Presence in the Dark: Joint Attention and the Varying Modes of Being Aware of God’s Presence

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Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of joint attention and its relevance in understanding the modes of awareness of the presence of God. It explores the perspectives of Eleonore Stump and Andrew Pinsent, as well as the challenge raised by Donald Bungum, with the aim of reaching a better understanding of a distinct way of being ‘moved by God in a divine way’. According to Stump and Pinsent, joint attention can deepen our understanding of our relationship with God, emphasizing the importance of sharing attention with Him and making better sense of the way humans may be moved in a divine way. However, Bungum challenges this view by suggesting the possibility of closeness without explicit awareness. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of awareness and the presence of God in our spiritual lives, for our connection with God can manifest in diverse ways different from traditional accounts of explicit awareness. We suggest that a view of joint attention centered in action may be more suitable for an attempt to make sense of what ‘to be moved in a divine way’ amounts to.

Keywords: joint attention; philosophical theology; modes of awareness; enactivism; enaction

1. Introduction

In the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas there are at least two ways of understanding how creation is related to God. The first way consists in thinking about this relationship from a cause–effect perspective that emphasizes how they participate in their being and in their dispositions in the first cause (Silva 2022). The second emphasizes an experiential relationship of union and closeness to Him. This way appeals to the resources provided by philosophy about a “second-person relatedness with God, as ‘I’ to ‘Thou’, culminating in divine love or friendship” (Pinsent 2017, p. 355). This way, as we will see, promises to further our understanding of the relation between God and a creature by using the way in which science and philosophy have studied social cognition.

Aquinas (2023) talks about gifts of the Holy Spirit as ways in which human beings are moved by God in a determinate way. “It is fitting”, Aquinas claims, “for there to exist in man higher perfections, whereby he is disposed to be moved by God in a divine way” (ST 1-2.68.1). What exactly does this mean? What is it for one to be disposed to be moved by God in a divine way? Following the second way of understanding how a creature relates to God, Eleonore Stump (2010, 2018) and Andrew Pinsent (2012, 2017, 2022b) have attempted to show how progress in understanding the phenomenon of joint attention can further our understanding of a human being’s spiritual life, clarifying and supporting theological doctrine by philosophical analysis and argumentation. Stump and Pinsent have presented accounts in the Thomistic tradition that seem to align with the idea that progress in comprehending theological perspectives on union to God can be achieved by focusing on how philosophy of mind and developmental psychology have conceptualized the jointness of subjects elicited by joint attention among humans.
According to Stump’s and Pinsent’s view, being disposed to be moved by God in a
divine way depends on being close to God, and this closeness raises a theological issue
about the possibility of having an experience of a personal God and the way He manifests
Himself in actions; these are issues better understood through the kind of availability of
other persons studied by psychology and philosophy of joint attention. In other words,
closeness to a personal God is metaphorically understood like the way another subject is
available in joint attention (Stump 2010, p. 192; Pinsent 2012, p. 300). The study of joint
attention purportedly furthers our understanding of closeness to God insofar as it is meant
to make available ways of enriching the theological understanding of what is distinctive of
actions made in line with God’s will.

What is joint attention? Roughly, joint attention is what happens when, for example, a
parent and their child jointly experience and play with a toy, engaging in an experience
where each one is mutually present to each other overtly enjoying together this experience
of the toy. In such a situation, they jointly attend. Although we can use this as an initial
characterization, there is much disagreement about what such experience amounts to (see,
(2011), and Fiebich and Gallagher (2012)). As we will show, Stump and Pinsent ought to
adopt a more nuanced view of the nature of joint attention to deal with challenges raised to
their view.

According to Stump and Pinsent, if a person is close to God in a specific action in the
relevant sense then they are also aware of that union. How? In joint attention, the parent
and their child are mutually and overtly aware of their attending together to the toy in a
way that they are aware of the presence of each other (Eilan 2005; Peacocke 2005); in acts of
love, one is aware of a closeness to God in those actions very much like the way in which
the child is aware of their parent in joint attention. Stump’s and Pinsent’s views (though
varying in detail as we will see) seem to entail that, for instance, if works of mercy manifest
closeness to God then one is aware of such closeness, like the way in which one is aware of
another subject co-attending in joint attention.

Just like a point of special interest in the philosophical discussion of joint attention is
the character of the jointness of joint attention (Hobson 2005), Stump’s and Pinsent’s claim
about union and its nature in philosophical theology has also been subject to discussion.
Donald Bungum (2013) has argued that works of mercy can be guided by God, that is, they
show union to Him, without there being an awareness of His presence like that available to
subjects engaged in joint attention. Based on the specific theological evidence provided
by the personal journals of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the possibility of “an advanced
stage of spiritual life marked by the subjective sense that God has abandoned and rejected
one” (Bungum 2013, p. 188), as exemplified in the Christian tradition by Saint John of the
Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, Bungum argues that it is possible to be united to God in
the relevant way and yet lack awareness of His presence. Mother Teresa, Bungum claims,
is engaged in “some sort of joint interaction with God without having to suppose that she
was aware of her sharing attention with God” (Bungum 2013, p. 206). Indeed, she claims to
have no awareness of His presence and even, upon prayer, feels abandoned by Him. Her
works of mercy are arguably guided by God, but she does not seem to have the kind of
awareness possible for subjects of joint attention.

Our aim in this paper is to enrich and deepen our understanding of joint attention
in philosophical theology. We argue that while Bungum’s criticism is not completely
unreasonable, his proposed alternative account of union based on the phenomenon of
blindsight misses the mark. We argue that experiencing the presence of the person of God
Himself constitutes, at least in part, works of mercy like those of Mother Teresa. In this
sense, joint attention gives us a model to understand what it means that He is present in
our actions. We suggest, with Pinsent, that action guided by God is different in quality
not merely in degree from other actions; it is one in which His presence itself constitutes
the action, and this is why joint attention, specifically one understood as a phenomenon
immediately related to action, can help further philosophical theology. How can another
subject or person constitute one’s own action? For Aquinas, God is the first cause of all things and, thus, “He is a cause of the actions of all agents” (ST 1.105.5). Moreover, “God Himself is a cause, in the sense of an end, of every action” (ST 1.105.5). However, in the special case of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, “God exists in a special sense in a rational creature who knows and loves Him either actually or habitually” (ST 1.8.3).

In the following, we attempt to explain further our understanding of this sense. How can God Himself constitute our actions in a way over and above Him being first cause and end of human actions? The metaphor of joint attention among human beings, though there is an essential asymmetry between God and human persons, furthers our understanding here in so far as it illuminates the relation between a divine person and a human one.

2. Eleonore Stump’s Proposal: The Nature of Union to God and Joint Attention

According to Aquinas’s doctrine, God is omnipresent and thus is always available to human beings, and yet this omnipresence does not entail a union in love with Him for every human being (Stump 2010, p. 56; 2018, p. 132). Taking this into account, Eleonore Stump (2010) in Wandering in Darkness develops an account of the “nature of union in love” with God (Stump 2010, p. 109), showing that there are demands from the part of human beings to share attention with Him. She holds that love is a “systems-level feature, emerging from two interconnected, mutually governing desires, for the good of the beloved and for union with the beloved” (Stump 2010, p. 102). Joint attention, she adds, serves as an explanatory tool to show how such kind of desire may make us “more deeply attentive” (Stump 2010, p. 117) to God’s presence in our life and is part of what explains how we are united to Him.

According to Stump, there are two ways in which God is present to us: in a significant or in a minimal way (Stump 2010, p. 117). She says that a “second person-experience is necessary for minimal personal presence, and it includes (but is not exhausted by) direct and unmediated causal and cognitive contact between persons. Something more—namely, shared attention—is necessary for significant personal presence” (Stump 2010, p. 119). In this sense, having a second-person experience with another person means being cognitively and experientially available to her. However, this is not sufficient to have significant personal presence because it is possible for someone to be aware of one without one being aware of her presence, as in the case of God, who is always available and attentive to us without us being always available and attentive to Him. In fact, “union is the intrinsic limit of closeness when it is mutual and crowned with joint attention” (Stump 2018, p. 149). This is why, for Stump, engaging with God in joint attention requires something more than merely a direct and unmediated causal and cognitive contact.

Stump claims that God’s presence could only be significant for human beings if they are able and knowingly “willing to share attention with God” (Stump 2010, p. 117). According to her view, if they want God’s significant presence in their life (Stump 2010, p. 117). According to Stump, to share attention with God means to be available to Him and to will what He wills. Consequently, for God to be significantly present in someone’s life it is necessary that she be aware of God and attentive to Him similarly as she would be aware and attentive to another human being in a certain event. Joint attention, for Stump, furthers our understanding of union insofar as it makes sense of what is necessarily a significant presence in one’s life. As we will see, what Stump’s view entails depends on the account of joint attention favored.

3. Andrew Pinsent’s Proposal: Joint Attention and Movement by God in a Divine Way

Pinsent’s (2012) overarching purpose in The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics is to review traditional interpretations of the relationship between Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s ethical thinking and to argue that the difference between these two authors is greater than it might seem. Aquinas’s moral project was a revolutionary transformation of Aristotelian thought, not unlike the Copernican revolution of Aristotelian astronomy (Pinsent 2012, p. 107).

According to Pinsent (2012, p. 3), Aquinas’s treatment of the virtues is, despite the many similarities, crucially different from that of Aristotle in several important ways to be
fundamentally explained through an appeal to a comparison with the phenomenon of joint attention. In this sense, Aquinas states that what he means by a ‘gift’ differs from the notion of a virtue presented by Aristotle. In fact, although gifts “are sometimes counted as virtues according to the ordinary meaning of ‘virtue’” (ST 1-2.68.1.1), “they contain something that goes beyond the ordinary notion of a virtue, because they are divine virtues that perfect a man insofar as he is moved by God” (ST 1-2.68.1.1). In this sense, gifts open the horizon of human action, for, as a special kind of virtues, they perfect the human being in a new way, enabling her to enter into a relationship with God from the perspective of the second person. Aquinas acknowledges that we can acquire virtues in the Aristotelian manner by repeated good actions, but he thinks, however, that perfect virtues are not acquired, but are infused in us by God.

To develop his interpretation of Aquinas’s ethical thought, Pinsent appeals to the phenomenon of joint attention to explain, based on ordinary human experience, the network of attributes he finds in Aquinas as a network of virtues, gifts of the Holy Spirit, beatitudes, and fruits of the Holy Spirit. All of them, Pinsent claims, are constituted by a second-person relationship with God and enable us to enter a friendship with God or, in other words, share His perspective towards others and the world by desiring with Him what He desires. According to Pinsent, Aquinas’s view is that human flourishing is seen as a relational dynamic between God and a human person, in which God communicates His gifts and prepares the person to attain friendship with Him through the practice of virtues infused by Him. In this sense, friendship with God is primarily achieved, not through the individual’s isolated effort to grow in virtue, but through this friendship that transforms the way we experience the world and our relationship with others. When God grants His gifts, He infuses virtues within a human person, predisposes her to share His desires, and instills hope in attaining beatitude.

Thus, according to Pinsent, for Aquinas, friendship with God, which consists of desiring what God desires and is received as a gift, is expressed in the way we relate to others and the world. By engaging in a friendship with God, which involves joining our attention with Him, there is a sense in which we adopt His psychological orientation “towards objects and actions” (Pinsent 2012, p. 69). Sharing our attention with God entails a transformation in how we conceive the world and our actions; they are not constituted in the same way. According to Pinsent, this participation of the human being in the divine perspective on objects and actions in the context of divine grace is derived from the movement of the Holy Spirit upon our minds.

Pinsent identifies two fundamental characteristics of this movement of the Holy Spirit. First, a sense of God’s presence “in or through the movement”. And second, the movement involves a modification of one’s own stance toward objects and others based on sharing or participation in God’s stance toward the same thing (Pinsent 2012, p. 41). How are we to explain this movement of the Holy Spirit?

Pinsent claims that this movement can be understood through an appeal to how joint attention between humans happens. From this viewpoint, God prepares us to develop a friendship with Him in which

the theological virtues are the virtues of cognition of God and desire for union with God, the gifts enable a person to be ‘moved’ by God as by a second person, and the infused moral virtues are the virtues of ‘shared stance’. Since the infused moral virtues dispose a person to share God’s stance (a term more properly described as ‘a conative attitude prompted by understanding’), these dispositions differ in many details from their Aristotelian counterparts. (Pinsent 2012, p. 100)

In having a friendship with God, Pinsent claims, we share with Him our attention, desiring to experience His presence in our lives, opening our hearts to His will, allowing Him to move us into action, and sharing His perspective on objects and actions. We do not achieve this experience through our own merits alone; it is a gift from God. In this sense, the experience of union with God occurs at the beginning of our journey to perfection rather than at the end. Therefore, Pinsent considers the Pelagian tendency to associate the
perfection of the individual with the “idea suggested naturally to the human mind by the vertical metaphor of the supernatural end is that of an inaccessible mountain peak, made accessible by divine aid” as a mistake (Pinsent 2012, p. 102).

The correct way of understanding is given by joint attention. Pinsent’s account makes use of joint attention to understand how we are ‘moved in a divine way’ so that we achieve this union with Him toward objects and the others. Based on the philosophical accounts of joint attention offered by Campbell (2005, 2011), Eilan (2005), Hobson (2005), and Stump (2010), Pinsent claims that episodes of joint attention involve an open relation where there is a triadic person–person–object scenario in which the object is the focus of attention of both persons; a sharing an awareness of the sharing of focus; and a shared sense of mutual presence and union with one’s co-attender in the context of the attention. (Pinsent 2012, p. 44)

The openness of the experience of jointly attending with another person accounts for the fact that, during these episodes, both individuals have an experience of each other’s mutual presence, which allows for them to have second-personal stances towards each other, that is, views about the other not as a distant object but as another person to be referred to with second personal pronouns. They are common cognitive states that occur in contexts where one necessarily uses the pronoun “you”. These contexts allow for intimacy or the experience of closeness with others, as illustrated well in face-to-face communication contexts such as a conversation between two friends. According to Pinsent’s account, joint attention can be seen as an appropriate way to make sense of the way in which God moves us in a divine way and our experience of union with God.

4. Bungum’s Challenge: Shared Attention without Awareness

In his article, Joint Attention, Union with God, and the Dark Night of the Soul, Donald Bungum (2013) offers a critique of Stump’s view that also seems to apply to Pinsent’s account. He claims that joint attention does not help account for the sort of union to God. Based on Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul, he states that it is possible to be united with God without being aware of His presence in our life.

My point is simply to show that the connection between interpersonal union and joint attention is not entirely severed by the dark night, and that there is at least one way in which someone enduring the dark night might lack awareness of God and yet share attention with Him. (Bungum 2013, p. 206)

Bungum’s idea is that it is possible to have shared attention without awareness. He claims that reflection on the phenomenon of blindsight (Weiskrantz 2009) can make sense of the idea that it is possible to be united with God, ‘sharing attention’, while lacking awareness of His presence. Bungum holds that the idea of a person being united with someone through ‘shared attention’ without mutual overt awareness has a great value to understanding the nature of union because it helps us see how God could move us without us being aware of His presence during those events (Bungum 2013, p. 204).

His argument appeals to a reading of the experience of Mother Teresa as told in her letters. Mother Teresa says that she feels the absence of God’s presence during prayer, while she simultaneously reports awareness of an indeterminate presence in her works of mercy. For instance, in her personal writings, Mother Teresa describes an experience where she felt a complete absence of communication with God shortly after the foundation of the religious community God inspired her to found, the Missionaries of Charity, in 1948. She says:

Now Father—since 49 or 50 this terrible sense of loss—this untold darkness—this loneliness—this continual longing for God—which gives me that pain deep down in my heart. —Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason.—The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me. (Kolodiejchuk 2007, p. 259)

This is an instance of the phenomenon called the dark night of the soul (See Note 4). Mother Teresa exemplifies the case of a person having a rich spiritual life, who received a
calling to leave everything behind and serve the poor, who claims to have had an experience of the presence of God in her life and presumably knows what it is like to feel that presence, and yet, in her dark night of the soul, Mother Teresa is convinced that God is absent. For her, there seems to be a moment in her spiritual life where she stops experiencing the presence of God and yet she seems to be most close with Him.

As Bungum notes, joint attention is an overt phenomenon (Eilan 2005; Campbell 2005, 2011; Peacocke 2005), where the presence of the co-attender is revealed to one through awareness of her. This is so because the individuals involved in the episode of joint attention are aware that they are sharing their attention with each other. Because of this, it might seem reasonable to say that Mother Teresa does not seem to share attention with God because she lacks awareness of the presence of God in her own life.

If someone, like Mother Teresa, is prevented by the dark night from becoming aware of sharing attention with God, then that person is prevented from sharing attention with God altogether. Consequently, if shared attention is necessary for the fulfilment of interpersonal union with God, such a person also lacks the fulfilment of interpersonal union. (Bungum 2013, p. 204).

However, Mother Teresa also describes another scenario in which during the dark night of the soul she is aware of the obscure presence of someone despite her claims of feeling abandoned by God.

When outside—in the work—or meeting people—there is a presence—of somebody living very close—in very me. —I don’t know what this is —but very often even every day— that love in me for God grows more real. (Kolodiejchuk 2007, p. 260)

Although Mother Teresa claims not to be aware of God’s presence while in prayer, she recognizes the presence of an unidentified character who seems to make her love for God grow, where this presence seems to change her stance towards the world and others, those who she assists during works of mercy. Bungum claims this shows that Mother Teresa experiences being moved towards God by someone not yet identified (Bungum 2013, pp. 197–98). If this reading of Mother Teresa’s experience is correct, her situation defies the appeal to joint attention made by Stump and Pinsent, for it challenges the idea that awareness of the other, a key aspect of joint attention, is a necessary condition for union to God. Mother Teresa is united with God, but she seems not to be enjoying joint attention with Him.

Nevertheless, Bungum also thinks that sharing attention helps understand what it means to be united with God. And thus, he considers the ways in which there might be a connection between Mother Teresa’s case and some form of joint attention by exploring what Stump calls dyadic and triadic joint attention (cf. Stump 2010, pp. 113–16; Bungum 2013, p. 199). Neither, Bungum holds, can make sense of the case of Mother Teresa.

The kind of joint attention that describes Mother Teresa’s experience is not the dyadic one. Bungum (2013, p. 200) affirms that, in Stump’s view, dyadic joint attention is used to describe how it is to be aware of another subject in conversation. This seems to imply that one should be able to discriminate with whom one is engaging in conversation. But since Mother Teresa is not clearly aware of God’s presence, for “the place of God in [her] soul is blank”, she cannot clearly identify Him in her experience through prayer. She is not in conversation with God as understood in Stump’s dyadic joint attention.

Triadic joint attention falls short for similar reasons. According to Bungum, triadic joint attention aims to explain cases of non-verbal communication while the agents are engaged in a common task. Suppose that a couple of agents “A and B are carrying a large piece of furniture up some stairs and A cannot see B, A still experiences the couch-carrying differently than A would if A thought he were carrying it alone” (Green, in Bungum 2013, p. 201). This is where the literature around joint attention usually speaks of a triadic person–person–object scenario in which the object is the focus of attention of both persons, where there is mutual, overt awareness of the sharing of focus and a shared sense of mutual presence and union with one’s co-attender in the context of the attention.
This is an instance of triadic joint attention (what most of the literature calls a case of joint attention) because it is a situation that requires awareness of the furniture but not of the co-attender herself. As Bungum points out, it is a situation where the co-attender appears in the “periphery” of the experience (Bungum 2013, p. 203). As it is described, A is not directly aware of B’s presence, but only of B’s carrying the furniture. However, in virtue of a lack of direct awareness upon B, it is possible that A comes to realize at the end of the task that he has carried the furniture with a different agent, for instance, C, not B. It follows, then, that A is aware of an unidentified B; a fortiori, in a specific way A is not aware of B’s presence, although he is certainly aware of someone who appears in his experience in an obscure way.

According to Bungum, “triadic interaction alone is nothing more than co-attention with an unidentified other” (Bungum 2013, p. 202, emphasis added). This purportedly means that awareness of the co-attender, as required by triadic joint attention, puts anyone in a position where they might not know who they are sharing attention with. Bungum adds, “the introspective availability of the joint attention would be nothing other than the human’s ability to perceive by introspection that he jointly attends an object with another person, but a person whose identity is obscure” (Bungum 2013, p. 203). Therefore, triadic joint attention always implies an obscured awareness of the other, as it were, awareness in the dark. If this were the version of joint attention that metaphorically describes the complex experience of Mother Teresa in her dark night, Bungum claims, it would nevertheless fail to explain how Mother Teresa is united with God. If Mother Teresa does not know who she is sharing attention with, it is difficult to say why Mother Teresa experiences an increased love for God at works of mercy. Accordingly, he says: “the fact that the subject’s co-attender is unknown means that the joint attention itself can neither perfect the human subject nor draw him [sic] closer to God” (Bungum 2013, p. 203).

If Mother Teresa lacks awareness of God in the relevant way and joint attention explains union, she would not be significantly united with God. This is the crux of Bungum’s critique of explanation of union with God through joint attention. If we were to explain union through joint attention, there would have to be a mutual, overt awareness among the subjects. But Mother Teresa lacks such awareness and, nevertheless, according to her writings, her love for God increases while doing works of mercy to assist other people, purportedly because she is being moved by God at her work and, therefore, she is united with Him. So, according to Bungum, it is possible to be moved by God in a divine way and be united with Him without being aware of Him at all. He writes:

Suppose that the thoughts and activities of a person are directed by God through joint attention, but that the person is not aware of God’s involvement in directing his activities. Then God and the person will be united in their actions, but the person will not be in a position to know this. (Bungum 2013, p. 204)

How do we make sense of the possibility of being united with God through joint attention while lacking awareness of Him? Bungum turns to another phenomenon studied by psychology and philosophy of the mind: blindsight. According to some case studies of blindsight patients, it is possible that another person’s attention towards an object can direct someone’s attention (and actions) towards the object without awareness of this. More generally, Bungum says, it is possible that one of the causal factors sustaining a person’s attention on an object might be that another is attending to that same object, even though the person has no explicit thoughts about the direction of the other’s attention or awareness that the person is there. (Bungum 2013, p. 205)

Bungum claims that it is possible to have a pair of subjects in joint attention out of the scope of awareness at all. This purportedly counts as a form of shared attention because the other’s attention to an object can causally sustain one’s attention to the same object, even though there is no overtness involved. In this sense, it is a version in which one can be moved by someone without awareness of his presence, as in the blindsight case.
Likewise, as Bungum’s suggestion goes, it might be the case that Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul is an instance of a form of “spiritual blindsight” (Bungum 2013, p. 206). He suggests that it is possible that God’s stance towards the world, in this case, towards those in need, causally sustains Mother Teresa’s stance towards the same work of mercy without her awareness of His presence. This is a form of “spiritual blindsight” for Mother Teresa, because, despite being moved by God in a divine way, she “might lack awareness of God [. . .] as directing her attention or stance towards other things” (Bungum 2013, p. 206). Bungum’s “combination of joint attention and blindsight” (Bungum 2013, p. 187) purportedly shows that since Mother Teresa during the dark night of the soul lacks any determinate awareness of God’s presence in her spiritual life, she lacks any awareness at all of God’s presence in her spiritual life and yet is united with Him.

However, as we will see in the following section, it could still be the case that, although Mother Teresa lacks some forms of awareness of God in her spiritual life, this does not entail she absolutely lacks any awareness of God.

5. One Possible Response: Stump’s Account of the Lack of Awareness

As seen above, Stump considers that to have a significant personal presence of God in one’s life one must have joint attention with Him. Union in love with God is crowned by being available to Him, that is, by being able and willing to join attention with Him.

Nevertheless, Bungum holds, this implies that sharing attention with God consists of a form of awareness of His presence in our life that Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul lacks; during triadic joint attention, as was the kind of joint attention Mother Teresa was purportedly engaged in while practicing works of mercy, “interpersonal closeness might be realized through a consistent pattern of external actions without, however, direct awareness of one person by the other” (Bungum 2013, p. 187). Thus, Mother Teresa’s case seems to show there could be joint attention with God without awareness of His presence and union in love with Him, while at the same time lacking the necessary conditions for sharing attention with Him in a strict sense (for there is no overt awareness). In other words, being able and willing to share attention with God might be through “union of will and of work” (Bungum 2013, p. 207) and not through awareness.

In her book Atonement, Eleonore Stump (2018) seems to engage this challenge. Considering Christ’s cry of dereliction, a moment of a deep sense of abandonment and anguish experienced by Jesus during his crucifixion, Stump thinks of the possibility in which there is a powerful “connection of mind and will with God” (Stump 2018, p. 146) but where, for reasons external to the subject’s will, “this connection is broken” (Stump 2018, p. 146). For her, there can be a union of minds while simultaneously some sense of abandonment.

Stump accounts for this case as a form in which the awareness for the connection could be broken in cases of great pain, “physical or psychological” (Stump 2018, p. 151). She illustrates this failure of awareness through two examples from The Lord of the Rings, where “[a] person in great psychological or physical pain can experience as absent even those gathered around him [sic.] in love to care for him [sic.]” (Stump 2018, p. 153). This first example is from Frodo, where, in his anguish after being wounded by the Black Riders and his mind wandering in Mordor, he loses “the ability to share attention with them [those gathered around him]” and he experiences “them as disappeared from him” (Stump 2018, p. 153). Those gathered around him, and thus openly available to his awareness, disappear because of the great psychological pain he is in. The second example is from Pippin, where the Palantir “connects Pippin’s mind in a mind-reading way with the mind of the dark lord of Mordor, Sauron” (Stump 2018, p. 153); the overwhelming anguish blocked his awareness of his loved ones who surrounding him. Even though Frodo and Pippin are close to their friends, they cannot share attention with them. In fact, “the good and caring world around each of them becomes shadowy and hard for Frodo and Pippin to access” (Stump 2018, p. 163). Although presumably willing to share attention with them, they “can be prevented or undermined by things external to his own agency” (Stump 2018, p. 153). This is the reason why to recover his faculties of mind-reading Frodo had to wait until
“finally he faints from pain” (Stump 2018, p. 163) and Pippin needed “the powers of the wizard Gandalf [. . .] to return to the daylight world and to make contact with his friends again” (Stump 2018, p. 163).

Although there could be different reasons why Frodo and Pippin are unable to share minds with those who care about them, it is not their failing to desire such union. Likewise, Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul, Stump might respond, fails to share attention with them in virtue of something external to their own desire. In this sense, even though Mother Teresa is not actually abandoned by God, the significant personal presence of someone who loves them is lost for reasons other than their own will or that of God. These cases seem to show, in different ways, how one could be undermined to share attention with someone without desiring it.

Such a response seems to accept Bungum’s point: it is possible for there to be union to God and yet no awareness, at least in some cases. However, we think there is an alternative response to Bungum’s challenge suggested in the following remark:

The difficulties that I have pointed out for Stump’s view concerning joint attention and interpersonal union could be solved if there were a way to hold that human beings, while experiencing the dark night of the soul, can engage in joint attention with God without being aware of their doing so. (Bungum 2013, p. 204)

For Bungum, and apparently also for Stump, the difficulties raised by Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul could be solved if there were a form of joint attention without awareness. Alternatively, we believe there is a different response to Bungum’s challenge, suggested by Pinsent’s work, that focuses on different ways of being aware of God. We need a richer notion of what overtness of the mutual awareness in joint attention amounts to.

6. Modes of Awareness for Action

Our suggestion is that there is no single way to understand awareness of another subject’s presence in joint attention. The way Stump and Bungum suggest implies an awareness that seems closer to how the direct objects of perception are available: necessarily and immediately available to thought, belief, and propositional knowledge. Mother Teresa fails to express in her journal her awareness of God and therefore she is not aware of God, Bungum claims. This overlooks discussions about the non-conceptual or non-propositional nature of awareness in perception (Fiebich and Gallagher 2012; De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; Di Paolo and De Jaegher 2017). And in the case of Mother Teresa, awareness of God might take the form of an availability for action. Here, what we need is to understand awareness of God as a source of agency. It can be, as it were, a presence in the dark. Let us explain.

To see the form in which God might be present as a source of agency, let us turn back again to Aquinas (1956). According to him, the experience of union with God consists of establishing a friendship with Him that transforms our conception of the world and our relationship with others. Indeed, although God grants us the grace of experiencing Him by instilling in us the desire to establish a friendship with Him, this desire alone is not sufficient to experience His presence in the world and in our activities. The experience of union with God gradually enriches and intensifies.

Even though the Holy Spirit constitutes us as “lovers of God”, Aquinas holds that one must bear in mind that the sons of God are driven not as slaves, but as free men. For, since he [sic.] is free who is for his [sic.] own sake, we do that freely which we do of our very selves […] the Holy Spirit so inclines us to act that He makes us act voluntarily, in that He makes us lovers of God. (Summa Contra Gentiles (SCG) 4.22)

For Aquinas, the children of God are free because they act on their own initiative, performing their deeds in accordance with what their own virtuous disposition prompts them to do because they are children of God who love Him. However, although it is the Holy Spirit who inspires us and forms our disposition to carry out the virtuous work, His
inspiration is actualized in the light of the agreement with our own initiative and of the
operation that follows from it. Therefore, friendship with God, a relationship with Him
as lovers, not as slaves, develops based on cooperation with Him, where he inclines us to
move in a divine way.

Following this reading of Aquinas, desire alone is insufficient to explain this experience
of presence, for to significantly experience the presence of God in our lives, it is also crucial
that our actions be oriented towards the good, that is, that they align with God’s will
and contribute to the enrichment of the community to which we belong. By doing so,
we experience the transformation of the way we see the world and others for action.
Consequently, although desire allows us to receive the grace of experiencing God in our
lives, it is through action oriented towards the good of others that this experience intensifies.

Aquinas says that our experience of union with God involves experiencing a friendship
in which three things are sought: (i) “fulfilling the beloved’s desire”, (SCG, 3.95); (ii) aligning
one’s own will with the divine will “in what is desired”, (ST 1-2.19.10. SC); and (iii) “making
the friend a participant in what one possesses because, just as a man considers his friend
as another self, he must help him as himself by making him share in his goods” (SCG 4.21).
Friendship with God is built by desiring what God desires and doing good to others (SCG,
4.21), because “friends unite their activities in pursuit of a common goal” (Flood 2018, p. 99).

The presence of God in human actions can be seen in the triadic structure in which
God acts by instilling in the human person the desire for union, the person actualizes this
desire in action, and the action is oriented towards the enrichment of the community that in
turn intensifies and perfects the experience of union in friendship with God. The structure
consists of three aspects: (1) God acts by inspiring good desires in a person, which is partly
constitutive of the experience itself; (2) the person fulfills their role by actualizing their
desire for union in friendship with God in action; and (3) this action is directed towards the
good of the community. (So merely desiring to do God’s will does not construct a friendship
relationship with Him; the other two are also needed for his significant presence).

God infuses in humans the grace that leads them to desire union with Him, and a
person intensifies their relationship with God by striving to align their actions towards the
good. This means that in their actions, which always have an object other than oneself, they
actualize the desire infused by God. Flood (2018) expresses this by stating that “since the
primary object of charity is God, and its principal act is to unite with God in love, the more
one loves God, the more one loves other human beings” (Flood 2018, p. 33). When one
becomes a “lover of God” one therefore is a “lover of their neighbor” and does “good to
their friend” (SCG 3.117).

Pinsent’s appeal to joint attention is meant to explain the sense in which a person and
God are both involved in virtuous acts, that is, how we freely respond to the gifts of the
Holy Spirit in virtuous action. Pinsent claims that the experience of union in friendship
with God “suddenly leads us to see the world from a new perspective, a world that has not
visibly changed but, in the perceived presence of a divine person, is apprehended from a
new understanding” (Pinsent 2012, p. 357). Such transformation, a new way of being and
acting in the world, is a gift from God but also the result of activities oriented towards the
good through which we enrich the community to which we belong. This is the form in
which God might be present as a source of agency. In Pinsent’s words:

Whoever does a thing through love, however, does it of herself, by her own
inclination, so that the very notion of servility is contrary to action from love.

Since all the gifts are unified through love, action by means of the gifts cannot,
therefore, be that of a slave or an inanimate instrument. (Pinsent 2012, p. 35)

Based on Bungum’s suggestion about “spiritual blindsight” (Bungum 2013, p. 206),
we can say that the phenomenon we can call “spiritual blind attention” aptly accounts
for the mode of awareness of the presence of God. But this seems to block the possibility
of freely striving to accept God’s gift, of which Aquinas is talking about. It is just causal
interaction, like an instrument. The new mode of awareness of the world coming from
the presence of a divine person that Pinsent, following Aquinas, speaks of is a mode of
awareness of a person who freely and consciously is acting in the world and having this experience of friendship with God. Blindsight patients do not know why they are moving or how they are moving through the corridor; they just do it. A person united with the presence of God knows why they act so; works of mercy are the product of their love of God and others. The mode of awareness is a mode of presence in action.

Bungum might respond that his suggestion of “spiritual blind attention” is compatible with the above conception of action, in so far as the way God guides Mother Teresa does not override her self-direction, of freely striving to accept God’s gift. She can act otherwise. Such reading is additionally compatible with a reading of Aquinas’s account of the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

As sailors can harness the power of the wind to push a ship in various directions, so also the human soul retains a certain ability of self-direction according to this metaphor, even when moved by the wind of the Holy Spirit. So a person who is moved in this way also acts himself [sic.], consistent with Aquinas’s claims about gift-based movement. As a further benefit, this image also seems, at first glance, to be consistent with scriptural typology. The Holy Spirit is often referred to as being like a ‘wind’, and the laborious rowing of oarsmen is drawn from the story of the disciples straining at the oars in Mark 6:48.1. (Pinsent 2012, p. 36)

The suggestion is that “spiritual blind attention” might be like a “wind” that gently nudges Mother Teresa without her awareness. This captures the above account of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and, more generally, explains how God might be present as a source of agency. Nevertheless, the metaphor of wind is mistaken, as Pinsent claims:

A serious problem can be seen in the claim […] that the forward progress of a ship is the same when using the oars or the wind, even though the movement by the wind is much easier than the labor of rowing. The implication is that the work of human zeal and industry and gift-based movement are different in degree not in kind. This image clashes, however, with the fact that Aquinas claims that the gifts and infused virtues are specifically different, and infused virtues and acquired virtues are specifically different, implying that metaphors of degree are unsuitable. (Pinsent 2012, p. 36)

Aquinas’s view, Pinsent claims, is one in which the way God moves us to action in a divine way is not merely causal. It does not merely modify our actions; it changes its very nature. What Aristotle and Aquinas call virtues are similar but fundamentally different. A dead horse and a live horse might be similar but are fundamentally different kinds of things in so far as life constitutes the nature of the latter. Likewise, Aristotelian virtues and Thomistic virtues might be similar in some respects, but they are fundamentally different in so far as God is involved in the latter. The way God moves us is one in which His presence partially constitutes our action themselves. There is a fundamental difference between an action that is not thus moved. God does not move us through “causal conditions underlying joint attention coupled to a state of spiritual perception similar to blindsight”, as Bungum claims; rather, God himself moves in us in a divine way.

According to Pinsent, Aquinas’s concept of God as a personal agent suggests our understanding of God’s influence within our actions should not be limited to causal mechanisms; it suggests that “appropriate metaphors should be sought in the field of social cognition” (Pinsent 2012, p. 42). Moreover, Pinsent (2012) adds, “the triadic person–God–object scenario further suggests that a potentially relevant subset of this field is a comparatively recent discipline in experimental psychology and philosophy called joint attention” (Pinsent 2012, p. 42). This brings the issue full circle.

Bungum and Stump seem to focus on the role of joint attention as involving a specific form of awareness of the other subject. Because of this, they both seem to consider the case of Mother Teresa as evidence against the presence of God like that of joint attention. However, Pinsent focuses on a Thomistic account of virtues that rather makes the point about the constitution of actions guided by God. Notice here how he characterizes joint attention:
The notion that joint attention is a distinct kind of interaction arises, first, from the everyday observation that the experience of attending to something with someone is subtly different, for most people, from the experience of attending to an object alone. The key point is that although it is the object, rather than the other person, that is the focus of one’s attention, the presence and attention of the other person seem to make a qualitative difference to one’s experience. A simple example of this difference is the way in which infants often manifest a preferential interest in objects that are the focus of the attention of caregivers who are also present. Various manifestations of this interest may include referential use of eye contact, offering and giving objects to others, pointing at objects, and following others’ points. Actions that are engaged in jointly, such as reciprocated smiling, pre-verbal turn taking, and using noises communicatively, are also sometimes considered as instances of joint attention. (Pinsent 2012, p. 42)

Pinsent (2012) does not assume a unique form of the presence of another subject. He does not seem to be interested in the oral reports of a subject engaged in joint attention, but rather in the use “of eye contact, offering and giving objects to others, pointing at objects, and following others’ points” (Pinsent 2012, p. 42). Joint attention gives us a model to understand the way we are united to God in so far that it helps us understand what it means to say that He is present in our actions: the triadic relation present in joint attention suggests a metaphysical account of what being moved by God in a divine way means. This throws us into the discussion of joint attention and what the mode of awareness of the co-attender is with an additional constraint: if an account of joint attention is to serve as a model for the understanding of union to God it ought to make sense of the presence of another in a way directly linked to action and activity. Bungum looks for a distinct form of awareness that is not to be found and need not be. We have shown that, to work within the framework set up by Aquinas, we need forms of awareness or experience that emphasize action, much like those accounts by De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007), Di Paolo and De Jaegher (2017), and Gallagher (2011).

Our suggestion here aligns with an enactivist approach of mind cognition. This means that an adequate explanation of awareness involves the activity carried out by subjects in a specific context and, thus, joint awareness involves joint activity. Therefore, we believe that the best metaphor for understanding awareness of God’s presence is through this joint attention linked to joint activity. However, unlike other enactivist views like those of Gallagher’s or De Jaegher's, awareness of God’s presence need not be explicit. In other words, it is not a specific, singular awareness of God’s presence because this type of awareness does not prompt the use of singular terms like “you” or “thou” to refer to Him. Instead, God’s presence is primarily understood as a way of perceiving and acting in the world, rather than as another explicit presence within the field of awareness.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, we examine joint attention and its relationship with the modes of awareness of the presence of God and how it offers valuable insights into the nature of the spiritual life. We consider Stump’s and Pinsent’s compelling arguments for the significance of joint attention in understanding our connection with God: Stump emphasizes the idea that sharing attention with God is a crucial aspect of experiencing His significant personal presence, while Pinsent highlights the transformative power of the Holy Spirit’s movement through joint attention.

We present Bungum’s challenge to the assumption that joint attention is necessary for union with God by drawing on the example of Mother Teresa’s dark night of the soul. He suggests that shared attention without awareness is possible, invoking the concept of blindsight and suggesting this as a model for understanding how God moves us in a divine way. This raises important questions about the nature of awareness and the ways in which we can be united with God, even in the cases of absence of explicit awareness, prompting us to consider alternative modes of awareness and presence in our relationship with God.
In response to Bungum’s challenge, we consider a broader understanding of awareness. Rather than solely focusing on the explicit awareness that Stump seems to associate with joint attention, we explore the idea that awareness of God’s presence can manifest in different ways, including a sense of His guidance and movement in our actions. This aligns with Aquinas’s idea that our actions, when oriented towards the good and in accordance with God’s will, can be seen as a form of joint attention with Him. This means that the experience of union with God may involve a deep sense of connection and alignment with His desires, even if it is not accompanied by explicit awareness in the sense meant by Stump and Bungum, as long as this constitutes forms of being disposed to act with grace that are fundamentally different in kind from dispositions without grace that do not involve God.

Ultimately, the exploration of joint attention and the modes of awareness of God’s presence invites us to reflect on the complexity of our relationship with the divine. To accept that joint attention provides a valuable framework for understanding our connection with God implies recognizing that our awareness of God’s presence can take many forms. We need a nuanced understanding of awareness and presence. Our suggestion has been to consider the possibility that our actions, driven by love and guided by the Holy Spirit, can themselves be a manifestation of our union with God, even if we are not consciously aware of His presence in every moment, insofar as the actions themselves are partly constituted by our union to Him.

In the end, we wish to suggest the exploration of joint attention, and the modes of awareness of God’s presence also invites us to deepen our understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in the phenomenon of joint attention as studied in psychology and philosophy of mind.

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**Notes**

1. According to Aquinas, “The human mind is moved by the Holy Spirit only if it is united to Him in some way—just as an instrument is moved by a craftsman only through contact or through some other sort of union. Now the first union a man has [with the Holy Spirit] is through faith, hope, and charity” ([*Summa Theologica* [ST] 1-2.68.4.3]). Faith, hope and charity are the first union, but there are ways in which these are further developed. “Hence, the gifts presuppose these virtues as the roots, so to speak, of the gifts. Hence, all the gifts have to do with these three virtues insofar as they are certain derivatives of these virtues”. ([ST 1-2.68.4.3]) In this paper, we aim at understanding further gifts that are derivative of these virtues.

2. Cf. ST 1.13.9. A metaphor, for Aquinas, shows that there is a proportion between the property of the creature and the divine attribute and, thus, that the speaker could transfer meaning, from the sensible properties of the creature towards a certain divine attribute to somehow explain it. Appealing to joint attention as a metaphor of our experience of union with God seeks only to advance a possible way to understand God’s presence in our life. Agreeing with Aquinas’s position, Pinsent (2022a) says that metaphors are indispensable for understanding theological doctrines because through metaphor “the diverse characteristics of what is remote can be associated with what is familiar” ([Pinsent 2022a, p. 20]). Pinsent does not always distinguish properly
between metaphor and stronger forms of comparison like analogy, and we leave open the issue of how strong the comparison ought to be taken. We are thankful to the editor for this suggestion.

3 Sartre’s point in Being and Nothingness (Sartre 1978) of blurred experience that is not determined in relation to a singular person is not obviously inconsistent with our view concerning experience of the presence of God. In fact, Sartre refers “to a concrete nothingness, such as is often experienced in the perception of someone’s absence” (Catalano 1985). This idea appears also in another text by Sartre, The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination, where he explores the idea of the possibility of the constitution of our experience of the world without a transparent consciousness of what is in front of us. In his words: “Consciousness would cease to be transparent to itself; everywhere its unity would be broken by the inassimilable, opaque screens” (Sartre 2004, p. 6). Both ideas could be discussed as a way to further our point. However, an exhaustive development of the relation of Sartre’s ideas with our view could be the object of another inquiry. We are thankful to an anonymous reviewer for this comment.

4 In the philosophical discussion of joint attention, it is sometimes distinguished between joint attention proper and merely shared attention (Stephenson et al. 2021, p. 553). Stump appears indifferent between the two names when talking about the phenomenon of joint attention, as do researchers like Siposova and Carpenter (2019).

References


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