

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Theistic expansive naturalism: which God?

Jessica Eastwood 

Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, Durham, UK
Email: jessica.g.eastwood@durham.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article looks at the question of whether and how there can be a theistic expansive naturalism. In light of Fiona Ellis's work, I will identify a crucial issue for this research programme moving forward, namely, the question of 'which God?'. Ellis seeks to develop a metaphysical framework that offers a rationale for incorporating theism into naturalism, and the acceptance of God comes through a reflection on our relation to value. Offering a sympathetic interpretation of her position, the article will suggest that Ellis's conception of God has been significantly modified in her more recent writings, moving from a rather 'thick' conception of God to more a modest account. I will suggest a move toward a 'less thick' position is preferable.

Keywords: Naturalism; religious realism; value; God; Fiona Ellis

Introduction

This article looks at the question of whether and how there can be a theistic expansive naturalism. In light of Fiona Ellis's work, I will identify a crucial issue for this research programme moving forward, namely, the question of 'Which God?'. Ellis seeks to develop a metaphysical framework that offers a rationale for incorporating theism into naturalism, and the acceptance of God comes through a reflection on our relation to value. Offering a sympathetic interpretation of her position, the article will suggest that Ellis's conception of God has been significantly modified in her more recent writings, moving from a rather 'thick' conception of God to more a modest account. I will suggest a move toward a 'less thick' position is preferable.

This article will have four sections. The first (entitled 'Naturalism Three Ways') will give the current philosophical landscape on the theory of naturalism. Specifically, I will present two distinct types of expansive naturalism that grew from John McDowell's account, those being an atheistic version (through the lens of David Macarthur) and a theistic branch (postulated by Fiona Ellis). The second (entitled 'Which God?') will trace a tentative shift in Ellis's conception of God from a rather 'thick' conception of God to a 'less thick' conception. The third move (entitled 'A Move Towards a "Less Thick" God') will further explore this shift and suggest that Ellis's later work adopts a relational conception of God. The final section (entitled 'Alternative Conceptions of God') will suggest that the project of expanding naturalism in a theistic direction is one well worth pursuing as it contributes to the wider philosophical project which explores genuine, alternative

conceptions of divinity. I will also briefly offer a ‘thin’ conception of God that might positively resonate with some theistic expansive naturalists by qualifying how we might use Ellis’s conception of desire from her recent work.

Naturalism three ways

It has been common practice in philosophy of religion to define ‘naturalism’ in a way that limits reality to the natural world as described by science. This scientific paradigm demands philosophical scrutiny insofar as it rejects any and all appeals to metaphysical or religious models of philosophical inquiry. In accordance with the Weberian claim that the modern world is ‘disenchanted’, the scientific naturalist insists that scientism allows for everything to become understandable and tameable, if not currently understood and tamed, in the modern world (Jenkins (2000), 12). Therefore any incalculable, mysterious, supernatural, operational forces that were previously thought to control the world are removed from the world-image.

However, in the last decade the standard rubric of what constitutes the supernatural has evolved, largely to accommodate value appropriately. The demand for a rightful place in the ontology of human experience has seen the expansion of scientific naturalism to include moral entities. The ‘expansive naturalist’ (or ‘liberal naturalist’) insists that it is perfectly legitimate to make room for value as a phenomenon that cannot be wholly comprehended in scientific terms, while giving due respect to the findings of modern science. Exceeding the parameters in this way must be distinguished from more pernicious accounts of ‘re-enchanting’ the world which are often seen to invite ‘spooky’ entities from a ‘magical’ or ‘occult’ framework, threatening a reversion to pre-scientific superstition. In an attempt to avoid naturalism being characterized in purely scientific and circular terms (whereby naturalism is defined as the view that there are no supernatural entities) we might consider the idea of ‘lawlikeness’. Reality is lawlike, and there are no exceptions to the laws, such as would be required by a miracle.¹ That is to say, expansive naturalism seeks to *expand* (or take a more *liberal* approach to) the scope of ontology to include moral values within a wholly secular framework.

Arguably the most interesting version of this position is offered by John McDowell.² His account of expansive naturalism makes the anti-scientific claim that nature must be comprehended in at least ‘partially enchanted’ terms to accommodate the evaluative meanings to which we are responsive as human beings (McDowell (1994), 86). However, McDowell is anxious about how we are to say that the natural world might be ‘enchanted’ after all. He fears that it will lead to an ‘objectifying’ approach which involves *inventing* order, which then leads to a reductive ontology where the human mind projects meaning onto a value-neutral world (*ibid.*, 72).³ To avoid any ‘crazily nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world’ McDowell says the following on the topic of whether including a concept of God threatens the seriousness of the re-enchantment thesis (*ibid.*).

There is no need for me to take a stand on whether everything is natural in that sense (thereby, among other things, giving needless offence to people who think respect for modern science is compatible with a kind of religious belief that preserves room for the supernatural). (McDowell (2008), 218)

McDowell’s preferred conception of the meaning of ‘natural’ is ‘not supernatural (not occult, not magical)’, this is clear. However, we can see here that he stops short of proclaiming the truth of atheism. In the same section McDowell uses the imagery of darkness to refer to that which exceeds the limits of his more relaxed conception of nature (*ibid.*, 217–218). As a result, McDowell’s criticisms of the supernatural have inspired two distinct

forms of expansive naturalism, one atheistic and one theistic. One form we have already addressed, namely the type that supports the end of the monopolization of nature by the natural sciences, and the idea that naturalism can (and ought to be) stretched out to incorporate evaluative phenomena. Crucially, however, this type of expansive naturalism is this-worldly and does *not* accommodate a conception of God within its enchantment. A key proponent of this type of expansive naturalism, or liberal naturalism as he would have it, is David Macarthur. He describes the *atheistic* position in the following way:

liberal naturalism . . . refuses to identify nature with the scientific image of the world . . . for why should we suppose that science is a metaphysical touchstone of reality? . . . Liberal naturalism opposes supernatural entities (e.g. transcendent gods, immaterial souls and demonic spirits) . . . Liberal naturalism thus equates nature with the manifest image or, better, with the critical manifest image that is the result of subjecting the manifest image to critical scrutiny, which includes how well it hangs together with the scientific image of the world. (Macarthur (2019), 573–574)

And so, for Macarthur, liberal naturalism is a dialectical move aimed at resisting purely scientific naturalism while retaining the notion of naturalism as anti-supernaturalism, which includes any notion of divinity.⁴ Therefore, Macarthur's interpretation of McDowell's ambiguity regarding the compatibility of the supernatural and naturalism is to insist that liberal naturalism is *not* an ontology. Instead, it is a recovery of the manifest image, that which metaphysics tended to overlook, with a study of its normative topography. In other words, liberal naturalism attends to the philosophical task of uncovering and evaluating basic principles that underlie the being of each individual thing. Moreover, the job of the liberal naturalist is to reject the pure scientific naturalist's conception of a scientific image and remind them that science is a set of practices that presuppose values (including moral values) and so we are uncovering values that were always already there.

However, there are those who seek to take advantage of this 'expansion' and suggest that it invites a reconfiguration of the traditional 'naturalism versus theism' dichotomy. This reconfiguration is not aimed to convince the naturalist of God's existence but to make the naturalist mindful of the possibility that incorporating a conception of divinity into this richer and more textured world-image is not (or need not be) a 'huge leap' if we can, in turn, reconfigure the naturalist's conception of 'supernatural'. And this is the second distinct form of expansive naturalism; a *theistic* account.

It is the familiar assumption of the scientific naturalist that God could only ever be a separable and 'spooky' *something else* which has no bearing upon the question of nature, rather God is 'an unnecessary cosmic excess' (Ellis (2014), 146). This is certainly the concept that McDowell was working with: depicting God as something which can be removed from the picture at no cost to the reality of a world which is enchanting in the relevant, value-involving, sense. It would throw us into a region of darkness, McDowell insists, a region that has shrunk 'with the advent of a modern scientific outlook', and should not be widened again (McDowell (2008), 217). In an effort to counter this claim, Fiona Ellis uses McDowell's philosophy as a stepping stone to defend a theistic form of expansive naturalism.

Ellis's two cheers for expansive naturalism

Ellis gives (only) 'two cheers' to McDowell's account of expansive naturalism. The first 'cheer' is to his rejection of superstitious beliefs, such as the occult and magical forces that were equated with pre-scientific superstition, agreeing that these types of offending powers should not be brought back into the fold (Ellis (2014), 83). The second 'cheer' is to

his rejection of those religious beliefs which insist that the workings of nature are controlled by capricious and egoistic gods, again, a pre-modern conception of divinity that can be eliminated (*ibid.*, 84). A third ‘cheer’, however, is withheld as it remains open, Ellis argues, that there is a kind of religious belief, or conception of divinity and supernaturalism, which might survive this criticism.

A partly enchanted world that permits morality admits of a ‘theistic gloss’, says Ellis, and as a result grants us the right to talk about a divinely enchanted world in such a way that we are not in danger of reawakening spell-casting superstitious beliefs (*ibid.*, 139). To do this, Ellis plans to bring God and value into closer proximity by offering a naturalist position which somewhat mirrors the expansive naturalist’s conception of our relation to value, by offering a conception of God to whom we relate to by relating to value. In this next section I will trace the conception/s of God with which Ellis works. What we will find is that Ellis moves from a rather ‘thick’ conception to a more modest conception.

Which God?

It is clear from Ellis’s writings that she wishes to show that there is room for God within an expanded account of naturalism, namely one that introduces values into our ontology. What is not so clear, however, is the nature of the divine that she accommodates within her account of theistic expansive naturalism. Hence the question, ‘Which God?’. It appears as though the concept of God that Ellis describes as part of her theistic expansive naturalist project changes over the course of her writing. Let us now explore the ways in which Ellis modifies her conception of God in her more recent writings.

The God of Christianity

In her 2014 book *God, Value and Nature* Ellis overtly suggests that the God of Christianity offers the best conception for expanding naturalism in a theistic direction.⁵ To demonstrate this Ellis explores Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of God which is that we relate to God through our relation to value. More specifically, by upholding our moral responsibilities to other human beings as we encounter them in face-to-face relations, we open ourselves up to an ideal or type of religious belief, namely a desire or belief in the good and the infinite or, in other words, God. Belief or desire for God is therefore essential to our humanity as it animates the moral life through which we achieve an elevated existence.⁶ The claim here is that our relation to God is desire-involving – we have a desire for God (Ellis (2014), 134). It is not a self-desire to seek our own satisfaction, it is a metaphysical desire with an irreducibly moral dimension, insofar as we relate to God by standing in moral relations to others. As Ellis puts it, ‘a desire for God is a desire for goodness, and a desire for goodness has nothing to do with wanting goods. It is a desire to be moral’ (*ibid.*). Desire for God is therefore essential to our humanity as it animates the moral life through which we achieve an elevated existence.

Although Ellis agrees with Levinas that the concept of morality encompasses an important aspect of our relation to God, her fear of a collapse into atheism or as she otherwise puts it, God being ‘squeezed out of the picture again’, leads Ellis to suggest that Levinas’s conception is too narrow (*ibid.*, 179). And so to ‘thicken up’ the conception of God Ellis draws on the Christian theological tradition and puts forward the possibility of a loving communion with God unmediated by moral relations with others, which brings with it a ‘warmth and consolation’ missing from Levinas’s picture and also inspires love for others (*ibid.*, 173). Although Ellis’s main argument does not hinge on the acceptance of the Christian God as the only viable conception, in *God, Value and Nature* she does suggest that Levinas (and we can assume others who hold a non-Christian conception of God more

broadly) could accept the God of Christianity because Christianity allows for a more satisfactory conception of God, of value, and of our relation to value.⁷

This question of whether, in this case, Levinas could concede to the Christian position is ‘analogous’, Ellis suggests, to the question of whether the secular expansive naturalist should concede to Levinas. Ellis reminds the non-theistic expansive naturalist that they have already taken considerable steps in the direction of theism by expanding their boundaries, thus ‘re-enchanting’ the natural world. She even goes as far to say that although the ‘leap seems massive’, if we allow that the secular expansive naturalist ‘can and perhaps should concede to Levinas’s God’ and more notably that Levinas ‘can and perhaps should concede to the God of Christianity’, then the ‘gap is considerably narrowed’ (*ibid.*, 176; my italics). Another way Ellis puts it is to say that the project of theistic expansion is a ‘horizontal’ one and not a vertical one, in the sense that accommodating God is not too great a leap compared to the one made by the non-theistic expansive naturalist to expand *her* preferred boundaries, namely beyond scientism (*ibid.*). And if this is the case Christianity, she suggests, offers a ‘more satisfactory conception of God’ than a non-Christian conception such as Levinas’s (*ibid.*, 179–180).

On this idea of inspiring love, while both Levinas’s God and the Christian conception of God include a notion of love, if only with practical significance, Ellis argues that the Christian conception is better placed to accommodate ‘our love for God, and, indeed, His love for us’ (*ibid.*, 173), and so although Ellis’s theistic naturalist project might begin with ‘a fairly minimalist conception of God’ it culminates in a ‘rather less minimalist God of Christianity’ (*ibid.*, 7). However, Ellis’s chapter entitled ‘Between Orthodox Theism and Naturalism Atheism’ shows a move away from the God of Christianity towards a conception that places much more emphasis on the idea of love (Ellis (2019a)).

A God of love

This time Ellis draws on the work of Tim Mulgan to help establish her nuanced position. Mulgan explores the conceptual space that might exist somewhere ‘between’ the ‘benevolent theism of the Abrahamic religions’ (namely God as ‘benevolent to individual human beings, has plans for our lives, [and] takes an interest in our fate’) and atheism (Ellis (2019a), 147). One alternative includes the God of ‘*ananthropocentric theism*’ (*ibid.*, 146). Mulgan describes this God as a morally perfect being who has no interest in human beings or at least our value does not have any cosmic significance (*ibid.*, 148).⁸ Although Ellis applauds Mulgan for seeking a ‘middle ground’, she says that the mistake is to ‘fail to see that love is essential to God’ (*ibid.*, 147). Mulgan’s failure to think about God in love-involving terms, Ellis suggests, falsely requires a dismissal of human ethical values in favour of unspecified cosmic values, and it estranges us from God by refusing to recognize any moral or spiritual relations to God (*ibid.*, 154). ‘The God with which I am concerned’, Ellis tells us, ‘is a God of love’ (*ibid.*, 156).

Interestingly however, this is *not* the God of benevolent theism for Ellis. In fact, this God of love ‘is to be distinguished from the God of benevolent theism’ (*ibid.*, 156). Why? Because it is important for Ellis that ‘we are given the freedom to take charge of our lives and to be responsible for bringing love and goodness to the world’ (*ibid.*). Ellis questions the philosophical terms that Mulgan uses to describe God, those being Swinburnian terms such as necessary, omnipresent, perfectly good, creator of all things etc., (*ibid.*, 147) namely the (philosophical) description of the classical Christian God.⁹ As part of her critique, Ellis makes reference to Nicholas Lash’s objection to Swinburne’s non-love-involving conception and emphasizes the traditional Christian themes of the Trinity and God’s non-coercive power to strengthen her insistence that the concept of love is key (*ibid.*).

What is significant here is Ellis's conscious aim to carve out a 'middle position' between benevolent theism (as described by Mulgan in the article) and atheism. Mulgan's 'middle position' is not a satisfactory form of theism, says Ellis, as it does not hold love as a defining feature of God's essence. In opposition, Ellis proposes her own 'middle position', which places love at its centre as she describes a 'loving God' who is 'source and the sustainer' of the world, of morality, and of love (*ibid.*, 158 n. 8). In this respect, Ellis purposely separates out the 'Generic Theism [Mulgan's 'middle position'] and the God of love' (*ibid.*, 147). The former is in reference to the God of a certain philosopher and involves a commitment to the standard list of divine attributes as presented by Swinburne (*ibid.*). It describes a God who is benevolent but in such a way where this God 'stands over and above us as a morally perfect and controlling presence' (*ibid.*, 148). By contrast, the 'tables are turned completely' with the latter, Ellis insists, because the God of love is the one to whom we relate when we stand in moral relations to others.

Commitment to this God, Ellis tells us, does not require us to think of God's loving nature as 'nominal extra' because the love in question is operative and our human freedom and responsibility to be loving in the world is what it *truly* means to be loved by God and to love God (*ibid.*, 147 and 156). Ambiguously perhaps, Ellis leans into Christian doctrine to defend the significance of God's transformative, love-involving relations as a definitive part of God's essence while at the same time openly wanting to carve out a 'middle position' that is *not* the God of the Abrahamic religions (nor is it the philosopher's God) (*ibid.*, 147). What we can say for certain is that Ellis does *not* insist that the God of Christianity is the most satisfactory conception as previously stated but in fact tentatively moves away from this God in favour of a 'God of love' and as a result confidently espouses to a form of *Platonism*,¹⁰ a move that is played out in an article written the following year.

An 'adult' conception

In a 2020 article 'True Naturalism, Goodness, and God' Ellis's turns to Murdoch's form of naturalism known as 'true naturalism'¹¹ and argues that it is amenable to theistic interpretation. Murdoch's 'true naturalism' draws on a teleological drive towards goodness but insists that our moral interactions have no theistic significance, and that God must be relegated to some alien morally irrelevant realm. Ellis is sympathetic to Murdoch's rejection of a God understood as an infinitely remote super-being which has no bearing upon our loving relation to others. In fact, Ellis agrees with Murdoch on two fronts. The first is that religion and morality are inextricably tied with love at the centre, and the second is that the idea of God as a supernatural person irrelevant to morality is a 'contestable' one (Ellis (2020), 210). However she disagrees with Murdoch's conclusion that there is therefore no room for God. And so as part of Ellis's aim to offer a reworked version of what Murdoch deemed to be an 'adult religion',¹² that being to think on morality and religion in non-God-involving terms, Ellis invites sympathizers of Murdoch's non-theistic naturalism to consider the idea that we are already saturated in a divine reality by virtue of being morally receptive beings.

Ellis's appeal to Murdoch's true naturalism indicates a shift in her thinking with (a form of) Platonism taking primacy over Christianity. Murdoch ascribes morality to an irreducible mysterious dimension that is a Godless form of authentic religion. Therefore in response to the broader charge that naturalism leaves no room for the transcendent, Ellis insists that if we re-conceptualize the false God that Murdoch rightly dismissed then Murdoch's true naturalism might be said to accommodate God. In the article Ellis points to Paul Tillich who she believes delivers a more authentic conception of transcendence with the notion that God is to be found 'in the "ecstatic" character of this world, as its transcendent depth and ground' (*ibid.*, 120). On the assumption that Ellis's

use of Tillich (1975) is simply to appeal to his 'ecstatic naturalism', his conception of the transcendent and the Christology can be left to one side if one prefers.

What I hope to have shown here is that the rather 'thick' Christian conception presented in *God, Value, and Nature* has been toned down in Ellis's recent writings, that the concept of love is now primary, and that this goes hand in hand with an interest in Murdoch's Platonism. Although the relevant distinctions (between the God of Christianity and the God of love; between God and the Good) are not absolute (the God of Christianity is a God of love!), I will suggest in the next section that this move towards a 'less thick' position is traceable and preferable.

A move towards a 'less thick' God

God; 'He'

In Ellis's earlier writing in *God, Value, and Nature* (2014) she refers to the conception of God that she wishes to accommodate in her expansive account of naturalism as 'He'. 'He', she says, 'is the source of things, He sustains them in existence, and is the condition of there being creaturely agency at all' (*ibid.*, 165). This classical conception is steeped in theological tradition but is specifically attributed by Ellis to an article written by John McDade entitled 'Creation in Salvation' (*ibid.*, 150 n. 8).¹³ The article provides an overview of Catholic teaching on the relationship between creation and salvation and argues that the centrality of this relationship in Christian theology is affirmed by a fully Trinitarian vision of creation. It is a vision which clearly depicts God's non-competitive relation to the world. To support the importance of this relation, McDade draws on Kathryn Tanner's theology as she provides arguably the most well-known contemporary account of God as non-competitive (Tanner (1988)).

Tanner explains this intimate relationship as the understanding that we, as God's creatures, become fully ourselves in harmony with God's being, which is to say that there is no 'trade-off', there are no 'winners' and 'losers' with one being 'better off' or 'worse off' than the other. Our ability to be whole, our sense of self and freedom, does not 'decrease' so that God may 'increase' because God and creatures exist on different planes and thus they cannot be compared. 'God, from beyond this plane of created reality, brings about the whole plane of creaturely being and activity in its goodness'. Ultimately, 'God differs differently', Tanner tells us.¹⁴

What grounds this non-competitive relationship for Tanner is the perfect unity of the Trinity. It is exhibited to us in the incarnation as Jesus realizes a perfect relationship with the Father. It becomes a possibility for us in the world as we become more and more united with Christ. God gives to us with the expectation that we will receive (although we may instead refuse) and with the expectation that we will become ministers of God's beneficence, sharing God's gifts with others according to their need. Ellis draws on Tanner's conception of God and describes God as non-competitive in the following way.

Ellis explains that God's omnipresence in the world should not be translated to mean that God is constantly performing miracles. If it were to be interpreted as such it would be so on the assumption that 'He functions as a competitor cause in this context' (note that Ellis uses 'He' again here). Rather it ought to be understood that there are natural causes in the world, which are left to their own devices, but are importantly created and are sustained by God. This theistic underpinning, Ellis explains, 'does nothing to undermine the findings of science, nor does it add anything to it qua science' (Ellis (2014), 150). Moreover Ellis insists that 'God does not function as a competitor cause' (*ibid.*). Ellis then directly quotes Tanner's *God and Creation in Christian Theology* in this context:

Non-divine being must be talked about as always and in every respect constituted by, and therefore nothing apart from, an immediate relation with the founding agency of God . . . created being becomes what it is and this all the more fully, not by way of separation and neutrality from God, but within the intimacy of a relationship to divinity as its total ground. (*ibid.*, 150 n. 8)¹⁵

In light of adopting McDade and Tanner's non-competitive thesis, Ellis uses this conception to help describe the distinction between God and Value. '[T]he difference with God', Ellis tells us, 'is that *He* remains radically distinct from anything within the world even whilst retaining the most intimate connection with it' (*ibid.*, 5; my italics). The use of 'He' here is important again as it reminds us that although Ellis has drawn on other interpretations of this idea of a magnetic pull towards moral goodness, both atheistic and theistic, neither Murdoch (and her atheistic account) nor Levinas (and his theistic account) would have referred to this 'magnetic pull' as a personal God, as 'He'.

To recap briefly, 'Good' as a transcendent reality has not only been understood as a God-given movement by Christians. Murdoch as part of her 'true naturalism' believed that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all of the characteristics traditionally associated with God, where God 'was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*' (Murdoch (1970), 55). In reference to human striving and desiring, Murdoch's account of expansive naturalism is served without a theistic gloss insofar as it is without explicit theistic phrasing and does not identify this minimalist trace of the transcendent with divinity but with goodness.

Levinas's account, on the other hand, would be served with a theistic gloss insofar as he insists that we relate to God only by standing in moral relations to others. In other words, Levinas would allow that we have a 'God-given movement towards God' (Ellis (2014), 163), but he understood this movement as comprehended in terms which would be acceptable to the secular expansive naturalist.¹⁶ Levinas maintains that 'no relation with God is direct or immediate', the divine can only be accessed through the human other to whom the self is infinitely responsible (Levinas (1990a), 159). That is to say that '[t]he Divine can be manifested only through my neighbour' (*ibid.*, 195). It is worth taking a moment to think about that which Murdoch and Levinas's projects highlight, something which we might call the 'freedom of naming'. By this I mean that both philosophers make reference to a similar space but one calls it 'God' and one calls it 'Good'.

To avoid atheism and to defend a 'thicker' theistic gloss than Levinas, Ellis's earlier work leant into a classical Christian framework (including the work of McDade and Tanner) to explain how it is that God's communicative action is irreducibly open to nature while insisting that God does not interfere with our freedom (*ibid.*, 153). However what we see in Ellis's more contemporary defence of a theistic account of expansive naturalism is a modified conception of God, a modification that (self-consciously we ought to assume) abandons the use of 'He' and instead leans into a relational conception of God.¹⁷

God, 'the one in whom we desire the good'

If it can be assumed that a 'thick' conception of God can be described as the God of Christianity and that this conception can be interpreted through a Swinburne-style theism and described as 'He', then I suggest that we can trace a tentative shift to a 'less thick' conception of God in Ellis's writings as she develops her theistic account expansive naturalism. We saw that Ellis (2019a) wishes to take us some distance from (Mulgan's interpretation of) *benevolent theism* of the Abrahamic religions where the emphasis is placed upon 'what God can do for us rather than what we ourselves can contribute to the world's goodness by partaking in God's love', and even Mulgan's alternative conception:

anathropocentric theism, which describes a God who is unconcerned by our existence insofar as we have no cosmic significance.¹⁸ What Ellis offers instead is a God that we relate to ‘authentically at the level of praxis’, a God ‘in whom we desire the good’ (*ibid.*, 154). This God, she explains, is quite removed from *benevolent theism* and *anathropocentric theism* for it ‘neither requires dismissing human ethical values in favour of unspecified cosmic values, nor does it estrange us from God by refusing to recognize any moral or spiritual relations to God’ (*ibid.*).

Not only does Ellis move away from a ‘thick’ conception of God but she actively and self-consciously moves toward a ‘less thick’ conception, one that takes us *only some* distance from Levinas’s position. Although Levinas would ‘resist putting the point’ in the same terms as Ellis does, he would accept that ‘we relate to God at the level of desire’ as he admits that this is how we express the infinite in this context, as he says the ‘infinite is not “in front of me”: it is I who express it’ (*ibid.*, 154 n. 14).¹⁹ Since Ellis cannot quite use Levinas’s terminology to describe God in ‘loving-involving’ terms, she adopts the language of participation as used by Paul Fiddes. Fiddes (2017) develops this idea of God as love through his conception of God, namely as ‘the one in whom we desire the good’, the preferred conception of God that Ellis adopts in her more recent work. Ellis has lifted this conception from Fiddes’s 2002 article ‘The Quest for a Place Which Is Not-a-Place’, which expresses the point that we might use a participatory form of language to point towards a supreme reality, a supreme Good which is God.

Fiddes is adamant that we think of God in relational terms, that being God as love and the loving desire that attracts us to this love. In a 2022 article entitled ‘Liberal Naturalism and God’ Ellis references Fiddes’s work once again to help defend the idea that ‘God’s being is irreducibly relational’ (Ellis (2022), 31). This means, Ellis explains, that ‘we partake in this reality when we stand in loving relations to others’ (again, we can hear Levinasian tone here) (*ibid.*). This ‘less thick’ conception of God fits well within a (theistically expanded account of) naturalism and how it might accommodate divinity as it attempts to dismantle the dualistic model of God and nature as two externally related items separated by an insurmountable space. Instead, Ellis asks us to imagine the relation between God and nature as ‘a circle within a circle’, the larger circle representing God’s infinite love and the inner circle representing us, human persons, standing in loving relation to one another and as such participating in God’s love (*ibid.*).

This idea of God as irreducibly relational involves an extreme move away from the idea of God as any kind of entity. As Ellis puts it, it involves a ‘move away from the temptation to suppose that God is a special kind of supernatural being, and allow that the love in which we partake has a transcendent dimension’ (Ellis (2019a), 153). For a naturalist like Ellis the significance here can be found in the idea that we all agree upon the significance of love (whether atheist or theist), which means that we have a starting point for exploring the possibility of moving in the direction of theism. Without this minimal level of content (God as love) Ellis’s dialectic – from morality/love to God – would not be possible.

Naturally, as a naturalist, Ellis is quick to respond to a question which she anticipates will be an issue, that being: ‘What does it mean to describe love as transcendent?’ (*ibid.*, 153–154). It is here that Ellis leans into Platonism, a later move that we tracked earlier. How we interpret the supernatural or the transcendent is largely down to how we interpret the apparent other-worldliness of Plato’s approach to desire, Ellis tells us. It is Ellis’s belief that Platonic desire can be rescued from a pejorative other-worldly ‘location’ to an ‘earthly’ existence, more specially within a (theistic, expansive) naturalistic framework, a belief she outlines in a 2021 article entitled ‘Love and the limits of Platonic Desire’.

Assuming that the fears empiricist philosophers have regarding Plato’s metaphysics more broadly go hand in hand with a scientific (classical) form of naturalism, Ellis insists

that we ought to reinterpret this notion of ‘location’ as if goodness exists in some second supernatural realm. Instead we ought to embrace Platonism as Murdoch and McDowell do (Ellis (2022), 244) and understand, on the contrary, that ‘the world in which we are immersed has an irreducibly moral dimension – one to which we are receptive at the level of desire’ (Ellis (2021a), 244).

However Ellis foresees another potential problem. The issue, she says, is that theism understood as a set of beliefs in reference to supernatural phenomena not only deflects attention from what really matters, namely morality, but also ‘points in the opposite direction’, that being our ‘egoistic desires’ (Ellis (2020), 29). Murdoch understood this to be the case but it can be contested, Ellis argues, if we move towards a more relational conception of God, a manoeuvre that Fiddes can assist. ‘[T]he presence of God’, Ellis quotes Fiddes, ‘will always be hidden in the sense that it cannot be observed or known as an object of perception but can only be participated in . . . God is not the *object* of desire but the one in whom we desire the good’ (*ibid.*, 31). So Platonism *can* be ‘brought down to earth at no cost to its religious significance’, Ellis insists, if we adopt the belief that our desires are ‘revealed – and expressed – in our loving desires for others’ (Ellis (2021a), 246).

To assist Ellis further in this move towards a ‘less thick’ relational conception of God that might best fit with a genuine account of theistic expansive naturalism, I suggest that the naturalist (looking to expand their naturalism in a theistic direction) could lean into an Eckhartian approach to apprehending the relation between God and nature as laid out by Denys Turner (1995), a move that Ellis might approve of because in a 2019 article entitled ‘Religious Experience and Desire’ Ellis, albeit in a footnote, notes that the ‘idea that God is desire is familiar from the mystical tradition, one figure from which – Eckhart – will be important to my discussion’ (Ellis (2019c), 357). And Fiddes’s formulation of God as the one in whom we desire the good, borrowed by Ellis, was taken from a chapter entitled ‘Eckhart: Detachment and the Critique of Desire’ in Turner’s 1995 book *The Darkness of God*. Fiddes briefly draws on Eckhart (1981, Sermon 9) and his neo-Platonic approach to help articulate this hidden ‘no-place’ by describing this ‘unseen’ place of union as being such that it cannot be compared and thus a distinction can be observed (Fiddes (2002), 46).

In ‘Eckhart: Detachment and the Critique of Desire’ Turner provides a helpful account of Eckhart’s metaphysics and theology so that we might bring all this together: desire, God (as the (false) ‘object’ of desire), and morality. This is done through the principle of ‘detachment’. Eckhart’s strategy of detachment is described by Turner as exercising an apophatic theology. More specifically it is the practice of ‘dispossessing desire of its desire to possess its objects, and so to destroy them’ (Turner (1995), 183).²⁰ This is a method that understands ‘possessiveness’ to be the ‘principle of destruction’ (*ibid.*, 184). And so to live by detachment is to ‘live without an explanation, without rationale, namelessly one with the nameless God’. What one is working with then is a bare, apophatic, minimalist conception of a loving God (*ibid.*, 184). One which I suggest might best fit with a theistic expansive account of naturalism. In Sermon 83 Eckhart beautifully rounds out what I hope to be a genuine, if not persuasive, account of a minimalist conception of God within a naturalistic framework:

Then how should I love God? You should love God unspiritually, that is, your soul should be unspiritual and stripped of all spirituality, for so long as your soul has a spirit’s form, it has images, and so long as it has images, it has a medium, and so long as it has a medium, it is not unity or simplicity. Therefore, your soul must be unspiritual, free of all spirit, and must remain spiritless; for if you love God as he is God, as he is spirit, as he is person and as he is image – all this must go! ‘Then

how should I love him?' You should love him as he is nonGod, a nonspirit, a non-person, a nonimage, but as he is pure, unmixed, bright 'One', separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of 'something' into 'nothing'. (Eckhart (1981), Sermon 83)

What I hope to have shown in this section is that when defending a God-involving naturalism Ellis has modified her conception of God from a 'thick' to a 'less thick' conception, and so the question 'Which God?' is paramount if this project is to prove worthwhile, and if it is to resonate with the expansive naturalist looking to accommodate some conception of God within their expansive naturalistic framework. It is the view of this article that a 'less thick' conception is preferable, and I will briefly explain why in the concluding section as well as provide parameters to help articulate just how minimalist this thinner conception of God is that I am recommending.

Alternative conceptions of God

In accordance with classical theism as depicted in the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – God is all-powerful, the creator and sustainer of the universe, and therefore totally ontologically distinct from the universe. Philosophers of religion are increasingly interested in exploring alternative conceptions of 'God' which usually challenge at least one of these claims.²¹ Examples include pantheism (the belief that the universe is identical with God), panentheism (the belief that the universe is a temporary physical manifestation of the divine life), and theistic expansive naturalism, which is what we have focused on in this article.

The reason for this interest might come from both directions. It may come from those who once held a 'thick' conception of God but can no longer (for whatever reason) commit to a stronger account of theism and are looking for a 'less thick' religious position. Or it may come from those on the other end of the 'spectrum' who question the scientist's monopoly on nature, have accepted an expansive account of naturalism, and perhaps wonder how big the leap would be to allow some conception of divinity within that picture. I estimate that the former is more likely to describe the majority of those who are invested in this modern-day exploration of alternative conceptions of divinity. Therefore I suggest that a minimalist or relational God is better suited for a theistic account of expansive naturalism if it is to genuinely resonate with what I expect will be a 'weak' religious realist who is looking to make space within their naturalistic worldview for their belief in that which might best be described as divine.

Ellis makes this move towards a minimalist conception as she moves away from a Swinburnian conception of God as necessary, omnipresent, perfectly good, creator of all things, etc., to a relational conception of God, one that might be described as a 'Levinas-Plus' religious position. By this I mean that Ellis wishes to use participatory language to reinterpret Levinas's God: 'thickening it up', but *without* affirming a conception of God that commits expansive naturalists looking to incorporate some conception of divinity (whom I have called 'weak religious realists') to a whole host of additional traditional metaphysical structures which, for some, are difficult to accept.

Thus, in response to this article's question of 'Which God?', a 'less thick' or 'minimalist' conception of God has been presented as a preferable position. Now this response might be said to elicit a second question: 'Just how minimalist is this thinner conception?'. It is important to both Ellis and I that God is loving, and it is not just that the appropriate response to God is one of love, but is there a potential tension here if we are to exercise Turner's truly apophatic approach? It is a traditional theological practice to use apophatic language when approaching God however the God that is being approached is the God of

Christianity, a God whose loving nature is implicitly taught in the Scriptures. Assuming that the ‘weak’ religious realist looking to adequately and meaningfully describe their non-traditional, minimalist God will hesitate to refer to Scripture to articulate this God as loving, how might they preserve love as a characteristic of this minimalist God without saying too much? I suggest that we can draw on a suitably qualified version of Ellis’s concept of desire to do this.

In a recent article entitled ‘Meaning, Desire and God: An Expansive Naturalist Approach’ Ellis sets out an answer to the question of the ‘meaning of life’ by suggesting that it has something to do with our innate ‘desire’ for something which takes us beyond ourselves as she says that ‘we are attracted away from the self towards a reality of supreme value and inexhaustible depth’ (Ellis (2021b), 317). Both theistic *and* atheistic expansive naturalists take seriously the idea that there exists a spiritual or supersensible (moral) dimension to *this* world. An atheistic approach to apprehending this reality can be drawn from Murdoch, who describes this conceptual space as an ‘ideal limit of love’ which ‘always recedes’ (*ibid.*, 313).²² It is agreed on both sides, Ellis continues, both the theistic and the atheistic, that this dimension encompasses the ingredient of love in order for it to be central to a properly spiritual existence. She goes on to describe love as (at least one of the) central ingredients to working out life’s meaning and asks us to consider that love, as part of this spiritual dimension, is sourced in God.

My suggestion is that rather than focus on the wider question of ‘the meaning of life’, we instead use Ellis’s concept of loving-desire as being ‘attracted to an independent source of value’ (*ibid.*, 318) to help flesh-out this ‘less thick’ conception of God that both I and seemingly Ellis are drawn to. Hence my narrower question: ‘Which God?’. The reason why we might wish to qualify Ellis’s concept is because although Ellis *does* use this concept of desire to point to God, she does not explicitly separate out this concept from a theologically ‘thicker’ conception of God, nor from Levinas’s conception of God which, as we have seen, she describes as problematic (*ibid.*, 317).

Ellis fails to separate out Gregory of Nyssa’s concept of desire as the vision of God from his Platonic Christian conception of God. By not making this separation clear, assuming such a separation can be done, Ellis might appear to endorse a connection between (what might be an otherwise powerful albeit nebulous concept of) desire and a Trinitarian conception of God. Therefore, it can appear as though Ellis is appealing to a ‘thicker’ conception of God. In doing so Ellis might alienate those religious realists who hesitate to commit to a traditional theological conception of God while resonating with this rich conception of an insatiable desire steeped in some kind of divine love. If we can separate the two, which I think we can, I suggest that instead we use Ellis’s understanding of desire as a potentially universally relatable, unquenchable longing or yearning for an inexhaustible source to *help characterize* a ‘less thick’ conception of God for the ‘weak’ theistic expansive naturalist, the audience to which she is arguably appealing by moving away from a ‘thicker’ God concept.

This article has been divided into four sections. In the first section I provided what might be a helpful overview of the current philosophical landscape on the theory of naturalism, and how it has been expanded by some philosophers in both atheistic and theistic directions. The second section focused on the *theistic* direction in which the expansion of naturalism has been taken through the lens of Ellis. I suggest that we can trace a tentative shift in Ellis’s conception of God from a rather ‘thick’ conception sourced from (an interpretation of) classical philosophical theism and (an interpretation of) Christianity, to a ‘less thick’ conception where love becomes the primary concept, and developed through a sympathetic interpretation of Platonism.

In the third section I dived a little deeper into this transition to a ‘toned down’ conception of God by looking specifically at how Ellis moved from referring to God as ‘He’

(in line with a *form of* classical philosophical theism and Christianity) to ‘the one in who we desire the good’, a conception borrowed from Fiddes, who is (plausibly) a leading proponent of the thesis that God is love. To cement this relational conception of God further, I suggested that Ellis might lean into a Eckhartian framework as it exercises an epistemic humility that might appeal to the ‘weak’ religious realist/naturalist.

Finally, in this fourth section, I briefly attempted to demonstrate that the project of expanding naturalism in a theistic direction is one well worth pursuing because it contributes to the wider philosophical project that explores genuine, alternative conceptions of divinity for those looking to articulate their belief in that which might best be considered divine. I also attended to a potential follow-up question concerning the ‘thickness’ of a minimalist conception of God. By nuancing and qualifying Ellis’s conception of desire, I suggested that the project of theistic expansive naturalism will find a more universal appeal with the idea that ‘moral reality is there to be discovered, and that it can be cognitively accessed through a certain kind of loving desire for the good – a good whose attainment does not spell the end of desire, but its perpetual renewal’ if we can be clearer about *which God* this project best fits with. I have suggested that a minimalist conception of God, which can be traced in Ellis’s later work, is the best fit and might be understood as an inextinguishable, loving desire.

Notes

1. I am thankful to Robin Le Poidevin for offering this idea of ‘lawlikeness’.
2. McDowell (1994) and (1998).
3. For more on this concern see Taylor (2011a) and (2011b).
4. MacArthur’s liberal naturalism involves a rejection of God qua transcendent entity. This implies atheism only if God is a transcendent entity. Ellis rejects this implication.
5. It is worth clarifying what is meant here by the God of Christianity as it does not necessarily express one particular concept. It might apply both to the God of perfect being theology, and to the very personal God of Scripture, but Tillich’s personal ground of being might also count as the God of Christianity for example. At least in *God, Value and Nature* Ellis largely professes her interpretation of the God of Christianity by comparing her interpretation as a favourable one to Levinas’s ‘austere’ and ‘unfair’ one (Ellis (2014) 172 and 175). Put crudely, Levinas objects to an incarnate God because he believes that any powerful or ‘coercive controller’ God who works His magic from on high compromises our ability to be truly moral by pandering to our egoism (*ibid.*, 159). Ellis, on the contrary, puts Christ at the centre of her interpretation as she emphasizes the importance of the incarnation for our capacity to love, both God and one another.
6. For more on see Levinas (1969), (1990a), (1990b), (1990c), (1991), and (1998b).
7. For more on the consequences that Ellis lays out if Levinas does not concede to the Christian position, see Ellis (2014), ch. 7.
8. For more on this conception, see Mulgan (2019).
9. There is a debate about precisely how classical it is to describe God as *morally* good. See Davies (2006). More broadly, it is worth inserting the following caveat here. I am conscious that a Swinburne-style theism ought not to be taken as normative for Christianity, otherwise it causes work like Ellis’s to seem like more of a break with tradition than it might in fact be. Arguably, it is in fact Swinburne who is breaking with the tradition of Christian theism that we find in authors such as Augustine and Aquinas, by presenting God as a kind of super-person; an entity among entities. Therefore, I wish to nuance the word ‘classical’ and acknowledge that there are debates over the extent to which Swinburne-style theism is classical relative to the Christian tradition. For instance, one might consider the contrast between classical theism and theistic personalism in Davies (2004). Thank you Simon Hewitt for highlighting this issue.
10. For Ellis, ‘Platonism is not ipso facto a rejection of theism, although there is a question of how best to think about God’ (Ellis (2019a), 156).
11. For example, see Murdoch (1992), 419–425.
12. For more on this, see Ellis (2019b), 8–9.
13. McDade (2019).
14. See also, Tanner (2001).
15. Originally from Tanner (1988), 84–85.

16. For more on Levinas and 'minimalist ethics', see Levinas (1998a), and for Levinas and a potentially minimalist conception of God, see Hilario (2019).
17. It is perfectly orthodox within Christianity to deny that God is gendered/sexed. Lots of Christian authors have varied in the use of 'He' at various points, including feminist theologians of various sorts and Herbert McCabe. I have tracked Ellis's use of 'He' throughout her writings because I think it is significant that she chooses not to use 'He' in her more contemporary work as her conception of God tentatively shifts from the God of Christianity, as the most suitable conception for a theistic account of expansive naturalism, to a 'less thick' relational conception of God. Thank you Simon Hewitt for encouraging me to clarify the significance here.
18. Mulgan explains that this conception of God helps with the problem of evil, and responds to the notion that it is 'self-aggrandizing to suppose that we matter in these ways' (Ellis (2019a), 148).
19. Originally from Levinas (1998), 75.
20. Note a Murdochian flavour here.
21. For more, see Nagasawa (2017), Hewitt (2020), Buckareff and Nagasawa (2016), Ellis (2018), Meijer and De Vriese (2021), Fiddes (2021), and Schaafsma (2022).
22. Originally from Murdoch (1970), 28.

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