



Naturalism, Supernaturalism, and the Question of God

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Abstract

My starting point in this paper is that expansive naturalism is a defensible position. I spell out what this position involves, and grant with Iris Murdoch that we should take seriously the idea that the world in which we are immersed has an irreducibly spiritual dimension. I consider what it could mean to think of spiritual reality in supernaturalist terms, agree with the naturalist that dualistic supernaturalism is to be rejected, and ask whether one can legitimately reject this model as both a naturalist and a theist.

Keywords Naturalism · Expansive naturalism · Theistic naturalism · John McDowell · Iris Murdoch · John Robinson · Supernaturalism · Transcendence · Immanence · Paul Tillich

1 Setting the Scene

Most contemporary analytic philosophers are naturalists, for naturalism ‘has become a slogan in the name of which the vast majority of work in analytic philosophy is pursued’ (De Caro and Macarthur 2004, p. 2). The naturalist stands opposed to supernaturalism (Stroud 2004, p. 25), this is said to rule out things like ‘gods, demons, ghosts, and souls’ (De Caro and Macarthur 2004, p. 2), and the position has tended to be aligned with the natural sciences. These scientific naturalists agree with Wilfrid Sellars that ‘in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things’ (1963, p. 173) and some of them have gone so far as to insist the scientist has a monopoly on reality too. So, the claim is not simply that genuine explanations of reality must proceed in scientific terms (methodological naturalism), but that there is nothing beyond what can be so explained (ontological naturalism). As Dan Zahavi has recently summed up the outlook, ‘everything which exists (including everything pertaining to human life, such as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, rationality, normativity, values, culture, or history) has to be studied by the methods of the natural sciences, and is ultimately explanatorily and

ontologically reducible to natural scientific facts’ (2017, p. 138).

Not all scientific naturalists are committed to this scientific outlook, and more and more philosophers are taken seriously a liberal or expansive conception of naturalism. Such figures object that there are no good philosophical or scientific reasons for insisting that science is the sole measure of explanation and/or reality, and that naturalism should be expanded to accommodate a range of methods that are more suited to capture the nature of the aforementioned things pertaining to human life. Scientific naturalism is rejected on this ground, but as James Griffin has put it in the context of discussing the phenomenon of value, one of the ‘deep motive forces’ of the position must be retained, namely, the insistence that the relevant phenomena ‘do not need any world except the ordinary world around us...An other-worldly realm...just produces unnecessary problems about what it could possibly be and how we could learn about it’ (1996, pp. 43–44). Expansive naturalism is a form of anti-supernaturalism in this sense, but one can defend it without being a scientific naturalist, and there are good philosophical reasons for taking this more liberal route.

It has been standard to conclude from expansive naturalism’s opposition to supernaturalism that it must exclude platonism and theism. After all, these positions involve reference to things like the forms, immortal souls, invisible spiritual agencies, and God, and the typical naturalist

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associates such things with the offending supernaturalism.¹ Matters are less straightforward than this familiar dialectic suggests, for platonism and theism do not invariably involve reference to a second, supernatural realm, and some of the imagery which tells in favour of platonistic and theistic forms of dualism is compatible with a one-world position. Talk of the form of the Good being distant or remote is an obvious case in point, and McDowell interprets such talk as a metaphorical way of capturing how difficult it is to engage clear-sightedly with ‘the ethical reality that is part of our world’.² He defends Plato along these lines, adds that Plato has a ‘penchant for vividly realized pictorial presentations of his thought’, and castigates recent moral philosophy for its dreary literal-mindedness (1998b, p. 177). Iris Murdoch interprets Plato along similar one-worldly lines,³ and makes clear also that it is compatible with such a position that there are limits to what we can comprehend. As she sums up the position—a version of which she herself endorses—‘we are able to feel or intuit the world as a whole, but not as a totally comprehended whole’ (1992, p. 79).

So, McDowell and Murdoch take Plato to be off the hook as far as the offending supernaturalism is concerned. Yet McDowell leaves it open that there is a kind of platonism that *does* involve reference to an ‘alien’ extra-natural world to which we are mysteriously and seemingly magically connected (1994, p. 77), and he distinguishes this ‘rampant’ variety from his own non-rampant approach. According to non-rampant platonism, the relevant dimension of reality—in this case, the evaluative—is part of the natural world rather than existing beyond it. It cannot be fully comprehended scientifically, but there is no insuperable mystery concerning what it is and how we relate to it, provided that there is more to the world than what can be explained scientifically, and provided that our conception of human nature is broad enough to accommodate the possibility of ethical formation

and practical wisdom. McDowell leaves open the possibility of there being ‘a kind of religious belief that preserves room for the supernatural’, but he makes clear that it transcends the limits of expansive naturalism. As he puts it, ‘What “natural” means, as the root of “naturalism” in, say, “relaxed naturalism” as I use that phrase, is: not supernatural (not occult, not magical, ...’ (2008, p. 218).

There is a concession here to the idea that there are limits to what we can comprehend, and that these limits apply in a religious context, but it is assumed that religious belief involves a commitment to the disputed ‘other-worldly’ realm. I have suggested already that Murdoch is keen to acknowledge the relevant limits, and she is likewise interested in the religious dimension of reality. The difference with her position, however, is that she takes such a dimension to be a feature of *this* world rather than belonging to a second, supernatural realm. It is also intertwined with the moral, for Murdoch takes morality to be central to religion properly so called, and she warns against the dangerous tendency to separate religion ‘from the truth-seeking struggle of the whole of life’ (1992, p. 418). This ‘true naturalist’ picture, as she describes it, involves the belief that we are ‘immersed in a reality which transcends us and moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to its purposes’ (1956, p. 56).

The reality in question has its source in a goodness which is ‘to some extent mysterious’, and Murdoch talks of the ‘infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality’. She grants that the background to morals involves mysticism, but this mysticism is ‘unesoteric’ (1997, p. 360), and amounts to no more than ‘a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience’ (1997, p. 360). Such faith is divorced from the idea of God, and Murdoch recommends that we ‘remove’ the traditional notion of God, where ‘God’ ‘is the name for a supernatural person’ (1992, p. 418). She questions whether belief in such a being could make any difference to the human struggle towards goodness, and approves of the way in which religion ‘is detaching itself from supernatural dogma’ (1992, p. 425). She insists, however, that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all of the characteristics we associate with God, where God ‘was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*’ (1997, p. 344).

When Murdoch talks of the way in which religion is detaching itself from supernatural dogma she has in mind the ‘demythologizing’ project which was taking place in academic theology at the time she was writing, and popularized by John Robinson in his famous or infamous 1963 book *Honest to God*. The basic idea—clear from what Murdoch herself has said—is that we need to move beyond the conception of God as a supernatural person ‘up there’ in heaven

¹ Hence Stroud: ‘By “supernaturalism” I mean the invocation of an agent or force that somehow strands outside the familiar natural world and whose doings cannot be understood as part of it’ (2004, p. 20). John Dupré likewise describes himself as an anti-supernaturalist, and adds: ‘[e]xcluded by anti-supernaturalism are such things as immaterial minds or souls, vital forces, and divine beings’ (2010, p. 290). For similar claims see Ellis (2014, Chap. 1).

² Hence: ‘The remoteness of the Form of the Good is a metaphorical version of the thesis that value is not in the world, utterly distinct from the dreary literal version that has obsessed recent moral philosophy. The point of the metaphor is the colossal difficulty of attaining a capacity to cope clear-sightedly with the ethical reality that *is* part of our world’ (1998a, p. 73).

³ In an essay on Schopenhauer, Murdoch claims that Plato would deny with Schopenhauer that the task of metaphysics is to pass beyond the limits of experience to some other-worldly realm, and that both thinkers take seriously ‘our finite nature together with our passionate desire to understand “the world” which we attempt to intuit “as a whole”’ (1992, p. 79).

or ‘out there’ beyond the natural world. What is less clear is what it means to move in this anti-supernaturalist direction and what kind of position we are left with. It has seemed to many that it involves a significant if not total concession to atheism,⁴ and Murdoch herself helps to legitimate such a response given her preference for a position in which the word ‘God’ is dispensed with altogether. As she puts it, ‘useless confusion arises from attempts to extend the meaning of our word ‘God’ to cover *any* conception of a spiritual reality... “God” is the name of a supernatural person’ (1992, p. 419).

It is surely right to impose limits upon what could count as a God-involving conception of spiritual reality, but Murdoch’s confidence that she has moved beyond theism seems premature. The ‘demythologizing’ theologians with whom she is in dialogue agree that spiritual reality is not best viewed on the model of a supernatural person, and given that the criteria for talking appropriately about God are so unclear, it is too quick to assume that a rejection of this model leads to atheism.⁵

In what follows I am going to take for granted that expansive naturalism is a defensible position, and that Murdoch is right to take seriously the idea that the world in which we are immersed has an irreducibly spiritual dimension. My questions concern what it means to think of spiritual reality in the offending supernaturalist terms, and whether one can legitimately reject this model as both a naturalist and a theist.

2 God as a Supernatural Person and Dualistic Supernaturalism

Tackling the question of what it means to think of God as a supernatural person requires that we are clear about what it means to think of God as both a person and a *supernatural* person. The theologians with whom Murdoch is in dialogue reject the conception of God as a being ‘up there’ in heaven or ‘out there’ beyond the natural world, and although there is a question of how this language is to be interpreted, the disputed position is clearly reminiscent of the supernaturalism rejected by our naturalist. Robinson lends justice to this comparison when he identifies the structure of the disputed

approach with the ‘dualistic supernaturalism’ rejected by the biologist Sir Julian Huxley in favour of ‘unitary naturalism’, which latter is defined in purely scientific terms (1963, p. 15).⁶ Dualistic supernaturalism presupposes that the natural and the supernatural are dualistically opposed, and it involves treating God as a supernatural being—the supreme being...existing in his own right alongside and over against his creation’ (1963, p. 15). As Huxley puts it, in the context of demarcating his own preferred ‘scientific humanism’: ‘[t]he Humanist is one whose real faith is in the possibilities of human experience achievement, rather than in a Supernatural Being or revealed religion’ (1958, p. 282).⁷

Talk of God as a supernatural being existing in *his* own right already suggests an element of personhood, and Robinson talks in this context of God as a ‘Person, who looks down at this world which he has made and loved from “out there”’. Thus conceived, God is ‘an external, personal, supernatural, spiritual being’ (1963, p. 15). This suggests that God is a conscious being, rather like the beings that we are in this respect. Such a conception is familiar from the Bible, where God addresses, is addressed, and is related to in a way not dissimilar to the way we relate to human persons. However, it is nowhere claimed in the Bible that God is a person, and God is described in many other ways besides.⁸ As for Classical Christian theology, it is difficult again to find any explicit commitment to such a position. The doctrine of the Trinity reserves the category of personhood to the ‘persons’ of the Trinity,⁹ and although the doctrine of the Incarnation tells us that one human person—Jesus—is God, it is not saying that it belongs to the divine nature to be a human person.¹⁰ Biblical texts and Classical Christian theology notwithstanding, Robinson is right to say that the conception of God as a person is pervasive in popular Christianity, and it is taken for granted also by the typical atheist. Robinson

⁴ Hence Macintyre: ‘[w]hat is striking about Dr Robinson’s book is first and foremost that he is an atheist’ (1963, p. 215).

⁵ It is more understandable that popular atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens take theism to be inextricably linked to this supernaturalist framework, for they have little knowledge of theology or theism. As Mark Johnston puts it, ‘There is an important sense in which real religion never comes into view in these authors. (Did they meet in a back room with the fundamentalists, long ago, to agree to collaborate in the task of obscuring real religion?)’ (2009, p. 39.)

⁶ Robinson is referring here to an article on ‘Science and God’ published in *The Observer* on 17th July 1960. The biologist Sir Julian Huxley was one of the authors, the other was the Anglican theologian E.L. Mascall.

⁷ There is a difficult and unresolved question of the prevalence of dualistic supernaturalism in traditional theology. Talk of a ‘demythologizing’ approach to theology suggests that rejection of this framework is a relatively recent phenomenon. Bentley-Hart (2002) has argued that there is a problematic Thomistic interpretation of the natural/supernatural relation, that it should be rejected in favour of a radically monistic vision, and that this vision is in keeping with healthier currents of medieval and modern Catholic thought.

⁸ Compare Brian Davies: ‘The Bible compares God to people such as shepherds, kings, fathers, builders, and a husband whose wife has cheated on him. But it also compares God to a lamb and an eagle and a case of dry rot whilst also asserting that God is like nothing else’ (2022, p. 433).

⁹ See Robinson (1967, pp. 20–28) for a helpful discussion of this issue.

¹⁰ See Davies, *op.cit.* p. 433.

concludes on this basis that it is difficult to criticise such a conception without appearing to threaten the entire fabric of Christianity.¹¹

The relevant criticisms are a mixture of the metaphysical, the epistemological, and the moral. The first difficulty is that the idea of God as a supernatural person threatens to compromise God's nature, implying as it does that God is just another kind of thing—who happens to live 'up there' rather than 'down here'. But God is not a part of the world—whether this world or any other—and not any kind of thing.¹² The issue here concerns how we are to model God's *transcendence*, and the worry is that God has been reduced to just one more finite measure—something purely immanent.

A second difficulty is that God *qua* supernatural person ends up being banished to the edges of human life to become an extra, spooky storey to which we might or might not ascend when the business of living is over.¹³ God quickly becomes irrelevant to human existence and to the natural world more generally, the question is raised of whether and how there could be evidence for such a being, and the way is paved for an atheistic naturalism. This objection is again targeted at the framework of dualistic supernaturalism. It is used by Robinson to undermine the associated conception of God, and the underlying dialectic is brilliantly summed up by Nietzsche in his 'History of an Error' in *Twilight of the Idols* where it is objected that the idea of a 'true world'—a placeholder for the offending supernatural realm—is 'of no further use', 'obsolete', and 'superfluous', and that we should get rid of it (2005, p. 171). Nietzsche's stance is atheistic, but he lacks Murdoch's confidence that the removal of the offending realm will leave everything else in its place, associates it with both Platonism and theism, and worries that we have 'unchained this earth from its sun'.¹⁴

Nietzsche is concerned with Murdoch's 'truth-seeking struggle of the whole of life' and worries that the removal of a 'superfluous' supernatural realm could leave us with nothing. Murdoch takes this struggle to involve a quest for the good (Nietzsche's sun), and she avoids the threat of nihilism by distinguishing this good from the idea of a supernatural being and making explicit its relevance for life in the here and now. She shares Nietzsche's reservations about whether a supernatural being could have any role to play in

this context and worries that even if we *could* relate to such a being, there is no guarantee that the relationship will be morally transformative (1992, p. 419).

Moral transformation is ruled out if one is good simply for the sake of heavenly rewards, and one might suppose that the presence of a supernatural being could tempt one in this direction, assuming that such a being operates with a system of rewards and punishments. Such a position is anthropomorphic and idolatrous, and it turns God into a product of our egoistic fantasies. Mark Johnston takes it to involve a kind of spiritual materialism, the spiritual materialist being someone who is 'inauthentic in his engagement with religion, and with his spiritual quest or search' (2009, p. 16). Such a figure fails to engage with anything beyond the demands of the selfish ego, his 'unredeemed' desires are projected onto a 'heaven' which promises endless satisfaction, and there is no prospect of moral or spiritual transformation. Johnston finds elements of spiritual materialism in the monotheistic traditions, objecting that much within these traditions is false and spiritually debilitating.¹⁵ Dualistic supernaturalism is a particular target here, and a central claim of his book is that it is essentially idolatrous, and that a more satisfactory position is to be found in a 'legitimate naturalism'.¹⁶

Inauthentic spirituality is likewise the target of Nietzsche's criticisms when he objects to those who neglect this world in favour of lies about 'the beyond' (2005, pp. 15–16), and bemoans their indifference to the 'higher' values that bestow meaning upon *this* life. He identifies a similar spiritual malaise in those with no aspiration for anything beyond happiness and satisfaction.¹⁷ Nietzsche is adamant that a commitment to supernaturalism derails our truth-seeking struggle and feeds into our spiritual malaise. He

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Gregory (2008, pp. 495–519) offers a brilliant critique of the offending conception of God. Gregory's target is the typical atheist, and he does a fabulous job of exposing some faulty but pervasive assumptions about God and the God/world relation.

¹³ See Robinson (1963, p. 15 and 1967, p. 22). See also Ellis (2014, pp. 88–90).

¹⁴ These worries are expressed in Nietzsche's famous pronouncement of the death of God in his *The Gay Science* (2002, §125).

¹⁵ Johnston's aim in this book—as stated on the book's dust jacket—is to show that 'God needs to be saved not only from the distortions of the "undergraduate atheists (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris), but, more importantly, from the idolatrous tendencies of religion itself'. The idea of God as a supernatural person is said to be idolatrous (2009, Chap. 3).

¹⁶ Johnston claims to take issue with supernaturalism *per se*. I have taken care to refer to dualistic supernaturalism, leaving open the possibility that a more satisfactory conception of the supernatural can be accommodated from within a non-dualistic framework (Ellis 2014, pp. 88–93). There are implications here for how we think about the relation between the transcendent and the immanent.

¹⁷ This is Nietzsche's 'last man' or 'last human being' as described in the prologue of: 'The time approaches when human beings will no longer give birth to a dancing star. Beware! The time of the most contemptible human is coming, the one who can no longer have contempt for himself. Behold! I show you *the last human being*... "We invented Happiness"—say the last human beings, blinking/ They abandoned the regions where it was hard to live: for one needs warmth' (2006, pp. 9–10). For a brilliant account of Nietzsche's nihilism and the role of 'higher' values in his solution to this predicament see Andrew Huddleston (2019).

identifies supernaturalism with theism and platonism, takes it to be dualistic in the sense previously described, and seeks an alternative which destabilizes the offending dualism and grants us the right to find meaning and value in the here and now. Lawrence J. Hatab describes him as a naturalist on this ground, and spells out his position as follows:

Nietzsche's naturalism is driven by what can be called a presumption of immanence, in that natural life as we have it is the only reality. This excludes the validity of supernatural claims, which have been motivated by dissatisfaction with natural existence...The basic problem can be located in Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical thinking: 'the fundamental faith of metaphysicians is *the faith in opposite values*' (BGE 2). Here reality is divided into a set of binary opposites—constancy and change, eternity and time, order and strife, reason and passion, truth and appearance, good and evil...Nietzsche's alternative to oppositional thinking advances an intertwining relationship between supposedly exclusive categories...' (2019, p. 332).

Naturalism is the solution to the problem of supernaturalism for all our protagonists, but significant disagreements remain. Murdoch and Nietzsche insist upon an opposition between naturalism and theism on the ground that theism involves a commitment to supernaturalism, and Nietzsche takes platonism to be similarly supernaturalistic. Johnston, by contrast, takes the idea of God as a supernatural being to be degrading of God and of the experience of God (2009, p. 39). He objects to the atheistic assumption that God is 'essentially' a supernatural being (2009, p. 39), and protests that real religion never comes into view in the positions of atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. It is tempting to add Murdoch to this list of atheists except for the fact that she is so clearly engaged with the task of defending a true religion and so clearly engaged with theology.¹⁸ Our theologians testify to the possibility of rejecting dualistic supernaturalism as theists, and Johnston himself falls into this category, although he, no less than Robinson, has been interpreted as an atheist. Hence John Cottingham:

In the end, his naturalism must mean that, despite his sympathy for true religion, and despite his frequent use of the word "God", and phrases like "The Highest One", he cannot really believe in anything like the personal God of the traditional Abrahamic Faiths. Instead, drawing on Alfred North Whitehead's "process theology", he identifies God with "a universal process understood as outpouring and disclosure". Here, God

is no longer in the category of substance, as in traditional theology, but in the category of activity (2010).

3 Interlude

We are going round in circles and in danger of 'gerrymandering the terminology, one way or another' as Johnston puts it. However, some clues have been laid down along the way. First, we are clear about some of the difficulties of dualistic supernaturalism, and clear also that these difficulties have been associated with platonism and theism. We know also that platonism and theism can be interpreted non-dualistically, but that it has been equally common to build the offending dualism into the essence of these positions. According to this second approach, platonism and theism cannot be naturalistic, and naturalism cannot be expanded in the ways we are beginning to explore.

Why take 'naturalism' in this broader sense? And why take seriously the possibility that it could be expanded to accommodate God? Part of the answer takes us back to what I said at the start. The scientific naturalist does not have a monopoly on the meaning of the term 'naturalism', and recent philosophy testifies to its pliability. The idea of stretching this meaning in a theistic direction is alien to much analytic philosophy, but there is no real engagement with theology in this context, and it is assumed that theism goes hand in hand with dualistic supernaturalism. A nice example here is Thomas Nagel who, in the context of spelling out his own more expansive naturalism, claims that his 'speculations about an alternative to physics as a theory of everything do not invoke a transcendent being but tend toward complications to the immanent character of the natural order' (2012, p. 12).

Nagel's 'presumption of immanence' is familiar from what Hatab has said on Nietzsche's behalf, but Nietzsche is supposedly deconstructing oppositional thinking, and it is striking that the binary opposition between the transcendent and the immanent is left dangling both in Hatab's description of Nietzsche's critique and in Nagel's description of his own naturalistic approach. There is a marked contrast here with Murdoch—whose naturalism accommodates the transcendent as a dimension of nature, albeit in a context which purports to be atheistic. My final task is to give a sense of what it could mean to 'advance an intertwining relationship' between the transcendent and the immanent as both a theist and a naturalist.

¹⁸ For a wonderful recent account of the details of this engagement see Fiddes (2022).

4 Naturalistic Theism

Our supernaturalist treats the transcendent and the immanent as dualistically opposed entities or realms, and the atheistic naturalist rejects the first term of this dualism. What would it mean to provide an alternative to this ‘oppositional thinking’? Robinson turns to Paul Tillich as someone who pushes beyond the relevant extremes to defend a naturalism that promises to accommodate God.¹⁹ But how is God to be understood in this context? And what does it mean to describe God as transcendent? Tillich answers as follows:

To call God transcendent in this sense does not mean that one must establish a ‘superworld’ of divine objects. It does mean that, within itself, the finite world points beyond itself. In other words, it is self-transcendent (1975, p. 8).²⁰

And as Robinson sums up Tillich’s approach, we have:

the reinterpretation of transcendence in a way which preserves its reality while detaching it from the projection of supranaturalism [dualistic supernaturalism]. ‘The Divine’, as he sees it, does not inhabit a transcendent world *above nature*; it is to be found in the ‘ecstatic’ character of *this* world, as its transcendent Depth and Ground.²¹

This ‘ecstatic naturalism’ promises an ‘intertwining relationship’ between the transcendent and the immanent, and, from a structural point of view, it corresponds to Murdoch’s true naturalism (we are immersed in an inexhaustible reality). Murdoch’s inexhaustible reality is oriented towards the good, and this good is said to be ‘to some extent mysterious’ (there are limits to what we can comprehend). God’s reality is likewise mysterious, and this has implications for how much we can say about this reality, including how much we can say about the difference between theistic naturalism and platonism.

Robinson takes the crucial feature to be found at the level of the personal, albeit a conception thereof which is divorced from the metaphysics of dualistic supernaturalism. He talks in this context of wanting to ‘give expression to the form of the personal at the level of the universe as a whole, to the overwhelming conviction of the ultimate reality of the ‘Thou’ at the heart of things’.²² Hence, to speak of ‘God’:

is to acknowledge a relationship, a confrontation at the heart of one’s very constitution as a human being, of which one is compelled to say, in existential terms: This is it. This is the most real thing in the world, that which is ultimately and inescapably true...God statements are statements about the reality of this relationship. Of what lies outside it or beyond it we can say nothing meaningful. Hence the reticence of the Bible even to utter the name of God, as though one were presuming to fill in the hole at the centre of the wheel. One can only describe the spokes of the relationship, the reality which is God-for-Us...The question of God is not a question of describing or defining what or who exists on the other side of the door, outside the relationship. It is the question of whether this relationship is veridical, of whether reality is of such a nature as to ‘answer’ this sort of knock, not to confound this sort of trust’.²³

Much of this provides further clarification of what it could mean for the transcendent and the immanent to be ‘intertwined’ rather than opposed. Robinson’s insistence that we are confined to the reality which is ‘God-for-us’ is another way of lending emphasis to our epistemological limitations, but the confinement imagery is not intended to imply that this reality is less than fully divine (the immanentist position), for it is a manifestation of the divine, albeit a divine whose nature is not exhausted by any particular manifestation.²⁴

So far so Murdoch, but Robinson wants to go further than this, and to say that *what* we are in relationship with is itself personal. Hence the claim that there is a ‘Thou’ at the heart of things. We know that this cannot mean that there is a supernatural person at the heart of things, and to get a clearer sense of a more appropriate model I want to return to the idea—noted briefly in discussion of Johnston’s position—that God’s reality is to be modelled on the idea of activity or outpouring rather than substance.

Nicholas Lash sums up the position in question with the claim that ‘The holy mystery of God simply *is* the giving, the uttering, the breathing that God is said to be and do’ (2008, p. 23).²⁵ In the Christian tradition this divine outpouring is understood as a kind of loving, and it is that in which

¹⁹ Robinson (1963, p. 32). Tillich’s position is spelled out in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1975) where his target is ‘supranaturalism’. Supranaturalism is equivalent to what I have called dualistic supernaturalism.

²⁰ Quoted in Robinson (1963, p. 34).

²¹ Robinson (1963, p. 34).

²² Robinson (1967, p. 23).

²³ Robinson (1967, p. 67).

²⁴ For a similar reading of Hegel’s position see Anselm K. Min’s brilliant 1976 article.

²⁵ Lash adds that this interpretation is defended on both Scriptural and Scholastic grounds. Hence: ‘And, for those unreconstructed souls who prefer the language of scholastic metaphysics to the imagery of Scripture, what else are we saying when we say that God is *actus purus*, ‘pure act’, if not that, in Him, the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘does’ has no application’.

‘we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). Now if God’s reality is intrinsically relational in this sense, and if we partake in this relationship when we love, then this means not simply that we relate to God when we stand in loving relations to others, but that there is something of God within us.²⁶ Robinson talks in this context of ‘an ultimate relatedness in the very structure of our being from which we cannot get away’, bemoaning the modern (dualistic supernaturalist) tendency to displace God’s reality from this pivotal position (1967, p. 72). As to the question of what it really means to describe God as personal, it is because ‘at this deepest level men have experienced reality as encountering them with the sort of graciousness and claim that we recognise at its highest in the love of another human being... For in pure personal relationship we have the nearest clue to the nature of ultimate reality. “No man has ever seen God”: but, “if we love one another, God abides in us... He who abides in love abides in God” (1967, p. 73).’²⁷

5 Moving On

I have ‘complicated the immanent character of the natural order’ and began to make a case for describing it in theistic terms. These terms are not mandatory,²⁸ they will fail to persuade those who remain wedded to a dualistic supernaturalistic interpretation of theism, but I hope to have shown that this interpretation is open to challenge. The positive position I have outlined takes inspiration from Robinson and others, and Robinson’s position is significant for my purposes not just because he writes so clearly and relevantly, but because his *Honest to God* has been taken to be a significant marker in Western Culture’s move towards atheism. It should be clear that I reject this interpretation.

The move towards atheism continues, and there is a question of whether an enquiry of this kind could make any difference. Perhaps it could persuade a certain kind of atheist that they are operating with a faulty conception of God.

However, one of the deep messages of the framework under exploration is that an authentic relation to God requires something more than that one’s metaphysics and epistemology is in order, and that there is something practical at stake: it requires that one is capable of love—[h]e who abides in love abides in God. The atheist can respond that love is doing all the important work here, and that the things taken so seriously by our protagonists—living well, value, spiritual health and so forth—can be adequately comprehended and enacted without the need to bring God into the picture. However, the essential question is begged if God is assumed to be something other than love and love is assumed to be adequately described in atheistic terms. As for the act of loving and living well and being spiritually authentic, one can certainly do these things and be these things without thinking of God and without believing in God, and this is to be expected given the limits of our understanding. The theist will add, however, that one’s knowledge can grow in this context, and that one might come to see, as Augustine did as he reflected back on the role of God in his life, that ‘You were with me, but I was not with you’.²⁹ Such reflection is difficult to make sense of on the assumption that dualistic supernaturalism is true, but this framework has been challenged in favour of a naturalism in which the transcendent and the immanent are intertwined rather than opposed, and I have argued that it is to be taken seriously.

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²⁶ This way of thinking is prevalent in the Christian tradition, and is to be found, for example, in Augustine’s claim that God is closer to me than I am to myself (*Confessions* 3.6.11). It is even more pervasive in the mystical strand of Christianity. For a recent defence of this approach see Bentley-Hart (2002).

²⁷ The quotation is from 1 John 4. 7–21.

²⁸ The atheist can object to the position in at least two ways: first, she will deny that there is subjectivity/personhood at the heart of reality and will insist that these are merely late-coming and local features of a particular part of reality ‘far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy’ (Douglas Adams). Second, she can question what the justification is for insisting that *love* is fundamental to reality, rather than being a local aspect of one part of reality. I thank John Cottingham for pressing me on these points.

²⁹ For clarification of these points I have benefitted greatly from reading Patrick Sherry’s wonderful 1981 paper.

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