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**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
OF THE MYSTICISM OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS**

BY

DANIEL C.C. SO, M.SC., M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

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**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
OF THE MYSTICISM OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS**

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is to understand the nature of mystical knowledge. After rejecting the perceptual model and the “pure consciousness” model for mystical knowledge due to their inaccuracies, I try to develop a new model for mystical knowledge using the phenomenological method. This new model is based on the mystical experience of St. John of the Cross, the famous Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century. To ensure the accuracy of the model, the mystical theology of St. John is exposed in sufficient details, with special emphasis on St. John’s characterization of different types of mystical knowledge. Then, drawing on the insights of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler and other phenomenologists, I develop a new model for mystical knowledge called *knowledge through the resonance of love*. According to this model, the mystical knowledge of St. John has the nature of an affective self-knowledge through love. Suggestions are also made on how the model can be applied to other mystics. The conclusion to be drawn from this model is that mystical knowledge is not an Absolute Knowledge of an extra-linguistic nature, but an event of understanding that takes place within the linguistic horizon of the mystic’s religious tradition.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- The works of St. John of the Cross are referenced in the following manner:
 - The first letter represents the following prose works
 - A *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*
 - N *Dark Night of the Soul*
 - C *The Spiritual Canticle*
 - F *The Living Flame of Love*
 - In the case of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*, the three numbers which follow the abbreviation indicate consecutively the book, the chapter, and the section. For example, “A 2.13.4” stands for Bk.2, Chapter13, section 4 of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.
 - In the case of *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, the two numbers following the letter indicate consecutively the stanza of the poem commented on by St. John and the section of the commentary. For example, “C 16.3” stands for commentary on stanza 16 of *The Spiritual Canticle*. section 3.
 - The second redaction of *The Spiritual Canticle* has been used, except in one occasion where we use the first redaction and indicate that by “CA” instead of “C.” All references to *The Living Flame of Love* refers to its second redaction
 - All quotations are taken from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed., (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), unless the word “Peers” appears after the numbers (e.g., “A 2.3.4. Peers”), which means the translation by Peers (*The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. E. Allison Peers, 3 vols. rev. ed., London: Burns & Oates, 1953) is being used. When there is a possible confusion, I also put “K & R” after the numbers (e.g., A 2.3.4. K & R) to indicate that the quotation is from the translation by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez.

- Sets of numbers not preceded by any letter (e.g., 7.2.1a) refer to sections of this dissertation.
- The works by Edmund Husserl are referred to by the following abbreviations:

LI *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

Ideas I *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982.

DR *Ding und Raum. Vorlesungen 1907. Husserliana XVI*, the Hague: Nijhoff, 1973.

1. Introduction: The Epistemic Significance of Mysticism

1.1 The Problem of Mystical Knowledge

In each of the great religious traditions of the world, there exists a small group of practitioners who claim to have arrived at a sublime knowledge of the Divine that is unavailable to the general public. These practitioners claim that such knowledge is inaccessible by science, theology, or other modes of discursive learning, but only by a special type of illuminating experience that takes place in a peculiar mode of consciousness. They also claim that the knowledge they have received, although difficult to express in language, is of great significance, concerning such subjects as the ultimate nature of reality, the final meaning of life, and the eternal destiny of the human soul.

In modern times these practitioners have come to be known as “mystics.” Their strange experience is called “mystical experience,” and the knowledge they have received is called “mystical knowledge.”¹ While some mystics have been revered as “saints,” “masters,” and “gurus,” others have met with suspicion both

¹ For the history of the term “mysticism,” see Louth 1983. The modern notion of “mystical experience” has recently been challenged by Turner (1995) and Cuppitt (1998). While this dissertation focuses on mystical experiences that take place within religious contexts, it by no means denies that mysticism may also exist

inside and outside their own religious traditions, and critics have rejected the value of their alleged “mystical knowledge.” For these critics, mystical experiences can give no knowledge, but are at best pleasant experiences of limited spiritual value, and at worst they are forms of fanaticism or insanity.

1.2 The Philosophical Defense of Mystical Knowledge: The Approaches of The Empiricist and The Perennial Philosophers

While many theologians and religious thinkers have tried to defend the value of mysticism and the validity of mystical knowledge, philosophers in general have paid little attention to mysticism. The philosophy of mysticism was never a significant topic in philosophy until one great philosopher turned his attention to it — when William James delivered his famous Gifford Lectures in 1901 (which were later to become his famous book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), he pioneered a new approach to the study of mysticism. Instead of discussing mysticism within any specific theological or religious framework, James takes an “outsider’s” point of view and evaluates mysticism from a psychological and philosophical perspective.² In *The Varieties* he gives his famous “four marks of

outside of religious contexts.

² According to James himself, he is abandoning “theological criteria” and is “testing” religion and mysticism “by practical common sense and the empirical method.” (James 1961, p.297)

mysticism.”³ (a) *ineffability* — mystics often report that their experiences “defy expression”;⁴ (b) *noetic quality* — mystical experiences are reported to bring significant knowledge to the mystics in an illuminating and authoritative manner; (c) *transiency* — mystical states are transient, and “cannot be sustained for long”;⁵ (d) *passivity* — mystical experiences are received in a passive manner, and “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.”⁶ Among the “four marks,” the “noetic quality” of mysticism is of the greatest importance for James, who calls it “the essential mark” of mysticism.⁷ James believes in the epistemic significance of mystical experiences, and he defends this significance not on any theological or religious grounds, but according to his own empiricist-pragmatist principles. He argues that mystical experience is analogous to sense experience. According to his analysis, mystical experiences are “absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality,” and they are like “face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist.”⁸ The implication of this is that a thorough-going, consistent empiricist who takes the senses to be the source of all knowledge cannot ignore the

³ For James, these “four marks” do not constitute a definition of mysticism, as many have come to understand them. James intends them to serve only as criteria for identifying a special sort of experience. See James 1961, pp. 394–40.

⁴ James 1961, p.300.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., pp.320ff.

contribution of mystical experience to our complete understanding of the universe.⁹ His pragmatist criterion for knowledge also lends support to the value of mystical knowledge: this criterion judges the “truth” of a belief by the value it enjoys when we put it into practice.¹⁰ He justifies the truth of mystical knowledge by the “fruits” it brings — that is, the mystic’s “saintliness,” which is witnessed to be a positive power of transformation in the mystic’s life and community.¹¹

More recently, William Alston has taken up James’ empiricist-pragmatist approach to mysticism. With his theory of *mystical perception*, he suggests that the mystic’s experience of God is similar to our sense perception of physical objects, and that mystical knowledge should thus be considered a subset of empirical knowledge. He attempts to justify mystical knowledge using what he calls a “doxastic practice approach” to epistemology, arguing that mystical knowledge is the product of a belief-forming mechanism (which he calls Christian Mystical Practice [CMP] in the case of the Christian mystics) the reliability of which can be justified on the basis of practical rationality. Alston then concludes

⁸ Ibid., p.332.

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 135, 335.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.35, 347.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p.33, Lecture 14 and 15, and the discussion in Barnard 1997, Chapter 4.

that mystical knowledge enjoys an epistemic status similar to that provided by our physical senses.¹²

There is another group of philosophers and religious scholars who argue for the epistemic value of mysticism using another approach. Inspired by what has been called the “perennial philosophy” — a philosophy that believes in the ultimate unity of all religions¹³ — W.T. Stace argues that there exists a “common core” to mystical experiences in different religious traditions. This “core” is a state of “pure consciousness,” a contentless, feelingless state of mind in which the mystic experiences an “undifferentiated unity” and a loss of personal identity.¹⁴ Stace claims that there are “unanimous” reports of such a state of consciousness offered by mystics from diverse cultures and religions, and that this constitutes strong evidence for the existence of such mystical experience. Stace argues that while this same experience of “undifferentiated unity” has been interpreted differently by different religious traditions — and materialistic, theistic, and monistic frameworks have all been used for its interpretation — it is best

¹² See Alston 1991 and Chapter 0 of this dissertation.

¹³ For a discussion on the perennial philosophy, see Huxley 1954, 1962.

¹⁴ Strictly speaking the description given here only applies to what Stace calls “introvertive” mystical experience, but not to “extrovertive” experience (see Stace 1961, pp. 62-81). However, it is the “introvertive” experience which is of real significance in Stace’s approach. Neither does Stace or any of his followers have much to say about the “extrovertive experience.”

interpreted by a pantheistic world-view, in which the finite self and the Universal Self (also called the One, Brahman, God, etc.) comprise a unity.¹⁵

The notion of a “common core” of mysticism has been seriously challenged by philosophers and religious scholars, most notably Steven Katz and the authors in the three volumes of essays he has edited,¹⁶ who object to taking mystical experience as constituted by an uninterpreted “core” experience plus a subsequent interpretation. This group of thinkers, sometimes branded “constructivists,” believes that the mystic’s experience is always shaped by the mystic’s background and expectations, so that there is no uninterpreted “core” that is common to mystical experiences belonging to different traditions. Yet another group of philosophers has recently come to Stace’s defence. This group includes Robert K.C. Forman, Philip Almond, R.L. Franklin, and the authors included in the two volumes of essays Forman has recently edited.¹⁷ They attempt to establish the existence of a state of “pure consciousness” on empirical grounds, hoping then to employ this state of “pure consciousness” as a foundation for mystical knowledge.

Both of these approaches, the empiricist’s and that of the “perennial philosophers,” try to anchor the epistemic value of mysticism with some kind of

¹⁵ See Stace 1961, Chapter 4.

¹⁶ See Katz 1978, 1983, 1992.

¹⁷ See Forman 1990, 1998.

account of the nature of mystical experience. In the case of James and Alston, mystical knowledge is based on the empirical nature of mystical experience, and for Stace and Forman, mystical knowledge is ultimately based on the state of "pure consciousness." Both approaches rely for their arguments on the phenomenological characteristics of the mystical experience. Yet neither approach offers an accurate analysis of mystical experience. On close analysis, neither view does justice to the nature of mysticism.

1.3 The Phenomenological Method and Reduction

Husserl's phenomenology is a descriptive study of consciousness, in which conscious experience is analyzed using the notion of intentionality. Intentionality is the directedness of a conscious experience toward some object or state of affairs. An experience is "intentional" when it is "of" or "about" something. In this sense, much of our conscious experience is intentional. Husserl calls an intentional experience an act, and later, a *noesis*. By analyzing consciousness with the notion of intentionality, Husserl lays bare the structures of different modes of our consciousness, including perception, memory, imagination, expression, feelings, and so on. The phenomenological method has been applied to various regions of human experience, most notably to aesthetic experience, ethical experience, and religious experience. In this dissertation, I shall employ the notion of intentionality and techniques of phenomenology in analyzing mystical

experiences.¹⁸ The various tools and concepts developed by Husserl and other phenomenologists—most notably, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer — will enable us to clarify many issues that arise in the analysis of mystical experience. The employment of the phenomenological method requires a crucial first step, called the *phenomenological reduction*, which should be explained here.

The phenomenological reduction is a central concept in Husserl's method of studying consciousness. Husserl considered this topic to be "the hardest thing of all in philosophy,"¹⁹ and it remained a theme he constantly recalled throughout his career.²⁰ We shall look at the notion as it is developed in Husserl's *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book (Ideas I)*. Husserl here discusses our "natural standpoint" or "natural attitude" — the non-reflective, believing attitude with which we experience things in our everyday life. Husserl's phenomenology seeks to understand our life as it is lived in this "natural attitude," but in order to proceed, we must first perform a "reduction" of this natural attitude. This initial "reduction" consists in a suspension of our natural convictions about our world; this alone will enable us to examine our experience of the world reflectively. Husserl also calls this

¹⁸ For some pioneering works in the phenomenology of mysticism, see Walther 1955, Albrecht 1951, 1982.

¹⁹ Husserl 1968, p.79.

²⁰ The different ways in which the *epoché* may be performed lead to different ways in which Husserl's philosophy has been interpreted. I here follow

“reduction” the *epoché*, or “bracketing, of our beliefs. The *epoché* is not a denial or doubt of our beliefs, but a neutralization of our conviction in these beliefs. Husserl calls this the “*phenomenological*” *epoché* to distinguish it from the skeptics’ use of the term. The *epoché* may be applied to various beliefs concerning different objects, but its most radical application is to our very conviction concerning the existence and nature of our “natural world.” This is the conviction that our world is “something that exists out there” (*Ideas I* § 30), continuously present for us spatial-temporally, and filled with objects that exist in a definite and orderly manner independent of my act of cognizing them. By means of the *epoché* we “bracket” or suspend our previous ontological and metaphysical convictions regarding the nature of the “objective,” or “transcendent,” world. We also bracket the notion of *causality*, which Husserl takes to be inherent to our view of the “natural world.” We even “bracket” all the results of the natural sciences, which, according to Husserl, are founded on the natural world-view. This, again, does not entail any skeptical denial or doubt of the world’s existence or of the results of scientific research.²¹ Rather, we suspend that accepting or trusting attitude we

Sokolowski’s interpretation. See Sokolowski 1974. Chapter 7.

²¹ For Husserl, the *epoché* does finally lead to the rejection of everyday realism and to a *transcendental idealism*. But the *epoché* itself is nothing more than a simple procedure, a step taken in a phenomenological inquiry that does not aim at the demolition of any particular view. As performed by different philosophers, the *epoché* has led to different conclusions concerning the metaphysical nature of our world.

have when we experience and cognize the world, so that instead of *living* in those cognizing acts we may attain a reflexive stance towards them. We may then look at the world and the things around us not as what they are usually taken to be, in our everyday attitude, but *as objects that are experienced and given to consciousness*, thus fulfilling the Husserlian motto of “to the things themselves” [*zu den Sachen selbst*].

In performing a phenomenological analysis of mystical experience, a similar *epoché* must be performed. We have to suspend, first of all, our own convictions concerning the existence and nature of God and the world, whether these be atheistic, theistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, or whatever.²² We must also place in brackets the mystic’s own theological or philosophical points of view — the validity of the viewpoint, be it Platonic, Aristotelian, Augustinian, Thomistic, or whatever, must not be assumed while we try to understand the mystic’s experience. This does not mean, however, that we have to turn a blind eye to what the mystic himself believes. On the contrary, we must take the mystics’ beliefs *as they are being believed in*, and we must seek to understand the mystic’s experience against the backdrop of his beliefs. Ours is not a theological study seeking to understand God’s nature, or to find out whether He has one. We are seeking to understand the very consciousness through which God is *experienced*

²² Husserl mentions that besides the transcendence of the world, the transcendence

by the mystic. As with all phenomenological studies, we are not searching for any *normative* theory of mysticism. We are not trying to come up with empirical “laws” that must govern different elements of the mystic’s experience in causal relationships, nor are we attempting to derive a *norm* for (good, great, genuine) mystical experience. Rather, we seek only to *describe* in a new light the mystic’s experience. This alone will allow us to assess properly the epistemic significance of mysticism.

1.4 The Mysticism of St. John of the Cross

Another weakness of both the empiricists’ and the “perennial philosophers” treatments of mysticism is that they are usually based on a wide selection of writings by mystics belonging to different religious traditions. While that might seem at first to afford a broad base of discussion and to guarantee the “generality” or “universality” of results, it in fact suffers from severe shortcomings. The analyses are usually based on small excerpts from mystical literature that are taken out of context, and the meanings and connotations of special terms are seldom carefully ascertained.

In this study we shall focus on a single mystic: St. John of the Cross. There are three good reasons for choosing St. John. First, he has written extensively on different types of mystical experience in a highly systematic fashion. His detailed

of God must also be bracketed in his *epoché*. See *Ideas I* § 58.

descriptions and careful comments on his own experiences easily lend themselves to philosophical analysis. Second, St. John's works are frequently quoted and discussed, so they form a good basis for discussion and dialogue with other philosophers and religious scholars working on mysticism. And third, St. John is recognized as one of the greatest Christian mystics, both deeply rooted and highly influential in the Christian mystical tradition. Conclusions drawn from his works can be trusted to have relatively broad validity, at least among Christian mystics. Even if St. John's representative value were to be called into question, the record of his remarkable experience remains a rich source for research in the philosophy of mysticism.

1.5 Summary of this Dissertation

I must stress at the outset that the present examination does not purport to engage in "St. John scholarship." The present work makes no attempt to enter into critical debate having to do with matters concerning historical or philological details. The present study does not concern itself with such burning issues as why the eleventh stanza in the Codex of Jaén of 'Cántico Espiritual' is not included in the codex of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. The aim of this dissertation is far more modest. Our goal is simply to construct a new model of mystical knowledge that will fit St. John's descriptions of his own experiences, and which will allow for an effective defense

of the epistemic value of mysticism. Let me briefly summarize what I shall be doing in each chapter.

In Chapter 2, I shall give a concise summary of the life and works of St. John of the Cross and of his views on the human person and mystical union. In Chapter 3, I shall map out St. John's classifications of various types of mystical knowledge and the essential characteristics of each type. Together with the material presented in Chapter 2, these classifications will provide us with the necessary background for an informed examination of St. John's mysticism. In Chapter 4, I shall take a critical look at the perceptual model of mysticism proposed by William Alston. This chapter will serve the dual purpose of illustrating the shortcomings of such a model of mystical knowledge and introducing some of the basic concepts of the phenomenological method that I shall subsequently employ in the examination of St. John's mysticism. In Chapter 5, I shall take some tentative phenomenological steps towards the mysticism of St. John by exploring the preparation for the reception of mystical experience supplied by contemplative prayer. It has been widely believed that mystics have to abandon all thought, concepts, and understanding in order to enter into mystical experiences, and this has often been used in support of the argument that mystical experiences are states of "pure consciousness" that lie beyond language and any human understanding. In this fifth chapter, I shall challenge this view with an

alternative position formulated through a phenomenological analysis of St. John's contemplative prayer.

After analyzing what happens as the mystic is trying to enter a mystical state, we shall consider the mystical experiences and mystical knowledge that St. John finally attains to. In Chapter 6 we shall explore one of the highest peaks of mystical knowledge that a mystic can ever hope to reach: the knowledge of God's attributes. We shall note along the way some important features of this knowledge that must be incorporated in any sound model of mystical knowledge. In Chapter 7, I shall elaborate my new model of the knowledge of God's attributes. This model, revolving around what I call the resonance of love, might help us at least better to appreciate the power and sincerity of St. John's writings. In Chapter 8, I shall conclude this dissertation by discussing the implications of our model for the philosophy of mysticism. I shall also discuss how our new model, or one similar to it, might be applied to the writings of other mystics from other religious traditions, and what this new model might have to teach us about the nature of mystical knowledge.

2. An Introduction to the Mysticism of St. John of the Cross

The purpose of this chapter is to give a brief introduction to the mysticism of St. John of the Cross. It will provide the necessary background for our discussions in the chapters to follow.

2.1 St. John of the Cross: The Person

Juan de Yepes, later to be known as St. John of the Cross, was born to a humble family in Fontiveros, a small village on the central plateau of Spain, in 1542. His father died when he was seven, and a few years later his mother moved the family to Medina del Campo, where John started his education. At the age of twenty-one he graduated from a Jesuit college in Medina and entered the Carmelite Order. In 1564 he entered the University of Salamanca, then one of the greatest centers of learning in Europe. In this university, where Thomism had a great influence, John began to develop his interest in mysticism.

St. John distinguished himself in his three years of study and was elected "Prefect of Students" in his college. In 1567, he completed his courses and was ordained to the priesthood. That year also marked a turning point in John's life when he met Teresa of Jesus (who would later become known as St. Teresa of Ávila), a Carmelite nun who had started a reform in the Carmelite Order.

Dissatisfied with the easiness and the laxity of the religious life in the Order, St. Teresa founded a new convent based upon the stricter, more severe, original Carmelite rule of life. She wished to open new houses under the same rule, and John, who already had the desire to embrace a stricter style of living, was willing to help. Together, they founded the Reform's first house for men at Duruelo, in 1568, at which time John changed his name to Juan de la Cruz ("John of the Cross").

The Teresian Reform continued to grow and was met by severe resistance by the unreformed, or the so-called "mitigated." Being the confessor of a convent at Ávila, where much political action took place around Teresa, St. John was soon drawn into the conflict between the two sides — the Calced (the "shoed," that is, the mitigated) and the Discalced (the "barefooted," the reformed, to which St. John belonged). After several unsuccessful attempts by the Calced to induce him to abandon the Reform, St. John was kidnapped and imprisoned in a monastery in Toledo. In his nine months of imprisonment he suffered various abuses, and was confined to a dark, small cell for most of the time. It was during this time that St. John started writing his great poems. Among his compositions in this period were 30 stanzas of *The Spiritual Canticle*, and, probably, his famous poem, *The Dark Night*.

St. John made a dramatic escape in 1578. In the following years he assumed various offices in the Discalced Order, acting as administrator as well as

spiritual director for various Discalced communities. This was also the period in which he composed his major works on mysticism. In 1591 he was drawn into another round of power struggle, this time among the Discalced themselves, between the Provincial of the Discalced Order, Nicolás Doria, and his predecessor, Jerome Gracian. When John spoke out against Doria's planned treatment of Gracian he was stripped of all his offices and sent into exile in Andalusia. About one month after his arrival in Andalusia, he fell ill and was transferred to a small monastery in Ubeda, where he died on December 14, at the age of forty-nine. He was beatified in 1675, canonized in 1726, and was declared 'Doctor of the Church Universal' by Pope Pius XI in 1926.¹

2.2 His Works

St. John has been considered one of the greatest poets in Spanish history.² He has left us about two dozen poems and four major prose works: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living*

¹ The above biographical data are drawn mainly from Peers 1943, Payne 1990, pp.4-7, and Wilhelmsen 1985, pp.1-4. For more details, see Bruno 1932 and Crisógono 1958, which is now considered the standard biography of St. John. For more contemporary treatments of the saint's life, see Brennan 1973, an often-quoted work, and Hardy 1982.

² See Wilhelmsen 1985, p. 126. In 1952, St. John was named the patron of Spanish poets by the Spanish Ministry of National Education (see John of the Cross 1991, p.33).

Flame of Love.³ The first two of these prose works form a complete book, and were written as a commentary on St. John's own poem, *The Dark Night*. The other two prose works are again commentaries on poems bearing the same titles. St. John's purpose for writing those works was to provide practical guidance for those seeking spiritual perfection. While the poems are the primary expressions of St. John's mystical experiences, it is in the commentaries that St. John expounds his experiences and gives us his views on mysticism.⁴

The current study will be based mainly on the four prose works by St. John. Rich in experiential and philosophical content and highly systematic in their organization, the four works form a good platform for our study of St. John's mysticism.

2.3 St. John's Place in the History of Spirituality

Despite the profound quality of his works, St. John was not very well known outside of Spain until the early 1900s, when critical editions of his works were first published and scholarly interest in him arose. Since then, St. John has become one of the best known Christian mystics, both inside and outside Christendom. Within the Catholic circle, St. John's works "have become almost

³ John of the Cross 1991.

⁴ For John's own comments on the relationship between his poems and his commentaries, see C, Prologue.

the norm for interpreting the mystical ascent to God.”⁵ St. John’s influence can be easily felt in contemporary discussions of mysticism: major works in the field at least quote him or include passing remarks on him.

St. John’s importance in Christian mysticism is one of the reasons why the present study is based on him. He is an important representative of a major tradition in Christian mysticism, and his works should not be neglected by any general theory of mysticism. A careful look at St. John’s mysticism will allow us to disqualify those philosophies of mysticism which boldly claim to be “universal” yet remain unable to do justice to St. John’s mysticism — a number of such theories will be discussed in later chapters. A study of St. John will also provide a solid basis for my own account of the nature of mystical knowledge: with a strong foothold in a major mystic like St. John, the account can then be more confidently extended to a wider range of mystics.⁶

⁵ Egan 1991, p.450. Dicken (1963) comments, “Since . . . the turn of the century, attention [of spiritual theologians] has been steadily more and more sharply focused upon the writings of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross, until today they are regarded by most continental scholars as the point of reference to which all other writings must be brought.”(p.5)

⁶ In the concluding chapter of this dissertation (8.2), I am going to discuss how my theory of mystical knowledge can be applied to the experience of other mystics.

2.4 St. John's Theory of the Human Person

In order to understand St. John properly, we first need to understand the psychological theory that underlies his thought. St. John's philosophical outlook is basically Thomistic: this is a point generally agreed upon by the commentators⁷ and it is easily verifiable by a reading of his works. Therefore, we are going to find in St. John a human psychology quite similar to that offered by St. Thomas, yet different at some crucial points.

2.4.1 *Body and Soul*

Though not explicitly stated, given that St. John subscribes to a basically Thomistic understanding of the human person, it is safe to say that for St. John, the human person is a hylomorphic composition of soul and body.⁸ The relationship between the two is that between "form" and "matter," in the Aristotelian sense, so that the soul is the form of the material body — it is in fact its animating principle. For John, the soul and the body form "a unity in one suppositum" (C13.4), in contrast to the Platonic view, according to which the soul

⁷ See Dicken 1963, p.328. Payne 1990, p.17. For a discussion of the differences between St. John and St. Thomas, see Payne 1990, p.44, n1.

⁸ The term "soul" (*alma*) enjoys three meanings in St. John's works. It can refer to the person as a whole; it can refer to the non-material aspect of the person (i.e., the *anima* as referred to by the scholastics); or it can refer to the "spirit," the higher part of the person, consisting of intellect, memory, and will (Nieto 1979, p.58). Here I adopt the second usage of the term by St. John, just to render his theory of

is a separate entity in its own right. Some commentators argue that St. John holds a Platonic view of the soul, and their argument is based on a literal understanding of St. John's references to the body as a "prison" for the soul (A 1.3.3, 1.15.1, 2.8.4, C 18.1). Such an interpretation, which runs contrary to the whole of St. John's system, is not really defensible.⁹

For St. John, the human body cannot, through its natural capacity, contribute to the soul's mystical union with God. Rather, due to its corrupted nature after Adam's fall, God's supernatural communications to the soul will cause intense suffering to the body (N 2.1.2, C 14.19, 19.1, 39.14, F2.13). The result is that the body becomes an impediment for mystical union because the bodily sufferings create in the person a tendency to "pull back" and withdraw from the supernatural communications (C 13.4-5, F2.13). But such weaknesses in the body will be removed when the senses have been purified through the soul's "Dark Night." A new level of psycho-physical integration is then finally achieved, producing a harmony among various parts of the person, and the body is no more a hindrance to divine union (F4.11-12); it even enjoys certain benefits caused by the union (F 2.13, 22).¹⁰

human nature clear.

⁹ For a discussion of this point, see Nieto 1979, p.57, Payne 1990, p.17.

¹⁰ For how the body is involved in mystical experiences, see also C 7.4, 26.5, 28.2.8, F 3.7.

2.4.2 The Soul

According to St. John, the human soul consists of two parts: the “sensitive part” (*parte sensitiva*) and the “rational” (*racional*) or “spiritual” (*espiritual*) part. In relationship with each other, “the sensitive part” is also called the “lower” or “exterior” part, and the “rational part,” the “higher” or “interior” part. (A1.13.10, A2.2.2, N 1.4.2, C18.7). For St. John the two parts are in close relationship with each other, forming a single subject of experience (N 1.4.2, N 2.1.1, N 2.3.1). The two parts of the soul are subdivided into different “faculties” (*potencias*): the sensitive part into “exterior” and “interior senses,” the rational part into “the intellect,” “the memory” and “the will.” In the following we will look at these five faculties one by one.

2.4.2(a) Exterior senses

The “exterior senses” include our senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. The term does not refer to the organs for the senses, which are parts of the body; rather, it refers to the faculties or “powers” in the soul for receiving the “sensible species” of particular colours, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. The exterior senses are the soul’s channels of access to the external world, and they constitute the basis of all natural knowledge. St. John subscribes to the Thomistic view that:

... the soul is like a *tabula rasa* [a clean slate] when God infuses it into the body. Without the knowledge it receives through its senses it would be ignorant, because no knowledge is communicated to it naturally from any other source. (A 1.3.3)

2.4.2(b) Interior Senses

According to the scholastics, the sensible species received by the exterior senses have to be received again and organized by the *interior senses* in order for internal, sensible representations of exterior objects to arise. Aquinas believes that there exist in the soul four interior senses: (a) the central or common sense (*sensus communis*) which receives and organizes *all* sensible forms together internally; (b) the imagination, which is a “storehouse” of sensible species perceived by the common sense, and which is also responsible for creating objects and images by separation and combination of sensible species in storage; (c) the estimative sense, which performs limited judgments on sensible, individual objects (concerning, for example, their utility); (d) memory, which is a storehouse for the judgments made by the estimative power, and which recalls things according to the judgments passed on them before.¹¹

¹¹ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (henceforth ST) I 78.4. We might note in passing the difference between Aquinas’ and today’s ordinary use of the terms “imagination” and “memory,” and particularly the “storehouse” function of the imagination.

Concerning the number of interior senses, St. John takes a position different from that of Aquinas:

We are speaking of two interior bodily senses: imagination [*imaginación*] and phantasy [*fantasía*]. They are of service to each other in due order because one is discursive with images and the other forms them. For our discussion there will be no need to differentiate between them. This should be remembered if we do not mention them both explicitly. All that these senses, then, can receive and construct are termed imaginations and phantasms [*imaginaciones y fantasías*]. These are forms represented to the interior senses through material images and figures. (A 2.12.3)

From the above passage we see that St. John only recognizes two interior senses: the imagination and the phantasy. The phantasy corresponds to what Aquinas and others call the “central sense” or “common sense.” This identification is confirmed by St. John’s only mentioning of the *sensus communis* in F 3.69, where he refers to it as “the common sense of the phantasy.” The same passage also ascribes to the phantasy the “storehouse” function for sensible forms. “Imagination” in St. John, then, retains only the “discursive” function of separation and combination of sensible forms to construct different images.¹² However, as stated in the passage just quoted, St. John does not usually draw a

¹² The functions of phantasy and imagination are also discussed in A 2.16.2. Payne (1990) points out that St. John’s view of the phantasy was probably influenced by Avicenna (p.21).

distinction between the two interior senses; sometimes the term “phantasy” refers to all the functions of the interior senses.¹³

There is another important difference between Aquinas and St. John: instead of regarding memory as an interior sense, St. John makes it a “spiritual faculty” in the rational part of the soul, alongside the intellect and the will. The faculty of memory will be discussed later.

2.4.2(c) The Intellect

While Aquinas denies that there is a rational faculty of memory,¹⁴ St. John follows the Augustinian tradition’s three-fold division of the higher or rational part of the soul into the intellect, the memory, and the will.

The intellect is the soul’s faculty for understanding. On the function of the intellect, St. John follows Aquinas closely. Aquinas believes that material objects are not in themselves understandable. “A thing is intelligible only by its definition and essence.”¹⁵ In other words, a thing is understood only when we recognize the “essence” of it. For a material object, the essence is the form, whose existence as such depends on the matter of the object. The essence, in this case, is said to be existing “materially” in the object. For the subject to know the object is for her to

¹³ See, for example, A 2.16.2: there, the phantasy is also referred to as the “mirror” within the soul, which reflects or receives perceptual objects interiorly.

¹⁴ ST I 79.6.

¹⁵ *On Being and Essence*. Chapter 1, trans. Maurer 1949.

have the essence of the object existing “intentionally” in her soul, in separation from the matter of the object. This is made possible by the operation of the intellect. For both Aquinas and St. John, the intellect is divided into two parts: the “active” or “agent” intellect, and the “passive” or “possible” intellect. While the active intellect is the agent that “abstracts” the intelligible species from the sensible images or “phantasms” formed by the interior senses, the passive intellect is the receptacle of the “abstracted” essences or the intelligible species. (ST I, 79,3-4; C 39.12).¹⁶

Aquinas also teaches that the intellect has two other functions besides the apprehension of essences: (1) making judgments through the division and combination of intelligible species, and (2) reasoning, in the sense of making logical inferences.¹⁷ For St. John too, the intellect will perform these functions.¹⁸

2.4.2(d) *Memory*

The spiritual faculty of memory retains records of that which has entered into the interior senses and to the intellect, and also recalls those records when needed (A 2.16.2, 3.2.4, 3.7.1, 3.14.1). It also serves as a “storehouse” for intelligible species and knowledge acquired by the intellect, much as the *phantasy* serves as the

¹⁶ For more on Aquinas’ theory of knowledge, see Copleston 1993, pp.388-97, Davies 1992, pp.125-8.

¹⁷ *Exposition of Aristotle on Interpretation*, I, Lect.1. Also, see ST I 79.8.

¹⁸ See, for example, A 2.16.2, where John mentions the intellect’s function of

storehouse for sense impressions.¹⁹ Due to its recording and storage function, St. John likes to describe the memory as a possessive function of the soul (A 2.6.3, 3.15.1). Certain functions of the intellect depend on the memory— for example, judgment and reasoning will require the recalling of concepts and objects whenever they are not present to the intellect. Imagination, which consists of dividing and combining of species that are previously apprehended, also requires the use of memory (A 2.8.5).

It has also been suggested that, for St. John, the memory not only recalls the past, but also anticipates the future.²⁰ Some go even further and suggest that for St. John, memory is the source of our temporal experience; and given that

judgment.

¹⁹ Dicken 1963, p.331. Payne (1990, p.40) suggests that the memory cannot be an archive for knowledge, or the “emptying of the memory,” which happens during the soul’s “dark night,” will lead to the loss of acquired knowledge, contrary to what St. John claims. But St. John applies the notion of “emptiness” to all faculties of the soul, even including the interior senses (N 1.11.2, 2.6.4, 2.8.5, C16.11, F 3.54). If “emptiness” of an archival faculty means losing whatever is stored up, everything retained in the soul would be wiped out and lost forever after the “dark night,” including the sensible species stored up in the phantasy — and that surely does not happen, according to St. John. Also, Payne’s suggestion that intelligible species and knowledge are stored in the “central sense of the soul” implies that the “central sense” is another spiritual faculty separate from the intellect, the memory, and the will — an idea that he does not seem to support later (p.44). Thus, Payne’s position seems to be incoherent.

²⁰ See Dicken 1963, p.331.

human existence is fundamentally temporal, the memory becomes a “totalizing power” that constitutes the personality by orienting it towards the future.²¹

2.4.2(e) *The Will*

The will is the highest governing power in the person and directs all the soul’s faculties, passions, and appetites (A 3.16.2). The other two spiritual faculties depend on the will for their operation: “. . . the intellect and other faculties cannot admit or deny anything without the intervention of the will” (A 3.14.1). But the dependence also goes in the other direction: at least during its natural operation, the soul can only will or love what the intellect understands clearly (C26.8, F 3.49).

To understand the nature of the will, we have to go back to Aquinas: for him, every natural form has its own inclinations. An inclination is called a *natural appetite* (the word *appetite* comes from *appetere*, which means “to seek”) when the inclination follows naturally from the form (like the inclination of fire to rise). It is a *sensory appetite* when it is an inclination in an animal towards that which is perceived by the senses. It is an *intellectual appetite* when it is an inclination towards what is apprehended by the intellect. The faculty of *intellectual appetite*

²¹ See Wilhelmsen 1985, pp.15-7. The point, which is highly interesting, seems to lack direct textual support: I think it is best conceived as a creative way to read St. John in an “existential” approach

in human beings is called the will.²² It is the “higher appetite,” under which other appetites (except involuntary ones) are subjected.²³ The will is necessarily directed towards what the intellect judges to be good.²⁴ When a person sees something as good and the will directs the person towards obtaining it, we have voluntary actions—actions with conscious aims in mind.²⁵

Although the will always aims at what is apprehended to be good, this does not mean that human beings will always move towards that which is *actually* good for them, for the rational faculties can be affected by the passions. Both Aquinas and St. John, following Boethius, recognize four principle passions in the soul: joy, sadness, hope, and fear (ST I, II 25.4, C 20-1.9-15, A 3.16.6). They are described as “motions” or “movements” in the soul, responses stirred up by the objects of a person’s appetites (ST I, II 22.2, N 2.11.6, A 3.20.3).²⁶ They may

²² For Aquinas on appetites, see ST I 80. On the will, see ST I 82.

²³ ST I 81.3.

²⁴ ST I 82.3ad2.

²⁵ ST I,II 6.3. For more on voluntary action according to Aquinas and how this notion differs from the modern popular notion, see Davies 1992, pp. 221–4. For a different notion of free will in St. John, which suggests that the will is not free when overwhelmed by passions, see N 2.13.3.

²⁶ Aquinas also emphasizes that the passions belong to the sensory appetites (ST I 82.5 ad1, 79.2 ad2, 95.2) and they involve physiological changes to the body (ST I,II 22.2 ad2.3). Neither point is mentioned by St. John, who simply treats the passions as affective, evaluative responses to any apprehension, be it bodily or spiritual, natural or supernatural (A 3.17.1). For more on Aquinas on the passions, see ST I,II 22- 48.

impede human reason, so that what is evil is taken to be good,²⁷ and the will thus assents to it. Thus, the control of passions comes to be a major challenge on the way to moral perfection.²⁸

St. John's notion of passions [*pasiones*] deserves further explanation here. Another word he uses for passion is "affection" [*affecciones*] (translated "emotions" by Kavanaugh & Rodriguez). St. John does not draw a clear distinction between these two terms, and what he says about the "passions" would clearly apply to the "affections" (for example, in A 3.16). The usage of the phrase "affections of the will" (e.g., in A 2.23.2, 3.19.1, N 2.13.8, C 27.7) seems to suggest that by "affections" St. John indicates those passions which are excited by objects of the will, i.e., objects which are first apprehended by the intellect and judged to be good. Thus, "affections" are associated with voluntary appetites and actions.²⁹ "Passions" caused by involuntary appetites (for example, wanting water when one feels thirsty) and the involuntary actions which result are of little concern to St. John, who does not think that they can be hindrances for moral perfection (A 1.12.6).

²⁷ ST I 79.2ad2, 95.2. The point is emphasized by St. John. See, for example: A 2.21.8, 3.16.6, 3.19.3, 3.20.2.

²⁸ This is a topic to which St. John devotes the last two-thirds of Book III of the Ascent. Notice that due to the relation between human passions and appetites, the scholastics, and St. John included (A 3.16-45), like to treat human emotions as something belonging to the will, the appetitive faculty of the spirit.

²⁹ Dicken 1963, p.338. Luévano 1990, p.57.

A term in St. John's works which is related to "passions" or "affections" is the term *sentimiento*, which is usually translated "feelings." Dicken (1963, pp. 340-341) points out that for St. John the term *sentimiento* has a sense of objectivity and direct contact not present in the English term "feeling" — the term is a perceptual one, coming from the verb *sentir*, which refers primarily to tactile sensations, but can also be used to refer to all of the five senses. Even the "central sense" which has been discussed earlier is referred to by the term *sentido común*.³⁰ Thus, while similar to "passions" and "affections," the term "feelings" in St. John has a "cognitive" overtone that is missing in the other two terms.³¹ This "cognitive" nature of "feelings" will in fact become an important in our study, as we shall see in the chapters to come.

³⁰ Notice that in Peers' (1934) translation, "*sentir*" and related terms are translated into "perceive" and "touch." (e.g., C 14-15.13, F 3.64). Comparing with the now popular translation by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Peers' translations then are more in line with Dicken's idea of the proper sense of the verb.

³¹ Dicken (1963) even makes the stronger claim that the term "feeling" *never* has the sense of an "emotion" even when the context may suggest so (pp.340-41). In saying that, however, he seems to have ignored the intimate relationship between "feelings" and emotions as shown in many passages, including those he cites for his argument (e.g., C 14-15.13). Also, Dicken's claim runs contrary to St. John's remark that the "spiritual feelings" [*sentimientos espirituales*] belong to the will, not the intellect (A 2.32.3).

2.4.3 *The Sense and Substance of the Soul*

There are two more notions in St. John concerning the human soul that many commentators have found obscure. They are the “sense of the soul” and the “substance of the soul.” and both expressions appear in an important passage in

The Living Flame of Love:

By the sense of the soul is here understood the virtue and vigor that belong to the substance of the soul that it may perceive [*sentir*] and have fruition of the objects of the spiritual faculties by means of which it tastes the wisdom and love and communication of God. Hence in this line the soul calls these three faculties — memory, understanding and will—the deep caverns of sense: for by means of them and in them the soul has a deep perception and experience of the grandeurs of the wisdom and the excellences of God. . . . All these things [the intelligence, the sweetness, the fruition, the delights, and so forth, that come from God] are received and established in this sense of the soul, which as I say, is the soul’s virtue and capacity for perceiving, possessing and having pleasure in everything, and the caverns of the faculties minister this to it, even as to the ordinary sense [*sentido común*, the *sensus communis* of the scholastics] of the fancy there flock the bodily senses, with the forms of their objects, and this sense of the soul, therefore, which has become a receptacle and store-house for the grandeurs of God, is enlightened and made rich to the extent that it attains this lofty and glorious possession. (F 3.69. Peers)

We can conclude the following from this passage: (a) the sense of the soul is “the receptacle” for perceiving and enjoying all objects of the spiritual faculties, including the “grandeurs of the wisdom and the excellences of God”: (b) it is also a “store-house” for “possessing” or “keeping in store” that which has been perceived and enjoyed: (c) it perceives through the three spiritual faculties of

intellect which are said to “minister” to it; and (d) the “sense of the soul” is said to belong to the “substance of the soul,” as its power for apprehension.³²

But what then is the “substance of the soul” which St. John talks about here? The term appears in quite a number of instances in St. John’s writings.³³ It is being described as the locus of some of the most sublime mystical experiences — particularly the “touch” of God; it is where God dwells in the soul, and is united with it. Since the three spiritual faculties are also described as those which receive God’s communications and those by which the soul is united with God, a question then arises: how are the spiritual faculties related to the “substance of the soul”? Apparently, St. John does draw a distinction between them by explicitly referring to “the substance and faculties of the soul” in a number of places (e.g., N 2.9.9, F 1.17) and by describing different things that happen to the “substance” and the “faculties” at the same time during certain mystical experiences.³⁴

While some suggest that the substance of the soul and the related “sense of the soul” are something different from the three spiritual faculties, Dicken (1963, pp.368-74) and Payne (1990, pp. 42-44) argue that this cannot be the case. They

³² We can therefore identify the “sense of the soul” as the “soul’s power of touch” explicitly mentioned in C 14-5.13, and implicitly contained in those passages which describe God’s “substantial touch” on the soul (N 2.23.12, 2.24.3, C 19.4, F 1.17, F 2.16-22). Also see Dicken 1963, p.332 and Payne 1990, p.24.

³³ For example, in A 2.24.4, 2.32.3-4; N 2.9.3, 2.13.3, 2.23.11-12; C 14-15.12-18, 25.8, 39.8; F 1.9.1.14, 4.4-15.

³⁴ For example, see C 14-15.12-13, F 1.17, 1.20, 2.34.

believe that the “sense” and “substance” of the soul are equivalent to one another, and they simply represent *the totality of the soul's spiritual faculties*. Payne elaborates that by the two terms St. John refers particularly to the highest mystical experience for the soul, while the three faculties refer to the natural operations of soul, or to mystical experiences of lower levels. I do not find the treatment by Dicken and Payne satisfactory. They cannot explain the redundancy of the phrase “the substance and the faculties of the soul” which St. John uses. It is clearly inadequate just to identify the “substance” with the highest mystical experiences and the “faculties” with the natural operations of the soul, since St. John has described how *both* participate differently in the highest mystical experiences.³⁵ Also, I do not think that the “substance of the soul” should be equated with the “sense of the soul.” Though St. John does not necessarily use the term in a strict, scholastic sense, one can sense from the texts that his usage of the term “substance of the soul” retains a sense of an *actuality*, a sense of a “subject” on which or within which certain things happen (like the touch of God). On the other hand, the “sense of the soul” remains a “sense,” a “capacity” or a *potency*, which cannot become a “substance.” Also, separating the two makes it more sensible for F 3.69 (the passage just quoted) to claim that the “sense of the soul” is a capacity which belongs to the “substance of the soul.”

³⁵ Ibid.

The two notions are “admittedly obscure” in St. John, as is remarked by Payne (1990, p.44). However, later in this dissertation we shall analyze St. John’s experience in detail using the phenomenological method, and we will come up with new ways to understand the “sense” and the “substance” of the soul.³⁶

2.5 The Mystical Journey of the Soul According to St. John

According to St. John, the soul attains to its height of mystical consciousness through a dynamic journey. A basic understanding of the mystical journey of the soul is crucial for a proper understanding of John’s mysticism; yet, to clearly explain in details what the mystical journey consists of would be an enormous task which exceeds the scope of this dissertation. In the following, I will briefly explain the mystical journey according to its goal, its nature, and its stages.

2.5.1 *The Goal: Union with God*

In the prologues of all the four mystical treatises by St. John, he identifies the goal of the mystics as “union with God” (A Prologue, N Prologue, F Prologue).³⁷ which is also qualified as the “ultimate state of perfection” of the soul (C Theme, N Prologue).

³⁶ The “substance of the soul” will be discussed again in 7.3.2(a).

³⁷ In the “Theme” of *The Spiritual Canticle*, the goal of the mystic is identified as “spiritual marriage,” which is the ultimate stage of “union with God,” as we shall see.

Before going into the precise nature of such “union,” it should first be acknowledged that such a goal of the mystical journey is by no means unique to St. John’s mysticism, nor is it a goal only for the mystics. Christian theologians, including Aquinas, clearly identify God Himself as the “Absolute Good,” the ultimate object of the human which alone can give the soul complete happiness (*beatitudo*) (ST I, II 2.8). Thus, the soul attains its perfection — fulfills its ultimate destiny — by possessing God through a union with him, in which God is seen (by the intellect) “as he is” (ST I 62.1) and loved as he loves. Such “vision” of God and love for God, which is essentially God’s own self-knowledge and self-love, is possible for the soul only when it participates in God’s very nature (ST I 12.4), and thus becomes like him, at which stage the soul is said to be “made deiform” (ST I 12.5). This usually happens only during the “beatific vision” enjoyed by the saints in the afterlife. But, on some rare occasions, such union is also granted to persons still living (ST I, II 175.3).³⁸

St. John’s notion of union with God is basically the same as that of Aquinas. It is a foretaste of the beatific vision, in which the soul is “deified”:

... It is a total transformation in the Beloved, in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine. God through

³⁸ For Aquinas on human happiness, see ST I.II 2; on vision of God, see ST I 12; on contemplation, see ST I.II 180; on rapture, see ST I.II 175.3. Also see Davies 1992, Chapter 12-4, in which some of these topics are discussed.

participation, insofar as possible in this life. . . . It is accordingly the highest state attainable in this life (C 22.3).

This union consists of a vision of God that is received by the passive intellect (C 14-15.14).³⁹ In this vision all the virtues and goodness of God are also received and enjoyed — since in God, his essence, being, and virtues etc., are one (F 3.2). This vision transforms the soul, so that now the soul does not just enjoy God's virtues and beauty (C 36.5), but "conforms"⁴⁰ to God in all his faculties:

In this way God makes it die to all that is not naturally God. . . . This is naught else but His illumination of the understanding with supernatural light, so that it is no more a human understanding but becomes Divine through union with the Divine. In the same way the will is informed with Divine love, so that it is a will that is now no less than Divine, nor does it love otherwise than divinely, for it is made and united in one with the Divine will and love. So, too, it is with the memory; and likewise the affections and desires are all changed and converted divinely, according to God. And thus this soul will now be a soul of heaven, heavenly, and more Divine than human. (N 2.13.11, Peers; also see F 2.34)

³⁹ The nature of such a vision of God is a central concern of this study, and it will be looked at in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

⁴⁰ Dicken (1963, pp.352-62) argues by etymological evidence from medieval Spanish that "union" (*unión*) with God is primarily the soul's "conformity" (*conformar*) to God's will, minimizing the metaphysical and ontological significance of such union to the soul. Though "conformity" to God's will is certainly one important aspect of the union and is sometimes emphasized by St. John (e.g., A 2.5.3-8, A 3.16.3), Dicken's approach fails to capture the richness and complexity of the phenomenon, as we shall see.

Such likeness between God and the soul gives rise to an intimate union between them, which St. John, like many mystics who preceded him, uses the imagery of marriage to describe:

When there is union of love, the image of the Beloved is so sketched in the will, and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. . . . Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love. (C 12.7)

In this state even self-consciousness of the soul seems to disappear in certain occasions of “absorption”:

. . . That deification and exaltation of the mind in God wherein the soul is as if enraptured, immersed in love and wholly one with God, allows it not to take notice of anything soever in the world; and it is withdrawn not only from all other things, but even from itself, and is annihilated, as though it were transformed and dissolved in love, which transformation consists in passing from itself to the Beloved (C 26.14, Peers).

Besides the comparison with the union of the lovers, St. John also explains the union in some very lively analogies: the soul is like a log of wood penetrated by fire (which symbolizes God) and turned completely into fire (N 2.10.1);⁴¹ it is also compared with the air within a flame, in which the air (the soul) is enkindled

⁴¹ In F 1.16, C 26.4, St. John draws a similar analogy, using a piece of coal instead of a log.

and intermingled with the fire (God) (F 3.9);⁴² the soul is like the light of a candle or a star that got absorbed into the light of the sun (C 22.3, 26.4); it is also like a stainless window illuminated by the sun, in which “to all appearances the window will be identical with the ray of sunlight and shine just as the sun’s ray [which represents God]” (A 2.5.6; see also C 26.4). However, St. John maintains that the soul does not lose its identity and become God in an unqualified sense; to the “light-window” analogy, he adds:

Although in reality the window has nature distinct from that of the ray itself, however much it may resemble it, yet we may say that that window is a ray of the sun or is light by participation. And the soul is like this window, whereupon is ever beating (or, to express it better, wherein is ever dwelling) this Divine light of the Being of God according to nature, which we have described. (A 2.5.6 Peers)

So, in the union the soul’s “nature” or “substance” remains unchanged;⁴³ but it is united with God in “one spirit and love” (C 22.3), becomes God by participation and “appear[s] to be God” (C 22.4).⁴⁴ The human nature of the

⁴² Dicken (1963, p.465) reminds us that for people of St. John’s time, burning is not a process of combination with oxygen, but a process of “transmutation,” in which matter takes up the “form” of fire. The idea, once understood, makes the two metaphors self-explanatory.

⁴³ For Aquinas the “nature” of a thing is its “essence” (*On Being and Essence*, I); St. John seems to employ the same meaning of the word here. Also, in F 2.34 he refers to the difference between the deified soul and God as one of “substance,” since the soul cannot undergo a “substantial change” and become God.

⁴⁴ The phrase, however, does not imply that the union is only a superficial or apparent one: see C 26.1.

mystic is not annihilated, and the deified mystic remains a “rational animal,” an animated composite of form and matter, with its sensual and spiritual faculties.

2.5.2 The Journey: the Dark Night

St. John has developed three metaphors that capture the process of mystical transformation of the soul into God: (a) the metaphor of the “dark night,” mainly developed in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*; (b) the metaphor of the lovers, developed mainly in *The Spiritual Canticle*; and (c) the metaphor of the flame, which is developed mainly in *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Living Flame of Love*. Of the three, the metaphor “dark night” is the most famous, and in the following we will use it to explain the mystical journey as described by St. John.⁴⁵

By the metaphor of the “dark night” St. John tries to convey the idea that the mystical journey is a process of privation — by depriving the soul of all that is not God, the soul will attain to God. We have looked at St. John’s idea of “union with God,” which consists of the soul’s total conformity with God; St. John argues that this is possible only if the soul can be emptied and freed from all things. John’s argument can be organized into three steps:

⁴⁵ For a general discussion of the four metaphors, see Luévano 1990.

(a) God is infinitely beyond all creatures, which bear no “essential resemblance” with their Creator, meaning they do not carry God’s essence in them (A 2.8.3). Though they contain “traces” of the Creator’s grandeur and goodness, which can give us a “partial” and “remote” knowledge of God, they fail to give us “essential knowledge” of him — a knowledge of his very essence (C 5, 6).⁴⁶ Creatures, when compared to God’s infinite beauty and goodness, are like darkness contrasted to light.

(b) “Two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject”; John adopts this principle from the scholastics and applies it to (a), drawing the conclusion that any soul which conforms to creatures (which is like darkness in contrast to God, the Light) cannot receive the Divine essence and be united with God.

(c) “Love effects a likeness between the lover and the loved” — another scholastic principle which he adopts (A 1.4.3)— so that love of creatures (or anything which is not God) and attachments to them effect a likeness between the soul and the creatures. Together with (b) it means that love of creatures deprives the soul of conformity and union with God. Thus St. John advises:

⁴⁶ Also from A 1.4.4, where the difference between creatures and God is emphasized to the maximum degree: “All the beauty of creatures compared to the infinite beauty of God is the height of ugliness. . . . All the grace and elegance of creatures compared to God’s grace is utter coarseness and crudity.” However, as C 5 shows, St. John does not deny that the soul can come to limited knowledge about God through nature.

I should like to persuade spiritual persons that the road leading to God does not entail a multiplicity of considerations, methods, manners, and experiences . . . but demands only one thing necessary: true self-denial, exterior and interior, through surrender of self both to suffering for Christ and to annihilation in all things. (A 2.7.8)

Not just the enjoyment of creatures must be forsaken, but the soul must stop seeking any spiritual pleasures and consolations from God, so that she can love God for God's own sake (A 2.7.11). Therefore, *abandonment of all things is the way to God*. Not only is that the necessary way, it is also the sufficient way. As soon as the soul is stripped of all that is not God and reduced to pure detachment and poverty, God necessarily enters into union with the soul, leaving no "vacuum" in the soul, as St. John puts it (A 2.15.5; also A 2.5.4, A 2.16.4, F 3.34). John's famous motto summarizes well the soul's way to God:

To reach satisfaction in all
 desire satisfaction in nothing.
 To come to possess all
 desire the possession of nothing.
 To arrive at being all
 desire to be nothing.
 To come to the knowledge of all
 desire the knowledge of nothing.

To come to enjoy what you have not
 you must go by a way in which you can enjoy not.
 To come to the knowledge you have not
 you must go by a way in which you know not.
 To come to the possession you have not
 you must go by a way you possess not.
 To come to be what you are not
 you must go by a way in which you are not. (A 1.13.11)

St. John's emphasis on total privation as the way to God earns him the popular title of the "doctor of nothing" [*doctor de la nada*] and puts him squarely into the *apophatic* tradition in Christian spirituality, which emphasizes "the way of negation." *via negativa*, as the proper way to attain union with God.⁴⁷

2.5.3 *The Stages*

Though the soul's mystical journey forms one dynamic whole, the "dark night" can be described in terms of three stages, according to St. John: *the night of the senses*, (which is compared to the beginning of the dark night), *the night of the spirit* (which is compared to the midnight), and *the rising dawn*⁴⁸ (which is compared to the close of the night) (A 1.2). In the following we will look at each of these stages in more detail.

2.5.3(a) *The Night of the Senses*

In the night of the senses the soul's sensuous appetites are mortified. It is called a "night of senses" because darkness is privation of light; the soul is deprived of all

⁴⁷ The discussions on the *apophatic* tradition, see Louth 1981, Lossky 1957.

⁴⁸ I take the expression from C 14-15.23. St. John does not follow through the terminology of the three nights: his *Ascent-Night* ends abruptly after the night of the spirit, leading most commentators to talk about "two nights" instead of three (e.g. Dicken 1963, Chapter 9, Payne 1990, Chapter 3). St. John's identification of the "spiritual betrothal" as the "rising dawn" at the end of the dark night in C 14-15.23 allows us to lay out the whole spiritual journey, as described in the totality of his works, as "three nights."

the pleasures that arise from the senses, the lower part of the soul (A 1.3). This night is subdivided into two phases: the “active night” and the “passive night” of the senses. The active phase is marked by the soul’s active role in mortifying the senses, and the passive phase is marked by God’s active work and the soul’s passive co-operation (A 1.13.1).

The “active night of the senses” consists of serious ascetic efforts in rejecting all pleasure of the senses. For that St. John gives no detailed instructions, but tells those in the active night of the senses to practice meditation and discursive reflections using the imagination;⁴⁹ they should also meditate on Christ and imitate him. In addition, he also gives the following suggestions:

Strive always to prefer, not that which is easiest, but that which is most difficult;
 Not that which is most delectable, but that which is most unpleasing;
 Not that which gives most pleasure, but rather that which gives least;
 Not that which is restful, but that which is wearisome;
 Not that which is consolation, but rather that which is disconsolateness;
 Not that which is greatest, but that which is least;
 Not that which is loftiest and most precious, but that which is lowest and most despised;
 Not that which is a desire for anything, but that which is a desire for nothing;
 Strive to go about seeking not the best of temporal things, but the worst.
 Strive thus to desire to enter into complete detachment and emptiness and poverty, with respect to everything that is in the world, for Christ’s sake.
 (A 1.13.6, Peers)

⁴⁹ What those meditations and reflections should consist of, St. John does not state precisely. For a discussion of what such exercises could be like, see Dicken 1963, pp.109-115. We shall also discuss the topic of meditation in Chapter 5.

By going through the active night of the senses the soul starts to lose its love for things of the world, and succeeds in conquering its sensuous desires to a certain extent. It finds much joy in meditation and prayer and starts to develop a fervent love of God. But there are still many moral imperfections in the soul, particularly the pride of its own spiritual achievement (N 1.1-8). At an appropriate time God will lead the soul into the *passive night* of the senses. He starts to do so by infusing a "general, loving knowledge" into the soul; this supernatural knowledge is described as a "Divine light," whose infusion into the soul's intellect hinders its natural operation which relies on the "natural light," its active intellect. Before such Divine light can ever be enjoyed by the soul, it is going to obstruct the soul's natural faculties and cause it great frustration, because the soul can no longer make imaginative or discursive meditations, which it used to enjoy so much. The soul's imaginative faculty (which belongs to the interior senses) and its discursive faculty (its intellect) seem to be inhibited, so that meditations cannot be properly performed as before. The soul also fails to find any sweetness or consolation in spiritual things. The soul is thrown into a state of "aridity," and suspects that it has been "backsliding" in its spiritual progress and has been abandoned by God. What the soul should do at this time is to just remain patient, and allow God to take charge and work in the soul. Instead of striving to regain the spiritual pleasures it has enjoyed before through meditation, the soul should rather "learn to abide attentively and wait lovingly upon God" (A 2.12.8. Peers) in

a state of quietude. The souls passing through this stage should leave themselves “free and disencumbered and at rest from all knowledge and thought . . . contenting themselves with merely a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God, and in being without anxiety, without the ability and without desire to have experience of Him or to perceive Him” (N 1.10.4, Peers; see also F 3.65). This way the soul can be free from all sensible and intelligible species and enter into a mode of “prayer” known as *contemplation*, which is “nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God “ (N 1.11.6).⁵⁰

Through the passive night of the senses the soul is purged of its sensuous desires and obtains a great degree of liberty;⁵¹ many of its imperfections are also purged, and it gains different virtues, among them humility and charity. The final result is that the lower part of the soul is “subjected” or “united” to the spiritual part of the soul. Such integration means that the higher faculties of the soul will no longer be obstructed by the senses, so that the soul now more often enjoys the sweetness of contemplation, and is better prepared for greater communication from God. Above all, contemplation produces inside the soul a burning desire for

⁵⁰ *Contemplation* will be discussed in detail in 3.3.2 and Chapter 5.

⁵¹ However, the purification of the senses is incomplete until the soul has passed through the second night, that of the spirit, because, for St. John “the subject is only one” (N 2.1.1, Peers) and the unity between the higher and the lower part of the soul means that the latter cannot be totally purified unless the former is purified too.

God which, as the third stanza of the poem *The Dark Night* describes, becomes the motivation and guide of the soul towards union with God.⁵²

The soul's transition from the *active* to the *passive* night of the senses is probably the most critical turning point in the soul's journey, and St. John gives us the signs for recognizing it (A 1.13, N 1.9). The transition marks the onset of God's mystical grace on the soul, which takes the soul from "the way of the beginner" onto "the way of the proficient," as St. John puts it (N 1.1.1). It is only after this point that the person involved really becomes a "contemplative" or a "mystic," whose life is now oriented towards a mystical union with God.⁵³ But this is not to say it is a rare experience: it comes to many (N 1.8.3, 1.8.5), though not all would successfully pass through it and become a "contemplative."

2.5.3(b) *The Night of the Spirit*

This is a phase in which the higher part of the soul, which consists of the three spiritual faculties, is emptied of all that is not God. This phase is again subdivided into the "active" and "passive" nights of the spirit. It is in this night of the spirit (particularly during the active night) that the soul may experience various "extraordinary phenomena" like visions, locutions, revelations, raptures and

⁵² For the many benefits of the night of the senses, see A 1.7.10, N 1.12.1-14.1, N 2.1.1.

⁵³ St. John lays enormous stress on how the spiritual director in charge should give the soul appropriate guidance at this critical point of the spiritual journey: St.

transports. John discusses such “supernatural communications” in detail in Chapter 11-32 in Book II of *The Ascent*, describing their nature and how the soul should respond to them.⁵⁴ John warns that these apparent “supernatural communications” can have their source from within the soul itself or from the devil, as well as from God. It is therefore important for the soul to avoid possible deception or error by treating these experiences with caution. The soul should never desire these experiences, and for those which involve sensible contents (like a vision of the Virgin Mary or words coming into one’s ears) or those concerned with creatures, one should reject them resolutely, not even wasting time to determine the experience’s authenticity. It is only by doing so that the soul’s three spiritual faculties can be purified according to the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.⁵⁵ Faith is darkness to the intellect, for it is the virtue by which the soul assents to truths that it does not understand. So, by rejecting the supernatural communications that seem to give the soul understanding of things and of God through sensible or intelligible species, the soul preserves itself in pure faith and voids the intellect of anything that is not God (A 2.3-4). Hope is

John harshly criticizes those directors who hinder the souls’ progress (F 3.30-62).

⁵⁴ The nature and epistemic value of these “supernatural communications” will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the theological virtues as understood in Thomism, see Davies 1992, Chapter 14. St. John basically subscribes to the same view of the three virtues, but he emphasizes the negative aspects of them. See A 2.6, 2.9, 3.2, 3.16.

darkness to the memory, because one only has hope for that which is not yet possessed. While the memory always tries to possess, by rejecting all that is communicated to the soul through supernatural (as well as natural) means and refusing to record it, the memory is preserved in pure hope and is emptied of anything which is not God (A 3.2-15). Charity is darkness to the will, because it makes us love God above all things and for God's own sake; by leaving our desires for all things in privation and darkness (even spiritual consolation received by supernatural means), the soul preserves its love for God alone (A 2.6, A 3.16-45, N 2.21.11).

The active night of the spirit is a relatively long period of peace and tranquillity for the soul (N 2.1). While the soul tries its best to preserve itself in darkness with respect to the three spiritual faculties during this period, what it can achieve by its own efforts are limited. For the soul to reach the purity required for union with God, it will have to pass through the "passive" phase of the night. The "passive night of the spirit," according to St. John, is a "horrible and frightful" experience which happens only to very few people (N 1.8.1-2) and is the darkest and the most difficult part of the mystical journey. Like the passive night of the senses, the passive night of the spirit is marked by an apparent withdrawal of God, and the disappearance of all the spiritual favours that the soul used to enjoy. As in the passive night of the senses, the soul cannot pray or enjoy other spiritual blessings (N 2.8.1). The soul has a deep sense of being abandoned by God; it also

starts to see all the deep-rooted impurities in itself; this causes the soul enormous distress and it feels that it deserves God's abhorrence (N 2.5.5). The soul also feels that it is forsaken and condemned by everyone, particularly its friends (N 2.6.3). The functioning of its spiritual faculties in ordinary life is also disturbed, which leads to a great deal of frustration — the intellect is darkened, the memory is alienated from common sense and knowledge of things (N 2.9.5), and the will is left in aridity. In the midst of all this the soul can find no consolation or support (N 2.7.3). The soul experiences ineffable afflictions "to an extent surpassing all possibility of exaggeration" (N 2.9.7, Peers).

Terrible as it is, the soul's suffering in the passive night of the spirit is actually caused by God's infusion of his own light into the soul, which is contemplation, now in a much stronger degree than in the previous night. In itself the light contains nothing which can cause pain; it is the soul's own imperfections that torment it when the divine light is received. Since two contraries cannot co-exist in one subject, the divine light strives to drive out all the impurities in the soul, and that causes the soul great suffering. St. John compares this light, which is God Himself, with a flame that assails a log: for the flame to totally penetrate the log and turn it into fire, the impurities in it (all that is not fire) must first be attacked and driven away. In the same way, the divine light is exposing and driving out all the imperfections in the soul — many of them being deep-rooted habits in the soul which were never recognized before (N 2.9, F 1.18-26). The

effect of the infusion of the divine light is also compared to a very bright light shining on eyes which are sick and weak, causing them much pain and blinding them — in the same way, the Divine ray which in itself is most pure and bright, blinds the intellect of the impure soul and becomes “a ray of darkness” (a phrase St. John borrows from Pseudo-Dionysius) to the intellect (N 2.5.5, A 2.86).

The passive night of the spirit will last for some years, until the soul “becomes so delicate, simple, and refined that it can be one with God. . . .” (N 2.7.3). The soul can play no active role in this night; it can only patiently endure its purgation and let God finish his task (N 2.8.1). At times the soul will feel that there will be no end to its sufferings. But there also occur intervals of relief in which contemplation does not assail the soul as heavily, but allows the soul to enjoy the benefits of the purification — the “great sweetness of peace and loving friendship with God,” a foretaste of the union which the soul will enjoy. The soul then oscillates between states of blessing and states of afflictedness until the purgation is over. Going through this night of the spirit, the soul is finally purged of all impurities. The change of the soul is so drastic, that the soul is said to be “destroyed” or “annihilated” in its very substance; it suffers a “cruel spiritual death” in which it “melts away” (N 2.6) or “goes forth from its very self” (N 2.4.8, N 2.9.5). Contemplation also produces in the soul a passion of love for God, which in itself causes the soul grief and great yearning for God until He is possessed by the soul through union (N 2.11, 2.13.2-9, C 1.16-22, 7.1-4, C 8-11, F

2.6).⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it is this love which motivates the soul to journey towards God, in spite of all the hardship it has to bear (N 2.13.9).

2.5.3(c) *The Rising Dawn*

In this phase the soul is finally approaching the end of the journey — God. It is the phase in which divine union finally takes place, and the soul is transformed into God. It again is subdivided into two phases: the spiritual betrothal and the spiritual marriage.⁵⁷ The difference between these two phases is well illustrated by their names — it is much like the difference between the betrothal and the marriage between two lovers; the betrothal is a phrase of intimate relationship between God and the soul which finally leads to marriage, in which full union occurs.

The beginning of the spiritual betrothal is the onset of the mystical union. Though full union is not yet achieved, there is now established a “unity of will”

⁵⁶ St. John is most famous for his detailed and penetrating descriptions of the passive night of the spirit. For a study of the dark night from the point of view of Jungian psychology, see Arraj 1986.

⁵⁷ The spiritual betrothal is mainly described in C 13-21, while the spiritual marriage is described mainly in C 15-40 and in *The Living Flame*. Whether the spiritual betrothal is in fact part of the passive night of the spirit is a matter of debate among St. John scholars (Dicken 1963, pp.470-74, Payne 1990, p.88 n33). A definitive answer to the question is not our concern here. I would say that given the “three-nights” scheme we have adopted, the spiritual betrothal would naturally fall under the third night, as C 14-15.23 suggests. Also, it is quite clear that the betrothal belongs to the “unitive way” as indicated in C 21.3, and from the

between the soul and God (F 3.24). God starts to “appear” to the soul in his frequent “visits” to the soul. In such “visits” the soul has raptures, and it seems to leave its body” (C 13). It also receives “secrets and strange knowledge of God” (C 14-15.2). It also enjoys God’s “substantial touches” — so called because the touches occur to the “substance of the soul” in which pure essences, without accidents, are received (C 14-15.12).⁵⁸ In such touches the soul receives visions of God (C 14-15.13-22). In these visits the soul enjoys much peace and tranquillity, which is described as a “spiritual sleep” (C 14-15.21). The soul becomes aware of a wonderful harmony in all creatures (C 14-15.25-27). Though much of the agony the soul experiences during the night of the spirit has ceased (C 14-15.2), the soul still sometimes suffers greatly when God withdraws his presence (C 14-15.30). Also, the sensuous part of the soul is not yet totally subjected to the spiritual part, and it may occasionally cause disturbances to the soul (C 14-15.30, C 16.2, 18.4); the non-conformity of the lower to the upper part of the soul also explains the violent, rapturous nature of the visit, which causes the body much pain (C 13, C 19.1). The spiritual betrothal prepares the soul for the spiritual marriage by purging all the remaining weaknesses of the soul in all its appetites and faculties (C 20-21.4), and clothes it in the great beauty of perfect virtues (C 17.5-10).

descriptions of the state given in C 14-15.

⁵⁸ See earlier discussions of the meaning of the word “substance” and “substance of the soul” in section 1.4.3. Also see C 19.4, which describes the same “touches”

The soul then enters the spiritual marriage, the highest state of perfection that one can reach in this life. The goal of the mystical journey — perfect union with God — is finally reached; The soul and God yield “entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of union of love” (C 22.3). The soul is totally transformed in God and becomes God by participation. The soul now enjoys “a much greater abundance and fullness of God. a more secure and stable peace; and an incomparably more perfect delight than in the spiritual betrothal” (C 22.5). This strong and powerful union of God and the soul is also described as an “embrace,” which can be habitually felt by the soul (A 1.4.7, C 20-21.1,14, F 4.14.15), and in which the soul now lives a life as happy and as glorious as God’s (C 23.5). The soul’s virtues are now perfect and fortified, so that it enjoys security from all attacks (C 24.35) and “it hardly fails God” (C 25.11). Rid of all evil habits, the soul’s state of existence is compared to Adam’s state of innocence before the Fall (C 26.14, N 2.24.2). While sweetness and tranquillity can now be habitually experienced (C 24.5, F 4.14-15), the soul also, from time to time, experiences “absorption of love” in which the soul is elevated and immersed in God, losing all forms and knowledge of things, including consciousness of the self (C 26.13-17, 3i.2, F 4.14-15). And with “remarkable ease and frequency,” great

in the context of spiritual marriage.

mysteries of God are revealed to the soul, particularly the mysteries of the Incarnation and the redemption of mankind. (C 23.1).

The spiritual marriage is not a static, final stage of the mystical journey. "With time and practice," St. John remarks, "the soul may become more completely perfected and grounded in love" (F Prologue.3). This is illustrated by the fact that though belonging to the same stage of spiritual marriage, the degree of perfection⁵⁹ described in *The Living Flame* already surpasses that described in *The Spiritual Canticle*. In fact the room for further improvement in this life seems to be endless, because however sublime an experience the soul may have in this life, it cannot be compared with the beatific vision in the next life in which God will be seen in "essential glory" with complete clarity. That is why this "third night" in the mystical journey is still a "dark night" (though it is already the "rising dawn" which is not as dark as the ones before) compared with the "day" of the illumination of glory which the soul will receive in the next life (C 1.10-11, 13.10, 14-15.23, 39.13; F 1.14). For this reason, the soul has a deep, though painless (C 20.11, F 1.28) longing to be loosened from the flesh (its physical nature being the last hindrance to perfect transformation) and to enter into the state of eternal glory (C 39, F 1.25). But even entering into the next life is not the

⁵⁹ For St. John, the term "perfection" does not mean a singular, ultimate point of measure; rather, St. John uses it to denote a stage of spiritual development in which all observable evils are already uprooted, and it admits of different degrees.

end; there is so much in God to be discovered that there is always more to be understood and experienced in him by angels and the blessed souls in heaven (C 7.9, 14-15.8, 36.10, 37.4).

2.6 Some Preliminary Considerations Regarding the Nature of Mysticism

To close this chapter let us make some preliminary observations concerning the nature of mysticism. According to St. John's description, the development of the mystical consciousness is a dynamic process. The mystic develops various modes of experience and apprehensions and is said to receive "knowledge" of various types. This stands in great contrast with what we call in Chapter 1 "the perennial philosopher's approach" to philosophy of mysticism, which defines mysticism very narrowly as an experience of "an undifferentiated unity" (1.2). The approach takes mysticism out of the context in which it is practiced and developed and reduces it to a peculiar psychological state. The approach also oversimplifies the experience of the mystics, changing it from rich and complex to dry and shallow, and it leads many to misconstrue the philosophical issues that are involved in mysticism.

In the following chapters we will study St. John with an approach very different from the perennial philosophers': we will seek to understand the experience described by St. John in the context of his whole system of mystical theology, as I have started to lay it out in this chapter. In order to evaluate the

epistemic significance of mysticism. I will, in the next chapter, examine the alleged “mystical knowledge” that St. John describes, with respect to its various subjects and the various means by which it is gained. It is hoped that by this approach, we will start to gain some insight into the nature of St. John’s mystical knowledge.

3. Mystical Knowledge in St. John of the Cross

In this chapter, we are going to look at St. John's own classification of various types of mystical knowledge. This will provide us with the necessary framework for our analysis of St. John's mysticism.

3.1 Supernatural Knowledge and its Classification

In Book II, Chapter 10 of *The Ascent*, St. John gives his classification of supernatural knowledge.¹ According to St. John, this classification offers an exhaustive scheme in which *all* kinds of supernatural knowledge will find a place.² This scheme is depicted in the figure on p. 87. The task of going through this scheme step by step will prove tedious, but it is necessary, for many misrepresentations and over-generalizations in the literature on mysticism are due to the failure to distinguish different kinds of mystical experience and knowledge.

For St. John, there exist two possible channels of knowledge: the natural and the supernatural. All natural knowledge originates from the senses. Excited by

¹ Here we are *not* going to equate "supernatural knowledge" with "mystical knowledge": the distinction between the two will be introduced at the end of this chapter (3.4).

² St. John remarks, at the end of his discussion of supernatural knowledge, that "there is no intellectual apprehension that cannot be reduced to one of these kinds." (A 2.32.5) The scheme, then, is at least adequate for the classification of

physical objects, the exterior senses give rise to *phantasms* that are received by the interior senses. The intellect then abstracts universals from the *phantasms*; it may then reason and make judgments concerning what has been perceived, thus producing knowledge. Supernatural knowledge, on the other hand, “comprises everything imparted to the intellect in a way transcending the intellect’s natural ability and capacity” (A 2.10.2). For St. John, *any* knowledge gained by ways different from that described above is supernatural.

Supernatural knowledge is subdivided into two groups: corporeal and spiritual.

3.2 Corporeal Supernatural Knowledge

Corporeal supernatural knowledge is received by the exterior or the interior senses. This involves presentations of objects through “category of image, form, figure, and species” (A 2.16.1) — i.e., through what the scholastics call the *sensible species*. Objects of such visions are various, including physical objects, persons, the Saints, the angels, the Virgin Mary, or even Jesus Christ in his humanity. When they are received by the exterior senses, the experience is similar to that when the bodily senses are excited. While the person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes objects as if they were objects in the exterior space, there really

St. John’s own experience of mystical knowledge.

are no external objects exciting the senses — the exterior senses are put to work by God’s supernatural acts. Such experiences are sometimes referred to as “corporeal visions” (here the term “visions” does not necessarily refer to a visual experience, but includes apprehensions by any of the physical senses). The other type of corporeal supernatural knowledge is received through the interior senses alone, without involving the exterior senses; this knowledge consists of what are called “imaginary visions,” in which objects appear not in exterior space, but interiorly, before “the eye of the mind,” so to speak.³ St. John considers imaginary visions to have greater value than corporeal visions, since they are usually “subtler and produce a deeper impression upon the soul” (A 2.16.3, Peers). Further, as they are more “interior” than corporeal visions, they are supposed to be “more perfect,” in the sense that they are further removed from corporeal substance and are thus “more spiritual.” The result is that the soul benefits more from imaginary visions.

A few remarks should be made on St. John’s view of the two types of visions: they are common experience for spiritual persons (those who have made certain progress in purifying their senses, through the night of the senses) (A 2.11.1, A 2.16.3). Though God can in fact teach the souls great things by these

³ Maréchal (1964, pp.62-67) compares the nature of corporeal vision to that of perceptual hallucination, and imaginary visions to what psychologists call “pseudo-hallucinations.” Though the comparisons may not be totally accurate, I think they do capture the basic phenomenological differences between corporeal and imaginary visions.

visions, they are not to be desired and treasured by the souls, for the following reasons: (a) as long as objects of these visions are given through *sensible species*, they resemble God in no essential manner and they give no knowledge of God Himself. If these visions are cherished, they impede further growth in the knowledge of God;⁴ (b) the devil too may produce similar visions for the soul, causing in it desires and deceptions that will lead the soul to evil (A 2.11.7, A 2.16.4). Facing such visions, the soul should “flee from them completely and have no desire to examine whether they be good or bad” (A 2.11.2). That way, if visions are produced by the devil, the soul will avoid error, and if the visions are really from God, the benefits for the soul will be irresistibly produced, regardless of the soul’s attitude towards them (A 2.11.6, 2.16.10).

3.3 Spiritual Supernatural Knowledge

The other type of supernatural knowledge is called “spiritual,” because it does not involve the *sensible species* and the “sensitive part” of the soul. Rather, God infuses knowledge directly to the “spiritual part” of the soul. The category is subdivided into two: the “distinct and particular.” and the “vague, dark, and general.”

⁴ See A 2.8, 2.11.3–4, 2.16.7. St. John is not denying that we can gain some understanding of God through Creation; rather, for St. John, the mystics’ knowledge goes beyond that.

3.3.1 Distinct and Particular Spiritual Supernatural Knowledge

The first type of spiritual supernatural knowledge is called “distinct and particular” since it involves particular knowledge content being communicated to the soul in a manifest manner. St. John compares the apprehension of such knowledge by the intellect to sight, and he calls such apprehensions “visions of the soul” or “intellectual visions,” in which the intellect works like “the spiritual eye of the soul.”⁵ Such “distinct and particular” knowledge is subdivided into four categories: visions, revelations, locutions and spiritual feelings.

3.3.1(a) Visions

We have already seen that the term “visions” has been employed by St. John in various manners: here the term refers specifically to “whatever the intellect receives in a manner resembling sight, because the intellect can see objects

⁵ St. John’s explanation for the comparison is worth quoting here:

Let it be known that in a broad sense these four kinds of apprehensions can all be titled visions of the soul because we also call the understanding of the soul its vision. And insofar as all these apprehensions are intelligible, they are called spiritually visible. . . . And just as all that is corporeally visible to the material eye causes corporeal vision, so all that is intelligible to the intellect, the spiritual eye of the soul, causes spiritual vision. (A 2.23.2)

Here, St. John is just repeating the age-old analogy of understanding to seeing, of intelligibility to visibility: he should not be taken to support a “perceptual model” of mystical experience. The perceptual model for mysticism will be discussed in

spiritually just as the eyes can corporeally” (A 2.23.3). These are experiences in which “objects” or “substances” are apprehended by the soul without using the bodily senses. According to the types of substances apprehended, it is subdivided into two types: *visions of corporeal substances* and *visions of incorporeal substances*. The first type has corporeal or material substances as its objects (e.g., the heavenly Jerusalem which St. John the Apostle saw and described in the Apocalypse), which the soul sees “by means of a certain supernatural light derived from God” (A 2.24.1), just as the bodily eyes see physical objects by means of the natural light (A 2.24.5). Although these visions can produce benefits in the soul, including quietude, joy, illumination, etc., St. John holds the same attitude towards them as towards visions received by the exterior or the interior senses: “a person should behave in a purely negative way as with the other visions we mentioned.” (A 2.24.8) Since they are all visions of creatures that bear no resemblance to God, desiring or treasuring them can only hinder the person’s progress towards union with God.

The other type of visions are those of incorporeal substances including souls, angels and God. This types of vision requires “a higher light [than the supernatural light we have just mentioned], called the light of glory” (A 2.24.2) through which the very essence of the apprehended substance (even the essence of

God) is received by the soul. In the essential vision of God, the soul receives God's very essence. It is described as a "face to face" encounter with God (C 10.7), an immediate vision employing no "intermediaries" (C 19.4). The soul receives not just perfect knowledge of God, but also a perfect love — with which the soul loves God with the love God loves it.(C 38). The essential vision of God exceeds all other mystical knowledge in its strength and clarity — any other mystical knowledge, no matter how sublime, is like darkness compared to light compared with this vision (C 1.10-11, 13.10, 14-15.23, 39.13; F 1.14). It is a vision reserved for the soul to enjoy in the next life, since the "force and vigor" of God's "light of glory" exceeds what human nature can bear — just as the bodily senses would be ruined by too strong a perception, one's bodily life would be destroyed were one to receive this glorious vision in this life. Therefore, the experience happens in this life only "in some rare cases and in a transient way" (A 2.24.2). St. John cites St. Paul's rapture [2 Cor.12:2-4] and Moses' experience recorded in Exodus 33 as examples.⁶ In the cases where the vision is received in this life, God has to temporarily separate the soul and the body in order to prevent the destruction of the person's bodily life: He "abstracts the spirit entirely, and by his own power supplies the natural functions of the soul toward the body" (A

⁶ Notice that nowhere does St. John suggest himself to have received the essential vision of God.

2.24.3).⁷ The bodily nature of the soul, which prevents this essential vision from being enjoyed in this life, is compared by St. John to a “veil” that separates the soul and God — for those who have reached the stage of spiritual marriage, this veil is “tenuous” and “thin” so that God’s Divinity can shine through it, giving the soul a great knowledge of Himself (F 1.29-32).

The essential vision of God is the highest possible achievement for the mystical journey — it is only in this essential vision of God that the soul’s transformation and participation in God is finally complete (C 39.6). Therefore, the essential vision is greatly desired by the mystic (C 11.5-10, F 1.27).

3.3.1(b) Revelations

By revelations, St. John refers to “what the intellect receives as though by learning and understanding something new (just as the ears do on hearing what has never before been heard)” (A 2.23.3). It seems that the nature of “revelations” differs from that of “visions” in two aspects: (a) one is best described by the metaphor of hearing, and the other by seeing; and (b) “visions” are apprehensions of certain substances or objects, while “revelations” have to do with “judgments,” or “states of affairs.”⁸ It is subdivided into two groups: the first is called *disclosure of truths*

⁷ This also happens during the soul’s rapture, which does not necessarily include an essential vision of God: see C 13.4.

⁸ The difference, of course, is not absolute, as if “seeing which” (seeing a certain

to the intellect (A 2.25.1) (also called “intellectual notions or concepts” [ibid.] or “knowledge of naked truth” [A 2.26.1]), and the second group is called “disclosure of secrets and hidden mysteries” (A 2.27.1).

3.3.1(b).1 Disclosure of truths to the intellect

The *disclosure of truths* to the intellect is of two types: the first type is of particular importance to our study, and we will call it *knowledge of God's attributes*. In this type of experience: “God is the direct object of this knowledge in that one of his attributes (his omnipotence, fortitude, goodness, sweetness, and so on) is sublimely experienced” (A 2.26.3). St. John points to the important nature of this type of knowledge: “they are God's own knowledge and God's own delight” (ibid.). Since this knowledge is “divine” in its very nature, it is attainable only if the soul participates in God through union with him, and thus St. John remarks that:

This sublime knowledge can be received only by a person who has arrived at union with God, for it is itself that very union. It consists in a certain touch of the divinity produced in the soul, and thus it is God himself who is experienced and tasted there. Although the touch of knowledge and delight that penetrates the substance of the soul is not manifest and clear, as in glory, it is so sublime and lofty that the devil is unable to meddle or produce anything similar . . . or infuse a savor and delight like it. This

object) and “seeing that” (seeing a certain state of affair involving the object) are totally different and separable events.

knowledge tastes of the divine essence and of eternal life, and the devil cannot counterfeit anything so lofty. (A 2.26.5)

This passage tells us the following about this knowledge: (a) it is itself union with God; (b) it is a divine “touch” which penetrates the “substance of the soul,”⁹ and it causes in the soul “sweetness and intimate delight” (A 2.26.7);¹⁰ (c) though it is not as clear and manifest as the spiritual vision of God Himself received through the light of glory, it nevertheless gives a taste of the divine essence and eternal life; (d) the experience is so sublime that it cannot be counterfeited by the devil. Other characteristics of it that St. John stresses include the ineffability of the experience (A 2.26.1, 2,4) and that this knowledge usually comes when it is least expected (A 2.26.8). Since such disclosure is “an aspect of union” (A 2.26.10), St. John’s attitude towards it is not as negative as towards some of the supernatural experiences we have discussed; he remarks that the soul “should remain humble and resigned about it [the disclosure], for God will do his work at the time and in the manner he wishes” (A 2.26.9).

The second type of disclosure of truths has creatures as its objects, and we will call it *infused knowledge of creatures*. It “embodies knowledge of the truth of

⁹ For the term “substance of the soul” see the discussion in section 2.4.3 of this dissertation.

¹⁰ According to A 3.14.2, the “divine touch” here in fact belongs to *spiritual feelings*, another type of mystical knowledge which we will discuss later in 3.3.1(d). The relationship between the *disclosure of truths* and *spiritual feelings*

things in themselves and of human deeds and events.” (A 2.26.11). It consists of “infused habits about different truths,”¹¹ including — St. John goes back to the Book of Wisdom for examples— “the divisions of time, the course of the year, and the position of the stars, the natures of animals, the rages of beasts, the power and strength of the winds, the thoughts of the people. . . .” [Wis. 7:17-21] and also “knowledge about events happening in their [the knowers’] presence or absence” (A 2.26.12). The knowledge usually comes with a kind of conviction, so that it is difficult for the recipients to believe in the contrary. St. John warns us that this kind of knowledge may be counterfeited by the devil to produce convictions in the soul about false ideas. As knowledge of creatures, attachment to this type of disclosure can prove a hindrance to union with God. Therefore, St. John warns that “people should be extremely careful always to reject this knowledge” (A 2.26.18). As with visions received by the senses, “the effect God desires to produce through these passive communications will be fixed in the soul without need for efforts of its own” (ibid.), so it is always better for the soul to reject them at all times.

will be explored in detail in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

¹¹ Here “habits” refers to knowledge, which, for the scholastics, is a “virtue” or “habit” of the intellect. See ST I.II. 57.2.

3.3.1(b).2 *Disclosure of Secrets and Hidden Mysteries*

This group consists of two subgroups: the disclosure concerning God Himself, “which includes the revelation of the mystery of the most holy Trinity and unity of God,” and the disclosure concerning “that which God is in His works”; the latter includes “the other articles of our Catholic faith [besides the doctrine of Trinity], and the propositions deducible from them which may be laid down explicitly as truths” and also “many other particular things which God habitually reveals, both concerning the universe in general as also in particular concerning kingdoms, provinces and states and families and particular persons” (A 2.17.1, Peers). Such revelations need not come by words alone, but they can also come by “signs, figures, images, and likeness” (ibid., Kavanaugh and Rodriguez).¹²

The *disclosure of secrets and hidden mysteries* differs from the *disclosure of truths to the intellect* in that its subjects are “secret and hidden” — they are things unknowable by natural reason, such as future events and the Trinity of God, which St. Thomas considered not demonstrable by natural reason.¹³

Therefore, the “disclosure of secrets and hidden mysteries” is more properly called “revelation” than is any other “disclosure,” as John remarks (A 2.25.2). St.

¹² Clearly, there are possible overlaps then between this “disclosure” and, for example, corporeal visions received by the senses and “locutions” (to be discussed in the next section). Thus it is the *content*, not the *mode*, of knowledge that distinguishes this disclosure.

John teaches that a negative attitude should be held towards this knowledge. If it is about God's works and is concerned mainly with creatures, the reasons for rejecting it are the same as we have discussed in the last few sections; if it concerns doctrines of faith, St. John teaches that one should hold onto the doctrines by pure faith — the proper means of union with God¹⁴ — instead of believing because of the revelations one receives personally.

3.3.1(c) Locutions

By "locutions" St. John refers to the apprehensions received "in a way similar to hearing" (A 2.23.3). They are knowledge received through precise words from God.

The first type of locutions is called *successive*, which consists of successive words formed by the soul when it is "recollected and absorbed very attentively in some meditation" (A 2.29.1). With the help and illumination of the Holy Spirit, the soul reasons about the subject of her considerations and forms concepts and judgments in precise words. The words are formed with such ease and clarity that they might have been given by a third person. St. John suggests

¹³ See Aquinas, *Exposition of Boethius on the Trinity*, I, 4, c.

¹⁴ It is notable that in most cases, after warning the readers against accepting knowledge, visions, and revelations of various kinds, St. John exhorts the readers to travel by the negative way of "pure faith," that of "dark contemplation," which we shall discuss shortly.

that the soul may even be receiving illumination from the Holy Spirit when she forms the words.

The second type of locutions is called *formal locution*, in which the soul receives words that are formally uttered to it by a third person. It differs from the last type in that the soul feels “clearly and distinctly” that it plays no part itself in forming these words (A 2.30.4). The words sometimes come to the soul suddenly, when the soul is neither recollected in prayer nor thinking about the subject of the locutions. St. John warns us that one can never know the true source of such locutions, or whether it’s from a good or an evil spirit. So one should not attach any importance to such locutions, and one should not even consider accepting or following such locutions without much reflection.

The third type of locutions comprises what are called *substantial locutions*. They can be considered a subgroup of *formal locutions* that are peculiar in producing “vivid and substantial effects upon the soul” (A 2.31.1). As the soul receives such locutions, what is contained in them is produced “substantially” in the soul at once. For example, when God utters to the soul “Fear not” in a “substantial” manner, the fear in the soul will be immediately taken away. St. John remarks that these locutions are “a great aid to union with God”(A 2.31.2), and that the soul should neither be afraid of them, nor desire them. St. John says that “The soul should rather be resigned and humble about them” (ibid.).

3.3.1(d) *Spiritual Feelings*

The last type of supernatural spiritual knowledge consists in what is called *spiritual feelings*. According to the loci of actions, spiritual feelings are divided into two types. The first type contains feelings “in the affection of the will,” and the second type contains feelings “in the substance of the soul.” While those belonging to the first type are described as “sublime,” those belonging to the second type are said to be “the loftiest” and “exceptionally advantageous and good.” Both types of feelings are said to “take place in many ways” (A 2.32.2). Due to the effects they have on the soul, both types of touch are often described as “wounds of love” (C 1.17-19, C 7.2-4, C 8.2, F 1.7, 2.7). These “wounds” are sometimes further described as burns, or even as “cautery,” caused by God, the Living Flame (C 1.17-19, F 1.7, 2.7).¹⁵

The type of spiritual feeling that is most important and most often mentioned by St. John is the “spiritual touch.” Concerning the diversity in spiritual touches, St. John remarks that “some of these touches are distinct and of short duration, others are not so distinct and last longer” (A 2.32.2; see also C 25.8). According to their loci of action, “spiritual touches,” like spiritual feelings in general, can be divided into two types: one touches the soul “in the affections

¹⁵ Other references to “touches” that contain a sensation of heat includes N 2.12.5-6, C 25.5 and F 1.33.

of the will,” and the other in “the substance of the soul.” We may call the first type an “affective touch,” and the second, following St. John, a “substantial touch.” The former is inferior to the latter in terms of its sublimity and effects (A 2.32.2; see also N 2.12.6, C 7.2-4). For the “affective touch” in the soul, St. John gives the following example:

. . . besides the many other different kinds of visits God grants to the soul, in which he wounds and raises it up in love, he usually bestows some secret touches of love that pierce and wound it like fiery arrows, leaving it wholly cauterized by the fire of love. . . . So extreme is this torment that love seems to be unbearably rigorous with the soul, not because it wounded her . . . but because it left her thus suffering with love, and did not slay her for the sake of her seeing and being united with him in the life of perfect love. (C 1.17)

This affective touch, which “wounds” the soul and drives it to seek God, is, paradoxically, “very delightful and desirable” (C 1.19). But its force and intensity are totally surpassed by the “substantial touches.” In explaining the line “O delectable wound!” in *The Living Flame*, St. John remarks:

As often as the cautery of love touches the wound of love, it causes a deeper wound of love, and thus the more it wounds, the more it cures and heals. The more wounded the lover, the healthier the lover is, and the cure caused by love is to wound and inflict wound upon wound, to such an extent that the entire soul is dissolved into a wound of love. And now all cauterized and made one wound of love, it is completely healthy in love, for it is transformed in love. . . . It is understandable that this cautery and this wound are of the highest degree possible in this state. . . . For this cautery is a touch only of divinity in the soul, without any intellectual or imaginative form of figure. (F 2.8)

This substantial touch, as said above, is the highest form of “spiritual touch” that can come to the soul. It is a “touch of Divinity” (the same phrase appears in A 2.26.5, N 2.12.6, 2.23.12), i.e., a “contact of the soul with the divinity,” a “touch of naked substances — of the soul and the divinity” (C 19.4). This touch delicately penetrates the substance of the soul and absorbs it entirely in God (F 2.17; also A 2.26.5). Thus, the touch is itself union with God, and it is also called “substantial touch of union” (N 2.23.11, 2.24.3; see also A 2.32.4, F 1.17). It is also described as an “intimate spiritual embrace,” in which the soul “perceives the delight of the glory of God in its very substance, which is now transformed in Him.” (C 22.5)

A few points of clarification should be made concerning the notion of the “substantial touch” of God. The term seems to include both (a) an “objective” sense, referring to the “event” of “contact” between the substance of the soul and God; in this general sense the term is synonymous with “union with God” (N 2.23.11, 2.24.3; see also A 2.32.4, F 1.17, C 7.4); and (b) a “subjective” experience of *touching* God and *being touched upon* by God. This usage is most clear in C 14-15.13, which mentions the soul’s “sense of touch.” A 2.32 suggests that “touches” in the first sense is the cause of “touches” in the second sense. When St. John uses the term “substantial touch,” he has both senses of the term in mind: the “substantial” touch is never an objective event without “subjective feelings,” nor the other way around.

“Touch” is not the only perceptual analogy St. John uses in describing the spiritual feelings; he also includes in this category of experience “sweet spiritual fragrance, spiritual savor, or spiritual delight that the soul can enjoy supernaturally” — in fact St. John includes under the category “spiritual feelings” all supernatural apprehensions that are not received in the manner of spiritual seeing (visions) and spiritual hearing (revelation, locutions) (A 2.23.3). While explicit and detailed discussions on the “spiritual fragrance” and “spiritual tasting” are lacking in St. John’s works,¹⁶ some passages from *The Spiritual Canticles* that seem to be referring to the two “spiritual feelings.” In C 17, St. John describes God’s “breathing through the soul”:

To breathe through the soul is to touch and put into the motion the virtues and perfections already given, renewing and moving them in such a way that of themselves they afford the soul a wonderful fragrance and sweetness. as when you shake aromatic spices and they spread their abundant fragrance that before this was neither strong nor so highly perceptible. (C 17.5)

Here, the soul’s own perfections (which are the same as God’s) cause in the soul great fragrance and sweetness. A similar experience is described in C

¹⁶ While terms like “sweetness,” “fragrance” and “delight” fill his works, it seems unlikely that St. John is referring to “spiritual feelings” with all of them. Passages that contain the terms “spiritual sweetness” (N 1.13.10, C 14-15.4) and “spiritual savor” (N 1.5.1, 1.9.4, F 3.36) are not very illuminating either — in these passages, the terms seem to refer to the soul’s feelings of delight in a very general sense.

24.3, where the soul's union with God is likened to a "a bed in flower" which "delights with its touch and refreshes with its fragrance." In another passage describing the soul's "awareness and experience of the fullness of God's riches" (C 20-21.11), John says:

Nothing can reach or molest her now that she has withdrawn from all things and entered into her God where she enjoys all peace, tastes all sweetness, and delights in all delights insofar as this earthly state allows. . . . As one at a banquet enjoys the taste of a variety of foods and the sweetness of many melodies, the soul at this banquet, which she now receives at the bosom of her Beloved, enjoys every delight and tastes every sweetness. (C 20-21.15)

While the earlier examples describe the "fragrance" the soul enjoys, in this passage, God's (and the soul's) richness in virtues is "tasted" by the soul. From these examples, we can see that "spiritual fragrance" and "spiritual tastes" have the virtues and perfections of God (and of the soul united with him) as their "objects." Also, the two "spiritual feelings" seem to be inferior in their degree of intensity and intimacy when compared to the "spiritual touch."

It should be added that not just the "substance of God," but other "spiritual substances (angels or other souls) can also be felt in the "substance of the soul" through spiritual feelings (A 2.24.4). In themselves, spiritual feelings are not states of knowledge — St. John remarks that they belong properly to the will, not

to the intellect (A 2.32.3).¹⁷ According to St. John's faculty psychology, that means spiritual feelings belong to what he calls "passions" or "affects" (see 2.4.2(e)). Nevertheless, "from these feelings the apprehension of knowledge or understanding frequently overflows . . . into the intellect," producing "usually an exceptionally sublime and delightful experience of God in the intellect" of various kinds" (ibid.). St. John remarks that such "overflowing" happens "frequently, even in the majority of cases" (A 2.32.3). In particular, he refers to substantial touch as "a touch of supreme knowledge" in C 7.4, thus showing the close relationship between substantial touch and knowledge of God — a relationship that will become the focus of our study in Chapter 7.

St. John holds a positive attitude towards spiritual feelings and the knowledge resulting from them. Instead of telling people to reject them as in many other cases of supernatural knowledge, St. John makes the following remark: since this knowledge is to be received directly by the passive intellect, the soul should remain passive, and "refrain from meddling through the use of its natural capacity" (A 2.32.4). Therefore, the soul "should not strive after this knowledge or want it," but should remain humble and resigned towards such knowledge.

¹⁷ In section 2.4.2(e), n.30, we have mentioned Dicken's claim that the Spanish term for "feelings" [*sentimiento*] contains no affective connotation. However, from the discussion in this section and St. John's remarks in A 2.32.3, it is now clear that "feeling," at least in the case of "spiritual feelings," are affective in their nature.

3.3.2 The Vague, Dark, and General Supernatural Knowledge —

Contemplation

We have looked at St. John's complex classification of various types of distinct and particular supernatural knowledge. Now we are going to look at the other kind of supernatural knowledge: the vague, dark and general. This type of knowledge is of considerable importance for our understanding of St. John's mystical theology: John always emphasizes that the soul should seek to travel along the way of this dark contemplation in order to arrive at union with God. The distinct and particular knowledge, on the other hand, is never to be actively sought, but is to be either sternly rejected, or treated with a resigned and humble attitude. Our study will concentrate on a number of passages in which the subject of dark contemplation receives the most elaborate treatment by St. John.¹⁸

The term "contemplation" has a long and venerable history in the Western philosophical and theological traditions, and we cannot go through that history here.¹⁹ Rather, we are going to concentrate on the meanings of the term as it is used by St. John. We can distinguish two senses in which St. John uses the term. In its broadest sense, contemplation is also referred to as "dark contemplation," "night of contemplation," or "mystical theology" (e.g., in A 2.8.6, N 2.17.1-2, C

¹⁸ These passages include A 2.12-15, N 1.8-10, 2.5-10, 17.2, 17.7, C 27.5, 39.12 and F 3.27-67.

28.5, C 39.12). It is “an infused loving knowledge that both illumines and enamors the soul, elevating it step by step to God” (N 2.18.5). Three features of contemplation are included in this description: (1) It is an infused knowledge of God. As explained in C 39.12, God infuses “substantial knowledge” (knowledge stripped of all accidents and devoid of any sensible species) directly to the passive intellect, without the aid of the person’s bodily or spiritual faculties. Thus, contemplation in a broad sense corresponds to the summation of all kinds of “supernatural and spiritual knowledge,” including those “distinct and particular” ones that we have discussed in the last few sections.²⁰ (2) It elevates the soul to God “step by step,” meaning that contemplation, instead of being a singular event or mode or knowledge, is realized in a dynamic process with gradation, which leads finally to a complete union with God. Therefore, St. John also describes contemplation as a ladder of ten steps that lead to God (N 2.18-20). In this sense, contemplation is a process which coincides with the analogy of the dark night that St. John uses in describing the whole process of the soul’s ascent to God — thus we see why it is also referred to as the “night of contemplation.”²¹ (3)

¹⁹ See, for example, Lagrange 1937, pp.221-35.

²⁰ See, for example, A 2.26.3, where revelations that disclose God’s attributes are described as “pure contemplation.”

²¹ For an explanation of St. John’s metaphor of the “dark night,” see section 2.5.2 - 2.5.3. Strictly speaking, while the overarching metaphor of “dark night” includes even the active night of the senses as a part of it, contemplation, in the sense we are discussing, only begins with the passive night of senses, where God’s

Contemplation not only illumines, it also “enamors”— it involves the will as well as the intellect, and it is a knowledge inseparable from love. In fact, it is also called “a science of love” (N 2.18.5), in the sense that,

Love is the master of this knowledge and what makes it wholly agreeable. Since God communicates this knowledge and understanding in the love with which he communicates himself to the soul, it is very delightful to the intellect since it is a knowledge belonging to the intellect, and it is delightful to the will since it is communicated in love, which pertains to the will. (C 27.5)

So we may say that in its broad sense the term contemplation stands for the mystical life as a whole, understood as a privative process that leads to the infused, substantial knowledge of God through love.

There is a second sense in which the term is used more narrowly. We have already seen in A 2.10.4 that contemplation, as one type of spiritual supernatural knowledge, is opposed to the “distinct and particular” supernatural knowledge, and described as “vague, general, and dark.” The soul begins to receive this general knowledge of God when it enters the *passive night of the senses* (see last chapter). In fact this knowledge is the most important sign in recognizing the onset of the passive night:

supernatural grace begins. Thus the two terms do not coincide in the strictest manner.

The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises. . . of the intellect, memory and will. Such a one prefers to remain only in the general loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned, without any particular knowledge or understanding. (A 2.13.4)

So, like contemplation in the broad sense, contemplation in the narrower sense is also a "loving knowledge" that contains both a noetic and an affective aspect. In its noetic aspect, contemplation is an "awareness" of God which is "general and obscure," without anything particular being understood (A 2.14.4). This knowledge is said to be "simple" and "spiritual" in the sense that it is devoid of any sensible species. Due to the generality and simplicity of this knowledge, the mystic can only speak about it in highly general terms: the soul is "satisfied, quiet and content, and aware of God" (or "conscious of the presence of God," according to Peers' translation; N 2.17.5), and it enjoys "peace, rest, savor, and delight" (A 2.13.7). In its affective aspect, besides the peace and tranquillity already mentioned, contemplation consists of "a delight of love" (A 2.14.12, F 3.34), "an inebriator of the spirit, by which the soul feels tenderly and gently wounded and carried away, without knowing by whom or from where or how" (F 3.38).

St. John also gives the mechanism by which this knowledge is received: God is infusing into the soul his "Divine light of the highest kind" (N 2.9.2), which strikes the passive intellect and the will. Being much brighter than the soul's natural light of understanding (the active intellect), the Divine light

overwhelms the soul and blinds it, like a bright light blinding the eyes of an owl (N 2.5.3; see also A 2.14.10). The result is that the soul, after receiving this light at the onset of the *passive night of the senses*, can no longer perform discursive and imaginative meditations. Since the soul is then cut off from the pleasure it used to enjoy through discursive meditation, the result is an experience of aridity, and the fear that the soul has been backsliding and abandoned by God. Thus, in the beginning, God's infusion of his Divine light into the soul causes frustration and suffering. At this point, the soul may not yet be conscious of the "general, loving knowledge" which contemplation is supposed to bring, since the soul is still so much attached to its senses (N 1.9.4, 1.11.2, A 2.13.7, 2.14.8, 2.14.12, 2.24.9, F 3.39).²² But if the soul allows itself to rest in quiet and repose without falling back into discursive meditation, it will soon experience this knowledge (A 2.13.7). To a soul in this stage St. John gives the following instructions:

All that is required of them here is freedom of the soul, that they liberate themselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts, and care not about thinking and meditating. They must be content simply with

²² The fact that the "general, loving knowledge" may not be perceptible at the beginning is also discussed in A 2.14.8-10 and N 2.8.2-5. St. John also gives explanations for how this Divine light of God could sometimes be imperceptible even to souls that are already purified of their senses. He compares this Divine light with a ray of sunlight which enters a room through one window and goes out through another: if the room is clear of dust or other "impurities" which will reflect light, it will pass through the room without being perceived.

a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him. (N 1.10.4)²³

By doing that, the soul will become more and more “habituated” to a calmness and peace in which it will become more and more conscious of the loving knowledge.

Besides the aridity and the general, loving knowledge mentioned, the infusion of God’s divine light into the soul can sometimes cause a third kind of effect: when it strikes “forcibly” on the soul, it puts the soul in a “deep oblivion,” in which “it knows not where it has been or what it has done, nor is it aware of the passage of time” (A 2.14.10, Peers); in this state “the soul remains as though ignorant of all things, for it knows God only, without knowing how” (A 2.14.11, Peers). St. John explains that this “oblivion” is due to God’s Divine light which “renders the soul simple, pure, and clear of all the apprehensions and forms through which the senses and memory were acting when conscious of time” (A 2.14.11; see also A 3.2.5-6). This occurs when God suspends the exercise of all the faculties of the soul, which happens very seldom” (A 2.14.12).²⁴

²³ On John’s advice see also N 1.9.6, A 2.13.7, 2.15.5, F 3.34-36.

²⁴ N 2.12.6 probably describes the same experience of “oblivion.” This state of suspension and obligation has been taken by some authors, especially the “perennial philosophers,” to be typical of mysticism. It is clear that for St. John, it is only one form of mystical consciousness, and an atypical one at that. St. John even says that such experience of oblivion ceases after the soul has attained union with God. (A 3.2.8)

According to St. John, the attitude one should hold towards this general loving knowledge of contemplation is similar to that which one should have towards, e.g., the disclosure of God's attributes and spiritual feelings: though one does not need to reject them, one should not actively seek them either.²⁵ St. John remarks that one should hold a passive attitude towards this knowledge; this is because in contemplation God alone is the agent of the action (F 3.29) and the soul does not work at all, but only receives the knowledge through its passive intellect (A 2.15.2). Any activity of the soul, particularly any intellectual activity, can only obstruct the infusion of God's divine light. Besides preserving itself in solitude and detachment from the senses, the soul should simply receive the loving knowledge of God, "as one that opens his eyes with the awareness of love" (F 3.33; also A 2.15.2).

3.4 Some Preliminary Conclusions

Notice that out of the many kinds of supernatural knowledge, there are only a few towards which St. John holds a positive (or non-negative) attitude. These are: (1) the incorporeal vision of God; (2) the disclosure of truths concerning God's own attributes; (3) spiritual feelings; and (4) contemplation as a loving awareness of God.²⁶ They all share the following two similarities: they are empty of any

²⁵ See N 1.10.4, which we have just cited, and also A 2.15.2.

²⁶ I have excluded "substantial locution" which, strictly speaking, does not give us

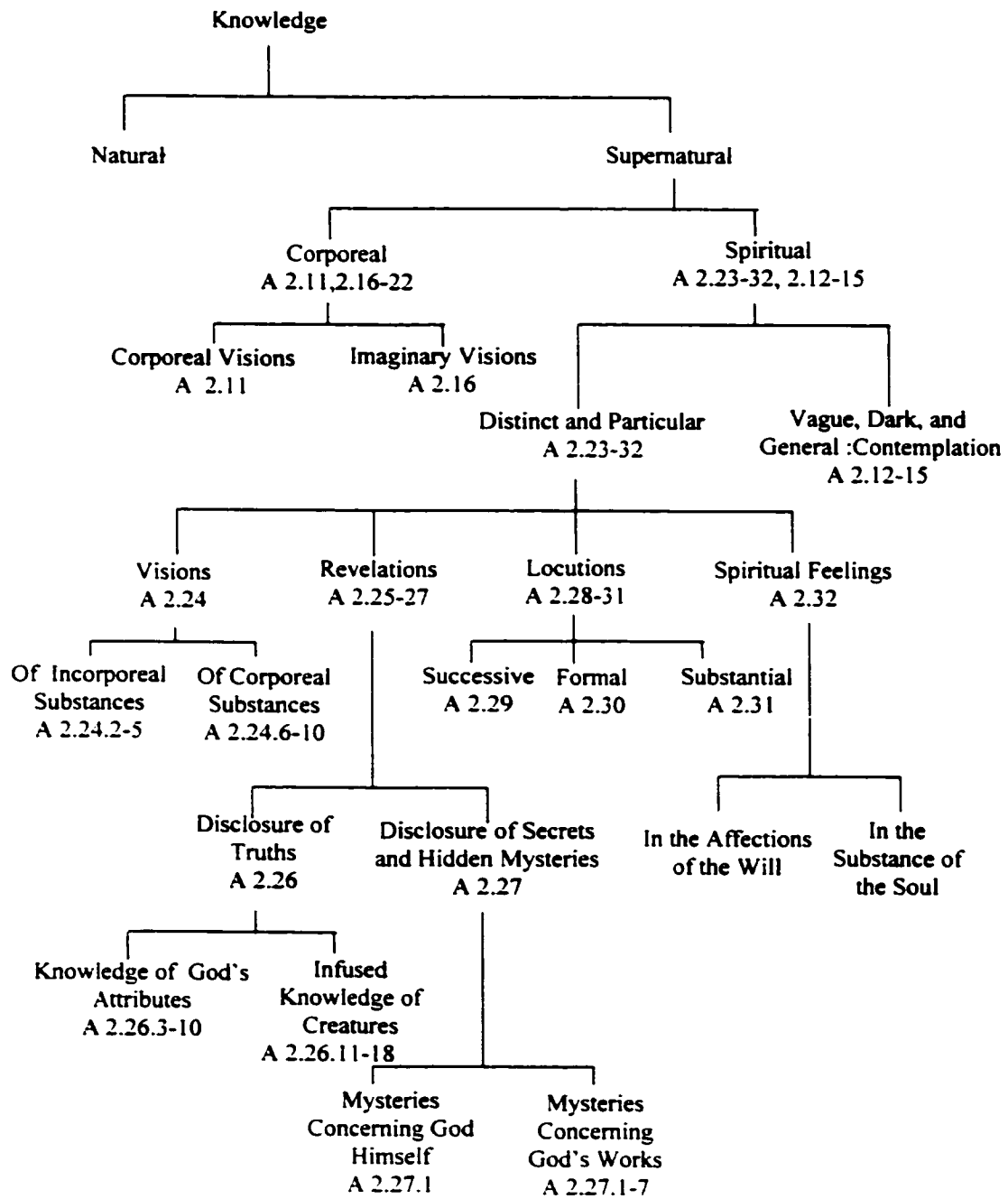
sensuous species, and they all concern knowledge about God, not creatures. Why St. John is positive towards these kinds of supernatural knowledge and negative towards the others becomes clear if we bear in mind the goal of his mysticism—namely, union with God (which includes a knowledge of Him and a love for Him) through the privation of all creatures from the soul (see section 2.5). Thus any supernatural knowledge about creatures and any knowledge coming through the senses is not to be valued but sternly rejected. Though the soul may benefit from this knowledge, it does not serve the goal of the mystic in a primary manner (in the worst cases, it may even impede the soul traveling on its mystical journey). In the literature, these types of knowledge and experience are usually referred to as “secondary” or “accidental” phenomena of the mystical life.²⁷ In the following chapters, adopting St. John’s idea of the mystical life, we shall use the expression “mystical knowledge” to refer to that knowledge which belongs to the mystical life in a primary manner — i.e., the four kinds of knowledge listed above, which St. John endorses.

We have successfully delimited a notion of mystical knowledge within the context of St. John’s mysticism, and we are now ready to look more carefully into the nature of such mystical knowledge itself. We shall next examine what we have called in the Introduction (section 1.2) the “empiricist approach” to mystical

knowledge.

knowledge. In the next chapter, we shall critically assess one of the most influential models offered by the “empiricist approach” to mysticism — the model of mystical perception formulated by William Alston.

²⁷ See Farges 1926, Part II, and Underhill 1990, p.268, Stace 1960, pp.47-50.



THE CLASSIFICATION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE BY
ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

4. The Perceptual Model of Mystical Experience

4.1 Introduction

The goal of this dissertation is to find a model for mystical knowledge which allows us to understand and defend the epistemic significance of mysticism. After a brief exposition of St. John's mysticism given in the last two chapters, we are now ready to begin our philosophical task. In this chapter we shall examine one of the most elaborate models used by the empiricist approach to mysticism — the perceptual model by William Alston. I shall also begin to lay down the phenomenological framework in the terms of which St. John's mysticism will be studied in the subsequent chapters.

Proponents of the perceptual model claim that mystical experience is analogous to sense perception¹ — i.e., that there exist basic similarities between our perception of physical objects and certain mystical experiences such that we can say that God is being *perceived* in such experiences. The model has obvious attractions: given that we are all acquainted with sense perception, the model gives us a good intuitive grasp of what some mystical experience is like. More

¹ Some authors, like William Alston, make the less radical claim and hold that

importantly, if certain mystical experiences can be taken as perceptual, they can then become the basis for mystical knowledge in the same way that ordinary perception serves as the basis for empirical knowledge. It will then become difficult to deny mysticism its epistemic value: if the mystic's experience is similar enough to our sense experience, it would constitute a "bias" on our part if we accept perceptual experience as a source of knowledge and deny mystical experience the same status. That is the argument put forward by William James, who can be taken to advocate a certain perceptual model for mysticism:

Our own more 'rational' beliefs are based on evidence *exactly similar* in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of facts for those who have them as any sensation ever were for us. The records show that even though the five senses be in abeyance in them, *they are absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality*, if I may be pardoned the barbarous expression —that is, *they are face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist.*²

Notice how James boldly claims that the mystics' experiences are "exactly similar" to sensory experience, and James even takes them to be "face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist." Mystical experience thus has the same epistemic value as perceptual experience, and, according to James, the

certain mystical experiences are perceptual in nature.

² James 1961. p.332. italics mine. In this passage, James' language reveals his clear inclination towards a perceptual model of mysticism, although he does not explicitly elaborate or advocate such a model, as does William Alston.

implication of this is enormous: “the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe.”³ Thus: “No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”⁴ Mystical experiences, then, become an indispensable source for a complete knowledge of our universe.

Another important proponent of the perceptual model is Augustine Poulain. In his highly influential work, *The Graces of Interior Prayer* (1950), Poulain argues against the view that mystical experience consists solely of intensified feelings (e.g., of love and peace) that cause the soul to draw inferences regarding God’s presence and actions. For Poulain, mystical experience consists of “experimental knowledge” of God in which “the soul *perceives*; she does not *conclude*” (p.67), says Poulain. According to Poulain, mystical experience is direct experience of God: “The delicate point is the daring to admit to ourselves that it is God Himself of whom we were thus conscious and that we were really in touch with Him” (p.69). To explain how this direct, experimental knowledge of God Himself is effected, Poulain makes use of the doctrine of *spiritual senses* — a doctrine in Christian mysticism which claims that the soul has certain powers of spiritual seeing, spiritual hearing, spiritual tasting, smelling, and sensing by which

³ Ibid., p.335.

it can experience God. The spiritual senses are “spiritual” in that they do not employ any sensuous features of the five ordinary senses; nevertheless, the very nature of the experiences caused by these “spiritual” senses naturally leads the soul to compare them to the five perceptual senses. Poulain understands the doctrine in a more radical way than many other authors do. Instead of taking the comparison with the five senses as mere metaphor, he takes it to express a “close analogy,” a “strong resemblance” — in short, he believes that there exist five distinct powers in the soul that allow God to be *perceived*, just as the five ordinary senses allow us to perceive material objects. While Poulain’s position was harshly criticized by many theologians of his time, he was nevertheless supported by a number of thinkers.⁵

Major contemporary proponents of the perceptual model of mystical experience include William Wainwright (1981) and William Alston (1991). The latter has given us a highly elaborated theory of *mystical perception*. This will serve as the basis for our discussion of the perceptual model of mysticism.

⁴ Ibid., p.305.

⁵ Albert Farges was one of the chief defenders of Poulain’s position. In *The Mystical Phenomena* (1926), Farges maintains that God is directly experienced by the mystics through certain “infused species,” which are different from both sensuous species and affects. Poulain and Farges’ belief in a direct experience of God in mysticism is a major issue in a series of intense debates over mysticism that took place in France during the early decades of the twentieth century. For an account of the debates, which are sometimes portrayed as between Jesuit and Dominican thinkers, see Butler 1967, xxiii-lxxii, and McGinn 1992, pp.277-280.

4.2 William Alston's Theory of Mystical Perception

4.2.1 Perception as Direct Presentation of Objects

Alston's *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (1991) is an effort to show how religious beliefs can be justified by religious experience in the same way as our empirical beliefs are justified by our perceptual experience. In the first chapter of the book, Alston seeks to establish a parallelism between sensory perception and a particular group of mystical experiences that he calls *mystical perception*. Alston wants to show that there exists a "basic commonality" between sensory and mystical perception, that the two can be considered "species of the same genus" (p.36). In order to arrive at a "generic concept of perception" (ibid.) under which both mystical and sensory perception can be subsumed, Alston starts off with a phenomenological analysis of sensory perception. To Alston, the most central feature of sensory perception which distinguishes it from other operations of the mind (like thinking, imagining, or remembering, and so on) is that the objects of sensory perception are themselves *presented* or *given* to the consciousness. Alston then offers the following elaboration on his notion of perception as *presentation*: (a) contrary to abstract thoughts in which the object of thoughts is *absent* from the consciousness, in perception, the object is *given* to the person in the sense that it is *present* to the person's consciousness (pp.14-15); (b)

in such a *presentation*, the subject is said to be *directly aware* of the object, meaning the presentation is not mediated by any other object — the object of perception is not being aware of by virtue of another object, like a plane is recognized by the track it makes in the sky;⁶ (c) in this presentation, “. . . the subject is passive; no effort of will is needed; no power of attention or reasoning, no activities of formulating propositions are involved.”⁷ That marks the difference between perception and other cognitive states of the mind, like remembering, imagining, or thinking about an object. Alston uses the example of seeing a house to illustrate the point: standing before a house with your eyes closed, I perceive the house by simply opening my eyes, and letting the house *present* itself to you. Such *presentation* is marked by a *passiveness* of the perceiver that is absent in

⁶ Besides the *direct awareness* defined here, Alston recognizes a higher degree of directness or *immediacy* in which certain things can be given to the consciousness: in some situations, there is no distinction between the object of awareness and the state of consciousness through which the object is being aware of (for example, a pain that I am aware of which cannot be distinguished from my awareness of that pain). Alston call that a “maximally direct awareness” of an object. Perception is *not* such a maximally direct awareness of objects. Consequently, Alston excludes from the corresponding notion of “mystical perception” any mystical experience which demonstrates such immediacy like, for example, the experience of an “undifferentiated unity” discussed by Stace. See Alston 1991, p.24.

⁷ Alston 1991, p.16. Alston does not give this as a direct description of perception. Rather, this is Alston’s qualification for the so-called “infused contemplation,” which Alston argues to be a kind of perception. Given the purpose of the statement, I find nothing inappropriate in taking that as a description of perception by Alston.

processes like remembering, imagining or thinking about the house;⁸ (d) for Alston, such a presentation of objects is “essentially independent of any conceptualization, belief, judgment, or any other application of general concepts to the object, though it typically exists in close connection with the latter” (p.32). This means, for Alston, that the *perception* of an object must be strictly separated from subsequent acts of the mind that involve concepts and such judgments as, for example, *identifying* the object as being this or that, or *believing* the object to have certain characteristics, and so on: (e) the *presentation* or *awareness* of an object must have definite content, so that when S is perceiving X, X is *appearing* to S as *being such-and-such* (p.38). Alston actually does appear to believe that such presentation of objects constitutes the defining feature of sensory perception, which any theory of perception must admit and come to terms with, be it an externalist theory, an adverbial theory, or a theory of appearing (p.57). Thus, Alston thinks that his argument does not depend on any particular theory of

⁸ Nowadays, it is very common to believe that the perceiving subject is not totally passive and she is participating in some kind of interpretive process. Alston explicitly rejects the notion (see Alston 1991, pp.35-42). But we do not have to go into debates with Alston on this point. Alston’s position can still be maintained if we do not take the degree of passivity he requires to be *absolute*. We can take *passivity* here to mean that no *conscious effort* is involved. In fact, for our purpose, the whole debate on whether perception is *interpretive* can be easily avoided as long as the critics of mystical perception fail to show how mystical perception is *more interpretive* than sensory perception.

perception, but only on the phenomenological character of perception that he seriously believes he has demonstrated.⁹

4.2.2 *Mystical Perception*

Utilizing the above notion of perception, Alston defines *mystical perception* as a “putative direct experiential awareness of God” (p.35). It is defined as a “putative” awareness, so that a *mystical perception* is not necessarily a “veridical” or “genuine” perception of God. Whether an experience is a mystical perception is then determined by its phenomenological characters, and it is independent of whether God exists or not, or whether God is actually perceived by the soul or not. It is defined as a “direct experiential awareness,” in the sense that God Himself is *presented* to the soul who is *directly aware of* it. Defined as such, *mystical perception* will have the same basic nature as sensory perception. If examples of such *mystical perception* can be found in the mystical literature, Alston will succeed in establishing a parallelism between sense perception and (certain kinds of) mystical experience. Alston points to a number of reports by the mystics which he takes as examples of *mystical perception*. Most of the examples he cites belongs to two groups of mystical experience: (a) those in which God’s *presence*

⁹ Alston himself favours the Theory of Appearing, in which “for S to perceive X is simply for X to appear to S as so-and-so.” But he thinks that additional requirements for perception in other theories of perception can also be satisfied by

is reported to be felt: (b) those in which God is reported to be "seen," "heard," "tasted," "smelled" or "touched" by the soul in a non-sensuous manner — i.e., apprehensions of God by what Poulain and Alston refer to as the "spiritual senses." Belonging to the first group is a report by St. Teresa of Ávila, which Alston quotes:

There was one thing that I was ignorant of at the beginning. I did not really know that God is present in all things; and when He seemed to me so near, I thought that It was impossible. Yet I could not cease believing that He was there, since I seemed almost certainly to have been conscious of His very presence. Unlearned persons told me that He was there only in His grace. But I could not believe this, because, as I have said, He seemed to be really present. (Teresa of Ávila 1957, p.127; quoted in Alston 1991, p.15)

As an example of apprehension of God by the spiritual senses, Alston cites a report by Angela of Foligno:

At times God comes into the soul without being called; and He instills into her fire, love, and sometimes sweetness; and the soul believes this comes from God, and delights therein. But she does not yet know, or see, that He dwells in her: she perceives His grace, in which she delights. And again God comes to the soul, and speaks to her words full of sweetness, in which she has much joy, and she feels Him. This feeling of God gives her the greatest delight; but even here a certain doubt remains: for the soul has not the certitude that God is in her. . . . And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her, 'Behold Me!' and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another. For the eyes of the soul behold a plenitude of which I cannot

mystical perception. See Alston 1991, pp.54-59.

speaking: a plenitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can say nothing. And the soul rejoices in that sight with an ineffable joy; and this is the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her.¹⁰

Alston points out that in examples like these, the mystics report having an *awareness* of God Himself in a non-sensory manner, an experience quite different from simply *believing, imagining, or thinking of* God. The *awareness* is described as very strong and vivid, even comparable to sense perception in its clarity and certitude. ("He seemed to be really present," says St. Teresa; "She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another," says Angela of Foligno.) Neither can this *awareness* of God be explained away as an inference or effect of the strong feelings and emotions the mystics enjoy (as many authors want to claim), since the mystics do make a distinction between the *awareness* of God and the related effects. In St. Teresa's case, she distinguishes between God's presence by grace (God's presence experienced by the *effects* he produces, such as peace and love) and the presence of God Himself (which she is directly experiencing).¹¹ Angela of Foligno also clearly distinguishes between her vision of God and the effects she felt before and during the vision. The awareness described in these cases is a *direct* awareness by the mystics. They do not report to have apprehended God through any mediating object — they report to have apprehended God Himself.

¹⁰ Angela of Foligno, *Livre de l'exerience des vrais fidèles de Ste Angèle de Foligno*, pp.170. seq. Quoted in Underhill 1990, p. 282, and in Alston 1991, p.13.

Moreover, this awareness is a passive one — the mystics do not bring about the experience in a voluntary manner. This is particularly clear in the case of St. Teresa, who did not even know that such an awareness was possible before the experience. The awareness also involves definite contents. Both St. Teresa and Angela of Foligno become aware that God is present in their soul. With all the requirements for an experience of *object presentation* now fulfilled, Alston concludes that examples such as these show that some mystics do enjoy *mystical perception*, an experience with the same generic nature as sense perception.

Alston excludes from his discussion cases in which people are aware of God through experience that involves the senses — for example, those cases of corporeal visions we discussed in section 3.2. Though they fit the definition of mystical perception given by Alston, he regards them as less important than the non-sensory perception of God, which “has a greater chance of presenting Him as He is than any sensory presentation,” for “God in His essential nature is purely spiritual.” (p.20) That means in Alston’s discussions, mystical perception refers specifically to “putative direct experiential awareness of God” which are non-sensory. Since the notion of “mystical knowledge” we are working with in this dissertation also excludes mystical experience involving sensory elements (see

¹¹ See Teresa of Ávila 1957, p.189 for the distinction.

3.4). we too shall limit our discussion concerning the perceptual model to mystical experience of a non-sensory nature.

4.2.3 Spiritual Senses and the Problem of Mystical Qualia

To push his "parallelism" a bit further, Alston suggests that there exist "basic phenomenal qualities for mystical perception, analogous to color and shape for the visual modality and temperature and texture for the tactile." (p.49) Mystical perception involves a whole variety of phenomenal qualia that are unique to mystical perception, just as sensory qualia belong exclusively to the experience of sense perception. Against those who believe that mystical perceptions are effects of "feelings" and emotions, Alston maintains that the "mystical qualia" he talks about are non-affective in their nature. Just as a colour is different from the effects it produces, a mystical quale is different from the accompanying effects it produces in mystical perception.¹² To support his belief in mystical qualia, Alston refers to the doctrine of "spiritual senses" as it is understood by Poulain, who maintains, as certain writings by the mystics seem to suggest, that there are five distinct "spiritual senses" by which God may be perceived. Alston maintains that

¹² Alston argues that even if the phenomenal qualities of the alleged mystical perception were to consist of nothing but affects, it would not change the perceptual nature of the experience (ibid., pp. 50-51). His argument confuses perception and affection and might be challenged on this point. In the following discussion, I shall take Alston's mystical perception to be made up of unique

the distinctiveness of each spiritual sense implies that each of the spiritual senses must have its own distinctive set of qualia, just as each of our physical senses does.¹³

Alston addresses a question that arises at this point. If mystical perception involves distinct qualia, which are different from the sensory or affective qualities that we usually experience, why is that mystics do not have a distinct vocabulary for enumerating them, a vocabulary similar to that which we have for colours and sounds? Alston's answer is that we lack a language for describing the mystical qualia because mystical perceptions are gifts that God bestows for His own purposes and intents, for which we have "absolutely no handle on prediction and control."¹⁴ That means they lack the regularities required for us to analyze them, categorize them, and name them. But this constitutes no ground for denying the existence of distinct mystical qualia.

4.2.4 The Contents of Mystical Perception

Like sensory perceptions, mystical perceptions have definite contents. In mystical perceptions, says Alston, God appears to the mystics as either *being so-and-so*

"mystical qualia," as he puts it.

¹³ Poulain himself does not seem to have gone that far. While maintaining that the five spiritual senses are five distinct powers for perceiving God, Poulain has not explicitly addressed the issue of distinct mystical qualia. See Poulain 1950, pp.570-71.

(good, powerful, present, loving, and so on) or *doing-so-and-so* (speaking, forgiving, strengthening, and so on). That immediately gives rise to the problem of how such things as goodness, powerfulness, forgiving, and strengthening can be “directly perceived” by the mystics. They seem to be abstract concepts involving complex experiential or behavioral patterns and not the sort of things open to immediate perception. Alston answers the question by saying that the mystics’ descriptions of their experience involve *comparative* rather than *phenomenal* concepts. He means that when a mystic says she sees God as a powerful being, she is not reporting the qualities of her perception (like saying she sees the tie is red). Rather, she means God is “presenting the kind of appearance it would be reasonable to expect a supremely powerful (good, loving) being to present.”¹⁵ When pressed on how the mystic knows how a “supremely powerful (good, loving) being” should appear, Alston answers that it is the mystic’s more humble experience with powerful (good, loving) persons which gives her the clues. So the reports of the mystics on their mystical perceptions are based on *comparisons* of the perceptions with their personal experience of worldly objects.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.49.

¹⁵ Alston 1991, p.47.

4.2.5 *Summary of Alston's Approach*

To summarize, Alston is defending a parallelism between sensory and mystical perception. He maintains that the two are similar in the following respects:

- (1) they both involve the *presentation*, or *appearing* of objects to consciousness;
- (2) the objects are *presented* or *appearing* as being or doing so-and-so; and
- (3) sensory and mystical perception both involve distinct types of subjective qualities, or "qualia."

While trying hard to establish the parallelism between sensory and mystical perception, Alston acknowledges that there are differences between them. Besides the fact that the latter does not have any sensory content, he thinks there exist the following differences: (1) while sense perception is present in all our waking hours, mystical perception occurs much more rarely; (2) while sense perception is vivid and richly detailed, mystical perception is dim, meager, and obscure; (3) while sense perception is shared by all humans, mystical perception occurs to a much smaller number of persons.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid., p.36. While (1) and (3) seem clear enough, (2) remains questionable. Perception is not always "vivid and richly detailed" (consider a low-pitched rumble, for example), and not all mystical perception is "dim, meager, and obscure" (consider the example of Angela of Foligno's vision of God).

Establishing the parallelism between sensory and mystical perception is just the first step in Alston's project of showing how people can be justified in holding certain religious beliefs by virtue of having a perception of God. He then applies to mystical perception his own *doxastic practice approach* to epistemology. We can only briefly summarize Alston's highly complicated project here. In the remaining chapters of *Perceiving God*, Alston tries to show that there exists in the Christian community a doxastic practice (a belief-formation mechanism) that he calls "Christian Mystical Practice" (CMP). This Christian Mystical Practice produces religious beliefs based on one's mystical perception of God. Alston then argues that CMP, like Sense Perceptual Practice (SPP), which produces perceptual beliefs from sense perception, enjoys the status of what he calls a "basic doxastic practice." As CMP enjoys the status of a basic doxastic practice, it is *rational* for participants of CMP to accept the beliefs thus formed as true and justified.

4.3 A Critique of Alston's Notion of Mystical Perception

I shall offer here a critique of Alston's perceptual model for the class of mystical experiences that he identifies as "mystical perception." While various authors have offered criticisms of different aspects of Alston's project,¹⁷ my critique will

¹⁷ For a recent discussion, see Fales 1996.

concentrate on the parallelism between mystical and sense perception that Alston has tried to establish. I shall focus on his notion of *perceptual presentation*. This is the cornerstone of Alston's model, yet there has been little critical discussion of it in the literature.

Let me briefly outline the critique I am going to offer. My main objection to Alston's perceptual model of mysticism is that he has utilized an inadequate notion of perception. To show that Alston's notion has failed to capture the essential nature of perception, we shall look at the works of two important philosophers in the phenomenological tradition, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who have given us highly sophisticated accounts of essential features of perception. We shall see that according to the analysis by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Alston's notion of *presence of objects* fails to define a "perceptual mode" of consciousness under which we may subsume both sensuous and mystical perception. Also, we shall see that according to the account of perception given by the two phenomenologists, Alston's "mystical perception" cannot qualify as "perception" at all. We shall further explore the nature of the "presence of God" that the mystics experience, and show that it cannot be perceptual. We shall then conclude this chapter by suggesting what may be a better way to understand the manner in which God is experienced by the mystics.

4.3.1 Husserl on Intuition and Perception

Husserl's phenomenology is a descriptive study of consciousness, in which conscious experience is analyzed using the notion of *intentionality*. Intentionality is the directedness of a conscious experience towards some object (or some state of affairs). An experience is *intentional* when it is "of" or "about" something. In this sense, much of our conscious experience is *intentional*. Our perception, memory, imagination, thinking, and feelings are, in most cases, of or about some objects. Husserl calls an intentional experience an *act*.¹⁸ An act can be generally described by specifying its *quality* and *matter*. The *intentional matter* of an act specifies the *intended object* of an act and *how* it is intended (as, for example, having certain qualities or related to other things in certain ways). For example, in the visual experience of the cat being on the mat, the cat being on the mat is the *matter* of the act. In this manner, the *matter* of the act defines an *interpretive sense* (*Auffassungssinn*)¹⁹ of the act. The *intentional quality* of the act or the *act quality*, on the other hand, is the *manner* or *attitude* in which an *intentional matter* or its *interpretive sense* is to be taken up. In our last example of seeing that the cat is on the mat, "seeing" is the quality of the act. Different *qualities* can combine with the

¹⁸ For Husserl, the term contains no sense of an "activity," but means simply an experience with an intentional character. See *LI*, V§13.

¹⁹ Husserl later refers to this "interpretive sense" with the term *noema*; I have avoided the more complex term at this stage in order to keep things simple, but I

same *matter* to form different acts. Instead of “seeing” that the cat is on the mat, we can “remember” that the cat is on the mat, or “imagine” that the cat is the mat, or “think of” the cat being on the mat. We can also “love it” that the cat is on the mat, or “feel excited” about the cat being on the mat. The seeing, remembering, imagining, thinking, and feeling all represent different act *qualities* that can go with the same *matter*. *Intentional quality* and *intentional matter* are never without one another; an act quality without matter, or vice versa, is unimaginable — in Husserl’s terminology, *quality* and *matter* are both abstract *moments* of an intentional act.²⁰

According to Husserl, there exists a class of acts which are most simple and basic, upon which all kinds of intentional acts are built. Husserl calls them *objectifying acts*. It is through *objectifying acts* that objects are intended by consciousness.²¹ According to their *intentional quality*, *objectifying acts* can be divided into two groups: the *significative* and the *intuitive*. In a *significative act* the intended object (or state of affairs) is referred to, talked of, or thought about by means of signs or symbols, without the intended object itself being present to the consciousness. For example, when we make the statement (or have the thought) that “the cat is on the mat,” the saying (and the thought that is contained in it)

shall come back to it in Chapter 5.

²⁰ For the quality and matter of acts, see *LI*, V §20.

²¹ For the notion of *objectifying acts*, see *LI*, V §§ 37–43.

expresses something about the cat (and the mat) without making the cat itself *present* to the mind. While language is one means by which a *significant act* can be made, it is not the only one. Other symbols, or even concrete objects (for example, a road sign) can serve the same purpose.²²

There are another types of acts that are *intuitive*, through which the *intended objects* are *present* (or *presented*) to the mind. For example, when I see the cat which is on the mat, the cat is itself *present* (visually, in this case) to my consciousness through that very act of seeing. The cat is *itself present*, or present *in propria persona* (*LI*, p.538), in the sense that it is not some sign that represents the cat to me, but the very cat itself is appearing visually before me.²³ An object can be *present* to the mind in various senses through other intuitive acts, as in imagination and recollection. When I imagine (graphically) a cat which sits on a mat, the imagined cat is there, *present* before my mind. When I remember the scenario in which the cat was on the mat, the *cat* is again *present* to my mind. These two sorts of *presence* of the cat can be contrasted with the case in which I am merely thinking about the cat (in an imageless manner), in which case the cat is *absent*.

²² It should be noted here that Husserl's notion of a *significant act* is very broad and goes beyond the idea of being an expression (see, for example, *LI*, VI, §15). We shall have more to say on this in the next chapter.

²³ Thus, in *LI*, Husserl holds a naive-realist notion of perception. For Husserl, a person perceives the very object itself, not the sensations it produces, as the

Husserl also calls the intention of a *significant act* an *empty* or *inauthentic* intention, while the intention of an *intuitive act* is called a *filled* or *authentic* intention. Notice how *sensations* are involved in the two types of intentions in very different manners: an *empty intention* is expressed through signs or symbols that are in turn expressed through certain sensory elements. The sensible elements may be, for example, the sound of words, the look of certain symbols, or even the look of an object that stands as a sign of another object which is emptily intended. In all of the above cases, the sensory elements' relation to the intended object is purely conventional — a certain word or symbol stands for an object by a certain agreement among its users.²⁴ The case is different with a *filled* intention. In the case of a perception, for example, the very properties of the intended object are given to us through the sensations involved. Also notice that whether an act is *significant* or *intuitive* depends not on the sensory elements involved, but on the *quality* of the act, i.e., the *attitude* by which the sensory elements involved are taken. For example, the face of a stop sign on the road can be taken as an element of an intuitive act in which the sign (as a physical object) is

“representationalists” believe.

²⁴ This is not to say that there can be no causal relationship between properties of the object and the sign employed. Rather, the idea is that even if such a relationship exists, it is not a *necessary* one, and we can always use another sign in place of the original one without affecting the meaning of the sentence.

perceived. The very same face of the sign can also be taken as the element of a *significant* act that tells drivers to stop where the sign is located.²⁵

While acts like thinking, speaking, writing or gesture making are examples of *significant* acts, perceiving, imagining, and remembering are examples of intuitive acts, or *intuitions*. While perception, imagination, and recollection may *intend* simple perceptual objects like trees, tables, and flowers, there is another class of *intuitive acts* called *categorial intuitions* that *intend* what Husserl calls *categorial objects*. Categorial objects include such “abstract” entities as states of affairs, concepts, relationships, and universals. We can use our previous example to illustrate the difference between the two types of intuition. While seeing the cat (which is now on the mat) is a simple intuition, seeing *the fact that* the cat is on the mat is a categorial intuition. In this example the categorial intuition (that the cat is on the mat) depends on the simple intuitions of the cat and the mat, which are related to each other in a particular spatial relationship. According to Husserl, all categorial intuitions are *compound acts* comprising such simple intuitions.

4.3.2 The Inadequacy of Alston’s Notion of Perception

After looking at Husserl’s classification of intentional experience, Alston’s notion of perception as direct awareness of an object sounds inadequate. For Alston,

²⁵ Another famous example is given by Husserl in *LI*, V, §§ 26-27, where he

perceiving X means to have X itself directly presented to the consciousness and appearing as being so-and-so or doing-so-and-so. In the perspective of Husserlian phenomenology, such presence of the object itself is a generic feature of a whole class of acts called intuitions, and perception is only one member of this class. There are other kinds of intuitive acts that do not intend physical objects and in which physical sensations are not directly involved. Throughout the history of philosophy, countless things have been proposed as objects of such acts of intuition. In fact, in current standard analytic philosophical practice the first condition that must be met by any suggested solution to a problem is that it not be "counter-intuitive." "Counter-intuitive" is equivalent in meaning to "self-evidently false." So it seems that intuition has long enjoyed a privileged status in philosophical analysis. And, as stated above, the history of philosophy has witnessed the identification of countless entities as objects of intuition.²⁶ For proponents of intuitionist theories, intuition involves a direct presentation of the object to consciousness; the object itself is said to be given to consciousness. These alleged "intuitions" also have the same nature of passiveness that Alston

illustrates the same idea by the example of a statue of Napoleon.

²⁶ For example: (a) universals (as in Platonism, or at least in the popular interpretation of it); (b) the truth of self-evident or indubitable propositions, with mathematical and logical truths being the prime examples; (c) values, as in ethical intuitionism, which takes moral values to be directly intuited; (d) states of mind of other persons, as many take the apprehension of the other's states of mind to be an act of intuition. For discussion of various intuitive acts from a phenomenological

ascribes to perception; in these “intuitions” the objects are passively received.

Perception, in short, is not the only form of intuition that we commonly acknowledge. But if perception is not the only possible form of intuition, it is not clear why it is necessary that the direct apprehension of God should have to be considered under the category of “perception,” as Alston and his followers would have us believe. Why not considered it as a *sui generis* type of intuition? After all, people have always considered mystical experience of God as a type of special intuition of God. There is no clear advantage that is gained by calling this intuition a perception. In fact, categorizing the apprehension of God as a perception not only trivializes the experience of the mystic, but it may well render the “solution” to the “problem of mysticism” impossible in principle.

The motivation behind the notion of a mystical perception of God as found in James and Alston lies in a basic principle of empiricist epistemology. This principle stipulates that only individual material objects are ever experienced directly, and all other “objects” of consciousness—such as values, ideas, universals, and others’ states of mind — are results of intellectual operations (including abstraction, inference, etc.) that make use of the data provided by sense-perception. According to this empiricist principle, there is no intuition (understood as a direct experience of things) outside of perception. In short, all

perspective, see, for example, Smith 1989.

intuitions must be cases of perception.²⁷ The implication is that if one is to directly apprehend God, she must “perceive” Him. Thus, to account for the direct apprehension of God by the mystics, Alston has to extend the notion of perception to the non-material and non-spatial realm, so that God can be said to be perceived. But to demand that the non-empirical be subject to verification according to empiricist criteria is clearly to make a monumental category mistake. It’s also counter-intuitive.

4.3.2 Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on Perceptual Presence

Employing Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of perception, we shall examine perception in a more detailed manner than is possible with Alston’s view of perception as direct presentation. This will enable us to see that what Alston calls “mystical perception” in fact lacks certain features that are essential to perceptual acts.

According to Husserl, perception is especially peculiar in that a perceptual object is never entirely given to consciousness. Though the object is wholly present, only certain parts of it are experienced by consciousness at any one

²⁷ Many empiricists do not even believe in intuition in the sense of the direct apprehension of objects. For “representationalists” such as Locke, we never experience objects directly, but only their “internal representations” through sensations. Alston attempts to combine his direct realism with such a representationalism (see Alston 1991, pp.17, 19, 50), and this jeopardizes the

moment. Take the case of vision: the visual object is experienced in a perspectival manner, in the sense that only one side of the object can be seen at any one time. Husserl calls the impression we have of the side of an object we see a "profile" (*Abschattung*)²⁸ of the object. But the perceptual act entails more than the mere seeing of the side of the object that is facing us; the existence of the unseen sides of the object are also suggested, or "implied," by our perception of the side that we see. Thus an act of perception is quite complex in its nature: the unseen sides and parts of the object are emptily intended by certain significative intentions²⁹ which, together with the filled intention of the seen parts, constitute the whole object of the perceptual act. The same analysis can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to our other senses.

The very idea that there are emptily intended sides or features implies that these sides and features can also, in principle, become fully intended. This is usually achieved by a change of perspective on the part of the subject through bodily movement. To put it another way: we perceive objects as having hidden sides or features because we experience changing profiles of objects by virtue of our bodily motility. Such motility includes the locomotion of the body, the change

integrity of his own theory of perception.

²⁸ For a more thorough discussion of this term, see Sokolowski 1974, pp.89-92.

²⁹ Husserl calls the significative intentions *indications*, which shall not be confused with "judgments," "expectations," or "imagination": we shall have more to say about this in the next chapter.

of bodily postures, the movements of our limbs and eyes, and so on. A change of perspective will bring about a different profile in which certain features that had previously been emptily intended appear now in fullness, and those features that were previously intended in fullness may now become hidden and intended only emptily. In general, a perceptual object is experienced through a series of profiles. A perceptual object is in principle something that can be explored from different perspectives, and such exploration is made possible by our bodily motility.

Thus there exists an intimate relationship between perception and bodily motility, and the former is functionally dependent on the latter.³⁰ This does not mean that every singular instance of perception must involve bodily motion; rather, perception *in general* involves motility. When I see a house sitting before me, I see it as something that I may, in principle, explore from different perspectives. Thus perception is not really understandable apart from motility. A “static” notion of perception, like the one used by Alston, cannot capture this essential feature of perception, because “static” perception is only a special case of “dynamic” perception — perception which is accompanied by and coupled with bodily motility. Further, perception is never separable with the body and with spatiality, for the two provide the basis for motility. Here, by the body, we do not

³⁰ See *DR* §49. Also, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962): “there is not a perception followed by a movement, for both form a system which varies as a whole” (p.343).

mean the body as a mere physical or bio-physiological object; rather, it is what Merleau-Ponty calls the phenomenal body, which is the very vantage point from which I perceive things. The body is also that very subject which moves and explores objects in the world through perception. The space that is inhabited and explored by the phenomenal body is called "lived space." This is the space of our daily experience of meaningful actions, as opposed to the "objective" or "geometric space" that is a product of theoretical reflection.³¹

The brief introduction I have given above cannot do justice to the depth and complexity of the analyses performed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on perception. But one thing should be clear by now: in its very essence, perception involves the notions of body, space and motion. Perception is more than a presence of an object to the consciousness of a subject. Perceptual presence is a presence to body through a profile; it is a presence in a space in which the object may (in principle) be explored from various perspectives through the movement of the body. This is how perceptual presence can be properly distinguished from other types of presence to the mind, and how perception can be properly distinguished from other intuitive acts of the mind. Whether so-called "mystical perceptions" are really "perceptual" must be determined using this richer concept of perception.

³¹ For Merleau-Ponty on the *phenomenal body* and spatiality, see Merleau-Ponty

Now, do cases of so-called “mystical perception” exhibit a structure similar to that found in ordinary perception? We do not require here that “mystical perception” involve one’s physical body and bodily sensibility as in ordinary perception — that would be too strict a requirement. Our requirements here remain *formal* ones. “Mystical perception” must involve some parallel notion of a *body* that gives the mystic a *vantage point* for the perception, and this perception must involve a *parallel* notion of *space* in which *motility* is realized, and through which the object of “perception” — God — may be explored from different perspectives.

Do such elements exist in the mystic’s experience? I think the answer is negative. Looking at the two examples that we have quoted, in the reports by St. Teresa of Ávila and Angela of Foligno, there is no trace of such a body, space, or motion. There are spatial terms, like God is “near” or “dwells within” the mystics. But we use such spatial metaphors even in describing our ordinary life, and these terms alone do not prove that there is a notion of *spatiality* involved in “mystical perception.”³² More importantly, in these cases *God is never given through*

1962. pp.98-147, 243-98.

³² One of the most interesting studies of the spatial character of mystical experience is offered by Nelson Pike, in Pike 1992, Chapter 3. He suggests that God is experienced by mystics in various degrees of closeness through the “spiritual senses” of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching, and in a manner similar to that in which physical objects are experienced in different degrees of closeness by our different senses. While Pike’s work seems to give

changing profiles; the mystics do not experience different aspects of God through any change of perspective, *and all that can be experienced by the mystic in that experience is given all at once*. “I seemed almost certainly to have been conscious of His very presence” — that is nearly all that St. Teresa can say about the nature of her experience, which is simply an awareness of God’s presence, an experience that lacks any detailed account of perceptual features. In Angela of Foligno’s case, she says that “the soul sees Him dwelling within her,” and again no detailed description is offered. The situation is the same with the other examples Alston cites. It might be suggested that the mystics are getting “snapshots” of God, static “images,” in each of these instances. But that would amount to saying that in its modality, so-called “mystical perception” is not really perceptual. Just as our perception of things is not a collection of “snapshots” of perceptual objects, these “snapshots” of God do not give us *perception* of God, in the strict sense of the word. If the experience of changing profiles is not ever experienced in “mystical perception,” then it is not a real perception.

It may be objected that we are defining perception as perception of material beings, which must then involve the body and spatiality. The question of whether there can be perception of non-material objects like God would then be

strong support to a perceptual theory of mystical experience, his argument is based on a casual reading of the mystical texts and ultimately proves unconvincing.

pre-empted. But we are not trying to exclude the possibility of “mystical perception” by defining perception in a certain biased manner; rather, *we are raising the fundamental issue of whether there can be a proper, meaningful notion of perception of non-material objects.* Through phenomenological analysis, we can see that perception is the peculiar mode of appearance by which material beings are given to us. That renders impossible Alston’s project to build a parallelism between mystical and ordinary perception.

4.3.3 The Presence of God as a Personal Presence

We have shown that what Alston calls “mystical perception” lacks the salient features of perception as described by phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. As we look further into the nature of the mystic’s awareness of God, we will find that most of the examples given by Alston have a common feature, to which Alston has paid little attention: the presence of God to the mystic is like the presence of a person. This is clearly the case in Angela of Foligno’s experience, in which God is experienced as a loving person that “speaks to her words full of sweetness.” This is also the case with the following examples given by Alston:

All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be at my side, but as this was not an imaginary vision I could not see in what form. But I most clearly felt that

He was all the time on my right, *and was a witness of everything that I was doing. . . .*³³

I attended service at a church in Uppsala. . . During both the Confession of Sin and the Prayer of Thanksgiving which followed Communion, I had a strong consciousness of the Holy Spirit *as a person*, and an equally strong consciousness of the existence of God, that God was present, that the Holy Spirit was in all those who took part in the service. . . . The only thing of importance was God, and my realization *that He looked upon me and let His mercy flood over me, forgiving me for my mistakes and giving me the strength to live a better life.*³⁴

From these and other examples on which Alston has based his argument, we see that the presence of God to the mystic is a *personal* one. God is present to the mystics as a being who is consciousness of the mystic's environment and situation, who has feelings and thoughts, and who is able to communicate these feelings and thoughts to the mystic through language or by other means. To see the importance of this feature of God's presence to the soul, let us look at our ordinary experience of other persons. To do so, let us first "bracket" or "suspend" our metaphysical beliefs about the relationship between the body and the mind, and put aside the question of whether dualism, materialism, monism, or other theories provide the best answer to the "mind/body problem." Rather, we are going to look at the way we become aware of other persons. What we will find is that the apprehension of another person is pretty different from the way we

³³ Teresa of Ávila 1957. Chapter 27. pp.187-89. quoted in Alston 1991, p.13. Italics mine.

perceive physical objects like tables, trees, or rocks. Even though the “presentation” of persons to our consciousness usually involves a perception of the person’s body, it is quite clear that the “presentation of personhood,” as we may call it, cannot be equated with the perception of the person’s body. When I see a living person before me, she is presented to me as something *more* than a lump of physical matter. Rather, she is apprehended as another *subject*, another *center of consciousness* as we may call it, which can feel, think, and express herself as I do. There are different theories of the manner in which this “presentation of personhood” is accomplished beyond the physical perception of the body. Some believe that I “infer” the existence of certain “mental properties” of that person from what I physically perceive of her body. Others believe that in the process I “project” my own conscious states onto the body that I perceive, taking it to be something conscious like myself. Still others propose other theories on how the other person is apprehended. While there remains disagreement concerning the ontological status of personhood — whether it is a “substance” in its own right, or some properties of the body, or an “epiphenomenon” due to the body’s physical operation, or something other than all these — and on *how* personhood is apprehended by consciousness, some have maintained that personhood is not something directly perceived by the five senses. Though it may

³⁴ Unger 1976, p.114, quoted in Alston 1991, p.14. Italics mine.

depend on the perception of bodies, it may be that the apprehension of personhood is not itself a case of perception.

Now, if consciousness' apprehension of other persons is *not* an instance of sense perception, and the mystic's apprehension of God is more like the apprehension of other persons than the perception of trees, rocks, and tables, there is no longer any parallelism between the perception of things and the apprehension of God. Once the personalistic nature of God's presence is affirmed, it seems inappropriate to compare the mystic's apprehension of God to sense perception. Alston's notion of mystical perception has become irrelevant. It no longer provides us with a viable model for understanding mysticism.³⁵

4.4 Conclusion: an Alternative Way to Understand the Presence of God

We have looked at some problems of Alston's theory of mystical perception. We have seen that Alston employs an inadequate notion of perception, which leads naturally to the question of why the direct experience of God should be a

³⁵ Alston might want to insist that something similar to perception of the person happens in mystical experience, and that the mystic "perceives" a certain "spiritual substance" through which God is presented to the person, much as in the presentation of personhood through the perception of bodies. But then Alston would be inventing a strange kind of "spiritual substance" as the object of mystical perception and giving us a very complex model indeed. In that case, we would still have the questions of why we call that apprehension of spiritual substance a perception, and how the mystical perception of God's spiritual substance leads to an apprehension of God's personhood. Such a theory would

“perception” at all instead of a *sui generis* type of intuition. We have also looked at the salient features of perception as described in phenomenology, and have shown that what Alston calls “mystical perception” lacks those features. We have also shown that the presence of God to the soul is more like the presence of a person to consciousness, making the parallelism which Alston tries to establish between physical perception and mystical apprehension an impossibility.

Besides saying that the mystic’s apprehension of God is *not* a perception and it is like the awareness of a person, is there something more we can say about the nature of such an apprehension? Before closing this chapter, I would like to engage in some speculation on the manner in which God is *presented* to consciousness. Let us turn to some descriptions of the mystical presence of God as given in Poulain’s *The Grace of Interior Prayer* (1950), from which Alston takes many of his examples. The following passages will give us some clues to the nature of the mystics’ apprehension of God:

It is not only in the state of glory that God is known experimentally, but also in our earthly state. God is known here, obscurely and by faith, it is true; but He can be known by a certain *experimental touch without being seen*. In the same way, we do not see our soul, but we feel her as an object that is present, having experimental knowledge of the fact that she animates the body, that she gives life to it. . . . God makes Himself really present, in a special manner. (de Vallgornera, *Mystica Theologia divi Thomae*, No. 868, quoted in Poulain 1950, p.106)

cause more problems than it could hope to solve.

God is present in the soul. If she does not precipitate herself outwards by an irrational love of the things of sense, she will find God *present* as intimately as *she is present to herself*, and in a similar manner; not by the sensible faculties, not by the understanding which, however, can lay hold of absent objects, but by a *certain more intimate means*, giving a conscious presence. (Thomassin, *Dogmata theologia: de Deo*, Book VI, Chapterv, No.9. Quoted in Poulain 1950, p.107)

In these examples, the mystic compares his experience of God's presence to the presence of the self to herself. These examples further support our claim that the mystic's apprehension of God is unlike the perception of an object; rather, the mystic's awareness of God seems to have a nature similar to the mystic's *self-awareness*. This, together with the personalistic nature of the apprehension of God we discussed in the last section, opens up a new way to understand mystical experience, which we shall explore in the last two chapters of this dissertation.

In the following chapters, we shall proceed with our phenomenological analyses of St. John's mysticism. We shall begin with an important act that leads mystics into the mystical experience — contemplative prayer.

5. Contemplative Prayer in St. John of the Cross

In this chapter, we shall begin our phenomenological analysis of St. John's mysticism. However, instead of proceeding directly to the subject of mystical knowledge, we shall examine an important transitional effort taken by mystics to enter mystical consciousness — namely, contemplative prayer. Many mystical traditions regard contemplative prayer as a vital step in attaining mystical consciousness. As all thought and concepts are abandoned when a person enters contemplative prayer, some argue that the mystical state thus entered is a “pure consciousness state” which is extra-linguistic and devoid of any content.¹ By looking carefully at the nature of contemplative prayer, certain misunderstandings of the nature of mysticism may be avoided. Our analysis will also allow us to gain some insight into how language is related to mysticism and mystical knowledge.

5.1 St. John's Descriptions of Contemplative Prayer

Let us first look at how contemplative prayer is described in the works of St. John.

¹ See, e.g., Foreman 1990, p.32. Stace pp.103, 109.

5.1.1 The Motivation for the Contemplative Prayer

As discussed in 2.5.2, there exists an unsurpassable ontological gulf between God and creatures, which means that no natural way of knowing can give us an authentic knowledge of God. St. John summarizes the situation as follows:

Nothing in this life that could be imagined or received and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means of union with God. In our natural way of knowing, the intellect can grasp an object only through the forms and phantasms of things perceived by the bodily senses. Since, as we said, these things cannot serve as a means, the intellect cannot profit from its natural knowing. (A 2.8.4)

For genuine knowledge of God, one must enter what St. John calls the *dark night*, a privative process in which the soul is emptied of all that is not God, so that God Himself can be infused into the soul and be united with it (see 2.5.2 and 2.5.3). This process requires the soul to let go of all its former efforts to know God, and St. John, following Pseudo-Dionysius, calls this a process of “unknowing”:

In order to draw nearer the divine ray, the intellect must advance by unknowing rather than by the desire to know, and by blinding itself and remaining in darkness rather than by opening its eyes. . . To reach union with God the intellect must obviously blind itself to all the paths along which it can travel. (A 2.8.5-6)

One important means for achieving this unknowing is *contemplative prayer*. To properly understand the nature of contemplative prayer, we can

contrast it with a more popular form of prayer known as *mental prayer*, or *meditation*. Let us see the difference between the two.

5.1.2 Meditation versus Contemplation

The term meditation refers to the mind's reflective and discursive consideration of things from a spiritual point of view. As such, it may involve a whole variety of subjects and methods — perhaps a reflection on some Christian truths, or a passage from Scripture, or some personal experience. It employs words, ideas, or imageries in a more or less logical fashion, with the aim of gaining a better understanding and a personal appropriation of the religious truths, or gaining a spiritual perspective for one's life experience.² Instead of being merely an activity of the mind, meditation is supposed to involve a loving and prayerful attitude towards God and to accumulate in supplications, confessions, decisions, and adoration; thus meditation should involve the *will* and the *emotions* as well as the intellect and the imagination — in fact, the whole being of the meditator is employed.³ Traditionally, meditation is also called *mental prayer*, in contrast (but not in opposition) to *vocal prayer* (liturgical or personal recitations of set prayer formulae) and to *contemplative prayer*.

² See Ward 1983.

³ For a description of the practice of meditation in the history of Christian monasticism, see Poulain 1949, pp.37-42.

In contrast to meditation, which is discursive in nature, contemplation or contemplative prayer is a kind of prayer in which reasoning and active imagination are stopped. In contemplation, the person does not need to consider any particular subject; but if she does consider one, she does so in a simple and intuitive, instead of a discursive, manner. In contemplation, words and thoughts are kept to a minimum; images, if present, become blurred and without detail. In its simplest form, contemplation is described as a "loving attention to God," or a quiet rest in Him.⁴ Historically, contemplation has also been called "prayer of simplicity," "prayer of simple regard," "affective prayer," "prayer of recollection," "active contemplation" or "acquired contemplation."⁵ In many spiritual traditions (including St. John's, as we shall see), contemplative prayer is taken as the proper preparation for the reception of mystical experience.⁶

Clearly, meditation and contemplation should not be considered as two totally separate or dissimilar types of activity. Meditation is usually taken as the necessary preparation for contemplation, and contemplation may result when meditation is greatly simplified in its subject and method. Thus, *the two should be*

⁴ Thus *contemplation* is akin to, but not identical with, today's popular notion of *meditation* as practiced in Transcendental Meditation, Za-Zen, and Raja Yoga. Regarding similarities and differences among these practices, see, for example, Johnston 1995, Part II and Naranjo 1971, Part I.

⁵ For discussion of these terms and the debates surrounding them, see Garrigou-Lagrange 1937, pp.221-38, Poulain 1949, Chapter 4, Dicken 1963, pp.100-15.

⁶ For the contemporary notion of contemplative prayer, see Merton 1971, Poulain

*seen as two ends of a spectrum.*⁷ Also, in the Christian tradition (particularly the Catholic tradition) both meditation and contemplation are always understood and referred to as *prayer*, with the term conceived in the very broad sense of communion between God and the soul.

5.1.3 The Transition from Meditation to Contemplation in St. John of the Cross

In the last section we looked at the differences between meditation and contemplation, understanding the terms according to their common use. In the works of St. John of the Cross, however, the term *contemplation* has more restrictive meanings, which we have already discussed in section 3.3.2. To avoid confusion, from now on I will follow St. John in using the term *contemplation* to refer to the “general and obscure” supernatural knowledge of God that contains no distinct contents, but only a simple awareness of God in love and peace. I will use the term *contemplative prayer* to refer to the non-discursive type of prayer that we have discussed in the last section. Following common usage, I will call the practitioner of *contemplative prayer* a *contemplative*.

1949 Chapter 2. 4. Pennington. 1982. Ward 1983.

⁷ See, e.g., Poulain 1949, Chapter 2, which explains this view in detail.

As discussed earlier in section 5.1.1, in order for the soul to receive mystical knowledge of God, it must advance by “unknowing” and by “blinding itself” and remaining in darkness” (A 2.8.5). This is effected by the soul’s transition from a predominately *meditative* to a *contemplative* form of prayer. As discussed in section 2.5.3, this transition marks the passage of the soul from the *active night of the senses* into the *passive night of the senses*. According to St. John, the transition is initiated by God, and the onset of this transition is marked by the soul’s inability to perform meditation.⁸ No matter how hard she tries, the soul can no longer get illumination, pleasure, and sweetness out of meditation; rather, the exercise causes increasing aridity, weariness, and disquietude to the soul. St. John’s explanation for the inability is that God is infusing into the soul His own Divine light, which overwhelms and interferes with the operation of the soul’s natural light of reason. The inability is a call for the soul to switch her mode of prayer from meditative to contemplative. Like many other traditional authors, St. John sees contemplative prayer as an advance over meditation. Going from mental prayer to contemplative prayer, the soul learns to detach itself from the senses and to receive God’s more abundant and more perfect communication.

⁸ The meaning of the term *meditation* for St. John is very close to its contemporary meaning as explained in the last section. Dicken (1963) suggests that St. John probably takes as his model of meditation the method taught by St. Peter of Alcántara, whose works were prescribed readings of the Discalced Carmelites. For an idea of what such meditations was like, see Dicken 1963, pp.

The transition is compared to weaning a child from her mother's breasts (N 1.7.5, F 3.32).⁹ St. John also compares meditation to a journey and contemplative prayer to the journey's end where the traveler may enjoy rest (A 2.12.6-7, A 2.14.7). He also compares meditation to cooking and contemplative prayer as enjoyment of the meal (A 2.14.7). However, this transition should not be made pre-maturely, or it will do the soul more harm than good (A 2.13.1, 2.14.7). He gives four signs for the appropriate time for the transition:¹⁰ (1) the soul's inability to meditate — it finds no more pleasure and blessings, but aridity and weariness by meditating; but since this may be caused by sins, lack of diligence, or "lukewarmness" towards spiritual things, the second sign is needed — (2) the soul not just fails to enjoy meditation, but she finds no joy in any creature; thus the soul's "aridity" is not caused by a turn of his love from spiritual to worldly things; nevertheless, this lost of interest even in worldly things may be caused by a melancholy due to physical complications of the body: so, two more signs are needed: (3) the soul experiences a "painful care and solicitude" for God which, at this stage of transition, causes

95-96, Toon 1987, Chapter 6.

⁹ But notice St. John also uses the metaphor in the opposite manner, describing contemplation as receiving milk from the breast. See A 2.14.3.

¹⁰ Most commentators talk about the three signs for the transition, assuming that the two different lists of signs in A 2. 13 and N 1.9 are actually the same (see Dicken 1963, pp. 150-51). Here, without getting into the debate concerning the matter, I present the four apparently different signs which St. John has mentioned, treating sign (3) which comes from N 1.9 and sign (4) from A 2.13 as uniquely found in their respective sources.

the soul to fear that it is “backsliding” in its spiritual progress (N 1.9.3-7); and (4) the soul receives and delight in a “general, loving knowledge” of God when it ceases to meditate (A 2.13.4); as we have discussed in 3.3.2, this “general, loving knowledge” of God and its reception by the soul is what St. John calls “contemplation.” The last sign of the four is the only sign of a positive nature, and is described as “the surest sign” for the transition. Nevertheless, St. John also emphasizes this “general and loving knowledge” of God may not be observable at the onset of the transition (A 2.13.7, 2.14.12 N 1.11.2).

One should note that this transition from meditation to contemplative prayer is not an abrupt one: at the beginning of the transition, neither does the soul become unable to meditate at all times, nor does it enjoy that “general, loving knowledge” whenever it starts to pray. Contemplative prayer and the reception of God’s “general, loving knowledge” is thus a “habit” (A 2.15.1) which is developed “little by little” (A 2.15.5).¹¹ During the process of the development, the person would sometimes meditate (when she is still able to do so and when she is not yet occupied by God’s “general, loving knowledge”) and sometimes “contemplate” (whenever she finds herself no longer able and desire to meditate, but is experiencing God’s “general, loving knowledge”).¹² In fact the soul may

¹¹ See N 1.9.9 for the same point.

¹² St. Teresa of Ávila similarly advises that a person pray differently at different times. See Teresa of Ávila 1957, 13.11.

have to make modest use of meditation in order to lead herself into contemplative prayer. (A 2.15.2).

For those who are facing this transition from meditation to contemplation, St. John offers several pieces of advice:

[A]

When the spiritual person cannot meditate, let him learn to abide with loving awareness in God, with stillness of the intellect. even though they seem to themselves to be idle. For little by little and very soon the divine calm and peace will be infused into the soul, with a wondrous, sublime knowledge of God, enveloped in Divine love. And let him not meddle with forms, meditations and imaginations, or with any kind of reasoning, lest his soul be disturbed, and brought out of its contentment and peace, which can only result in its experiencing distaste and repugnance. And if, as we have said, such a person has scruples that he is doing nothing, let him note that he is doing no small thing by pacifying the soul and bringing it into calm and peace, unaccompanied by any act or desire, for it is this that Our Lord asks of us through David, saying: *Vacate, et videte quoniam ego sum Deus*. As though he had said: Learn to be empty of all things (namely, interiorly and exteriorly) and you will see that I am God. (A 2.15.5, Peers, translation altered).

[B]

. . . it [the proper method for contemplative prayer] consists not in labouring with the imagination, but in setting the soul at rest, and allowing it to remain in its quiet and repose, which is more spiritual. For the farther the soul progresses in spirituality, the more it ceases from the operation of the faculties in particular acts, since it becomes more and more occupied in one act that is general and pure. . . . (A 2.12.6, Peers)

[C]

All this is required of them here is freedom of the soul, that they liberate themselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts, and care not about thinking and meditating. They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him. (N 1.10.4)

[D]

And the soul has then to walk with loving awareness of God, without performing specific acts, but conducting itself, as we have said, passively, and having no diligence of its own, but possessing this simple, pure, and loving awareness and determination, as one that opens his eyes with the awareness of love. (F 3.33, Peers)

Beyond these and other similar instructions,¹³ St. John never supplies any concrete technique for contemplative prayer (like patterns of breathing or the use of mantras, which are found in meditative practices in other spiritual traditions).¹⁴

¹³ See, for example, A 2.12.8, 2.15.2, N 1.9.6, and F 3.35.

¹⁴ It is not by accident or out of negligence that St. John does not discuss the technique for contemplative prayer. In a brief discussion of the "methods" of prayer, St. John says:

Where, upon this road, to enter upon the road is to leave the road; or, to express it better, it is to pass on to the goal and to leave one's own way, and to enter upon that which has no way, which is God. For the soul that attains to this state has no longer any ways or methods, still less is it attached to ways and methods, or is capable of being attached to them. . . . Nevertheless it has within itself all ways, after the way of one that possesses nothing, yet possesses all things. For, if it have courage to pass beyond its natural limitations, both interiorly and exteriorly, it enters within the limits of the supernatural, which has no way, yet in substance has all ways. (A 2.4.5, Peers)

Thus the omission is totally consistent with the spirit of St. John's radical

Thus contemplative prayer in St. John must be understood first and foremost as an *attitude* of the mind instead of a *technique*.¹⁵ In this attitude is contained a mistrust not just of language, concepts, and reasoning, but of all formalities and human efforts for getting hold of God. St. John's instructions for the contemplative prayer can be briefly summarized as follows:

(a) the soul should cease from meditation, and stop any prayer which is of a discursive or imaginative nature [B], [C];

(b) it must simply "rest" in quietude, with no desire or concern for feeling or experiencing anything [C];

(c) the soul should not perform any particular act — this makes it seem as if the soul were "doing nothing" [A], [D];

apophaticism: in contemplative prayer the person ceases to approach God through any human "method" in order to receive God's infusion of Himself into the soul.

¹⁵ Echoing St. John, Thomas Merton (1971) comments:

Hence the contemplative way is in no sense a deliberate "technique" of self-emptying in order to produce an esoteric experience. It is the paradoxical response to an almost incomprehensible call from God, drawing us into solitude, plunging us into darkness and silence. . . . the contemplative way is, in fact, not a way. Christ alone is the way, and he is invisible. The "desert" of contemplation is simply a metaphor to explain the state of emptiness which we experience when we have left all ways, forgotten ourselves and taken the invisible Christ as our way. (p.92)

The basic characterization of contemplation as an attitude instead of a technique holds good also for the Eastern mystical traditions; see Naranjo 1971,

(d) it should learn to abide in a “loving awareness” [*advertencia amorosa*] of God [A], [C], [D]. As discussed earlier in 3.3.2, this “awareness” is a consciousness of God’s presence in quietude, love, and contentment; it is described as a *passive* reception by the soul that is as *effortless* as receiving objects of sight with open eyes [D]. However, the soul does not usually experience this knowledge at the beginning of the contemplative prayer, since it is “very subtle and delicate” to begin with. But as the soul lets itself “rest” in this prayer, this consciousness will grow and the soul will enjoy more and more this loving knowledge of God (A 2.13.7).

5.1.4 Contemplative Prayer and the Perennial Philosophy

From the description given by St. John of the Cross, we see that the contemplative prayer is a prayer in which thought and language cease, and the mystic enters into a state of silence. As discussed in 5.1.1, the mystic’s silence is motivated by a certain distrust of human language and concepts as a means of knowing God. Silence is an important component of an approach to God that is usually called the *via negativa*, the way of negation in which the mystic’s former beliefs and concepts about God are “negated,” and the mystic’s mind is emptied of all verbal and pictorial descriptions of God.

particularly pp.7-8.

A troubling question naturally arises in the context of the *via negativa*: if all verbal and pictorial descriptions of God are to be negated, how is the *via negativa* different from religious agnosticism or skepticism? If all that can be said and thought about God in religious doctrines and religious images is to be abandoned, would religious faith itself be nullified? There has been much discussion by theologians and philosophers of the relationship between religious faith and the *via negativa*. One opinion on the matter has been promoted in the so-called “perennial philosophy”¹⁶ and has become quite popular: the idea is that mystics are leaving traditional doctrines behind in search of a “higher” and more perfect way to God. For the perennial philosophers, religious life can be divided into the lower and higher ways: the lower way is for the ordinary and the less sophisticated, and the approach consists of adherence to religious doctrines and rites. The higher way is the “mystical way,” reserved for the more sophisticated, who dare to leave specific doctrines and religious ideas behind in order to enter into an experience which is beyond all language and human conceptions. In the “higher” way, all the differences between religious traditions are surpassed, so that mystics like Sankara, St. John of the Cross and Nagarjuna all come to a similar experience consisting of a common core of “undifferentiated oneness”

¹⁶ See 1.2 for a discussion of the perennial philosophy.

with the Divine. The “lower” way is nothing more than a preparation for the “higher way,” and it has to be abandoned if one is to enter mystical experience.

The position promoted by the perennial philosophy is partly based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the contemplative prayer: it is based on the belief that there can be a clean break between the “higher” and the “lower” ways or, in St. John’s language, between contemplation and meditation. In the following sections, we shall apply the phenomenological method in analyzing St. John’s contemplative prayer. The analysis will give us a better understanding of the relationship between mysticism and human language and concepts, and that in turn will help us to correct some common misunderstandings concerning contemplative prayer.

5.2 Phenomenological Analysis of St. John’s Contemplative Prayer

Before we start to analyze St. John’s contemplative prayer, we must first review and expand the phenomenological theory of language as given by Edmund Husserl. We shall do this in the next few sections.

5.2.1 A Husserlian Phenomenology of Language

5.2.1(a) Noema, Signification, and Indirect Language

In the last chapter (4.3.1) we discussed how, in Husserl's phenomenology, intentions are divided into two types: the *significative* and the *intuitive*. In the former, objects (or states of affairs) are intended *emptily* or *inauthentically* through signs, and in the latter, objects (or states of affairs) are *present* to the mind, and they are intended *authentically* or in *fullness*. In 4.3.1, we said that each intentional act can be described in terms of its *quality* and *matter*. We should now introduce another important concept in phenomenology that is closely related with the *matter* of an act. In *Ideas I* Husserl introduces the important concept of the *noema* of an act. The *noema* is sometimes identified with what Husserl earlier calls the *matter* of an act: however, it is in fact a richer concept. A noema is the very *sense* of an act, that "element" by virtue of which an act becomes "sensible" or "meaningful." The concept is sometimes compared with the Fregean notion of *Sinn* for an expression — for Frege, the *Sinn* is something *through* which an expression refers to a referent [*Bedeutung*]. Like the Fregean *Sinn*, the noema in a *significative* or *expressive* act is that "middle term" standing in between the words and the intended object, that is, the very *meaning* of the terms through which the objects of intention are successfully intended. However, unlike the Fregean *Sinn*, the noema exists not only for signifying acts, but also for *intuitive* acts — for

example, in an act of perception, the noema is again the “middle term” between the sensuous elements (the sight, sound, taste, etc.) and the perceived object; it is the very *meaning* of the sensuous elements by means of which the perceived objects are intended.

Thus the noema is the very *sense* of an act, and as such it contains in itself that which is said or intuited by the act; therefore, the noema is sometimes referred to as *the object as it is intended*.¹⁷ Corresponding to the notion of noema is what Husserl calls *noesis*, which is another name for “act,” and the *quality* of the act and other elements of the act outside of its noema are referred to as *noetic elements* of the act. Thus, instead of talking about the *quality* and *matter* of an act, we can describe an act in terms of its *noema* and *noesis*.

Now, let us further distinguish between two types of significative acts: *signification* and *indication*. At the beginning of the First of his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl discusses the two different ways in which we use signs, and the first is what he calls *signification*. In *signification* we *mean* things by words. The noema of a significative act is made up by the meaning of the words contained in the expression. For example, the expression “cat” intends its object — a cat — through the very meaning of the word “cat.” and that meaning is something fixed by convention and mutually understood by the interlocutors.

¹⁷ For discussion of the notion of noema, see Smith and Smith 1995, pp.22-27,

Meaningful words combine according to semantic and grammatical rules to form meaningful sentences, and meaningful sentences together form meaningful dialogues or texts.

Husserl equates signification with *expression*: signification is the act by which we express in language. The other type of significative act — *indication*, which we are going to discuss soon — has no place in Husserl's theory of expression. For Husserl, expressions are always made in a *direct language* — expressions are *direct descriptions* in which names (or sentences) directly correspond to the objects (or states of affairs) and intend those objects (or states of affairs) through conventional word meanings. The sentence "the cat is on the mat," for example, directly describes the situation that the cat is on the mat by referring to the cat, the mat, and the situation *that* the cat is on the mat, and it does so by employing conventional meanings of words.

In real life situations, however, we do not express everything in direct language. In literary works, for example, many things are said without being explicitly mentioned or named, and in those cases there is no direct correspondence between intended objects and names through conventional meanings. For example, a poem like Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" tells of the loneliness of a traveler without even mentioning the

word “lonely,” and a great novel like Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* reveals to us the spirit that permeates Russian society on the eve of war without having to offer us any direct description of that spirit. All these results are achieved not by direct description through propositions, but through the excess of meaning of the sentences in the text. The effects of symbols, metaphors, narrative structures, and the intertwining of sentences together create a meaning of the text that is not directly said—it’s a meaning that exists “between the lines.” The same thing also happens in everyday dialogues, which often involve an excess of meaning beyond what is directly said, so that to really understand what one is saying, we have to “hear between the lines.”

It appears that indirect expression is an important component of our language, and one that Husserl has ignored in his theory of expression. Indirect expression is, however, discussed by Merleau-Ponty, who refers to it as “indirect language.” According to Merleau-Ponty, because indirect language no longer refers to things through conventional, stabilized meanings, it has the peculiar power of expressing to us things that are novel and unusual. This is most clear in the case of literary art, where through literary devices such as symbolism, metaphor, parallelism, and innovative narrative structure the author makes it possible for the reader to experience something new, or to understand something in a fresh manner. Merleau-Ponty also calls this indirect language *authentic speech*, speech that discloses to us meaning and significance in a creative and

illuminating manner.¹⁸ Another important characteristic of indirect language is that, in general, what is said in indirect language cannot be exhaustively expressed in direct speech. Not everything expressed in indirect language can be translated back into direct language; otherwise, we would be able to give a direct account of what Shakespeare, for example, is saying through *Hamlet*, thereby rendering all his literary efforts ultimately superfluous. But this does not mean that what is expressed by indirect language is in itself something “beyond language” or something “ineffable.” The indirectly expressed is still expressed through language—it’s just expressed indirectly.

So, if language is more than direct language and things are expressed tacitly as well as explicitly, Husserl’s theory of meaning and expression sounds inadequate. Nevertheless, Husserl’s theory can be expanded and improved if the other type of significative acts called *indication* is recognized as a variety of expression. It is time for us to look at this notion of *indication*.

¹⁸ In fact, Merleau-Ponty argues that language as a whole works by indirect expression: “all language is indirect or allusive” (1964b, p.43). He bases his argument on the linguistics of Saussure. For Saussure, any linguistic system must be taken as a dynamic whole, and the meaning of any individual sign is not singularly specifiable, but resides in its difference from other signs. Merleau-Ponty draws the conclusion from Saussure that meaning always occurs “between words” as the result of the interactions among signs (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, pp.39-47). Our following argument will not depend on Merleau-Ponty’s claim that all language is indirect, but on the more obvious observation that language, in many situations, works *tacitly* as well as *explicitly*.

5.2.1(b) *Indication*

While in *signification* signs intend their objects through conventional meanings, *indication* works differently. When smoke *indicates* a fire or when a ringing door bell *indicates* a visitor, no conventional, pre-established meaning of terms is involved. Words too, can be used in an *indicative* rather than a *significative* manner — words that appear on a road sign like “The City of Toronto” do not *mean* or *express* anything *about* Toronto, but *indicate* to me that I have already entered the city.

Husserl analyzes the notion of indication using the notion of *motivation*. In the language of phenomenology, A indicates B when a belief¹⁹ in A *motivates* a belief in B: as, for example, when the sight of smoke billowing from a window makes us believe that there is a fire in the house. Such “motivation” is not a casual or probabilistic notion. For Husserl, causality and probability are notions belonging to the empirical realm, and as such they are already “bracketed” in the *phenomenological reduction*.²⁰ “Motivation” has to do with the lawful connections among our intentions, and the term is employed in speaking of

¹⁹ “Belief” here does not necessarily mean an explicit formulation of a proposition or a conscious state of the mind; rather, we use the term to refer to the *attitude* of taking something to be true or real. Taken in this sense, our perception of things always carries a *believing character*, which Husserl describes as a *doxic* or *thetic* attitude; see *Ideas I* §103.

²⁰ See our discussion of the phenomenological reduction in 0.

different ways in which intentions are connected, like a tragic scene *motivating* sadness, a rage *motivating* actions, and so on. Thus *indication* is just one special case in which an act with a believing attitude *motivates* another.

Let us consider a few examples of indication to help us understand its nature and significance. One example of indication is *intimation*: the indication of a person's "inner experience" as Husserl calls it (*LII* §7). For example, while a person's words *signify* something in a complaint (such as "The traffic is moving so slowly!"), the words also *indicate* or *intimate* the feeling of frustration that the person is experiencing. Also, that frustration can be *intimated* by the person's facial expression, which acts as a *sign* for the frustration that the person feels. *Intimation* does not involve conceptual knowledge or a conscious inference of the intimated mental states; rather, it is an "intuitive" apprehension²¹ of the intimated, as we are said to "see" a person's anger in her angry look. Such a "precept"²² of the intimated Husserl describes as an "intuitive," though *inauthentic*, presentation — it is *inauthentic* in that the anger which is intimated

²¹ Husserl himself uses the term "intuitive" to describes intimation (*LII* §7): he is using the term in its ordinary, everyday sense to refer to a "persuasion" that is "without verbalized, conceptual apprehension" (*ibid.*). This usage should not be confused with the strict, technical sense of the term "intuition," as we have employed it in 5.2.1(a).

²² Also a term used by Husserl himself; see *LII* §7.

through the angry look is not experienced *personally* by the person who sees the angry face.²³

Another example of *indication* occurs during our *perception* of physical objects, as is most easily illustrated by the example of vision. As we explained in 4.3.2, an important phenomenological characteristic of our perception of physical objects is the “one-sidedness” of our perception: no physical object can be seen in its entirety at one glance. Husserl describes the situation as the object being given to us inadequately.²⁴ At any one time it can be viewed from only one side, with the features on its other sides hidden from us. Husserl calls the impression we have of an object from one angle a “profile” (*Abschattung*).²⁵ Any profile of an object *indicates* that there are other profiles of the object available from other angles; the view from one side always *suggests* and *motivates* the belief concerning the existence and features of the other sides. When we see a house standing before us, we see it as a three-dimensional object with *depth* — our very perception of this side of the house indicates something *more* than what I see immediately — namely, the other sides and the back of the house. Therefore, it comes up as a surprise in case we walk around and discover that there are no other

²³ In the case when a person *does* have a personal appropriation of another person’s feelings and actually feels what the other feels, we have what is called *empathy*, a topic that we shall discuss in Chapter 7.

²⁴ For Husserl’s concept of *adequacy*, see *LIV §5. Ideas I §44*.

²⁵ For the notion of the profile of a perceptual object, see 4.3.2.

sides to be seen, and we were not actually seeing a facade. Moreover, in most cases, the *profile* of an object does not only *indicate* the existence of other profiles and other sides, but *indicates them in certain manners*: in seeing a basket ball the sight from one side *indicates* its spherical shape on the other side; in seeing a cartoon box, the view from one side *indicates* the existence of rectangular faces on the others.

Using our last example, we can further clarify the nature of indication. A number of mistakes must be avoided, as Husserl warns us:

(a) We must not think of this indication as motivating an expectation in the perceiver. for the perceiver does not necessarily *expect*, for example, to see the other sides of an object at some future time. The indication does not point to a future event but functions *immediately* to suggest something about the other sides of the object. without necessarily motivating an *expectation* to see the object from its other sides. Thus, in general, *indication* is more fundamental and basic than *expectation*; we may even say that we only *expect* what has been *indicated* to exist or to occur.

(b) We should also avoid saying that we are making an *inference* from the seen to the unseen during an indication. if by inference we mean something similar to performing step-by-step mathematical calculations. The indication we discuss here does not involve known rules or principles (be they of a logical,

probabilistic, or empirical nature) being applied with understanding, thus it is different from an inference in the ordinary sense of the term.²⁶

(c) We must also not say that we are *imagining* the unseen sides of the object during an indication. If by an act of imagination we mean forming a pictorial image of the object as it would be viewed from another side, that very act of imagination would itself contain an indication of the unimagined sides of the object. The attempt to understand indication in terms of imagination would thus lead us into an infinite regression. On the other hand, if we mean by imagination the mere entertainment of a possibility without the imagistic realization of this possibility, indication is still not reducible to an act of imagination because it remains *more* than the subject's entertaining of some possibilities — the subject actually *believes* in the indicated.

Indication also functions in perception in ways other than those we have described. It can also work *intersensorily*. It is not simply that the *view* of an object can *suggest* a certain *view* from another side. Rather, the *look* of an object may actually *indicate* its texture, its smell, its sound, or even its taste. Thus the look of a silk handkerchief suggests its smoothness, and the smell of food suggests its tastes. In fact in perception different perceptual aspects of an object

²⁶ See *LI I* §3. However, if by inference we mean simply of coming to a belief in A from a belief in B, I do not think there is anything wrong in saying that we have made an "inference" with an *indication*.

always stand in relations of *mutual indication*. This fact is often taken advantage of by painters, filmmakers, musicians, and other artists who are able to present the perceptual richness of an object through a singular media.²⁷ And as in the examples we have discussed before, the *indication* offers not a conceptual idea, but a “grasp,” a subtle “sense” of the objects’ unperceived aspects. For example, when we look at a silk handkerchief, we have a “sense” of its softness and smoothness. On the other hand, this “sense” or intuitive grasp is *inauthentic* or *empty* since we do not actually touch the handkerchief and enjoy the softness. Neither do we necessarily *imagine* touching the handkerchief and *imagine* its smoothness — the *indication* of the texture of the handkerchief, requires no efforts of the imagination, and it does not necessarily involve any *sensuous* element of smoothness being imaginatively experienced.

Distinguishing indication from *expectation*, *inference*, and *imagination*, we now have a better idea of its nature. Both in intimation and in perception, indication supplies the subject with a “precept” of the non-intuited aspects of things. This “precept” is *non-inferential* (in the sense we have discussed above); it is also *non-conceptual* — in the sense that it is not a conceptual apprehension through the direct application of word meanings or concepts to the intended

²⁷ For Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of this topic, see Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.323.

object. Also, indication is an *inauthentic* act, in which the *indicated aspects* of things are not *authentically* given.

In conclusion, indication is a special way by which consciousness intends something which is absent or some aspects of an object that are not authentically given. It serves the important function of allowing consciousness to *transcend* what is immediately given to it.²⁸

5.2.1(c) *An Expanded Notion of Expression*

Husserl's theory of expression can be expanded if *indication* is allowed a role in it. We have already seen how in perception, the authentically given aspects and the indicated aspects together form a unitary *noema* for the act of perception, so that the perceived object is perceived *as* having certain apparent as well as hidden aspects. I would like to suggest that something similar also happens in *expression*: when words are used to *signify* certain aspects of things, some other aspects of the thing may also be *indicated* by those words without being directly *signified*. The *signified meaning* and the *indicated meaning* together forms the *complete noema* of the *expressive act*, which includes what is directly and indirectly said. Such is the case in the creative use of language that expresses something not *signified* by the conventional meaning of words. In Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a*

²⁸ For further discussion of indication, see, for example, Sokolowski 1974, § 44, 51.

Snowy Evening, the lines “The only other sound’s the sweep of easy wind and downy flake” expresses the silence of the setting, which is only *indicated*, but not *said* by the words. Thus the *total expression* of the line includes the *said* as well as the *indicated*. That is also the case with other creative ways of using language as in symbolism, metaphors, narrations, and so on.

Thus the extended notion of *expression* includes the *indicated* in its noema, and allows us a broader notion of language that includes both direct and indirect speech. The two types of speech are intimately related: *the indirectly said is indicated by the directly said*. And as discussed in the last section, the *indicated aspects* of things are not something imagined or inferred; rather, through the directly spoken (and that alone) we arrive at a “grasp” of the *indicated*. Notice that while it may be possible to express the *indicated* in a direct language, that expression will involve a new act with a new noema in which the object of expression will be intended differently. For example, in Frost’s poem, if we replace “The only other sound’s the sweep of easy wind and downy flakes” with “All is very quiet.” the meaning of the lines are changed, and the silence loses the qualities indicated before. Moreover, in the new noema, what was explicitly said before is no longer referred to explicitly, so that now the “the sweep of easy wind” and “downy flakes” are no longer expressed. Thus all the aspects of the object cannot be explicitly given at the same time: some aspects are made *explicit* in the expense of some other aspects which have to remain *implicit* or unsaid. The

situation is similar to the perception of a physical object: the indicated, hidden side can be seen only from another angle, at which the formerly apparent side would become hidden. As we have discussed, such is the peculiarity with the perception of a physical object: that the object can never be given to consciousness in *complete fullness*. Husserl calls that peculiarity the *transcendence* of the object — the object *transcends* consciousness in the sense that it can never be entirely given to consciousness by a single act.²⁹ The analogous situation for expressions, as we have discussed, allows us to define an *object that transcends thoughts and language*: an object that cannot be exhaustively expressed by language and in thoughts. An object (or a state of affairs) that transcends language may be something that exists in reality (for example, the rich taste of a wine, a great aesthetic experience, an experience of horror) or something that does not exist (for example, an artist's conception of a picture, or a drama). It is difficult to describe fully and accurately an object that transcends language: our conceptual and linguistic scheme just seems highly inadequate for the complexity or the novel quality at hand. At these cases we may resolve to creative language and indirect speech which works by *indication*: the strategy is that instead of speaking directly, we will describe something else and let what we want to express be *indicated* by means of that which is directly said.

²⁹ See *Ideas I* §42.

This is a common strategy in artistic language, as in Robert Frost's poem, which does not describe directly the quality of the silence, but talks about the winds and the flakes.³⁰ In that way, indirect speech goes beyond direct meanings attached to words, and expresses a sense which does not fall comfortably into our fixed and finite concepts and meanings. However, the indirectly spoken is indicated by the directly spoken, and thus indirect speech still depends on direct speech. The dependence implies a limit to what can be expressed in indirect language: indirect speech is still *limited* by our meaning and conceptual scheme, although this limitation is not imposed in a straightforward fashion as in direct speech. Things that do not fall into our conceptual scheme can still be expressed, but it has to be done *with the help of the concepts and meaning that we possess*.

While our discussion above concentrates on *expression* through language, we must add that language (conceived in the narrow sense of a spoken or written language) is not the only means of expression: *pictorial presentation* is also a possibility, and by that we refer to graphical expressions through drawings or imagination, in which the signifying elements *resemble* the signified in a visual

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty points out that the strategy of an *indirect language* is employed not just in literary arts, but also in other languages of art, like painting. He gives the example of Cézanne: trying to paint the "white tablecloth, like a covering of snow newly fallen, from which rose symmetrically the plates and napkins crowned with light-coloured rolls" as described by Balzac. Cézanne explains that he would try to paint only the "the plates and napkins rose symmetrically" and the "light-coloured rolls": and if he tries to paint directly the "crowning" and the

manner (in, for example, a portrait of a person).³¹ Again we have both direct and indirect descriptions through images: for example, drawing some smoke which comes out from a house, the painter *indicates* the existence of a fire; from the great paintings in the museum to the comic strips in the daily papers, subtle meanings and ideas are expressed in implicit manners. Indirect expressions in pictures always draw on the indicative relationships which exist in our ordinary visual perception: thus, for example, drawing a row of trees in decreasing sizes, the painter gives us an idea of the depth of vision in the picture. Verbal and pictorial representation can be mixed together to form a powerful means of expression (as in comics and in multimedia art works). We mention pictorial expression here because it is important for our discussion: meditation often involves pictorial imagination being applied to biblical events or other religious subjects. According to St. John, these imaginations, like discursive thoughts, must also be discarded if the soul is to enter the way of contemplation.

5.2.2 Mediation, Contemplation, and Indirect Language

In the last few sections we have looked at the direct and indirect aspects of language. In this section, we are going to apply our analyses to meditation and contemplation.

snowy white, he would fail. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.198)

³¹ We might add presentation through sound, which is yet another possibility of

5.2.2(a) Religious Language Understood in An Expanded Husserlian Phenomenology

In section 5.1.2, we described meditation as “the mind’s reflective and discursive consideration of things from a spiritual point of view,” “with the aim of gaining a better understanding and personal appropriation of the religious truths, or gaining a spiritual perspective for one’s life experience.” While the subjects of meditation can range from biblical passages to a scene of nature, a life event, or even a simple idea, the media of meditation can range from words to images, sounds, or even bodily motions. We shall call the media of meditation *religious language* — the language (conceived in a broad sense to include non-verbal expressions, as we have just mentioned) by which one thinks about God, and makes expressions about Him to oneself or another.

To understand the nature of meditation and contemplation, we must consider how religious language functions. I would like to apply the modified Husserlian theory of language, as we have discussed in the last section, to religious language. At the first level, religious language works directly: it consists of words which “intend” God through more or less fixed word meanings. That is how descriptive statements of God are understood by the non-philosophically minded believers who comprise a large part of the body of the Church: statements

expression.

like “God is good,” “God is great,” “God is almighty,” “God is love,” etc., are understood in a more or less literal, straightforward manner. Such direct descriptions of God also include more graphical descriptions which, for some time in Church history, were taken more or less “literally”: that God dwells in the heaven “up there” and hell is deep below the ground. However, theologians, philosophers, and believers with a more sophisticated view of God have long questioned the value of such direct descriptions of God: since God is supposed to be infinite in His being, greatness, and power and He transcends creatures in an infinite manner, applying our daily concepts of “goodness,” “beauty,” or “creation” to Him sounds highly problematic. Some might argue that since human concepts and language are first used to describe worldly creatures and events and have their appropriate meanings in that realm, our application of them to God results in carrying over their meaning inappropriately into our understanding of God. For example, with regard to the popular anthropomorphic notion of God, God is conceived to have feelings and thoughts in a very human fashion. It is this tendency of religious thought that provoked Moses Maimonides, for example, to propose his negative theology. St. John of the Cross also discussed the problem of applying our concepts to God: our understanding works only with intelligible forms which the active intellect extracts from sensible images caused by sensible creatures; since these creatures bear no “essential likeness” to God, God cannot be understood or described appropriately with human notions (A 2.8). Though the

value of direct statements about God is never totally denied by St. John and by other theologians,³² their value is viewed with great suspicion.

But religious language also has another way to speak, which is by means of *indirect expression*. This happens, for example, with the *creative use* of language in religion. In the Bible, for example, there is abundant use of poems, images, symbols, metaphors, and narratives through which religious meaning is conveyed. As we have discussed in earlier sections, these literary devices function as an *indirect* or *authentic* language which convey descriptions of God through *indication*. Metaphors like “the Lord is my Shepherd” describe a relationship between God and the soul in a depth and richness which cannot be described in a direct language; symbols like “the Lamb of God” contain multi-layered meanings mediated through a rich historical, religious, and cultural background. These are ways in which religious language *points beyond* the primary, direct meanings of terms, towards a richer and deeper understanding of God.

An important development of this indirect approach of religious language is the analogical theory of religious language. In this theory which is embraced by Aquinas and many other theologians, terms like “goodness” and “beauty” are applied neither *equivocally* nor *univocally* to God and creatures, but are applied *analogically*, meaning that all goodness exists most excellently in God and in an

³² See, for example, C 12.4; we will have more to say about this point later.

infinite manner, and the terms like “good” and “beautiful” are applied *primarily* to God; creatures are called “good” or “beautiful” according to the *proportion* by which they participate in God’s goodness or beauty. In our language, that means statements like “God is good” are not direct statements about God in which we apply to God the term “goodness” with the same meaning it enjoys in our everyday speech; rather they are *indirect statements* which indicate something about God. In its broader sense, the analogical relationship does not exist only between language as applied to God and language as applied to creatures, but also between the being, goodness, and beauty of God and the being, goodness and beauty of creatures. Thus seeing the beauty of the universe we have a sense of the Beauty of God, because the former stands in an *analogical relationship with the latter*, being neither totally the same nor totally different from the former, but *participates by proportion* in the latter, which is the very source of all beauties. Thus St. John says that God left “some trace of who he is” in all creatures, clothing them with beauty and excellence so that by considering their excellence, one can come to a great realization of God’s greatness (C 7.6). Such *indication* of God’s greatness by creatures reaches its height in what St. John describes as the “death” of the soul: commenting on Stanza 7 of *The Spiritual Canticles*, St. John describes how creatures sometimes inspire a profound realization that “God cannot be completely understood or experienced.” St. John describes this realization in the following passage:

Sometimes God favors advanced souls through what they hear, see, or understand — and sometimes independently of this — with a sublime knowledge by which they receive an understanding or experience of the height and grandeur of God. Their experience of God in this favor is so lofty that they understand clearly that everything remains to be understood. This understanding and experience that the divinity is so immense as to surpass complete understanding is indeed a sublime knowledge. . . . this understanding is somewhat like that of the Blessed in heaven: Those who understand God more understand more distinctly the infinitude that remains to be understood; those who see less of him do not realize so clearly what remains to be seen. (C 7.9)

Such a sublime experience of God's immense greatness is beyond the soul's power of direct description, so that the soul describes this immensity as a "I-don't-know-what" [*un no sé qué*] — something "that one feels is yet to be said, something unknown still to be spoken, and a sublime trace of God as yet uninvestigated but revealed to the soul, a lofty understanding of God that cannot be put into words" (C 7.9).

Interpreted within our model, the experience of the soul's "death" as an experience of God's unfathomable greatness is due to the indicative effects of creatures. The soul has an understanding of the "height and grandeur" of God, seeing that there is an "infinitude remains to be understood" (C 7.9). This "I-don't-know-what" indicates that God infinitely transcends the soul's limited concepts and ideas of Him, and He will always remain an infinite potential for the soul's exploration and understanding.

We have already commented in 5.2.1(c) that indirect expressions depend on the operation of direct language, and the actual meaning, or the *noema*, of the expression has two components, the directly expressed and the indirectly expressed, and is a *mixture* of the signified and the indicated meaning. Statements like "God is good" is understood by most believers and even theologians in a "mixed manner": while the statement indicates God's goodness in an indirect manner, certain of the direct, literal meaning of the word "good" is still included in the meaning of the expression, and contained with it is the possible error of applying our human concepts to God. Another example is the use of religious symbols. A wooden cross, which is taken to be a symbol of Christ and His suffering, can so easily be turned into a fetish, in which case its function of pointing us to the Divine becomes mixed with a "literal" understanding of it as something divine in itself. Thus in Book II of *The Ascent*, St. John repeatedly teaches that communications from God which are mixed with human precepts (be they sensible images or intelligible forms) are to be rejected, because they give literally false expressions to what God is like.

5.2.2(b) Indirect Language, Meditation, and the Via Negativa

Our theory of religious language functioning indirectly also helps us in understanding meditation. Meditation on a religious text differs from a casual reading of it by being a process of reflection that seeks to enter into the depth of

the text. Meditation seeks to go beyond what is directly said and clearly stated, and explicates the deeper meaning of the text; thus meditation is often compared to a process of rumination, a process of dwelling and working on the text until its inner meaning is extracted. This attitude is most clearly manifested among the Latin Church Fathers, who, in their allegorical reading of the Biblical texts, seek to penetrate what they call the “mysteries” of God’s Word — those hidden truths with inexhaustible and unspeakable richness that are accessible only through prayerful meditation on the allegories and symbols in the Biblical texts.

Described in our language, in meditation one seeks to go beyond the direct meaning of the text and get at its indirect meaning. For example, in the meditation on the Passion of Christ, one seeks much more than reading a narrative, but is trying to get at what is *indicated* in that narrative — the courage and humility of Christ, His love for mankind, the meaning of sufferings and so on. If the language of the sacred texts were always plain, direct, and simple, meditation would not be necessary: one meditates because the language of the sacred texts, like other *authentic speech*, often functions *indirectly* and points us to things which defy direct and clear descriptions. The result of a good meditation, then, is often a moving *beyond* the direct meaning of the text in the attempt to capture also what it *indicates*; that is particularly the case when one is meditating on some of the “mysteries” of the Christian faith, like the Creation, the Incarnation, the Holy Trinity, and so on.

Thus, the fruitful practice of meditation depends on the indirect aspect of religious language. In fact, the indirect aspect of religious language is of utmost importance to religion: it is the means by which we try to go beyond or *transcend* our limited concepts and notions of the Divine. Nevertheless, in order to reach a better understanding of God, one must keep on *transcending* the limits as imposed by our concepts and language, and the *via negativa* is the mystics' strategy for such an ongoing transcendence.

In the last section we have already noticed the limitation of the indirect approach to religious language: our thoughts or expressions about God remain a "mix" of direct and indirect meaning. I want to suggest that the *via negativa* is an effort to transcend this limit of religious language. The assumption of the *negative way* is that all those direct meanings, as direct application of our concepts and notions to God, are wrong in the strict sense. The strategy is to *eliminate* those direct meanings concerning God from the mind. The way of doing that has already been discussed before (5.1): in contemplative prayer, all discursive thoughts and images are to stop, because they cannot serve to express God properly; the intellect will "blind itself" and remain "in darkness" by withdrawing from all possibilities of thoughts through words, symbols, or images.

However, it must be noted that contemplative prayer does not amount to the mind ceasing to intend God: if the goal is simply to stop thinking of God, there will be many ways of achieving that without the practice of contemplative

prayer, as long as the soul turns its attention away from God and thinks of something else. Nor is the goal just to create a pure vacuum of the mind, or contemplative prayer would be within anyone's capability (as long as she has the will power to maintain herself in that vacuum), and St. John would not have prescribed it only for those who have prepared themselves through meditation and the "active night of the senses." After all, St. John explicitly says that contemplative prayer is not a state of pure emptiness but a state of "loving awareness."³³ Now, if in contemplative prayer the mystic's mind is emptied and preserved in darkness without a "pure vacuum," what actually is happening during contemplative prayer?

I would like to suggest that in contemplative prayer, the mystic tries to eliminate all *direct expressions* about God from his mind, but preserves the *indirect meaning* that was once expressed through direct language. I would like to suggest that it is the *indirect components* from the noema of the soul's former expression of God that are preserved, while the *direct components* are eliminated. The idea is to *intend* God by *following* the *indication* given by the former expression, while leaving the *indicators* behind.³⁴ Only by doing that can the

³³ See A 2.14.6. We will come back to this point later, and refute, once and for all, the common myth that contemplation is a "pure consciousness state," a vacuum with no content.

³⁴ We can compare the mystic's intention with that of a person viewing a picture. Merleau-Ponty describes this as follows (1964b): the viewer is invited to "take up

mystic truly go beyond the literal meaning of the religious language *towards* that which the language indicates. To use a Buddhist analogy, it is like pointing to the moon with your finger: we want to follow the direction that's pointed out by the finger and to forget about the finger itself. Or to use a Taoist metaphor, we are to forget about the words once we have got the meaning, just like a fisherman who disposes of the net after the fish has been caught.³⁵ That way, the contemplative intends God through the indicated meaning, without the intermediary signs that were once involved in the process. In that way, the contemplative avoids any direct application of mundane concepts to her intention of God, and she is left with a tacit and general notion of God that is indicated implicitly in the former expressions about God.

To the above descriptions we must add two comments: firstly, since the original noema of religious expression is an intimate unity formed by the direct and the indirect components of expression, the indirect component of the original noema would probably receive some modifications when the direct components

the gesture which created it [the picture] and, skipping the intermediaries, to rejoin, without any guide other than a movement of the invented line (an almost incorporeal trace), the silent world of the painter, henceforth uttered and accessible." (p.51)

³⁵ Some take the metaphors to be talking about a certain mystical truth that is "extra-linguistic." I am *not* subscribing to such an interpretation. Rather, I am only agreeing to the indicative function of language as expressed by these metaphors. We will come back later to the question of whether mystical knowledge is "extra-linguistic" in nature.

are eliminated. However, the idea is to preserve that indirect meaning as much as possible. Secondly, the strategy does not assume that the indirect meaning is “right” about God while the direct meaning is “false” — the contemplative prayer is nothing more than a way to advance beyond explicit notions for conceiving God, a step in an *ongoing process* for a better understanding of Him.

One obvious difficulty arises now: we have said that the indirect expressions always depend on the direct, since the indication depends on the indicator. What we have said amounts to saying that we want to do away with the indicator but keep the indication. How is that possible? Let’s take an example we have used before: how can we maintain for ourselves the direction that the finger points to after the finger has disappeared? It would seem that another “marker” is needed (be it an imaginary finger, or a tree which stands in that direction pointed at) in order to mark out the direction for us. But in that way we will be relying on another indicator, and we are back to the original situation.

However, there is an important element in contemplative prayer which is seldom explored by philosophers who discuss mysticism. This element will prove to be crucial in allowing the contemplative to maintain the indicated noema of God without the indicators, and we are going to discuss this element in the next section.

5.2.2(c) *The Act of Love*

In contemplation, the contemplative stops thinking about God: she stops intending God through significant acts, as we have seen; yet, she continues to intend God through a *feeling of love* in which the indicated meaning of her former acts of meditation is preserved. To see how this is possible, let us look at the phenomenological characteristic of love.

Here, we are not talking about love as an action or a virtue, but the *feeling* of love that takes the form of a *passion* or *affection*. Love, as a passion, is something which all of us have experience of: we experience passion of love towards objects, persons, places, events, etc. Love is an *intentional* experience: it is always a love *of* or *towards* something. While that the object of love may create joy, happiness, and excitement in the lover, none of these (or their summed total) should be confused with *the passion of love*, since one can well be joyful, happy, and excited without experiencing a *love* for something. When I feel the passion of love towards something, I not only feel joyful, happy, and excited in the “inside,” but I have a feeling *towards* the object of love. For example, my passion for chocolate is a feeling with a definite object, and is not the same as the excitement or joy caused by the taste or thought of chocolate: rather, it is because I have a love for chocolate, that I shall feel excited and happy at the thoughts or taste of it.

Not just that love is intentional and has an object as its correlate, like all other intentional acts, it also has its noema: the act of love has a *sense* through which the object is being loved *as such*. For example, a sports car may be loved by a person *as* a car of style (while another person may love it *as* a car of speed); a person is loved *as* a person with charm and warmth. Here, we are not talking about the quality of the object as a *cause* of the love, but of the *specific way* through which the object is loved, and we call this the noema of the love. For example, in the case of my love for chocolate, while the chocolate itself is the object of the act, the chocolate *as* a tasty, mouthwatering object (not *as* a food which makes me gain weight) is the noema of my love.

Husserl calls acts of consciousness that are affective, appetitive, and valuative *axiological acts*. For Husserl, any *axiological act* must be grounded on one or more *doxic acts* — acts of meaning or intuition which *present* objects to the mind as things with a definite mode of existence (for example, as something which certainly exists, probably exists, does not exist, and so on); feelings, desires, and evaluations are then directed towards the *presented* objects. An example will be my love for the tree which stands before my house: according to Husserl, underlying this act of love is a doxic act which may be the seeing the tree, the remembering the tree, or the thinking of the tree using some signs, and so on: building on the doxic act is a new act which gives the *presented* object a *value*, making it an object of love. (*Ideas I*, §116-7).

Is Husserl correct in characterizing the *axiological acts* as “secondary” and dependent on the *doxic acts*? I think Husserl is partly correct; take the case of love (the argument applies also to other axiological acts): we cannot love something which is not first apprehended by the mind at some point of time in at least a vague and general manner. But Husserl is wrong when he thinks that an axiological act must contain in itself a doxic act; looking at love again, a particular act of love is not necessarily accompanied by any concrete act of presentation that takes place at the same time. The best example is a person in love: one’s heart can be filled with the feeling of love towards someone, even without seeing, imagining, remembering or thinking of the beloved. That feeling of love may even develop to become the “background” of one’s consciousness, so that it continues as the mind is being occupied by some other mental acts.³⁶ The same thing happens when we are expecting something we love, be it an arriving relative, an important occasion, or an upcoming sports game — the sense of excitement and expectancy fills the heart, even without the conscious acts of thinking, remembering, or imagining the object of love.

One may object to the examples, saying that in those cases the love, without an accompanying act of *presentation*, has degenerated into something

³⁶ The Protestant mystic, Andrew Murray (1981), discusses the soul’s continuous “waiting on God” using the example of a father’s intense love or longing for a sick child at a distance to illustrate how the “heart” can be filled with the love

non-intentional, something like a "mood" or an "emotion."³⁷ But a careful look will reveal that in all these cases there is *more* than a state of heightened emotions; there is a *longing* involved which is clearly directed towards certain objects. The evidence for that is the sense of *relief* and *fulfillment* which the person experiences with the final appearance of the object of love, which shows clearly that the former feelings of longing involve definite objects.

Thus though the noema of love is always something which must first be intuited or conceived by consciousness at some point of time, once the noema of the presenting act (or part of that *noema*) has been taken up by an act of love as its own noema,³⁸ an act of love can take place without an accompanying act of thinking or intuition. *Thus love provides a special way for the mind to intend an object in a specific manner without having to think or intuit it concretely.* Later, we are going to discuss how the mind can take advantage of that during *contemplative prayer*. But first, let us discuss the relationship between meditation, contemplative prayer and love.

when the "mind" is occupied with pressing business (p.128).

³⁷ For many phenomenologists, "moods" and "emotions" are themselves intentional in their nature: we will have more to say about the intentionality of affects in 7.1.

³⁸ This "taking up" of the noema of one act by another is called *modification* in Husserlian phenomenology. A *modification* occurs when the same noema is being taken up in another noesis: for example, the remembrance of a tree is a *modification* of the seeing of that tree. On the topic of *modification* see *LI V* §§ 39-40.

5.2.2(d) Love, Meditation, and Contemplative Prayer

In the Christian tradition, love has a very important place in meditative practices. As a religious practice, the goal of meditation is not just the “understanding” of sacred texts in a systematic or scientific manner; the ultimate goal of meditation is to arrive at a greater love of God.³⁹ Meditation often culminates in an affective response to God through love: through meditation one arrives at a better understanding of God through discursive thoughts or imaginative acts. This new understanding of God invokes a love for God: for example, one comes to a new understanding of the suffering Christ in the Passion narratives, and that understanding stimulates a great love for Him. The object of the meditation also becomes an object of love for the meditator, and the noema of the thoughts of the object also become the noema of the act of love directed towards the object — in our last example, Christ is being loved *as* that humble, loving, and courageous person which appears in the meditation. Although religious feelings other than love —such as guilt, thanksgiving, hatred towards sins, etc. — may also be invoked during meditation, it has often been maintained that the invocation of love is the culmination point of the meditation. At this point thinking should be stopped, and the meditator should concentrate and remain in that love of God which is invoked by the meditation. That love would then also motivate other acts

of confession, thanksgiving, or adoration. This love should also continue to fill the mind of the meditator after the meditation is over, thus become a motivating force for a more spiritual life.

Earlier in section 5.2.2(b), we have talked about how meditation leads one to go from the direct meaning of the text into the indirect or indicated meaning of the text. A good meditation, then, leads one to an understanding of God as “mystery” — as the One whose infinite richness and greatness cannot be captured in finite words or concepts. Such an understanding of God leads to a love of *God as mystery* — the noema of the love for God, which is the noema of the meditation, consists not of clear concepts and images, but mainly of the *indicated* “character” of God which transcends direct descriptions. Such a kind of love motivates an adoration of God as someone who is beyond clear thoughts and descriptions — an adoration most fitting to a God who is “mysterious” and “noumenal.”

As time goes by, this love of God as “mystery” is continuously strengthened as the person becomes more and more proficient in meditation. Corresponding to this love is a noema that is of a highly general nature, embodying a highly general understanding of God. The situation can be compared with the development a person’s love towards another person: as time passes, a

³⁹ See United States Catholic Conference 1997, p.713.

person develops a loving feeling towards the other that is of a general and stabilized nature. This love is the result of the habitual appearing of similar feelings towards the person, which in turn is due to a similar noema which re-appears in the apprehension of that person in various life situations.⁴⁰ The case is similar in meditation: similar *noematic elements* in various acts of meditation invoke a similar feeling of love towards God. These *noematic elements* involve mostly *indirect* or *indicated* thoughts rather than direct descriptions about God because (a) as a result of good meditation, those are usually the elements which invoke the soul's love of God, as we have discussed earlier in this section; (b) since they are *noematic elements* which appear *repeatedly* in meditations, they are most likely to be *general elements* in one's understanding of God, instead of *particular* thoughts, concepts, or images, which are contained in specific acts of meditations. We can again compare this to our feeling towards a friend: in a mature friendship, our love towards a friend would probably have its noema consisting mostly of the *general character* of a friend which is *indicated* through a wide range of actions in different circumstances; that noema would probably consist not much of the noemata of *direct* and *specific* perception like the colour

⁴⁰ The general feeling of love we talk about here can in fact be a combination of various feelings unified in a "compound" act. The idea is that stabilized acts of feelings towards the person are now built-up, and these acts combine together to form a general feeling towards the person. For convenience's sake, we will continue to speak of "the feeling of love" and its noema in the following, bearing

of her eyes or specific phrases which she likes to use. The case is similar for spiritual maturity: the heart is now filled with a love not for a God who is defined by definite concepts or images, but for a God whose greatness and beauty transcend all direct meanings, and are indicated by religious texts and grasped through meditation.

Thus through the successful practice of meditation, a particular love of God evolves; embodied in the noema of this love is a *general understanding of God* which evolves from the life of meditation, and it consists mainly (but probably not exclusively) of the *indirect* meaning of the religious texts that is indicated and grasped through meditation. This *general understanding* cannot be put exhaustively into a direct language, just like we cannot put into words our deep understanding of a good friend's character: while very general terms like "good," "kind," "charming" can be used, they fail to describe our understanding of the friend *in concreto*. The same happens when we try to describe this understanding of God in direct language: we can say that in this understanding God is "good," "kind," and so on; but these terms will fail to describe that understanding in its fullness.

After the *general love of God as mystery* is strongly established through meditation, the meditator is now ready to enter *contemplative prayer* — a kind of

in mind that the term might in fact stand for a pluralities of feelings and noemata.

prayer in which thoughts and images cease. With the general love of God firmly established in the soul, the person can now voluntarily invoke that feeling of love without using meditation, so that in contemplative prayer, the person simply *lives* in that love, without having to think of God using particularly words or images. This is possible because, as we have argued, an act of love can exist without the person thinking of or intuiting the object of love 5.2.2(c). Thus, in contemplative prayer, the soul simply *enjoys* that *general noema of God* in love, without any discursive thought or imagination.

Our phenomenological analysis of meditation and contemplative prayer is supported by an important but often neglected passage in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* on the transition from meditation to contemplative prayer; long as it is, the passage is worth quoting in full:

It should be known that the purpose of discursive meditation on divine subjects is the acquisition of some knowledge and love of God. Each time individuals procure through meditation some of this knowledge and love they do so by an act. Many acts, in no matter what area, will engender a habit. Similarly, through many particular acts of this loving knowledge a person reaches the point at which a habit is formed in the soul. God, too, is wont to effect this habit in many souls, placing them in contemplation without these acts as means, or at least without many of them. What the soul, therefore, was gradually acquiring through the labor of meditation on particular ideas has now, as we said, been converted into habitual and substantial, general loving knowledge. Accordingly the moment prayer begins, the soul, as one with a store of water, drinks peaceably without the labor and the need to fetch the water through the channels of past considerations, forms, and figures. The moment it recollects itself in the presence of God it enters into an act of general, loving, peaceful, and tranquil knowledge, drinking wisdom and love and delight. (A 2.14.2)

The passage talks about a “general knowledge” of God which is a “habit” effected by meditation (and aided by divine grace). This general loving knowledge is also what the soul enjoys as it enters contemplative prayer. Our model thus matches St. John’s descriptions of the transition from meditation to contemplation; it also explains how this is possible through a phenomenological understanding of language and love.

After the soul has entered contemplative prayer, it reaps two benefits by preserving itself in that prayer. First, by stopping all thoughts about God, the soul learns to detach herself from her habit of intending God through specific expressions or concepts. The contemplative still intends God in contemplative prayer, but she is getting used to doing so *affectively*, instead of *verbally* or *imaginatively*. And second, even that *noema* through which God is *affectively* intended will also get “purified”: as a product of meditation, to begin with, that *general noema* of the love of God that we talk about can also contain the *noemata* of direct expressions of God (for example, the meditator may come to develop a love for the image of Christ which is a product of her repeated acts of imagination); however, now, whenever that love motivates the contemplative to think of God through direct expressions again, the contemplative will have to *stop* that thought and pass into silence. That way, that part of the love by which the contemplative loves God through clear thoughts and images will remain unsatisfied and uninvoked in contemplative prayer, allowing the soul to detach

herself from those thoughts and images; the result is that the noema of that *general love* of God, resulting from habituation and reinforcement over time, will consist less and less of particular concepts and images, and more and more of the *indirect* or *indicated* meanings that are supplied by the former meditative acts.

This is why St. John of the Cross calls contemplative prayer the “dark night of the senses,” a process by which the soul is “weaned” from all enjoyments of thinking of God by particular thoughts and images.⁴¹ However, such a “purification” will not be completed until the soul also goes through the *dark night of the spirit*.⁴² Imperfect as it is in the present stage, the noema of that general love of God is a crucial element in the soul’s movement of *transcendence* from its finite conception of God. The soul has embarked on the *via negativa*: it tries to *transcend* the understanding of God as provided by positive theology, and to stop understanding God with specific concepts. This *transcendence* will also dispose the soul to receive various types of mystical knowledge that we have discussed in Chapter 3.

5.2.2(e) Further Support of our View from the Works of St. John

In the last section, I proposed a phenomenological model for understanding contemplative prayer: it is an *act of love*, whose *noema* is the product of the

⁴¹ See section 5.1.3.

⁴² See N 2.1.1.

fruitful practicing of meditation. This noema gets refined through the efforts to “empty” the soul through contemplative prayer, and, according to St. John, such a prayer will in turn lead to *contemplation, the general and obscure knowledge of God.*

In the following, I will demonstrate the merits of this model by showing how it captures a number of salient features of contemplation as described in St. John’s works. These features include:

(a) *The positive nature of contemplation and contemplative prayer.* For St. John, to engage in contemplative prayer is not to create a “vacuum” in the mind. On commenting on the beginning of a general, loving knowledge of God as a sign for transition from meditation to contemplation, he emphasizes that the soul *needs* that knowledge because without it the soul will be “neither doing anything nor receiving anything” and would “have no activity whatsoever relative to God” (A 2.14.6); this shows that for St. John, contemplative prayer *has* to have something to do with God, and it cannot be a pure vacuum of the mind. As we have seen, St. John describes the positive aspect of contemplative prayer as a “loving awareness” of God (5.1.3). Our model shows how contemplative prayer retains a *positive nature* in spite of the “silence” or “emptiness” of the soul — the soul is intending God *affectively* without using thoughts and images. This is made possible by the fact that we can have feelings towards things without consciously *presenting* them to ourselves by thinking, perception, imagination, or memory. In

contemplative prayer, it is the *feeling of love* which gives the prayer a positive nature and a *sense or meaning*, so that the contemplative is involved in a *meaningful silence* instead of an absolute vacuum, contrary to the descriptions of contemplation as given in popular writings on mysticism.

(b) *The close relationship between meditation and contemplative prayer.* While meditation and contemplative prayer are usually understood as two thoroughly different forms of prayer, St. John has described their close relationship with insights. As we have seen earlier when discussing the transition from meditation to contemplative prayer, St. John compares meditation to a journey and contemplative prayer to the journey's goal where the traveler may enjoy rest (A 2.12.6-7, A 2.14.7); he also compares meditation to cooking and contemplative prayer to enjoyment of the meal (A 2.14.7). Thus, meditation and contemplative prayer relate as means to goal. St. John also suggests that until the practice of contemplative prayer has become firm, one will have to make modest use of meditation in order to lead oneself into contemplative prayer (A 2.15.2). Our model can explain how these relationships can exist between two distinct modes of prayer. According to our descriptions, it is through meditation that a *general noema* is gradually built up and taken up in contemplative prayer. Thus contemplative prayer is in a sense an *achievement* through meditation, like the end of a long journey. With its purely affective nature which taxes not the soul's discursive efforts, contemplative prayer is thus like eating compared to cooking

— a phase of enjoyment after the preparatory work is completed. Since meditation is what supplies contemplative prayer with its noema of love at the first place, contemplative prayer can then be helped sometimes by some acts of meditation.

(c) *Love as the Guide of the Mystic*. As St. John exhorts mystics to follow the *via negativa* in search of God and to preserve themselves in darkness of the soul, he also emphasizes the function of love as a “guide” through such darkness. The idea is clearly portrayed in St. John’s poem, *The Dark Night*:

In the happy night, In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught, Without light or guide, save that which burned in my
heart. . . .
That light guided me More surely than the light of noonday,
To the place where (well I knew who!) was awaiting me —
A place where none appeared. (A. poem, Peers)

The idea is also expressed in *The Spiritual Canticle*:

Faith and love are like the blind person’s guides. They will lead you along
a path unknown to you, to the place where God is hidden. Faith, the secret
we mentioned, is comparable to the feet by which one journeys to God,
and love is like one’s guide. (C 1.11)

Thus, love assumes an essential role in the life of the mystic, and it fulfills a *guiding* purpose in the mist of the intellect’s “blindness.” This idea of a feeling of love being the “guide” is also expressed in the English mystical work of the

fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which many find to have great affinities with the works of St. John:⁴³

Therefore I will leave on one side everything I can think , and choose for my love that thing which I cannot think! Why? Because he may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held but by thinking never. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 6. Trans. Wolters 1978)

Thus the author of *The Cloud* talks about “the sharp dart of longing love”⁴⁴ and a “blind outreaching love to God himself,” which is “pressing upon the cloud of unknowing.”⁴⁵ Our model explains how love can assume the guiding effect as described by St. John and the author of *The Cloud*: love is in fact an *intentional act* which *intends* God through a specific noema. Thus one who has established in herself that general love of God which we have discussed, will possess a certain “sense” or understanding of how God is like — only that the understanding is a highly general one which cannot be clearly described in a direct language. This noema of the soul’s love gives the soul a vague “precept” instead of a clear conception of the God whom the soul is searching, without which the soul will be entirely lost in the *dark night of the soul*.

⁴³ See Johnston 1975, in which references to St. John of the Cross are constantly made as Johnston discusses the mysticism of *The Cloud*.

⁴⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 6, 11, trans. Wolters 1978.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 9.

Love has an essential position in the whole of Christian mystical tradition in the West — even the most casual reading of an anthology of Christian mystical literature will confirm that. Love is also an important theme in other theistic mystical traditions in Islam and Hinduism.⁴⁶ Our model can help to explain that important role of love in mysticism of theistic religions — it gives the contemplative prayer an *intention* as the mystic goes through the darkness that leads her to mystical experiences. Our approach may even be applicable generally to other mystical traditions: it explains how religious feelings in general (love in the case of Christian mysticism, and possibly other feelings for other traditions) may play an essential role in the development of mystical consciousness by “guiding” the soul when it is emptied of thoughts and images.

5.3 Conclusion: the Implications of Our Model

If the mystic’s silence sets the stage for her reception of mystical experience, what we have demonstrated by our model is that mystical experience does not happen within a vacuum of thoughts, but within a meaningful silence which situates itself within what we may call the *linguistic horizon* of the mystic’s religious

⁴⁶ See Zaehner 1960.

tradition.⁴⁷ As the *general noema of love* we have talked about consists mainly of the *indirect meanings* indicated in meditation, it is something ultimately grounded in religious language and cannot ever be produced without that language and its operation during meditation. Thus the mystic is led into that noema through language, and that noema still carries an understanding of God as indicated by that language. That is how the contemplative continues to *intend* the Christian God even after thoughts and images cease: they still understand God *in the direction* as opened and indicated by the Christian tradition, though not necessarily in the *concrete terms* employed in that tradition's daily operation.

If contemplative prayer is ultimately grounded on religious language, the perennial philosophers' distinction between the "lower" and the "higher" way of religion — the way of religious doctrine versus the extra-linguistic way of the mystics — is not really possible. The mystics do not really "negate" all of their religious language and concepts; rather, they are only taking them as indication to God, and they are negating the direct and literal meanings of that language.

Nevertheless, the relationship between mysticism and language is an intricate one, and we are barely touching the surface of the issue in our discussion. We will have more to say about the topic in the concluding chapter of the dissertation.

⁴⁷ The concept of the *linguistic horizon* of the mystics will be a topic of discussion

After an analysis of the contemplative prayer in St. John of the Cross, we are now ready to examine St. John's mystical experience. In the next chapter, we will explore one of the most sublime mystical experiences described in St. John's works: *the knowledge of God's attributes*.

in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

6. Knowledge of God's Attributes in St. John of the Cross

In Chapter 2 we looked at St. John's descriptions of various kinds of mystical knowledge. Under the category of *revelation and disclosure of truths to the intellect*, there is an important type of knowledge called *knowledge of God's attributes*, which is going to be the focus of our phenomenological analysis. In this short chapter, we will look carefully at St. John's description of the *knowledge of God's attributes* and discover some of its essential characteristics, which will then be analyzed in depth in the next chapter.

6.1 St. John's Description of the Knowledge of God's Attributes

According to St. John, the *knowledge of God's attributes* is itself the union with God, and it gives a foretaste of the beatific vision that the soul is to receive in life eternal (see section 3.3.1(b).1). In stanzas 14 and 15 of *The Spiritual Canticles*, St. John describes the experience in which this knowledge is conveyed, and he does so using a series of metaphors from nature:

My Beloved, the mountains,
The solitary, wooded valleys,
The strange islands, the sonorous rivers,
The whisper of the amorous breezes,
The tranquil night,
At the time of the rising of the dawn.

The silent music, the sounding solitude,
The supper that recreates and enkindles love. (C 14-15, Peers)

Explaining “the whisper of the amorous breezes,” John says:

By the amorous breezes are here understood the virtues and graces of the Beloved, which by means of the said union of the Spouse, assail the soul, communicate themselves most lovingly and touch it in its substance. And by the whisper of these breezes is meant a lofty and most delectable knowledge of God, and of His virtues, the which overflows into the understanding at the touch which these virtues of God effect in the substance of the soul: and this is the supreme delight which is contained in all things that the soul here experiences. (C 14-15.12, Peers)

St. John goes on to explain that the metaphor of the amorous breezes conveys two aspects of this experience in which God communicates Himself: just like ordinary breezes which can be felt and heard, these “amorous breezes” are both felt by the soul’s “sense of touch” and also heard by “the ear of the soul.” The “sense of touch” refers to the soul’s capacity to feel and enjoy God’s virtues, giving the soul a “feeling of delight [*sentimiento de deleite*]”; as we have seen in Chapter 3, John also refers to such touches of God as *spiritual feelings* (3.3.1(d)). While there exist different kinds of spiritual “touches,” in this case, the “touch” is said to be effected in the “inmost substance of the soul” (C 14-15.14, Peers) and thus it is a *substantial touch*. On the other hand, “the ear of the soul” refers to the passive intellect, which receives the knowledge of God’s virtues. We have already seen in the Chapter 3 that St. John uses the metaphor of “hearing” in describing

the mode of supernatural knowledge called “revelations,” under which is included “the knowledge of God’s attributes,” which we are discussing now (3.3.1(b)). This “whisper” received by means of such “spiritual hearing” is said to convey a “substantial” knowledge which is “stripped of accidents and imaginary forms” (C14-15.14, Peers). According to John, this knowledge “overflows into the intellect from the touch produced in the substance of the soul” (C 14-15.14, K & R). In our earlier discussions about the “spiritual feelings,” we have already come across the idea of the “overflowing” knowledge that enters the intellect (see section 3.3.1(d)); the passage describes such an instance of “overflowing” and suggests that the “knowledge of God’s attributes” is actually a *consequence* of receiving the “spiritual feelings” known as “substantial touches.” Later, we will discuss the relationship between spiritual feelings and the knowledge of God’s attributes in more detail.

St. John also mentions that in this knowledge of God’s attributes by “spiritual hearing,” the soul actually “sees” God: “to hear Him with the ear of the soul is to see Him with the eye of passive understanding. . .” (C 14-15.15, Peers) But by “seeing” St. John is not referring here to the essential vision of God received by the illumination of glory (C 14-15.20). Besides the essential vision of God (which we may call the “vision of God proper”), John calls *all* supernatural

and distinct knowledge of God “visions” or “intellectual visions”; it is in this sense that “spiritual hearing” is also “spiritual seeing.”¹

Similar experience of God’s attributes is also described in detail in the third stanza of *The Living Flame of Love*:

Oh, lamps of fire,
 In whose splendours the deep caverns of senses
 which were dark and blind,
 With strange brightness
 Give heat and light together to their Beloved! (F3, Peers)

In his exposition of this stanza, St. John explains that by “the lamps of fire” he is again referring to the virtues and attributes of God. The stanza describes an experience similar in nature to the one just described in stanza 14 in *The Spiritual Canticles*, but to an even more sublime degree since the soul has now entered into “spiritual marriage,” the highest stage of mystical development possible in this life. The “lamps of God” refer to God’s “innumerable” attributes, including his omnipotence, wisdom, goodness, mercy, and justice. Each of the “lamps” stands for an attribute *distinctly* experienced by the soul, yet “each of the attributes is the very being of God in his one and only suppositum”(F 3.2). The intricate relationships among each of the “lamps” are described as follows:

¹ See section 3.3.1.

Each lamp burns in love, and the warmth from each furthers the warmth of the other, and the flame of one, the flame of the other, just as the light of one sheds light on the other, because through each attribute the other is known. Thus all of them are one light and one fire, and each of them is one light and one fire. (F 3.5)

Thus even though each attribute of God is distinctly apprehended, each is known through another and each is “substantially the other” (F 3.17); and together they are experienced as “one simple being” (ibid.). This is all due to “the infinite simplicity and unity” of God (F 3.17): God, in his very Being, is each of his own attributes. In this experience of God, which sounds highly paradoxical, the soul can be said to experience *a multiplicity in unity*, in which “many things are seen in thee [God] when one thing is seen” (ibid.).

Just like the “amorous breezes” described in *The Spiritual Canticles*, each of the “lamps of fire” also consists of two aspects: the light and the warmth, which consecutively stand, respectively, for the noetic and the affective aspects of the experience. John comments on the mutual relationship between the two aspects: “And the light that the soul receives from them all together is communicated to it by the heat of the love of God. . .” (F 3.3, Peers). In section 3.3.2, we have already seen that St. John uses light and heat to refer to God’s supernatural infusion into the intellect and the will; thus, by the “warmth of love” St. John is referring to spiritual feelings. Just as the knowledge in stanza 14 and 15 of *The Spiritual Canticles* is an “overflow” from spiritual feelings, the knowledge described here

in F 3.3 is communicated by spiritual feelings. As each “lamp” is one of God’s different attributes, the warmth of each lamp, through its unique quality, communicates each attribute of God:

When individuals love and do good to others, they love and do good to them in the measure of their own nature and properties. . . . Since he is omnipotent, he omnipotently loves and does good to you; since he is wise, you feel that he loves and does good to you with wisdom; since he is infinitely good, you feel that he loves you with goodness; since he is holy, you feel that with holiness he loves and favors you. . . . [John continues with a whole series of attributes of God.] (F 3.6)

John penetrates more deeply into the experience as he explains the next line of the stanza, “In whose splendours.” The soul is not just illuminated by these “lamps” from the outside, but it is itself “within” the “splendours” of the lamp, transformed and turned into “splendours” through its union with God. Invoking here the air-flame analogy,² St. John describes the soul as the air which is now enkindled and transformed into flame, “the soul has become God of God by participation in Him and in His attributes” (F 3.9, Peers). St. John describes this unitive relationship between the soul and God as something dynamic, as “movements” of constant interactions. St. John likens these movements to that of a burning flame, which is itself the interaction of the fire and the enkindled air within it:

² See section 2.5.1.

The movements of these divine flames, which are flickering and flaring up we have mentioned, are not produced by the soul alone that is transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produces them alone, but they are the work of both the soul and him since he moves it in the manner that fire moves enkindled air. Thus these movements of both God and the soul are not only splendors, but also glorifications of the soul. (F 3.10)

Thus this knowledge of God's attributes is experienced as a dynamic interaction with God, in which the soul itself is transformed into those attributes.³ Thus *this knowledge of God's attributes is also the soul's self-knowledge*; it is in fact the self-knowledge of God enjoyed by the soul through its participation in him.⁴ It is similar with the soul's love of God:

The soul now loves God, not through itself, but through Himself; which is a wondrous brightness, since it loves through the Holy Spirit, even as the Father and the Son love One Another. . . ." (F 3.82, Peers)

So, just as the soul's knowledge of God is now God's self-knowledge, the *soul's love of God is God's self-love*. Traditional theology understands God's self

³ The very analogy of the "living flame of love" shows the dynamic state of mystic union, in contrast to the common conception that the apex of mystical experience is a static unity. We will come back to this point later in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

⁴ This is particularly clear in the experience described in C 16, when God reveals to the soul all the virtues she possessed, and "the soul feels that these virtues are both in her and in God so they seem to form a very pleasant and flowering vineyard belonging to the Bridegroom as well as to herself in which they both feel and delight" (C 16.8). Concerning the unity of all the virtues in the soul, St. John says: "all perfections and virtues are incorporated in orderly fashion in one solid

love as the love of the Father towards the Son, which is identified with the Holy Spirit. The soul is now fully participating in the Holy Trinity.⁵

St. John also tries to explain the soul's relationship with God in this experience using the metaphor of "overshadowing" [*obumbración*]. By "overshadowing" St. John means the "casting of a shadow" of something onto another. The shadow of an object is always in accordance with the "measure and property" [*talle y propiedad*] of its nature, such that a dark object gives a dark shadow, and a bright object gives a bright one. In the same way, God casts over the soul shadows whose grandeurs "commensurate" with God's attributes, so that the soul has "an effective realization of God's excellence" (F 3.14, Peers) and it "understands and enjoys God according to his property and measure in each of the shadows" (F 3.15). But the effects of these shadows on the soul are not superficial, as if the soul were merely "touched" by the shadows. Within the shadows, the soul is said to be transformed and "united" with their grandeurs so that the soul itself becomes "the shadow of God" (F 3.78, Peers). Nevertheless, just as an object is always different from its shadow, in this knowledge of God, the soul still does not comprehend God perfectly, as in the beatific vision.

perfection of the soul" (C 16.9).

⁵ On this point, also see C 39.3, F 4.2, 4.17.

In summary, St. John describes the knowledge of God's attributes as "a most lofty manifestation" of God (A 2.26.4); it is one of the greatest forms of knowledge that God can communicate to the soul in this life.

6.2 Knowledge of God in Relation to the Creation

Even though our usage of the term "mystical knowledge" excludes any knowledge having to do with creatures themselves, there is a type of mystical experience that has God as its primary object, yet is closely related to creatures. This type of experience can be taken as a special case of the knowledge of God's attributes, which we have just discussed. In this type of experience, an apprehension of God's virtues and perfections also includes certain apprehensions of creatures. Let us look at an example: in Chapter 4 of *The Living Flame* St. John describes an experience which he calls "the awakening of God in the soul" which happens to the perfect souls. Because God contains in Himself all the being and goodness of all creatures, in this experience, "the soul sees what God is in Himself and *what he is in the creatures*" together "in one single glance" (F 4.7, Peers, italics mine). God's Being and perfection are now experienced *in relation to the creatures*, so that while God remains the *primary* object of the experience, the creatures also become the objects of experience in a *secondary* manner. This allows the creatures to be understood in the following manner:

. . . All the virtues and substances and perfections and graces of all created things shine forth and make the same movement together in unison. (F 4.4, Peers)

. . . Not only do all seem to be moving, but they all reveal the beauties of their being, virtue, loveliness and graces, the root of their duration and life. For there the soul is able to see how all creatures, above and below, have their life and strength and duration in Him. . . . And although it is true that the soul is now able to see that these things are distinct from God, inasmuch as they have a created being, and it sees them in Him, with their force, root and strength, it knows equally that God, in his own Being, is all these things, in an infinite and pre-eminent way, to such a point that it understands them better in His Being than in themselves. And this is the great delight of this awakening: to know the creatures through God and not God through the creatures; to know the effects through their cause and not the cause through the effects; for the latter knowledge is secondary and this other is essential. (F 4.5, Peers)

In this passage, St. John describes the experience as a knowledge of the “virtues,” “substances,” “perfections,” and “graces” of all creatures, which “shine forth” in their “beauties”; it is also a knowledge of how all the creatures’ being and greatness are rooted in God — not in the sense that God is their “effective cause,” but that God is their “formal” cause, who is the creatures’ being and greatness in an “infinite and pre-eminent”⁶ manner. Notice two things: (a) the different virtues and perfections of the creatures are not experienced one by one, but all together “in unison”; (b) it is a knowledge of effects through the cause — after experiencing God Himself who is the root of the creatures’ being and

⁶ The phrase is a reference to the Thomistic theory of the Analogy of Being; see Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth*, II, 11,c.

goodness, the soul has come to a new and better understanding of the being and goodness possessed by the creatures. This stands in contrast to the knowing process in natural theology, in which the Being and goodness of God are known through creatures.⁷

A similar knowledge of what God is in creatures is also described in the introduction to the 14th and the 15th stanzas of *The Spiritual Canticles*. The two stanzas describe the soul's experience of God's communications during the spiritual betrothal by some very beautiful metaphors from nature. St. John remarks:

Wherefore, since God is all things to the soul, and the good of them all, the communication of this excess is explained by the similitude of the goodness of the things in the said stanzas. . . . It must be understood that all that is expounded here is in God in an eminent and infinite manner, or, to express it better, that each of these grandeurs which are spoken of is God, and they are all of them God; for, inasmuch as in this case the soul is united with God, it feels that all things are God *in one simple being*. . . in that possession the soul feels that all things are God to it. (CA 13-14.5, Peers; italics mine)

Here I have quoted from Peers' translation of redaction A of *The Spiritual Canticles*, whose 13th and 14th stanzas correspond to the 14th and the 15th stanzas in redaction B. It differs from redaction B in the phrase I have italicized,

⁷ The experience of knowing God through Creation is depicted in stanzas 4-7 of *The Spiritual Canticles*, which describe an earlier stage of the soul's spiritual development.

which helps to bring out the idea of the passage in a clear manner: the soul experiences God's greatness and grandeur *in one simple being*,⁸ which is also recognized as the very greatness and perfection found in all creatures. The experience can be summarized by the two phrases from the passages we have quoted: to the soul in union with God, "God is all things," and "all things are God." This should not be interpreted as a sort of "pantheistic" outlook of the world for two reasons: (a) St. John states explicitly in F 4.5 that in such an experience, the soul continues to see the creatures to have their created being distinct from God; (b) the emphasis is on the *perfections* of things being God's *very perfections*, not on their ontological identity with God.⁹

6.3 Knowledge of God's Attributes as Affective Self-Knowledge

We have observed certain important features of what St. John calls *knowledge of God's attributes* and in the following, I will summarize these features and provide more texts to illustrate them:

(a) *The knowledge of God's attributes is a knowledge through affects.* The passages we have looked at describe *knowledge of God's attributes* as

⁸ See also F 3.2, which expresses the same idea.

⁹ For the same reason, I reject the suggestion that the experience described here is what W.C. Stace calls an "extrovertive" mystical experience, which he identifies as pantheistic (see Stace 1961, pp.62-81). Moreover, Stace's "extrovertive" mystical experience involves sensory perceptions of objects, while the senses are excluded in such a mystical apprehension; see C 14-15.24-26.

“overflowing” from “spiritual feelings” and as communicated by “the warmth of love.” These descriptions point to the fact that the *knowledge of God’s attributes* is received through affects. An important passage in *The Ascent* supports the idea:

Though these spiritual substances [God, angels, and souls] cannot be unclothed and seen clearly in this life by the intellect, they can nonetheless be felt in the substance of the soul by the most delightful touches and conjunctions. These pertain to the category of spiritual feelings. . . .(A 2.24.2)

According to the passage, the closest “approximation” in this life to an essential vision of God is to “feel” God’s substance through spiritual feelings. The idea that the *knowledge of God’s attributes* is received through affects is further supported by the prominent place of love in St. John’s mysticism. The following passages illustrate that most succinctly:

The sweet and living knowledge that she says he taught her is mystical theology, the secret knowledge of God that spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because *it is a knowledge through love*. Love is the master of this knowledge and what makes it wholly agreeable. Since *God communicates this knowledge and understanding in the love with which he communicates himself to the soul*, it is very delightful to the intellect since it is a knowledge belonging to the intellect, and it is delightful to the will since *it is communicated in love*, which pertains to the will. (C 28.5. italics mine)

Jeremiah shows clearly that the soul is purged by the illumination of this fire of loving wisdom (for God never bestows mystical wisdom without love, *since love itself infuses it*). . . .(N 2.12.2, italics mine)¹⁰

Here, it is important to recognize that by love St. John means not merely acts of the will, but a *passion* by which God is desired and enjoyed (N 2.13). The affective nature of this love is clearly illustrated by the strong affective overtone in St. John's mysticism. While most commentators deny any essential relationship between the affective and the noetic aspect of St. John's mysticism, according to our observations, the *knowledge of God's attributes* is in fact a knowledge through affects.

On reflection, it sounds reasonable that the knowledge of God's attributes is knowledge through affects: the virtues of God that are experienced, such as goodness, beauty and kindness, are *values* that must be apprehended through feelings. The Platonic view — or what has come to be described as Plato's view — that values are ideal entities that can be grasped only by means of the intellect runs contrary to our daily experiences of values: to experience a beauty, a greatness, or a goodness is to *feel* it; simply to have an intellectual concept of it is just not enough. Thus it seems that the claim that the knowledge of God's attributes is received through feelings is not at all unreasonable.

¹⁰ See also, for example, N 2.18.5 and F 1.17.

(b) *The knowledge of God's attributes has the nature of self-knowledge.*

Unlike sense perception, in which the act of knowledge is directed toward an object *vis-à-vis* the knower, in the knowledge of God's attributes, the soul is itself transformed into the very attributes she feels, so that the knowledge is also the soul's self knowledge. The idea receives direct support from the characterization of this knowledge which we have just looked at (.3.3.1(b).1): "they are God's own knowledge and God's own delight," implying that it cannot be known "outside" of God, and is only obtainable by a participation in God Himself through a union with Him. Also supporting the idea is stanza 16 of *The Spiritual Canticles*, in which St. John continues to describe this knowledge as he has done in stanzas 14-15:

In many of these visits the soul sees within her spirit all her virtues by means of the light the Bridegroom causes. (C 16.1)

. . . it will happen that all her virtues are suddenly and clearly revealed in their perfection and give her immense sweetness and delight. The soul feels that these virtues are both in her and in God so they seem to form a very pleasant flowering vineyard belonging to the Bridegroom as well as to herself in which they both feed and delight. (C 16.8)

Thus the virtues that the soul experiences are not something "external" to it, but are virtues of God and of the soul at the same time, so that the knowledge of the virtues has the structure of a self-knowledge.

(c) In mystical knowledge, God's attributes are experienced as a *multiplicity in unity*: in one act the soul feels distinctly each of God's attributes, while each of the attributes is also known through each other and reinforces each other; yet all these attributes are experienced as "one simple being" (CA 13-14.5) and experienced in "one act of knowledge" (F 3.3) as "one light and fire" (F 3.4). This *multiplicity in unity* is also reflected in C 16.9, in which the virtues of the deified soul are said to form "one perfect whole" and "one solid perfection."

In the next chapter, I am going to offer a model of knowledge which possesses all of the three characteristics of the mystical knowledge of God's attributes. I will call it the model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* — by the term I am referring to a type of knowledge that many of us have experienced in normal everyday life and whose basic characteristics and structure make it the best model for understanding the mystic's knowledge of God's attributes. The nature of such *knowledge through the resonance of love* will be examined through phenomenological analysis; then, I will show how the model matches St. John's description of the knowledge of God's attributes.

7. A Model for Mystical Knowledge: Knowledge Through the Resonance of Love

In this chapter, I would like to establish the model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* for mystical knowledge, and show how it matches St. John's descriptions of the knowledge of God's attributes. To achieve these goals, I will do the following: I will first give a basic phenomenology of affective self-knowledge, at the end of which I will describe a special case of affective self-knowledge called knowledge through the resonance of love. That will allow me to construct the model of knowledge through the resonance of love as a model for mystical knowledge. Then, I will check whether the model accurately describes St. John's knowledge of God's attributes.

7.1 Phenomenology of Affective Knowledge

7.1.1 *Phenomenological Reduction and Affects*

According to the traditional and dominant view in the Western philosophical tradition, affects have little to do with the highest reaches of 'pure' knowledge. In the popular view in Western philosophy—or more precisely, the view that has come to dominate modern philosophy as received by the Anglo-American

tradition — knowledge is understood as the “adequation” between a mental representation and some entities in the world external to the mind. Unlike language or “sense data” provided by our sense organs, affects — including feelings, emotions, and moods — do not “represent” anything; they are no more than the mind’s “subjective responses” to things. What we experience through affects like pleasure, beauty, kindness, love, etc. do not exist as “real” properties of things; rather, they are taken as the mind’s “projection” upon the “objective” world. Therefore, affects play no important role in knowing. In fact, affects are always taken as the enemies of reason and knowledge, because they “affect” the “neutrality” of our perception and judgment. Philosophers like Plato or Descartes, for example, warn us specifically to guard against the interference of affects with our cognitive function.¹

Recently, some thinkers have begun to challenge the traditional view of affects and have argued vigorously for the importance of affects in our rational life.² However, in most cases they still grant affects a subordinate role to reason: some find affects to be “short-cuts” to rational calculations; others highlight the rational structure of “judgment” in affects. In general, the traditional view of

¹ See, for example, Plato. *Phaedo*, 66a-68b and Descartes 1985, Part I, article 47-50.

² See, for example, Damasio 1994, Solomon 1976, de Souza 1987.

affects has not changed all that significantly, and the epistemic value of affects has not been recognized in its own right.

It is through a phenomenological analysis that we can arrive at a new picture of affects. Once we have "bracketed" the metaphysical commitment on what "primary substances" make up the world and what "primary properties" they have, we may begin to re-examine our experience of the world in a new light. One observation which results then is that we very seldom experience things in affective neutrality: our perception and our thoughts of things are in most cases tainted with feelings, even though the feelings may be weak. There seldom are objects of experience totally deprived of any shade of feeling. Things appear in affects; the affectively neutral objects upon which we project our feelings are theoretical constructions only; in lived experience, feelings and emotions belong intimately to our world of experience. And if affects are basic features of our world, that which we experience through feelings, such as pleasure, beauty, goodness, etc. — what we will generally call *values* — is also a genuine element of our world of experience. These are not "projections" onto some neutral states of affairs, but are in fact *immanent* to the world of our experience. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this using erotic feelings as an example: the figure of a member of the opposite sex does not first appear as an abstract geometrical figure that subsequently excites one's sexual feelings: rather, the person perceives the figure in sexual significance:

In the case of the normal subject, a body is not perceived merely as any object; this objective perception has within it a more intimate perception: the visible body is subtended by a sexual schema, which is strictly individual, emphasizing the erogenous areas, outlining a sexual physiognomy, and eliciting gestures of the masculine body which is itself integrated into this emotional totality.³

The “sensuousness” or the erotic beauty of the body is not a “decision made in abstract,”⁴ but is discovered in the body through an “erotic comprehension” that belongs intimately to the act of perception. It is the same with many of our other affects: what we feel belongs intimately to the world.

7.1.2 Affects and Knowledge as Disclosure

The traditional view of affects is mistaken not only in that it denies values as integral elements of the experienced world, but also in that it wrongly identifies “representation” as the key element of knowledge. According to that view, knowledge is *adequate* representation of a thing by a belief (or some mental states equivalent to it); and since beliefs (at least those relevant to the knowledge enterprise) always exist (or are best expressed) as *propositions*, knowledge is propositional knowledge, and *propositions* form the very locus of knowledge.

However, in his phenomenology, Heidegger discovers that there is a more original sense of “knowledge” than “adequate representation”: this more

³ Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.156.

primordial sense of knowledge is found in a primordial experience of “knowing” which grounds propositional knowledge. Heidegger calls the experience an *uncovering* (*Unverborgenheit*), which is the experience in which a thing “shows itself for itself,”⁵ and appears to consciousness *as* something with a sense. For example, the basis for the perceptual knowledge that a tree is standing in front of me is the very perceptual *appearance* of this object *as* a tree in front of me. The key element which makes the perception of the tree a knowledge giving experience is *not* the apprehension of certain shades of green and brown before me, nor the sudden formation of the *belief* about a tree following the input of some sense datum. Rather, it is the tree’s *appearing as* a tree, the very element of *recognition* that there is a tree, which constitutes perceptual knowledge in a decisive manner. All relevant predications or propositions are subsequent to that *appearing as*. Heidegger calls such an *appearing as* a “primordial as,”⁶ which supplies consciousness with a “primary understanding”⁷ of what one is experiencing. This experience of *uncovering* is also called a *clearing* (*Lichtung*) since through this experience, things come out of darkness and into intelligibility for consciousness.⁸ That which *appears*⁹ in this *uncovering* are also said to be

⁴ Ibid., p.157.

⁵ Heidegger 1962, p.51.

⁶ Ibid., p.201.

⁷ Ibid., p.182.

⁸ Heidegger 1962, p.171.

disclosed to consciousness. and for Heidegger. knowledge, taken in its primordial sense. is understood to be a *disclosure* of how things are to consciousness.

With Heidegger's notion of knowledge. the notion of affective knowledge becomes possible: if knowledge is *disclosure*. affects certainly *disclose* to us how things are. In affects. things *appear as* this or that: through feelings. a flower *appears as* beautiful. a person *appears as* kind. and an event *appears as* tragic; the feelings then allow us to *know* the flower *as* beautiful. to *know* the person *as* kind. to *know* the event *as* tragic. and so on. Many cases of such knowledge through feelings are knowledge concerning what we usually call *values* — including aesthetic values (beauty and ugliness). moral value (goodness and evil). utilitarian value (pleasure and pain). and so on. Thus. in those cases when values are concerned. affective knowledge is *disclosure of values*.¹⁰

Also notice that affects do not only *disclose* things *as* this or that: in many cases. they also disclose the conscious subject itself to be in a certain *situation*. This happens particularly with *deep feelings* that we have (we will soon discuss the differences between deep and shallow feelings). Examples of such deep

⁹ Here I use the term "appears" in its usual sense. In Heidegger's own vocabulary. the term "appearance" implies something behind the appearing that does *not* show itself. and as such "appearance" is distinct from *uncovering*. See *ibid.*. pp.52-54.

¹⁰ It is not sure that all feelings have to do with values. and feelings are always "value-feeling" (*Wertfühlen*). as claimed by Max Scheler (1973. pp.257-61). Here. I want to make the more modest claim that many of our feelings have to do with values. and affective knowledge is. at least in many cases. disclosure of

feelings are what Heidegger calls “mood” (*Stimmung*). “Moods” disclose to the person both her environment and the *state of mind* (*Befindlichkeit*) she is in. An example is boredom — when I am bored, the mood of boredom discloses to me an environment which is uninteresting, non-exciting, “flat”; it also discloses myself to be in a “state of mind” that is calm, inactive, unmotivated, and so on. Another example is fear — fear discloses an environment or a situation which is threatening, and a self which is heightened, uneasy, and ready to react at any further signs of danger. From these cases we see that affects are not just pieces of “sense datum,” or just an “entities” or “elements” of subjective experience; rather they are *intentional*: they *point towards* the world or things in the world, in the sense that they are “about” the world or things in the world.¹¹ They are *intentions* which *disclose* the world and the subject from which the intentions arise. Both the world and the subject are disclosed together, because the subject is what Heidegger calls a “Being-in-the world” (*In-der-Welt-Sein*), a being which is enmeshed in webs of relationship with the environment in which she lives. The subject and her environment together constitutes a *situation*, and affects, like perception and intellection, are capable of *disclosing* that the very situation to the

values.

¹¹ For the kind of “intentionality” involved in moods, see Guignon 1993, Chapter 4.

subject. In such *disclosure*, both the world and the subject are *disclosed* because they are two inseparable sides of *one* situation that are to be understood together.

“Moods” are only one kind of affect which disclose the world and the subject which is “in” the world. While “moods” are about the “world” in a *general* manner, other affects like passions (desires, hatred, anger, hope, etc.) may have more *definite* or *specific* objects. Notice that even though affects are *intentional* in the sense that they are either *about* the world or some specific objects in it, the knowledge of the self which comes with it is *not* itself an *intentional act* in; it is rather part of an *act*. Also, this knowledge of the self through affects is *non-objectifying* — unlike the objectifying acts like perception and expression which *present* an explicit object or “objectivity” as we have discussed before (see 4.3.1), the self is not an explicit object in the act of affection. In this self-knowledge through affects, the self is not objectified or thematized. So, the affective self-knowledge is unlike what is traditionally called “introspection,” in which the self turns reflexively towards itself to “inspect” itself, and make itself an object of an “intuition. No “reflection” or “turning to oneself” is needed in order to know that one is, for example, in fear, boredom, or joy through feelings, since, with affective knowledge, to feel is to know, and to feel is not to reflect.¹²

¹² Here I am *not* claiming that we never learn about our state of mind through

Besides the fact that the affective self-knowledge is not an act and the self is never objectified in it, this knowledge has yet another characteristic: *images and language are not essential elements of this knowledge*. Words and images may have accompanied an affect at the first place, but once the affect is in place, in many cases, words or images are no longer necessary for its continual existence. An object — a roaring lion, for example — may have excited a fear which continues even after the lion has disappeared from sight and the my memories or imaginations of it have stopped. Hurting feelings may even continue after the actual words that caused them have been forgotten. In the case of love, as we have discussed before (5.2.2(c)), loving feelings can “fill one’s heart” without the person having to consciously image, remember, or think about her loved one. So, affective self-knowledge is *non-verbal* and *non-sensuous* — by that I do not mean that affective self-knowledge never involves words and sensations, nor do I mean that they are absolutely independent of language¹³ and sensibilities; rather, we

reflection. I am only saying that there are ways to know ourselves non-reflexively, and the affective self-knowledge I am talking about is one case. Neither am I saying that affective self-knowledge is an immediate “intuition” of the self — the point is precisely that it is not an “intuition,” at least not intuition in the traditional Cartesian, Kantian, or Husserlian sense. Also, I am by no means claiming that this affective-self knowledge is certain, inerrant, incorrigible, or enjoy any privileged epistemic status.

¹³ In fact, we have already discussed how contemplative prayer is linguistic without being verbal (5.3), and the situation is the same with affective-self knowledge and, ultimately, with mystical knowledge. I will have more to say on the relationship between language and mysticism in the concluding chapter of this

mean that in general, the act of affection which gives self-knowledge does not necessarily contain any act of expression or any element of physical sensation.

Thus, according to our discussion above, affective self-knowledge can be characterized as *non-intentional*, *non-verbal*, and *non-sensuous*. These properties make affective self-knowledge a possible model for mystical knowledge, which also has these three characteristics — from our discussion on the nature of mystical knowledge, it is already clear that mystical knowledge is non-verbal and non-sensuous (see 3.3); that the particular mystical knowledge we are looking at, *knowledge of God's attributes*, is also non-intentional, will be confirmed by our further analysis of St. John's description. The fact that mystical knowledge is non-verbal and non-sensuous has led many philosophers to believe that it involves a peculiar kind of "mystical intuition" which is different from any of the intentions or intellectual operations we ordinarily enjoy. Some even conceive this "intuition" to be a kind of "perception," as we have discussed in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, with the notion of affective self-knowledge available, we no longer need to postulate a mysterious kind of "intuition" to understand mysticism. We will soon see how we can arrive at a better understanding of mystical knowledge, using the notion of affective-self knowledge. However, since it is a model of "self-

dissertation.

knowledge” that we can talk about, we will need to take a quick look at the self as it is analyzed in phenomenology.

7.1.3 Phenomenology of Self-Consciousness

Contemporary psychology and psychiatry have taught us that the “self,” instead of being a simple substance, is a complex structure; instead of being a stable structure, the “self” is a fragile construction which may be disturbed by, for example, drugs, diseases, dramatic events, and so on.

Phenomenology is one way to study this elusive “self.” In phenomenology, we first “bracket” all the metaphysical assumption about the self — we will stop taking the self as a certain spiritual “substance” (as Descartes does); nor will we take it to be some unobservable “principle” which underlies the operation of consciousness (like Kant or even Husserl does); nor will we take it as some neural-physiological processes that take place in the brain (as materialists believe). Rather, we will look at our own experience in order to discover how consciousness comes to have a grasp and a sense of its own “self.”

After all the metaphysical notions of the self are bracketed, the self ceases to be a concrete entity located somewhere in our “stream of consciousness.” Rather, the self is not separable from the activities which constitute that “stream.” from the perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting which are parts of that “stream.” How then does any sense of the self arise from such activities of consciousness?

There seems to be no one way in which a sense of the “self” emerges, but we may distinguish between two levels at which the self appears to consciousness. At one level, the self becomes aware of itself in a reflexive manner. At this level, the self is grasped through discursive thought; for example, through his *Meditations*, Descartes discovers himself as a thinking subject. The *narrative self*—that is, the self constituted through narration — is another example of such a “self” being discovered through discursive thought. We can call such this self that is discovered through reflection *the self of the reflexive cogito*.

The self also appears to itself at a level “below” that of thinking. At this level, the self is not grasped as an “explicit” object. Merleau-Ponty calls this level of consciousness the “tacit *cogito*, the presence of oneself to oneself.”¹⁴ According to Merleau-Ponty, this tacit *cogito* is “myself experienced by myself,” and it makes possible one’s “comprehensive and inarticulate grasp”¹⁵ of oneself and one’s world. At the level of the tacit *cogito*, the self is not thought of, but *felt*. Contrary to the self of the *reflexive cogito*, this *felt self* is not abstract or theoretical, but is concrete and experienced in fullness. The *tacit cogito* feels the self in different ways: it is felt through bodily feelings, including kinesthetic and proprioceptive sensations; it is also felt through affects. As we have seen, in

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.404.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.404.

affects the self is disclosed to itself.¹⁶ Since the disclosure of the self through affects requires no reflection through language, it belongs to the level of the tacit cogito. Through affects the self is revealed to the tacit cogito, which only knows it *tacitly* — in the sense that the self does not evolve as a clear object of thoughts, and that such self-knowledge is not yet elucidated or elaborated by discursive thoughts.

7.1.4 Depth of Feelings and Depth of the Soul

While the self is disclosed to the *tacit cogito* through feelings, observations show that these feelings are arranged in different *levels of depth*. Max Scheler divides our feelings into four different levels: the sensible, the vital, the psychical, and the spiritual. By “sensible feelings,” Scheler means those feelings that belong to specific locations of the body (for example, a pain at the neck). By “vital feelings,” he means feelings that belong to the body in general, without being assignable to specific locations (for example, tiredness, excitement, etc.). By “psychical feelings,” he refers to feelings belonging to the psyche instead of the body (e.g., happiness and sadness). And by “spiritual feelings,” he refers to

¹⁶ The two means of tacit knowledge of the self — through bodily sensations and affects — are by no means mutually exclusive. The precise connection of the two is a subject that is beyond the scope of our present investigation.

feelings directed not towards specific areas of one's life, but to one's existence in general (e.g., bliss and despair).¹⁷

Whether Scheler's division is exactly correct is not of too much importance to us; rather, the important thing here is to see that our feelings do operate at different *levels*, so that one can feel emotionally negative at one level and positive at another. That resolves the paradox of how a person can be happy and unhappy at the same time — a person can be genuinely "joyous" even in the mist of immense bodily hardship, because though physical sufferings can make her miserable at the bodily level, she may well be joyous at the spiritual or religious level.

We will call such "leveling" structure of our affects the *depth* of our affective life. Different levels of feelings belong then to different *depths*: for example, the joy afforded by great art is often experienced and described to be "deeper" than the pleasure afforded by a beer, and the sorrow of losing a loved one is "deeper" than the sadness of losing a card game.

Corresponding to the depth of our affective life is a certain *depth of the self*. We experience different levels of feelings at different depths of our being — shallow feelings are said to touch us lightly on the surface"; deep feelings, on the other hand, strike us hard and touch us "in our depth," as if there is some part

¹⁷ See Scheler 1973, pp.328–44.

of us “deep inside” that is being “affected.” And we feel that in the “deep inside” there resides a certain “center” of our being, so that authentic living depends on our being in touch with this “core” through deep feelings. Therefore, genuine feelings are said to be “from the bottom of our hearts,” and people incapable of deep feelings are called “shallow,” and they are never in touch of their true selves.

But how do we understand such a *depth* of the self? Is it just some “subjective” feelings we have, or does it have any *ontological significance*, and corresponds to the way we exist as humans? Scheler’s description of the deep feelings like “bliss” and “despair” will allow us to gain some understanding into that very “depth” of the self which are touched by those feelings. According to Scheler, the characteristics of such deep feelings are that the feelings are experienced by *the whole of our being*; they are said to “bathe” or “permeate” “everything given in the inner world and the outer world.” Scheler explains:

... these feelings ... *fulfill*, as it were, our entire existence and our ‘world’, to the core of our person. We can then only ‘*be*’ blissful or in despair. According to the nature of these feelings, either they are *not* experienced at all, *or* they take possession of the *whole* of our being.¹⁸

Thus a feeling is deep and it touches our “depth” when it affects our *entire* consciousness in a thorough, wide-ranging manner. “colouring” all aspects of us in our thinking, sensing, and actions. In “bliss” we feel joyous: objects appear in

brightness, events appear optimistic, and we are full of energy. In “despair,” on the other hand, objects appear to be dull, things appear to be hopeless, and we lack energy to live on; for us *everything* has gone wrong. Scheler’s observation allows us to infer the following: since deep affects are those that “permeate” our whole being, *the depth of the self*, which correspond to that depth of affects, *is nothing but the very degree of wholeness of our being which is involved in an affect*.

John Dewey has made a similar observation. In *Art as Experience* he discusses the difference between pleasure and happiness:

Pleasures may come about through chance contact and stimulation; such pleasures are not to be despised in a world full of pain. But happiness and delight are a different sort of thing. They come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being — one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence.¹⁹

Here Dewey also identifies deep feelings with those which have to do with “our whole being.” He also identifies deep feelings as those which have to do with “the condition of our existence.” Dewey’s insight and vocabulary match very well with the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein* (human existence) as a “Being-in-the world,” who is “thrown” into a “condition of existence” as Dewey puts it, or a *situation*, as we have called it (7.1.2). Here, by the term *situation* phenomenologists mean not something which belongs solely to an environment

¹⁸ Scheler 1973. pp.343-4.

which is external to *Dasein*; rather, it is the *life situation* which is constituted together by *Dasein* and its world between which no strict boundary can be drawn. In Heidegger's language then, *the depth or the wholeness of the self is the degree of totality of one's situation that is disclosed in affects*. While shallow feelings may reveal my life situation in a partial and temporary manner (e.g., that I am "happy" when I am enjoying my beer), deep affects such as what Heidegger calls "moods" disclose the *condition of my existence* in a general, well-rounded, and total manner.²⁰ What Heidegger calls anxiety (*Angst*), for example, discloses the self to be a free being faced with different possibilities and with the responsibility to make choices for oneself. Such is the very basic structure or condition which underlies one's whole life, and this condition is revealed in that "state of mind" we call "anxiety," which, if not suppressed and forgotten, manifests itself powerfully in the various ways we see things and we act.²¹

According to the analysis of Merleau-Ponty, true love exhibits the same character of "affecting" the whole of our being. In false or illusory love which is a shallow feeling, the effect is peripheral: it "affects" my life in a partial manner —

¹⁹ Dewey 1858, p.17.

²⁰ Of course, the "totality" or "wholeness" is a matter of degree: there is probably no one singular affect which permeates absolutely every one of our acts. But the idea is clear enough — some affects are "local" to some parts or aspects of our life, and some are "global," through which we are affected in many important aspects.

²¹ See Heidegger 1962, pp.228-35.

it gets me a bit excited when I see my “beloved,” and makes me willing to spend some time with her. But that’s all to my “love,” and “I was not wholly in thrall, for areas of my past and future life escaped the invasion, and I maintained within me concerns set aside for other things.”²² True love, on the other hand, is very different: it affects the very way I exist. Not only do I perceive things differently (even physical objects look brighter and things look more positive), but I also live differently by changing my habits, or even my life plans for my beloved. With reference to my beloved, I interpret my past, my present, and my future now in a different manner than before. “True love summons all the subject’s resources and concerns his entire being,” says Merleau-Ponty.²³ *True love, as deep affect, touches the depth of me by touching the whole of me*, and that affect of love discloses my life situation as one with a definite orientation and a full dedication towards another person.

Anxiety and love are only two deep affects through which we apprehend our “depths.” Deep affects also operate in what Karl Jaspers calls the “limit situations” (in which one faces, for example, death, sufferings, and guilt);²⁴ and if the deep affects are grasped in these situations, they become means by which we may arrive at a deeper knowledge of ourselves.

²² Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 378.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jaspers 1963.

7.1.5 *The Center of Consciousness and the Self's Decentering*

Deep affects reveal the situation of the self in *fullness*. This situation is always something specific, involving concrete social-historical and physical conditions. Heidegger calls this concrete situatedness the *thrownness* of Dasein — Dasein is always already thrown into and enmeshed in that concrete situation; it is never a “neutral” or “atomistic” entity which subsequently enters into relationships with its world, as social atomists believe. The situation of Dasein provides a certain *perspective* from which Dasein apprehends the world and relates to it. The idea is most easily illustrated in perception — since the body is always situated in a particular spatial-temporal location, perception is always *perspectival*, as we have already discussed (4.3.2). However, not only our perception, but our thoughts, feelings, and our whole conscious life are also concretely situated in certain historical, cultural, and social backgrounds. Besides this general background Dasein’s situation also depends on its highly personal context which is defined by conditions of its environment, as well as Dasein’s own actions and dispositions in relation to that environment.

We will call this situatedness or condition of oneself the self’s *center*. By the term *center* we do not mean something physically spatial or metaphysically substantial: rather, the term carries three meanings: (a) the *center as situation* represents a *vantage point*, a *source of reference* for the self’s apprehension of the

world; (b) consistent with the spatial analogy of the *depth* of the self, the *center* represents a certain “core” of one’s being which is “located” at the self’s very *depth*. While we have said that the *depth* of an affect and of the self is a *measure* of *wholeness* of the self’s situation as revealed through the affect, *the center of the self is the very wholeness of the self, or the whole self which is revealed through deep affects* — here by *wholeness* we do not refer to *wholeness* of a metaphysical substance, but the *wholeness* of one’s life situation; (c) also consistent with the fact that *depth* of feelings allows *authentic living* (see 7.1.4), the *center* symbolizes the *true self* which one is in touch with when living authentically.

As defined, our notion of the *center* of the self is both consistent with our everyday use of terms like “inwardness” and “inner center” of the self, and with our phenomenological notion of the *depth* of human existence. After defining the notion of the self’s *center*, we can talk about two ways in which consciousness’ awareness of its own *center* may change. When a deep feeling reveals the situation of the self and puts one in touch with her own self, we can call that a *centering* of the self. Contrarily, in the case where consciousness is getting out of touch with its own *center* and losing its own “grasp” on its own life situation, we will call that a *decentering*. By the two terms we are describing consciousness’ *self-relation* — whether it is getting more in touch with oneself and is growing in self-knowledge or it is losing touch with oneself and is diminishing in self-knowledge.

While *centering* can be achieved through deep feelings as we have described, there are two important ways by which we can be *decentered*, and we will call them *dispersion* and *delocation*. Let us explain these terms.

In *dispersion* one is too much absorbed into particular acts of perception, affection, thoughts, volition, etc. In *dispersion* we do not feel in touch with our own inner center. That is the case when one is too much absorbed by work, entertainment, or bodily pleasure. What happens is that particular acts have absorbed too much of one's attention and energy, so that one loses sight temporarily of its overall life situation. The result is an experience of *decenteredness*, in which one loses touch with one's very self.

The *decentering* effect of *dispersion* implies that it has the contrary effect to deep affects that put us in touch with our own center. In fact, *dispersion* becomes a way to *escape* from deep affects. In face of what Heidegger calls *Angst* which is the "anxiety" caused by freedom and responsibilities, many people chose to escape; they indulge themselves in alcohol, drugs, sex, or work, in order to be *dispersed* and escape from that consciousness of one's *situation* of undecidedness and suspension.

Another case in which consciousness is *decentered* is through what we may call *delocation* in which the self *seems* to have taken up another *center* or perspective than the one in which it is actually situated. For example, I can imaginatively take up a perceptual perspective not actually available to me —

while working on this chapter before the computer, I may imagine myself sitting on a beach in Florida, enjoying the sunshine there. Similarly, *delocation* can also be experienced affectively — I can imaginatively feel the relief of having this thesis done; also, through memory, I can feel what I have felt before in another life situation as if I were still there. Most importantly, one may take up the perceptual, affective, or cognitive *perspective* of another person and experience what she sees and feels; phenomenologists call such “taking up” of other’s perspectives and their intentions by terms like *intentional transgression*, *encroachment*, or *transitivism*.

Like *decentering*, *delocation* can be a means to escape one’s center: our popular culture is full of entertainment with little deep meaning or message, whose aim is only to “transport” the audience into another fictional or theatrical situation in order to release the audience from the pressure and anxiety in life.

Not all *decentering* is bad — while the sense of awareness of the self is temporarily eclipsed during such moments of *decentering*, it does not necessarily mean inauthentic living. Sometimes we just need to “escape” for a moment from the “unbearable weight of existence,” only to come back to face it in freshness and strength. Moreover, it is sometimes necessary for the self to be eclipsed so that we can concentrate on seeing, feeling, sensing or thinking about particular things. But when one is always *decentered*, one gets into trouble — one will slowly lose contact with oneself and enter into pathological situations like workaholism,

substance abuse, continuous regress into the past, and non-stop fantasies about the future.

We have talked of *dispersion* and *decentering* being a means of escape from certain affects. In those cases, the escaped affects act as *motivating* forces for the acts of *dispersion* and *decentering*.²⁵ But besides *repulsive* factors like fear and anxiety which, when not properly faced, tend to *disperse* and *decenter* us, some affects may act as *positive* or *attractive* factors for *decentering*. The passion of love is an example of such an affect that *delocates* us by *pulling* us into another center. When I am in love, I am “carried away” from my own self — my immediate surrounding becomes unreal; I am concerned less and less about myself, but more and more with the one I love. My consciousness naturally “encroaches” hers, and I start to feel what she feels and sees what she sees. “To love something is to live her life, at least in intention.” Merleau-Ponty remarks.²⁶ This happens when the passion of love carries me away, “sweeps” and “swirls” me into the life of my beloved.²⁷ Such sweeping power of love is illustrative of what *e-motion* really is: a “motion” which drives me away from myself.²⁸ Love of another person is not unique in this respect. For example, love of one’s hometown

²⁵ For the notion of *motivation* in phenomenology, see 5.2.1(b).

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p.154.

²⁷ Mazis relates such sweeps and swirls to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the Flesh, taking them to be the “vortices” that Merleau-Ponty describes as surrounding centers of consciousness. See Mazis 1993.

might also have a decentering effect. Merleau-Ponty gives an example: when I am on holiday and away from home in the countryside. I am calm, and perfectly happy. But if now I suddenly hear that my hometown is threatened by war, I become concerned and worried. My love for my hometown carries me there, so that all my concern and attention are with it. I am *delocated* from my immediate spatial-temporal situation. My immediate environment feels unreal. In fact I am so much *centered* on my hometown while my body cannot be there, that I feel I am *in exile* in this countryside far away from home. There is a *tension* between the *quasi-center* which consciousness occupies through *delocation* and the actual center of the lived situation, which makes one feel that one is not where one really belongs. Such feelings also occur for a lover whose consciousness is centered on an absent beloved. Merleau-Ponty observes:

Our body and our perception always summons us to take as the center of the world that environment with which they present us. But this environment is not necessarily that of our own life. I can be “be somewhere else” while staying here, and if I am kept away from what I love, I feel out of touch with real life.²⁹

After looking at the *delocating* effect of affects, let us look at how *delocation* may also become a source of knowledge.

²⁸ See Mazis 1993. p.29 for a discussion of the etymology of the term “emotion.”

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty 1962. pp.285-6.

7.1.6 Knowledge and Self-Knowledge Through Delocation

Notice that *decentering* through *delocation* may provide us with special opportunities for knowledge — through imagining myself in different situations, I come to a better understanding of my own character; an architect comes to know her design better by conceiving it from different perspectives; and in the case of intentional transgressions, as we take up the situation of another person, we gain a knowledge of that person. In particular, when I take up the deep affects of that person, I come to an affective, non-reflexive knowledge of the person that is much like the affective self-knowledge we have discussed. Phenomenologists call this affective knowledge through delocation *knowledge through empathy*. For example, putting myself into the miserable situation of a friend, I take up her frustration and depression, as if they become my intentions. Through these affects, my friend's state of mind and her life situation are *disclosed* to me in a concrete and lively manner. Feeling being loved is also a source of empathetic knowledge: as I feel the other's love to me, I feel the loving intention which goes from her towards me. I take up that intention empathetically and from that is disclosed to me the *heart* from which the love flows, a *state of mind* which is filled with kindness, concern, and other qualities of that person.

Like affective self-knowledge, my empathetic knowledge of the other is also *non-intentional, non-verbal, and non-sensuous* (see 7.1.2). Notice that my

empathetic knowledge of the other should not be understood as a kind of mysterious “psychic transport” in which I magically becomes the one I now understand.³⁰ While I feel *as if* I am my friend, I do not actually become her and my life do not become miserable when I feel her misery; and my friend’s feelings do not become *my own feelings*, *my own* intentions towards *my own* life situation.³¹ Nevertheless, apparently, I am *delocated* from my own situation and

³⁰ The tradition of Romantic hermeneutics holds a view of empathetic understanding similar to this. See Gadamer 1994, pp.173-218.

³¹ Stein (1964) has observed this difference and calls feelings that belong to me *primordial* and feelings that belong to others but are felt empathetically *non-primordial* (pp.7-8). The distinction here is crucial. The difference is overlooked even by Scheler and Merleau-Ponty (who inherits Scheler’s notion of intersubjectivity). The inability to recognize the distinction leads to the mistaken view that the feeling subject does not originally have any “center” of its own; that feelings are “anonymous” to start with, and that at an early stage of the development of consciousness, a child simply feels what another person feels and there is no difference between her own feelings and those belonging to others. According to this mistaken view, only later does there come a differentiation between the other and the self, and from that point on one “owns” her own feelings; before that point the “transgression” into other “centers of consciousness” (or what Merleau-Ponty calls “transitivism” [1964a, p.155]) is dominant over “self-consciousness.” The conclusion drawn is that the self is the product of a more or less “reflexive” activity of the soul (a situation that leads Sartre to assert that “There is no *I* on the unreflected level” [Sartre 1957, p.101]). This view perhaps lies at the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s “Flesh” ontology in his later works (see Merleau-Ponty 1968; also Cataldi 1993, pp.60-64, Mazis 1993, pp.221-2).

While it is probably true that a child before a certain age does have difficulty distinguishing between her own feelings and those of others, this does not imply that the child experiences her own feelings and those of others in the same way. The child does not have a “universal mind” that happens to be drawn from time to time into different “vortices” (to use Merleau-Ponty’s term) of conscious “centers.” A difference does exist between *primordial* and non-

enter into my friend's. In this quasi-relocation of my *center*, my consciousness seems to "slip" into that of my friend's. Such an "encroachment" into my friend's consciousness can be understood by what Gadamer calls a *fusion of horizons*: while it *seems* that I have got out of my own perspective into my friend's in order to enjoy her *horizon* — i.e., to experience what she sees or feels, in fact it is her horizon being constructed within my own. While I may have temporarily "suspended" some of my beliefs or ideas, still, I never really leave my own situation behind, and I am always using my own knowledge and my own background to understand my friend, so that the understanding I obtain is a *fusion* between her way and my way of experiencing things.

The fact that the very structure of empathy is a *fusion of horizons* allows a special possibility for self-knowledge through empathetic understanding of the other. In empathetic knowledge of the other we understand the other through taking up her deep affects. But, as we have already discussed, deep affects always disclose oneself. That means while the deep affects disclose the other, they also disclose myself to my own self at the same time. On reflection, that sounds very reasonable and obvious: empathy is a *fusion of horizons* which has as much to do with the other's and my own situations: when deep affects arise during empathy, it

primordial feelings, and this difference is the *basis* by which the child can later distinguish her own mind from that of the other. So, while reflexive thoughts do contribute to the formation of self-consciousness, a self does already exist in the

is because *I am touched*, and the fact that I can deeply empathize with my friend tells as much about me as my friend. Such affective knowledge of myself through affective knowledge of others happens when, for example, we are reading a great novel or watching a great drama. Through empathizing with one of the characters, we experience her deep feelings because we are ourselves touched by the very situations she faces. Through that I discover myself to be someone similar or different from the character; I discover my own vulnerabilities, weaknesses and strengths. An important effect of great art works of art is that through them I come to a better understanding of myself. Gadamer makes the general statement that this effect is in fact common to all experience of genuine understanding; he claims that "every understanding is a self-understanding."³²

Also notice that genuine understanding of the other is also *transformative* — I am *changed* through that empathetic understanding. Knowledge which makes no difference to our lives is probably not real knowledge. In case of the empathetic understanding of others, it is *me* myself that is changed: I understand myself and my world anew; I re-orient myself accordingly, so that from now on I see, think, and act differently. Such is surely the case with powerful aesthetic and religious experience in which we are transformed not through cool-headed calculations, but affective understanding through feelings. Here we see the

non-reflexive and *tacit cogito*.

complete meaning of *fusion* in Gadamer's *fusion of horizons*: I do not just enjoy the other's horizon through mine, but I am myself changed and my own horizon is shifted, so that the state of understanding or fusion that I attain to is truly a new creation. Without that, an "understanding" of the other will be nothing more than applying our already fixed opinions to others, and "pigeonholing" others in our own narrow categories of thinking.³³

Remember that we started off by saying that when I enter the other's situation I am *delocated*. But now, it has been shown that if I understood the other through deep affects, I am also understanding myself deeply; I am then *re-centered* into myself, even more *centered* than I was before because since I am now more in contact with my true self, my own lived situation. Thus, empathetic knowledge of others through delocation is then a paradoxical way of centering oneself through decentering — a way in which the self is "lost" temporarily in order to be found again. This peculiar structure of *centering through decentering* is also an important feature of the development of the mystical life, as we shall see.

³² See Gadamer 1977, pp.44-58; Gadamer 1994, p.260.

³³ And this is one criticism that has been directed at Gadamer's hermeneutics. With its insistence on the value of "traditions" and "prejudice," it has been accused of promoting a conservatism that can never do full justice to "the other." This is not actually the case, however, for, as we have explained, Gadamer maintains that the self's horizon is not something fixed, but is constantly transformed through understanding itself.

7.1.7 *Resonance, Mutual Love, and Mutual Knowledge*

We have discussed the possibility of an empathetic knowledge of the other through *delocation*, in which I “enter” into the other’s situation, and gain understanding of both the other and myself. I have commented that in such cases even though I do *feel* the other’s feelings, I do not really *own* those feelings personally, since they are never *intentions* arising from me and directing to my own world. For example, to feel the grief of my friend’s loss of a loved one and to feel deeply sorry for her is *not* the same as what I feel when I lose a loved one myself, unless in the special case where I am intimately related to the one who was gone.

The exception I have just mentioned points to an important and interesting case we need to discuss. As empathy is a *fusion of horizons* instead of a *psychic coincidence* between me and the one I understand, it is not required that we are in the *same* situation for me to understand the other; otherwise, I will never be able to understand someone who is different from me. But what happens when my situation is indeed similar to the one I empathize with? And assuming that I have not yet come to a self-knowledge of my own situation, what would my empathetic knowledge of the other, now *similar* to me, contribute to my self-understanding?

In that case what naturally happens is that the feeling of the other which I take up is going to induce a *similar* feeling in me. At first, I am *delocated* and I

feel the other's deep affect; next, I start to feel a similar affect flowing from me — this time the affect is *my own*. We can call this a *resonance* of the other's affect in me, and that *resonating* affect becomes an important source of understanding, which discloses myself to my own self through an affective self-knowledge, as we have discussed before.

Examples of this can again be found in aesthetic experience — when watching a drama, I must first become delocated and *empathize* with one of the characters, whose situation in fact reflects my own life in a significant way. I can feel the character's frustration, struggles, bitterness, etc. What then happens, slowly or suddenly is that the feelings seem to *echo* in me, and similar feelings towards my life and my world are awakened in my heart. Those feelings are not experienced before, or not as powerfully, due to suppression or other reasons. But now these feelings flow, and they disclose my own self to me in a powerful way.

We call the phenomenon *resonance*, since it is pretty similar to the resonance of vibrations in physical objects: just like in resonance something strongly vibrates in one of its "natural frequency" when induced by that frequency from outside, in affective resonance, other's feeling is *induced* in my heart, because I am already in a situation similar to hers, and I am already *pre-disposed* into the possibility of having that feeling. I just need some small trigger to *release* that feeling in me. And my feeling is *released* by feelings of others, because, as we have already discussed in detail, empathetic knowledge of others is itself a

self-knowledge and transformative: in this case, empathetic knowledge of the other who is in a situation similar to mine has effected in me a *self-recognition* of my own situation; it also transforms me by *awakening* a similar feeling in myself. Ultimately, this new feeling resonates in the self and gives new insights and new knowledge of myself. With the new feeling which is *mine* awakened, I now come to know myself and the other, both now recognized to be in a similar situation, through *one* feeling, which is perceived to be both in the self and in the other. Using our last illustration, now I understand both myself and the character in the drama through *one* feeling, that is felt to be resonating, echoing itself both in me and in her — in between us there is formed a new *solidarity*.

The experience is even more powerful when the affect involved is a mutual love. That does not usually happen at the beginning of a loving relationship, but happens in a mature relationship; it happens when, for example, two lovers are now *alike* — not that they become exactly similar, which is impossible, but that after in a long-term and intimate relationship, they are sharing a similar life situation, a similar lifestyle, similar life goals and values, and so on. When one, through love, enters into the heart of another, she can feel his love for her: that love resonates and echoes in her, as a love towards her lover. The result is that the two share one feeling of love and now love through *one medium of love*, in which the loving intention is *reciprocal* and *reversible*: it is the love of her to him, and it is also be the love from him to her, and the two loves are now

indistinguishably one. This love also gives the affective knowledge we have discussed, and it gives a knowledge of both one and the other, disclosing both in a state of life which is joyous, secure, and completely fulfilled. To the extent that the two lovers are similar and to the extent that they are only occupied by the affective act of love at the moment — for example, during moments of heightened feelings and ecstasy, there is a perfect *union* in love: one *knows* the other when one *feels* herself, and one *knows* herself as she feels the other. In this perfect reciprocity and reversibility, the boundary between the two is blurred, and the lover can no longer tell who she is feeling and knowing, because it is both.³⁴ This union of love is characterized by a constant *flow* of love from one to another, so that there is not a static, but a dynamic relationship between the two.³⁵

7.2 Knowledge Through the Resonance of Love

The phenomenological analysis we have performed have allowed is to arrive at a model of affective knowledge called *knowledge through the resonance of love*.

Let me outline the four major aspects of this model:

³⁴ Interestingly, Cataldi compares the reversibility in affects with the reversibility of the “Flesh” in Merleau-Ponty’s “Flesh ontology.” See Cataldi 1993. Chapter 6.
³⁵ For a discussion of the relationship between emotional flow and the sense of the self, see Mazis 1993, pp.219-22.

(1) It involves a self and the other who are alike and in a relationship of mutual love.

(2) The self, through experiencing the other's love, comes to an empathetic knowledge of the other's *center* or *heart*.

(3) This love of the other and the empathetic knowledge causes a similar love to arise from the self towards the other, and through which the self obtains a deeper self knowledge.

(4) The self and the other are then experienced together through one medium of love, which has the peculiar characteristic of being totally *reversible* — the love and knowledge of the self toward the other are the same as the love and knowledge from the other to the self. The self and the other become indistinguishable from each other in a union of love which is dynamic.

The model I put forward above clearly satisfies the three basic characteristics of an affective self-knowledge which *knowledge of God's attributes* has already been shown to belong to (see 6.3) — it is a knowledge through affects; it has the structure of a self-knowledge: later, I will show that it also satisfies the third criterion of being a knowledge of a *multiplicity in unity*. In the following, I am going to show in detail how the model matches with the *knowledge of God's attributes*.

7.3 Applying the Model of “Knowledge Through the Resonance of Love” to the Knowledge of God’s Attributes

7.3.1 Similarity and Mutual Love Between the Soul and God

In the last section, I stated that the first important element for our model is a similarity between the self and the Other. That is indeed the situation of the soul and God, as the soul is prepared to enter the *knowledge of God’s attributes*. As we have already discussed in detail, the very goal of the mystical life is a union with God in which the soul becomes like God (see 2.5.1). It is a “transformation of love” which produces a “likeness” between the soul and God (C 12.7), so that “to all appearances” (A 2.5.6) the soul appears to be God (C 22.4) — the soul has become God of God by participation in Him and in His attributes (F 3.8). This process of *deification* is achieved through the *privative* process which St. John of the Cross calls the *dark night*, in which God removes from the soul all that is not God (see 2.5.2). It is a process in which the self is annihilated and re-made (A 2.7.9-12). St. John tells us that by the end of the *dark night of the spirit* the soul is already purged of most of its impurities — it is like a log which is assailed by fire, and whose impurities have all been consumed so that it is ready to be completely ignited and turned into fire itself (N 2.10.1, F Prologue 3–4, F 1.18-26). The soul is already in a rare state of purity that few can reach — it has “acquired virtues.

strength and perfection” (F 2.26); its “charity is highly increased” and it is “almost completely purified (N 2.20.1). It already has much of God’s virtues and perfections, only that it has not yet the chance to enjoy them during the process of purgation (N 2.10.6); these virtues will be fully revealed to the soul only in the mystical experience she is going to receive. (C 16.8).

The soul is also in a mutual love with God. That the soul is motivated by a love of God to go through the mystical journey is a point which needs no more elaboration here (see 2.5.2 and 5.2.2(e)). On the other hand, unlike the neoplatonic mysticism that asserted such a great influence on St. John, the mysticism of St. John also involves a love of God towards the soul. That a mutual love exists between the soul and God even before the stage of union is shown in stanza 13 of *The Spiritual Canticles*, in which St. John describes God using the imagery of a stag going to his wounded mate:

If he hears the cry of his mate and senses that she is wounded, he immediately runs to her to comfort and caress her. The Bridegroom now acts similarly. Beholding that the bride is wounded with love for him, because of her moan he also is wounded with love for her. Among lovers, the wound of love of one is wound for both, and the two have but one feeling. (C 13.10)

Thus the soul and God already share “one feeling of love.” and in fact it is that love which prompts God to reveal Himself to the soul. The soul is already approaching that “perfect love” which is a “love of equals” (C 32.6), a mutual

love between God and the soul in an “equality of friendship” (C 28.1). Therefore, we can say that the soul, as it enters mystical union and receives the *knowledge of God’s attributes*, is already like God and is in a mutual relationship of love with Him.

We must make one point clear before we go on: all our talk about the soul’s “perfection,” and the “equality,” “mutuality,” and “reciprocity” with God are *matters of degree*. The union of the soul and God are never perfect in this life; and even in the life to come, it seems there will always be room for progress (see 2.5.3). Thus what we have said here and what we are going to say about the soul’s “similarity” or “equality” with God and the “mutuality” of love between the soul and God must not be understood in absolute terms. The expressions shall not be taken as exact attributions of metaphysical properties of the soul and God; rather, they describe the *mode* of the soul’s existence and the *mode* of love operative between the soul and God.³⁶

³⁶ In fact, this statement marks the major difference between my phenomenological understanding of St. John’s mysticism and most of the other popular approaches to mysticism.

7.3.2 *The Soul's Empathetic Knowledge of God Through Delocation*

The second important feature of our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* is that it involves an empathetic knowledge of the other through *delocation*.

Let us see whether it is also a feature of the *knowledge of God's attributes*.

7.3.2(a) *Center and Substance of the Soul*

While empathetic knowledge involves the *decentering* of the self from its own center, St. John of the Cross also talks about the *center of the soul*: in *Living Flame of Love* he describes God's "wounding" of the soul at its "deepest center" in the "substance of the soul." St. John explains that by the *center of the soul* he does not mean any "center" in a spatial sense; while the *center of the soul* is also called a "keen point in the substance of the soul" (F 2.9), paradoxically, St. John says that it is not actually a "part" of the soul, since the soul as a pure substance has no parts (F 1.10). Rather, similar to our notion of the self's *center*, the *center of the soul* represents a *condition or situation* of the soul; St. John explains:

The deepest center of an object we take to signify the farthest point attainable by that object's being and power and force of operation and movement. . . . Accordingly, we assert that when a rock is in the ground, it is, after a fashion, in its center, even though it is not in the deepest center, for it is within the sphere of its center, activity, and movement; yet we do not assert that it has reached its deepest center, which is the middle of the earth. Thus the rock always possesses the power, strength, and inclination to go deeper and reach the ultimate and deepest center; and this it would do if the hindrance were removed. When once it arrives and no longer has

any power to inclination toward further movement, we declare that it is in its deepest center. (F 1.11)

St. John is using the Aristotelian cosmology to illustrate his point:

something is at its center when it is in its proper sphere in the universe. The *centering* of the object can be of different degrees, and the object's deepest center is the point at which it has no further inclination to go further. Thus, an object's *center* refers to a *state*, a *situation* that it is in. St. John then applies the notion of "centering" to the soul:

The soul's center is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest center in God, it will know, love, and enjoys God with all its might. (F 1.12)

The soul reaches its center when the *wholeness* of its being has attained to God. Thus it is similar to our model, which takes the *center* to be the *wholeness* of the self's *situation* (see 7.1.5). That St. John calls God the *center of the soul* reveals his own theological and anthropological insight: interpreted in our model, St. John is saying that one comes to perfect self-knowledge of the wholeness of the self and attains to authentic living only when one is living the life of God.

The centering of the soul, as described by St. John, can be of different degrees. St. John calls the "deepest center." "the farthest point attained by its own

substance, virtue, and power.” “the maximum to which the soul can attain” (F

1.14, Peers). The soul is led into different depths by different degrees of love:

It is noteworthy, then, that love is the inclination, strength, and power for the soul in making its way to God, for love unites it with god. The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God and centers itself in him. We can say that there are as many centers in God possible to the soul, each one deeper than the other, as there are degrees of love of God possible to it. . . . But once it has attained the final degree, God’s love has arrived at wounding the soul in its ultimate and deepest center, which is to illuminate and transform it in its whole being, power, and strength, and according to its capacity, until it appears to be God.(F 1.13)

The different degrees of love correspond to the different depths of affects in our models which reveals the self to different depths (7.1.4).

Applying our model, we now have an *existential* interpretation of the center of the soul which also provides us with a solution to a problem commonly addressed in St. John scholarship: that is, the meaning of the *substance of the soul* (2.4.3). While St. John uses the term to describe the locus of deepest mystical experience, it is difficult to ascertain what faculty or “part” of the soul the term refers to. We have already examined different suggestions on how to understand the term and rejected those suggestions. Here, I would like to suggest that the term should be understood experientially, not metaphysically as referring to any “part” or “faculty” of the soul. That St. John does not use the term in a technical way as he uses terms like “intellect,” and “will” suggests that he is using it to capture aspects of his experience which go beyond the categories of Thomistic

psychology. According to St. John, the *substance of the soul* is the place where mystical union takes place: it is also portrayed as the *realm* in which the *center of the soul* is “located” (F 1.9, 2.8, 2.9). And if, in our model and as described by St. John, the center of the self is revealed through deep feelings and deep love, the *substance of the soul*, which is the realm of such revelation, is nothing but *the soul’s deep affective life*. It is the *depth dimension of the tacit cogito through which the self knows its own self through deep affects*, and knows itself *concretely and substantially*. The “substance” of the soul then refers not to any metaphysical substance, but a *concreteness and substantiality of the felt self as revealed in spiritual feelings*.

7.3.2(b) *Decentering and Delocation of the Soul*

As already discussed in the last section, St. John describes the center of the soul to be God, implying that one attains to genuine knowledge of God when she is in touch of her own center, and this is made possible by love. Thus, so far, we can already see that the mystic’s knowledge is well described by our model of affective self-knowledge — through deep feeling, one’s own center, defined as one’s whole life situation, is revealed to oneself. And provided that the soul’s life is itself filled with God’s attributes (a condition that is being gradually fulfilled on the mystical journey), God will then be known through this very feeling of love.

This centering of the soul through love is made possible by two crucial elements in the mystical journey. The first element is the contemplative prayer, which we discussed in Chapter 5. Remember that the contemplative prayer is a prayer in which all activities of the mind cease and the soul enters into a rest in God. Such a prayer is thus the soul's withdrawal from various acts of the mind in order to concentrate on a single act of love towards God. As such, contemplative prayer is an important countermeasure for the *dispersion* of the soul — in section 7.1.5, we have talked about the self's being absorbed into particular acts in daily life; in contemplative prayer, the soul withdraws her attention from all these acts, so that it can be in touch with its own center. This is why contemplative prayer is also called “centering prayer” by contemporary spiritual writers.³⁷

However, on its own, contemplative prayer, as a way to counteract the soul's dispersion is of limited help to the soul. Mere withdrawal from different acts of consciousness and the silencing of the mind can only create a “vacuum” in the mind which, for St. John, is of little value for the soul (5.1.3, 5.2.2(e)). The contemplative prayer is beneficial only if the soul is already living a purified life as it enters the contemplative prayer, and that is why one must first go through the *active night of the senses* before entering the contemplative prayer (2.5.3(a)). Also, besides its centering effect, the contemplative prayer is also an act of love,

³⁷ See Pennington 1980.

as we have analyzed in detail in Chapter 5. Let us now see how this love helps the soul in achieving further *centering* and the mystical knowledge of God.

In section 7.1.6 we have discussed the delocating effect of love. Now, this delocating effect is at work in the soul, effecting the paradoxical *centering through decentering* which we have discussed before. With the soul filled with a love of God, its attention is carried away from its living environment into a continuous care of God. This kind of delocation or decentering into God is clearly demonstrated in C 8, which describes the life of a soul wounded in love for God:

To understand these lines it should be known that the soul lives where she loves more than in the body she animates; for she does not live in the body, but rather gives life to the body and lives through love in the object of her love. (C 8.3)

Thus the soul is experiencing the delocating effect of love as described in section 7.1.6, and is "carried away" by love from one's immediate living environment and becomes centered in God, much like the person described by Merleau-Ponty (7.1.6), who feels "on exile" from home as he hears bad news about his hometown during vacation:

And living both in the body and in God, she necessarily feels great torment, since the one painful life thwarts the other delightful one, so much that the natural life is like death to her, because through it she is deprived of the spiritual life in which she has all her being and life through nature, and all her operations and affections through love. (C 8.3)

However, it is the soul's centering in God that allows an empathetic knowledge of God, which we are going to discuss on the next section. Thus this delocating and decentering will, as we shall see, lead to a greater centering of the soul. While we have described this as a way to "lose" oneself in order to find oneself (7.1.6), this is also the way the soul describes the experience retrospectively, after it has attained the union with God:

You will say that I am lost;
that, stricken by love,
I lost myself, and was found (C 29)

7.3.2(c) The Soul's Empathetic Knowledge of God

As our *knowledge through the resonance of love* is sparked by an empathetic knowledge of the other, in *knowledge of God's attributes*, the soul receives an affective knowledge of God through experiencing God's love towards its own self through empathy. This happens after the soul is now centered in God through delocation, and St. John explains how this works in an important passage:

How remarkable, how advantageous, and how multifaceted will be your delight: in all and from all you receive fruition and love, since God communicates himself to your faculties according to his attributes and powers! When individuals love and do good to others, they love and do good to them in the measure of their own nature and properties. Thus your Bridegroom, dwelling within you, grants you favors according to his nature. Since he is omnipotent, he omnipotently loves and does good to you: since he is wise, you feel that he loves and does good to you with

wisdom; since he is infinitely good, you feel that he loves you with goodness; since he is holy, you feel that with holiness he loves and favors you. . . since he is the virtue of supreme humility, he loves you with supreme humility and esteem and makes you his equal, gladly revealing himself to you in these ways of knowledge. . . .Who, then, will be able to express your experience. O happy soul, since you know that you are so loved and with such esteem exalted? (F 3.6)

This passage demonstrates that the soul perceives God's attributes through feeling the very love that God has for the soul. The soul is taking up, empathetically, the feeling of love that God has towards the soul. As one's deep affects reveal one's own self to herself, the empathetic knowledge of the love of God reveals the very attributes of God which is disclosed by the very qualities of love. Notice that the passage also indicates that the love between the soul and God is a love between equals, as we have discussed in 7.3.1. The description of *knowledge of God's attributes* in C 14-15 also have the similar character as the passage says. "God's attributes are lovingly and sweetly communicated" in "a state of gentleness and love" (C 14-15.14).

Thus, consistent with our model, in the *knowledge of God's attributes* the soul has an empathetic knowledge of God through feeling God's love. I believe that the feeling of God's love, as discussed above, is that *spiritual feeling* from which the *knowledge of God's attributes* overflows (see 6.1). I will show that the "overflowing" which completes the *knowledge of God's attributes* can be

described by the *resonance of love* in our model, which I am going to discuss now.

7.3.3 Resonance of Love and Self-knowledge of the Soul

In our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love*, the empathetic knowledge of the other's love induces a similar love towards the other in the self, and this love discloses the self to the self. This is also the case in *knowledge of God's attributes*. St. John says that the soul is "enkindled in love" by the *knowledge of God's attributes* (for example, F 3.3). "Enkindling" is a term that St. John uses very often. It is taken from his analogy of the fire-log, which we have discussed more than once (see 2.5.3(b), and 7.3.1): a log is enkindled by a fire when that very fire is produced in the log itself and the log is itself transformed into a flame. This is the same with God's action on the soul: God, the "living flame of love," assails the soul until that very same love is produced in the soul. In fact the whole mystical life is a process by which the soul is enkindled. As we have explained, the infusion of God's love into the soul causes it much suffering because of the soul's own impurities (2.5.3(b), N 2.10). However, after all impurities are purged, the soul will then be able to give forth the same love that God gives. In the language of our model, the perfected soul, which is now like God, is able to *resonate* God's love as it assails the soul, and to love God with the same love as that with which He loves her. St. John compares this process to a

“spark” that seizes upon the dry wood and makes it “wholly enkindled” (F 1.33, F 1.1). In this stage the soul “loves in no other way than divinely, united and made one with divine will and love” (N 2.13.11).³⁸

It is also the case that, consistent with our model, the soul now receives *self-knowledge* through the enkindling love. When the soul is still in the *dark night of the spirit*, it seldom enjoys the knowledge of its own virtues even though it is continuously making progress towards God (N 2.10.6, C 16.8). Now, in the *knowledge of God's attributes*, the soul is said to feel itself “exalted” and “admired in holy beauty” (F 3.16), and “sees within her spirit all virtues by means of the light the Bridegroom causes” (C 16.1). St. John also says that such self-knowledge is impossible without God’s divine action in the soul (C 31.4).

I would like to suggest that the soul’s experience of God’s virtues in its own self is what St. John describes as the “overflowing” of spiritual feelings into the intellect to cause mystical knowledge. In comparison to this knowledge, the empathetic knowledge of God we discussed before becomes vague and general, because now the soul knows God’s virtues in the most intimate and clear manner possible — by having these virtues in itself and revealed to itself through deep love.

³⁸ See also, for example, F 3.82, for similar descriptions.

Through receiving the *knowledge of God's attributes*, the soul is itself transformed, as it is supposed to be the case with empathetic knowledge involving deep affects (see 7.1.6). Though the soul is already pure and God-like before entering the experience, the *knowledge of God's attributes* makes it even more perfect — the very fact that the soul now has self-knowledge of its own virtues makes it more God-like. Also, the soul is now able to love God with the same love with which God loves it, and that means the soul is more “virtuous” in terms of loving God to the utmost degree possible.

7.3.4 The Union in Reciprocal Love

In our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love*, the self and the other are finally known through one medium of love, which is *reversible* or *reciprocal* so that it is no longer possible to tell the feeling or the knowing of the other by the self and the feeling and the knowing of the self by the other. This is also the case with the *knowledge of God's attributes*. That there is only *one* love here between the soul and God is a point we have shown in the last two sections, and that already guarantees the *reversibility* and the *reciprocity* of love in the experience. I would only add one quote, which is useful in highlighting the point:

A reciprocal love is thus actually formed between God and the soul, like the marriage union and surrender, in which the goods of both (the divine essence that each possesses freely by reason of voluntary surrender between them) are possessed by both together. (F 3.79)

In this love, the soul and God are disclosed as resembling each other, since they share the same virtues (C 16.8) so that “the soul seems to be God and God seems to be the soul” (C 31.1). Thus, for the soul to know herself in this love is to know God, and to know God is to know herself; this is illustrated intricately in the following passage:

Let us so act that by means of this loving activity we may attain to the vision of ourselves in your beauty in eternal life. That is: That I be so transformed in your beauty that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold ourselves in your beauty, possessing then your very beauty; this, in such a way that each looking at the other may see in the other their beauty; hence, I shall see you in your beauty, and you will see me in your beauty, and I shall see myself in you in your beauty, and you will see yourself in me in your beauty; that I may resemble you in your beauty and you resemble me in your beauty, and my beauty be your beauty and your beauty my beauty; wherefore I shall be you in your beauty, and you will be me in your beauty, because your very beauty will be my beauty; and thus we shall behold each other in your beauty. (C 36.5)

That “I shall be you in your beauty and you will be me in your beauty” implies a blurring of the boundary between the two. This is also described as an “absorption” of the soul into God:

The soul is not only annihilated with respect to all things and estranged from them, but undergoes the same even with respect to herself, as it she

had vanished and been dissolved in love; all of which consists in passing out of self to the Beloved. (C 26.14)³⁹

Thus, consistent with our model, there is an absorption and dissolution of the self that takes place in the *knowledge of God's attributes*.

Also notice that in this union with God, as in our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love*, the situation is not "static." It is characterized by a flow of love to and from the soul and to and from God. "[L]ove is never idle, but in continual motion" says St. John (F 1.8), who compares this interaction between the soul and God as the "movement," "flickering" and "flaring" of the flame (F 3.10), which is itself made up of the soul and God. This flow of love between the soul and God is also beautifully described as a "spiration of love":

By his divine breath-like spiration, the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father. This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit himself, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to herself. (C 39.3)

This stands in great contrast with what is described as the "pure consciousness" model of mysticism, which pictures mystical union as a plain, vacuous, and monistic state. Our model of *knowledge through the resonance of*

³⁹ See also C 26.4, C 31.2, F 4.14-15.

love, on the other hand, allows a union which involves a dynamic flow of affects, and it matches much better with the experience as described by St. John.

7.4 Affective Knowledge as Multiplicity in Unity

We have already seen how our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* describes well St. John's *knowledge of God's attributes*. We have yet to show that our model also allows God's attributes to be felt both distinctly and together in "one simple being" (see 6.3). In fact, by virtue of being a knowledge through affects, our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* satisfies the criteria for being a model for mystical knowledge.

Affective acts have this peculiarity that a feeling can be complex yet unitary. Take, for example, our general feeling towards a person: we may discover different components in this feeling that we can focus on and even enumerate — that the person is gentle, humorous, genuine, and so on. Yet these components also combine in a certain "synthesis" into a true unity which is not a simple addition of its components. This is illustrated by the fact that the my general feeling towards the person is *a* feeling which is not truly analyzable into *separate* components — it is always a bit artificial to break it down into a feeling of gentleness plus a feeling of humor plus a feeling of genuineness and so on. When broken down that way, we can always examine "how gentle" or "how genuine" the person is, and we will always find that the gentleness is uniquely qualified by

the other accompanying components, so that the gentleness is not the same as the gentleness of another friend of mine: that gentleness in fact exists in and among the other qualities of her character which I feel. It is the same with what we call artistic *style*: Bach's, Chopin's and Wagner's music all have their different styles. We can appreciate the different elements of that style — for example, the orderliness, the serenity, and clarity in Bach's music. Yet, these elements of style form together a complex *style* in which none of the elements is independent of the others — for example, the serenity in Bach's music is different from that in Chopin, because of that orderliness and clarity which goes with it. It is the same with our "feeling" towards Bach's music: that feeling is itself a "complex whole" through which we perceive the "multiplicity in unity" of Bach's style.⁴⁰

That is also the case with the soul's *knowledge of God's attributes*: because it is received through *spiritual feelings*, the soul can experience God's attributes as a multiplicity in unity; each quality of the love felt reveals one of God's attributes, and each reinforces the others. Together the different qualities form *one love* which reveals *one God*.⁴¹ Thus, our model, which takes the

⁴⁰ Using Husserlian language, the different elements which make up the feeling are then *moments* not *parts* of the feeling, making the feeling a *unity* made up by *multiple elements* that do not exist independent from one another. For Husserl's discussion of parts and wholes, see *LI III*.

⁴¹ Note that St. John also uses two affective analogies to describe the soul's spiritual feelings of God: as a wonderful fragrance of aromatic spices (C 17.5), and as a taste of "spiced wine" (C 25.6), showing that the multiplicity in unity in

knowledge of God's attributes as a kind of affective knowledge, can well allow such an experience of *multiplicity in unity* as described by St. John.

7.5 Conclusion

After going through some brief phenomenological studies of our everyday affective consciousness, we arrived at a peculiar mode of knowledge called *knowledge through the resonance of love*. We then applied the model to what St. John calls the highest of all mystical experiences in this life: the *knowledge of God's attributes*. Our conclusion is that *St. John of the Cross's knowledge of God's attributes has the same structure of a knowledge through the resonance of love*. Thus, we have arrived at a good model for understanding St. John's mystical experience.

Let us briefly address some possible objections to our model:

(a) *The model makes God finite by taking Him as a "center" or "situation" with which the soul empathizes.*

The answer to the objection is that our model does not actually make God Himself finite; rather, our model recognizes the *finitude* of human understanding; by that we do not only mean that human understanding, even the deified mystics', must be from a certain *situation*: we also mean that God, if He is ever understood

the *knowledge of God's attributes* is similar to the one that we find in complex affects.

by us, must be understood as *in-a-situation*, that is, *in relationship* with something which is not God. Our model does not put that limitation on mystical knowledge, but merely *reveals* that very “limitation” inherent in mystical knowledge: in the case of *knowledge of God’s attributes*, God is understood as someone who loves the soul according to all His attributes. Notice that some of these attributes that St. John lists, like “humility” and “gentleness” do not even have any sense outside of a *relational* context. In *knowledge of God’s attributes*, God is also understood in relationship with Creation: that God is the source of all goodness, so that “God is all things and all things are God” (see 6.2). Thus, our model does not make God finite; rather, it shows how God’s infinite goodness is understood through various situations God is in, and in which one empathizes with God.

(b) *The model only applies to an experience with a personal God and it cannot be applied to mystical experience of a non-personal nature.*

My answer is that as far as my model is taken to be a model of Christian mysticism, its essentially personalistic nature is its *strength*, not its weakness. As any cursory reading of Western mystical literature (including Christian, Jewish, and the Islamic traditions) will tell, *love* has a central place in the most of Western mysticism. Given that a love which is truly mutual can exist only between beings that are “personal,” my model has captured one of the most important features of Western mysticism. Also notice that my model does not limit God to being a *person*: God may well be a being that is “beyond personhood” — that He may be

personalistic without having the limitation that a person has. How this is possible depends on the complex issues concerning the nature of personhood and the nature of God, which we cannot enter into here.

Though my model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* describes mystical experience of a personalistic nature, with some modifications, it may well be applicable to mystical experience of a non-personal nature. Taking the elements of empathy and love away, the gist of our model will be that mystical knowledge is *an affective self-knowledge centering*, and it does seem that many mystical experiences in Eastern traditions have that nature — I will discuss that in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

(c) *The model depends on empathy, but it remains uncertain how we can empathize with non-embodied beings like God.*

In the contemporary literature on empathy, some authors claim that *embodiment* is the very condition for our empathy with each other. It is through *perceiving* the other's bodies (including seeing their gestures and hearing their language) that one can empathize with another. If that is the case, how is it possible that we may empathize with God? ⁴² I cannot give an answer to the question. However, in our phenomenological study, we are concerned not so

⁴² The question of how there can be empathy between spiritual beings without bodies has been raised by Edith Stein at the end of her *On the Problem of Empathy* (1964, p.106), and it is a question which Stein has not answered.

much with *how* the empathy takes place between the soul and God, but with whether it takes place or not; and for the answer to that question, we trust what mystical experience teaches us rather than any *a priori* argument based on certain presumed nature of empathy. According to our interpretation of St. John's experience, an empathy between the soul and God does take place. The fact that the empathy is regarded by St. John as a "supernatural" experience shows that it is not governed by everyday laws concerning empathy, but is simply *given* to the soul. Our argument, then, is based on that *givenness* and is unaffected by theories about how empathy usually happens.

With the objections answered, we now have a model for mystical knowledge that we may trust. However, a good model does not just fit its data, but also illuminates them and enhances our understanding of the data. In the next chapter, I will conclude this dissertation by discussing some major implications of our model for understanding the nature of mysticism.

8. Conclusion

In the last chapter we applied the model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* to St. John's *knowledge of God's attributes*. In this chapter, we will conclude this dissertation by discussing (a) how the model we have proposed can serve as a general model for St. John's mysticism; (b) how the model may be applied to treat the experiences of other mystics; (c) why the perennial philosophers' approach to mysticism is inadequate; (d) what our model tells us about the nature of mysticism.

8.1 A General Model for the Mysticism of St. John

While we have proposed the model of *knowledge through the resonance of love* as a model for *knowledge of God's attributes*, I would like to comment on how the model may also be applied to understand the nature of *contemplation* — the mystical knowledge which is “vague, dark, and general.”

In section 3.3.2 we explained that St. John uses the term *contemplation* in two senses: in the first, broader sense it is a synonym for “mystical life” or “mysticism”; in the second, narrower sense the term stands for a type of mystical knowledge which is “vague, dark, and general.” which a mystic starts to receive as

she enters the *passive night of the senses*. There are close connections between the two senses of the term: (i) both are described as a “loving knowledge” of God;¹ (ii) both are described as an infusion of His own light into the intellect (N 2.5.3, A 2.14.10); and (iii) both involve *spiritual feelings*.² Also, as defined above, contemplation in the wider sense will necessarily include as its beginning contemplation in the narrower sense. Therefore, I find it natural to understand contemplation as a vague, dark, general knowledge to have the same nature as the *knowledge of God's attributes*: the former is the beginning of contemplation (understand in the wider sense), and the latter is the flowering and apex of the same contemplation.

If our understanding of the relationship between contemplation (in its narrower sense) and the *knowledge of God's attributes* is correct, our model for mystical knowledge will also be applicable to contemplation. That means the mystical knowledge which is vague, dark and general can also be understood as an empathetic knowledge of God through love — only that the soul, at the beginning stage of mystical consciousness, has not yet attained to union with God so that the *resonance of love* between the soul and God has not yet happened (or is only happening to a small degree) during contemplation. In this vague, dark, and general knowledge of God, the soul's love of God still lacks the necessary *depth*.

¹ Compare, e.g., C 27.5 and A 2.13.4.

so that the soul has not yet been *centered* in God as in union; the knowledge of God thus obtained is then of a more preliminary and general nature. The knowledge is vague, dark, and general, because the soul's *spiritual feelings* towards God are still vague and general, and while the soul's love of God contains a multiplicity of feelings in unity (6.3, 7.4), the love at this stage is more a unity than a multiplicity. This can be compared with wine tasting: for a wine taster of limited experience and knowledge, the wine is more of a *unitary* taste, and the taster is not able to appreciate the subtlety and multiplicity of tastes involved. However, an experienced taster will be able to identify the distinct elements in the wine which combine synthetically to form its taste. In the same way, contemplation, as mystical knowledge of a beginning level, is general and vague while *knowledge of God's attributes* is bright and distinct. We can also add that the *overflowing effect of resonance* (7.3.3) also allows greater clarity of the mystical knowledge of God — as God's love of the soul has also become the soul's love of God, the understanding of God revealed in His love is now experienced in a more *personal* manner, making that knowledge clearer than before.

With the nature of contemplation clarified, we are now in a better position to understand how contemplative prayer, as discussed in Chapter 5, leads to

² Compare A 2.24.4 and the discussion in section 6.1 of this dissertation.

contemplation as a mystical knowledge of God. It is in contemplative prayer that the soul learns to intend God with a pure act of love; this love, as it is firmly established in contemplative prayer and intensified, becomes the love which *delocates* the soul into God, and allows an empathetic knowledge of Him, as discussed in section 7.3.2(c).

Thus, we have now got a model which covers the mysticism of St. John of the Cross from its onset to its apex: it is also a *general* model for mystical knowledge in St. John, because it incorporates the three kinds of mystical knowledge that one can receive in this life: *knowledge of God's attributes, spiritual feelings, and contemplation.*³

8.2 Application of the Model to Other Mystics

Our model for mystical knowledge is not applicable only to the mysticism of St. John: we have already seen how it agrees with the mysticism of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (5.2.2(e)) and it is not difficult to find other Christian mystics to whom our model of mystical knowledge through love can also be applied. We find such an example in St. Francis de Sales:

God attracts our minds to himself by his supreme beauty and incomprehensible goodness. . . . So God, Father of all light, supremely

³ See section 3.4 for our definition of mystical knowledge in the context of St. John's mystical theology.

good and beautiful, by his beauty draws our intellect to contemplate him, and by this goodness he draws our will to love him. Beautiful, he crowns our intellect with delights and pours his love into our will. As good, he fills our will with his love and arouses our intellect to contemplate it. Hence, it follows that ecstasy and rapture depend wholly on love, for it is love that carries the intellect to contemplation and the will to union. . . .⁴

Our model is applicable even to mystics outside of the Christian tradition, in particular those traditions which take mystical knowledge to be essentially bounded with love. Such examples can be found in Sufism, for which the love of God is an important theme.⁵ We also find a similar form of mysticism in the Hindu tradition, with the mysticism of the *Bhagavad-Gita* giving us the best example — in Krishna's address to King Arjuna, he says:

To love is to know me,
My innermost nature,
The total that I am:
Through this knowledge he enters
At once to my Being. (18.55)

And in his last words to King Arjuna, Krishna remarks:

Give me your whole heart,
Love and adore me,
Worship me always,
Bow to me only,
And you shall find me:
This is my promise

⁴ Francis de Sales 1975, Vol II, pp.27-29.

⁵ See Zaehner 1960.

Who loves you dearly. (18.65-66) ⁶

The examples I have given above are classified by some as belonging to *theistic mysticism* — mysticism which concerns a personal deity. However, at the end of Chapter 7, I have already remarked that our model does not necessarily assume the “object” of mystical knowledge to be a person. If we take empathy in a sufficiently wide sense, it may take place between any two “entities” which are not persons in the full sense of the term,⁷ but between which feelings flow. Applying such a broader notion of empathy to mysticism, our model can be applied to mystical knowledge that involves higher divine or spiritual beings that have feelings, or from which feelings flow. Satisfying this criterion are some cases of the so-called *nature mysticism*, in which no personal deity is involved. Here is an example of such a kind of nature mysticism:

It was as if I had never realized before how lovely the world was. I lay down on my back in the warm, dry moss and listened to the skylark singing as it mounted up from the fields near the sea into the dark clear sky. No other music ever gave me the same pleasure as that passionately

⁶ *The Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Prabhavananda and Isherwood 1954.

⁷ What actually constitutes *personhood* is itself a complex philosophical issue; possible criteria include possession of a will, a reasoning faculty, feelings, moral sense, ability to communicate or to love, or any combination of these factors. Here, I am claiming that empathy may happen between two entities who may lack certain of the factors which normal persons have. For example, arguably, we may “empathize” with animals; we may even be able to “empathize” with, for example, spiritual forces which do not have a will or intellect, but is understood to be a kind of positive, loving energy — if such entity indeed exists.

joyous singing. It was a kind of leaping, exultant ecstasy, a bright, flame-like sound, rejoicing in itself. And then a curious experience befell me. It was as if everything that had seemed to be external and around me were suddenly within me. . . I felt its freshness dropping into my soul, and I felt in all my being delicious fragrance of the earth and the grass and the plants and the rich brown soil. I could have sobbed with joy.⁸

With the expanded notion of empathy, our model of mystical knowledge may well be applicable to a even wider spectrum of mysticism, including, for example, the mysticism in certain of the Upanishads⁹ and of the enlightenment experience in Confucianism.¹⁰

How about those mysticisms that lack any trace of “empathy”? I will have to admit that our model will not apply to those mysticisms. But that is not a problem to us, because it is not our purpose to find a universal model for mysticism, but only a model with a wide scope of application. However, some of the elements discussed in our model like the centering and delocation of the soul, and the idea of mystical knowledge being a self-knowledge may well be applicable to those mystical traditions which our model does not fully describe. Therefore, our phenomenological analysis may be helpful for understanding a very wide range of mystical traditions.

⁸ Forest Reid 1902. *Following Darkness* (London: Arnold). p.42: quoted in Zaehner 1957, pp.40-41.

⁹ Noticeably the *Mandukya* and *Svetasvatara Upanishads*; see Zaehner 1957, pp. 136-141 for a discussion.

¹⁰ See Wan 1996, Chapter 2, for an analysis of the discussion by Ch'eng Hao, the

However, I must add that all the remarks I have made above concerning the applicability of our model to other mystics are conjectures only. It is only through careful analyses of the mystic's experience like the one we have performed on St. John that the applicability of our model can be confirmed.

8.3 The Inadequacy of The Perennial Philosophers' Approach

Although our model of mystical knowledge lacks universal applicability, it is already sufficient to disprove the perennial philosophers' claim about the nature of mysticism. This is because the perennial philosophers are making the universal claim about a "common core" for all kinds of mysticism, and one counterexample is sufficient to disprove a universal claim. In fact we have not just found a counterexample, but one from the experience of a prominent mystic which the perennial philosophers cannot afford to ignore. Throughout this dissertation I have made scattered comments about the insufficiency of the perennial philosophers' approach; now, let me briefly summarize my critiques as follow:

(a) In Chapter 2 we demonstrated how, for St. John, the mystical life is a dynamic whole; to focus on a particular state of mind (for example, the "pure consciousness state") and to base the philosophical significance of mysticism on that singular state — which is the approach of the perennial philosophers and

11th century Neo-Confucianist.

many other philosophers of mysticism — is to make most of the mystical life totally irrelevant to philosophical discussions. Such an approach is, at the very least, absurd. This is like trying to understand the nature of scientific knowledge without trying to understand how science is done — a flaw that contemporary philosophers of science have started to avoid. That approach, when applied to mysticism, leads to a distorted view of mysticism and a confusion of the relevant philosophical issues.

(b) In Chapter 3 we discussed the classification of mystical knowledge in St. John. Most of these varieties of mystical knowledge are totally ignored by the perennial philosophers' approach. The only trace we can find in St. John of what the perennial philosophers call the "pure consciousness state" is in what St. John calls the "deep oblivion" which occurs during contemplation. As we have seen, it is a state of "forgetfulness" in which all the soul's faculties are suspended (see 3.3.2). However, such an "oblivion" is never a central element of St. John's mysticism. St. John even says that it is a secondary phenomenon which will disappear as the soul enters union with God (A 3.2.5-8). It shows that the perennial philosophers are wrong in making the pure consciousness state a central element of the mystical consciousness. The perennial philosophers' model is then inadequate as it neglects all other of St. John's mystical experiences which are so rich and intricate.

(c) In Chapter 5 we discussed the nature of contemplative prayer. We have shown that though it is a state in which thoughts and images cease, contemplative prayer is never a “vacuum” of the mind as described by the perennial philosophers. Rather, it is a state of meaningful silence, and affects, especially love, are what make this mystical silence meaningful. We have also shown how language and concepts do not cease to influence the mystic in contemplative prayer, but they continue to do so in an indirect manner through the feelings of the contemplative. The perennial philosophers, however, have missed that in their understanding of the contemplative prayer.

(d) In our analysis of St. John’s *knowledge of God’s attributes* in Chapter 6, we have seen how mystical knowledge is knowledge through love. According to our model, the knowledge involves an experience that is of considerable complexity and richness. It also shows that the mystic’s union with God is a dynamic state of love instead of a static, contentless state of pure consciousness. Thus, the perennial philosophers’ understanding of mystical consciousness is totally inadequate when applied to St. John.

Thus, we can conclude that the perennial philosophers’ approach does not apply to St. John’s mysticism, and it fails as a universal model for mysticism. If our own model is indeed applicable to the wide range of mysticism which were indicated above, the success of our model will also refute the perennial philosophers’ approach in all those cases. Whether the perennial philosophers’

model still applies to *any* form of mysticism at all, is not a question we can look into here. But given that it has neglected much of the richness and complexity in St. John, we have reason to doubt that it is doing the same to other mystics with its approach in analyzing the mystics. Thus, its value as a philosophical approach to mysticism, should be seriously doubted.

8.4 The Implications of Our Model for Understanding Mysticism

Finally, I should address the implications of our model for understanding the nature of mysticism. Again, I must emphasize that I am not trying to make universal judgments about all forms of mysticism. I am only trying to describe the epistemic significance of those types of mysticism to which our model applies. So, as I refer to mystical experience or mystical knowledge below, I mean mystical experience and mystical knowledge *as understood in our model*.

There are two points I want to address: (a) the nature of mystical knowledge; (b) the relationship between mysticism and religious traditions.

8.4.1 The Nature of Mystical Knowledge

Our model describes mystical knowledge as an empathetic knowledge of God. This empathetic knowledge is in turn similar in nature to consciousness' tacit self-knowledge through affects. This knowledge is non-intentional, non-reflexive, and non-verbal (see section 7.1.2).

As such, mystical knowledge stands in great contrast with the “knowledge” as discussed in contemporary epistemology, which is often understood to be *justified true belief*.¹¹ In our model, mystical knowledge is not a justified true belief resulting from a mystical experience (as it is for Alston, who takes it to be “mystical-beliefs” resulting from mystical experience). Because mystical knowledge does not consist of *beliefs*, mysticism does not give us certain beliefs, indubitable beliefs, incorrigible beliefs, or any belief with any form of privileged epistemological status. Also, because mystical knowledge is non-intentional, it does not give us *intuition* of God, or of any religious or metaphysical truth, if intuition is understood as a situation in which the knowing subject is in a direct cognitive relationship *vis-à-vis* a definite object of knowledge. And because mystical knowledge is *non-verbal and non-reflexive*, it should not be understood as a “best interpretation” for certain “mystical experience.” as Stace takes it to be.

What then is the nature of mystical knowledge? According to our model, mystical knowledge has the nature of what Heidegger calls an *understanding* (*Verständnis*)¹² — it is an “*insight*,” to use a more common term, into one’s lived situation in which things are *disclosed* in their meaningfulness. As we have discussed, the knowledge as *disclosure* is more *primordial* than reflexive thoughts

¹¹ See Dancy 1985. Chapter 2.

and theoretical reasoning. And here stands the epistemic significance of mysticism — it does not give us beliefs, intuitions, or “interpretations”;¹³ rather it gives us “insight” which illuminates our understanding of ourselves, our world, and cosmos, our God, and their mutual relationships. This understanding of the nature of mysticism is consistent with the understanding of mystical knowledge in various mystical traditions: as *samadhi* in Hinduism, *bodhi* in Buddhism, *sapientia* in Christianity — these terms stand not for any discursive or reflexive knowledge, but they are usually taken as “wisdoms” or “insights,” which are akin to Heidegger’s *understanding*.

Our understanding of the nature of mystical knowledge also suggests to us how mystical knowledge should be evaluated and defended: because mystical knowledge is unlike propositional or discursive knowledge, any effort in trying to evaluate them by methods we employ for testing philosophical propositions and scientific theories are going to be futile. We must treat alleged mystical knowledge as *insights*, as illuminating understanding of the self and of the Divine. We then test these insights as we test the “wisdom” from people who are allegedly wiser than us — what fruits result as the mystic puts her insights into practice?

¹² Heidegger 1962, pp.182-214.

¹³ Here, I mean mystical knowledge is not an interpretation imposed onto some raw data given to consciousness; I do not mean that mystical knowledge is not “interpretive” in the Heideggerian sense of the term. See Heidegger 1962, pp.188-95.

How does the insight change her life? And how does it change those lives who follow the example of the mystic? Because mystical knowledge is more primordial than discursive and theoretical thoughts, their evaluation cannot be discursive or theoretical, but it has to be practical, if there is to be any evaluation at all.¹⁴

8.4.2 *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*

Finally, let me address the relationship between mysticism and the religious tradition in which it occurs.

At the end of our discussion on contemplative prayer (5.3), I comment that contemplative prayer does not happen in a vacuum of thought, but is grounded on the language of a religious tradition and takes place in the *opening* created by that tradition. Notice that it is also the case for the *knowledge of God's attributes* as described in our model of *knowledge through the resonance of love*. Remember that in our model, we understand the self as a *situation*, a *center*, a *perspective* from which things are intuited and understood. As such, the self is always *centered* in a *particular* physical, geographical, social, cultural, and historical situation, and Heidegger describes that *situatedness* of Dasein as its "*thrownness*." The *thrownness* of Dasein implies that there will be *limitation* to what Dasein can

¹⁴ I am thus agreeing with James' pragmatic criteria for evaluating religious experience: see James 1961, pp.32-35.

perceive, intuit, and understand. That very *thrownness* of Dasein gives rise to a limited range of experience for Dasein which we call the *horizon* of Dasein.¹⁵ Just as we can only see so far from our physical locations, there exist cultural and historical horizons for our understanding so that things from another culture or another epoch may sound totally foreign and defile our understanding. The same situation applies to the mystic's knowledge: in our model, mystical experience is not a "transposition" by which the mystic finally abandons her horizon of understanding, but is an empathetic knowledge which is a *fusion of horizons*, as we have explained in 7.1.6.

The horizon of the mystic's experience is constituted by various factors which include the mystic's own religious tradition in which the mystic lives, learns, and practices her mysticism. Notice that there is one important medium through which the religious tradition asserts its influence on the mystic — the medium of religious language. Through religious texts, sermons, rituals, prayers, and religious images, the mystic is instructed in her own religious and theological tradition; she also *inhabits* that tradition through all these activities which are conducted in religious language. In this way, the mystic's life is lived within a certain *religious or theological horizon*, and because this horizon is constituted through religious language, we will also call it a *linguistic horizon* of the mystic.

¹⁵ On the notion of the *horizon* for experience, see Gadamer 1994, pp.302-307.

Some think that because the mystic has abandoned all thoughts and images when entering contemplation, she has already left her theological and linguistic horizon behind. The falsity of such view is already pointed out in Chapter 5, where we discuss contemplative prayer: the noema of the mystic's love of God is supplied by meditation and religious language, and it continues to guide the soul through its *dark night* until it reaches union with God. Even at the peak of union, the mystic does not totally transcend her theological horizon: that is because the soul's *knowledge of God's attributes* is an affective knowledge, and religious language and concepts can still influence the mystic through those affects. Our point can be easily proven by looking at the mystical literature — while mystics from different traditions seem to enter a similar state of “emptiness” and “union” with God, the One, the Divine, or the Void, mystical states from different traditions carry with them different affective qualities. The feelings of love and joy in St. John's mystical states are different from that sense of calmness and total silence experienced by a Buddhist mystic. In these cases and others, the correlation between the “mystical feelings” and the religious doctrines of the traditions are undeniable, and it is not possible to argue that the mystics are totally “free” from the influence of religious doctrines. Many philosophers have overlooked that connection between the highest mystical states and their religious horizons, because they have neglected the affective aspects of mysticism; that negligence is in turn due to a literal and straightforward understanding of those

terms in the mystical literature like “emptiness,” “darkness,” “void,” and taking these terms to mean the same thing for different traditions.¹⁶

Thus, even though mystical experience maybe *non-verbal*, it is not *extra-linguistic* — mysticism is not something totally free from or unrelated to language. The mystics therefore do not totally transcend the religious language of their traditions, and the theology inherent to that language. There is a dynamic link between the *cataphatic* (positive) and the *apophatic* (negative) theology — the former is the root of the latter. Cataphatic theology always remains the basis and the *horizon* upon which *apophaticism* operates.

What we have just said can serve as a refutation for two general conceptions of the mystics which have become popular: (a) to see the mystics as “elite” in their religious traditions who travel on a “higher way” to the Divine that is superior to the “ordinary” approach through rites and doctrines; (b) to see the mystics as “rebels” or “dissidents” in their traditions who, through their enlightenment, have come to realize the contingency of positive doctrines and are ready to let go of them.¹⁷ The two conceptions, if taken as a general descriptions

¹⁶ For a discussion of such errors among philosophers, see Katz 1978, especially pp.22-66.

¹⁷ For example, in popular conception, Meister Eckhart is usually taken as such a “rebel” of the Church. For arguments against that view, see Davies 1991. Nieto (1979) also pictures St. John as a non-radical “rebel” of the Church. Another example is the popular conception of Zen as a “philosophy” which totally transcends traditional Buddhist doctrines.

for the mystics, are both wrong. I believe that our study of St. John of the Cross, an important representative of Western mysticism, has already refuted these conceptions. Mysticism is not a rejection or suspension of traditional faith; rather it always takes traditional theology as its assumption. *It is within the horizon of traditional theology that the very development of the mystical life takes place.*

Nevertheless, it is not my intention to portray St. John or any mystic as a “religious conservative” who, with absolute loyalty, never “crosses the line” in conveying something to us beyond traditional theology. When we say the mystic’s experience takes place within the *horizon* of traditional theology, we do not mean the mystics never experience anything new or see things differently from their traditions. While the idea of a *horizon* denotes the possible range of experience as limited by a particular standpoint, we shall not take the *theological horizon* as something bounding the mystic’s experience; rather, the very notion of a *horizon* already suggests the possibility of looking beyond it. To use the vision field as an analogy, the *horizon* is not something which *closes up* the field, but something that *opens up* to unseen possibilities. Gadamer comments:

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the

horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition. is always in motion.¹⁸

The key idea here is the “motion” or *change* of the person, which brings along a change of her horizon. When we say that mystical experience takes place within the horizon of traditional theology, we do not mean there is no change to the mystics’ beliefs and her understanding of her own tradition. Rather, her very embarking on the *via negativa* becomes the “motion” which introduces a change to her horizon: traditional doctrines and beliefs are given fresh meanings and are now opened to novel means for their realization. The main idea I am arguing for is: *mysticism is not a way to abandon one’s theological horizon, but a way to keep expanding it and keep moving it, in order to see beyond what one was been able to see.*

Understanding mysticism in the way we have outlined, we see that mystical experience and mystical knowledge always occur within a certain linguistic horizon, and mysticism does not offer any *absolute standpoint* which allows an Ultimate Truth beyond all cultural and historical contingencies. Thus, mysticism is not a source of *Absolute Truth*, but an ongoing process of transcendence through which one arrives at an ever better understanding of Being and Truth.

¹⁸ Gadamer 1994, p.304.

Here ends our study of the mysticism of St. John of the Cross. It is my hope that this study helps in illuminating our understanding of the nature of mysticism, and in advancing a new methodology for the study of mysticism.

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