

# Desire

Tad Dunne

(This version is a slightly edited version of an article published in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey, Liturgical Press, 1993).

*The hairs on your head are far easier to count  
than your feelings and the movements of your heart"*  
(St. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.15).

We experience desires, first of all, as psychological events. But their origins are buried in sub-psychological events, and their effects extend beyond our psyches to the larger society and to yet unborn progeny. Furthermore, the history we inherit and the history we make are always entangled in sinful desires and yet graced by a doubly self-giving God. So if we are to understand desire in its fullest contexts, we should take into account a number of perspectives: cosmology, psychology, theology of history, theology of grace, biblical hermeneutics, and Trinitarian theology. From these perspectives we can give some very practical suggestions about how to deal with desires. These will be helpful either to spiritual mentors in the process of helping others or more directly to ourselves as we try to understand and deal with the desires of our own hearts.

Let us begin with a partial definition that sets desire in its cosmological, historical, and sin-fraught contexts:

Desire is our experience of the burgeoning character of the universe in the throes of an uncertain birth.

Keep in mind that as we speak of desire we also include aversion, since aversion is simply a desire to withdraw from something.

## *The Cosmos*

A fully empirical view of the burgeoning universe in which we live envisions a series of layered plateaus—from physical, to chemical, to biological, to psychological, to intellectual, to reasonable, to responsible, to the affection and love that mold communities and direct history. If we regard these layers as an ongoing process, the transition from what is "material" to what is "spiritual" should be no more disturbing or miraculous than the transition from physical processes to chemical processes. Up through all the layers, there are events that instigate changes, raising the odds that a higher level

of controls will emerge, and there are events that consolidate changes, and so preserve any higher level of controls that happened to emerge. Within the human arena, desires are that part of the great hierarchy of events that instigate change. Desires are the drivers of specifically human evolutionary processes insofar as they help make us what we become, but they are also the experienceable part of a continuous creation going on in the universe.

### ***The Human Spirit***

However, what makes the transition to the human so miraculous and unlike any other known reality is the fact that our human nature has a say over what its nature is to be. We live somewhat above mere spontaneity, inherited instinct, and the blind probabilities of evolution. We experience an inner pull to direct our own nature through our intelligence, wisdom, and love, and particularly through our desire to do what is intelligent, wise, and loving.

We experience desires first as mere instinctual events in reaction to our perceptions or to organic functioning, much as animals do. But our minds measure the costs and our hearts weigh the wisdom of following these instincts, so that instinctual desires can be transformed into responsible or irresponsible desires. Unfortunately, our hearts are fickle, and our desires by themselves do not automatically direct themselves to what is responsible. And so, also unlike any known reality in the universe, the pulls of desire are tragically and paradoxically involved in self-contradiction. We ignore loftier desires and embrace baser desires, making our own nature less than human. Thus, in us the universe can give birth to either its own life or its own death.

### ***Human History***

This disturbing fact of life is the aboriginal possibility of sin, and every man, woman, and child experiences desires both for and against what is good. All "sins" that display themselves in broken promises, broken families, broken economies, and broken civilizations are hatched from these inner throes of the soul. The Bible is full of admonitions against following sinful desires, but it was not until St. Augustine's brilliant *City of God* that Christian literature named this inner tension of desires as the key to understanding the making of human history. A millennium later St. Ignatius Loyola encapsulated Augustine's theology of history in a parable designed to prepare a Christian for making a major, practical life-decision. His "Two Standards" meditation plunges a person deep into the imagery of this inner war of desires going on in all people, of every race, in any place and time. These visions present the individual with a worldview of the essential workings of all historical process. Such a view of history, rooted in the inner struggle of desires, repudiates other views held by Christians and non-Christians alike—for example, that

history is governed ultimately by mere chance (fatalism), by the stars (astrology), by various uncontrollable forces (Buddhism, Taoism, Stoicism, Progressivism), by forces normally hidden from human knowledge (gnosticism), by reason alone (rationalism), by actions to be rewarded or punished in an afterlife (deism), or by any trick of human will that ignores the pull to evil in us all.

### *God's Grace*

Happily, there is more to the dynamics of history than good and bad desires. There is also the gift of God's grace. But what does this ancient dogma of salvation really mean? Our understanding of how God's "grace" redirects errant desire should be consistent with our contemporary, empirical understanding of the universe so that we can collaborate with God more intelligently. So let us sketch out what we have learned about the exact tasks we face as we beg God to flood our souls with that healing grace.

### *Three Tasks*

As we move into the 21st century, we know of three fundamental tasks regarding our desires.

1. First there is the intellectual task of understanding the specific desires and aversions we experience. We are under a double cloud here. On the one hand, we do not always realize that we desire something, even as we are driven by unnoticed urges—jealousy, for example. Or we may claim to desire something when in fact we only fear to differ from our parents, whose patent desires on our behalf have eclipsed our own. On the other hand, we may clearly experience desire but be ignorant about its true object. A teenager may claim to want to be a doctor, but he or she may actually desire merely the esteem of others. So the intellectual task, commonly associated with Freudian psychological analysis of the workings of repression, is to clarify whether our feelings are actually our own desires and what the precise objects of our desires really are. —

2. The second task lies in the moral realm. Once we know our desires and their objects, it is up to us to either allow or suppress them, since not all desires are for good objects. But to one person "good" can mean whatever benefits oneself; to another, whatever benefits one's group; to still another, what is objectively worthwhile. We are not speaking here of the mere failure of good intentions to produce good results; we are speaking of the difference between the criterion of the merely comfortable and the criterion of the truly good. It is upon this underlying opposition of criteria that we call some people "good" and others "bad." In practice, a liberal tolerance of all subjective desires as legitimate waives all moral responsibility for following some and suppressing others. The moral task is rather to choose what is objectively the best of known options, to turn our desires in that direction,

and to suppress contrary desires. This is the task commonly associated with seeking counsel, advice, mentoring, or wisdom.

3. The third task arises when we actually try to take control of our desires for the truly good and find our hearts enmeshed in the sinful heritage of Adam and Eve. We soon discover that we are morally shortsighted about what the truly life-giving alternatives may be. If this is not shameful enough, in the times when we do recognize a best option, we not always experience the effective desire to carry it out: consider, for example, our efforts to let go of our own attitudes of resentment, bitterness, or self-hate. Finally, even when we recognize, desire, and actually do what seems best, we have little assurance that our actions will be effective, as anyone can testify who has tried to renovate our cities, give direction to our youth, or provide security to our elderly and handicapped. So we can say that our good desires are debilitated by a triple disease: blindness, impotence, and despair. There is need for a triple moral healing of desire.

Thanks be to God, when we ask for grace, we usually experience the eye of faith to see what is good, the heart of charity to make good desires effective, and the guts of hope to endure uncertain, forestalled, or frustrated outcomes—graces that heal moral blindness, impotence, and despair, respectively. These graces are experienced events. Yet they cannot be had on demand; they are God's powers, not ours. When God gives them, they enter the soul gently, easily, like something coming home where it belongs. St. Ignatius described the movement as a drop of water penetrating a sponge—slowly, silently, yet fully. For all their quiet arrival, they can supercharge otherwise ineffectual desire. They can unleash our greatest powers for turning around a bad situation. These three strengths come easily and often to the person in love with God—more so when one asks for them directly as Jesus recommended, pounding on the Father's door, as it were.

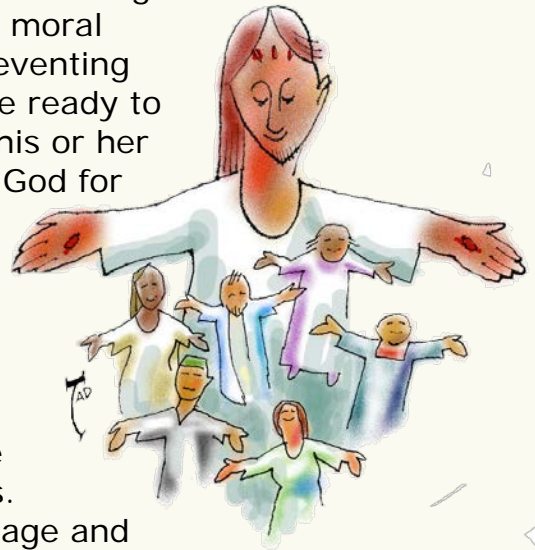
### ***Spiritual Mentoring***

Each of these three fundamental tasks defines a distinct "moment" in spiritual mentoring.

1. *The moment of truth.* In a "truth" moment, it can take some time and talk to uncover what a person's desires and aversions really are. To accomplish this, a spiritual mentors must be aware of their own limits in psychoanalysis and be prepared to recommend a trained psychologist where repression does not release its real, hidden desires. In any case, both the mentor and the person seeking guidance must share not only an acknowledgment that some closets of the heart detest the light but also a resolve to let in the light of truth.

2. *The moment of responsibility.* In a second, "moral" moment, once the relevant desires are brought into the light, the question is one of wisdom. Which desire should I follow? This ought not to be conceived as an intellectual task of "finding God's will," as if God's will were a mere fact to discover. Rather, it is the moral task of evaluating known alternatives and being ready to take responsibility for one's actions. Practically speaking, it helps to articulate the various voices of one's culture, family, friends, and Church calling this way and that, in an effort to stand apart from them all and to gain as much objectivity as possible. Still, it often happens that the right path has been clear to a person for a long time; there no need to investigate other paths; one needs to make a heartfelt decision to start walking. It is in the moral moment that we discover how moral blindness, impotence, and despair prevent us from being responsible.

3. *The moment of grace.* This brings us to the third moment of spiritual mentoring: the moment of "grace." Again, people seeking guidance should be fully prepared to expect that moral blindness, impotence, and/or despair may be preventing them from making a good choice. They should be ready to discuss each of them in detail, to humbly admit his or her own concrete fears and weaknesses, and to beg God for the faith, charity, and hope that will overcome them and will liberate their God-given desires. In this moment, a person "discerns the spirits," that is, scrutinizes the origins and the quality of desires and aversions to determine which are most in harmony with one's being in love with God and with feeling God's love for the world. Also in this moment, one not only decides. One supports the decision thereafter with the image and emotion drawn from Scripture, from an imaginal theology of history such as Ignatius's "Two Standards," from the liturgy, from the feelings and commitments shared with other Christians, and from the New Testament.



In English translations of the New Testament, this moment of grace underlies their various references to God's *justice*, *righteousness*, and *will*. These terms are not about abstract virtues imputed to God. Nor are they about laws and infractions. They regard a "right order" in a person's soul. The writers were imagining God's right-hearted desires for Israel, and a right-hearted welcome of God's desires as Israel's desires. The justice, righteousness, and will of God are typically associated with the "Kingdom" of God, imagined as a reign in which people live by God's own right-hearted desires.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray, he likely

prayed that God's kingdom will come and that God's desires are realized as much in history as it is in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

To finish off the partial definition of desire given above, the deployment of our desires is an experience of God's double self-gift. First, insofar as we effectively desire to embody the truth, do what is truly good, and act in love, we are part of God's innermost Word with Christ. We are co-creators with the Word of truth, goodness, and love. We embody Christ even to the point of surrendering our own lives. We bring on God's Kingdom where we are. Second, insofar as we experience God's love flooding our hearts with good desires, we share with God's innermost Spirit both the desire for, and the welcome of, God's own Word of truth, goodness, and love in the concrete particulars of our lives. In us the Spirit yearns for the fullness of life of anyone who cries, "Abba!"

Desire, then, is also our experience, at times, of God's own desires as part of the parenting character of God's Spirit bringing God's perfect Word to birth.

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Bibliography: B. Lonergan, *Healing and Creating in History, A Second Collection: Papers by Bernard J. F Lonergan, S.J.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974). E. Kinerk, 'Eliciting Great Desires,' *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16/5 (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1984).

Version 062518

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<sup>1</sup> For evidence on what New Testament authors meant by *justice, righteousness, and God's will* see Benedict Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in R. Brown, J. Fitzmeyer, and R. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1990), secs. 6, 45. In many other places, English translations speak of God's *will*. But the Greek *thelesis* is better understood not abstractly as a fixed faculty (will) of God but a concrete, ongoing activity (desiring). To convey to English readers what Jesus and the NT writers had in mind, it seems both more accurate and more concrete to speak of God's *desires* rather than God's *will*.

<sup>2</sup> For references in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola regarding desires as gifts from God, see para. 16. See also the many references to God's "gift" of desires in his letters: W. Young, trans., *Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), pp. 19, 20, 43, 50, 92, 131, 153, 186, 222, 232, 314, 354, 368, 375, 378.