

Project Description: Devotion and Spiritual Yearning

Devotion—the firm, unwavering commitment to an ideal, cause, relationship, or activity—is a quality that, when expressed authentically and positively, we value: we admire the devoted parent, the devoted teacher, the devoted champion of a worthwhile cause. While devotion plays a clear role in faith communities, it also provides an answer to spiritual yearnings and significance-seeking in the non-religious. Paul Katsafanas’ recent work maintains that in the absence of traditional religious commitments, individuals long to express devotion in other ways. In doing so, they find a vital sense of purpose, direction, and meaning. Absent such opportunities, they find their values dissipating and their allegiances coming undone. So devotion, as a practice—whether religious or secular—plays a key role in human flourishing. For this project, we propose a collaborative, interdisciplinary investigation that has four main aims: (1) deepening our understanding of non-religious devotion and its connection to spiritual yearning; (2) promoting interdisciplinary work from philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists on the *nature* of non-religious forms of devotion; (3) engaging in the descriptive task of *distinguishing the different forms and objects* that non-religious devotion can take; and (4) *assessing* these manifestations of devotion, aiming to determine which constitute healthy expressions of spiritual striving and which are problematic or pathological. Below, we describe these four aims in more depth.

First, the project seeks to **deepen our understanding of non-religious devotion and its connection to spiritual yearning**. We will investigate the idea that a central way of fulfilling our spiritual yearnings is through *devotion*. As a working definition, we understand spiritual yearning as the longing that drives us to ask existential questions about life’s meaning, purpose, or significance. Those who do not satisfy this yearning through religious frameworks and communities often find other ways of imbuing their lives with a sense of meaning, purpose, or significance—for example, through their long-term commitments to certain groups, activities, goals, or projects.

If we see spiritual yearning as the longing that drives us to ask these existential questions, and if we additionally note that many individuals find at least partial fulfillment of this longing through these long-term commitments, then we can predict that certain types of long-term commitment will be integral to fulfilling our spiritual yearnings. Our hypothesis is that *devotion*, rather than less robust forms of long-term commitment, plays an essential role in fulfilling this longing. The devoted individual finds a sense of meaning, purpose, or significance through their devotion to some object. The devotion is not just an ancillary or dispensable part of their lives: rather, it is through the continuously maintained stance of devotion to some object that they fulfill, in whole or in part, their spiritual yearnings.

Religions typically provide structured opportunities for devotion, enabling religious individuals to fulfill their spiritual yearnings. Non-religious individuals, who do not or cannot avail themselves of the religious opportunities for expressing devotion, may find it harder to fulfill these yearnings—they may experience difficulty in locating suitable objects of devotion. We maintain that individuals who *do not* or *cannot* find opportunities for devotion will experience a frustration of their spiritual yearnings. There is a rich literature arguing that some individuals fulfill spiritual yearnings through devotion to extremist and fanatical groups. Some of this literature suggests that it is the devotion to groups or to ideals that provides fulfillment, independently of the aims of these groups or the content of these ideals. Katsafanas has argued for a broader version of this point: that devotion is a

basic human motivation which, when unfulfilled, leads to a form of spiritual malaise and dissatisfaction.

If our hypothesis is correct, we should expect to find key connections between individuals who identify non-religious outlets for devotion and individuals who experience non-religious spiritual fulfillment. In pursuing this connection, the project will investigate the role of the social setting and community in enabling and sustaining non-religious forms of devotion. In addition, it will ask whether—and to what extent—these non-religious manifestations of devotion can fulfill the role traditionally played by religious forms of devotion. This leads us to the project's second goal: charting and exploring the forms of non-religious devotion.

Second, the project will **promote interdisciplinary work from philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists on the nature of non-religious forms of devotion.** We can easily identify instances of devotion in familiar characters, pointing to the devoted spouse or the devoted environmentalist or, in a more problematic case, the devoted member of a hate group. But what exactly *is* devotion? How should it be analyzed? Katsafanas has offered one account of devotion, presenting it as a sacralized form of commitment in which the person treats the object of commitment as *dialectically invulnerable*. Roughly, this means that no argument, distinction, clarification, or other dialectical move could dislodge the commitment or attitude, or cause it to dissipate; and, further, that showing the commitment or attitude to be irrational; inconsistent with other commitments; in conflict with moral principles; or lacking adequate justification has no effect. One series of questions, which several disciplines could address fruitfully, concerns whether this account of devotion is adequate or in need of further refinements or modifications. Another series of questions would deepen the analysis by asking how devotion relates to epistemic, ethical, and psychological factors. For example, how does devotion to a particular good relate to open-mindedness about other possible objects of devotion? How does devotion relate to our thoughts about the ethical standing of various goods? How should we understand the psychology of the devoted agent?

Third, the project will **engage in the descriptive task of distinguishing the different forms and objects that non-religious devotion can take.** We can be devoted to individuals (i.e. a devoted marriage); to groups (a twelve-step program); to ways of life (a yoga practice and its associated ethos); to ideals (accepting others who are different from ourselves); or to causes (climate change). And this is not, of course, an exhaustive list. In an effort to understand these various forms and objects, the project will seek to chart and systematize them. After exploring the possible objects of devotion, we can then ask, for example: does devotion take the same form when it is directed at persons and when it is directed at ideals? Or are these different manifestations of devotion? Does devotion to all types of causes take the same form, or do different types of causes generate different forms of devotion? Do some objects preclude full-fledged devotion, while others promote or facilitate it? Addressing such questions will be key to developing a systematic understanding of devotion.

Fourth—with this systematic account of devotion's forms and objects in place—the project will **assess these manifestations of devotion, aiming to determine which constitute healthy expressions of spiritual striving and which are problematic or pathological.** This portion of the project is explicitly normative, focusing on what devotion *should be* and *evaluating* actual manifestations of devotion. Devotion can take very different objects, as when one person devotes herself to social justice and another to a hate group. So, we might ask: do these objects generate differences in the evaluation of a person's devotion? Or can devotion be good regardless of its

object? It might be, for example, that the problematic and intolerant forms of devotion are structurally analogous to the positive, praiseworthy forms, and differ only in that they take different objects. Or it might be that being devoted to objectionable or problematic objects generates differences in the structure of devotion, so that the person who manifests genuine, healthy devotion exhibits and experiences something quite different than does the devoted member of a hate group. Teasing apart these conceptual distinctions, and exploring the motivational basis and psychological implications of devotion's possible objects, will be a major task of the project. Moreover, we aim to discover whether there are problematic, unhealthy, or morally objectionable forms of devotion that are non-fanatical and non-extremist. In other words, we aim to investigate whether the problematic forms of devotion extend beyond the familiar fanatical and extremist variants.

This project is important because it offers an opportunity to diagnose—and potentially ameliorate—a root cause of the discord plaguing contemporary social and political life. Why do people persist in commitments that seem to threaten their happiness, security, and comfort? Why do some of our most central, identity-defining commitments resist the effects of reasoning and critical reflection? Our time is rife with conflicts that spring from pathological or problematic forms of devotion: hate groups, fanatical organizations, and oppositional communities offer ample opportunities for powerful, yet reprehensible, manifestations of devotion. Factionalism and disunity threaten social cohesion, depriving people of the conditions for a good life. But what if there are healthy ways of expressing devotion? What if we can address spiritual yearnings in the non-religious by learning what people seek, what forms devotion can take, and how devotion can go astray? By discovering devotion's mechanisms and motivations, we can understand how to experience devoted attachments in a healthy way that makes meaningful, sustained commitments possible. Consequently, this project will spur research on topics that offer hope for addressing the deep fissures in our social and spiritual worlds.

Our approach is novel because, despite its centrality in human life, devotion in the non-religious has received very little philosophical attention. While there exists a rich literature on religious devotion, philosophers have overlooked non-religious manifestations. They have instead focused on related, yet distinct topics—for example, intention, commitment, meaning, grit, and the role of aspirational ideals in reflection. While some of these topics intersect with and provide fruitful resources for addressing the nature of non-religious devotion, there are no studies focusing on this particular phenomenon. Isolating the topic of non-religious devotion, and exploring its conceptual and motivational bases, will enable us to clarify the fundamental connections between devotion and spiritual yearning.