

effect taken the first place?⁷ Lastly, have we as a community succumbed to a—perhaps the—pervasive ethic of modern western society by transposing the order of Jesus’ greatest commandments thereby changing the whole dynamic of Christian relationships? Has the commandment to love our neighbour surpassed Christ’s premier order to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength? What are our Catholic priorities?

- 1 This paper was written during a University postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Religious Studies at The University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I would like to dedicate it to Mr. K.A. Waites.
- 2 William L. Moran, ‘The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963), pp. 77–87.
- 3 John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*. (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce, 1965), p. 780.
- 4 See Hillel the Elder’s famous dictum ‘What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Law, and all else is commentary’ (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a).
- 5 For a very full discussion of the early Jewish techniques of biblical interpretation witnessed in this and the parallel passages of Matthew 22:34–40 and Luke 10:25–28 see E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1978), pp. 247–51). I am grateful to Professor W. McCready of The University of Calgary for this reference.
- 6 It is surprising how few modern Christians realize that the commandment to love your neighbour originates in the book of the Law to which many of them have the most difficulty in relating, Leviticus.
- 7 See Hugo Meynell’s poignant dialogue, ‘Quaestio Disputata—Sex and Catholicism, *New Blackfriars* 67 (Nov. 1986), pp. 485–93.

The Nearness of God

Charles Taliaferro

‘God is closer to me than I am to myself’

Meister Eckhart¹

Can God be closer to you than you yourself are? I believe that the answer to this question is ‘yes’. Indeed, God is such that it is impossible for you to be closer to yourself than God. Surely this is a paradoxical claim. It would be paradoxical to maintain that something could be closer to, say, a stone than a stone. Not even God could get closer to the stone than the stone itself. How then could God be closer to you than yourself? In part, I believe that the answer lies in appreciating the nature of what it is to be

psychologically present to someone, including oneself. There is more to ourselves than meets our eyes, but not the eyes of God. A rich appreciation of personal identity and psychological presence can illumine the sense in which God is supremely present in our lives, indeed closer to us than we are. I spell out the nature of this Divine human proximity and conclude with reflection on what it is for someone to be indwelt by God.

I shall be assuming the intelligibility of certain classic tenets about the God of Christianity. God is the all-knowing, all-powerful, loving Creator of the cosmos.² I shall also help myself to some garden-variety claims about persons. Persons have beliefs, emotions, desires, and sensations. They have a conscious and unconscious life. They act (or are capable of acting) in the world. They often have a past and future. These are not to be taken to be necessary conditions for personhood. Maybe there could be persons who have sensations, but no desires and the like. I will assume, more modestly, that these features pick out sufficient conditions for being a person. If something is fortunate or unfortunate enough to have the above characteristics, I assume it is a person. I now outline five respects in which persons may be said not to be present to themselves; these concern our self-assessment, projects, unconscious, memory, and future.

(1) *Self-assessment*. Imagine I have a wildly distorted view of myself and I think I am the greatest pianist in the world. When I look in the mirror I think to myself: 'Ah, the greatest pianist in the world is wearing a green tie today'. Little do I know I am actually one of the world's worst pianists and, as it happens, the greatest pianist in the world is currently in Vienna and has never worn a green tie. There is a rather large gap between my beliefs about myself and who and what I am; one might well say there is a great distance.

The popular turn of phrase 'to be out of touch with oneself' expresses this rather well. In the case imagined, I fail to be in touch with myself. Stones cannot do this. Whenever and wherever the stone touches the kitchen counter, it is touching the kitchen counter. By way of contrast, whenever and wherever I believe I am looking at the greatest person on earth (me), it by no means follows that I am truly doing so. I believe that this illustrates well a sense in which I fail to be present to who I am.

(2) *Our projects*. I believe that our identity is partly constituted by what we choose to pursue, our central projects. I may desire and even endeavour to be the greatest pianist in the world. To the extent that I am alive to this project, one that I am deeply committed to, I am close to myself or who I am. But imagine there are times when I am overcome with weariness and either forget the depth of my commitment to piano-playing, or even become bored with it. Now, it could be that this failure to be enchanted by or psychologically attentive to this project discloses a very real, and by no means illegitimate, reassessment of my commitments. Nonetheless there may arise occasions when my commitment may remain

constant and yet my attentiveness and spirit wanes. Imagine that during an episode of *ennui* I destroy the piano with an axe. Afterwards I declare my fit of destruction to be idiotic, pointless, mad. We may plausibly take certain cases like this as instances of my temporarily losing touch with my settled, central drives or projects. I thereby fail to be present to myself insofar as I fail fully to appreciate my central goals.

Consider the kind of closeness that typically characterizes friendship. A friend may not sympathize with all (or even most) of one's goals. Nonetheless, a salient feature of much friendship involves more than acquaintance with at least some of our central commitments. We expect friends not to be bored by the goals that shape our lives. A best friend may try desperately to get me to stop my piano-playing or perhaps prevent me from destroying pianos. He remains distant from me insofar as he finds my projects and goals to be of little interest, neither delighting in my success nor grieving over my ills.

There is some popular literature which commends persons to be their own best friends. Much of this literature is as odd as it is unhelpful to our personal development. Being a friend, like being a brother, seems to be the sort of thing which cannot take place in isolation from other people. It takes at least two to be a brother. Be that as it may, I believe there is some sense in speaking about being one's own good friend. In *The Laws* Plato suggested that we are (or can be) friends with ourselves. What this may amount to is that one cares about one's own goals and projects, one takes interest in one's welfare, one avoids self-destruction (presumably a case in which one is one's enemy). It seems to me that insofar as we fail to give sufficient concerned attention to ourselves, we fail to be fully present to ourselves. Those who fail to be friends to themselves (or even interested in themselves) fail to be close to themselves.

(3) *The unconscious*. Psychologists and philosophers have argued plausibly that persons have an unconscious life. That is, we have beliefs and desires of which we are not consciously apprised. This is not the place to offer lengthy arguments for the unconscious, but I note two reasons for recognizing its existence. One is that the existence of the unconscious allows us to account for much of the action we do when we are not consciously aware of the reasons for our activity. In a Freudian fashion, if we attribute to me a secret, unconscious desire to bed my mother, we can understand my odd behaviour towards my father. Without positing such a desire, my dreams and behaviour at home are peculiar and mysterious. A second rationale for positing the unconscious rests upon an appeal to introspection. When we consciously alight upon certain given beliefs, they present themselves to me as beliefs I have been maintaining all along. Thus, after much therapy I may come to realize that I am jealous of my brother. Hitherto I have never consciously thought of myself being jealous nor have I been fully aware of any ill will I bear towards him. When I

realize my state I come to have a sense: 'Ah, all along, I have been nursing a grudge against James, but never realized it.' Insofar as I am not acquainted with my unconscious life, I am not present to those regions of myself.

(4) *Memory.* There is a popular philosophical theory which characterizes personal identity over time in terms of memory beliefs. John Locke argued that what makes me the same person today and that person born in the early 50s is that I am linked together by memory experiences. I am not always remembering the past, but I could recall it under the right conditions. I believe this theory is false as far as a full characterization of personal identity is concerned. I may be the same person tomorrow as I am today even if I should irreversibly suffer amnesia during the night and irretrievably lose my memories or if I should undergo some wild transformation and think I am someone else. It would still be the case that it was Taliaferro who had these funny, new beliefs or had lost his funny, odd memories of his past. Still, I believe there is something to Locke's memory criterion; my personality or character is largely constituted by what I take to be my memories of my past. Insofar as my memories are distorted or lost *tout court* I believe I am less present to who I am, my character. I can endure over time as a self despite vast changes, but who I am is inseparable from who I have been. I am the person who used to do such and such and suffered this and that.

(5) *The future.* Aristotle once wrote that we should call no human beings happy until they are dead. Aristotle believed that human beings' happiness, flourishing or fortune involved matters stretching beyond their individual, current states. Roughly, whether or not one has truly flourished, and may be justly considered to be happy in the full sense, depends (in part) upon the eventual success of one's projects, the well-being of one's children, and the like. We may not subscribe to Aristotle's dictum or his rationale, but I believe there is an important insight in his view. Imagine I have every reason to expect to live many years but have no conception of what will happen to me. Perhaps I am like Kierkegaard's aesthete, who lives only for and in the pleasure of the moment. I believe that such a life is truncated in an important respect. We are creatures who live in time and while there may be a last moment to our lives (if there be no afterlife) more often than not we are creatures with some future. We have probably all been guilty of doing what could well be described as living in and for the future, neglecting the importance of the present moment. In so doing we wind up by being rather remote, inattentive or even oblivious to who we are. But insofar as we are inattentive or oblivious to what is to come, or what we may reasonably anticipate, I believe we are also remote from who we are. Clearly the future is not wholly written out for us, the rest of our lives stretching out with fixed patterns. I do not suggest that we are remote from ourselves to the extent that we fail to

know exhaustively what will take place. More modestly, I suggest that if we utterly disregard or even suppress all measure of anticipation of what we will be like, we are not close to who we are. This is by no means a diatribe against spontaneity. Our lives would be poorer if we failed to act on any impulses or whim. There is a time to act without forethought. On the other hand, to act without any forethought, to only move on the basis of impulse, is to denigrate the temporal nature of our being.

These may not be the only respects in which human beings may be said not to be close to themselves. Surely each of the above cases could be illustrated in many different ways. When someone slips LSD in my coffee I may lose touch with myself in all five areas above.

Could God fail to be close to Himself in any of these ways? In the Incarnation there may be a sense in which God could do so in the human life of the second person of the Trinity. Perhaps God *qua* Jesus Christ did not always know of his nature (1), his Messianic mission (2), his unconscious (3), his past (4), and future (5). By envisioning this lack of unity with who He is as the Divine second person of the Trinity, we may understand His agony in the passion as a profoundly personal agony in which a man is nearly rent in two. I will not endeavour to spell out here the implications of this for Christology. Instead, consider the question of whether God *qua* omniscient, omnipotent loving Creator could be somehow remote from Himself. I believe the answer is no.

As an omniscient or all-knowing being, God could not have a false understanding of Himself (1). Insofar as God is envisioned as being essentially omniscient, God may be assumed not to have an unconscious. God knows all; there could not be facts about Himself of which he has no consciousness (3). God must likewise be conceived of as being alive to His projects (2). Some religious literature abounds with pleas that God be less relentless in bringing about his revealed will concerning human history. Christian philosophical theologians are divided on the matter of whether God has a memory. If God is outside time, God has no past to remember (Thomas Aquinas). But if God is in time God has a past and future to remember and foreknow respectively. Given either theological understanding of God's relationship to time, I believe God *qua* omnipotent, omniscient being could not undergo a remoteness from Himself such as I described at the outset of this article. If God has memories, these may be presumed to be exact and true. If God has a future God may be presumed to know with precision what it will be like.

Some Christian theologians have contended that God is in time and does not know precisely what will take place. They argue that God does not know the future free acts of creatures.⁴ If their schema is correct, could God be remote from Himself in cases where He fails to correctly predict what will occur? I do not think so. These alternative readings of the Divine attribute of omniscience underscore that God knows all that is

metaphysically possible to know about the future. Thus, God knows all conceivable outcomes of creaturely free action, albeit He does not know which of the myriad of choices may be selected. Still, the Divine predictions are conceived of as being unsurpassably great, as exact as is metaphysically or logically possible. God knows all that may be possibly known about the future; He is cognizant of His temporality (if He is temporal) and does not live in the present moment without forethought of what is to come.⁵ I conclude that an omniscient, omnipotent Being cannot be remote from Himself with respect to (4) and (5) above.

How close can God get to you? Very. First note the way in which we may believe God is close to a world of inanimate objects, including stones. I believe the classic theistic tenet that God is omnipresent amounts to the claim that for any object that exists God knows the object exhaustively. God can exercise His omnipotent power with respect to the object, and God creates and conserves it in existence.⁶ What it means to say that God is present everywhere, including the kitchen where there is a stone, is that God knows all aspects of everything in the kitchen (the size and weight of the stone), God can exercise omnipotent power with respect to every object in it (elevating the stone off the ground), and none of the items in the kitchen, stone and all, would exist were it not for God's creative and conserving power. God may be understood to be present to us in these respects and others as well. Unlike stones, we have rich, complex psychological lives enabling God to be close to us on the inside. Consider the closeness of God to persons over against persons' closeness to themselves.

The all-knowing God of Christianity knows my lack of piano skills, when I look in the mirror, my thoughts, feelings, yearnings. God is aware of my jealousy and Freudian impulses; indeed, every feature of my life is transparent to the omniscient God. No matter how well I know myself, as a finite being the scope and precision of God's love for me is unsurpassed. My unconscious is, *ex hypothesi*, remote from my conscious purview. Insofar as I have an unconscious God will have a deeper, clearer grasp of who I am. My plans, projects and goals cannot escape the attention of an omniscient God. Moreover, as a God of holy love we may imagine God's attentiveness to our inward life to surpass our limited powers of concentrated focus. God knows our past with unsurpassable exactness. Depending upon one's theology, one may suppose the God of Christianity knows our future precisely in every detail or that God knows all the possible courses our future may take. I conclude that God is unsurpassably present to our lives.

More needs to be said, however, to complete even this rough portrait of the nearness of God. Is God as close to an evil, relentless sinner as to a saint? What is the relationship between the kind of Divine-creature closeness I have identified and what is described in Christian tradition as

the indwelling or abiding of God in the believer?

For the reasons cited above, I believe that God is closer to the relentless sinner (call him Gordon) than Gordon is to himself. God knows Gordon with unsurpassable clarity and precision. He knows Gordon's unconscious, dreams, projects, past, present and future with greater lucidity than any creature can attain. Moreover, God knows the nature and character of Gordon's spiritual and moral life; what Gordon should be like. I, for one, would be reticent to claim that God loves Gordon any less than the saint. Both Gordon and the saint are close to God's heart. Surely God is proximate to Gordon in the respect in which the omnipresent, ubiquitous God is present to each object in the universe; God not only knows of Gordon, but can exercise power with respect to him (lift him off the earth and the like), and God conserves Gordon in existence. But there remain some important differences between such Divine presence with Gordon and the kind of presence of God in the life of the saint.

The saint and relentless sinner may differ in their own remoteness from themselves. Psychological proximity or closeness is not necessarily symmetrical. I may be close to you in many respects and yet you have as little interest in or knowledge of me as you have of yourself. Someone's wickedness may stem from faulty self-estimation, certainly a false picture of his place in the universe. A wicked person may act on impulses that are uninformed by a clear grasp of the pain and suffering he is inflicting. God may be close to the wicked, apprised of both what they actually do as well as what they think they do, but the wicked are as ignorant of the full weight and character of their action as they are of God. Saints may be marked by a kind of self-forgetfulness. Indeed, perhaps some theologians are correct in affirming the existence of 'anonymous saints' who do not believe explicitly in God. Be that as it may, I believe the saints have a marked integrity and unity of person. They do good in virtue of correctly perceiving the goodness of the action. They are more in touch with who they are, what they have been, what they will be. St. Bernard of Clairveaux and St. Francis of Assisi were people who knew themselves as creatures of a beloved God. One may assume, then, that there is either greater symmetrical closeness (or at least a receptiveness for this closeness, as in the case of the anonymous saint) between saint and God than between relentless sinner and God. But, important as this is, we still have not identified the principal difference between Gordon and the saint. Gordon could be symmetrically present to God. Gordon knows of God, but hates Him. God is close to Gordon, but as an enemy. We still have not captured the critical difference between God-Gordon closeness and the indwelling of God.

I believe the key difference lies in properly understanding the role of creaturely freedom in the life of the believer. Someone's closeness to you

may be measured in part by the ability of that person to act in your life. It is further measured by that person's actual interaction with you. The relentless, consciously wicked person is one who refuses to recognize God's love, refuses a kind of friendship with God. Christian theists typically characterize us as free agents and God as a respecter of freedom. God will not violate our choice to live as though He does not exist (at least for now!). Thus, God may not be close to the plans of the wicked, in that these plans are conceived and carried out with relentless disregard of God's justice. Gordon himself may be close to God's heart, but surely Gordon's plans are not close to the mind or heart of God.

I conclude that the saint (or the God-indwelt 'ordinary believer') and wicked man differ in the kind of closeness they share. Presumably God is close to the saint as one friend is close to another, or, to put it paradoxically, as persons are close to themselves. Recall Jesus's saying recorded in St. John's Gospel that the followers of Christ are to be one with Him and He and the Father are one. Part of what it means to be indwelt by God is to have the oneness of friendship with the Creator, a sharing or mutual enjoyment of will and emotion. This brings to light the character of saints as being those in whom one can see the activity of God.⁷ God is close to the saint in that the saint makes God's love and justice visible. We are brought close to God by being close to the saints. Until Gordon becomes a saint, the very opposite may occur. The more one resembles Gordon's vain pride the more remote one becomes from a proper sense of God and self.

In Eckhart's judgement 'God's activity is not the same in a person as in a stone.... Similarly God does not work in all hearts alike but according to the preparation and sensitivity he finds in each. In a given heart, containing this or that, there may be an item which prevents God's highest activity'.⁸ I hope to have identified several of the many ways in which this high activity takes place.

- 1 German Sermon 69 (M.O'C. Walshe tr., *Meister Eckhart: Sermons & Treatises* Vol. II, London 1981, p. 165).
- 2 I have defended the coherence of such traditional Divine attributes in 'Divine Cognitive Power', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 18, 1985, pp. 133—140; 'The Magnitude of Omnipotence', *IJPR*, Vol. 14, 1983, pp. 99—106; 'The Art of Creation and Conservation', *New Blackfriars*, July/August, 1986, pp. 315—323.
- 3 Cf. Thomas Morris' *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). I believe the considerations I have cited here would be accommodated within Morris' two minds theory of the incarnation.
- 4 Cf. work by William Hasker and J.R. Lucas.
- 5 'Divine Cognitive Power'.
- 6 I articulate features of what it means for God to be omnipresent in 'Kenny and Sensing God', *Sophia*, Vol. 25, no. 2, July 1986, pp. 11—16.
- 7 Cf. R.M. Adams' fascinating discussion of saints in 'Saints', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1984.
- 8 Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart* translated by R.B. Blakny (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), p. 88.