Insatiable Desire

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1. Preliminary thoughts

Last night I had a desire for a glass of wine. Luckily I had a bottle in the fridge and could satisfy my desire. Earlier in the day I had a desire to run on the heath and I satisfied this desire too. And today, tired of reading yet more stuff on desire, I satisfied my desire to start writing. So desires can be satisfied. Not that they are guaranteed to be satisfied – the bottle in my fridge might have failed to materialize, and something might have prevented me from going for a run or getting down to writing – but that they *can* be satisfied. Witness C.S. Lewis:

> Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex.[1]

Lewis then makes something of an about turn, suggesting that there *are* desires that cannot be satisfied. He counters this with the following response:

> If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing…I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.[2]

We can sum up the argument as follows. First, there are two apparently contradictory claims: (1) our desires can be satisfied; (2) not

[1] *Mere Christianity* (London: Fontana, 1960), Bk III, ch 10: 'Hope'.
[2] Ibid.

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all our desires can be satisfied. It is then suggested that (2) is elliptical. What it really means is (3) not all our desires can be satisfied *in this world*. However, it cannot be excluded – and Lewis believes that this is the most probable hypothesis – that there is another world in which the insatiable desires of this world can be satisfied. This other world is not to be found until after death, but the implication is that it provides the ultimate focus for our earthly desires, and that what we really desire cannot be had in this world. Hence:

> The longings which arise when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality.[3]

And:

> You might as well offer a mutton chop to a man who is dying of thirst as offer sexual pleasure to the desire I am speaking of.[4]

According to Lewis, we should distinguish between desires that can be satisfied in this world and those that cannot. Into the first category fall desires for food, for sex, and for swimming. Presumably my desire for wine and running fit the bill. There is a sense in which we might also wish to describe them as insatiable, for satiety is only temporary. Although I satisfied my desire for a glass of wine last night, this desire will re-emerge tonight and will be satisfied again assuming that my supplies haven't run dry. Should we conclude that such desires cannot be satisfied? Arguably not, for this would suggest that genuine satisfaction demands satisfaction once and for all. As far as my desire for things like wine, food, and running is concerned, it surely makes sense to suppose that temporary satisfaction can be genuine.[5]

What of the desires in Lewis's second category, the most significant for my purposes being the desires arising when we fall in love? We are

[3] Ibid.

[4] *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fontana, 1959), 137–8.

[5] In any case, today's desire for wine is numerically distinct from yesterday's desire. The emergence of a similar desire today does not impair the satisfaction of yesterday's desire. There are also desires guaranteed not to recur, such as the condemned man's desire for a last cigarette.

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told that these desires are insatiable not because they can be satisfied only temporarily, but because they cannot be satisfied at all – not in this world, at least. However, Lewis tempers the force of this claim by saying that they cannot *really* be satisfied. This suggests that we think that they can be satisfied, that we try to satisfy them, but are frustrated in the very attempt. Lewis offers an explanation for our optimism, namely, that in the first stages of desire we get a momentary glimpse of its true object before it withers away. So, the claim is that the thing that would really satisfy such desire *is* given to us in this world, but only in a fleeting form. For genuine satisfaction, we must ascend to another world.

According to Lewis then, no desires are insatiable, but some cannot be satisfied in this world. These latter desires are only contingently insatiable, assuming that there *is* another world, and that we can partake in it. Lewis implies that there is a link between such desires, claiming that our 'earthly' pleasures 'arouse' or 'suggest' whatever it is that would really satisfy them. Presumably these pleasures depend on the satisfaction of our earthly desires – desires that can be satisfied in this world. It is unclear whether he means that all earthly pleasures have this effect, but he certainly holds that sexual pleasure does. This implies that the desire for sex is really a desire for something else – something not available in this world. Not in its full glory at least.

2. The fundamental questions

Can Lewis's distinction be upheld? And should it be drawn in terms of insatiability and distinct worlds? Lewis's claim that desires insatiable in this world can be satisfied only after death suggests that *this world* is the world we inhabit as human beings. But what are the limits of this world, and, indeed, those of our putatively earthly desires? His examples of earthly desires – desires for food, drink, and sex – suggest that they belong to our animal nature. And to say that they can be satisfied in this world is to say that there are things in the world to satisfy them – food, drink, and people to have sex with. When I have a desire for food or drink, I satisfy my desire by eating or drinking. I relate to the object of my desire by consuming it. The idea that we satisfy our desire for sex by consuming a person is less plausible, leaving aside bizarre cases which require that the other person is literally served up on a plate. However, we can note Kant's claim that once one's sexual appetite is stilled, the

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other person is 'cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry',[6] and give a sense to the term 'consumption' here.

It does not follow that the human world is a world of things that exist simply to be consumed or used. This would put an undue restriction on what there is, and imply that we exist simply to consume and use. Lewis avoids these implications by acknowledging desires that cannot be satisfied in this way but whose presence affords a fleeting glimpse of another world. The idea that they cannot be satisfied in the way that we satisfy 'earthly' desires suggests that we cannot relate to their objects in the way that we relate to the objects of earthly desires. But what does *this* mean? Does it mean that they cannot be satisfied by *consuming* the object? Or, rather, that they could be so satisfied except for the fact that their objects are inaccessible to us? The latter option suggests that all our desires demand the same kind of satisfaction. This would make it difficult to understand Lewis's claim that desires which cannot be satisfied in this world reveal 'our true country' and that the main object of our lives should be to press on to this destination. If this true country were simply a world of yet more consumable objects, there would be no reason to press on towards it, no reason to suppose that it would give genuine satisfaction for desires which remain frustrated in this world. The alternative is to suppose that the satisfaction is of a different, superior kind.

This raises the questions whether there are such desires, and what it could mean to say that they point towards another world. Lewis mentions desires which arise when we fall in love, think of some foreign country, or take up some subject that excites us. These desires are not easy to relate. Nor does it seem true that they cannot be satisfied in this world. We can fall happily and requitedly in love, enjoy our travels, and secure tenure at an appropriate place of learning. Lewis, by contrast, implies that such satisfactions are spurious. To return to our most significant example, he claims that even the best possible marriage fails to satisfy the longings which arise when we fall in love.

Given Lewis's disparaging remarks about sexual pleasure, one would expect him to say that it is sex that fails to satisfy these longings. We can agree that sex *can* fail to satisfy these longings, when, for example, it is sex with someone other than the person one loves. This kind of sex is likely to be as useless as a mutton chop to a man dying of thirst. But sex with the person one loves is not like this. It

[6] Kant discusses this in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans., Louis Infield, (London: Methuen, 1930).

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affords a satisfaction unrivalled by anything one could get from a casual sexual encounter. Or so it seems. Why then does Lewis insist that the best possible marriage, and by implication, the best possible sex with one's beloved, fail to satisfy the longings which arise when we first fall in love?

Lewis's position has an explicitly religious dimension. What he really means when he says that the longings cannot be satisfied by sex is that they can be satisfied only after death, and their true object is God. The desire for the human beloved, he suggests, is really a desire for God, and this desire cannot be (properly) satisfied in the here and now. What could it mean to talk about a desire for God? In what sense, if any, is this desire insatiable? And where do other human beings and other desires enter the picture? We can begin to address these questions by turning to Emmanuel Levinas.

3. Distinguishing desires

Levinas distinguishes two types of desire and, like Lewis, elucidates this distinction in terms of insatiability and distinct worlds. Desires for food, drink, and sex fall into the first category, and Levinas calls them *needs*. Needs stem from a lack in the subject, and this lack can be filled by consuming and 'assimilating' an object that satisfies the desire: 'in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other'.[7] However, there is more to need than lack, for we 'thriv(e) on our needs', and are 'happy' for them… 'Need, a happy dependence, is capable of satisfaction, like a void which gets filled,' and happiness is 'the satisfaction of all needs'.[8] Levinas's needs correspond to the desires which, for Lewis, can be satisfied in this world. Such satisfaction brings happiness, and this happiness is found not merely when we enjoy our food and drink, but also when we are swimming, running, or lying in the sun. Nevertheless, Levinas has misgivings about this mode of existence, and implies, like Lewis, that its satisfactions are illusory, that what we really want, whether we know it or not, lies elsewhere:

> (w)e are thus moving toward the thesis of the inadequacy of satisfaction to need. The analysis of the satisfaction of need and of the atmosphere in which it is brought about will lead us to

[7] *Totality and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), trans., Alphonso Lingis, 117.
[8] *Totality and Infinity*, 114–115.

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> attribute to need a type of insufficiency to which satisfaction could never respond'.[9]

This insufficiency is found at the level of *metaphysical desire* – a kind of desire to be distinguished from need:

> The other metaphysically desired is not "other" like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell…I can "feed" on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends towards *something else entirely*, towards the *absolutely other*…(i)t is a desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves…It is a desire that can not be satisfied.[10]

The idea that metaphysical desire cannot be satisfied suggests that it has something in common with those desires which, for Lewis, can be satisfied by no experience in this world. Its tending towards '*something else entirely*' – 'a land foreign to every nature' – recalls Lewis's 'other country,' the true focus of our earthly desires, which can be properly attained only after death. Levinas accepts a version of the claim that metaphysical desire takes us beyond this world.[11] Unlike Lewis, however, he believes that it is in principle insatiable: not only can it not be satisfied in this world, it can never be satisfied.

4. Metaphysical desire

Metaphysical desire tends towards '*something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*'. This means, *inter alia*, that it tends towards something resisting consumption and possession. This need not imply that it is a desire for something other than the things we tend to consume and possess, for it remains open that we can relate to these things, or some of them, in other ways. Even such obvious consumables as food and drink do not exist for me alone. They are there for others too, and there will be occasions when it is appropriate to offer my food and drink to others, and, at the limit, to sacrifice my own

[9] *On Escape*, trans., Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) 60.

[10] *Totality and Infinity*, 33–4.

[11] This justifies Levinas's use of the term 'metaphysical': metaphysics pertains to that which is 'elsewhere' or 'other'.

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hunger and thirst. Food and drink are still consumables, but they do not exist simply to satisfy *me*.

Levinas insists that we acknowledge others' needs and do not treat others as mere means to our own satisfactions. Others put into question my freedom to control and to appropriate them.[12] I *can,* of course, treat others in egoistic terms, or I may refrain from doing so simply because 'conquest is beyond my too weak powers'.[13] But the advent of the other calls into question and silences my egoistic tendencies. In the face of the other 'I *am no longer able to have power'*. There is established 'a relationship not with a very great resistance but with the absolute Other, with the resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance'.[14]

The idea that my relationship with the other has an irreducibly moral dimension emphasises the claim that she does not exist merely to satisfy my needs. So, she is not 'for me' in this sense, and has an otherness that resists such treatment. I cannot 'contain' her.[15] Levinas adds that I can relate to another *qua* other only by existing 'for her'. Not that I am a means to satisfy *her* needs, but that I acknowledge my obligations to her, and my moral responsibility for her.[16] This relationship 'opens the very dimension of the infinite, of what puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the Same and the I.'[17] One motive for introducing the infinite is to secure the human other's status as 'an absolutely exterior being', exterior in the sense of resisting possession: '(t)he infinity of this being, which one can therefore not contain, guarantees and constitutes this exteriority',[18], and her advent into my world compromises the self-sufficiency of egoistic consciousness.[19] Levinas also exploits a theme in Descartes' Third Meditation:

[12] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, Adriann Peperzak (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993) 98.

[13] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 110.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 109.

[16] See 'A Religion for Adults', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans., Sean Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 20, and 'The Thinking of Being and the Question of the Other', in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans., Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 121.

[17] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 110.

[18] Ibid., 109.

[19] Ibid., 110.

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> The intentionality that animates the idea of the infinite is not comparable with any other; it aims at what it cannot embrace and is in this sense the Infinite…In thinking the infinite, the I from the first *thinks more than it thinks*. The Infinite does not enter into the *idea* of the infinite, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept.[20]

Some things no doubt resist attempts to conceptualize them, but why should human beings fall into this category? We can pick them out, say what they are, and distinguish them from beings which are not human. It is surely a distinguishing feature of human beings that we relate to them in moral terms, a mode of relating which forbids possession and control. But why should we suppose that conceptualisation involves possession and control, that moral relations with others therefore forbid us to conceptualise them and require us to regard them as 'infinite'?

5. Introducing God

The answer lies in Levinas's view of God. Descartes is of course referring to God. God, Levinas agrees, is beyond our conceptual grasp, and is 'absolutely exterior' in a sense that outstrips the supposed exteriority of human beings. Given that conceptualization involves appropriation and power, Levinas rejects a theoretical approach to God, regarding it as yet another manifestation of our need to control and possess.

It is surely questionable whether conceptualization need be viewed in these egoistic terms, as *imposing* our concepts on intrinsically concept-free beings and as inevitably inhospitable to the moral dimension.[21] Other human beings *can* be treated in egoistic terms, and some conceptualizations no doubt conduce to this. But not all conceptualisation does so. Egoism and conceptualisation are also relevant to God, especially to the anthropomorphic approach. Anthropomorphism assumes various guises, ranging from the more sophisticated conception of God as father to the cruder 'man in the

[20] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 107.

[21] One of Levinas's bugbears, the arch-conceptualiser Hegel, would reject the charge of egoism by insisting, firstly, that it is not he personally who deploys concepts, but the reason common to all human beings and, secondly, that appropriate conceptualisation involves submission to the intrinsic objective conceptual structure of the subject-matter, not the imposition of concepts alien to it.

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sky' position. We need not take either of these descriptions literally. They may even enrich our understanding of God and make it easier to relate to Him. Nevertheless, either conception can easily put God to the service of egoism. Thus understood, He is there to satisfy our needs, and our relation to Him is purely instrumental. He becomes, as Levinas puts it, an inhabitant of a child's heaven.[22] We can agree that a god which emerged from our desiring in this sense would not be God, but an idol.

Another approach to God provides, on the face of it, the perfect antidote to egoism. Levinas describes it as surrender to a mystical abandon which 'envelops and transports' me 'beyond (my) powers and wishes'.[23] This leads away from the self in one important sense: I am enveloped and transported. Levinas complains, however, that this 'uncontrollable surplus' involves 'a form of violence' which compromises our freedom and is 'contrary to the education of man'. Such kenosis, he implies, is spurious, a form of self-intoxication which is just a further expression of the egoistic impulse it might be expected to silence. There are doubtless forms of mystical awareness, or putative forms thereof, which are self-seeking in this sense.[24] But there can nevertheless be authentic forms which can relate the subject to God. However, Levinas seemingly excludes this possibility by insisting that we can relate to God *only* by standing in moral relations to others: 'The vision of God is a moral act. This optics is ethics';[25] and 'I approach the infinite insofar as I forget myself for my neighbour who looks at me…A you is inserted between the I and the absolute He'.[26] He has several reasons for this. First, it excludes the idea that we could stand in an unmediated relation to God, either by grasping Him in thought or by a mystical encounter. Second, it guarantees that God is not a mere construction of our egoistic desires. Third, it guarantees that we, too, escape the ego's clutches so as to relate authentically to God: 'to know God is to know what must be done'.[27]

Where does metaphysical desire come in? Levinas introduces it as follows. The moral relation is a relation to something resisting

[22] 'Loving the Torah more than God', in *Difficult Freedom,* 143.

[23] 'A Religion for Adults', 14.

[24] Compare Pope Benedict XVI who refers to a false ecstasy which involves a 'sinking in the intoxication of happiness' ('Deus Caritas Est', CTS Publications, 2006), 9.

[25] 'For a Jewish Humanism', in *Difficult Freedom,* 275.

[26] *Collected Philosophical Papers,* ed. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 72–3.

[27] 'A Religion for Adults', 17.

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possession, something 'exterior'. Hence, morality is distinct from cognition, at least in the appropriative sense. However, since we relate to something exterior, the moral attitude cannot be a 'subjective sentiment':

> The idea of the infinite, in which being overflows idea, in which the Other overflows the Same, breaks with the inward play of the soul and alone deserves the name experience, a relationship with the exterior. It is then more *cognitive* than cognition itself.[28]

So, our attitude is cognitive in the sense that it takes us beyond the confines of egoistic consciousness, and relates us to something irreducible to the products of consciousness: it involves a movement that 'proceeds from what is thought and not from the thinker'.[29] This recalls Descartes' claim that the infinity involved in the idea of God cannot be produced from our own resources, and has its origin in God. As Levinas says, 'the infinite is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it'. He then says: 'A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire "measures" the infinity of the infinite.'[30] This is metaphysical desire, and we already know that the other metaphysically desired cannot be 'fed' on in the way that I feed on things that can be 'reabsorbed into my own identity'. She cannot be fed on because she is beyond anything I could grasp either in thought or deed. Crucially, however, metaphysical desire 'does not call for food'.[31] Thus, it is insatiable, not because it involves 'an infinite hunger' for something we cannot reach in our finitude,[32] but because it expresses an 'insufficiency' that is 'without possible satisfaction – not only unsatisfied *in fact,* but outside of every perspective of satisfaction or unsatisfaction'.[33] We revert to the idea of an insufficiency to which satisfaction could never respond, an insufficiency finding inchoate expression at the level of need, but to which we can respond properly only via metaphysical desire. As metaphysically desiring subjects, we experience an 'exteriority foreign to needs' which reveals:

> (a)n insufficiency full of this very insufficiency and not of hopes, a distance more precious than contact, a non-possession more precious than possession, a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself. This is not some romantic dream,

[28] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 112.
[29] *Totality and Infinity*, 61.
[30] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 113.
[31] Ibid., 114.
[32] *Totality and Infinity*, 63.
[33] Ibid., 179.

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> but what from the beginning of this research imposed itself as Desire. Desire does not coincide with an unsatisfied need; it is situated beyond satisfaction and nonsatisfaction. The relationship with the Other, or the idea of infinity, accomplishes it.[34]

This insufficiency cannot be nourished by an object, and involves no hope for such nourishment. It is 'full of this very insufficiency': '(t)he true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy, but hollows out'.[35] The subject of this desire is not lacking anything in the way that she lacks something when she is hungry. On the contrary, she is 'in possession of (her)self', 'on (her) own feet',[36] and experiences this desire with 'plenitude and joy'.[37] Thus, she finds nourishment in this desire because it offers something superior to satisfactions at the level of need. It is 'the insufficiency of what is self-sufficient'[38], 'the lack in a being which *is* completely, and lacks nothing', a being in possession of herself.[39] She lacks nothing because she is now related to something which silences the hungry ego's demands. By virtue of being so related she is 'lacking' or 'insufficient' in an alternative sense, acknowledging that she is not the measure of reality and does not exist merely to consume. She is nevertheless capable of relating to its true measure, she relates to it as an object of desire, and does so authentically only by standing in moral relations to others. This, we are to suppose, is where genuine satisfaction is to be found.

6. Interlude

Lewis and Levinas agree that some desires can be satisfied. These desires belong to our animal nature,[40] their satisfaction is temporary, and it involves consumption and use. So these desires are self-directed, and Levinas expresses this by saying they stem from a lack in the subject which is filled by an appropriate object. The lack

[34] *Totality and Infinity*, 179.
[35] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 114.
[36] *Totality and Infinity*, 63.
[37] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 114.
[38] Ibid.
[39] *Totality and Infinity*, 103.
[40] Some specifically human, i.e. non-animal, desires seem to be satiable, e.g. the desire to do a crossword or to have a philosophical conversation. Lewis and Levinas could either agree that this is the case or ague that such desires are, despite appearances, insatiable. It is beyond the scope of this paper to settle this matter.

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remerges to be filled yet again, and our protagonists insist that a mode of existence confined to such satisfactions is deficient and ultimately unsatisfying. This mode of existence obstructs access to a dimension of reality which is our true aim, and to which we are responsive only by virtue of desires of a different kind. For Lewis, such desires can be satisfied only in another world, for Levinas they are insatiable.

Lewis's idea that such desires can be satisfied in another world implies that they are of the same order as other desires. Levinas avoids this conflation by distinguishing between desires that can be satisfied by consuming an appropriate object and desires that cannot. The insatiability of such desires is not a limitation, so there is no implication that we are lacking something which is fundamental to our being, and that the human predicament is tragic. Rather, the idea is that this 'lack' is itself fundamental to our humanity, for it is that in terms of which we relate to God, and God cannot be 'consumed'. This is what Levinas is getting at when he tells us that such desires call for something other than food. What they call for is God, and any attempt to satisfy them consumptively leads back to an egoism whose deficiencies can never be filled. These deficiencies *can* be filled if we relate to the desired object, God, in the right way. We do this by being moral. Satisfaction at this level comes from relating authentically to God, and because this requires the distance of God to be maintained, there remains an 'insufficiency' at the heart of this desire. It is sustained rather than eliminated.

Lewis does not explicitly mention God, but the desires he regards as insatiable in this world are presumably desires for God. He claims that the longings which arise when we fall in love are insatiable in this sense; they cannot be satisfied sexually because this would compromise their nature. This is acceptable if sexual satisfaction is regarded as consumptive. However, Lewis goes further by suggesting that the beloved can have no role in satisfying such longings. Levinas challenges this in one important respect, for he believes that we can relate to God only by relating morally to others. He retains sympathy for the idea that the longings which arise when we fall in love involve a desire for God, and, like Lewis, finds a difficulty in the idea that it could be properly expressed sexually.

7. Erotic love

For Levinas, the desire of erotic love has a significance which outstrips the desire for sexual pleasure. Thus, 'to recognize its exceptional place among relationships', we must distinguish eros from

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power and possession, and acknowledge that it involves 'a relationship with alterity, with mystery':[41]

> (T)he caress does not know what it seeks…It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come…It is made up of this increase of hunger, of ever richer promises, opening new perspectives onto the ungraspable. It feeds on countless hungers.[42]

If eros is a relationship with alterity, then the beloved does not exist simply to be consumed or possessed. Furthermore, the association between alterity and mystery attributes religious significance to the desire. This is borne out by Levinas's description of the caress, which seems to follow the trajectory of insatiable desire.

Given that we can relate to God only by relating to others, one would expect Levinas to say that that the beloved plays a fundamental role in this journey. Clearly, she cannot be treated as a mere means to sexual satisfaction, for this would reduce the desire to need, its religious significance would be lost, and the beloved's role would be purely incidental: this would be to aim not at the Other but at her voluptuosity, it is 'pleasure' and 'egoism'.[43] But what is the right way to aim at her? Must one ignore her sexual attractions? And if so, what becomes of the lover's caress, which seems irreducibly sexual?

One option is to say that such caresses are misplaced, just one more expression of the desire to consume, and cannot provide the right level of satisfaction. As Lewis would say, it is like giving a mutton chop to a man dying of thirst. Levinas is attracted to this response. After saying that love is an 'essential and insatiable hunger', he continues:

> In the random agitation of caresses there is the admission that access is impossible, violence fails, possession is refused. There is also the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and love-bites. It is as though one had made a mistake about the nature of one's desire and had confused it with hunger which aims at something, but which one later found out was a hunger for nothing. The *other* is precisely this objectless dimension. Voluptuousness is the pursuit of an ever richer

[41] *Time and the Other*, trans., Richard A Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 88.
[42] *Time and the Other*, 89.
[43] *Totality and Infinity*, 266.

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> promise; it is made up of an ever growing hunger which pulls away from every being.[44]

That the caress involves the admission that access is impossible, etc., suggests that it involves no such aim. But Levinas puts it on a par with kissing and love-bites, which give the false impression that one's hunger is consumptive. Should we conclude that caresses and kisses inevitably compromise the nature of the lover's desire? Only if the beloved plays the role of Kant's lemon, sucked dry and then abandoned. As yet, however, we have been given no reason for accepting this characterization of her role, and every reason for thinking that the lover's caress involves no such aim.

Even if the lover's caress involves no such aim, she nevertheless relates to her beloved in a manner very different from how she relates to others in a moral context: after all, she does not give them erotic caresses. For Levinas, we relate to God only by relating to others in moral terms. If this is so, and erotic desire follows a similar trajectory towards God, then the beloved must be related to in moral terms, viz. forgetting oneself for the other and being responsible for her in a manner that seeks no return. Forgetting oneself could simply ensure that egoism does not prevail. Yet Levinas often seems to be gesturing in the direction of a more thoroughgoing self-sacrifice: shedding my preferences and emotional attachments, and loving others in a purely agapic sense.[45] We are encouraged to suppose that eros is paradigmatic of the type of love that reduces to self-concern.

[44] *Existence and Existents*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 35.

[45] There is a question about what Levinas is really committed to, and he certainly seems prepared to temper the force of the utopian-like vision that finds expression in many of his claims. For example, he tells us that 'my responsibility for all can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called on to concern itself with itself (*Otherwise than Being*, 128. Hilary Putnam expresses some Aristotelian worries about this vision in his 'Levinas and Judaism', *Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds., Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57. Michael L. Morgan responds to some of these worries in his *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 289–299: 'Ethics does not eliminate or seek to eliminate the rest of human life; it does, however, seek to place it in its context of the good, as our determinative and unavoidable concern'. I reserve judgement on the question of whether Morgan's interpretation can be made good, although it should be clear from what I go on to say that there is a serious tension in Levinas's position which comes out in his attitude towards erotic love.

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'Love', we are told, 'does not transcend unequivocably – it is complacent, it is pleasure and dual egoism'.[46]

A morality requiring total suppression of the self is too demanding, and would compromise our humanity just as much as unrelenting egoism. It would preclude intimate relationships with others and any glimmer of self-love. Perhaps this is Levinas's paradigm of what it would be to be in possession of oneself. However, we could hardly find nourishment in such an existence, and moral relations with others do not obviously require it. Nor does authentic relation to God obviously entail that we can love others (and therefore God) only by radical self-effacement.

Where does this leave the erotic relationship? Lovers are emotionally involved, their care and concern is preferential, and they feel erotic desires which, *ceteris paribus*, demand sexual expression. Such expression involves a giving. But it is a giving of one's body and it requires a return from the beloved. Not the return that would satisfy one who is simply seeking sexual pleasure. Rather, it is the beloved one wants, and the return demanded is her desire and its expression: I 'love the love the Beloved bears me'.[47]

Levinas regards this as reinstating an egoistic love in which one 'love(s) oneself in love'. But this may be compatible with loving another. It may simply express the joy of participating in such a relationship. There is a variant, however, which warrants criticism, namely, when lovers are in love, not with each other, but with the feeling of being in love. Here the beloved's role is purely instrumental – to arouse a feeling of intoxicated yearning. Either or both may seek to prolong this feeling by imposing, or seeking, obstacles between them.[48] Why isn't their desire insatiable in Levinas's sense? After all, the distance between them is 'more precious than contact', and they feed upon the hunger stemming from distance. Well, all they really want is intoxication on their own desire. Their desire for desire in this sense is satisfied by inaccessibility, and distance is engineered to preclude relating to anything beyond 'subjective sentiment'. But Levinas's insatiable desire involves a distance which relates the subject to something other than her 'subjective sentiments'.

[46] *Totality and Infinity*, 266.

[47] Ibid.

[48] This is how Denis de Rougemont interprets Tristan and Isolde in *Love in the Western World*, trans., Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956). I consider this interpretation in my 'Scruton's Wagner on God, Salvation, and Eros' (*British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol **50**, no.2, April, 2010, 169–187).

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The desire of erotic love involves a desire for the beloved, and it presupposes that she is not there simply to provide sexual pleasure or endless self-intoxication. So 'the inward play of the soul' has been 'broken'. This manner of relating involves a 'distance' which is 'more precious than contact' if 'contact' amounts to using the beloved in the forbidden ways. But then distance is precious because it guarantees that the lover engages not simply with her own intoxicating desire or pleasure, but with her beloved. The beloved is the object of desire, and this desire is created and sustained by one's love – a love which, in turn, is sustained by the desire-involving love of the beloved. Being irreducible to desire for sexual pleasure, this desire for the beloved is not eliminated by sexual contact. It does, however, involve a desire for sexual contact, and this contact brings consolation, even if consolation is neither the goal of the desire nor the means to satisfy it. So there is nourishment to be found in relating to the beloved sexually, and the lover feeds off the sexually expressed desire. However, she is not simply feeding off a feeling of intoxicated yearning and 'in love with love' in this sense. She is in love with her beloved, and finds nourishment in the desire this generates. So there is satisfaction to be found in such desire, but it is the desire that satisfies and its object is the beloved and the desire she feels in return. If this is right, then the desire of erotic love is insatiable in Levinas's preferred sense. But should we accept also that such desires require reference to God?

8. Desire for God

An atheist can raise two objections to Lewis's and Levinas's introduction of God into such desires. The first objection allows that some desires cannot be satisfied consumptively and that their pursuit is fundamental to our humanity, but it denies that they express desire for God. Rather, they express our desire for fulfilment, which, like Levinas's God, can be pursued only indirectly, but it can be pursued in this world; the desire for fulfilment can be satisfied, but only through earthly pursuits. This objector resists Lewis's idea that fulfilment consists in restful equilibrium, and insists that our desire for fulfilment must be sustained rather than eliminated. He denies, however, that it involves a desire for God. This would imply that we can be fulfilled only by ceasing to be human, devaluing human existence and locating fulfilment elsewhere than in what we do. My own response to this objection is that while reference to God cannot be decisively shown to be obligatory in accounting for

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such desires, it equally cannot be excluded on the ground that it would rescind or degrade our humanity. Levinas agrees that we should avoid devaluing human existence, and so he too locates fulfilment in what we do, while nevertheless insisting that the desire for fulfilment is a desire for God. The atheist objector exploits an inappropriate conception of God, and of humanity, a conception which is to be dismantled in the course of this paper. To accept this objection at this stage would cut off the possibility of refurbishing our conception of God in such a way as to make it reasonable, though not obligatory, to introduce God in accounting for such desires.

The second objection mounted by the atheist is that even if such desires do involve desiring God, this does not entail that God exists. Sartre provides the paradigm of this objection.[49] On this position, our desire for fulfilment *is* a desire for God. This desire is fundamental to our humanity and the ultimate focus for our desires. It is insatiable because it is a desire to *be* God, an impossible ideal for us desiring, incomplete beings.[50] In fact the very idea of God is contradictory.[51] So the desire is insatiable not simply because it seeks an impossible ideal, but because its object could not exist. For Sartre, we can neither *be* God, nor be related to Him.

Lewis, Levinas, and Sartre ascribe a desire for God on the ground that we have insatiable desires. Lewis claims that these desires demand satisfaction, and are satisfied when we encounter God face to face. A desire for God is a desire for such an encounter, and only this can truly fulfil us. Levinas agrees that we have an insatiable desire for God, and only by relating to God shall we be truly fulfilled. He denies, however, that it demands direct encounter with God. Such a demand would be egoistic and thwart our relating to God. He concludes that desire for God is insatiable. For Levinas this desire could not originate in the subject: it involves a movement that 'proceeds from what is thought and not from the thinker'.[52] Sartre, by contrast, denies that it could originate in God, because God could not exist. His arguments, like all such arguments, are inconclusive. They provide equally good reasons for denying our own

[49] *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans., Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958). See also Stephen Wang, 'Human Incompletion, Happiness, and desire for God in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*' (*Sartre Studies International,* vol. **12**, Issue 1, 2006).

[50] 'To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God', *Being and Nothingness*, 566.

[51] *Being and Nothingness*, 615.

[52] *Totality and Infinity*, 61.

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existence, for Sartre believes that we ourselves are somewhat God-like, an idea which, in his hands, implies our inherent contradictoriness. This suggests that we solve no difficulties by assigning desire for God a human origin. It might also be thought to narrow the gap between Sartre's position and its theistic counterpart. I shall return to this point below. First though, we need to get a clearer view of what it could mean to say that desire for God has a human origin.

It means at the very least that desire for God is *my* desire. This must be so, since it translates into voluntary action. But the *source* of the desire may nevertheless be external. If the source is *not* external, then the desire is self-generated, not only *my* desire but with an object created by *me*. Some desires are self-generated in this sense. After all, we can form desires for non-existent things, which may be products of wishful thinking. Levinas would allow that on certain conceptions of God, desire for God is self-generated in this sense. If, e.g., God is conceived as satisfying *needs*, desire for 'God' is, at best, immature and, at worse, produced by egoistic consciousness. What of Sartre's conception of desire for God, as a desire to *be* God? Levinas would agree that this is an impossible ideal, egoistically motivated in two related senses: since God grounds everything, it implies a desire to bring reality into the ambit of egoistic consciousness and, since this aim is impossible, desire for it becomes an infinite hunger for something forever out of reach, a hunger which, immured in egoism, can never provide fulfilment. We can be fulfilled only if we are more than desiring beings in *this* sense, only if we have desires that do not call for food and whose object and source is God.

For Levinas, desire for God is a desire to relate to God, and this involves moral relations to others. So desire for God can be satisfied to this degree at least, as long as the desire is sustained rather than eliminated. We find satisfaction in the desire rather than satisfying the desire. I have suggested already that Levinas's position is ambivalent, and that although he grants the significance of self-concern, there is enough to suggest that my relating to God requires that all such concern be abandoned. And if self-concern is fundamental to humanity, then I can do this only by ceasing to be human. It might be thought to imply also that when I love my neighbour it is not I, but God who does the loving.[53] The problem arises from an alleged incompatibility between God's way of loving and our way of loving. God's love is selfless, while ours is selfish. To relate to God, we must love like God, but then we cease to be human. This

[53] See Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), ch. 9, for a criticism of the view that only God can love.

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interpretation of Levinas can be challenged, but it helps to explain why he finds it so difficult to grant the moral and religious significance of erotic love.

I have allowed that self-concerned beings can be moral. The desire of erotic love, insofar as it co-exists with care and concern for the beloved, has a moral dimension. Human love is not irredeemably selfish, it already contains an agapic ingredient. This implies that we can, after all, partake in God's love, even if God's love is purely agapic. However, if God's love is *purely* agapic, then it contains no erotic dimension. God is neither a subject of erotic love nor an appropriate object of it. So the desire of erotic love cannot lead us into a *complete* relation to God. It may well establish a *partial* relationship to him in virtue of the agapic ingredient in erotic desire, but it would surely be better to dispense with the erotic component and thereby establish a whole-hearted relationship with Him. There are two related responses to this. First, it is mistaken to suppose that the two ingredients in erotic love are simply juxtaposed and quite distinct from each other, the one entirely selfless and agapic, the other entirely selfish and grasping. The care and concern are after all directed at this particular person, not just at anyone who satisfies a certain description, who equally needs my care and concern. And the sexual desire is equally directed at this same person – it could not be sustained by some other being quite distinct from the object of my care and concern. In eros, self-concern and other-concern are curiously intertwined. Second, given this conception of erotic love, we can reconsider the assumption that God's love is purely agapic and wholly unerotic.

9. An Erotic God?

If erotic love is genuine love, and not simply the juxtaposition of other-concern and egoism, then both God's love and desire for God could have an erotic dimension.[54] Erotic desire could partake in His love and God Himself could be the object of erotic desire. This might be thought to lead in a mystical direction, towards a conception of union with God which violates the strictures imposed by Levinas. These strictures combat the supposition that desire for God could be satisfied in the same way as our desire for food or

[54] Compare Benedict XVI: 'God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being; but this universal principle of creation – the *Logos*, primordial reason – is at the same time a lover with all the passion of true love' (*Deus Caritas Est*, 14).

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sex. They remind us also that God is not present in the world like other objects of desire. The first point leaves unscathed the idea that desire for God could be erotic. The second might lead us to reflect on those subjects and objects of desire which are human beings, and to recall the theologically loaded terms in which Levinas characterizes them. These terms suggest two things: that in a sense God is already present in the world; and that we are God-like not just because we can love like God, but because we ourselves, *qua* God-like, can be objects of such love. I can relate to God not just by loving like Him but because the object of my love is like Him.

Levinas downplays the object-side of this relation by insisting that I relate to God only by virtue of what I do, because this alone guarantees the authenticity of the relation. So he emphasises my God-like love which is directed towards those in need. My concern is for the other rather than for myself, and she is not required to love me in return. But if God's love contains an erotic dimension, then, in loving like God, I likewise have concern for the other, but accompanied by a measure of self-concern, and this can involve desire for the desire of the other.[55] So we focus equally on how the other relates to me, and, if her desire involves her loving like God, I relate to God not just by loving like Him but because the object of my love loves like Him. This relation can be reciprocal, and a source of satisfaction for both parties. It does not follow that such desire is egoistically motivated, nor that it calls for 'food'. The lovers find nourishment in a desire exceeding such limits and sustained by mutual love. That is, they feed off their desire in a sense acceptable to Levinas.

This allows that erotic lovers desire each other. My beloved is no mere stepping stone to God. That would make my desire egoistically motivated. Nor is she herself God, for God is irreducible to anything human. Rather, she herself partakes in God's love when she desires me, just as I partake in God's love when I desire her. So we desire each other, but our respective desires stem from God. This respects

[55] I am not suggesting that the love we have for others in a purely moral context is to be assimilated to the case of erotic love, although we can note that Levinas himself gestures in this direction when he tells us that the ethical relation involves being 'possessed by the other, sick', and cites the lover's lament in the Song of Songs: 'I am sick with love', *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 142. We must surely allow that there is a distinction between *eros* and *agape* at least as far as human beings are concerned, and even if we grant with Pope Benedict XVI that 'God's *eros* for man is also totally *agape*' (*Deus Caritas Est*, 13), there is still a question of how these dimensions of love are to be related and distinguished in the human case.

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Levinas's requirement that we relate to God only by relating to others and his belief that erotic love provides a context for this.

Could God Himself be the object of erotic desire? In a sense He already is, if we can partake in His love, and this love has an erotic dimension. And if we can desire Him authentically *only* by relating to others, then there is no other way of desiring God Himself. Levinas accepts this as the only alternative to an unbridled mysticism where the subject feeds off her own intoxicating desire. It is of course possible for a lover to be in love with love to the exclusion of relating to anything beyond her subjective sentiments. But it is equally possible that her desire stems from and is sustained by her love for another.

We therefore lose one motive for denying that God Himself could be erotically desired, namely, that erotic desire is irreducibly selfish. But could God also be erotically desired without the mediation of another human being? Could the 'I' relate to the 'Absolute He' without the insertion of a 'You'? The testimony of mystics suggests so. The subject of such desire need not relinquish her responsibilities to others. (Compare: my desire for my human beloved does not prevent me from doing good work.) Nor is relating to God unmediatedly superior to other ways of doing so. It is simply a different and rarer way of relating, different, e.g., from relating to Him by being moral or by loving another human being erotically. It is a *direct* approach in that it is unmediated by another human being. However, the distance of God must be maintained if the relationship is to be authentic and the desire sustained. It perhaps offers a glimpse of a relationship to God surpassing anything achievable on earth, and so lends justice to Lewis's, even to Levinas's, conception of fulfilment. Witness Bernard of Clairvaux's description of heaven:

> In this place we find satiety without the sense of having indulged too much. Here we find a desire to penetrate deeper which is never quenched, yet which has no sense of unrest about it. Here we experience that eternal and incomprehensible desire which knows no lack. Here, finally, is that state of sober intoxication which does not come from drinking wine. This state does not result from being drenched with wine but from being set afire for God….Happiness is complete, but there is no end to desiring, and because of this the search goes on.[56]

[56] Quoted in Michael Casey, *A Thirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs*, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1987), 228–9.

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This heaven recalls the self-sufficiency of Levinas's metaphysically desiring being, but it cannot be experienced in its full glory in the here and now. Levinas implies that it can, but remains suspicious of the idea that we could be set afire by God and tries to avoid inflammatory ingredients. This risks leaving us with a metaphysically desiring being without erotic dimension, not a desiring being recognizable to us. Her 'self-sufficiency' removes her as far from humanity as occupants of Bernard's heaven. She is also remote from God, if God's love is irreducibly erotic. I have recommended that we reinstate this erotic dimension, ascribe it to God's love, but respect the difference between man and God. This allows that desire for God is insatiable. But the dimension of reality to which we become responsive hereby is only dimly prefigured in earthly pursuits; the 'insufficiency' at the heart of this desire may conceal a goal we cannot properly conceive of in our human state. The desire for such a goal need not be egoistically motivated, not a desire for something to consume and destroy, for something to satisfy the hungry ego and eliminate all desire. Rather, it is a desire for the equilibrium towards which our protagonists gesture, the equilibrium of a subject who lacks nothing, not because she has finally become God (Sartre's preference), but because her relationship to Him outstrips anything achievable in human existence.

Conclusion

Our exploration of insatiable, erotic desires has led us to a conception of God that differs from the traditional conception of Him in at least two respects. Firstly, God is conceived not primarily as a benevolent creator or a cosmic designer and, correspondingly, His love is not conceived as exclusively or even primarily agapic, as the sort of love appropriate to a creator or designer. His role as the ultimate object of our erotic desires requires Him to be conceived as an erotic God, as an appropriate object and subject of erotic love. Secondly, God is conceived neither as wholly outside the world and distinct from it nor as wholly contained within it in a pantheistic manner. He cannot be wholly outside the world, since he could not then be an appropriate object of erotic love. Or if we suppose that we too will one day join him in His extra-worldly abode and there fulfil our erotic desires, then we assimilate erotic desires to ordinary desires that are satiable consumptively within the world, even if the world in which they are satisfied is now *another* world. He cannot be wholly contained within this world, because this too would imply that erotic desires

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are satiable, and satiable within this world. Erotic desire points beyond this world, but it does not point towards *another* world.

So we follow clues laid within the world in a fairly traditional manner, but because the clues are not of the traditional sort we arrive at an untraditional conception of God. A cooperative atheist, who does not believe that sex is just like drinking a glass of wine, might follow us so far. But he will then ask: 'Does God, thus conceived, really *exist*? Do erotic desires have their *source* in such a God?' An initial response to this question might be to ask in turn: 'Is this a proper question?' If it is a proper question, then the answer to it is surely this: The fact, if it is a fact, that erotic desires are desires for God does not entail that God exists. If the question is then pressed, how we are to explain erotic desires, then even if we regard intra-worldly explanations, psychological, sociological, biological, etc., as unsatisfactory or incomplete, it is still by no means obvious that they need to be replaced or supplemented by postulating the existence of God as He is conceived by the erotic desirer or of any entity remotely corresponding to it. There are, however, at least two reasons for doubting whether the atheist's question is a proper question. The first is that the question of existence is appropriate only to *entities*. Yet it is clear, to Levinas at least, that God is not an entity of this sort. God has no specific location whether within this world or in another. The second reason is that the atheist's question is posed from *outside* the perspective of the erotic lover. To the lover the question 'Does your beloved really exist?' is as pointless and irrelevant as the question 'Is she really the most beautiful woman in the world?' Lovers and religious believers can only preach to outsiders, not argue with them.[57]

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