Conversion, Self-discovery and Moral Change*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. Preliminaries: the relationship between philosophy and religion

In approaching a topic like conversion as a philosopher, one is confronted by an immediate problem about the relationship between philosophical and religious discourse. Much current analytic philosophy is committed to a secular framework of thought; and in many cases, this takes the form of an explicitly naturalistic outlook – that is to say an explicit denial of the existence or (in some cases) even the possibility of supernatural phenomena, or failing that, at least a methodological principle that philosophical analysis and explanation should always avoid any reference to the supernatural. This means that many analytic philosophers might be inclined to shun the topic of conversion, considering it (rightly or wrongly) tainted with supernaturalist assumptions that they regard as having no place in contemporary philosophical discourse. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those avowedly Christian philosophers who might welcome the topic of conversion but would regard it as something to be discussed entirely within the framework of Christian beliefs and doctrines; for such a group it may be a matter of principle that (as Alvin Plantinga put it in a rather different connection) their philosophizing should be answerable only to Christian standards.[1]

The resulting polarization seems to me to have had some damaging effects. One consequence is that much philosophy of religion has retreated into a ghetto which tends to be frequented only by those already committed to certain theistic or even Christian assumptions. Within this category we find Christian philosophical theology (philosophical analysis of the logic of specific doctrines like the Incarnation or the Resurrection) – often philosophically rigorous and carefully argued, but likely to appeal mainly to committed Christians rather than the philosophical world at large. Secondly, even more explicitly *parti pris*, we find the domain of Christian apologetics, which it is probably fair to say that most secular philosophers (and some theists too)[2] find both philosophically suspect and also distinctly irritating in its tone and content. Apart from the two genres just mentioned, there is of course the traditional field of natural theology (including, for example, the standard arguments for and against the existence of God). This is perhaps most likely to reach outside the ghetto of believers, and much of it has proved philosophically engaging even to atheists (compare the interest aroused by updated versions of the ontological and cosmological

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[1] Discussing his notion of a "properly basic belief", Plantinga writes: "The criteria for proper basicality must be reached from below rather than from above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra*, but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples… Must my criteria [for a properly basic belief] or those of the Christian community conform to their examples [the examples of atheists]? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples not to theirs." A .Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds), *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16-93, at p. 77.

[2] An example is Søren Kierkegaard: "If one were to describe the whole orthodox apologetic effort in a single sentence, but also with categorical precision, one might say that it has the intent to make Christianity *plausible.* To this one might add that, if this were to succeed, then the effort would have the ironical fate that precisely on its day of triumph it would have lost everything and entirely quashed Christianity." *On Authority and Revelation* [1846-7], trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1966), p. 59; cited in B. Davies, "Is God Beyond Reason?", *Philosophical Investigations* 32: 4 (October 2009), pp. 338-359, at p. 340.

arguments among philosophers of all faith backgrounds and of none). But the confinement of acceptable philosophy of religion to natural theology has one drawback: it takes us into a very abstract domain that is often far removed from religion as it is actually operates in the life of the believer. It is rather as if the philosophy of music were to confine itself to the abstract theories of musicologists, without any attention being paid to the transforming power of music in the lives of those who experience it.

To be sure, the abstract theoretical questions of natural theology are not *irrelevant* to the religious adherent's life. For religious allegiance (at least in the main theistic traditions) typically includes subscribing to certain metaphysical doctrines about the existence and nature of God. There is, either explicitly or implicitly, a credal component, or an orthodoxy (though it may actually be a lot thinner than is widely assumed).[3] But what is most *salient* for the actual religious believer is often not the metaphysical or theoretical but the practical and moral components of religious allegiance;[4] and we risk ignoring this crucial component if we focus exclusively on the theological claims, or on the truth and content of the 'God hypothesis', as Richard Dawkins calls it.[5] I have argued elsewhere that it is a mistake to construe religious adherence as *primarily* a cognitive matter – a matter of assenting to certain propositions, or being satisfied of the truth of certain doctrines.[6] To understand the nature of religious allegiance our principal focus should instead be on how the life of the religious adherent is systematically oriented towards certain values.

To be sure, the distinction implied here is not a neat dichotomy: practical and moral orientation may go hand in hand with certain doctrinal beliefs, and, conversely, adopting certain doctrines may have implications for how one lives. Nevertheless, there is a broad general distinction which is clear enough for our purposes (a distinction that goes back a long way in philosophy) between the practical or action-guiding and the theoretical or abstract domains of human understanding. Religious allegiance, I would suggest, is not primarily a matter of intellectual assent to certain explanatory hypotheses about the nature or origins of the cosmos, or the acceptance of certain metaphysical claims about ultimate reality, but involves above all (to borrow some much misunderstood notions of Wittgenstein) a 'passionate commitment', which is inextricably bound up with a certain 'form of life'.[7] The collective evidence of Scripture, which is a rich source for our grasp of what is involved in religious allegiance, is pretty clear on this point: the divine call is chiefly heard as a moral and practical as opposed to a theoretical or purely cognitive one. The reality which the patriarchs

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[3] See for example David Benatar, "What's God Got To Do With It?", Ratio XIX (4), December 2006, reprinted in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

[4] Thus Linda Zagzebski argues that certain emotions, such as that of reverence, are "a more basic feature of religion than any belief." *Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 3.

[5] R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2007). For the opposite view, compare the reported comment of a catholic priest who, after a lecture from an atheist on spirituality, said that he agreed with every word. "Surely you can't agree," responded the speaker, since I say I don't believe in God or the immortality of the soul?" "Oh," replied the priest with a benevolent smile, "those are secondary matters." The anecdote appears in André Comte-Sponville, *The Book of Atheist Spirituality* [*L'esprit de l'atheisme* 2006] (London: Bantam, 2008), p.55.

[6] "What Difference Does It Make? The Nature and Significance of Theistic Belief," *Ratio* XIX (4) December 2006, pp. 401-420; repr. in Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism.*

[7] For a conspectus of the many passages where Wittgenstein discusses the importance of activity and 'forms of life', see H-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 124-9. For the notion of 'passionate commitment', see L. Wittgenstein, MS 136 [1947], in *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 73. For some of the misunderstandings of these texts, in particular the tendency to interpret Wittgenstein's view of religion as entirely non-cognitivist, see J. Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy," in H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman and (eds), *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P.M.S. Hacker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 203-227.

and prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the key protagonists of the New Testament are made aware of is one that calls them to change their lives, to follow a certain path of righteousness, to hear the cry of the oppressed, to love one another, to forgive those who have wronged them, and so on through a long catalogue of luminous moral insights that form the living core of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.[8]

The concept of conversion, it seems to me, fits most comfortably into this general domain of discourse. It is one of a group of concepts (including, for example, sin, repentance, amendment of life, salvation, and many others) that are to be understood primarily within a moral or practical context – they are part of a certain way of understanding what it is for humans to live well and to mature, morally and psychologically. Seen in this way, I would maintain that they ought to qualify as a perfectly proper object of philosophical study – as a legitimate part of the territory we know as moral philosophy. To this claim, I would add a second, equally important one: that the appropriate philosophical investigation of these concepts needs to take account of the context in which they occur – and this will inevitably mean that the relevant texts and sources will often include biblical materials, and perhaps the writings of biblical commentators, as well as, for example, patristic writers. Any such references or quotations may appear philosophically suspect to some atheistic readers; but inclusion of such scriptural or other texts most emphatically does not mean we have moved into the domain of apologetics, or that any self-respecting analytic philosopher, committed to the standards of critical rationality, should switch off, or stop reading. On the contrary, the nature of the sources or the examples used, and the metaphysical freight that is presupposed in some of these sources and examples, does not alter the fact that the topic to which these materials belong, how should we live, how should we change our lives, how should we improve morally, still belongs firmly within the domain of mainstream, moral philosophy.

It's perhaps worth adding, to conclude this opening section, that the blanket exclusion of religious themes and concepts by moral philosophers (as in a recently reported comment on some Pascalian arguments about the human condition, which dismissed them on the grounds that they were "based on the [false] assumption that a historical 'Fall' of man actually took place") seems misguided for two reasons: first because scriptural and religious ideas do not always have to be construed in a fundamentalist or literalist way; but second, and more important, because such secular dismissals often fail to appreciate what follows from their very assumption of the falsity of religious belief. For even if (in the words of Descartes in the First Meditation) "we grant for the sake of argument that everything said about God is a fiction", then this itself implies that the relevant fictional statements about God were devised by human beings, consciously or unconsciously, for some reason or reasons; and no open-minded philosopher is entitled to rule out in advance the possibility that these reasons might include, for example, pointing to a deep human need, or capturing a vital moral insight. The hardliner who wishes to exclude all religious ideas as irrelevant to moral philosophy is thus faced with a dilemma: either religion is true, in which case such ideas may be highly relevant; or else it is false, in which case it is a human invention, whose potential moral content seems at least prima facie as worthy of examination as that of any other human construct (for example the moral insights found in poems or novels or plays). In the light of this, it is worth considering whether we may not be doing our students a disservice by insisting, for example, that they plough through Aristotle's tedious pronouncements on 'great-souledness', while denying them the moral riches of Scriptural writings of a similar status and antiquity, often for no discernibly better reason than that the former are taken to be respectably secular.[9]

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[8] Similar calls, for compassion and self-purification, for example, are found in the Islamic scriptures.

[9] These comments on the blanket exclusion of religious themes from contemporary moral philosophy are drawn from J. Cottingham, "Impartiality and Ethical Formation," in B. Feltham and J. Cottingham (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality: Morality, Special Relationships and the Wider World* (Oxford: Oxford

2. What is conversion?

With these preliminaries in mind, how can we usefully approach the topic of conversion? Clearly conversion is a topic that belongs in the general domain of religious discourse, but I hope I have just said enough to establish that this in itself should be no bar to its attracting the legitimate interest of the moral philosopher. A further relevant point, arising from our opening remarks on the nature of religious allegiance, is that one should be wary of assuming that conversion is primarily a cognitive or intellectual matter. Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century remarked that it is the heart, not the intellect, that leads one to awareness of God;[10] and there may be a general lesson here about the role of the emotions in determining how we view the world that that philosophers could afford to absorb, given the widespread tendency to over-intellectualize such matters. We spend a lot of time debating the tenability of theism, but few of us can honestly say we have seen anyone change their religious allegiance, or lack of it, as a result of such intellectual argument.[11]

Some may be inclined to challenging this last claim, citing as counter-examples cases from their own experience where philosophical argument has supposedly led someone to become a theist, or an atheist. Such examples are not, of course, conclusive, since there may have been pre-rational, or even subconscious, factors also at work. But whatever the truth about the precise role of intellectual argument in moving someone towards or away from theistic belief, it seems clear that conversion, in any interesting sense of the term, is never about mere cognitive change. Clearly no one is converted in the sense of being saved, or for that matter damned, as a result of merely subscribing to, or ceasing to subscribe to, any given set of credal propositions. There is some confusion about this, I think, both among religious supporters and their opponents, because of biblical pronouncements like "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved" (from the almost certainly spurious section added on to the final chapter of Mark's gospel (16:16)). But whatever this and similar passages elsewhere may mean, they cannot coherently be asserting that the mere fact of accepting a credal proposition is the key to salvation. The idea of a morally perfect God rewarding people or awarding salvation points merely on the grounds of doxastic allegiance should, on reflection, appear manifestly absurd, not just to the opponents of religion but to its adherents as well. At least one reported pronouncement of Christ, incidentally, is very clear on this point: in the parable of the last judgement, when the sheep are separated from the goats, it turns out that credal orthodoxy gets you no points whatever: those who sincerely say "Lord, Lord", yet have

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University Press, 2010), pp. 65-83. The Pascal remark, from J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 146, is cited by J. L. Kvanvig. "Divine Hiddenness: What Is the Problem?", in D. Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 151. My comparison between the Bible and Aristotle may be objected to on the grounds that Aristotle's ethics are clearly philosophy, while scriptural writings are not. But that is too glib a distinction. Admittedly much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* contains rich philosophical argument and analysis of the kind we seldom if ever find in Scripture; but there is other material (Aristotle's account of the 'great-souled' man is just such an example) which simply reflects one among many possible historical conceptions of virtue – there being others (such as those found in Scripture) which are on any showing as if not more influential and important for a philosophical study of ethics and the good life.

[10] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no 424: *C'est le coeur qui sent Dieu et non la raison.*

[11] Here I would agree with Linda Zagzebski that "there are remarkably few people who have been convinced [by one of the classical] arguments for God's existence." *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 98.

failed to show moral transformation in their lives, are unequivocally condemned and thrust into outer darkness.[12]

So conversion, I propose, is primarily and initially to be understood as a *radical moral change*, a reorientation of one's life towards a new set of values. Some may object that this is already far too thin a way of understanding it, since there is no direct reference made to God. Well, if the religious worldview is correct, then such a moral change will of course be the effect of divine grace; but I want to suggest that this metaphysical component may be bracketed off for present purposes, where we are concerned to examine the topic from a perspective that might appeal to any moral philosopher, irrespective of religious allegiance or otherwise. (In case this should raise the hackles of religiously committed readers, it should be stressed that bracketing off is not the same as deleting. There is a parallel here with the case of morality generally: if the religious worldview is correct, then God will be the source of goodness and/or rightness; but it is possible for the moral philosopher to investigate these notions as they operate in human life and discourse while leaving on one side the metaphysical issue of whether morality is theistically based.) So I propose, as a method of proceeding, that one may look at the examples of conversion that have come down to us from the religious tradition in an open-minded or if you like neutralist way, with a view to seeing if they offer moral illumination or insight that can be recognised in human terms, irrespective of whether the underlying theological assumptions are accepted as true or regarded as fictions.

Even if we adopt this neutralist approach, however, our initial working definition of conversion still clearly needs to have something added to it beyond the mere notion of radical moral change. For someone who simply comes on reflection to a fundamental change of mind about some cluster of moral issues would not ordinary be described as having undergone a conversion, except perhaps in a very loose sense of the term. Conversion typically has a certain characteristic phenomenology – there is, as it were, a *psycho-ethical dynamics* of conversion, which manifests itself to the subject in a very specific way.

How can we make this more precise? An initial suggestion might be that the change involved happens in a particularly quick and dramatic fashion. Such a suggestion, however, does not survive deeper scrutiny. Some conversion narratives, it is true, involve a very sudden event, a blinding light literally "out of the blue", as in the most famous case of all, that of St Paul on the road to Damascus. Others, however, as in the intricately self-documented case of St Augustine, seem to have involved a protracted period of mental wrestling. But irrespective of the speed of the change, what seems common to both the sudden and the drawn-out conversion is the sense, phenomenologically speaking, of a *demand* for change: that is, it is something that presents itself to the subject as something he is *called on or required to undergo,* resist as he might. In a well-known poem of Rilke, this idea, or something very like it, is expressed in aesthetic rather than religious terms, where the writer comes upon an ancient statue from the Classical world.[13] It happens to be a statue of Apollo, but Rilke does not invoke any specific doctrinal elements from the Greek polytheistic outlook. Rather, the salient point is a human and moral one: the poet, confronted by that headless torso, with its austere perfection of form, feels an acute sense of the inadequacy of his own life. Although the statue has no head, and hence of course no eyes, the poet as he stands in front of the statue feels himself nonetheless searchingly and uncompromisingly scrutinized, and he is somehow called upon to respond:

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[12] Matthew 7: 21-3; cf. 1 John 2:3, Revelation 22:14. See also J. Cottingham, "Getting the Right Travel Papers. A Postscript to *The Spiritual Dimension*", *Philosophy,* 83, no 326 (October 2008), pp. 557-567.
[13] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Archaïscher Torso Apollos* [from *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, 1908]. I discuss this poem in "The Self, the Good Life and the Transcendent", in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (London: Palgrave, 2008). pp. 228-271.

denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern

for there, there is no place
but looks you through. Your life must be remade.

Conversion is a radical moral change, which arises as a result of a profound sense in the subject that his or her life has so far failed to measure up to certain objective ethical demands that require the whole direction of that life to be altered.

3. The psycho-ethical dynamics of conversion

The initial sketch of an account we have arrived at once needs to be deepened. To explore further what I have called the 'psycho-ethical dynamics' of conversion, it may be helpful to return to Pascal's idea of the role of the heart in leading us to awareness of God. A big part of the importance of the emotions in human life, as hinted at in one seminal conversion account, the story in Luke's Gospel of the how the disciples' hearts 'burned within them' on the road to Emmaus, is that they can have an 'unblocking' function, allowing us to understand ourselves and the world better, by revealing and bringing to the surface what we had previously concealed from ourselves, or been blocked from perceiving properly. Often such outflowings of emotion are the trigger for moral and spiritual change: the scales fall from someone's eyes, and they are brought to see that some present course of action, or even their life as a whole, needs to change.[14]

An example from literature may (as is often the case) help to make vivid, in imaginative terms, a phenomenon that will be familiar enough to many people from their own experience. Looking at the crisis that has overwhelmed him, Thomas Wolsey, in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, declares in his misery that he 'feels his heart new opened'.

I have ventured,
Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders,
This many summers in a sea of glory,
But far beyond my depth: my high-blown pride
At length broke under me and now has left me,
Weary and old with service, to the mercy
Of a rude stream, that must for ever hide me.
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye:
I feel my heart new open'd.[15]

Things suddenly look different, and the 'high blown pride' that has motivated Wolsey for most of his career is now seen as having carried him 'far beyond his depth', into vanities that now for the first time seem to him hateful. The example is not an explicitly religious one, nor is it described by Shakespeare in religious terms. But it would be a mistake to make a watertight separation between episodes of moral growth and change and the kind of spiritual awakening that is described for example in the Emmaus narrative, and in many other biblical stories.

What is common to such episodes is sense of a turning point, a change often marked

[14] The remaining portion of this section of the paper draws heavily on material from my *Why Believe?* (London: Continuum, 2009), Ch. 5, §4.
[15] William Shakespeare, *A History of Henry VIII* [1613], Act III, scene 2.

for the protagonists by intense psychological turmoil. In the strange yet highly suggestive story of Balaam in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet is in a state of fury and frustration as he tries to force his unwilling donkey along a certain path. Only when the animal takes on human speech and rebukes him for his cruelty are his eyes opened, so that he can now see the angel of the Lord standing in the path and barring the way.[16] His whole view of the journey on which he is embarked needs to change.

Quite apart from the fact that such biblical examples involve alleged supernatural intervention (which may lead to such episodes being dismissed out of hand by the sceptic), some readers may be inclined to wonder whether the view of moral change presented here may not be altogether too dramatic and theatrical to match our ordinary human experience. Is not the reality a good deal more prosaic and straightforward – more like that mapped out by Aristotle in his standard account of ethical development? [17] Here, instead of psychological crisis, and the sudden confrontation with a demand for change, we find a much calmer picture of moral development: an individual is inducted as a child into a certain ethical culture, and a result of training from parents and teachers is encouraged to develop certain feelings and attitudes, which gradually become ingrained. The outcome of this gradual process, if all goes well, is a person of mature ethical virtue: someone who has the right habits of feeling and action, but who also has the capacity to discern what should be done and why.

The message from the Judaeo-Christian tradition is that things are very seldom as smooth as the secular Aristotelian model envisages.[18] Christian and Judaic views about the inherently flawed character of humankind, dramatised as the doctrine of the Fall, imply that the path of righteousness is never an easy one. There may be a dispute here between those who might side with Aristotle in constructing a fairly optimistic map of the conditions for the good life, and those who might be drawn to a gloomier assessment of the inherent sinfulness of humankind. That debate, between what might broadly be called the Pelagian and the Augustinian perspectives,[19] has of course conditioned much of the history of Western religious and ethical thought. But rather than broaching that vast debate in its generality, I want focus on one particular strand in Christian thought, the idea of *metanoia*, or change of heart which is so crucial for a radical shift in moral outlook.

What are the conditions for such a change? I don't think one can proceed here by laying down general logical or causal conditions, but only by looking at examples. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus provides one such case; and it is of interest that it was a change radical enough to be flagged – by his assumption of a new name – as a complete personal and moral rebirth. There is a paradox about Paul, in that he spent a great deal of his subsequent energies as a Christian engaging in intricate intellectual and scriptural debate with those he was trying to convert. But his own conversion, from the little we know about it, was certainly not the outcome of rational discussion, but was an emotionally shattering episode marked by a serious collapse: he fell down, and was, for several days, unable to see (Acts 9:1-9). What can have precipitated this? The theological answer is, of course, clear: it was the voice of the risen Christ, who spoke to him out of a bright light. But the record also contains a vital clue to the psychological background, namely the fact that earlier in his life Saul had been present,

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[16] Numbers 22: 22-28.

[17] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [*c.* 325 BC], Bk II, Ch. 4 and Ch. 6, 1105a31-2 and 1106b21-2. For an insightful development of this theme, see Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[18] In what follows, I shall confine myself to the Christian case, but it seems probable that there are similar points to be made about the other two great Abrahamic faiths, not to mention other major world religions including Buddhism.

[19] Pelagius (5th century) asserted the perfectibility of humankind, and his views were the subject of a series of attacks by Augustine (such as *On Nature and Grace* [415]), which firmly established the doctrine of original sin as essential to Christianity

not as an instigator, but as an apparently willing young supporter (holding the coats of the executioners) at the stoning of the martyr Stephen (Acts 6:8-15, and 7:54 – 8:1). He went on from this to a career as a zealous persecutor of the Christians; but the account of the stoning provided in Acts leaves no doubt that the episode must have been one likely to call forth the horror and pity of any morally decent person. One does not have to indulge in too much amateur psychoanalysis to conjecture that the internal tensions generated in the young man by having to repress these feelings built up to the point where only something like a nervous breakdown could release the moral energies which would set him on a new course.

As I noted earlier, conversion can no doubt take many forms, sometimes rapid, sometimes protracted – as Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, either 'at once, as once at a crash Paul', or else 'as Austin [Augustine], lingering-out sweet skill …'[20] The latter image is of a protracted philosophical wrestling – though even in this Augustinian case it was clearly not just an intellectual matter, but involved a complex interior descent, a journey to the depths of the psyche.[21] At all events, what our discussion so far suggests is that conversion will always involve a characteristic emotional shift, allowing the world to be seen differently, and allowing a reality hitherto concealed to be disclosed in its true meaning.

To set against the relatively calm and ordered process of ethical development envisaged in classical Aristotelian virtue theory, the religious idea of conversion takes seriously both our 'wretchedness' and our 'redeemability' – the two poles of the human condition described by Pascal.[22] True moral and spiritual growth, on this picture, requires us to be shaken out of our ordinary complacency; it requires us to bring to the surface those 'reasons of the heart' which will open us to new ways of perceiving, and new possibilities for enriched awareness. Conversion, if this is right, is not a coercive process engineered by demonstrations of power, but is a response of the whole person, intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual, that enables what was hitherto hidden to come to light. The process is not one of being brought up short by new scientific evidence or paranormal events, but the working of an interior moral change that generates a new openness. Nothing can force acceptance unless we have "ears to hear".[23] And what is heard is not a barrage of confirmatory data, but a message that needs to be understood. It is, as the Second Epistle of Peter puts it, a *word* – one that must be "heeded, as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."[24]

4. Deconversion

At this point it is necessary to consider a possible objection to the approach to conversion that we have so far been following, namely that, despite our 'neutralist' methodology (approaching the topic from the standpoint of moral philosophy and moral psychology rather than from a committed religious standpoint), nevertheless the examples chosen are drawn exclusively from the religious domain, in such a way as to give a one-sided impression of the nature of conversion. The rubric for the 2011 Claremont conference on Conversion includes under the term "conversion" not just instances of converting *to* a religion, but the case of "rejection of religion for a secular world-view;" this implies that one can correctly speak of 'conversion' to atheism. Should not our exploration of conversion therefore reflect this possibility?

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[20] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland", stanza 10; in *Poems (1876–1889)*.

[21] "Go not outside, but return within thyself; in the inward man dwelleth the truth." Augustine, *De vera religione* [AD 391], xxxix, 72.

[22] "Christian faith serves to establish virtually only two things: the corruption of our nature, and our redemption through Jesus Christ". *Pensées*, ed. Lafuma, no. 427. Compare no 6: "the wretchedness of man without God; the felicity of man with God".

[23] Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:9.

[24] 2 Peter 1:19.

As far as the actual usage of the term 'conversion' goes, I suspect that people's linguistic intuitions may vary as to whether it includes cases where religious commitment is abandoned. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the term always connotes a move *towards*, rather than away from, religious allegiance: it defines conversion as "the bringing of anyone over *to* a specified religious faith, profession or party, especially to one regarded as true from what is regarded as falsehood or error".[25] The latter clause does, however, hint that the term might be legitimately extended to the bringing of someone *away* from religious allegiance, if that were seen as an escape from a worldview taken to be false or erroneous. And it may well be that since this particular edition of the dictionary was compiled the linguistic meaning of 'conversion' has indeed expanded to accommodate such cases – to accommodate the phenomenon of what we might call 'deconversion.'[26]

Here, then, is a fairly typical modern account of what might be called a 'deconversion' to a naturalist or secularist position from previous religious allegiance, taken from a recent study by the French atheist philosopher André Comte-Sponville: "I was raised a Christian, but I also believed in God. My faith, if occasionally laced with doubts, was powerful until around age eighteen. Then I lost it, and it felt like a liberation – everything suddenly seemed simpler, lighter, stronger and more open. It was as if I had left childhood behind me, with its fantasies and fears, its closeness and languorousness, and entered the real world at long last – the adult world, the world of action, the world of truth, unhampered by forgiveness or Providence. Such freedom! Such responsibility! Such joy!"[27]

One might suppose that such a scenario completely refutes the idea I have so far been arguing for in this paper, of a distinctive phenomenology of conversion, structured round the sense of confrontation with an exterior moral demand. I would suggest, however, that on the contrary it tends to confirm it, precisely by offering a kind of inverted mirror image, in which all the features are reversed. In the religious cases I have cited earlier, the agent is made vividly aware of his own moral failure, and presented with what seems an uncompromising exterior constraint – an absolute demand for moral change or reform. In the Comte-Sponville description of his 'deconversion', by contrast, it is the exact opposite. There is a sense of *liberation*, of the constraints or 'closeness' of the previous structure falling away, and of the subject's 'freedom' to do as he wishes. "Such freedom!"

It is of course true that Comte-Sponville immediately adds "such responsibility!" – thereby bolstering what turns out to be his repeated insistence in the book that deconversion to atheism does not at all imply abandoning morality. This latter claim is of course indisputable: despite Dostoevsky's "without God everything is permitted",[28] it would be absurd to suggest that those who have come to atheism after previous religious allegiance feel themselves thereby to be freed from moral constraints. But it is nonetheless significant that Comte-Sponville goes on to declare that his liberation from the religious worldview has led him to see that the "absolutization of ethics", as he terms it, is in the end "illusory". There are, in Comte-Sponville's new naturalist world view, no truly absolute or unconditional moral demands; rather, he construes moral imperatives as "projection on to Nature" of "what only exists within ourselves".[29]

Now there may be alternative versions of secularism that somehow preserve the normative character of morality in the strong sense of an absolute or unconditional demand.

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[25] *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), emphasis added.

[26] The latest online edition of the complete OED (accessed December 2010) does not however include any such meaning; instead it merely lists the traditional theological sense of the term: "the turning of sinners to God; a spiritual change from sinfulness, ungodliness, or worldliness to love of God and pursuit of holiness."

[27] Comte-Sponville, *Atheist Spirituality,* pp. 5-6

[28] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* [*Brat'ya Karamazovy*, 1880], Bk XI, Ch. 4.

[29] Comte-Sponville, *Atheist Spirituality*, p. 178.

But at least from the particular case under discussion, together with the religious cases referred to earlier, the position seems clear enough: conversion in the original and strict sense of being brought *to* a religious faith is characteristically experienced in terms of a phenomenology of being brought up against an uncompromising moral demand. Conversion in the opposite sense of moving away from a religious allegiance – what I have called 'deconversion' – is experienced as a liberation from absolute demands, and a sense of the subject's freedom to determine the course of his own life as he sees fit. Comte-Sponville's conclusion, at any rate, is that once one comes to see the "illusion" of absolute moral demands, morality becomes a function of the agent's wholly autonomous decision about how he chooses to live his life: "Should I rob or rape or murder?", Comte-Sponville asks; and he quotes admiringly from Alain's answer: "No, because it would be unworthy of what I am, and what I wish to be."[30] The phenomenology of submission to an absolute external demand is replaced by that of the liberation of the ego as autonomous creator and determiner of what is worthwhile. As to whether this inverted image of religious conversion is an authentic mode of moral growth for human beings, or else a kind of temptation, a distorting fantasy of the human agent as creator and determiner of value – that is clearly far too vast and complex and issue to be examined, let alone settled, within the confines of the present paper.[31]

5. Conversion and the psychotherapeutic framework

In this final section I should like to leave on one side the complex issues relating to 'deconversion', and revert to what may be called the 'mainstream' notion of conversion to religious faith. The ideas so far identified as playing a key role here include those of emotional response, moral crisis, interior descent, and radical psycho-ethical change. To explore these a little further, I want to draw an analogy between the domain of spiritual conversion and the seemingly very different domain of psychotherapy. Some may find such an analogy inappropriate or even repugnant, but I can only ask them to suspend judgement for a moment until the point of the comparison emerges. I should also make it clear that by 'psychotherapy' I do not here mean those cognitive and behavioural techniques which are aimed solely at the manipulation and alleviation of surface symptoms of psychological disorder (and which, because they offer quick and measurable results, are often favoured by public funding bodies), but the more mainstream psychoanalytic approach championed by Freud, Jung, Klein and their successors. I am not presupposing allegiance to any or all of the complicated theoretical postulates of any of these theories, which are of course highly controversial and disputed even among their supporters. The point of my comparison, rather, is the common *moral teleology* which underlies the psychotherapeutic process, namely its aim of enriching people's self-awareness, and enabling them to live more responsible and morally mature lives in relation to themselves and others.

In a certain way, the psychotherapeutic goal is a kind of rebirth or re-parenting, which will help to liberate us from infantile projections, from fantasies of control and domination, so that we may begin live openly and freely, in a way that acknowledges our own vulnerability and respects the vulnerability of others. The teleology of religious or spiritual conversion, I would suggest, has to be understood in a broadly similar way. The image repeatedly used by St Paul is that of coming out of darkness into light – into a state, in other words, where there is no room for projection or evasion, but where one is seen as one truly is. And to see oneself in this way has automatic implications for one's relation to others. The ideal of 'brotherly love', which Paul enjoins on his fellow converts, involves ceasing to treat others as objects to

[30] Comte-Sponville, *Atheist Spirituality*, p. 42.

[31] I touch on some of the issues in "Impartiality and Ethical Formation," esp. §4.

be used or defrauded or despised, and seeing them instead as just as deserving of love and respect as one would aspire to be oneself.[32]

Aside from these initial points of contact, two further similarities between the structure of conversion and that of psychotherapy may be noted. Firstly, the ultimate object posited in each domain is what may be called *anomalous*. In the psychoanalytic case the object is the Unconscious, while in the religious case it is God; and the anomaly lies in the fact that neither object can be brought entirely within the arena of ordinary human understanding. The Unconscious is, by its nature, that which is opaque to conscious apprehension – a fact that led some early philosophical critics of Freud to declare condescendingly that the very idea of the unconscious mind was incoherent, since what could not be brought within the domain of mental awareness could not, by definition, count as a mental phenomenon. Yet in truth the fact that the Unconscious is anomalous, outside the framework of ordinary mentation, need not be a fatal objection to positing it; for what cannot be fully encompassed may nonetheless be something we can reach towards. The "shadowy presentations" of the unconscious mind, as Jung termed them,[33] while remaining beneath the threshold of what is consciously registered, can nevertheless leave their traces in the faint forgotten memories of childhood, or the weird and only partly recoverable deliverances of dreams; and they can make sense, as Freud so brilliantly showed, of a whole range of similar phenomena, thereby illuminating and transforming aspects of our affective life that would otherwise be wholly baffling.

There is a close analogy here with what the religious adherent holds with regard to God – the elusive and mysterious source of being who, as Augustine declared, can never be brought fully within the grasp of the human mind. This resistance to being mentally encompassed is in the very nature of the divine: *si comprehendis, non est Deus*, wrote Augustine – if you grasp him, he is not God.[34] For the very fact of our encompassing him, bringing him entirely within the horizon of our human understanding, would be the best evidence that what was so grasped was not God but a mere idol of our own construction. Hence, to use a striking image from Descartes, God is like the mountain which we can never comprehend or grasp, never put our arms round, but which we can nevertheless touch; we can somehow reach towards him in our thought.[35] This anomalous aspect, which applies both to God and to the Unconscious – their resistance to the encompassing grasp of human inquiry

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[32] Compare 1 Thessalonians, 4: 3-9, and 5:4. See also Acts 26:18; Colossians 4: 13; cf. 1 Peter 2:9.

[33] "The psychoanalytic aim is to observe the shadowy presentations — whether in the form of images or of feelings — that are spontaneously evolved in the psyche and appear, without his bidding, to the man who looks within. In this way we find once more what we have repressed or forgotten. Painful though it may be, this is itself a gain — for what is inferior or even worthless belongs to me as my shadow, and gives me substance and mass. How can I be substantial if I fail to cast a shadow. I must have a dark side if I am to be whole; and inasmuch as I become conscious of my own shadow, I also remember that I am a human being like any other." Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Routledge, 1933) p. 40. For further discussion of Jung's position, see J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4.

[34] Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons* [*Sermones*, 392-430], 52, vi, 16 and 117, iii, 5.

[35] René Descartes, letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630: "I say that I know [that God is the author of everything, including the eternal truths], not that I conceive it or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought." Transl. in J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III, The Correspondence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, l995), p. 25.

– is only an obstacle to their acceptance for those who make the mistake of equating the limits our conscious apprehension with the limits of reality.

To this striking parallel between the psychoanalytic and the religious domains, let me in closing add a second, related one, which brings us back to the theme I broached at the start of the paper, that of the primacy of the practical and moral dimension over the theoretical and metaphysical when it comes to understanding the nature of the phenomena under discussion.

Like religion, psychoanalysis has, to be sure, a theoretical or doctrinal component; and just as we find in the religious case, that component can be the subject of fierce intellectual controversies and convoluted debates (the precise structure and dynamics of the unconscious mind calling forth almost as much furious factionalism as one finds in the long history of denominational schisms and heresies in the Church). But exactly as I argued in the case of conversion, so in the psychoanalytic case *one can to a large extent understand the process while bracketing off the theoretical and doctrinal content.* Psychoanalytic theorists may debate the precise role of the pleasure principle, or the depressive position, just as theologians will continue to thrash out the niceties of the monophysite versus Nestorian views of the Incarnation. But the healing work of psychotherapy, like the salvific work of religious conversion, depends not on intellectual discussion of metaphysical doctrines (which in any case, let us remember, concern what cannot ultimately be brought within the grasp of complete human cognition), but rather in the *psycho-ethical dynamics of the praxis*. The underlying nature of the process involved must remain partly opaque, and no amount of intellectual theorizing will capture it completely. For although real hidden entities and processes are surely at work, what must occur in order for the required healing and self-understanding to take place is the requisite effort on the part of the subject, a willingness to relinquish the narcissistic fantasy of self-sufficiency, and the humility to accept the need for change. The framework that makes sense of it all, in the therapeutic as in the spiritual case, is inescapably a practical and a moral one; and it is one that must be activated on the level of each individual psyche or soul.

In the psychoanalytic case, what the patient learns, if all goes well, is to confront the therapist without evasion, or projection; to allow oneself to be seen, exactly as one is, without concealment, without trying to manipulate or extort a response, simply as a human being among others, weak and dependent, yet for all that, deserving of respect and equality. Psychological and ethical integrity, in short, implies the ability to stand before the wise and compassionate and discerning gaze of the other, the other who cares, but not in a needy or demanding way, who knows one's failings and weaknesses, and yet who is prepared to offer support in the continued endeavour to trust and to grow.[36]

But what happens when, in Carl Jung's phrase, the "chains of the consulting room are finally severed" and the individual goes out into the world? Jung himself envisaged an ongoing post-therapeutic process of independent self-discovery and self-education, where the therapist is no longer needed, but psychotherapy "transcends itself and now advances to fill that void which hitherto has marked the psychic insufficiency of Western culture."[37] That might initially look like some kind of fantasy of complete, unconstrained autonomy and self-sufficiency – an interpretation which would take us in a radically different direction from the religious ideal of conversion. Yet unlike Freud, who considered the religious impulse to be infantile, Jung had the insight to see that the promised land for such continued moral growth could *not* be just the dry terrain of rational, scientific self-sufficiency; for the complexities of

[36] I am of course aware of how very brief and schematic a sketch this is, but for some readers it may perhaps serve to hint at something of the authentic power of the psychoanalytic framework, at its best.

[37] Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, pp. 61–2.

the human psyche generate a need for far richer modes of awareness. Religious imagery and symbolism, in Jung's view, could perform a vital function here, in facilitating that integration of conscious and unconscious elements of the self that is a precondition for wholeness.[38] The struggle for what he called 'individuation', in Jung's eyes, required just those modes of thought and expression which the religious archetypes provide. And from here it is a short step to acknowledging the importance of the archetypal figure of the compassionate Other, before whom one must present oneself in wholeness of being, without concealment or manipulation or dissembling. In brief, having one's life held up to the presence of God, precisely the phenomenological core of the conversion experience, becomes part of the psycho-ethical framework for the continued growth of the morally mature individual in his or her entirety. What we have here is a kind of *cosmic or theological analogue of the consulting room*, a permanent presence to support and cherish the individual's continued wholeness of being.

Is this, in the Jungian scheme of things, just an imaginary being, or a metaphor, or is there a real divine presence behind the symbol? Jung himself refused to pronounce on this, and although our current scientifically oriented culture is obsessed with the need for yes or no answers, neither science nor philosophical reason alone (here I would agree with Kant) can settle the question of whether or not there is such a transcendent divine reality. Yet what remains true is that having faith that one's life is presented in its entirety to such a being can be a powerful vehicle for continued moral growth and integration. And what I have argued, in the case of a conversion experience, is that the initial phenomenology of such experiences is precisely of this kind: the individual feels him or herself to be confronted by a demand that will not go away. The demand is presented, phenomenologically, as one that is not of our own making, as one that exerts a call upon us whether we like it or not. And whatever the details of the imagery, the moral content of the demand remains constant, encapsulated in the powerful last line of Rilke's Apollo poem: *du mußt dein Leben ändern* – you must change your life.

University of Reading and Heythrop College, University of London

[38] From *Aion* [1951], in C. G. Jung, *Collected Works* (revised edition, London: Routledge, l967-77), Vol. 9(2), p. 183. In similar vein, Jung observes that "the living and perceptible archetype … has been projected onto the man Jesus, and … has historically manifested itself in him"; *Psychology and Religion* [1938], *Collected Works,* Vol.11, p. 95. These and other significant passages are quoted in Michael Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London: Routledge, 1977), pp. 121, 135, who summarises Jung's thought as asserting that "what the individual identifies in Christ … is the archetype expressing his own need for wholeness and unity" (p. 135).