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DIFFICULT DESIRE

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I. Preliminary: Pertinent Inquiry.

There is a very laborious and highly respectable way to do an end run around philosophy as a never quite satisfied, never quite fulfilled desire for wisdom—the defense against any definitive touchdown. This mode of inquiry is scholarly research. It begins with a clearly framed project, collects relevant arguments from respectable sources and forges outcomes that have at the least a slight edge of novelty, of so-called originality. It is more often the labor of duty than of love.

Here is why this approach is minimally helpful when the inquiry concerns our soul or psyche or *nous* or mind or reason or understanding or consciousness or subject or whatever term hard-headed people, unwilling to get entangled in invisibilities, are willing to utter. The expectation of progress is the underlying justification of scholarship that drives honest research, but it is by no means clear that with respect to the human constitution its direction hasn't been regressive. One way to put it is that in order to master consciousness intellectually and to treat the psyche therapeutically, they've been cut down to the size of our understanding. Or that what was once an experience of grandeur—Heraclitus says:

Setting out for the bounds of the soul, you would not find them out, so deep a *logos* does it have (D.K. 45)—

has become a puzzlement about minutiae. Another, more positive, apprehension is that inquiries about the passions, emotions, feelings, or affects deal with internal processes often least known to those who harbor them and only minimally and unreliably open to public inspection. But what

is not evidential is private and what is private is non-contributory to the advance of secured knowledge.

Which brings me to that unamenableness of questions about the affects to research which I want to make the most of: Knowledge about them must come, I think, primarily from direct experience, from a primary search rather than from a secondary research. And that means from *introspection*, not a path of inquiry congenial to everyone or easily brought under the injunctions of the academy. Can you imagine a proposal for a doctoral dissertation entitled “Me and my feelings”?

I think, therefore, that this search, which delves into interiority, has certain features I ought to try to set out. First, originality is out of it. A search whose written testimonials are two-and-a-half thousand years old will not yield novelties, and a human being of moderate endowments will not produce originalities. What matters is not that the inquiry yield new items to the store of knowledge but new understanding to the inquirer. One such seriously respectable understanding might be that the affect you are inquiring about is a mystery, a secular mystery—an uncircumventable fact that just won’t yield to rational elucidation. Perhaps it may even appear that such a psychological mystery is ultimately a theological mystery.

Accept, I would say, that there are certain conditions for inquiring into the affects, in the present case, desire. For example, I think that a human being who has not seriously loved a being, be it animate or inanimate, or an activity, be it itself a fulfillment or an approach to a finality, is not prepared for thinking about desire. Nor is someone without the verbal copiousness to discern and give utterance to psychic subtleties, nor a person uncultivated by the fictional delineations and artful representations of psychic phenomena. Thus, for example, the bibliographical requirements for philosophy students should include the major novels of those

languages not linguistically alien to them, for example the novels of Jane Austen and of Tolstoy, of Charlotte Brontë and of Fyodor Dostoevsky. And, of course, the great epics, the *Iliad*-and-*Odyssey* (to be regarded as one) and *Paradise Lost*. But enough of preliminaries, except to say that I'll obey my own preachment in the manner of Frost's deceased old lady in his poignantly patriotic poem, "The Black Cottage." Her minister says of her, a widow with convictions, that

She had some art of hearing and yet not
Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.

I'll have her in mind when I launch into our subject without being much moved by current opinions upon it.

II. Etymologies: Suggestive Incitements.

I'm zeroing in on desire then, and I'll begin with some etymologies. I have no faith in etymologies as *revealing truths*, but only as *suggesting possibilities*. Etymology means, literally, the truth about words. It is not obvious that the oldest known meaning must be the truest—it might be simply primitive. To be sure, once linguistics had been established as a discipline, this truth was taken to lie in primordial meanings. The Greeks, however, had extracted significance from witty misconstruals. And even the Germans profited from plausible errors about homonyms; for example, Hegel etymologizes *Wahrnehmung*, "perception," as "taking for "true," although the *wahr* here is not "true" but "aware" (*Phenomenology*, "Consciousness," II).

Now it is a truth, discovered by this same linguistic research, that the early meanings for items now considered non-sensory, that is, transcending the appearances that we take in by our sense-organs, do all—at least all that I've looked up—refer to events that come to us from the concrete stuff called material and the motions of things made of material. So the etymology of *nous* and *noein*, the capacity and action of taking in, of receiving, is conjectural; however, one

linguistically acceptable supposition relates it to “snuffle,” that is, “to sagaciously following the scent.” *Logos* and *legein* are more definitively related to “a collection,” a gathering, and to the verb for “collecting” things dispersed. Concept, German *Begriff*, is traced back to “a seizing grasp”; soul, *psyche*, is originally “a cool breath.”

But desire is the most surprising. It is close relative to “consider,” which means originally “to take into account the stars (*sidera*),” your fate written into the heavens. Thus *desiderare* means something like “[to long for something to come] down (*de*) from the stars.” The verb “to long” itself is cognate with “to yearn and to lunge for” what is far beyond one’s reach. So in German “desire” is *Verlangen* and so is “demand.”

What’s the point? The etymology underwrites one half of what I think is our common understanding of desire: It goes out from me to an object, not to confront or consider it but to snaffle it, to pull it in, to claim it, in imagination or in reality. There *is* another half.

III. Excursus: Relevant Terms.

Before going on to desire in its wholeness, I’ll take a—long—moment to list once more the human capacities and faculties responsible for (or standing aside from) and the internal states and events involved in (or left out of) desire. These brief delineations will not be news to you, but let them function as reminders. Each of them could be associated with certain particular thinkers as its prime sponsors.

Soul: the whole complex that animates the human body, including all mentation and every affect. I’ll list under “soul” also its Greek name, *psyche*, substituted for soul in the soul-averse terminology of experts in soul-accounting, “psychology” in Grecised English, be it theory or therapy. —Plato.

Nous: the receptive capacity for direct insight into beings and the ability to attain such intuitions, stabilized thoughts, upon traversing the linear thinking called *dianoia* or

“thinking-through,” *dia* being, as ever in matters mental, a spatial preposition, indicating the twoness of “from here to there.” —Aristotle.

Mind: the latter-day successor of *nous*, a set of functions or operations rather than receptivities, which eventually shapes beings to its own requirements of certainty. —Locke.

Reason: *logos*, the faculty for thinking according to articulable rules called logic; also the ensuing accounts, *logoi*; also the relation of things similar to each other in qualities (*analogies, metaphors*) and of ratio-relations of quantities (*logoi, ratios*). —Heraclitus.

Consciousness: a latter-day displacement of the now largely proscribed soul. As *nous* is part of a *soul*, consciousness belongs to a *self* that is self-conscious in both senses—self-aware and often ill at ease. Consciousness, apperception, belongs to a subject that confronts or harbors or constructs objects. —Kant.

Let me pass right on to some terms for human interiority that are *not* mentation, that is, thoughts (ideas) or thinkings (reasonings).

Appetite: literally, “seeking toward”; directional seekings are part active, part passive stretchings-out toward an object-aware hunger, be it for physical satisfactions or for non-physical objects of attraction.

Affect: literally, “done-to-ness” the most comprehensive term. I think of our capacity for being affected as a great human-centered mystery. It’s my conclusion *after* having produced 500-plus printed pages of research on and search into the *feelings*. Its direct opposite is *spontaneity*, the self-generated aspect of mind, its apprehension.

Passion: *pathos* in Greek, a “suffering” in both senses, a painful affect but, more neutrally, a passive, done-to condition.

Emotion: a mode and term that gradually takes the place of *passion* in modernity. The term signifies an internal commotion or upheaval together with the expression of the internal motion—“emotion” is derived from *ex-movere*, “to move out.” If it’s done dramatically, it’s called “emoting.”

Feeling: the most all-overish kind of affect, as its etymology suggests—it is related to “palpitate,” to exploratory touch, to feeling out gently. Such tactile feeling is our basic sense, whose organ is the whole skin (Aristotle, *On the Soul* 413b). When transferred from the sensory to the affective realm, “feeling” betokens the most mood-like, pervasive aroma-absorbent inner condition, melding into that diffuse kind of thinking signified in our locution for an undeliberated opinion: “I feel that...”

Mood: the most philosophically consequential affect, our basic modality, our psychic condition. In German, mood is *Stimmung* as in the tuning, *stimmen*, of an instrument. In the last century the mood of most philosophical interest was anxiety (Latin *angor*, “choking”), our constricting confrontation with nothingness.

The point of these listings is to help frame the questions that will find a territory within which to locate desire. First, then, in which of our non-physical capacities does desire arise? I am bypassing here the strictly somatic answer implied in the stimulus and response theories, the lusting and lunging, such as Schiller attributes to worms in the “Ode to Joy”:

*Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben,
Voluptuousness was bestowed on the worm,*

and then he adds, to right the balance:

*Und der Cherub steht for Gott.
And the cherub stands before God.*

(Incidentally and inconsequentially, the “Ode to Joy” is, in Beethoven’s setting, the anthem of the European Union. But back to business.)

So, first, on the hypothesis that desire is not explicable in purely bodily terms, is it a receptivity of *nous*, intellect? Or an operation of the mind, a mode of rationality? Or a condition of the conscious self, an aspect of subjectivity? I mention last what I think of first: Is it a capacity of the soul, the non-somatic principle most immediately involved with the body? I think so.

And second, on the hypothesis that desire is probably primarily, if not exclusively, an affect, a *done-to* rather than a *doing*, is it a passion, an emotion, a feeling, a mood? Again, I leave to last what I had listed first: Is it appetite? That’s what I opt for because desire has a bodily side, but also because of what I learned from the two giants of the tradition concerning desire, who were not distractible by academic scholasticisms. They taught me, the one, namely Aristotle, that *a human being is appetitive from beginning to end*, and the other, namely Thomas, that *the passions are all appetitive, however specified*.

Let me say right away to what I'm referring. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins with the assertion that all human beings by their very nature reach for, hunger for, desire, to know. And the text culminates in the delineation of a divinity that is at once so terminally interesting and so utterly self-sufficient as to be the most absolute, that is, the most *irresponsibly irresistible* object of attraction, of the hunger, the desire, with which this treatise on the theology of thought comes to its climax. It is *Nous*, Mind, *Thought* itself. (XII vii, ix)

On a smaller scale, Thomas, in the "Treatise on the Passions" of the *Summa Theologiae* (Questions 22-48 of the Second Part of the First Part) places the passions in the sensitive, body-related *appetitive* part of the soul, under two rubrics: *concupiscible* and *irascible*, that is, "desirous" and "vehement" (Part I, Qu. 81, 2). These categories distinguish passions according to their way of attaining their object: whether the effort is smooth or rough, advances in peace or requires a struggle, hence a certain aggression, to attain its goal. But with all respect for Thomas' huge powers of discernment, I think that his objectors ("Treatise of the Passions," Qu. 23, 1) have a point: All the passions are fundamentally desirous, and both the recalcitrance against the object and the arduousness of the irascible passions serve as, and I quote, "the champion and defender of the concupiscible" (Qu. 81, 2); thus the vehement passions too are in the service of desire, the desirous passions. For both kinds, the desirous and the vehement passions are appetites.

So far, then, I've said that desire is one half a non-somatic longing or a non-physical lunging. Now I owe you the other half. But first, recall that I assigned desire its seat in the soul, that conception of our transcendent nature which is, during our life, most inextricably involved with the body.

I might recall to you here that Plato makes Socrates the most vivid myth-teller in behalf of this involvement of soul and body. I am thinking of the *Phaedrus*. Precisely one half of this dialogue, the second half, is devoted to the notion that genuinely seductive speech, rhetoric, has to be based both on psychological insights and logical distinctions, while the first half gives an example of such an insight into the soul and its descriptive image, its visual analogy. The visual depiction of the soul shows it as tripartite; a chariot, representing the body, is pulled by a self-indulgent black horse coupled with a self-respecting white horse and driven by a rational human charioteer. This soul-image as an *external appearance* enfolds the *internal feel* of it as a great male member, a phallus in the process of erection. The seductive message—it ought to pierce the awareness of all philosophy students—is that *the soul is as capable of arousal as the body*. The teaching of the *Phaedrus* is that the love of wisdom properly begins with the love of ensouled bodies—to be precise, in “enthusiasm,” a Greek-derived word for having “the god (*theos*) within (*en*),” or for seeing through the human body to the divinity.

IV. Inwardness: First Arousal.

It is this arousal that is the other, really the first, half of desire. That assertion is a claim about desire and therefore problematic. Here is a more concrete way to inquire: What is the relation of love to desire? The most explicit treatment of this question that I know of in non-fiction is again that of Thomas in the “Treatise on the Passions.” It is set out in the yet more precise question “Whether love is the first of the concupiscible passions?” (Qu. 25, 2). The question itself suggests the answer, for it asks: “Is love the beginning of desire?,” and the answer to Thomas’ “yes or no” *quaestiones* is normally “yes,” as far as I know. I’m about to quote extensively from the question. But first I want to say, I hope unnecessarily, that there’s no point

in reading Thomas, the master of human experience, unless you let it resonate—I mean, take it as a real perplexity not to be muted by the neat complexity of his response.

Thus the first objector (I like attributing the so-called objections to a person, as I may, since they are as much Thomas speaking as the “I answer that...” which follows)—this first objector immediately picks up my problem: Thomas says that concupiscence is the same as the passion of desire, and since the whole faculty is named from its chief characteristic, namely the concupiscible or desiring power, desire precedes love in significance and exceeds it in scope. For love is but a member of that concupiscible class. Nonetheless, among the concupiscible passions, love is first. So here, then, is Thomas’ answer to the question: “Is love the first of the concupiscible passions?,” somewhat abbreviated, yet long; forgive that—it *is* the best treatment of our topic that I know:

Augustine says that all the passions are caused by love since *love yearning for the beloved object, is desire; and, having and enjoying it, is joy*. Therefore love is the first of the concupiscible passions.

Good and evil are the object of the concupiscible faculty. Now good has the aspect of an end, and the end is indeed first in the order of intention, but last in the order of execution. Consequently the order of the concupiscible passion can be considered either in the order of intention or in the order of execution. In the order of execution, the first place belongs to that which takes place first in the thing that tends to the end. Now it is evident that whatever tends to an end, has, in the first place, an aptitude or proportion to that end, for nothing tends to a disproportionate end; secondly, it is moved to that end; thirdly, it rests in the end, after having attained it. And this very aptitude or proportion of the appetite to good is love, which is complacency in good; while movement towards good is desire or concupiscence; and rest in good is joy or pleasure. Accordingly in this order, love precedes desire, and desire precedes pleasure.—But in the order of intention, it is the reverse: because the pleasure intended causes desire and love. For pleasure is the enjoyment of the good, which enjoyment is, in a way, the end, just as the good itself is, as stated above.

[T]he effect of love, when the beloved object is possessed, is pleasure: when it is not possessed, it is desire or concupiscence: and, as Augustine says, *we are more sensible to love, when we lack that which we love*. Consequently of all

the concupiscible passions, concupiscence is felt most; and for this reason the power is named after it. (“Treatise on the Passions,” Qu. 23, 2)

I think it follows that there is a perspective from which love is a pre-desirous desire. I don’t think this is the passionless love attributed to God and the angels, but it delineates a familiar phase of *human love*.

See if this description isn’t true to your experience. You’re now in the throes of the most yearning longing, a hungry attraction, probably to a human being, but by no means necessarily so. It could be a work of imagining or understanding or an event of action or contemplation. Wasn’t there a moment or a span, depending on the sturdiness of your temperament, when the love was pure delighted contemplation, utterly devoid of cupidity—when love was without longing? Perhaps it was, after all, what Schiller meant with the line from the “Ode to Joy” that follows on the voluptuous worm: “And the cherub stands before God.” It doesn’t last long, the “I want” in its triple sense asserts itself: I lack, I need, I choose—“I choose,” because the German *Woll-ust* and the Latin *vol-uptas* are both references to the choosing will, *voluntas*. In sum, the direction is from hands-off quasi-stupefied looking to the urgent will to possess. Thus Satan, before beginning the willful seduction of Eve, stands for a moment, within sight of her innocence, “Stupidly good” (*Paradise Lost* IX 463. Incidentally, Milton’s Eve is never innocent, not from the beginning when, at first consciousness, she falls in love with herself, IV 449).

So the first half of desire, often much briefer in time, but equal in significance with the longing part, is the love that is as yet mere delighting but also already a tending. Perhaps one way to put it is that there is *desire yet potential*, the pull of the object, attraction, and there is *desire now actual*, the push of the subject, longing.

So much for what I’ll call, somewhat gracelessly, the structure of desire: It’s bivalvic: early arousal of attention hinged to the consequent pursuit of the object.

V. Consequences: After Desire.

Now comes a real problem in theory, and, heaven knows, in experience: What's next? Suppose the object, him-, her-, itself, is unwilling. William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* tells the story of William Dobbin, who, through much of his adult life, longs for Amelia; she, in turn, quite willfully denies herself to him. When she finally wakes up, he's still willing but the other parts of wanting have been worn out. Desire is deflated. It happens. It also happens that the object is easily captured but not long kept: "I'll have her but will not keep her long" says the eerie soon-to-be King Richard III (I ii 230) of his wife-to-be, Lady Anne.

These are unfoldings good for fiction, but the case to put to philosophy is that of desire prosperously fulfilled. For it, the most head-on yet subtle treatment that I know of is in Plato's *Philebus* (34 ff., 44 ff.). Here is the setting of the problem: If desire implies a lack and a longing, two dual elements must be involved: pain/pleasure and memory/imagination.

The Greek word for desire is *epithymia*. *Thymos* as self-respect is the classical forerunner of will, so *epithymia* can be pretty faithfully rendered as "willing-toward," somewhat as my earlier analysis of desire suggested. Will and willing, however, always, I think, have a futural aspect; they are directed toward what is expectantly hoped for but is not yet, what *will* be, if we have our way.

Socrates develops these consequences for desire. Desire originates in a lack, which gives pain, and tends towards a fulfillment that is expected to give pleasure. Such expectant hope can never arise in the body because it requires imagination. Imagination, in turn, is a function of memory, for we can—or so I am persuaded—form mental images only of what we have seen in the past, either by eying terrestrial appearances or by receiving other-worldly visions, that is, by

the deliverances of reality or by messages from the Muses. Consequently, although the body undergoes the deficiency, the lack, and so the desire, is never experienced there.

Now there are, Socrates reports, people who speak to this effect. If desire is the painful longing to fill a lack, then, when the lack is filled, the longing and its pain cease (also *Gorgias* 494A-B). They imply that there supervenes a pain-relieved state. I'll interject here that, as we all know, this relief can be intensely pleasant—for a moment. But we also know that very soon both pain and its relief have slipped out of awareness, and we find ourselves in the state of normality, which is a condition of awareness-neutrality. In fact, any additional fulfillment, for example, yet another serving of even the most delectable of foods, such as meatloaf with mashed potatoes, becomes painful when you're stuffed. Or perhaps a more refined case, from, say, Jane Austen: When the two who were destined for each other finally find each other willing, the story is over. The ensuing marriage lacks the tension of longing. If it's tellable at all, it's a comedy; all her major married couples that I can think of, be they quite contented or merely resigned, are more than faintly funny, often hilarious. Jane Austen's novels are fictional realizations of the *Philebus* problem.

This problem of desire has, it seems to me, two versions. One is this: Is ardent desire sustainable under conditions of availability? The other is: Can active love be maintained under conditions of normality? Perhaps there is a third and best way to put the question, in Thomas's own term: Is there *fruition*, "enjoyment," the delightful union with the desired object—once it is attained? His affirmation of that possibility, his faith-driven answer "yes" to the problem of desire, makes a huge difference to the tenor of life: Is it, external conditions being favorable, inherently disappointing, or at best a-pathically contented? Is there secure delight? When Thomas opts for "fruition," he is saying that earthly happiness is, in principle, possible.

There might be, however, a take on life outside these three possibilities, the ones that I might call the classical cases, since ancient schools are nameable for each: Stoic, for the damping, Epicurean, for the maintaining, and Aristotelian, for the fruition of desire. This new possibility is the Romantic one, which, of course, like any way of thinking, may happen at any time, but also has its period of dominance. I take the canonical Romantic mantra from Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and *still to be enjoy'd*,
 For ever panting, and for ever young;...

I've emphasized "still to be enjoy'd." I take "still" here to mean "yet to come." Romantic desire is fixed as "for ever" futural, fruition-removed, and *that* is called happy love. It is love in the mode of indefinite increase: "*more* happy love! *more* happy, happy love!" Thus it is an example of the very pleasure that Socrates refuses to accept in the *Philebus* as the human good, partly because as measurelessly and illimitably formless (31A) it is soul-destroying and partly because as deliberately and willfully incomplete it is self-incoherent. One might say that open-endedness, the lack of finality and limit, is the feature of romantic desire that distinguishes it from classical desire.

IV. Completion: What ends?

What might be a good way into the question whether the fulfillment of desire is a fruition or a let-down? Is attainment a joy or should we, adapting a famous Aristotelian dictum to the contrary, *tristum omne animale post coitum*, "every animal is depressed after intercourse," say instead, in my made-up Latin, *laetus omnis homo post consummationem*, "every human being is joyful upon fulfillment."

I think this inquiry, if we engage in it for real (by “for real” I mean only secondarily to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and primarily to clarify our life), should probably begin with thinking about pleasure. Where does it arise, in the nervous system or in the soul? What kind of affect is it, a passion or a mood, or what? Aristotle’s most memorably apt description of pleasure is also a dead end; he says that it perfects an activity by being a certain supervening perfection, like the moment of bloom on things in their prime. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1174b 33) “The bloom of things in their prime” is the loveliest, the most telling figure of speech, but what does it tell? Not under what conception of our humanity pleasure is to be classified, nor what sort of affect it may be said to be. In fact, a bloom, a perfection, is perhaps not an affect at all.

Think of all the questions to be asked about pleasure, and you will, I imagine, end up realizing just why an inquiry about desire calls for an early analysis of pleasure and why, just as studying jokes is terminally unhilarious, so investigating pleasure is unavoidably unexhilarating. But it is, I think, the necessary beginning.

Here are my questions: Is there pleasure in anything for which longing desire has been extinguished by reason of fulfillment? To put it another way: Is fulfilled desire, desire sans longing, a contradiction in terms, or a nameless affect or is its name perhaps pleasure itself? Is the motive, the “end”—ambiguously so named, since end means both termination and consummation—is this “end” of desire an object, the goal of an attraction, thus a present being, or is it rather a prospect, the hope of pleasure, and so a future condition? Why is desire bivalent—a state of arousal within, hinged to a motion toward an object without? Can love, the inner arousal, be satisfied if there is no pleasure to be drawn in from an object beyond? Can longing, the outward reach, arise in a soul unmoved by anticipation of pleasure? Is there really

entirely objectless desire, pure vagrant longing? And finally, what are we to make of that complexly inverted desire, that attractive aversion for what is engrossingly ugly or captivatingly bad, bad for us and bad in itself—and what is the nature of the beckoning pleasure? *Can* evil be our good?

I could go on: there are, concerning pleasure, questions of terminology, of classification, of causality, of valuation, and these are, I think, deeper, more primary and thus antecedent to the apprehension of desire. Let me frame my last question, the one that is as real as it gets, by returning to Thomas' classification of the passions. Although they are all desirous and long for the good, yet they are divided into a concupiscible and an irascible kind—those that simply seek what is good and goes down easy and those that are embattled for what is difficult to attain and demands a fighting spirit.

The Greeks have a saying: *chalepa ta kala*: “good things are hard.” They mean, I think, thereby preempting and undermining Thomas' authority, that *everything* that is good is difficult, including pleasure. For example, to go for it directly is to forestall it terminally. I'm with the pagans here, and so I ask: Why is our desirous soul so in need of obliquity, of obliqueness, of slantwise and creeping approaches, when candor and naivety seem to be its native virtues? Why is pleasure and its desire so beset by uneasiness? This question confronts, I think, a great mystery that envelops our affective nature: the mystery of negation. Here begins ontology, real thinking.