

Transcending science: humane models of religious understanding*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. *Theism and explanation*

We know there is a continuing decline in religious belief, at least in the developed Western World. But what is it that people are rejecting? The answer may at first seem clear: they are rejecting the classical theistic worldview that held sway in the West for many centuries, up until the modern age. But what exactly is this classical theism that is now losing its hold on many peoples' allegiance, or which they seem to find it increasingly hard to accept?

According to one of its most distinguished expositors, the philosopher Richard Swinburne, theism is an '*explanatory hypothesis*, which purports to explain why certain observed data are as they are.' These observed data include certain very general features of the universe, such as the law of gravity, and the fact that these laws are such as to bring about from an initial state (the Big Bang) 'the eventual existence (some 13 billion years later) of human beings; and that these humans are conscious beings.'¹

If the main focus of theism is indeed on an explanatory hypothesis of this kind, then I think it is not hard to see how it has lost its appeal. For the features just cited are precisely the kind of thing modern science aims to account for; and so great has been its success to date that I suspect a great many people would be inclined to accept the physicist Brian Cox's claim (in a much praised television broadcast) that science is 'very close' to explaining the general features of the cosmos and our own eventual emergence from the slowly unfolding process since the Big Bang.²

In his broadcast, Professor Cox invoked Einsteinian relativity, quantum mechanics, and the elegant mathematical theory called 'inflation', in order to account for the unfolding of the universe over the last 13 or so billion years. Add to that the success of the Darwinian model of evolution by random mutation and natural selection, coupled with modern genetic science, and we have an extraordinarily rich explanatory structure, worked out in the crucible of a rigorously constrained methodology, and meticulously tested against a formidable body of observational evidence. So brilliant is much of this work that even the gathering and processing of the relevant data is an achievement meriting Nobel prizes in its own right.

Set against an explanatory apparatus of this calibre, it's not hard to see why contemptuous eyebrows are raised when someone says 'I actually have an alternative and rather better hypothesis: a *person* did it, a person willed it all, a person created it all and keeps it in existence.' It has become fashionable for theologians and philosophers of religion to disparage the attacks on religion mounted by militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins, but I think integrity requires us to acknowledge just how exasperating the alternative theistic 'hypothesis' must seem to Dawkins and to many of those like him who have a detailed knowledge of the magnificent and hard-won achievements of science.

Imagine for a moment what a field day an *advocatus diaboli* would have with the explanatory hypothesis of theism. A person, we are told, is responsible for the cosmos. "A *person*? What kind of person?" Well, an invisible person. "You mean we can't see his body?" No, he doesn't have one. "Doesn't *have* one? How then can he exercise any power over the universe?" Well (to quote from Swinburne), 'ordinary human persons exist for a limited

* This is a typescript the definitive version of which was subsequently published in Fiona Ellis (ed.), *New Models of Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 23-41.

¹ Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 16

² Second programme in the BBC 2 series *Human Universe*, broadcast in the UK in Autumn 2014.

period of time, dependent on physical causes (their bodies and especially their brains) for their capacities to exercise their powers, forms beliefs and make choices. God is ... unlimited in all these respects and [does not] depend on anything for his existence or capacities.’³

So we are being asked to suppose there is *explanatory force* in the idea of a person, who can mysteriously think things and do things without any of the corporeal features that our entire past experience tells us are required whenever persons think or act. I am putting it this way not in any way to disparage the work of natural theologians (many of whose writings, as in the case of Swinburne, are greatly to be admired for their clarity and intellectual rigour), but simply to make a point about explanation. The proposed theistic explanation for why we are here, when set against the intricately worked out heavy lifting achieved by the scientific theories mentioned a moment ago, seems to many a modern ear radically impoverished. Worse, so far from doing what explanations are normally supposed to do, namely reduce our puzzlement, it seems if anything to increase it. To invoke a person of this invisible and incorporeal kind, operating so completely outside the context in which we normally use and understand the concept of a person, makes it hard to accept that we really understand what we are talking about. And if we add mind-boggling properties like ‘omniscient’ and ‘omnipresent’, this only seems to push things nearer to the edge of intelligibility. As Anthony Kenny has graphically put it, highlighting one reason for his own inability to retain his religious faith: ‘the language that we use to describe the [operations] of human minds operates within a web of links with bodily behaviour and social institutions. When we try to apply this language to an entity ... whose scope of operation is the entire universe, this web comes to pieces, and we no longer know what we are saying’.⁴

Perhaps there may after all be good supporting reasons for holding to a religious worldview – indeed, as I shall shortly be indicating, I think there are. But in the light of what I’ve just been saying it seems to me best to admit that the supposed explanatory power of theism as a hypothesis is *not* one of these supporting reasons. The late Dominican writer Herbert McCabe put the point nicely when he remarked that to invoke God is not to clear up a puzzle, but to draw attention to a mystery.⁵ The existence of the universe that produced us remains a profound enigma, just as each human existence, for the individual subject who reflects on it, is something vertiginous – an existential wonder or horror, a deep mystery. To be religious, in my view, is in a certain way to embrace that mystery, with hope and perhaps with joy, but certainly not to regard it as dissolved by an ingenious explanatory hypothesis called theism.

In saying theism fails at the explanatory level, I’m emphatically not implying that modern science has all the answers. If I may refer just once more to Brian Cox and his television series, this is a presenter with impeccable scientific expertise and an infectious sense of the awesome wonders of the cosmos. But on occasion, like quite a few of his physicist colleagues,⁶ he falls victim to the confused fantasy of the scientific method as a golden key that will unlock every last question that confronts us – as when in the programme mentioned he first ventures the (absurd) opinion that modern physics has arrived at a ‘plausible mechanism’ for how universes are made out of nothing, springing into existence out of fluctuating quantum energy, and then goes on to say that since a infinite number of universes

³ Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?*, p. 6.

⁴ Anthony Kenny, *What I Believe* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 11.

⁵ Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* [1957] (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 128.

⁶ Stephen Hawking is a case in point: he speculates, absurdly (though such is our awe of physicists that few dare to say so), that if physicists could manage to formulate a grand unified theory of everything, it ‘might be so compelling that it brings about its own existence.’ *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam Press, 1988), pp. 192-3.

are thereby created, it is an absolute necessity that one of them will be of a kind that gives rise to the actual universe in which we live. Two dubious steps seem to be involved here: the first is claiming to offer a solution to the fine-tuning problem – how the physical constants in our universe are exactly calibrated to allow the formation of stars and planets and eventually us – by positing an infinite number of calibrations of which ours is but one; even when dignified with the label ‘multiverse *theory*’, this is of course simply a disguised *restatement* of the fine tuning problem not a genuine solution to it.⁷ And the second error, or equivocation, is to construe a fluctuating field of quantum energy as the ‘nothing’ out of which universes spring. Fluctuating energy may be ‘nothing’ in the sense that it contains no atoms or molecules, but it is not *nothing at all*. Quantum theory, for all its impressive success, does not remotely undermine the unshakeable logical maxim ‘*ex nihilo nihil fit*’, from nothing, nothing comes’.⁸

There is however a more general moral which goes beyond the equivocations of current scientific cosmology. Physics, for all its magnificent achievements, could never be shown to have provided a complete and final explanation of all reality: those who suppose otherwise have stepped outside science and fallen for the seductive dogma of scientism, whose incoherencies are well established. Scientism, the claim that science is the measure of *all* of reality, or *all* truth, is a claim that could not possibly be established by scientific means, and therefore, if truly asserted, would be self refuting. So much is familiar ground; but it needs to be added that even once we grant that science could never furnish a complete account of all reality, it does not follow that theism is equipped to fill the explanatory gap. On the contrary, as I have just been at pains to argue, its resources, if it is interpreted as an explanatory hypothesis, are far too thin to allow it to discharge this role.

Part of the problem for classical theism in this context is that the very idea of an immaterial person has lost its power to command any allegiance, outside a small and diminishing minority of theologians and philosophers. The slow decline in credibility started to take hold quite a while ago, so that by the 1970s the Cambridge philosopher of religion and Anglican cleric Don Cupitt was already speaking for many when he declared that he could no longer seriously believe in, as he put it, God as a ‘Great Spirit’.⁹ Everything we know from modern biology and medicine indicates that consciousness is a highly complex process that cannot function without intricate physical mechanisms (of a neurological or some other analogous kind) whereby the relevant inputs and outputs are coordinated and the relevant information is managed. For Descartes it was virtually inconceivable that thought and understanding could be realised in a physical process; now the wheel has come full circle and it is virtually impossible to conceive of how they could be realised without it.

This does not mean that meaning and cognition can be *reduced* to neurological events as some misguided modern philosophers imagine; but it does mean that the notion of thought as the property of an immaterial, non-spatial substance now struggles to retain any appeal. Even within the seventeenth century Cartesian framework, the notion was already problematic; for although given Descartes’s crude cogs-and-wheels and gas-pipes model of the nervous system, and his complete ignorance of what we now know of the eight billion neural connections in the brain, it was entirely reasonable for him to doubt that a physical system

⁷ The medieval logical maxim *De posse ad esse non valet consequentia* (‘inferring actual existence from possible existence is not valid’) retains its force. It will not do to try to get round this by arbitrarily stipulating that the (infinite number of) other possible universes are all ‘actual’ (whatever that can mean).

⁸ Nor is Cox’s position rescued by his observing at one point that the mathematical equations ‘prohibit emptiness’ – a bizarre revival, in mathematical guise, of the ontological argument, since it appears to want to derive conclusions about actual reality from conceptual premises.

⁹ Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981).

could possibly perform the functions associated with language and thought,¹⁰ he nevertheless left it entirely unclear how making the system a simple, indivisible, immaterial one could make the job any easier. From an *explanatory* point of view, souls, at least of the incorporeal Cartesian type, are, and always were, thin to the point of emptiness; and although I am no fan of contemporary scientific naturalism, one can in a certain way see why souls are routinely placed by many modern analytic philosophers in the same dustbin as God – outmoded, ‘spooky’ entities that cannot do any useful explanatory work.

2. *Religious understanding*

So much for the fierce headwinds under which classical theism is struggling to keep afloat in our present-day intellectual culture. My initial tentative conclusion is that something other than theism in its classic theological guise is needed if religious thought is to hold its own in the educated Western world. We need a *new model of religious understanding*. This means that being religious should not be thought of (or not primarily be thought of) as subscribing to an explanatory hypothesis about the origins of the cosmos and our human nature. Of course people can continue to think of it that way, or to insist that it should be thought of that way (who am I to lay down the law?); but it appears likely that this will only accelerate the decline of religious adherence. (It seems no accident, for example, that the fiercest contemporary assailants of religion tend to insist on construing it in just this way: compare Richard Dawkins’s use of the phrase ‘the God hypothesis’.¹¹)

So what kind of alternative model of religious understanding is available? The phrase ‘religious understanding’ is open to various interpretations, but I propose we construe it in what I think is the most intuitively obvious way, namely adverbially, as it were, as referring to a certain *mode* or *manner* of understanding the world. In similar fashion we speak, for example, of ‘scientific understanding’, of ‘musical understanding’, or of ‘psychoanalytic understanding’; and in all these domains what one has in mind is a characteristic way of relating to or interpreting reality, or some part of it. The question about religious understanding then becomes *What is it to relate to the world religiously?* or *What is it to understand things in a religious way?*

Let us pursue the analogy with musical understanding for a moment. By ‘musical understanding’ someone might perhaps have in mind the kind of theoretical intellectual understanding that musicologists aim at – for example being able to expound the difference between ‘just intonation’ (where the ratios of notes are related by small whole numbers) and ‘equal temperament’ (where all notes are defined as multiples of the same basic interval). But in contrast to this kind of abstract or theoretical approach to the domain of music, one might be thinking instead of the kind of rich cognitive and emotional awareness that we attribute to someone when we say, in ordinary parlance, that he or she is a ‘very musical’ person. These two different kinds of musical understanding seem logically, psychologically and causally quite distinct. It seems possible, for instance, that someone could score very well in a musicological examination where the candidates are required to write an essay on equal temperament, or some similar topic, while not having much, if any, musical understanding in the latter sense of having a rich musical sensibility; and conversely, it seems clear that someone could be gifted with outstanding intuitive musical awareness without any grasp of theory (an actual example is the opera singer Njabulo Madlala, who at the age of nineteen auditioned at the London Guildhall and was offered a full scholarship even though, as he

¹⁰ See John Cottingham, ‘Cartesian dualism: theology, metaphysics and science’ in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (1992), pp. 236-257.

¹¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), Ch. 2.

subsequently informed the adjudicators, he had had no musical education and could not even read music).¹²

The basic thought here is that one can have a kind of direct, intuitive, way of understanding something that needs to be distinguished from a detached, analytic way of approaching it. Iain McGilchrist, in his groundbreaking book *The Master and His Emissary*, explores this in part by reference to the results of scientific research into the differential ways in which our awareness of reality is mediated by the two hemispheres of the brain. (Before we proceed, an important caveat needs to be entered here at the outset about how to understand terms such as ‘left-brain’, ‘right-brain’ and the like, as found in McGilchrist and others influenced by him. Such terms are best thought of as convenient shorthands for referring to two distinctive human ways of relating to the world; it should not be supposed that the two hemispheres of the brain operate as wholly independent and autonomous systems (as some critics of McGilchrist have mistakenly supposed him to be saying.)

The crucial distinction McGilchrist aims to alert us to is to

two ways of being in the world, both of which are essential. One is to allow things to be present to us in all their embodied particularity, with all their changeability and impermanence and their interconnectedness, as part of a whole which is forever in flux. In this world we, too, feel connected to what we experience, part of that whole, not confined in subjective isolation from a world that is viewed as objective. The other is to step outside the flow of experience and ‘experience’ our experience in a special way: to re-present the world in a form that is less truthful, but apparently clearer, and therefore cast in a form which is more useful for manipulation of the world and one another. This world is explicitly abstracted, compartmentalised, fragmented ... essentially lifeless. From this world we feel detached, but in relation to it we are powerful.¹³

The kind of ‘power’ referred to here is very seductive for philosophers. We like to feel we are detached scrutineers, above the fray, mapping out the logical structure of various theories and pronouncing our lordly judgements about their viability. But if McGilchrist is right, there is a danger in always allowing the logical, analytic, detached mode of awareness to predominate in our philosophical thinking (or indeed, as he goes on to argue, in our conduct and our society generally). In similar vein, Eleonore Stump has recently deplored the ‘cognitive hemianopia’ of much contemporary analytic philosophy – its blindness to the kinds of insights associated with the right cerebral hemisphere, and its unwarranted tendency to ‘suppose that left-brain skills alone will reveal to us all that is philosophically interesting about the world’.¹⁴ Stump makes a powerful case for supposing that philosophy, if it is to achieve a richer awareness of the world, especially in the moral and religious domains, needs to draw on additional resources, for example those arising from our responses to the multiple resonances of literary, and scriptural, narrative. The key point here is that much moral and religious discourse is *multilayered* – it carries a rich charge of symbolic significance that resonates with us on many different levels of understanding, not all of them fully grasped by the reflective, analytic mind. Any plausible account of the human condition must make space for the crucial role of imaginative, symbolic, and poetic forms of understanding in deepening our awareness of ourselves and the reality we inhabit. This in turn suggests that it is a serious

¹²*Financial Times*, 17 October 2014.

¹³ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 93 (slightly adapted).

¹⁴ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 24–25.

error to try to reduce the religious outlook to a bald set of factual assertions whose literal propositional content is then to be clinically isolated and assessed.¹⁵

So if we are looking for a new model of religious understanding, I think we need to take seriously the possibility that understanding the world religiously is *not* an attempt to dissect and analyse and explain it in the manner of modern science (let alone to try to control it – for example, by thinking of petitionary prayer as a spiritual alternative to modern technology),¹⁶ but rather a mode of engagement with, or connection with, reality as a whole. Perhaps the kind of connection it searches for cannot be achieved by the critical scrutiny of the intellect alone, but requires a process of attunement, or *Stimmung*, to use a Heideggerian term,¹⁷ a moral and spiritual opening of the self to the presence of the divine.

One of the implications of this is that we need a new epistemology for thinking about religious belief and its basis. Both the Dawkins-type critics of religion, and interestingly many mainstream practitioners of natural theology as well, seem to operate with an *epistemology of control*. We stand back, scrutinize the evidence, retaining our power and autonomy in a ‘left-brain’ kind of way, and pronounce on the existence or otherwise of God. Now of course if the theistic world view is correct, then one ought to expect that humans have been given the wherewithal to achieve some awareness of God. But it does not follow that the divine presence will be detectable via intellectual analysis of formal arguments or observational data: the ancient Judaeo-Christian idea of the *Deus absconditus* (the ‘hidden God’) suggests a deity who is less interested in proving his existence or demonstrating his power than in the moral conversion and freely given love of his creatures, and in guiding aright the steps of those who ‘seek him with all their heart’, in Pascal’s phrase.¹⁸ And as soon as we start to think about the means of such conversion, it becomes clear that it could never operate through detached intellectual argument alone, or through the dispassionate evaluation of ‘spectator evidence’, to use Paul Moser’s label.¹⁹ Hence those who insist on casting the ‘God question’ in a form that is apt for evaluation by ‘left brain skills’ alone may be missing the core issue that is at stake in the adoption of a religious worldview. The question is not ‘Can I, while scrutinizing the data and remaining detached and fully in control, satisfy myself of the rational acceptability of belief in God?’; but rather something like the following: ‘How can I embark on a path of moral and spiritual change which might open me to a deeper awareness of something that I now glimpse only faintly?’

In short, this is an area where we need to relinquish the epistemology of control, and substitute an *epistemology of receptivity*. This is not special pleading, since there are all sorts of other areas of life – appreciation of poetry, or of music, for instance, or entering into any kind of personal relationship – where we need to be ‘porous’, to use Martha Nussbaum’s term: not hard, detached, critical evaluators, but open, yielding, receptive listeners.²⁰ Otherwise, while we pride ourselves on being in control and judiciously evaluating the

¹⁵ See John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Ch. 1.

¹⁶ See Mark Johnston on ‘spiritual materialism’, in his *Saving God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 51.

¹⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], §137, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 177. See also George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana, 2nd edn, 1992), p. 55.

¹⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 427.

¹⁹ Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 47.

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Love’s Knowledge’ [1988], reprinted in Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 281-2.

evidence, *we will actually be closing ourselves off from allowing the evidence to become manifest to us.*

3. *The object of awareness*

Revising our model of religious understanding and religious awareness in this way, though it takes us further away from classical academic theorizing about religion, has the advantage of taking us closer to traditional religious thought and practice. If we look at the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, for example, we find that although God is spoken of the maker of heaven and earth, there is very little material that emphasises the explanatory role of this claim, or attempts to demonstrate its theoretical power and scope. Instead, what we often find is language whose focus we would probably classify (in our somewhat impoverished modern vocabulary) as ‘aesthetic’ or ‘moral’, as in the following verses from a well-known Psalm:

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice: let the sea roar, and all it contains.
Let the field exult, and all that is in it: then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy
Before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth: he will judge the world in
righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.²¹

God is here not an immaterial force that is supposed to *explain* the behaviour of the oceans and fields and the woods; rather the vivid beauty and splendour of the natural world is that which *makes manifest* the divine. The world is understood *religiously* – not as a blank impersonal process, not as A. E. Housman’s ‘heartless witless nature’, not as a manifestation of ‘blind, pitiless indifference’²² as Richard Dawkins characterizes it, but as ‘charged with the grandeur of God’ to quote the first line of the famous poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins.²³

The feebleness of modern labels like ‘aesthetic’ for this type of language is even more apparent in an earlier Psalm, where God is described as the one who ‘breaks the cedars of Lebanon and makes it skip like a calf’, who ‘shakes the wilderness and strips the forests bare, while all in the temple cry “Glory!”’²⁴ The cry of ‘Glory’ (in Hebrew *kavod* כָּבוֹד) signifies something weighty with significance, sacred, mysterious, a manifestation of the divine, like the pillar of fire and cloud which led the Israelites out of Egypt, or the cloud atop Mount Sinai where God’s law was manifest to Moses.²⁵ We are not talking of ‘natural beauty’ in the attenuated modern sense, but of something fearful that calls forth reverence and awe, like the burning bush, flaming but never consumed, where Moses was told ‘do not approach any nearer, take the shoes from off your feet, for the place you stand on is holy ground!’²⁶ This is not an ‘impressive sight’, of the kind familiar from television nature programmes, but an event pregnant with moral significance, as is clear from the lines in the first Psalm quoted above, where the forests ‘sing for joy’ not just in pantheistic exuberance, as it were, but rather because *the world is to be judged*. In psychological or phenomenological terms, what is happening here is an experience where the subject is overwhelmed by the power and beauty

²¹ Psalm 96 [95]: 11-13.

²² Richard Dawkins, *Rivers Out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 133.

²³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘The World is Charged with the Grandeur of God’, from *Poems (1876–1889)*, in W. H. Gardner (ed.), *The Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953). Compare the following: ‘All things therefore are charged with love, are charged with God, and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him.’ G. M. Hopkins, *Note-books and Papers*, ed. H. House (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 342; cited in *Poems and Prose*, ed. Gardner, p. 231.

²⁴ Psalm 29 [28]: 5-9.

²⁵ Exodus 13:21 and 24:16.

²⁶ Exodus 3:5.

of nature in a way that is somehow intertwined with awareness of one's own weakness and imperfection, and a sense of confrontation with the inexorable demands of justice and righteousness. The 'religious understanding' involved here is, in short, the kind of awareness which enables one to see the world transfigured, so that it is irradiated with meaning and value, and the human subject, caught up in that mystery, is unmistakably called on not to be any longer a spectator, a mere 'tourist', but to *respond*, to be a morally responsive agent, part of a cosmos that is *diaphanous*, transparent to the divine.²⁷

At this point a major objection might be raised. Even if it is true that the wellspring of religious belief is the kind of awareness just described, will it not also be true that we still need the intellectual categories of classical theism in order to characterize the *object* of such awareness and the *content* of such belief? Do we not still need classical natural theology if we are to give a proper theoretical account of the nature of the divine – the nature of that which is perceived in the kinds of experience described in language such as that just quoted from the Psalms? After all, to revert to our musical analogy, direct musical awareness of the 'right-brain' type does not in any way undermine the validity of the more theoretical 'left-brain' language of music theory – on the contrary, it could be said to be complemented by it, with the latter, left brain terminology specifying genuine formal properties which apply to what is intuitively grasped by the 'right brain' modes of awareness, and did so all along, even though every intuitively musical person may not have been explicitly aware of them?

Certainly, if we go back to Iain McGilchrist's work, although he criticises the excessive dominance of left-brain modes of awareness in modern Western culture, he nevertheless allows or even insists that in most contexts the left and right brain modes are complementary and equally necessary (indeed he speculates that the bilateral modularity of function in the brain may have evolved because of the need for animals *both* to concentrate in a narrow beam, sharply focussed way on specific tasks, such as obtaining and consuming food, *and* at the same time to maintain a broader, more holistic kind of general receptivity to the environment – both of these modes being essential for survival).²⁸

So can both modes of religious understanding, the classical theistic abstract explanatory mode, and the experiential or 'transfigurative' mode, happily coexist? By nature a reconciliationist, I should in principle like to be able to accept such an accommodation, but unfortunately I have doubts about whether it will do all the necessary work. To begin with, if we press a little harder on our analogy with musical understanding, I think it becomes clear that it does not succeed in delivering the kind of thing that is required in the religious case. Music theory cannot, in the end, claim to uncover the *nature* of the reality that is experienced when we exercise our musical sensibilities. The sounds that delight us have certain formal or numerical properties, that is true, but these are merely abstract ratios of various kinds – they do not *explain* musical experience, or what it is an experience of, except perhaps in so far as they show that what we hear is not a collection of random sounds that happen to appeal to us, but has pattern, a shape, with a mathematically intelligible form. The kind of abstract

²⁷ The above two paragraphs draw on material from John Cottingham, *How to Believe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), Ch, 5.

²⁸ 'In Darwinian terms, there is a need to be able to focus on ... feeding and to keep a look out for predators at the same time. This requires the bringing to bear of diametrically opposed types of attention to the world simultaneously: one, narrow-beam, sharply focussed, fragmentary, already committed to its object; the other, broad, open, sustained, vigilant and uncommitted as to what it might find. This is a difficult feat. The solution adopted by all reptiles, birds, fish and mammals so far studied is a divided and asymmetrical brain, in which the two halves remain sufficiently distinct to function independently, but sufficiently connected to function in concert. This is also, unsurprisingly, the case in humans.' Iain McGilchrist, Summary presented at the Templeton symposium on *Ascetical Practice in a Secular Culture*, Villa Palazzola, Italy, September 2014.

mapping that the musicologist provides is no doubt of considerable value and importance in its own right, but it hardly provides an explanatory hypothesis to account for the phenomenon we call music.

But in any case there is a further and special difficulty in the religious case, namely that the object of theological inquiry is, so to speak, *anomalous* – it stands outside our human frame of meaning and reference. On the theologian's own account, the properties of the divine qua divine are in a radically different category from any of the properties that characterize the empirical world. In this respect, attempts to map its properties and exhibit them as bearing an explanatory relationship to the observed data must remain inherently problematic. As I have argued elsewhere,²⁹ there is some partial analogy here with what we find in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, whose object, the Unconscious, is similarly anomalous, outside the domain of normal observation or introspection – and it is precisely for this reason that many critics of Freudianism have been sceptical about whether the theory has genuine explanatory force. The problem is not merely an epistemic one, about how we can know these hidden processes are occurring – after all, many scientific explanations invoke processes beneath the threshold of ordinary common sense observation. Rather, the problem is a deeper semantic one, a problem about how we are to understand the ascription of the relevant properties. In the psychoanalytic case, our understanding of concepts like desire, anger, lust, fear and so on is so deeply rooted in our conscious experience that we cannot be confident we know what we are saying when we transfer these to a supposed domain of unconscious mentation. And so, *mutatis mutandis*, for the concepts applied to God, who is by definition beyond the horizon of direct human apprehension. The worry, corresponding to that raised by Anthony Kenny in the passage quoted earlier, is that we no longer know what we are saying when we transfer to this divine domain concepts whose meaning derives from their use in the ordinary human world.

The idea of analogical predication (going back to Aristotle and Aquinas) is often thought to provide the resources to tackle this problem. It is readily admitted by classical theologians like Aquinas that the properties ascribed to God are drawn in the first instance from the human world, so the sense in which personal attributes like love and goodness and rationality are predicated of God is only by analogy with how we use them normally. But there is no reason, according the supporters of this approach, why this should be a fatal objection to intelligibility. After all, the use of analogical predication is familiar from science – as when physicists speak of the micro world in terms of 'waves' or 'particles' or 'forces', using terms drawn from the human macro world – but no one supposes this undermines the explanatory value of modern physics.

I think it is fair to say that modern science does indeed use such analogical language, and it is by consensus allowed to remain silent about the 'real nature' of the phenomena it investigates – the real intrinsic properties underlying the analogies. As Hume put it, the 'ultimate springs and principles' of nature remain opaque³⁰ (and he here followed 'the incomparable Mr Newton', who explicitly said he did not pretend to know the real cause of gravity);³¹ so in this sense one might say that there is an 'apophatic' strand, or an 'ineffable element', even in modern science. The fact is, however, that science retains an explanatory legitimacy, based on the fact that modern physics is able to produce a mathematical framework of equations, which, when certain values are plugged in for the variables and the constants, are able in principle to yield results that correspond to the observable behaviour of the cosmos, and yield powerful predictions about its future behaviour. And our culture has

²⁹ Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, Ch. 7.

³⁰David Hume, *An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748], sectn 4, part 1.

³¹Isaac Newton, Letter to Richard Bentley, 1693.

come to associate genuine explanatory power so closely with this kind of precise subsumption, testability and predictability, that, once again, the explanatory pretensions of classical theology have come to seem radically impoverished by comparison.

There are many further issues related to the scientific model that would repay further discussion, but these are a subject for a separate paper. Let me instead draw to a close by very briefly developing the comparison just mentioned with psychoanalytic understanding, since I think it does in the end provide us with some useful hints for getting at the new model of religious understanding we are seeking. Suppose we concede that psychoanalytic theory cannot by any effort of ingenuity be turned into an explanatory hypothesis of anything like kind that is normally expected in science. There is no mathematical modelling, no clear testability or predictive power, and we have only the haziest grasp of the supposed powers or properties involved, since any mentalistic terminology used of the unconscious is severed from the context in which it is normally at home. Yet in spite of that, what is undeniable is there are very many people who have actually undergone the process who will insist that their understanding of their day-to-day mental life, of their thoughts and feelings and psychological struggles, has been illuminated and indeed transformed by seeing it as infused with the unconscious mentation – coloured in, as it were, by drives and desires and fears of which our conscious thought is dimly if at all aware. What enables them to say this with confidence is the belief that the hidden powers involved, even if their nature cannot properly be articulated, may nonetheless be something we can dimly sense. The ‘shadowy presentations’ of the unconscious mind, as Jung termed them,³² 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 illuminate, as Freud brilliantly showed, a whole range of similar phenomena, thereby transforming our self-awareness and allowing us to move towards more hopeful and integrative ways of living.

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, as the long apophatic tradition of religious thought tells us, is of the very nature of the divine.³³ For the very fact of our encompassing God, 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 (perhaps, dare one say it, like the God who is the object posited by explanatory theism). And just as with the mysterious ‘traces’ left by the unconscious, so the divine reality that we cannot fully grasp or describe may be thought of as leaving *traces*, which, for the religious believer, are manifest for example in the beauty of the natural world and the compelling power of our moral sensibilities – the exaltation of ‘all the trees of the forest’, as the Psalmist puts it, as they and we sense that we live in a world that is after all imbued with objective value and meaning.³⁴

We thus end with a paradox – that our understanding of existence can be transformed by using a framework of interpretation whose structure does not function like an explanatory

³² Carl Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Routledge, 1933), p. 40. For further discussion of Jung’s position, see John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4.

³³ ‘Si comprehendis, non est Deus’ (‘If you grasp him, he is not God’). Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons* [*Sermones*, 392–430], 52, vi, 16 and 117, iii, 5; in J. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* (Migne: Paris, 1857–66).

³⁴ See John Cottingham, ‘Human Nature and the Transcendent’, in C. Sandis and M. J. Cain (ed.), *Human Nature*. Royal Institute of Philosophy supplement 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 233–254.

theory. How do we solve the paradox? As with Zeno's paradox, *solvitur ambulando*: it is solved not by further theorizing but by action. For religious understanding is inseparable from moral action and spiritual practice³⁵ – something that gives us yet another striking point of convergence with psychoanalytic understanding. Compare, for example, the following comment from the distinguished philosopher and practicing psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear:

How are we to think about the enduring philosophical significance of psychoanalysis? The *wrong* place to begin is with any of its theoretical claims, for instance the discovery of the unconscious. Rather, the appropriate starting point is *practical and ethical*: one person comes to another seeking help and, after some preliminary discussion, the other person agrees to join in a working relationship.³⁶

It should be no surprise that the appropriate language for expressing the resulting understanding, whether in the religious or the psychoanalytic case, will not be scientific or quasi-scientific language. Instead (as Rowan Williams has recently argued in the religious case) it is likely to include the kind of dramatic metaphor and resonant narrative that we find so often at key points in Scripture. The parables of Jesus, for example, are not meant to offer explanations or theories, but aim to shock us into new kinds of awareness. And they work on us not atomistically, by giving us a set of propositions or conclusions to be affirmed, but holistically, by radically transforming our awareness. "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho ..." Commenting on the story of the Good Samaritan, Williams suggests that you cannot distil out of this a descriptive characterization of God; rather God is represented by *the entire narrative*:

to enter into this story and discover where you as a hearer fit and what role it is possible for you to adopt imaginatively, is to become able to offer a representation that claims truthfulness but not – in the usual sense – verisimilitude.³⁷

In sum, the 'religious understanding' we are seeking cannot come about by abstract theorizing, but only through more direct and imaginative forms of involvement and engagement. If this moves religious understanding away from the theoretical and towards the practical domain, this does not at all mean that the practical steps that have to be undertaken are arbitrary or irrational. They may be undertaken in 'direst need' [*höchsten Not*], as Wittgenstein put it,³⁸ but their reasonableness will, if all goes well, be retrospectively validated as the subject finds his or her understanding growing and her life progressively transformed. And in case our 'left brain' ways of thinking make one last effort to take control here, let it be added that what comes to light as a result of such action cannot be forced into the mould of 'confirmatory data', to be construed as increasing the probability of the theory's

³⁵ Compare Rowan Williams: 'Theologians like myself know that their failures of understanding are actually failures of praying.' from lectures given at Bristol 1997-2002, cited in Rupert Short, *Rowan Williams: An Introduction* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003), p. 81.

³⁶ Jonathan Lear, 'Synopsis' for keynote address to *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis Conference*, Senate House, University of London, 17 October 2014.

³⁷ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 149.

³⁸ '...the Christian religion is only for one who feels an infinite need ... To whom it is given in this anguish to open his heart instead of contracting it, accepts the means to salvation in his heart.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, remark dating from *circa*1942, in *Culture and Value [Vermischte Bemerkungen]* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 52

truth. For the framework within which understanding takes shape is not an abstract and theoretical one, involving a set of posited objects and properties that can be analysed and assessed by our ‘left-brain’ capacities; rather it is, a framework of *engagement*, something that must be enacted through involvement and commitment, and which offers, through openness and listening, a possible way of achieving that state of attunement where we can hope to glimpse, as through a glass darkly, the light of meaning and truth that irradiates our world and transforms our human existence.³⁹

³⁹ I am grateful to Fiona Ellis, Kyle Scott and the other participants at 2014-15 seminar series for the ‘New Models of Religious Understanding’ research project at the Centre for Philosophy of Religion, Heythrop College, University of London, for helpful discussion of an earlier version of this paper. The research project in question was funded by a generous grant from the Templeton Foundation. I am also grateful for comments received when I presented versions of the paper at the Philosophy of Religions Workshop series at the University of Chicago School of Divinity, and at the Renard Endowed Lecture at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, in April 2016.