The Quest for God: Rethinking Desire

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Abstract
How are we to view the nature of desire and its relation to value, humanity, and God? Sartre, Nietzsche, and Levinas have interesting things to say in this context, and they can be understood to be responding in their different ways to two seemingly opposed ways of conceiving of desire, namely, as lack or deficiency (option 1) or as plenitude or creativity (option 2). I clarify, link, and distinguish the relevant conceptions of desire, and give a sense of what it could mean to comprehend desire in either or both of these ways. I question Sartre's insistence that man is a 'useless passion', trace it back to his commitment to a 'lack' model of desire, and argue that this model, as he understands it, stands in the way of the more creative conception which is lurking in the background of his account. There will be a question of whether the atheist is entitled to this creative conception, and I shall challenge his assumption that it becomes available only when theism is overthrown. I shall suggest also that there is something important to be salvaged from the lack model.

1. Introduction

How are we to view the nature of desire and its relation to value, humanity, and God? Nietzsche and Levinas have some important things to say in this context,[1] and I want to relate the relevant themes to the position developed by Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness*.[2] It is agreed on all sides that desire is inextricably tied up with what it means to be human, but this has led to very different conclusions about the nature and value of our predicament given the differing conceptions of desire at work in the relevant discussions. My present focus concerns the distinction between two seemingly mutually exclusive ways of conceiving of desire, namely, as lack or deficiency (option 1), or as plenitude or creativity (option 2). What it means to think of desire in either of these terms is obscure, and I

[1] See my 'Religious Experience and Religious Desire', forthcoming in *Religious Studies*, 2019; 'Levinas and Nietzsche on Desire and Love', in *Love: The History of a Concept* (ed.) Ryan Hanley (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2019); 'Insatiable Desire', *Philosophy*, vol. 88, April 2013, 243–265.

[2] *Being and Nothingness* (Henceforth BN), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

doi:10.1017/S1358246118000735

shall endeavour to offer some clarification. We can note at this preliminary stage that the distinction is acknowledged by Plato in *The Symposium*,[3] and a creative conception of desire is likewise operative in the work of many religious thinkers, all of whom insist that this model fits the desire for God.

This latter point is central to my present concerns, for it is a growing theme in contemporary Nietzschean scholarship – and more generally in the grand narrative of Western metaphysics as presented from this perspective – that anybody who has anything to do with God is committed to thinking of desire as a kind of lack, and that this conception goes hand in hand with a distrust and hatred of desire, and, by implication, a hatred of what it means to be human. This picture is set against an alternative conception of desire which corresponds to the second, creative, option, and which is intended to rescue us from the despair of passive nihilism – where we give up on the world and human life to succumb to nothingness. Such is the official story at least, and some of its elements are replayed in the following words of Gilles Deleuze:

> Desire: who except priests would want to call it 'lack'? …Those who link desire to lack, the long column of crooners of castration, clearly indicate a long resentment, like an interminable bad conscience.[4]

This remark suits my purposes at several levels. First, one of my protagonists – Sartre – treats desire as a kind of lack, but he is about as far removed from a priest as one could imagine. He does, however, possess a kind of Nietzschean religious sensibility, describing himself as an atheist who is obsessed with God's absence. Second, Levinas – another protagonist – rejects this lack-model of desire to defend an alternative which sounds a lot like the creative conception endorsed by Deleuze (and Nietzsche). Crucially, however, Levinas is a theist. Third, and differences notwithstanding, Sartre and Levinas both insist that desire is oriented towards God in some sense, that it is

[3] See *Symposium* 206c where Plato takes us from a conception of desire as lack to desire as 'creating out of abundance' or 'giving birth in beauty'. As R.L. Markus puts it: 'this "desire" is now of a being already complete or "perfect"…indeed, complete to overflowing, no longer is it thought of as a lack. This desire is not for something to be obtained – the beloved – but for giving something of itself', 'The Dialectic of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*', *Downside Review,* no. 233, 1955.

[4] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 91.

insatiable, and that it is fundamental to what it means to be human. The Nietzschean, by contrast, rejects all reference to God, but he agrees that desire is central to what it means to be human, and wants to be able to make sense of its insatiability.

What little I've said rules out the imposition of a straightforward disjunction between those (religious types) who treat desire as a kind of lack and those (the atheists) who do not. In what follows I want to clarify, link, and distinguish the relevant conceptions of desire, all the better to challenge the assumption that religion is the enemy of desire (and hence, life), and to get a clearer and less ideologically loaded picture of what it means to comprehend desire in either or both of these ways. I shall question Sartre's insistence that man is a 'useless passion', trace it back to his commitment to a 'lack' model of desire, and argue that this model, as he understands it, stands in the way of the more creative conception which is lurking in the background of his account. There will be a question of whether the atheist is entitled to this creative conception, and I shall challenge his assumption that it becomes available only when theism is overthrown. I shall suggest also that there is something to be salvaged from the 'lack' model.

2. Sartre on desire as lack and the desire to be God

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre tells us that '[t]o be man means to reach toward Being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God'.[5] In offering this conception of man Sartre is in agreement with all those who posit a fundamental desire to underlie and structure all other desires – think of the concept of eros in Plato's *Symposium*,[6] Freud's libido,[7] Schopenhauer's will,[8] and the

[5] BN, 566.

[6] Hazel Barnes draws the parallel with Plato's eros in her Introduction to BN, xxvii.

[7] Freud implies that the parallel between his own position and Plato's exists at the level of content as well as structure. Hence: 'In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love, the 'Eros' of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis', *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,* http://freudians.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Freud_Group_Psychology.pdf, 90.

[8] I discuss some tensions in Schopenhauer's conception of desire in my 'Schopenhauer on love', *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Love*, eds. Christopher Grau and Aaron Smuts (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

desire for God as proposed by theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas. The typical theologian's conception of the desire for God is not a desire to *be* God, although he is happy to talk of wanting *union* in this context, and we shall see from Levinas that it makes sense to say of one who gives expression to such desire in the context of a human life that she does God's work in this context. However, it is no part of such a picture that God has been jettisoned in favour of man, although it is a common theological thought that there is a (diabolical) temptation in this direction. As Heidegger put it, man 'contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure…for everything that is'.[9]

Sartre is an atheist, albeit one who finds God's absence both distressing ('along with [God's] disappearance goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven'),[10] and liberating ('man is free, man is freedom').[11] The God he rejects is defined in opposition to man, and with reference to the metaphysical framework it is his purpose to defend. Thus understood, God represents an ideal synthesis of being and consciousness – in-itself-for-itself as Sartre puts it in deference to the Hegelian language he inherits, although the basic idea is familiar from much traditional theology.[12] God is being-in-itself by virtue of involving no lack, no longing, no imperfection; He is being-for-itself by virtue of being self-conscious and self-grounding. Sartre associates this ideal with beauty, love, and supreme value, but claims that it is an impossible synthesis because the relevant dimensions of being resist valid coordination (inevitably so if self-consciousness is inextricably tied to lack). He concludes that God (and the associated values) cannot exist.

Sartre's reasoning can be disputed, and there is a question of how seriously he takes these rational considerations in any case. Either way, he remains steadfast in his atheism, and denies on this basis that the desire to be God can be satisfied. So man cannot become God, and this, for Sartre, means that the desiring subject is a 'useless passion': man desires to be God, but this aim can never be completed. It is in this sense that we are incomplete or lacking beings – defined by an impossible desire, desire itself being understood

[9] 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 134.

[10] *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 28.

[11] *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 29.

[12] BN, 194.

as a lack within the subject. As Sartre puts it, 'the existence of desire as a human fact is sufficient to show that human reality is a lack';[13] 'desire is a lack of being. It is haunted in its inmost being by the being of which it is desire…it bears witness to the existence of lack in the being of human reality'.[14] We are said to experience ourselves as failures in this respect – 'the for-itself in its being is failure…in truth this failure is its very being, but it has meaning only if the for-itself apprehends itself as failure *in the presence of* the being which it has failed to be';[15] we are 'haunted by' and 'thirst for' being.[16]

We can agree that we lack the perfections of God, and it makes sense to say that we are incomplete in this respect, assuming that we are to be defined in contrast to such a being. Sartre claims not merely that we are lacking in this respect, but that this lack manifests itself as desire, that this desire is fundamental to our motivational make-up, and that it is a desire to be God. He claims also that we 'thirst' for God, and that this thirst is experienced as a deficiency or failure.

The idea that we 'thirst' for God is familiar from biblical and theological literature, and although the imagery brings connotations of wanting to assimilate or possess, it is more properly understood – in these contexts at least – as capturing the mesmeric attraction at issue when we are drawn to God in this manner. Sartre seems at times to be conceding to such a picture, when, for example, he talks of desire being haunted by the being of which it is desire. The more prevalent message, however, is that the desirer in question wants to *be* the being she desires.

Thus far, the message seems predominantly bleak. The desiring subject can never find the fulfilment she craves, she is irreducibly unhappy in this respect, and filled with a sense of failure. So our experience as desiring beings is tied up with this sense of failure, and Sartre takes this to be borne out in the frustrations we experience at the level of everyday desires and satisfactions, and in our attempts to find happiness in the realm of interpersonal relationship. Erotic love is just one more context in which the desire to be God is enacted and frustrated – this time in one's desire to be God in the eyes of the 'beloved', and the problem extends more generally to undermine the possibility of love across the board. As Kate Kirkpatrick puts

[13] BN, 87.
[14] BN, 88.
[15] BN, 89.
[16] BN, 89.

it in her important recent book on Sartre, his critique of love – 'which seeks and fails to fulfil the lover's lack….extends to all human loves: every profession of love, on his view, is a masquerade…*amour-propre* masquerades not only as *eros*, but as *agape* and *philia*'; other people are simply 'cast offs we leave behind in the wake of our self-aggrandisement'.[17]

There is no love in Sartre's worldview – which helps to explain why God – whom Sartre associates with love – appears only in the guise of an egoistic desire to take His place. All is not entirely bleak, however, for in the midst of this 'abyss' there emerges a more optimistic picture – one which follows on from the picture of human reality as lack, and which suggests that it has the potential to bring forth a kind of creativity or productivity. It does so in two senses. First, we are told that 'desire by itself tends to perpetuate itself; man clings ferociously to his desires',[18] and Stephen Wang talks in this context of 'the refusal to rest satisfied, the constant push beyond', 'the necessity of going beyond and building something new'.[19] Second, our nature as lacking beings is bound up with our freedom, for freedom:

> is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to *make itself* instead of *to be*…for human reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept. Without any help whatsoever, it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be - down to the slightest detail. Thus freedom is not a being, it is the being of man – i.e., his nothingness of being.[20]

Sartre's idea that we cling ferociously to our desires, when wedded to the suggestion that they are experienced as a source of pain, brings to mind a rather desperate insistence of the ego or will. It might be thought to suggest also, however, that they are a force for the good, motivating us to pursue our ends and make something of ourselves in the process. We are to suppose that this is a uniquely human way of existing, and it is clear from what he goes on to say that desire's productivity in this context is inextricably tied up with the possibility

[17] *Sartre on Sin: Between Being and Nothingness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 209.
[18] BN, 101.
[19] 'Human Incompletion, Happiness, and the Desire for God in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*', *Sartre Studies International*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 2006, 8–9.
[20] BN, 440–441.

of value. Having seemingly ruled out – in the above quotation – that value could have its source in something beyond the subject, Sartre speculates that our freedom will reveal itself as 'the unique source of value and the nothingness by which the world exists'. The moral agent, he continues, will see that he is 'the *being by whom values exist*'.[21] This possibility and its consequences is left open, and it is left equally open that freedom will remain ever defined 'in relation to a transcendent value which haunts it'.

Sartre seeks to defend the possibility of reinventing meaning and value in a world without God. Desire is the decisive ingredient in this context because there is value to be found in our desires – we cling ferociously to them, and they move us to pursue our ends, involving a kind of creativity in this respect. The creativity at issue here concerns desire's motivating force and Sartre wants to reject any explanation which involves reference to an external source of value. So there are no prospects for saying that value motivates our desires, and the alternative seems to involve tracing the source of value to the desiring subject whatever this really means. One thing it could mean is that value is determined by the desiring subject in the sense that it is her desires that determine what counts as valuable in the first place. However, this seems to involve just one more attempt to play at being God – a hopeless attempt if, in line with the official metaphysics, desire and value are to be dualistically opposed. By contrast, if this framework is rejected, then the question is whether there is an alternative conception of desire which is better equipped to accommodate its creative potential. It is a task of the following section to explore this possibility, initially in the context of an atheistic framework which purports to free us once and for all from the *transcendent* value that haunts us.

3. From lack to creativity

The 'lack' model of desire is a familiar object of attack for the Nietzschean. Such a figure shares Sartre's atheistic stance, but insists that this model is symptomatic of the theistic framework to which we remain beholden. No wonder it is so difficult to make sense of meaning and value if our framework dictates that they are unattainable! So it is agreed that we are desiring beings, and that desire in this context is a distinctively human capacity which is inextricably tied to life and value. What is denied, however, is that these connections

[21] BN 627.

can be made good if desire is comprehended in lack-involving terms. Robert Pippin sums up the agenda as follows:

> We want a picture of striving without the illusion of a determinate, natural lack that we can fill. To anyone with an intellectual conscience, it will have to feel as though there just can be no human whole, not as proposed by Plato or Aristotle or Christianity or Schiller or Hegel, and so forth, and yet it can't just "not matter" that there can be no such harmony or completion, because all of the ways we have come to think about such desire start out from these assumptions about caused needs or an incompleteness that we strive to complete.[22]

The first thing to note is that it is not invariably an illusion to suppose that striving involves a determinate, natural lack that we can fill, for the picture appropriately fits at least some of our desires – for example, the appetitive desires at issue when we feel hunger and thirst. Levinas will describe such desires in precisely these terms, classifying them as 'needs', and claiming that they stem from a lack in the subject which is filled by consuming or 'assimilating' an object that satisfies the desire.[23] As he puts it, 'I can "feed" on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as thought I had simply been lacking them'.[24] These desires have their origin in us, they stem from our biological nature, and Levinas is anxious to distinguish such tendencies from the desire at issue in the present discussion, namely, one which is irreducible to tendency, fundamental to what it means to be human, and inextricably tied to the question of value.

Let us grant that there could be a picture of striving without the illusion of a determinate, natural lack that we can fill, but how are its details to be understood? Pippin introduces the proposed alternative in the context of a discussion of the Death of God and Nietzsche's remark that Brahms 'does not create out of an abundance; he *languishes* for abundance'.[25] This is what Pippin says:

> This distinction between desire as a lack and the death of God as a new lack and desire as abundance, excess and so the death of God

[22] 'The Erotic Nietzsche', 187. Pippin has done some brilliant work in this context, and he has been a great source of inspiration for my own thinking.

[23] *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 117.

[24] *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

[25] Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), 643.

as freeing such generosity will emerge frequently in what follows.[26]

We are familiar with the idea of desire as lack – it is associated with the theistic picture to be rejected, and involves seeing the desiring subject as striving towards a completion or perfection that she lacks (either contingently or in principle). The suggestion now is that one who is wedded to this conception of the desiring subject will take God's absence to be a further expression of the relevant lack, or a new occasion for languishing in it. This provides an accurate description of Sartre's position. By contrast, there is an alternative conception of desire which liberates us from this tragic conception of humanity, and which becomes available *only* when God is out of the picture (even as an unattainable ideal). According to this alternative conception, desire is to be understood as abundance or generosity. Pippin refers in this context to Nietzsche's talk of an 'overflow' of 'outpouring forces', and his use of the image of the beehive overloaded with honey.[27] The implication here is that we have desire in abundance. But to repeat the questions we raised in our discussion of Sartre: where does it come from? What keeps it going? And what is its nature?

4. Unrequited love

Pippin is concerned with the question of how such desire is to be sustained, for he associates nihilism with its *failure* – the 'flickering out of some erotic flame',[28] as he puts it – and takes Nietzsche to be concerned with the problem of how it is to be reignited. There is a

[26] 'Love and Death in Nietzsche', in *Religion after Metaphysics* (ed.) Mark Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

[27] See, for example, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (ed.) Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), Preface, §1: '"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"; *our* treasure is where the hives of our knowledge are, As born winged-insects and intellectual honey gatherers we are constantly making for them, concerned at heart with only one thing – to "bring something home"'. See also the opening of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (eds) Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3: 'I am weary of my wisdom, like a bee that has gathered too much honey…I want to bestow and distribute…Bless the cup that wants to flow over, such that water flows golden from it and everything carries the reflection of your bliss'.

[28] 'The Erotic Nietzsche', 177.

concession here to Plato and Augustine in the sense that the desire at issue is *erotic*, but the Nietzschean supposedly parts company with this framework by conceiving of desire as an overflow of outpouring forces rather than as a lack to be filled. I have already questioned the assumption that this conceptual shift is the prerogative of the atheist by noting that Levinas is similarly dismissive of the 'lack' model as it applies to our properly human desires. I have noted also that an analogous conceptual shift is enacted by Plato in *The Symposium*, and the notion of an effusive or outpouring force is often used to describe the loving desire which comes from God – the 'infinite overflow of love' in which we participate when we reach out to others. This description comes from Max Scheler who talks also of an 'abundance of vital power',[29] quoting Matthew's claim that '[a] good man out of the good treasure of his heart, bringeth forth good things'.[30] A paradigm of what it could mean for desire to be productive of value, albeit with no implication that it is one's heart's desire that determines what counts as good.

Nietzsche likewise uses Matthew's image of the heart's treasure, citing with approval his '[w]here your treasure is, there will your heart be also'.[31] Assuming, however, that theism has been rejected, then the heart's treasure in this context cannot have its source in the infinite overflow of God's love, and cannot be understood to be oriented in this direction. It is in the context of tackling the question of how its source and trajectory is to be understood that Pippin appeals to the image – taken from Nietzsche – of the unrequited lover. Not one who hankers after an inaccessible object (the lack model), but one who loves her unrequited love, and which she would 'at no price relinquish for a state of indifference'.[32] Hence:

> [T]he possibility of such an unrequited love, especially the possibility of sustaining it, turns out to be one of the best images for

[29] See *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis B. Coser and William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2003), ch. 3, 64.

[30] Matthew 12.34. Scheler, 67.

[31] See footnote 27.

[32] This is the passage in full: 'Restless discovering and divining has such an attraction for us, and has grown as indispensable to us as is to the lover his unrequited love, which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference perhaps, indeed, we too are *unrequited* lovers!', *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 429 (eds) Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter; trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

> the question Nietzsche wants to ask about nihilism and our response'.[33]

The aim here is to accommodate desire's effusive power without reference to an external source and object. The image of the unrequited lover offers a model for what it could be for such desire to be sustained, but only if the object of desire is the unrequited love itself rather than some inaccessible object. The idea here seems to be that if we could explain the possibility of desiring a desire for its own sake rather than for the sake of its inaccessible object, then we should have an explanation of how there could be a self-generating desire which was not to be comprehended as a lack in the subject.

Levinas seems to have some such picture in mind when, in the context of defending his own anti-lack conception of desire he says that 'it nourishes itself…with its hunger',[34] is 'not an appeal for food',[35] and 'desires beyond anything that can simply complete it'.[36] It is fundamental to *his* position, however, that something comes to the desiring subject from without – something she can receive[37] and accept (to revert to Sartre's description of the position to be avoided) – and he concludes on this basis that desire has its source in something beyond the desirer which 'animates' the desire.[38] This something – its 'object'– is referred to as 'the Desirable',[39] 'the Other',[40] 'the Most High',[41] 'the Invisible',[42] 'the Transcendent',[43] 'Infinity';[44] it has a moral and metaphysical significance which puts it on a level with Plato's goodness,[45] and we are told that desire [in this sense] is 'revelation'.[46] We are left in no doubt about its theistic significance.

[33] 'The Erotic Nietzsche', 187.
[34] *Totality and Infinity*, 34.
[35] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 63.
[36] *Totality and Infinity*, 34.
[37] Hence: 'A being *receiving* the idea of Infinity, *receiving* since it cannot derive it from itself, is a being taught in a non-maieutic fashion', *Totality and Infinity*, 204.
[38] *Totality and Infinity*, 62.
[39] *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
[40] *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
[41] *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
[42] *Totality and Infinity*, 35.
[43] *Totality and Infinity*, 78.
[44] *Totality and Infinity*, 78.
[45] See *Totality and Infinity*, 34, 38, 218.
[46] *Totality and Infinity*, 62.

Levinas commits the cardinal sin as far as our atheist protagonists are concerned. Crucially, however, he agrees that we must reject the lack conception of desire – as he puts it, desire is 'not an appeal to food', and has nothing to do with wanting completion: it 'desires beyond everything that can simply complete it'. He agrees also that the desire at issue here is fundamental to our humanity. The idea that it is beyond any appeal for food allows Levinas to reject the idea that God is there simply to satisfy us. Indeed, he wants to deny that God is there to satisfy in any sense at all, this going hand in hand with the further claim that desire's object serves to 'hollow out' the desire rather than to fill it: 'the true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy, but hollows out'.[47]

Levinas is trying to capture what it means for desire for God to be insatiable, albeit in a framework which involves a rejection of the lack model. Desire is insatiable on the lack model in the sense that it fails to reach the desired object and is ever present for that reason. We are to suppose that satisfaction would bring it to an end, and that desire is aimed at its own extinction in this respect. On the alternative Levinasian model, by contrast, desire is insatiable in the sense that it is kept alive by something beyond the subject – something which fills us with 'higher thoughts' rather than food, and which cannot in any case be grasped as an object. The thoughts in question motivate us to be moral, and Levinas wishes to claim that it is at this level of interaction that the desire for God is truly expressed. We have moved away here from the Sartrean idea that desire is to be defined in opposition to (an impossible) God, for Levinasian desire is essentially God-involving, although to repeat, God is not experienced as an object in this context, but only in and through the moral movement towards the other.

It follows that there are two senses in which Levinasian desire counts as creative: first, it is constantly renewed/'hollowed out' by its (independently desirable) object, where this involves the subject being attracted in this direction; second, and in line with the requirement that God cannot be represented as an object, this attraction is expressed in the subject's motivation to be moral (God is known at the level of action rather than contemplation: 'to know God is to know what must be done').[48] Levinas can therefore grant with Sartre that creative desire is tied up with the question of value. He can say also that value has its source in the desiring subject, but what he means

[47] 'Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite', 114.

[48] 'A Religion for Adults', in *Difficult Freedom,* trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 17.

by this is that she is motivated to bring value to the world, when, for example, she reaches out to another human being and does 'what must be done'. The weight of responsibility is said to be on her shoulders in this context, and Levinas talks of God hiding His face to demand the superhuman of man.[49] The idea is likewise familiar from Sartre. What Levinas denies, however, is that, in realizing value in this way, the subject creates the requirements they impose. On the contrary, she is conscious of 'Good, and the Law' in this context,[50] and filled with the 'higher thoughts' which come from an acknowledgment of God's greatness.[51] We are told that '[s]pirituality is offered up as absence' in such a scenario, although this is not intended to compromise the idea that God is 'real and concrete'.[52]

Talk of God's absence returns us again to Sartre, and there is a sense in which he, too, seeks to exploit this absence as an opportunity for erecting an ethics. The difference, however, is that he takes God's absence to be equivalent to non-existence, and concludes on this basis that there is no genuine love in the world, and no hope for fulfilment either. Levinas is happy to grant that fulfilment must elude us, but this is because he *rejects* the lack model of desire, seeing the desire for fulfilment as just one more expression of egoism. Furthermore, and in contrast to Sartre, he wants to say that there *is* genuine love and goodness in the world, but only because it contains desiring beings like ourselves who are motivated to be moral. It is at this level of interaction that we are said to 'express' the infinite.[53]

4. Atheism, again

Levinas offers a picture of striving without the illusion of a lack to be filled, but his position confronts a seemingly decisive difficulty,

[49] 'Loving the Torah More Than God', in *Difficult Freedom*, 145.
[50] 'A Religion for Adults', 20–22.
[51] 'Loving the Torah More Than God', 145.
[52] 'Loving the Torah More Than God', 145.
[53] Hence: 'The infinite is not "in front of me"; it is I who express it, but I do so precisely in giving a sign of the giving of signs, of the " for the other" in which I am disinterested: here I am [me voici]', 'God and Philosophy, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75. Compare Simone Weil: 'God must be on the side of the subject and not on that of the object during all those intervals of time when, forsaking the contemplation of the light, we imitate the descending movement of God so as to turn ourselves towards the world', *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1976), 358.

namely, that it presupposes the truth of theism. Yet it is a non-negotiable premise of our atheist protagonists that theism is unsustainable, and that our only hope in the face of the abyss is to defend a conception of desire (and hence meaningful life and value) which is shorn of any reference to God. Hence the demand for a conception of desire which is self-sustaining in a non-theistic sense.

The truth of atheism is taken for granted in such discussions, but it is worth noting that this supposed truth has not been established, and it is certainly not established by anything said by Nietzsche, Sartre, or their latter day disciples. After all, Levinas's God is absent from the world in one clear enough sense, and if God is made present only at the level of morality, then there are important implications for an understanding of the distinction between atheism and theism. It means for a start that there is a knife-edge between Levinasian theism and any secular position which allows that we are responsive to an external source of value.[54]

A similar knife-edge exists between Levinasian theism and the Nietzschean position defended by Pippin, although we could separate them once and for all by insisting on Nietzsche's behalf that nothing is objectively valuable, and that the subject's desire *creates* any value in its object. I have noted already that such a position seems to involve just one more attempt of the subject to play at being God. There is also a question of whether desire thus understood could be sustained in the manner required, and if so, whether it could support a properly human existence.[55]

The atheist is not bound to be a radical subjectivist, and there is enough in Nietzsche (and Sartre too) to suggest that he is committed to rejecting such a position. It is a familiar enough idea that Nietzsche's real aim is to overcome the values of our Judaeo-Christian heritage, but even this much is contentious given the difficulty of determining what these values are, and the extent to which he

[54] For more on this see my *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[55] Mark Platts has argued that once we move beyond the animal desires which rear up inside us in response to our bodily needs, there is a question of how desire's motivating force is to be explained. He argues that the most significant category of human desire concerns those which are motivated by the desiring subject's conception of their independently desirable object, and that the price of abandoning such realism can be the death of desire. See his 'Moral Reality and the End of Desire', in *Reference, Truth, and Reality* (ed.) Mark Platts (London: Routledge, 1980). If Platts is right then this has huge implications for the Nietzschean position, assuming that it involves a commitment to radical subjectivism.

succeeds in this aim. Scheler's conception of authentic Christian love sounds a lot like Nietzsche's will to power, and will to power has been interpreted so as to suggest that Nietzsche, no less than Levinas, is offering up spirituality as absence.[56] Given the already present difficulty of drawing a line between atheism and theism, it is unhelpful to insist that the real difference comes with the rejection of God.

5. Picking up the pieces

In a paper on the abyss Grace Jantzen raises the question of how the nihilist's loss of value might be transformed into possibilities for new growth. This is the question with which we have been wrestling, the central issue being whether this new growth can be sustained at the level of desire and in the absence of God. Towards the end of her paper Jantzen suggests that perhaps Heidegger is right when he says that only a god can save us now. She quickly adds, however, that 'God will come only as love is born within us, only as we ourselves become divine'. Her paper as a whole is concerned to defend this possibility, and to do so with reference to the conception of abyss assumed by some medieval mystics (her focus is Hadewijch). According to this conception the abyss refers to the unfathomable abyss of the divine nature and the human heart rather than the hellish groundlessness exploited by the likes of Sartre and Nietzsche. Jantzen's aim is to exploit this conception in the context of effecting a reconfiguration of nihilism: yes, we face the abyss, and thank God for that!

It should be clear from my discussion that the real problem concerns whether this reconfiguration is permitted in the first place, and what it really amounts to. I have argued that we are entitled to move beyond Sartre's framework – at least in the sense that we do not have to accept his conception of desire as lack, or the related assumption that we are compelled to pursue an impossible ideal. So hell can be avoided to this degree at least, and we can surely question his insistence that the world which stands before us has neither joy, nor love, nor light. This is not to suggest that atheism has been refuted. The point is simply that we are not obviously in hell.

Our Nietzschean agrees that we must move beyond Sartre in these respects, *her* aim being to effect the transition from abyss 1 (hell) to

[56] See Jacob Golomb's 'Will to Power: Does it Lead to the "Coldest of all Cold Monsters"?', *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* (eds) John Richardson and Ken Gemes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 526.

abyss 2 (heaven) from the resources of the human heart alone, as if we ourselves are infinite. This is the interesting move, and I have sought to determine the different things it could mean, narrowing the gap between this option and its theistic rival. I have questioned the most radical interpretation of the Nietzschean position (value as reducible to desire), and suggested that this is just one more expression of the Sartrean desire to be God. Jantzen, of course, is happy to talk of our *becoming divine* when love is born within us, but she is not suggesting that God has been cast aside in favour of man, and is more properly understood to be articulating – à la Levinas – the sense in which we are caught up in God's loving desire and giving expression to the infinite in this respect.

Becoming divine in this sense involves acknowledging that we are responsive to an external source of value. Desire's creative activity is constrained in this respect, and we must surely grant also that we are more than just ciphers for God's love – after all, we have a measure of self-concern, and not all of our desires are oriented towards the good.[57] We fall short of being 'superhuman' in these respects, although Nietzsche and Levinas prefer to downplay such limitations. Hence the preference for a conception of desire which involves creativity rather than lack.

If unconstrained creativity is the devil in disguise, then the form of a solution is to incorporate the relevant 'lacks' into our understanding of desire, albeit from within a framework which involves a denial of the Sartrean assumption that we are hitting a brick wall in this context – ever fated to remain out of touch with our heart's desire.[58] This first requirement is satisfied with the claim that desire involves being responsive to an external source of value – assuming that this is what we really want; but what of the Levinasian worry that a lack-involving conception of desire will reduce it to a simple 'appeal for food'? Recognising that we are limited in the relevant respects – i.e. recognising that we are human – *cannot* mean that all of our desires are appetitive. What it does suggest is that talk of wanting fulfilment is not entirely inappropriate, although this need not imply that we want to be without desire. To put it in the required Levinasian and Nietzschean terms, the desired fulfilment is to be found *in* desire rather than in its termination. As for the Deleuzian complaint that a

[57] For a brilliant exploration along these lines see Seiriol Morgan's 'Dark Desires', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6 (4), 2003, 377–410.

[58] Levinas notes and rejects Plato's idea that love is 'the offspring of abundance and poverty' (*Totality and Infinity*, 63), and in doing so can be understood to be rejecting any such concession to the notion of lack.

link between desire and lack is bound to involve resentment and bad conscience, this is surely a more apt riposte for one who takes desire's creative movement to be entirely unconstrained, assuming that such a position is just one more expression of the desire to be God. If it is not, then this concession to the 'lack' model poses no threat.[59]

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[59] This concession can be related to the idea – so important to early Christianity and Plato – that eros and agape can be fruitfully intertwined. See Sarah Coakley's *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) for a defence of this conception of the relation between eros and agape.