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DESIRE: A THEOLOGICAL REAPPRAISAL

REVD PROFESSOR CANON GRAHAM WARD
University of Oxford

The aim of this essay is to open a fresh enquiry into the nature and operation of desire from a theological perspective. From the Platonic influences on the Church Fathers, notably Origen and the Cappadocians, to the theologies of de Lubac and Marion, desire and its cognates—longing, yearning, seeking—have played a fundamental role in shaping an understanding of the dynamics of the divine-human interaction. We learn about its dynamics and its impact on conversion, salvation, sanctification, and the cosmic scale of redemption. Doctrines of the triune God, pneumatology, sin, creation, nature, grace, ethical life, and anthropology are all bound up negatively (with *porneia* and *concupiscentia*) and positively (with *agape* and *caritas*) with its processes. But, in this essay, I want to ask a simple question that seems to get occluded: what is desire?

As recently as 1986, Roger Scruton lamented that modern philosophy has 'tended to avoid the experience of desire as scrupulously as [it has] avoided its analysis'.[1] This is only true for the British tradition. It could not be said of French modern philosophy, as we will see. But nevertheless, in modern theology it was not a matter of avoidance—desire has been central—so much as a dearth of analysis. And analysis is needed, for it is not obvious what desire is; its currents are concealed and complex. The effects of attraction and repulsion, pleasure and pain become manifest in the choices we make, the goals we pursue, that which compels, that which seduces, that which keeps adoration on track, that which deceives and deludes. But what it is has remained ambiguous and undefined. The aim of this essay is to try and shed some light on the nature of desire as Christian lives are caught up in the circulations of divine love. In this respect, the essay moves between the dogmatic, the spiritual, the ethical, and the pastoral, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the operations of this key concept.

The essay will proceed in four stages. The first points to how we are in a better position today to make such an enquiry. The second will return to the theological tradition (particularly Augustine and his influence on early modern theologians) to pick up some important threads in their own analyses. The third will show how this tradition was revisited and secularised, in all that modern French thinking to which Scruton didn't attend. And finally, I will draw out some theological implications and new directions for future critical exploration.

This is a sketch. There is so much more to be examined in ways which cross various disciplines and bring them together. The cross-disciplinarity is necessary because the question of what desire is fundamental for theological enquiry, and it cannot be addressed (it will never be finally answered) from within the methodological resources of one discipline. But what I wish to demonstrate through proceeding in this way is that: a) desire is a natural phenomenon; b) while associated with sexuality, it far exceeds the sexual in its impact upon motivation, imagination, intention, cognition, and action; c) because it empowers and

[1]Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Phoenix, 1986), vii.

energises living itself. '[H]umans are meaning-making creatures',[2] but we *make* that meaning through the orientation of our attention and the selections it makes about what to attend to. This is all the work of a primal seeking that cannot be disassociated with all forms of *appetitus*. Desire is at the forefront of that which keeps us alive. And that has profound theological consequences.

I. DESIRE TODAY

While theologies of desire abound in the Christian tradition, in modern theology, according to Judith Butler, we in the West became 'subjects of desire' in the late eighteenth century. In her first book, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*,[3] she maps out a cultural and philosophical trajectory going back to the early German romantics and, for her, culminating in the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. It is within this trajectory that the late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century explorations that became psychoanalysis took place. Desire re-entered theological conversation. It features prominently in von Balthasar (especially related to Greek patristics), Rahner (especially related to Latin patristics), and Henri de Lubac. Most evident was a turn that brought the body back to notions of the soul and the spirit. This eventually finds its way into some feminist and later queer theologies. Despite the impact of Nygren's *Agape and Eros* thesis (mainly upon Protestant theology), the range that 'desire' now covered in modern theology admitted no dualism between *caritas* and *amor*, although, theologically, the old Platonic distinction between erotic love and sexual love still remained. Recent French thought has actively promoted discussions that move fluidly between philosophy and theology (particularly in the work of Michel de Certeau, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Louis Chrétien). But while its incarnational emphasis is associated with salvation, spirituality, transcendence, and pneumatology, the question remains: what is desire? The question arises because, as theologians concerned with concepts closely allied to desiring, yearning, longing, and seeking—concepts such as grace, participation, friendship, love, and formation, for example—we employ it *as if* we knew what it is and the mechanics of its operations were self-evident.

Desire can work inwardly in terms of gratification (the old terrain of *appetitus* and *concupiscentia*), and outwardly in terms of sacrifice and generosity (as self-denying *caritas* fostering *communio*). But desire is obscure and multiple, elusive, deceptive, and slippery, as psychoanalytic and psychiatric practice has shown. Much trauma theory and its treatment works to unlock behaviours of self-care, and the self-management needed when strategies of coping with adverse conditions—compulsions, addictions, cycles of rage, violence, and abuse—issue from destructive rather than creative desiring.[4] Therapies aimed at regulating arousal are at the core of any

[2]Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 17.

[3]Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

[4]For a summary of trauma theory, its past and current physical and psychological treatment, see van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

treatment, the issues here only becoming compounded and more complex when the trauma is related to domestic violence, rape, and sexual abuse. For desire cannot be erased and arousal is what sentience is all about.

Following the work of John Bowlby, research has frequently been conducted not in terms of Freud's *libido*, but rather 'attachment'. But Bowlby does speak of desire: 'Sensory input of an organismic origin is of many kinds. Some, when interpreted and appraised arouse desire—for example desire for warm clothes, desire for fresh air, desire for food, desire for a member of the opposite sex.'[5] For Bowlby there seem to be three distinct levels: sensory input, appraisal that arouses, and craving for connection (attachment). Recent work in developmental psychopathology, neuroscience, and neurobiology, while not challenging the centrality of attachment, suggests arousal happens *with* sensory input (in fact the input is actively sought), as we will see. Bowlby also makes an interesting connection for theologians of desire that will concern us later: 'The terms "wish" and "desire" refer to a human subject's awareness of the set-goal of some behavioural system or integrate of systems that is already in action, or at least alerted for action…Such reports are usually trustworthy, but psychoanalysts know well that that is not always so, a subject may mis-identify the set-goal of a behavioural system currently active…This leads to the concept of an unconscious wish.'[6] Why this observation is of interest to theologians of desire is because *voluntas* (and its Greek equivalent, *thumos*) were actively used by the likes of Augustine and Maximus the Confessor in their theological reflections on desire as a primary wanting. There is no attachment without the desire. Bowlby refers on several occasions to the infant's 'primary craving to return to a pre-natal state of unity with the mother'.[7] Whether this is the case or not, this *in utero* 'craving' is a desire to be attached even though, in later development, the object attached to is not another person, but an object (such as a teddy bear) or safe place (such as a home). When theologians write about salvation, it must be remembered that *salus* relates health to security.

As I have indicated, more recently attention has been drawn to the underlying biologies and neurologies of desire, such that what happens in the brain/mind has been shown to impact and change our physiological condition.[8] One of the foremost syntheses of this research is by the scientist, Jaak Panksepp, and the psychotherapist, Lucy Biven. The importance of their work for this theological re-examination of desire is that they take us back to Bowlby's 'sensory input of an organismic origin' and reveal how much more we understand now about that 'input'. For biological organisms do not simply *receive* input, they are compelled to *seek* it; and only by *seeking* it do they survive, flourish, and remain alive. As human beings we live with what they call our 'ancestral passions',[9] which have evolved in all animals. Of these, Panksepp and Biven place SEEKING first, for this 'allows animals to search

[5]John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol.1 (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1971), 147.

[6]Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 176.

[7]Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 434.

[8]See, for example, Marc Lewis, *The Biology of Desire: Why Addiction is not a Disease* (London: Scribe Publications, 2015) and David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Making* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

[9]Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 1-46.

for, find, and acquire all of the resources that are needed for survival'.[10] SEEKING (always in block capitals) is a primary system characterised by 'eager anticipation, desire, euphoria, and the quest for everything'.[11] Seeking and sentience work together, and sentience involves arousal. Without that arousal the body's chemistry cannot operate, neural connections are not made, the hormones that energise and regulate that energising are not secreted, and being alive, staying alive, is not possible.

From the affective SEEKING system, according to Panksepp and Biven, the other passion systems galvanise our living and experiencing, from the autonomic activities of breathing, feeding, and excreting, to the stirrings of sexual attractions (the LUST system[12]), anxiety (FEAR system[13]), anger (RAGE system[14]), compassion and love (CARE system[15]), sadness (PANIC/GRIEF system[16]), and social wellbeing (PLAY system[17]). In human beings, the operation of these systems in furnishing consciousness compose what Panksepp and Biven (among others[18]) understand as the 'core self'.[19] What this means is that desire, as part of the SEEKING system (which is obviously not unrelated to both the LOVE and CARE systems), operates far below notions of the I, ego, or the self, and at this primary level of arousal and response, distinctions between need, want, and desire are indistinguishable.

Where does this leave us grappling with a theology of desire? The results of these neuroevolutionary researches, combined with the studies of mood, memory, and emotion, the practices of wellbeing and the anatomies and treatment of trauma, have given us unprecedented analysis of what the biochemist Nick Lane calls a 'patchwork of symbioses'.[20] What we recognise as desire begins in this 'patchwork' that effects metabolic changes in the single cell; changes that power and energise the cell. A droplet of glucose in a tank of pure water activates an amoeba's cilium to dart eagerly towards it; desire vitalises movement, feeding brings euphoria. At this microbiotic level, it is difficult to employ words such as 'it senses' or 'it knows' or 'it wills', but basic life as we know it (and which we cannot recreate in a laboratory) is propulsive and

[10]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 95.

[11]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*. This is the subtitled of the chapter on SEEKING, 95-144.

[12]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 245-82.

[13]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 175-202.

[14]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 145-74.

[15]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 283-310.

[16]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 311-50.

[17]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 351-88.

[18]For example, Antonia Damasio, *The Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010) and Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), especially 463-84.

[19]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of the Mind*, 389-424. The chapter is entitled, perhaps significantly for theologians, 'Toward a Neurobiology of the Soul'.

[20]Nick Lane, *The Vital Question: Why is Life the Way It Is?* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 6. This patchwork is not unlike the immersive forces operating kinesthetically, both internally and externally, in Augustine's complex understanding of desire. Significantly, in *Loci Communes 1521*, Melanchthon understands the vitality of sin as an 'energy'.

compulsive.[21] It requires and lives only through the energies that generate and nourish it. It feeds, it converts, it excretes what it needs and doesn't need in relation to the environments in which it lives.

Its sensing is not at all passive. Its membrane is covered in receptor molecules and it actively engages with what is around it through these myriad openings that make it totally vulnerable and dependent upon the conditions it occupies and modifies.[22] This vulnerability and dependence enables it to live and move; to produce the energy required for its continuing existence. This is a 'sensing' beneath feelings (like hunger or thirst) and certainly beneath thought (there is no cognitive activity as such). So, on a vast multi-cellular basis, bodies of whatever kind are already in a state of desiring. They live only by going beyond themselves and engaging in the metabolic operations that exchange energies from the outside to the inside and from the inside to the outside. Sensing is already foraging. It is not a matter of will even at its lowest level of SEEKING, though seeking as both volitional and non-volitional (Augustine's *voluntas*) emerges from the primary motors of living. It is far from the level of will as decisive action (closer to Augustine's *libero arbitrium voluntas*).[23] In fact, some scientists have pointed out that the body is already engaging in an act prior to the brain having consciously made the decision to act.[24] This has to be reckoned with, because it qualifies a conscious willing that can control or police certain states of wanting, or the idea that ethical virtues can be developed through disciplining habit alone.[25] And many, if not all traditional religions, have seen such control or policing as spiritual disciplines or pedagogies to heighten a focus upon higher states of being—fasting and celibacy are two such embodied disciplines. These disciplines will always have to engage compensatory biological and physiological operations unless taken to an extreme. Fasting can benefit the body by shifting its mechanisms towards detoxification. Abstention from sexual activity enables the body to direct productive energies in other directions—training in sports, ambition in competitive environments, creative intellectual pursuits, for example. To call these actions 'displacements' is to name them negatively. These ecologies and economies of biological energy are continually in play for nurturing the life of the organism—states of excitation and satisfaction (Freud's pleasure principle) constitute the primordial rhythm of existence.

Desire is part of those dynamic ecologies of the self and subject to feedback loops between the body, the psyche, the environment, and strategies of coping with adverse conditions. It is, literally, a life-force, and these various studies, examinations, analyses have made us recognise its depth and

[21]See here Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Emergence of Life: From Chemical Origins to Synthetic Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and the physicalist approach to the mind-body problem in George MacDonald and David Papineau (eds.), *Teleosemantics: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[22]For the discovery and research into this see, Candace B. Pert, *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

[23]I am aware of the manifold debates about 'will' as self-determination in Augustine, and the confusions of translations using the language of will as if Augustine intends something more modern (an autonomous decision or free choice). I am guided in my own understanding by both John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 176-77, and James Wetzel, *Parting Knowledge: Essays after Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 48-9. See also Sarah Beyers, 'The Meaning of *Voluntas* in Augustine', *Augustinian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 171-189, https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies200637212.

[24]For a discussion and examination of this see, Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Who's in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2012).

[25]This is the behavioural conditioning evident in 'conversion' therapies.

complexity. They provide what the earliest psychoanalysts were calling for, since Charcot, Freud, and later Lacan each insisted there was a biological and physiological substrate to the psychic phenomena they were observing and theorising.[26] These new empirical studies of desire impact not only our theological anthropologies, but our doctrines of creation, pneumatology, and Christology. The Psalmist sings: 'Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart' (Ps. 37:4).[27] But what are the desires (plural) of our heart? In Mark, we have Jesus asking James and John: 'What is it you desire (*thelete*) I should do (*poiêsð*) for you?' (Mark 10:36), a question he puts later to blind Bartimaeus: 'What do you desire (*theleis*) that I should do (*poiêsð*)?' (Mark 10:53) But can we name our desires, our desire? Is desire something nameable? Poets have tried. Theologians are being asked to name, but we cannot, unambivalently, and psychology has taught us why. It has taught us about our endless need to displace, project, transfer, and repress.[28]

These evolutionary and physiological accounts of desire, and its role in our affective, intellectual, and social life more generally, greatly amplify not only what Bowlby's attachment theory has taught us, but also the philosophies of desire that have been central to modern continental thought. Scruton's lament that desire had so little philosophical examination in the analytical tradition strikes the right chord, in 1986, but on the continent, and particularly France, in the wake of structuralism and poststructuralism, the work of desire was central. But it is worthwhile going back to the older theologies before taking that postmodern turn, because the work of several of these philosophers makes explicit connections with such theologies, particularly Augustine's.

II. AUGUSTINE AND THE EARLY MODERN AUGUSTINIANS

Theologically, the introduction of desire into current examinations is part of a revised Augustinianism. We have to appreciate something of this if we are to understand how modern theology could so easily develop transcendental anthropologies and doctrines of trinitarian

[26]Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and Sigmund Freud were all medical doctors specialising in neurology and psychiatry as they excavated the nature of trauma (usually of child abuse). For Charcot, see Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 212-18; for Freud, see many of the items listed in the first two volumes of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Stratchey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), notably 'The Psychical Mechanisms of Hysterical Phenomena' in volume 2, 1-17; for Jacques Lacan, see the first books of *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan* (1953-54; 1954-55), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). Lacan also received his training in medicine before specialising in psychiatry.

[27]See also Psalms 21:2; 38:9; 78:29; 145:16,19.

[28]There is nothing mystical or apophatic about this. Panksepp and Biven root primal passions in the oldest part of the animal nervous system to which we have no direct access. We registered the effects of its operations in our embodiment, and nothing more. The middle, 'reptilian' brain that deals with memory, learning, and emotional control is what they call a 'secondary process'. We move from instinct to intuition here, and we are treating what psychoanalysis explores as the unconscious. It is only at the tertiary level, with language and the development of the neo-cortical cognitive processes, that we begin to name.

rondos in which subjects of desire are inscribed within theological reflections. For the centrality of desire is part of a retrieval and affirmation of a long theological tradition.[29]

In Book I of Augustine's *Confessions*, sin is not far from the surface of his account of babyhood and boyhood. The language of sin, like the language of *theosis*, is the language of desire, however wayward it might wander in one direction or another (and who can measure?). In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine defines sin as '*voluntas perverse malus amor*',[30] while, elsewhere, the language of desire opens a rich semantic field that positions itself between restlessness (*inquietum*) and rest (*requies*). Desiring is a kinetic field, full of movement, propulsion, compulsion, attraction, repulsion, wandering, and journeying. All these words are related to the words for sin used in Hebrew and Greek, words that get translated as 'trespass' and 'transgression'. From that very opening book of *Confessions*, the meaning of desire circulates for Augustine through a number of verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs (*voleo* and *voluntatis, amo* and *amicitia, fornicatio* and *adultero, affectione* and *affectus, petendus, optatio, cupio* and *cupiditas*, *voluptatis, diligio, delectione* and *dulcissimus*, *libido* and *stuprum*, and *incundus*). For human beings, groping through the material contingencies of this world, desire has as many faces as names; as many deflections as objects.[31] Rest is an eschatological condition, which means that all the relations that compose the complexity of movements within the field are governed by a certain stillness exceeding them: the relation of divine love, within which our notion of who and what we are before God emerges. In the stillness we 'wait', 'abide', 'dwell', 'find refuge' and 'deliverance'—all biblical metaphors. For human beings on their own, rest is an impossible relation because desire is excessive, biologically and psychologically. Desire is also spiritual, and part of what remains to be thought is this relation between body, soul, and spirit. With Augustine we enter not into the single flow of what Freud would define as a 'drive' (*Trieb*), but rather a complex force-field in which there is both chaotic, random movement and an emerging order (an *ordo caritatis*); paucity and plenitude; error and conversion; benevolent liberality and rapacious consumption; displacing fragmentation and healing; sin and salvation. In this complex interweaving of forces lies our freedom to act, for Augustine, and the responsibility for our actions.

Desire never forgets its embodiment in Augustine. Its examination is not conducted in terms of a dualism so much as two spectrums both with roots in classical thinking: the spectrum from *mania* to *euphoria*, found in Plato[32]; and the spectrum of animal instinctiveness to human rationality, found in Aristotle.[33] The various shadings within the spectra were valued hierarchically. The ideal

[29]We find a similar return to the topic of desire in the Christian tradition in figures other than Augustine. For example, the very different work of patristics scholars such as Virginia Burrus's treatment of the Cappadocians in *'Begotten Not Made': Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) and Paul M. Blowers, 'The Dialectics and Therapeutics of Desire in Maximus the Confessor', *Vigiliae Christianae* 65, no. 4 (2011): 425-51, https://doi.org/10.1163/157007210X524286. These are the sources, of course, of von Balthasar's theological account of desire.

[30]Augustine, *Confessions* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1942).

[31]This same condition does not apply to God. In a defining moment in his late work (*De Trinitate*), we have '*Quid est aliud caritas, quam voluntas*?' (Book XV.38). In *De civitate Dei*, he makes a further elision between the meanings of *dilecto, caritas*, and *amor* (Book XIV, 7).

[32]In *Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*, for example.

[33]This spectrum was predicated on animals lacking mind/soul/consciousness, something we now know to be erroneous.

was *sôphrosunê*, a balanced regulation (for Plato), or *phrônêsis*, practical wisdom (for Aristotle).[34] If Augustine's goal is rest from the ceaseless oscillations of the embodied soul, then, as in the classical model of desire, desire's extirpation is not and cannot be advocated. As with both Plato and Aristotle, a discipline and a pedagogy *is* required. Only, for Augustine, human beings of themselves have very limited capacities to discipline and educate themselves in things divine. The disciplining has to come from an obedience to Christ. This turned what was the paradoxical nature of desire in the classical world, where a human could be thrown into obsessive madness or become creatively energised, into more of a dialectical and asymmetrical model. For God, in Augustine, also desires (our salvation). The *telos* is now not simply regulation or prudential assessment, but also an ascending purification in which, most particularly, the sexual is filtered from the erotic.

In their own ways, both Melanchthon and Ignatius (both rooted in Augustine) pick up this kinesthetic activity (Augustine employs the verb *excitare*), structured in terms of a spectrum that conflates (*pace* Giorgio Agamben[35]) *bios* and *zôê*, relating both to *zôê aiônios*. Similarly, they take up an explicitly theological account of desire as dialectical and, in being dialectical (with respect to God's desire towards us), pedagogical; a work of grace and divine providence. Furthermore, they develop the purification of desire through the filtering (in obedience to God) of the sexual from the erotic. Early modern theological conceptions of desire, in Melanchthon and Ignatius, undergo a shift in the secularisation of those conceptions. But this shift, I would argue, undergoes a further transformation, as postmodern accounts of desire return us to a 'rhizomatic' (the word is Deleuze and Guattari's[36]) model of desiring that is more premodern than modern—though now with a radically secular *gravitas*.

The same relation between sin and desire in Augustine is maintained in the opening of the Ignatian *Exercises* in terms of *'affectiones omnes male ordinatus'*.[37] Ignatius, from the beginning, is wishing to work upon that 'disordered desire' that, 27 years earlier, Philip Melanchthon, in his 1521 *Loci Communes* ('defining sin') describes more floridly as '*obnoxii turpissimis atque miserrimis adfectibus*'.[38] The shift from *voluntas* to *affectus*, as being core to operations within the soul (*motus animi*), is significant, owing much to the early modern retrievals of Stoicism, the development of voluntarist philosophies and theologies, and the rise of the

[34]The ideals of *sophrosyne* and *phronesis* are not far from the contemporary ideals of mindfulness and psychotherapy, since both work at developing cognitive control of affective processes.

[35]Giorgio Agamben makes a distinction between these upon which a nature/culture divide issues, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). I deny such a divide: culture and cultivation are inseparable, and have given rise to co-adaptation theories of evolution.

[36]Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari employ this metaphor first in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987), in distinguishing between the hierarchical and ordered root, trunk, and branch metaphor of modern thinking, and the non-hierarchical and multidirectional thinking they will both perform and recognise as a mode of thinking more appropriate to the contemporary, capitalist *Zeitgeist*.

[37]Latin text available at https://ia800400.us.archive.org/35/items/ExercitiaSPIgnatiiDeLoyola/ExercitiaSPIgnatiiDeLoyola.pdf, accessed on 12 March 2024.

[38]Facsimile of the text available at http://diglib.hab.de/wdb.php?pointer=20&dir=drucke%2Falv-ac-402-1s, accessed 12 February 2024.

reflexive-self (wrongly understood to be indebted to Augustine in certain narrative accounts of modernity).[39] But we will treat those topics only lightly here.[40]

The shift is theologically significant: Augustine's pneumatology in *De Trinitate* rests upon *voluntas*; in Melanchthon and Ignatius, pneumatology now rests upon *affectus*. The question is whether two rather different accounts of trinitarian operations related to divine and human desiring emerge. Melanchthon changed his position and tended, in later editions of *Loci communes*, severely to restrict his use of *affectus*.[41] But what remains similar in all three theologians is a relationship between aesthetics and salvation, where aesthetics is returned to its Greek meaning of *aisthanomai* (to apprehend or perceive according to the senses). This doesn't mean that beauty is not treated as such; but it does mean that, theologically, what is beautiful cannot be simply read off from what is perceived. Beauty and ugliness belong to *motus animi*—whether this is ordered or deformed. The movements of the soul take place along a trajectory in which *conversio* is changing the way we perceive and act.[42] What is seen, in salvation, is the true ordering of creation. It is this ordering that manifests God's eternal beauty.

III. THE POSTMODERN TURN[43]

This relation between desiring (whether centred on *voluntas* or *affectus*) and aesthetics (of both the beautiful and the sublime) bears an important relation to the different postmodern constructions of desire. From what I understand (not being an expert on Ignatian theology), there is an important difference here between Melanchthon and Ignatius, in that Ignatius recognised the importance of Christological mediation and participation in his aesthetic soteriology. This is more in keeping with Augustine, for whom 'Christology becomes the focal point for the manifestation of the eternal beauty of God in the temporal economy and unfolding of the temporal economy within the eternal beauty of God'.[44]

[39]See, as one example, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). But the word 'self' does not appear in Augustine. See John C. Cavadini, 'The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine's Thought', *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 119-32, https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies20073817. 'Augustine does not treat this topic at all, and that English phrase "the self" has no equivalent in Latin' (119).

[40]See Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Eric Alliez, *Capital Times: Tales from the Conquest of Time*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[41]See Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[42]For Hans Urs von Balthasar (like Augustine), this is a matter first and foremost of 'seeing the form'—Christ being the form of God's beauty. See *The Glory of the Lord*, *Volume 1*: *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leive-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1982).

[43]I am using the label 'postmodern' to mark a certain Western cultural sensibility between roughly 1975-2001. My sense is the term cannot describe where Western cultural sensibilities are today; not after 9/11, the financial crisis of 2007-08, and the austerities (including a pandemic) that followed.

[44]Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 27. Melancthon's elaboration of 'justification by faith' raised and did not resolve the question of *our* participation in the work of Christ for our redemption.

I examine postmodern accounts of desire with these Augustinian and contemporary biological accounts of being human, because they have strong resonances with the psychologies (Lacan), the philosophies (Deleuze and Kristeva), the genealogies (Nietzsche and Foucault), and the theologies (de Certeau) of desire that we encounter in poststructuralism.[45] In fact, a number of postmodern thinkers, or their pupils, draw directly upon Augustine. Lacan, for example, considered St Augustine's *De Trinitate* to be a model for the scientific theorisation of the name-of-the-father.[46] Derrida's *Circumfession* (1991) draws explicit parallels with Augustine's *Confessions*. Jean-François Lyotard wrote a book on *The Confession of Augustine*.[47] Foucault drew upon Augustine in his development of the confessing subject. Augustine turns up in Deleuze's *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* in a discussion of participation, exemplary and imitative likeness, and is central to Eric Alliez's *Capital Times*[48] (Alliez being a student of Deleuze). In the preface to *Desire in Language*, Kristeva points out that Augustine already knew what is axiomatic for her own work: 'that the possibility for language to speak the truth could not come from outside, but it 'governs the inner workings of the mind itself''.[49] She is quoting *De magisto*, and in that volume she goes on to quote from *De civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate*. Finally, it is Augustine's understanding of language and sacramentality that plays an important role in the development of de Certeau's social semiotics; evidence, no doubt, of the influence of his teacher Henri de Lubac (for whom desire is key as it was for several developing *nouvelle théologie*).[50]

Furthermore, each thinker, in his or her own way, locates the fundamental operations of desire in a move from closed (structuralist) to dynamic and relational systems.[51] They seek

[45]Desire, while appealed to by all these figures, is not one thing—though the examination of the differences has not been thoroughly explored as far as I know. One example clarifies this, to some extent (though it rehearses the classical paradox of desiring itself). In the aforementioned study by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the libidinal economy is treated in terms of excess. (I would say the same might be said of desire in the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard). In other figures, such as Kristeva and de Certeau, desire is treated in terms of lack (the same might be said in Lacan). Derrida plays with both, for the nature of *différance* means signification is always both excessive and lacking in its dynamic movement. More broadly, desire differs according to whether it is being employed psychoanalytically, philosophically, anthropologically, semiotically, or socially.

[46]See Emmanuel Koerner, 'The Name-of-the-Father and Scientific Thought: Lacan and Saint Augustine', *Essais* 30, no. 1 (2013): 125-136.

[47]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[48]Alliez, *Capital Times, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)*, part III, pp.77-136.

[49]Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora *et al*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), xi.

[50]What is interesting about postmodern desire and the prominence it gave to sexuality, embodiment and consumption in post-Second World War France, is the predominance of Roman Catholic voices who are articulating it—not as Roman Catholic theologians, but as inheritors of a Roman Catholic culture and imaginary: Lacan, Deleuze, Certeau, Foucault, Kristeva, Irigaray, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe and, in Italy, Vattimo and Agamben. 'I am the product of priests', Lacan once said of himself. He was educated by the Jesuits and there was a Jesuit presence in his *École freudienne* from the beginning. Barthes was from a Protestant background; Cixous, Derrida, and Levinas were Jewish.

[51]The move and, its close association with process, life and evolution have been examined by Mark C. Taylor in *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

to return us to the body in an anti-Cartesian move against the dualisms dominating modernity; a body immersed in a 'libidinal economy', to cite the title of Jean-François Lyotard's book. Such a body, at a discursive and descriptive level, emerges in and through embodiment.

But none of these thinkers explore the materiality, the biology and physiology, of such a body. Their postmodern accounts of desire are, in fact, insufficiently embodied; insufficiently material.[52] Their abstractions have consequences. Of course, much of the understanding we have of cellular activity at this level was not available to these postmodern thinkers. The secret mechanism of the so-called 'molecules of the emotion'[53] was only discovered in the advent of micro- and molecular biology. The postmodern analyses of desire rested upon construals of embodiment in the philosophical tradition—in Spinoza, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud[54]—and, later, existential phenomenology that explored embodied experience such as the work of Merleau-Ponty, for example, and Michel Henry. With bio-energetics we place desiring within a *Lebenswelt* that is pre-conceptual, pre-philosophical, and pre-theological (insofar as theological discourse is understood as a cultural production). We situate desiring with respect to *affectus*.

This biological contextualisation becomes important because the postmodern examinations of embodiment have been criticised as being far too abstract and philosophical, even in their playfulness. Judith Butler's early work is a case in point; and for all Kristeva's use of psychoanalysis, she has been criticised for the way her theorising bears little or no relation to any psychoanalytic practice. Of course, in wishing to overthrow Cartesian dualism (and binary thought more generally), those pursuing questions about the relationship of desire to sexuality and gender wished to avoid a reduction to the biological: so-named, biological essentialism. But, as the feminist philosopher, Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, it created a discourse that side-stepped and reduced the biological in an attempt to foreground the politics of the cultural and the historical.[55] In the 21st century, following advances in the genome project and epigenetics, philosophies have attempted to recover from post-structural abstractions by attending to 'life' and 'affect', developing 'a complex and subtle account of that biology…[that is] able to more adequately to explain the rich variability of social, cultural, and political life'.[56]

Broadly speaking (for there is only a certain homogeneity among these different postmodern thinkers), postmodern desire is characterised by an impossible relation. It is 'impossible' in two decisive ways. First, it is impossible because the relation has no ultimate object—though it operates *as if* there is one. The desire can never be satisfied. The absolute other that is desired is always infinitely beyond any capture. Desire desires *ad infinitum*. It is important to understand the condition for this impossibility, because it relates directly to the way desire lacks material

[52]This is the criticism of Elizabeth Grosz in her books *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) and *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). In fact, Grosz is one of the few thinkers who does treat evolutionary biology. See *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[53]See Pert, *Molecules of Emotion*.

[54]A critical appreciation of this is evident in Butler's *Subjects of Desire*.

[55]Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

[56]Grosz, *Time Travels*, 14.

particularity. Secondly, what governs this 'impossibility' is nominalism—though each espouses that nominalism in modified ways.

By nominalism here I mean the opacification of the sign; the sign has no participation in the thing signified. As Ferdinand de Saussure argued, it is arbitrary. Semiotics is not, then, primarily about meaning (or semantics); it is concerned with what Jean Baudrillard calls 'simulation and simulacra'.[57] Neo in the Wachowski brothers' (now sisters) film, *The Matrix*, is reading one of Baudrillard's books on this when his world is broken open and it becomes revealed to him that he is a living mind within a vast computer generating all the imagined objects that make up his world. Meanwhile his body is being used as a battery to power the system. This is nominalism dramatised. Lacan is more laconic. He captures the nominalism in a neat algorithm in which a big, bold 'S' (for sign) stands above a fraction line with a little 's' (for signified) below it. There is no crossing that fraction line, and it is that 'fact' which installs the impossible relation. The absolute other so desired is not God but meaning; meaning endlessly deferred in Derrida's notion of *différance*. Our hunger is infinite and our need is nameless—or, in Lyotard's understanding of the sublime, 'unpresentable'.[58] Desire always engages in what is excessive to meaning; excessive to whatever is the intentional object desired—and so it cannot be subject to a phenomenology unless there is a recognition that the phenomenon is 'saturated'. Marion has examined this theologically, and with respect to Augustine.[59]

What is important in the economy of postmodern desire is that it is not an account of desire as acquisition (in fact, it dispossesses because desire can never be satisfied). Neither is it an account of desire as excess or lack—what Girard will call (after Aristotle) 'mimetic desire'. In that account of desire, the object desired is what someone else has and I want because they want it. This, I suggest, is an account of desire that modernity advocated, along with a strong stoic discipline that regulated excessive desiring in accordance with an ascendant reason. On this account, desire is a chaotic and destructive *eros* (what Descartes understood as '*passiones*', a synonym of *affectus*) and it is to be subject to a deliberative will. This is a corruption of *voluntas* as Augustine understood it, in favour of what Augustine would call *libero arbitrium*. *Eros* cannot be appreciated positively, creatively. It cannot be engaged with in a redirecting and conversion; it has to be extirpated. A self-mastery is to be cultivated that does not just discipline, but erases affect in the attempt to get absolute instrumental control. This is Enlightenment anthropology, with its individualism propounding social atomism, promulgated and legitimated by any number of patriarchalisms, universal hegemonies, and colonialisms. It had implications for gender (women as the weaker and more prone to the passionate), for class (the working-classes understood as a peasant, unruly mob given up to licentiousness of all sorts), for race (Africans as wild and animalistic), and for economics (Adam Smith's parsimonious squire contra the rapacious greed of marketeers).

On modernity's account of desire, my lack is satisfied by my acquiring (by one means or another) the object of my desire. Within an economy of exchange, I give what is surplus to my own satisfaction to get from someone else an object they have which I want. Desire, as

[57]See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbour: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[58]Jean-François, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[59]Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

such, opens a need, and when I have that need satisfied then I no longer desire. I am satisfied—at least until another object is presented that I want. Modernity's account of desire was mechanical or functional, following early modern understandings of the body and its operations as mechanistic (Harvey, Descartes, Hobbes all present such a view of embodiment).

But when desire cannot ever obtain what it desires, when desire is not just part of an economy of exchange but is rather an ontological drive defining the human condition as such, then I see (in Freudian and then Lacanian terms) that the mother of all my satisfactions does not have the phallus. The object the other owns or is (in mimetic accounts of desire) was never really what I wanted. It was only a signifier of the phallus, which is really what I wanted; a nominal sign or placeholder for a deeper, febrile, directionless longing related to the flux of contingency itself. The object of such a desire was a displacement of a primordial and endless desiring such that things stand in for a signified that is unobtainable while hauntingly promised. And so, desire feeds upon its own hunger for the unobtainable. This is postmodern desire as an impossible relation. Thus, in what is a sadomasochistic move of enjoying the symptoms of one's own pathology (this is Žižek's phrase[60]), what is desired is actually desire itself.

Now Levinas, in a move that turns us towards theology more explicitly, will make this a desire for the infinite, a transcendent desire that beckons us through the face of the other person to go beyond that face to the wholly other. It is a desire that demands an eschatological realisation, though Levinas does not develop an eschatology. Desire is always implicated in *parousias* of satisfaction—premodern, modern, or postmodern—and because of this the theology in and of desire can never be deconstructed, only denied. Lacan (like Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy) sees only its continuous displacement along a plane of immanence. There is no transcendent horizon—only the ongoing and seductive promise that the phallus is to be grasped (so to speak).

In both the modern and the postmodern models, desire is an index of a distance, even alienation, that can never be overcome. In modern desire the distance (and alienation) is either disavowed (by strenuous self-regulation) or finite (obtainable for possession). In postmodern desire the distance and alienation are infinite, exposing the fragility of the self-made subject, which is to be suffered as such in a Sisyphean manner. It marks a wounding that bleeds forever. Discussing the '*spirit* of Christianity' as summed up in *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, Jean-Luc Nancy concludes that the body is 'turned into nothing but a wound'.[61] As such, '[a]s soon as there is love… There is only an infinity of shattering'.[62]

We might view this as a dissipative model of desire in accordance with the metaphor of the rhizome, as distinct from an instrumental and mimetic account of desire. It travels infinitely and multi-directionally along the plane of immanence and is end-stopped only, for the singularity of the individual, by death. Hegel would call this a 'bad infinite'; the impossible possibility of a future that can never be future enough. The immanence of desire is haunted by an alterity, an externality, often conceived as an abyssal and atheistic groundlessness. Many of these postmodern thinkers refer to this vertiginous *Urgrund* or *Abgrund* in

[60]See Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Own Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[61]Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Homes *et al*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 205.

[62]Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor *et al*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 98-101.

terms of Plato's description of the *khôra* in *Timaeus*: endlessly generative and chaotic.[63] John Caputo defines Derrida's understanding of '*khôra*' as: 'neither present nor absent, active or passive, the good nor evil, living nor nonliving—but rather atheological and non-human—khôra is not even a receptacle. Khôra has no meaning or essence, no identity to fall back upon.'[64]

IV. ON THE EDGE OF THEOLOGY FROM THE ABYSS OF CONSUMERISM

Levinas, in his own polemic against Heideggerian 'paganism' (by which is meant a radical immanence that is 'at home' only in the world), will not use '*khôra*'—though he will employ another Platonic trope: 'the Good beyond Being'. In his pursuit of what is 'otherwise than being' or '*tout autrement*', there is a theological turn in the good beyond being, but God as such is violently interruptive and always betrayed in being spoken about and represented. The 'said' (*le Dit*) has always to be broken up by the 'saying' (*le Dire*), but in this diachrony there remains what he calls '*la Sagesse du Désir*'.[65] There is a haunting, then, of the wholly other, and the haunting installs a quasi-transcendental movement, *archê*, or principle that constitutes desire itself and yet can only be traced in its interruptive absence. Why this should be called ethical for Levinas is still a matter of debate; as indeed is whether the 'God' extolled in Levinas is not some Manichean deity. But, for the moment we can leave that aside, for what remains is postmodern desire as an endless displacement along a chain of supplementing signs in an 'economy' that is neither teleological not eschatological—though messianically promises both. The meaningful and realised present is chased with the knowledge it cannot be captured, only traced through a trail of empty shells. As such, desire is primordial but locked into an endless kenosis, an endless emptying out of meaning to reveal surfaces and simulacra.

For several postmodern thinkers, this subversion of the solid, this making manifest of hierarchical ideologies that seem to offer foundational norms, provides the possibility for a pseudo ethics and a destabilisation of the political and ideological. The political and ideological is registered mainly as hegemonic, imperial, and totalitarian (reflecting the emergence of a Western culture from the trauma of Hitler and Mussolini and, in France, into the militarism of de Gaulle's post-war France). So, a libertarian desire is announced that is monolithic (even mythical) insofar as it lacks the excess it promises, returning to the multiple and subtle inflexions of desire found within Augustine's vocabulary.

We fail to grasp what is at stake here philosophically unless we understand the figure behind this is as much Hegel as Nietzsche. Much of what might be termed postmodern desire as an excess installing an eschatology without eschatology (Derrida was fond of using a substantive noun and then semi-negating it with the conjunction 'without' [*sans*]) is a return to Hegel that radicalises the role 'negativity' plays in his understanding of dialectical progress. Hegel would probably characterise the result as forms of the 'unhappy

[63]Advocacies of the mythical figure of *khôra* include Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Kristeva.

[64]John Caputo, *Prayer and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1997), 35.

[65]See Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'Être ou au-dela de l'Essence* (Le Hague: Martinu Nijhoff, 1974), 239-52.

consciousness'—endless regression that spirals into a dark night in which all cows are black. This is a radically secularised Hegel, shorn of his trinitarian framing. In fact, this account of desire as endless but meaningless excess is a hollowed-out version of some Christian construals of the Trinity—that God endlessly desires God. Hence the appeal many of these thinkers make to Christian mysticism and the *via negativa*. Derrida explicitly compares *différance* with negative theology in several essays, and theologians have made much of this.[66] In making this move, these postmodern thinkers helped to relegitimise the study of theology in the academy and encouraged the cultural turn to post-secularism. And this raises a question of the relationship between secularisation and the theological (particularly its Christian and Western) heritage. As with other secularised and modern takes on more traditional understandings of the nature of God (omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence)[67]—the secular is just never secular enough. Back to Hegel.

Kojève's pre-Second World War lectures on Hegel emphasised the universal paganism and immanence of his thought, and celebrated what Kojève understood as the sheer negativity of desire dominating Hegel's thought-world. Kojève's was a dialectical Hegelianism emptied of all the transcendent (and ambiguous) register by radicalising Hegel's notion of the work of negation. Kojève sketched, in these lectures, the trajectory that thinkers such as Lacan, Levinas, and Deleuze would follow. It was Kojève, in an opening session, who announced the character of what would become postmodern desire: 'Now what is the I of Desire', he asked, 'the I of the hungry man, for example—but an *emptiness* greedy for content; an emptiness that wants to be filled by what is full, to be filled by *emptying* this fullness, to put itself—once it is filled—in the place of this fullness, to occupy with *its* fullness the emptiness caused by overcoming the fullness that was not *its* own?'[68] You can hear the Hegelian kenotic resonances, the endless *aufhoben* that no longer believes in a future consummation but understands that the chase of desire will always install the promise of such a future. When, in May 1959, Lacan gave his lecture at the Max Planck Institute in Munich, entitled '*La Signification du Phallus*', he stated explicitly that: 'The phallus is the signifier

[66]See two early examples: Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and my *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). The work of John Caputo and Mark C. Taylor advances Derrida's association while collapsing any Derridean distinction between *différance* and negative theology. The most interesting and nuanced essays on the relationship between negative theology and *différance* appear in Derrida's *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood *et al*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[67]To expand and explain: modernity is frequently seen not to have erased the theological but put it to work in a way that demythologises its content. Famously, Carl Schmitt spoke of all the axiomatic ideas of the modern state as secularised theological concepts—particularly our notion of sovereignty, which gathers around it much of what was formally understood as God's omnipotence. The scientists' concern with objectivity, like the panoptic gaze of the viewer that organises perspective in *tromp d'oeil* murals, and our own obsessions with 'transparency' are, similarly, related to what traditionally was associated with God's omniscience or the 'view from nowhere'. The preoccupation with the '*modo*' in 'modernity' is a concern from experiencing the present as present, the now as now—which Augustine saw as impossible because living the present as such was to participate in the eternity of God's omnipresence. It is by inflecting these transcendent theological concerns in purely immanent and secular ways that the theological is not erased. In fact, the whole attention to the present as such is a realised eschatology; it is an aspiration to live as angels. And the theological being inerasable, then, the secular can never be secular enough. It can never attain the purity of the immanence it requires to vouchsafe its tenability; because what makes possible this immanence *is* theological.

[68]Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the 'Phenomenology of Spirit'*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 1980), 38.

of this *Aufhebung*' that 'gives rise to that [which] presents itself in man as desire'. In its turn, desire installs a demand. 'Demand in itself bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for. It is a demand of a presence or of an absence—which is what is manifested in the primordial relation to the mother, pregnant with that Other to be situated *within* the needs that it can satisfy.' In other words, the demand for satisfaction of the desire is *not* the mode of satisfaction but its blockage; the Other that the demand evokes is excessive to any satisfaction. Hence desire is caught up in the play of displacement and condensation, and the infinite demand (Levinas would say 'accusation') of the Other. Lacan characterises this 'man' as 'doomed' to an interminable 'dialectic of desire and demand', in which it is not a matter of learning whether he has or does not have the 'real phallus', but more fundamentally he is made continually aware that the object of his desire (the mother) 'does not have it'.[69] What Lacan then calls the law of desire enslaves any subject in an interminable grappling with its own incipient castration. What one really hungers for (the phallus, the Other) can never be satisfied, though displaced consumption continues. One becomes obsessed with and addicted to the *jouissance* of desiring itself. And if you thought this was just Freud lost in thickets of Hegel and Saussure, the essay concludes in the final sentence on the theological (explicitly the Christological and the pneumatological): 'The function of the phallic signifier touches here on its most profound relation: that in which the Ancients embodied the *Νους* and the Λογος'.[70]

Much later, at the opening of the 21st century, the French sociologist Luc Boltanski and the economist/management scientist Eve Chiapello, will take this logic of desire and consumption—filtered down through Deleuze—and recognise in it the ontological basis for what they call (in homage to Weber), 'the new spirit of capitalism'.[71] Its negativity is alarming and it roots contemporary economics in the anthropology of Hobbes's *homo lupus*; only the individuals now are a faceless multitude and the social contracts binding them legal fictions. Earlier, in the 1970s, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes had already proclaimed the end of man, the erasure of the subject, and the dissipated structures of anonymous power. Now, we have entered the realm of Nietzsche's *amor fati* through the forecourts of a profound fatalism.

It is a desire without beginning or end, shot through with theological vocabulary, sentiments, and resonances, offering endless opportunities for critique and splintering fractions, with only arbitrary, pragmatic, or virtual platforms for consensus and community. It provides the ontological conditions—where ontology is pluralist, non-normative, and non-universal—for movie stars, influencers, plutocratic businesspeople, and reality TV personalities to become presidents, and narcotic-funded wars to become a criterion for awarding the Nobel Prize for Peace. Unmasked are endless labyrinthine politics and endless labyrinthine trading either feeding or starving an endless, but ravenous, appetite for goods. As I said, desire is not one.

I am painting a bleak picture where liberations—racial, sexual, ethnic, and class-based—are local, spasmodic, and subject to rapid reversal. This is what Richard Sennett characterised as

[69]Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 286-89.

[70]Lacan, *Écrits*, 291.

[71]Luc Boltanski & Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005).

'consuming politics'.[72] The problem is that there is no conception—to return to Augustine, Melanchthon, and Ignatius—of the *perversion* of desire; a desire that is as fundamental as movement itself to all things living. Here all desire is caught up in its multidirectional perversions. There is no telos or trajectory for this desire, and therefore no discipline for its formation. There is no authority that can establish itself as a focus and legitimation for such a discipline. In this polymorphous and omnivorous desire, all the mechanisms of older disciplines have been unmasked as ideological, hegemonic, and/or profoundly compromised—states, churches, the academy, the police. As Žižek announces, all we can do is 'enjoy' the symptoms of our own pathologies.

But there is a question here; a question that arises when we lay aside 'postmodernity' as a cultural phenomenon specific to a certain period in Western history.[73] The question is: to what cultural pathology do the accounts of postmodern desire I have been outlining testify? They are articulations of what Frederick Jameson calls 'the political unconscious';[74] implicated in far larger cultural and social imaginaries than just this or that French or Italian intellectual. The similarities between these projects attest to a wider sensibility they are shaping but which is also shaping them. For however much the eternal haemorrhaging of meaning and the Sisyphean economies of desire can be thought, they can only be *lived* at a level of profound despair. And such despair cannot be 'enjoyed' without disturbing amounts of masochistic displacement and denial. Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy (2005-2012) is founded upon the idea that only lying can save us; but the Dark Knight, in the last film, abdicates his role, and we stand between 'fake news' and apocalyptic truth.

In a way that begins to return us to the biological, a new discipline was emerging within and beneath this polymorphousness. Foucault called it 'biopower'. It is not governed by any abstract notion of the Good, the *khôra*, the phallus or the Other; though it is no less mythologised. It is governed by health and the therapeutic.[75] At present this discipline is preoccupied with ecologies of well-being and mindfulness; regulations rooted in fragile and vulnerable life-rhythms. Health returns us to desire that is both embodied, individual, and continually open to both that which nourishes and that which poisons. It is not without its problems—eugenics has a troubled history; gene therapies and manipulations open uncharted moral, political, and economic territories; and health regimes open the way to consumer-driven narcissisms. And while I can see the appeal this new biopolitics might have for Christians wishing to resurrect an ethics based in 'natural law', I have to say the 'life' that biologists, biochemists, and biophysicists are revealing speaks loud about 'stabilities' and

[72]See Richard Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 131-178.

[73]For there is a very real question whether present Western culture can be described as 'postmodern' any longer. Following the exposures and revelations into the nature of capitalism since the banking crisis of 2007/8, the 'late capitalism' that cultural gurus such as Frederick Jameson saw as funding and furnishing 'postmodern' delights in excess, is undergoing a transformation. I'm far from sure we can define what it is transforming into, but globalism now is not what globalism was in the 1990s. The 'condition of postmodernity' (the title of David Harvey's influential book) has changed; and that means postmodern desire is being redirected or, at the very least, threaded with new anxieties (about the future, waves of austerity, cuts in funding, fiscal regulation through national interest rates, quantitative easing, and a new protectionism curbing free trade). See my 'Theology and Postmodernism. Is It All Over?', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 2 (2012): 466-484, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfr099.

[74]Frederick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983).

[75]It began in the 1960s, if Philip Rieff's book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) is testimony.

'regularities', and says nothing about apodictic laws. They all seem to admit frankly that they don't know what 'nature' is.

But I think that 'incomplete nature'[76] is a good theological starting point, because if creation *ex nihilo* helps us to understand anything, then it is the appreciation of materiality as mysterious, as graced, and therefore ultimately inexplicable on its own terms. It is the sheer fragility of health and well-being, the continual attention our bodies pay to healing, to being healed, that returns us to the old metaphysical question—why is there something rather than nothing?—in a way that reveals not just the complexity of all created things, or their profound interdependence, but the sacredness of life, where 'sacred' is a quality that eludes us about life because we are not its author. As I said: no one yet has been able to create life in a laboratory. And *that* life is governed by an innate desire (what at a cellular level biologists call *autopoiesis*[77]) for its maintenance, its flourishing. In fact, teleology is back as a hotly debated topic within the life sciences, as is meaning and mindfulness at the level of prokaryotic as well as the eukaryotic.[78] Desire becomes regulated at a level of our embodied and material creation—the *dunamis*, the *energeia*, and the *oikonomia* of living. *Salus* is given, again, cosmic significance—and government backing.

V. THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

In undertaking this reappraisal, what I have argued (in line with Augustine and several Augustinians) is that the operations of desiring are inextricable from the movement that governs life itself.[79] If desire can be correlated theologically with grace, then it is rooted firmly in nature. Desire is a natural phenomenon, but it is complex and will not deliver any natural theology. An ideal structure, from concupiscence to sanctity, the scale of ascent and purification of desire, the Christian's growth in holiness, has governed most theologies of desire. We need now to reflect on desire's complexity (and complicity). That has implications for our understanding of (and models for) spiritual formation. That there is a spectrum of desires and desiring, and an ongoing, though asymmetrical, dialectic between the human SEEKING and divine love, remains. It remains with caveats: judging the character and trajectory of a desire is very far from easy, and encompassed by human incapacity that is not about sin but the limitations of our most probing discernment. We do not have access to our desires, as we do not have access to any of our 'ancestral passions', because the changes to our physiology and its impact upon our cognitive processes 'emanate from deep noncognitive parts of the brain'.[80] Although, the SEEKING system, to some extent, 'plays a dynamic

[76]This is the title of an important book by the biological anthropologist, Terrence W. Deacon: *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

[77]See the work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela that began with *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980).

[78]See Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life*: *Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[79]See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011) for a detailed examination of this topic. Unfortunately, Sheets-Johnstone, while covering everything from molluscs to mind, dynamic systems to dance, does not treat either the biology or theology of desire.

[80]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 31.

supporting role for all of the other emotions'.[81] In human beings, it is a richly complex and adaptive system to individual, social, and cultural experiences. In this way, what is 'natural' is mediated and inflected in ways uncountable. Nevertheless, in terms of a God defined as love, and the call of all to love God and one's neighbour as oneself, then desire is written into creation, salvation, and the doctrine of God. Insofar as it operates dynamically and cosmically, then it is as key to pneumatology as it is to spiritual formation. And in stating this I am only taking Lacan's understanding of the economies of desire as his word (although he treats *Logos* metaphorically and mythologically). More nuanced anthropologies are needed here as theologians delineate accounts of salvation as lived, experienced, and learnt in pedagogies of grace and pedagogies of affect.

There is a foraging appetite within us; an appetite in every one of the billions of cells that compose us. Life responds to that which gives life, sustains it, and enables it to flourish. Living is appetite and movement. It exists, or better abides, in the pulse of all other appetites; multiple forms of living that are organic, but which cannot be reduced to the organic because the organic does not live in and of itself. It lives continually beyond itself as appetite actively searches out its nurture and its future in a material world it did not create; a material world saturated with grace because divinity caused it to be from nothing. This divine creativity constitutes an *ordo caritatis* in which the mystery of the material is endless; and so, the organic and the inorganic, and the relations between them, are irreducible. In and through SEEKING systems, life is lived ecstatically, co-adaptively with all other life-forms, and participating in that which gave and gives it to be. Consciousness emerges in this active and foraging state of abiding and participating, this primordial hungering and thirsting. Desire is highly plastic in the way Augustine's various verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and nouns reveals. It is intrinsic to consciousness and unconsciousness alike; as is curiosity (from which it cannot be separated).

Whatever we understand by 'sin' distorting *voluntas* or infecting *affectus*, theologically the *ordo caritatis* remains as the true framing of human flourishing. But we encounter desire not just as lack but excess: Eros the son of Chaos. So, while developing a theological anthropology, theology will need to revisit questions about the nature of sin, guilt, repentance, practices of penance, strategies of self-denial, and the ecclesial (and liturgical) disciplining of desire (so often policed and controlling in potentially damaging ways).[82] For the economies of desire are, simultaneously, biological, psychological, cognitive, and spiritual—as much rooted in physiological systems (endocrinal, digestive, respiratory, and immune) as in active enquiry into what is meaningful and beautiful, good, just, and true. Desire permeates multiple and myriad economies of desiring, caring, and loving that cannot be reduced to *agape* and *erôs* or erotic love and self-denying *caritas*. We are immersed within energy fields that galvanise and make possible the material, organic and inorganic. Because of this,

[81]Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 34.

[82]There are some very encouraging signs here. Since 2010, Simeon Zahl has been exploring *affectus* with respect to pneumatology in Luther and Melanchthon in a series of articles culminating in his book, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). As he rightly says, while the notions of sin and conscience are not convincing to many today, the 'primary site where sin manifests itself in our lives is in affective structures and attachments' (222). When we examine of the nature of human experience, Christian or not, distortions in desiring and their multiple consequences are manifest, however we label them. Zahl's concluding chapter outlines 'economies of desire' with respect to 'Desires of the Spirit' (183-231). There is also Megan Loumagne Ulishney's fine study of sin, evolutionary biology, and sexual difference, *Original Sin and the Evolution of Sexual Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

desire is made dynamic and makes dynamic, by what it lacks (and needs to consume), and by what is excessive to it (and continually gives itself to be consumed). It is dynamic also because of its continuous exchanges with the desiring forms in all the other economies of desiring within which it is co-abiding in and through time (and change). And so, desire lives *beyond* the objects it desires, but it also lives *in and through* those objects because it cannot be divorced from the material. Living beyond its immediate objects, desire's teleology is for *homeostasis*, 'rest' in Augustinian terms, at every level from the eukaryotic to the animal and human. It is what gave and gives, shaped and shapes: the *ordo caritatis* created in and through Christ. *Homeostasis* is a conformity with what we might describe as a rhythm that is both cosmic and divine: a rhythm of reception and response, giving and receiving, emptying out and filling up, kenosis and pleroma. Theologically, this is eschatological because all things seek their ultimate satisfaction in God: to abide in continuously beholding that which sustains and cherishes it. The organism is formed in and through its operations; and its formation is an endless transformation through the Spirit in which living finds its fulfilment in eternal life. To echo St Paul, and putting the trinitarian frame in place: our living is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). To understand and be formed by this account of desire, though, would require accepting creation as the primordial revelation of God, as creator, creating in and through Christ; and an ongoing operation of that revelation through the Spirit. It would require faith, operating beneath and in reason, participating in the materiality of our human condition.

As a theological reappraisal of desire, this is far too brief and schematic a sketch. But it is, I hope, a basis; a basis for a practice of hope beyond the pathologies of sin, shame, and despair. Perhaps, it can pave the way to a theology of pleasure. This is Foucault, writing in 1963: 'Perhaps the emergence of sexuality in our culture is an "event" of multiple values: it is tied to the death of God and to the ontological void which his death fixed at the limit of our thought; it is also tied to the silent and groping apparition of a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality and that of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions.'[83] It is time, for those who do not accept the death of God, and who have come to recognise that desiring cannot be limited to questions concerning sex and sexuality, to reflect theologically in the light of that 'event' and its 'multiple values'.

We know from pastoral experience that spirituality cannot be hived off in accordance with the old *duplex ordo* of nature and grace. And yet, that has not stopped theologians fashioning theological anthropologies, spiritual direction, doctrines of the Church and its sacraments, around the multivalence and ambiguity of desire *as if* the concept was transparent; *as if* there are just two poles, love of oneself and love for God, and *as if* salvation/formation/discipleship/stewarding the mysteries (whether priest or lay) was simply a matter of channelling a single current going in one direction (concupiscence) to another (Christ).

It is not that simple *because* desire is not that simple. We can accept an inner and an outer dynamic, but the travelling is not linear. Formation or discipleship is not 'development' (even 'progress') in an evolutionary sense; a movement from ego to adoration. We have no firm grasp of any of those key terms: the 'self' in *amor sui*, God in *amor Dei*, or the range of objects and

[83]Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy Carrette, trans. Donald E. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 70.

propulsions we label love. If desire is seen as the structuring animator, a kinetic energy, there is not a single flow, and many if not most of desire's distributive branches are underground. Sexual desire is probably the most manifest form of desire. And so, it should come as no surprise that sexuality is such a contemporary issue in the Church; a force to be policed with pastoral care and safeguarding training.

The names of the spiritually and sexually abused multiply; the questions over marriage and celibacy defeat even Jesuit casuistry, trailing other issues of abortion, contraception, sex outside of marriage, and pornography in their wake; and the range of alternative sexual identities between homo- and hetero- generate an increasing number of shadings across an expanding sexual spectrum. All these theological complexities (and they are not simply moral issues!) encroach upon the meaning of desire; what it is, how it operates. This essay can do no more than sketch, perhaps too rapidly, what it is stake, theologically. But now theologians, after (and along with) philosophers, psychologists, biologists, and neuroscientists, are beginning to talk about desire again, there is no room for denial. Christian theology has been and still is in denial about desire. But, as one Catholic scholar and priest, a victim himself of sexual abuse, has written: 'One's longing is, so to speak, like God. It never allows itself to be fully grasped. Like Him also, it gives life.'[84]

[84]Patrick C. Goujon, SJ, *Precarious*, trans. Joseph A. Munitiz, SJ (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 66-7.