desire (though the Buddhist practitioners spoke of this interplay in non-theistic terms) nor was he unusual in describing an evolution, indeed a transformation, of his spiritual desire over the long course of his practice.

This article seeks to clarify the relationship between spiritual desire and religious practice, and my method of enquiry is rather unusual for a philosopher. Some of the research presented here was supported by 'The Experience Project', a Templeton-funded research collaboration, and this emphasis on experience has encouraged me to explore how philosophy might be open to, and informed by, religious experience. By experience, I mean primarily the knowledge-by-acquaintance, acquired by long practice, which is conveyed by the phrase 'an experienced practitioner', rather than what is suggested by the phrase 'a religious experience' – though of course these two senses of 'experience' may be closely connected. This practice-oriented conception of religious experience is inclusive and undemanding, insofar as it does not signify anything special or unusual (such as an experience of the Holy Spirit, of transformed consciousness, of mystical union). Yet it is active, signifying participation in practices rather than simply observing the practices of other people.[1] Several scholars have criticized an elevated conception of religious experience, understood as a special subjective state, which they often trace to William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – and it seems that this conception is not limited to academic discourse.[2] I was interested to find that my interviewees, when told that I wanted to talk to them about their experience of practice, tended to assume both that I hoped to hear about extraordinary 'religious experiences', and that they were not especially qualified to speak of such experiences. They had a great deal to say, however, about their experience in the sense indicated by John Dewey when he wrote that experience encompasses 'what men do and suffer, what they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also how men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine'.[3]

In previous publications I have constructed a theoretical account of desire and practice in general, and of spiritual desire and religious practice in particular.[4] Having done so, I wondered how this account could connect with long-term religious practitioners' experiential accounts of how their desires and aspirations have shaped their practices, and been shaped by them. This orientation to 'experience' raises methodological questions, which I will return to at the end of this article. The first section, 'Practice and desire', will outline my philosophical account of practice, and discuss the role of desire within that account – for I suggest that desire is one of four cornerstones of the concept of practice. In the second section, 'Infinite desire', I will argue that spiritual desire – whether this is understood as desire for God, or non-theistically, for example as the desire for enlightenment – can be understood as an infinite desire, and that religious practices offer determinate, embodied, culturally specific ways to express this infinite desire.

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Within this theoretical framework, I will discuss certain salient features of the experiences described during my interviews with religious practitioners, showing how these first-person accounts of spiritual desire and religious practice relate to my philosophical analysis. The result is a clarification of the concept of spiritual practice, which also helps to show why an account of practices is essential to any philosophy of religious life.[5]

Practice and desire

By 'practice' I mean the repetition of an activity with the aim of cultivating a certain capacity and proficiency – for example, a musician practising her instrument, an athlete training for a competition. In a sense, practice can be considered a species of habit, which is a broader category of repeated action. Yet if practices are habits we deliberately cultivate, rather than fall into accidentally, this difference has effects so significant that practice might be contrasted to habit: in some cases at least, and certainly in the case of addiction, habit is a contraction of a person's sphere of activity and experience, while practice tends towards development and growth. On the other hand, practice can morph into habit: for example, in learning to drive a car, the different elements of this skill must initially be practised deliberately and with effort, but once a certain level of proficiency is reached the activity becomes habitual and effortless, no longer a matter of cultivation.

Given the continuities and differences between habit and practice, reflection on habit provides a starting point for understanding practice. This starting point enables us to draw on an extensive discourse on habit, which has been thematized more explicitly than practice within the philosophical tradition, and provides us with the insight into habit and practice conveyed by the etymology of 'habit'. This word comes from the Latin verb *habere*, and corresponds to the Greek *hexis*: both words signify having and holding, acquisition and possession, which suggest the duration or persistence of a certain relation over time.[6] And the various uses of the English 'habit' – to denote the way a crystal or a plant grows; a pattern of animal behaviour, such as a way of finding food and shelter; a psychological pattern of human thinking and affect; a physiological posture or bearing; a frequently occurring and recognizable form of expression, such as a gesture or a figure of speech; and a uniform mode of dress, such as a monk's habit or a riding habit – all have in common the notion of shape or form. In each case, 'habit' indicates a shape or pattern of growth, a particular way of moving through space and time – a particular way of moving through the world. Considered very generally, habit signifies the holding of a specific form over a stretch of time.[7]

From this provisional definition, we may proceed to an analysis of habit, understood primarily as a mode of human activity – for practice is exclusively human, and if it is a species of habit, then it must be a species of habit in this sense. In

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my 2014 book *On Habit*, I identified three conditions of habit-acquisition: repetition, receptivity to change, and resistance to change. Insofar as human beings are 'creatures of habit', we are subjects of repetition: beings who are formed and ordered by repetitions occurring both outside and within ourselves. We are modified by our own movements, as well as by our experiences and encounters.[8] This formation is facilitated by two contrary conditions: receptivity to change, and resistance to change. We acquire habits only because we are susceptible to influence, because we are modifiable; yet the persistent, enduring force of habit testifies to our resistance to change. These two conditions are transcendental: I am not making empirical claims about how habit operates, but asking how any being must be constituted in order for repetition to make a difference to it, and thus to be capable of habit. We may indeed regard receptivity and resistance as physiological characteristics; and in fact the intriguing combination of receptivity and resistance that conditions habit-acquisition is captured by the relatively modern concept of plasticity, the capacity to take on and hold a certain form, which is now a key term in neuroscientific theory. In the course of his discussion of habit, William James defined plasticity as 'the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once', and argued that 'the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed'.[9] Yet receptivity and resistance are not limited to physiology or biology: a person's attitude, for example, might be described as more or less receptive or resistant to a certain idea or influence, or to change in general. And in the context of religious life, practitioners may speak of being open to God, to grace, or to 'whatever comes', and of resisting temptation, distraction, Satan or Mara.

This account of habit is completed by the addition of a fourth element: desire, which animates the movements of repetition, receptivity, and resistance.[10] Conversely, each living being's particular pattern of repetition, receptivity, and resistance shapes and channels its desire, expressing its distinctive way of being in the world. In his 1838 essay *De l'habitude*, Félix Ravaisson suggests that all habit is animated by desire, and ultimately by 'the good', a view which indicates the influence on his thinking of both Aristotelian metaphysics and Catholic theology.[11] Ravaisson calls habit a 'way of being'.[12] This might sound vague, but in fact it is a profound and insightful claim that signals the ontological significance of desire, and thus of habit. We do not simply have desires, but we are – at least in some sense, and to some extent – constituted by desire, and our habits are formations of this desire: the shape they take as they are lived. For Ravaisson, desire is always desire for goodness, and ultimately desire for God, though he also espouses the Neoplatonic doctrine that all existence, insofar as it participates in God's being, is good, and thus desirable. Even the habit of a plant – the way it spreads along the ground, or shoots upwards – is its particular way of expressing its need for light and water, which signifies its desire to *be*.

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Habits give form to desires: they are specific, particular ways of expressing (and meeting) a desire or a need. For example, we all have a general desire for food, which through custom has been channelled into a desire for food at certain times of day – at lunchtime, for instance. This is often particularized further into a habit of eating certain things for lunch, perhaps going to a certain café and ordering a certain sandwich, and even sitting at a certain table in the café. Similarly, we may have a general desire for love and attention which, through the relationships we form with other people, becomes particularized as a desire to be loved (and indeed, to be loved in certain ways) by a specific person. As these examples show, within an individual's life a universal desire can be particularized, through habit, in a very determinate way.

Practice shares with habit the fundamental idea of form, or formation, and it also shares the four conceptual cornerstones just outlined: repetition, receptivity, resistance, and desire. However, these four elements are configured differently in *practice* than they are in *habit*. A person acquires a habit when her desire for a particular object (and for the experience produced by this object) leads to the repeated pursuit of that object (and of that experience). This repetition produces within her a modification, such as a strengthened inclination and a diminished effort in the relevant activity, which can be identified as the acquisition of a habit. But she has not directly willed the repetition itself, nor did she desire the resulting modification: her desire for the particular drove the repetition, and the resulting habit is simply its unintended consequence. For example, I have got into a habit of going to the Fleet River Bakery for lunch and ordering a grilled cheese sandwich, because the first time I did this I enjoyed it, and found myself wanting to repeat the experience at subsequent lunchtimes; I did not wish or plan to become a frequent customer at Fleet River, nor to habitually eat a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch. This structure is even clearer in the case of addiction: people do not intend to become alcoholics, or heavy smokers, but their desire for one particular drink or cigarette – specifically, the *next* drink or the *next* cigarette – generates repetition, which produces modifications, including a condition of physical and psychological dependency.

In the case of practice, by contrast, a person desires a certain modification of herself, and she explicitly wills repetition as a means to this end. For example, she wants to be a safe, proficient driver, or a better-performing athlete, or a more accomplished musician, and with this goal in mind she undertakes a regime of practice. She may or may not want to undertake the particular activity on any given occasion: she might dread the next driving lesson, be tempted to skip today's training session, or not feel like practising her scales, but these immediate inclinations are, in the case of successful practice, subsumed under the longer-term goal of cultivation. It is a common phenomenon of practice to feel resistance to the particular, yet to overcome this resistance with the desired outcome in mind; this is why practice, unlike habit, requires discipline (though of course *breaking* a habit often requires discipline). In my conversations with

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religious practitioners, this phenomenon of resistance was described several times. Ken, a Buddhist practitioner who has been meditating regularly for thirty years, told me that 'practice long ago became the most important thing' in his life, yet when I asked him whether he looks forward to his daily meditation practice, he replied: 'There's always been resistance to that which is of benefit. In any spiritual practice you have to overcome that. But once I start, you say oh of course, this is why I'm doing it.'

This brings us to another difference between habit and practice. As I have suggested, both require a combination of receptivity to change and resistance to change, and this is acknowledged, if only implicitly, in the case of practice. The practitioner regards repeated practice as a viable means of acquiring a desired proficiency only because she knows that this practice will make a difference to her, and thus that her nature or dispositions are modifiable, receptive to change. She also expects this difference to have some duration (like the difference you make to the ground when you walk across a muddy garden) rather than being totally ephemeral (like the difference you make to the surface of a lake when you throw a stone into it); she believes that if she practices today, the difference this makes will last until tomorrow, and that any proficiency she acquires will not simply evaporate as soon as she ceases practising – and this expectation testifies to her tacit grasp of her resistance to change. In habit and practice, the balance between receptivity and resistance shifts in different ways. In habit, receptivity has the upper hand at the outset, and we find ourselves effortlessly, unintentionally modified by our own actions; having acquired a habit, however, we may encounter a deep resistance to changing it.

Over time, habits can carve deep grooves into our existence, both inwardly and outwardly, and they can narrow down the range of possible actions open (or apparently open) to us. For example, once established in my habit of frequenting the Fleet River Bakery at lunchtime and ordering my grilled cheese sandwich, I might find it difficult to contemplate going to a different, unfamiliar place for lunch; my habit of taking a certain route to work every day may prevent me from considering alternative paths. Of course, this restriction is one of the great benefits of habit: precisely by imposing certain limits, narrowing the range of possibilities, habit saves us the time and energy it would take to contemplate, weigh up, and choose between all the options available to us. Yet sometimes, most obviously in the case of severe addiction, this blessing becomes a curse. In extreme cases, an addict's life is narrowed to a single habit, a single channel, carved by the repetition of an absolutely determinate particular, which subsumes all her other desires, orders her days, and dominates her interactions with others. (This existential contraction makes addiction pathological, beyond its physical effects: life becomes a closed loop, devoted to a determinate set of sensations that is in itself entirely meaningless and indifferent, allowing no scope for freedom or growth.) In practice, by contrast, resistance predominates at the outset, and it often takes considerable effort to persist in practice and cultivate the intended

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capacity; over time, however, this process yields continuing development and growth, so that we can see receptivity to change as the dominant element of practice.

Putting habit and practice alongside each other shows how desire, receptivity, and resistance are configured differently in each case. While habit and practice are both formations of desire, habit accomplishes a contraction of desire to concrete particulars, whereas practice facilitates a development, maturation, and refinement of desire – and the particularities of practice may vary and shift in the course of this process. This latter point was illustrated by the experience of all my interviewees. Ken told me how his Buddhist practice has focused on a series of different techniques over the years, including *samatha* (concentration) meditation, devotional chanting, yoga *asana* (postures) and the cultivation of *metta* (loving kindness). At Douai Abbey, Father C described changes in his early-morning silent prayer in the chapel: when he was struggling through a bereavement, he moved his customary place from the centre of the chapel to a seat next to the sacrament, which offered greater support, then returned to his previous position a few months later.

Having sketched out this account of practice as a formation of desire, I will now turn to the concept of infinite desire, which further clarifies the structure and significance of religious practice.

Infinite desire

I began by considering practice as a species of habit, and then drew some distinctions between habit and practice, suggesting that they involve different formations of desire; I have established that practice, unlike habit, is oriented by a desire for the expected outcome of the practice, understood as a modification within the practitioner produced by her repeated activity. Now I will attempt a further clarification of the significance of desire in specifically religious practice, by considering three different kinds of practice: skill practice, art practice, and spiritual practice. Driving a car is an example of a skill practice. Ballet dancing is an example of an art practice, but this category is not limited to the process of creating works of art such as dances, paintings, or poems: art practices belong to the art of living, understood broadly as the human pursuit of the good life – which may include artistic, intellectual, and ethical activities. While 'spiritual practice' encompasses a large range of phenomena, and indeed might be conceived as an entire way of life, meditation and prayer provide concrete examples of spiritual practice, which I will elaborate below. Conceptually, if not normatively, there is a hierarchy among these three kinds of practice, insofar as art practice incorporates skill practice, and spiritual practice incorporates features of both skill practice and art practice. The lines between the three may not be hard and fast, but distinguishing between them contributes to a philosophical account of religious practice.

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All practice is oriented by a desire for an outcome, and uses the repetition of particular processes as a means to this end. However, the three kinds of practice mentioned above conceive their goal or outcome differently. The difference between skill practice and art practice is illuminated by Talbot Brewer's recent essay 'Desire and Creative Activity', which draws on R. G. Collingwood's distinction between art and craft:

> The mark of a craft, for Collingwood, is that one's productive efforts are guided by a precise conception of the end at which one aims, and productive actions are grasped in advance of their enactment. With art, Collingwood says, things are very different. The intended result is not preconceived in fixed detail, or with precision, prior to the moment of creativity, leaving only the planning and execution before us.[13]

Collingwood's distinction between art and craft belongs to his aesthetic theory, but when it is applied to a broader range of human activity it captures the difference between skill practice and art practice. Skill practice is oriented by a desire for a determinate goal, clearly specified in advance. Once this goal is attained, the practice is complete. Perhaps, as in the example of learning to drive a car, practice then morphs gradually into habit, as repetition of the activity takes on a new significance: at some (possibly indiscernible) point, I am no longer practising my driving – I am just driving. While skill practice is oriented to a determinate end, art practice is oriented by desire for an end that is to some extent indeterminate.

Brewer invokes this notion of indeterminate desire to elucidate his account of 'dialectical activity'. This kind of activity is consonant with what I am calling 'art practice': Brewer explains that his concept of dialectical activity 'is supposed to ground a revisionist Aristotelian conception of the good human life – a conception that accommodates the fact that human life, even at its best, is marked by a continuous awakening to the good, not full apprehension of it', and his examples of dialectical activities include contemplative thought, conversation, making art, sports, and romantic and family relationships.[14] Dialectical activities 'are marked by their self-unveiling character. The only way to grasp the distinctive value internal to them, hence to refine one's sense of what it would be to carry them forward in a way that answers to that value, is to throw oneself into them with due passion and openness. What opens the possibility of increased depth is that our capacity to recognize the good extends beyond our capacity to pre-envision and concretize it in action.'[15]

Dialectical activity, or art practice, has a provisional, uncertain character. It is clearly goal-oriented, and indeed often deeply devoted to a sense of the good, yet the precise contours of this good cannot be specified in advance. Perhaps they gain greater specificity over the course of practice, but Brewer suggests that this is an open-ended process. This openness is not a sign of indifference or a lack of commitment, a case of hedging one's bets; on the contrary, it is a receptivity born of commitment (or 'passion', as Brewer puts it) to a good whose nature remains, to some extent, elusive. Brewer explains:

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> There is a perfectionist element in the conception of the good life grounded in dialectical activity, but the perfectionist practice in question is not a sort of continual self-disparagement. What one affirms, and is guided by, is something latent in what one is already doing . . . Dialectical activity is carried forward by thought that remains open to what is immanent in and yet exceeds its thus-far-achieved expressions. This teleologically inflected, anticipatory vision just is the practical thinking that carries forward dialectical activity.[16]

Brewer's account of dialectical activity is broadly humanist, rather than religious. Nevertheless, his analysis certainly applies to spiritual practice, where we see an indeterminacy about the good towards which the practice aims, and also a dialectic between the practitioner's activity and her conception of the good, which evolve in tandem and shift in response to one another. Indeed, spiritual practice seems to be the pre-eminent case of a dialectical activity, insofar as practitioners often recognize the indeterminacy of their goal and the open-endedness of their practice, and incorporate this recognition into their way of being on their spiritual path. Within the Christian theological tradition, the ultimate goal of practice can be conceived as knowledge and love of God, which perhaps consists in a communion with God; yet God is conceived as infinite and transcendent, never wholly accessible to experience or graspable by the intellect. Anselm's *Proslogion*, to cite just one example of this theological view, describes a practice of devotional prayer and philosophical contemplation that seeks God, who is specified in advance as 'that than which nothing greater can be thought', yet through this practice Anselm reaches the affirmation that God is 'boundless' and elusive, 'greater than can be thought'.[17] In the Buddhist tradition, similarly, the ultimate goal of practice is conceived as an enlightenment or liberation which cannot be described, imagined, or conceptualized in advance. In both cases, practice is oriented by desire for a good that is not only an indeterminate object, but not an object at all. This gives a hint of one significant way in which spiritual practice differs from art practice, or from Brewer's humanist brand of dialectical activity, and I will say more about this shortly.

Most of the religious practitioners I interviewed described an experiential correlate to the theological doctrine of divine infinity and transcendence, though their experiences of indeterminacy took a variety of forms. Some embarked on their practice oriented by a certain theological view – a particular image of God's will, for example – and then found themselves revising this view in the course of their practice; others began with a very vague sense of what they were seeking. Father C, for example, told me how he prayed for the first time when he was seriously ill in his early twenties, and experienced 'a deep peace in prayer, the first time I'd had that experience'. I asked him who he was praying to, and he couldn't say – he'd had no image of God, and was 'just baffled by it all, really'. Ken told me how he was brought to his Buddhist practice through 'some kind of hankering or thirst . . . there was always that searching'; he spent time in Sri Lanka as a child, and was fascinated by the Hindu temples and Buddhist monks he saw there; 'if I had an encyclopaedia I'd flick to the sections on religion, it

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was the eastern religions, and I could look at the pictures, and I was always drawn to that'. When I asked what was drawing him, he replied:

> something beyond this mundane life, there must be something more. I had working-class parents with limited horizons, this 1950s bland conformity, and I was thirsting for something beyond that, with this sense that mundane activities were shallow, lacked depth or richness. I can't explain it, but I know I always had it. A thirst, but I didn't really know what it was.

Steve, another member of the Buddhist group who, like Ken, began to explore Buddhism in the 1960s, recalled the indeterminacy of his early aspiration to 'enlightenment':

> I think what I thought then was, that would be nice, whatever it is, I've no idea what it is, I'm not so sure it's attainable anyway . . . It was a concept without any content whatsoever, because how could you know? It's like this fantastic prize which nobody can really define, but because it's in the literature and because it's started to be used as a word, everybody starts saying, oh yeah you've got to get enlightened, blah blah blah.

The desire at work in the 'dialectical activities' of art practice and spiritual practice can be described as an infinite desire. In the first place, infinite here means simply non-finite, indeterminate (or, perhaps, 'blah blah blah'): an infinite desire is an open-ended aspiration or longing for something that cannot be fully specified. This entails at least a degree of apophaticism, not only about the 'object' of the desire, but also about what it would be to attain this object, and through the course of practice there is the perpetual possibility that the practitioner's grasp of her goal will need to be revised. Of course, there is a difference between an indeterminacy that can be attributed to inexperience, and the indeterminacy attested by advanced religious practitioners and teachers. Like any novices, those embarking on a spiritual path can be expected to know relatively little about the terrain they set out to explore; their situation might be compared to that of expectant parents, who do not yet know much about what parenthood is like. Understanding what it is to be a good Buddhist or a good Christian, like understanding what it is to be a good parent, unfolds gradually in and through the activity itself. So the religious novice's indeterminate conception of the good which is orienting her practice tells us something about the nature of this good – that it is the kind of thing that cannot be known properly from the outside, in theory, but only from the inside, in practice – but apart from this, it reveals more about the practitioner's inexperience than about the intrinsic indeterminacy of her desire's object. However, when highly experienced practitioners find their goal to be indeterminate, this indicates that the knowledge they have undoubtedly gained in the course of their practice does not consist in a more precise specification of the object of their desire. They have probably become better acquainted with the practice and with themselves, and gained a deepening faith in the good that orients their practice, yet this good remains indeterminate.

Looking back on more than thirty years of Buddhist practice, Steve told me that his practice certainly had 'a direction', but

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> the direction emerged as it was lived. And what was going to come next, and still now what is going to come next, I have no clue about. But I have a confidence in what's happened so far, that there is a direction, that there is a deeper motive or drive. It's difficult to use the right word, because knowing what that is even is difficult – so how to define it, is it a drive, is it a longing, is it an energy, is it a lack? It's difficult to know.

It was clear to me that Steve has a deep and detailed knowledge of his spiritual path, and that he provides valuable guidance to less experienced practitioners. Nevertheless, he was unable to define or describe precisely the goal of his practice. While the Christian practitioners I interviewed had better access to a theological vocabulary to describe, in theistic terms, their sense of the good that motivated and guided their practice, reflection on this vocabulary – on the concept of an infinite, eternal, transcendent God, for example – reveals an indeterminacy that parallels Steve's account.

While spiritual practice shares with art practice the 'dialectical' character that Brewer describes so well, so that in both cases we may speak of an infinite desire, it seems that the goal of spiritual practice is more radically indeterminate, and that spiritual desire is infinite in a stronger sense. Two further differences distinguish spiritual practice from art practice, and these are not merely differences of degree. First, although spiritual practice, like all practice, is structured teleologically, practitioners often find that a goal-oriented mentality, and its attendant concepts of progression and attainment, have limited applicability to their spiritual path, and may even become counter-productive. Indeed, the loosening of this mentality is frequently experienced as one of the fruits of religious practice, and as a sign of a deepening, maturing understanding of the spiritual path. Ken gave a good description of this phenomenon: 'I definitely get a sense that the more active searching I do, it's almost like it pushes it away', he told me, and when I asked him why, he replied,

> Because it was always something I wanted for me. I wanted it for Ken. Ken was going to experience this thing. And there were also other bits and pieces attached to it, like Ken was going to be a teacher. You know, ego, identity. And certainly in the early days, oh look at Ken the Buddhist, you know, I'm different, I'm this, I'm that, I'm into something really special here. And also with the practice, *samatha* practice is very much to do with developing higher states of mind – and you do, you can experience various phenomena, fairly rapidly, and . . . I certainly experienced very peaceful states, like on retreats. So it was like you were getting something, but actually I've come to see [that] this was all identity. What I've realized is, you can't strive after this. It's a gentle . . . – this is going to sounded clichéd – it's a letting go, not a pulling to oneself. And it's not me that experiences it. Which is very hard [to describe] – I can't explain it at all.

Similarly, Steve told me that 'to say it's a desire is hard, because it's not a thing you can drive yourself to; you can feed something in you that grows, that allows that place to be accessed, is [how] I can best put it'.

The second distinctive feature of spiritual practice, linked to the first, is that in this case the desire or motivating force that animates the practice is experienced not as one-sided, but as reciprocal. Within the Christian tradition, this is a familiar

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idea: it is not simply that human beings want to know and love God, but that God wants human beings to know and love him, and indeed this latter, divine desire is the ground of the former, human desire. It was not surprising, therefore, to hear Father G describe his sense of vocation to the monastic life as a cooperation between his own desire and God's desire:

> if you only *wanted* it and weren't *called* to it you wouldn't last very long . . . And then once you realize that this is what God wants, and that you are called, and you actually fit, then you realize that all the reasons that you came drop away, because you get to the reality.

This idea of 'what God wants' was also prominent for another Douai monk, Father A, who described how his understanding of God's will has gradually changed since he entered the monastery:

> There's a saying, which somebody said to me when I first came here but I didn't believe it at the time, that the reasons you stay in a community are very different from the reasons why you came. And it's very obvious in one sense, but – it's certainly been the case.

When he began the novitiate, Father A envisaged an angry God who wanted him to improve himself, become a better person, and he believed that the monastic life would help him to accomplish this. Over his years at Douai, however, he discovered that '[this is] not what it's about at all. It's about being open to serve and to respond to God in many different ways. It's not all about me at all.' I asked him whether, when he talks about responding to God and serving God, he has a clear sense of who God is, and he replied:

> Again that changes. I'm sure I had this image of God in my head when I first came that he was some sort of white-bearded old man in the sky [who] was very angry. I was brought up in the Methodist tradition and I can remember hearing lots of very angry things being said about God from the pulpit. My father's side come from a Calvinist background – and I think probably subconsciously I was picking up a lot of very negative messages about God being a punishing God, an angry God. And maybe part of my motivation for coming here was really coloured by that: it was, well, if I don't do this God's going to be cross with me. And thankfully, over time, my image now is much more of a loving God, a compassionate God, a God who isn't going to catch me out, but is actually wanting me to serve him in love, not serve him out of fear.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the Buddhist practitioners also described a force or desire beyond themselves, which, they recognized in retrospect, drew them into their practice, and continues to guide them through it. Ken expressed his sense of wonder about discovering his spiritual path: 'when I look back on my life, I think how did that happen?' I asked whether he had any sense of what might be directing the process, and he replied: 'It's mainly mystery, mainly mystery. But whatever I'm experiencing, or whatever's being experienced, it's bigger than me, do you see what I mean? So it's just part of that bigness, it's that bigness expressing itself. I can't explain that very well . . .' When I asked if this 'bigness' has any other characteristics, he replied: 'Emptiness, spaciousness, love. Almost purpose, or – not purpose. See, I'm no philosopher and I don't often think about these things. But there's something unfolding, some great mystery unfolding, and it kind of

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unfolds almost in spite of you.' Like Ken, Steve struggled to find words to express his sense of a force directing his religious practice. He seemed to feel surprised, and even a little embarrassed, to be suggesting that he was being moved by something 'from outside', 'a quality above', 'something out there that is very real':

> there's been almost like a wake-up call from outside. This might start to sound a little bit weird, but it's as though there's a quality above that suddenly links to a quality in me and feeds that. Here [in my Buddhist community] that [has] been found or triggered, but it strikes me that it's everywhere in potential. If you're lucky enough to be able to sit in the midst of that – wherever, on a park bench, in your garden – then let it happen, that's my feeling, go with it. Again, it feels like another stage of learning about consciousness and its extent, and it certainly seems to have expanded beyond this body, quite a way, and it almost feels that there is something out there which is very real and this is the beginnings of a linkage with that, somehow. It sounds a bit odd, but that's the way it seems to be going at the moment.

Conclusion

My philosophical enquiry into practice and desire in general, and religious practice and spiritual desire in particular, has yielded a theoretical account that seems to fit with the experience of religious practitioners. Spiritual practice differs from skill practice in being 'dialectical' and open-ended, and in being oriented to an indeterminate goal, which is understood more deeply in and through the practice. Spiritual practice shares these features with art practice, but its indeterminacy seems more radical; its goal-directed structure is not entirely undermined, but certainly unsettled and problematized; and its animating desire seems to transcend the practitioner's agency, so that we might describe the practice not simply as desiring, but as being-desired. While these are, I believe, productive distinctions, they need not necessarily divide practices into rigid categories. For example, athletic activity might be predominantly a skill practice, but incorporate elements of art practice; the creative arts can be considered primarily as art practices, yet art practitioners may share with spiritual practitioners a sense of being moved by a transcendent agency. Perhaps another way of approaching this issue of categorization is to allow that, for example, the pursuit of sporting excellence can be an art as well as a skill, and that the work of painters and poets can be spiritual as well as artistic.

Nevertheless, the nature of religious practices is illuminated by showing that they cannot be exhaustively understood as skill practices, or as art practices (or humanist dialectical activities). Indeed, an approach to religious practice that is confined to these paradigms may be deficient, or at least limiting, from a theological and spiritual perspective. The religious life does not simply consist in mastering techniques or attaining a certain level of performance – in becoming proficient in prayer, or an accomplished meditator, for example. And the agency at work in the religious life is understood by practitioners – if not universally, then often enough to be taken seriously – to have its source beyond themselves;

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the good to which their practice aspires is not envisaged simply as a not-yet-realized and not-quite-specified ideal, but as an already active power, and this allows us to see the desires grounded in this good to be reciprocal rather than unilateral, cosmic as well as individual.

Once we understand spiritual desire to be a radically infinite desire for an object (or non-object) that remains at least partially indeterminate and elusive, the function as well as the character of religious practices becomes clearer. All practices, like habits, give a particular, determinate form to desire: they are ways of channelling our desire, and thereby enacting it concretely. Infinite desires, however, have to be expressed in ways that preserve their infinity or indeterminacy – otherwise they are converted into finite desires, a contraction or displacement that theistic traditions identify as idolatry. There is a practical tension here: on the one hand, it is *necessary* to finitize spiritual desire here in the world, through embodied, culturally specific activity, for this is the only way to express and live faithfully to it; on the other hand, there is a *danger* in finitizing this desire, and thereby forsaking the infinite good to which it aspires. This tension structures the religious life, and suggests normative principles for thinking about what a successful or authentic religious life might look like. Religious practices offer ways of inhabiting this tension. All religious traditions provide a wide variety of practices – practices of devotion, contemplation, or enquiry; practices of silence, listening, chanting, and song; individual exercises and communal rituals – which afford practitioners a means of particularizing and channelling, and thereby expressing and pursuing, their infinite desire. These practices are dialectical: their repetitions enact a receptivity and overcome a resistance to what is not entirely known and specifiable in advance. For example, spiritual practitioners must learn to resist their habitual tendency to grasp after a particular experience, or to displace a transcendent God by an idolatrous image. Religious practices give form to an infinite desire, channelling, enacting, and expressing fidelity to it, within the conditions of a finite embodied life; and yet their very form incorporates an element of openness – perhaps not quite formlessness, but indeterminacy. If this sounds paradoxical and mysterious, this is a strength rather than a weakness in a theory of religious practice, for paradox and mystery are common features of religious experience – the more so, it seems, the more experienced the practitioner.

Afterthought: experience and the practice of philosophy

The method followed in this article brings into focus a question that is pertinent to every philosophical enquiry: what is the relationship between philosophy and experience? Drawing on interviews with religious practitioners might look like an appeal to experience as a higher authority than philosophical analysis. Of course, the very concept of experience, as well as its validity as the basis of testimony, is problematic.[18] Nevertheless, while appeals to experience can always be contested, it is, as Clifford Geertz nicely put it, 'equally true that without

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[experience] cultural analyses seem to float several feet above their human ground'.[19] And while the connections between philosophy and experience usually remain unacknowledged and unexamined, our philosophical thinking is invariably informed by experience. In the case of the present enquiry, it would be difficult to imagine addressing the themes of spiritual desire and religious practice without drawing on my own experience of going to churches or participating in silent retreats, and of conversations with friends who engage in religious practices. Whenever our philosophical work engages with historical sources, we encounter texts which, in complex ways, reflect their authors' experiences, and reconstruct (or construct) and communicate those experiences. This is obvious in texts such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Anselm's *Proslogion*, yet all philosophical writing contains the sediments of experience – perhaps stretching over several centuries – and is always open to new experience. Here I am now, writing this article: my living, breathing, warm-blooded experience; here you are, reading this article: your experience.

My interviews with religious practitioners did not provide me with data that either proves my philosophical theory, or needs to be explained by it. If that had been my aim, this would be a very poor effort at social-scientific research. The interviews were not surveys but conversations, and the participants were in no way a representative sample of religious practitioners – though my decision to talk to Catholic monks and lay Buddhists allowed me to discern structural features of practice that are not exclusive to a particular theology, nor to a particular contemplative technique. These practitioners contribute to my enquiry not as representatives or statistics, but as witnesses – expert witnesses, whose knowledge-by-acquaintance and experiential understanding of spiritual desire and religious practice can expand, deepen, and challenge the knowledge and understanding accomplished through conceptual analysis. Philosophers frequently use examples to illustrate and clarify their theoretical claims; often these examples are generalized hybrids of imagination and experience, typical and recognizable but not specific. My conversations with practitioners have provided me with examples of a different kind: specific, singular examples, expressed in the practitioner's own words.[20]

It is also worth making explicit, within this brief methodological reflection, that the work of philosophy is shaped by elements of skill practice and art practice, and perhaps even spiritual practice.[21] In the present case, the goal of this philosophical work is a deepening understanding of spiritual desire and religious practice. The complex and open-ended nature of this goal makes its pursuit an art practice, what Talbot Brewer calls a 'dialectical activity': my object, and what it means to understand this object, are both sufficiently indeterminate to render my desire for them infinite, in the sense outlined in the second section of this article. I have pinned down an account of practice at four corners, yet the reality of practice – to which my interviewees have borne witness – gives rise to provisional, variable, and shifting interpretations. Furthermore, making an encounter with lived

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experience an explicit part of my philosophical enquiry accentuates its own dialectical character. My conversations with practitioners did not simply elicit descriptions of experience: like any conversation, they were singular experiences in themselves. In incorporating them into this article, I have been forced to confront what is lost in transcription: the tones of voice, the pauses, the longer silences, the tears, the 'body language', the feeling that passes between two human beings who talk to one another. There is a value, however, in letting the inarticulate, indeterminate fullness of experience exert a certain pressure on one's philosophical thinking, even if – indeed, *because* – it renders one's enquiry more evidently inconclusive.

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Notes

1. This conception of experience thus cuts through the distinction, proposed by Wilhelm Dilthey, between mere 'experience' and 'an experience', the former being 'simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events' and the latter being distinguishable, isolable events with 'an initiation and a consummation' which 'disrupt' the ordinary flow of 'mere experience'; see Dilthey (1976), 210; Turner (1986).
2. The concept of religious experience as a special kind of subjective state has been traced to Schleiermacher as well as to William James: see Proudfoot (1985). For an overview, see Sharf (1998); Taves (2009), 3–15, 56–87. Sharf suggests that the conception of experience I am adopting here, signifying (in Sharf's words) 'to participate in, to live through', is 'relatively unproblematic', whereas he is very critical of the 'more epistemological' sense of experience as a 'mental event or inner process' (Sharf (1998), 104). For a theologically oriented discussion of Jamesian religious experience, drawing on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, see Lash (1988), 9–50. More recent critiques of an over-emphasis on extraordinary experiences in philosophy of religion are undertaken in Gschwandtner (2014) and Barrett (2017).
3. Dewey (1929), 10; see also Abrahams (1986).
4. See Carlisle (2014); Carlisle (2018).
5. The argument in this article thus builds on that advanced in Carlisle (2018).
6. See Carlisle (2014), 17–22.
7. See *ibid*., 13–17.
8. On the concept of repetition, see Deleuze (1995); Carlisle (2010); Pickstock (2013); Carlisle (2014), 11–12.
9. James (1984), 126. See also Carlisle (2013b); Carlisle (2014), 21–22.
10. See Carlisle (2018).
11. See Ravaisson (2008), 71; Carlisle (2013b). Aristotle states that desire (*orexis*) is for 'the real or the apparent good': *De anima*, 433a 27–28.
12. Ravaisson (2008), 25.
13. Brewer (unpublished).
14. *Ibid*.
15. *Ibid*.
16. Brewer's account of dialectical activity is very similar to (though developed independently of) Jonathan Lear's account of irony, which combines these features of commitment to and indeterminacy about the 'aspiration' embedded in ethical activities: see Lear (2011). Brewer's concept of 'dialectical activity' helpfully adds to Lear's analysis of irony a clearer sense of how the activities or practices in question generate an 'unfolding' understanding of the good to which they aim.
17. Anselm (2008), 96.
18. See Scott (1991); Taves (2009), 56ff. Scott argues that:

> we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experience . . . Talking about experience [as internal] leads us to take the existence of individuals for granted (experience is something people have) rather than to ask how conceptions of selves (of subjects and their identities) are produced . . . Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts

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> as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested and therefore always political. (Scott (1991), 779, 797)

On the validity of religious experience as a source of knowledge, see Franks Davis (1989); Yandell (1993); Zangwill (2004); Wettstein (2012); Jäger (2017).

19. Geertz (1986), 373–380.
20. Stanley Rosen raises several questions relevant to this point in Rosen (1999), 218–239. It would be naïve, of course, to overlook the ways in which 'experience' is culturally constructed: first-person accounts do not provide a transparent window on a subjective state that constitutes the pure, true kernel of religious life, unmediated by theory; as Clifford Geertz puts it, 'experiences are made, [and] the "anthropology of experience" [is] a study of the uses of artifice and the endlessness of it' (see Geertz (1986), 380). For an overview of the debate about constructivism, see Taves (2009); see also note 18.
21. For an idiosyncratic historical account of philosophy as a practice or *askesis*, see Sloterdijk (2012).

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