

Article

Negative Theology and Desire in Spiritual Transformation According to John of the Cross

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Abstract: Desire is central to John of the Cross' treatment of the mystical ascent to God. He holds that God is desire and that there is a meeting between human and divine desire in the state of union with God, which is the goal. But it is less clear how this desire is to be understood against John's programmatic negation of desire on the spiritual journey in both its sensory and spiritual forms, according to his negative theology. He regards the lack of satisfaction of desire, which he expresses in terms of darkness and emptiness, as the main manifestation of desire in the process of spiritual transformation. The question arises as to where he locates the meeting between human desire and divine desire, when they seem to be only opposed to one another. The answer lies in the gradual uncovering, through this process, of what is happening beneath the presenting experience of desire, in the human soul's constitution as the subject. Desire is transformed, but in a way that can be affirmed only at the level of this transformation of the subject. This article examines how John of the Cross understands the relationship between desire and negative theology.

Keywords: John of the Cross; desire; negative theology; nothing; annihilation; absence; transformation; subjectivity; theology; spirituality



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1. Introduction

John of the Cross (1543–1591) is both a negative theologian and a theologian of desire. The poem 'One dark night' (*En una noche oscura*), for instance, on which he bases two of his major works, the *Ascent of the Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night*, describes a female lover who goes out of her house by night to meet her beloved in a secret place, drawn by desire. She is 'fired with love's urgent longings' (*con ansias, en amores inflamada*; stanza 1; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 50).¹ Desire guides her to him in the darkness: 'with no other light or guide/than the one that burned in my heart' (*en el corazón ardía*; stanza 3; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 50). They meet mysteriously in a place where 'no one appeared'—the beloved is never named—and their love is consummated in an intimate union of desire. For John's religious readers, the terms are familiar from the Song of Songs, and the figures of lover and beloved are traditionally understood as the soul and Christ. But unlike the Song of Songs, the journey of desire and the meeting with the beloved are situated among images of darkness and night. The lover's desire intensifies, yet in relation to one who must be reached by night and remains hidden in the darkness. John's negative theology is evident in this understanding of the spiritual ascent as shrouded in obscurity. As Sam Hole puts it, the language of the poem 'presses on the listener the question of what it is to think of oneself in relation to the non-objectifiable divine love' ([Hole 2020](#), p. 130). Love and desire are prominent, but the object of desire is not, and the desire itself is unfamiliar, driving the soul (as John calls the human subject) into the unknown. This negativity also forms a significant part of John's later works, the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*. The central metaphors found in these works, of the 'wound' and the 'flame' of love, combine elements of desire and lack, as desire grows beyond finite bounds, seeking a goal that is marked by the desire's insatiability.

In negating both the object of desire and desire's familiar character, John does not wish to assert merely the opposite, that desire does not lead to God. The negation functions as part of a negative theology, aimed at the goal of personal union with God. As Dionysius put it in his *Mystical Theology*, the work which did most in the history of Christianity to situate negative theology at the heart of the mystical ascent, 'we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion' (Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 2, 1000B; [Luibhéid 1987](#), p. 136). Negation is a repeated process, endlessly pointing beyond what has been affirmed as well as what has been denied, to the ontologically other, divine source. Negation serves what Michael Sells calls an evocative, linguistic 'strategy', which asserts that we approach God by denying positive concepts of God, on account of God's transcendence, while also, in a second negation, denying that God is named by this denial. Instead of describing the divine object, even in terms of transcendence, negative theology, as Sells puts it, constructs a 'meaning event' which 'displaces the grammatical object, affirms a moment of immediacy, and affirms a moment of ontological pre-construction'. That is, the negations point beyond language as a whole, indicating the space that a divine creator would occupy as the source prior to linguistic construction. Union with God is 'performed' by this language, which moves the subject towards this 'pre-constructed' space, to attain an intimate meeting with God beyond knowing ([Sells 1994](#), pp. 9–10). Desire is affirmed as motivating the process, but progress is understood negatively, according to the denials of the objects of desire as well as of the arrival of desire at any static conception of God. As the lack of satisfaction intensifies and changes, the divine object is asserted to come more closely into view, yet without resolving the desire in terms of any particular object. The negations yield a journey of spiritual ascent towards God.

If the spiritual journey is to be approached in this way, the question arises as to why desire might bring the soul to God, when it is negated because of its failure to do so. Frustrated desire might as well lead to anxiety and depression as to God. Following the tradition from Augustine, John understands the human soul to be created in God's image, possessing the mental capacity to know God. The capacity consists in memory, intellect and will, which apprehend both creatures and God according to dual 'sensory' and 'spiritual' orientations (Augustine, *Trinity* 8–15; John of the Cross, *Ascent* 2.6.1). This capacity, because of the Fall and sin, needs purifying of the sinful tendency to reduce God to creatures, and illuminating by grace to restore and raise it to the goal of the knowledge and love of God in union. Yet memory, intellect and will in their spiritual orientation are capable of having God for their object, without reducing God to a creaturely object. This does not answer the question of *how* God is to be apprehended, when God is not a creature and is beyond everything created, but it affirms that desire—as a spiritual activity of the will, along with memory and intellect when orientated towards God—is capable of desiring God as God truly is. Desire is divided between created objects and the creator; the same conscious subject can desire God as well as creatures, but the two desires are very different in character. This is the starting point for John's negative theology, leading him to assert that negating desire for creatures is the means to liberate the other, spiritual desire for God.

This spiritual desire extends beyond the desire for created things, being affirmed as desire while being denied as like the desire for creatures. The desire that is affirmed is prior to the desire for created things. It is desire in its origin, the capacity of the soul to desire at all; and it is at this level that desire unites the soul with God. Sam Hole, in his recent *John of the Cross: Desire, Transformation, and Selfhood*, argues that there has been a lack of attention in the scholarship on John of the Cross to his notion of desire 'in its fullest sense' ([Hole 2020](#), p. 61). By this, he means that John's treatment of desire as situated in a diachronic process of transformation has received too little attention ([Hole 2020](#), p. 58). The focus has been on epistemological and metaphysical questions about 'the experience' of the dark night and the state of union with God. While John understands desire to be highly experiential and to be known *through* these experiences, the desire that he seeks lies not in

the experiences but beyond them, in the soul's capacity for God. Desire is to be found at the level of anthropology, for John, in the soul's creation in the image of God. This capacity lies beyond experience as such. It is the capacity *by which* we experience rather than one of the things experienced. It is brought to awareness only 'on the move', that is, in the process of moving from one object of experience to another, as the hidden 'centre' of the soul's shifting awareness, over time. To experience desire at this level always lies in tension with the experience of any 'thing', being prior to it. Yet it can be known in terms of personal *transformation*, as a change in the soul's capacity to know and to love and to remember. This requires examining desire from the perspective of the process of personal transformation.

As Denys Turner puts it, 'John's "dark nights" are the metaphors not of experience, but of a dialectical *critique* of experientialist tendencies' (Turner 1995, p. 227). Turner reacts against what he calls the 'experientialism' of William James, which fails to distinguish between experience of the world and experience of God. John's negative theology, he says, seeks not an experience of God's absence (an 'experience of negativity') but the absence or negation of experience as a whole (a 'negativity of experience') (Turner 1995, p. 250). The absences and breaks in the flow of experiences become more significant than the experiences themselves, because they reveal what is happening within the experiencing subject, at the level of the soul's capacity as image of God. John's negativity serves this purpose of examining desire at a level beyond that of the presenting experience.

It is no coincidence that John writes as a spiritual director, addressing his writings to other directors and to those being directed (e.g., *Ascent* Prol. 3–9). His attention is on his directees' capacity to find God in relation to their experiences over time. He asks them to look beyond the presenting marks of experience to the significance of what is happening for their personal growth in relation to God. The director contributes to this process by turning attention from the experiential phenomena to the hidden level of the soul's growth towards perfection. The soul's failure to find satisfaction in the desire for God is, from this perspective, a fruitful area of focus, because it offers way to recognise God as one who brings desire to life in the subject in a way that is different from the mere satisfaction of desire in created objects.

I intend to concentrate here on the process of transformation of desire as John sets it out in his writings. But it is worth noting, in passing, that his approach has found resonances in some more recent treatments of desire. Mark Murphy, for instance, finds an analogous emphasis on the kind of desire that lies beyond experience in the psychoanalytic method of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). Lacan's connection with John of the Cross was rather distant, but he read John of the Cross through Jean Baruzi, in common with many of his generation, and refers to him in his *Seminar XX*, where he engages with a number of mystical writers. Murphy argues that Lacan reacts against Baruzi's 'experientialist' interpretation of John—not unlike Turner's reaction against William James (Murphy Forthcoming).² The point to note here is that for Lacan, the relationship between analyst and analysand in psychoanalysis allows desire to be worked through in such a way as to move beyond the conscious experience of desire to uncover a quite different kind of desire as sheer 'jouissance'. This 'jouissance', unlike the experience of desire, is not constituted by lack, but is a 'limitless desire' that can only be lived (Tarpey 2020, pp. 7–8). Clearly, the post-Freudian, post-Kantian context is very different from John's, not least in the absence of faith in God, but Murphy illuminates the way that John uses the relationship between the spiritual director and directee to open up a hidden level of desire which is negatively related to the presenting experience of desire. I do not intend to pursue this Lacanian retrieval of John here, but I use it to indicate the hidden nature of the desire that John is concerned with. It also reinforces Hole's point, that this desire must be examined in the context of the individual's personal transformation if it is to become visible. Other suggestive interpretations of John's desire can be found in the literature, though there are surprisingly few studies which attend to its emergence in the process of personal transformation, as noted by Hole (Hole 2020, pp. 25–61). My focus here is on how this desire relates to John's

specifically negative treatment in this transformative process, according to his negative theology.

John invests the negation of desire and the lack of satisfaction of desire with positive, transformative meaning. But it is not the lack that carries the meaning, rather the divine plenitude to which the failure of creaturely desire points. There is a break between the lack of satisfaction, as the means, and the divine plenitude, as the goal. How desire crosses this barrier, when desire is said to be thoroughly ‘mortified’ (*mortificado*; Ascent 1.11.2; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 142), is the question to be examined.³ In systematic theological terms, it is a question of nature and grace—how nature is both continuous and not continuous with grace—in John’s theological anthropology. But for John, it is also matter of mystagogy, that is, of desire as a personally transformative theological process in the ascent to God.

2. Background

Little is known about which sources most influenced John on the topic of desire in the spiritual journey (McGinn 2017, pp. 242–45). But it is possible to sketch an outline of some important historical elements from the evidence of his writings. As already noted, desire is approached by John according to his understanding of the human subject as made in the image of God. For John, as for Augustine and the tradition following Augustine, memory, intellect and will are the higher powers of the mind, by which we know both the world and God, in different ways (some, like Aquinas, reduced these to just two powers, intellect and will). These three powers belong together in the mind’s operations. Desire is inseparable from knowledge, involving an intentional relationship of the will to what is known by the intellect; and both desire and knowledge require memory, in the sense that, as human, they reside in a conscious subject—memory is understood as the self-presence which is the seat of personal identity (Augustine, *Trinity* 14.11.14). At times, desire and knowledge may be experienced as opposed to one another, for instance as suggested at the beginning of the poem ‘One dark night’, where the lover feels desire for the beloved while not knowing who or where he is. This darkness, John says in commenting on the poem, may also involve a temporary loss of memory, because when the mind turns from the world to God, there is a loss of the forms and images of creatures with which the mind naturally knows (*Ascent* 3.2.5). But these are aberrations occasioned by the purgation of the soul, while in the soul’s usual state, including in the perfect state of union with God, memory, intellect and will work together as one.

Nevertheless, John focuses on desire and regards desire as leading in spiritual transformation, which suggests further late medieval influences. As already indicated, he writes in the medieval commentary tradition on the Song of Songs, with its narrative of desire between the human ‘bride’ and the heavenly ‘bridegroom’ leading to loving union with Christ, which was made popular by Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Matter 1990). This is the narrative of his *Spiritual Canticle*, and in less prominent ways it is present in all his works (see *Dark Night* poem; *Ascent* 14.2; *Night* 2.19–20; *Flame* 1.3, 7; 2.36; 3.6; 4.17, etc.; for a list of John’s references to the Song of Songs, see Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 810). Further, the element of the insatiability of desire, to which John gives particular emphasis, shows the influence, for instance, of Richard of St. Victor’s *Four Degrees of Violent Love*, a popular spiritual text written about 1170 (though John makes no reference to it). This work was, in turn, influenced by courtly love lyrics, which appeared with the troubadours in Aquitaine from about 1100. In these stories, the courtesan or knight seeks and yearns for the love of his lady, as her vassal, by performing valiant and burdensome deeds, but he does not possess her: his desire is without fulfilment. As Barbara Newman points out, this is a development over Bernard of Clairvaux’s bridal love, for whereas the bride, for Bernard, ‘has no doubts about her lover or her own status as beloved’, never feeling despair but, at most, moments of languor and abandonment in her quest, the courtly self, taken up by Richard of St. Victor, ‘is typically unfulfilled and tormented by desire’ (Newman 1995, p. 144). Richard puts the element of painful desire at the heart of

his spiritual ascent: desire for God incapacitates the lover. The explanation that he gives is that the soul, according to its fallen nature, seeks a merely created, finite fulfilment in relation to God, but this natural fulfilment is incommensurate with God's infinite nature, and so the desire is correspondingly insatiable, being incapable of satisfaction by anything finite. The mismatch brings a 'foretaste of hell' in which the lover feels 'annihilated'. By grace, however, the impasse can be turned to good. The fallen, merely natural self 'dies' as insatiable desire provokes the soul's surrender to God, which paves the way for grace to raise the soul to a new relationship with its infinite partner, in which the insatiability of desire is recognised as proper to the relationship, and so, paradoxically, as also satisfying. Thus, in union, the soul is energised by grace and turns outwards in virtuous works for others, which flow selflessly from the union (Richard of St Victor, *Four Degrees of Violent Love*; Kraebel 2011, pp. 280–82, 294–96). As we shall see, all these steps are to be found in John's *Spiritual Canticle*.

A further influence on John comes from the secular poetry of sixteenth century Spain. In place of courtly love lyrics, the secular poetry most influential on him was the lyric style of the Italian renaissance, brought to Spain by, for instance, the poet Garcilaso de la Vega. John's lyric poems, like Garcilaso's, involve the language of erotic desire, a strong interiority, a play between seeing and not-seeing, and stock images of the pastoral (Hole 2020, p. 97). Desire is given the kind of prominence and sustained focus by John that we find in these poems.

For John, the insatiability of desire also has a deeper anthropological grounding, which he locates in the region called the 'depth', 'abyss' and 'centre' of the soul, where the soul, as made in the image of God, meets God in union (see especially *The Living Flame of Love* 3–4). These terms are predicated of memory, intellect and will together, rather than being understood as a further power of the soul, in addition to them (Howells 2002, pp. 31–34). John appears to have adopted them from the Flemish and German mysticism of John Ruusbroec, John Tauler and others, though it is not known by what route he came across them (Howells 2002, p. 17). Further back, they originated in a wider engagement between Augustine's psychology and Dionysius' angelic hierarchies, where progress to union is through an internal hierarchy of the soul's sensory and spiritual powers (as found in the Victorines including Richard of St. Victor; see McGinn 1994, pp. 382, 407–10; Girón-Negrón 2009). In this interior journey, Dionysius' negative theology is given the kind of psychological colour that we find in Richard of St. Victor, and the further terms 'depth', 'centre' and 'abyss' are later added to name the high point of the soul where the soul meets God in union (Radler 2020; McGinn 2014). These are negative terms—John says that the soul is 'empty' and 'nothing' (*nada*) at this point, transcending itself and opening directly onto God—but they are also anthropological terms, which situate union within the soul, especially in its quality as insatiable desire.

Finally, John follows Dionysius in regarding God as the divine *eros* who desires creation in the incarnation (Dionysius, *Divine Names* 4.10–17 (708A–713D)). Desire is a matter not only of the soul's movement in relation to God but of God's nature, in God's movement towards the soul, as both Son and Holy Spirit. From this perspective, John can say that human desire and divine desire truly meet, as desire, in union (McGinn 2017, p. 249). Hole notes that, in various parts of the scholarship, John has been regarded as ambivalent about desire in the manner of Augustine and Aquinas, where *caritas* (love) is more a matter of friendship and peace than of desirous love (*eros*); but in fact, unlike them, John affirms Dionysian *eros* in relation to both God and the soul (Hole 2020, pp. 82–83; see Coakley 2013, pp. 267–39). The full range of words that John uses for desire and love are part of his view that human desire is transformed into divine desire through every kind of desirous attraction and love: *apetitos* (appetites), *pasiones* (passions), *afectos* (affections), *ansias* (longings), *gemidos* (moanings), *gustos* (pleasures), *querer* (want, wish), *amor* (love), and desire itself (*desear/deseo*) (a similar list is given by McGinn: see McGinn 2017, p. 257). Union at its highest is to share intimately in the relations of the Trinity, which are themselves relations of desire (see the exposition below; Williams 2002).

3. The Negation of Desire

John negates desire in three main ways, according to the guiding metaphors of the poems on which he bases his major works. First, in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night*, which belong together (both are based on the poem ‘One dark night’), the ‘dark night’ of desire is occasioned by the pursuit of a God who transcends creation. God so far exceeds the finite categories of creation that God is ‘nothing’ in relation to human desire, ‘darkening’ and negating desire in the sense of being more than can be conceived in terms of the things of creation. To seek God increases this lack because, with the growth of desire for God, God’s ontological transcendence becomes more pressing. Second, in John’s *Spiritual Canticle*, which is a story of the lover’s pursuit of the heavenly bridegroom in the manner of the Song of Songs, desire is negated because of its failure to lead the soul to the promised union with the beloved. Desire reaches a crisis in which the beloved feels utterly out of reach, leading the soul to surrender her desire entirely. Third, in the *Living Flame of Love*, desire is negated in terms of the desiring subject. In place of the subject who desires, desire is identified with the abyssal emptiness of the soul, that is, as a negative, limitless poverty in relation to God.

John’s major works take the form of commentaries on his poems, and in his Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, he relates the dark night of the poem to the experience to someone who, after making good progress on the spiritual journey for many years, ceases to feel any ‘satisfaction or consolation as he previously did’ in his spiritual exercises. Where before he could identify the positive images and feelings generated by the exercises and relate them to God, he now loses this connection. Instead, he feels aridity, darkness and that he is ‘lost’ in relation to God, as if being punished for his evil, sin and lack of effort. The soul is in ‘darkness’ in the sense of this ‘lack of satisfaction or consolation’ in relation to the desire for God. But John insists that it is God’s work, and to be welcomed rather than rejected. It is a ‘sublime path of contemplation’, only one in which there is also a sense of aridity and of being lost, at least in comparison with what went before (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* Prol. 4–5; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 116).

John clarifies this strange combination of lack of satisfaction and spiritual progress later in the *Ascent*. Desire has lost any clear object to reach out for, because the soul feels unable to continue the discursive ‘acts and exercises’ by which ‘one progresses from point to point’ on the spiritual journey. Yet the soul also feels an ‘interior peace and quiet and repose’ (*Ascent* 2.13.4; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 190). The desire which moves in the familiar way from subject to object has come to an end, but on closer inspection, the lack of this kind of satisfaction reveals something else. There is an interior peace which ‘is extremely subtle and delicate, and almost imperceptible’ (*Ascent* 2.13.7; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 190). John adds that this is not the lack of application or tepidity encountered in the state of melancholy (or depression) (*Ascent* 2.13.6). Rather, it is a movement towards God, only one without any clear object. It is known negatively rather than positively, in the lack of satisfaction that is felt in relation to the previous objects of the soul’s desire. The effect is to direct attention to the non-objectifiable space opened up by the absence of satisfaction.

John explains this lack of satisfaction of desire in terms of the traditional three phases of spiritual ascent, of purgation, illumination, and union. The lack is felt in every phase, but in different ways. First, in the stage of purgation, the lack is especially felt in the senses, in the lack of feelings of satisfaction. John explains that this is because the soul is turning away from a sinful reduction of God to the objects of the appetites of the soul. The privation ‘is like a night for all his senses’ (*Ascent* 1.2.1; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 118). Second, in the stage of illumination, the soul rises above sensory satisfaction to the desire for God at the level of the spiritual powers of intellect, memory and will. The mind moves, through the grace of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, to seek God as divine and not as a creature. But God continues to transcend the natural capacity of these powers, so faith, for instance, still ‘excludes other intellectual knowledge’ and is received as a kind of ‘darkness’ (*Ascent* 1.2.3; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 119). Similarly, in the *Canticle*, John calls

faith, hope and love ‘blind person’s guides’, which lead the soul into darkness, because they cannot see or feel the divine object that they seek. Nevertheless, they move towards God in darkness and in the absence of satisfaction (*Canticle* 1.11–12; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 482). Third, union with God is dark because God’s communication continues to exceed the capacity of soul. According to the Platonic image that John uses later in the *Dark Night*, the divine light blinds with its excess, darkening the soul’s vision, like looking at the sun; it is Dionysius’ ‘ray of darkness’ (*Night* 2.5.3; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 402). God is known to be fully present at this stage, but only as a ‘dark communication’ which remains beyond the forms and images of creatures. John brings darkness and light together, saying that this stage is ‘like the very early dawn just before the break of day’ (*Ascent* 1.2.5; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 121). This is not to say that the desire for God can never be satisfied, but that the satisfaction is of a kind that is found precisely in the lack of satisfaction in relation to creatures. Our attention is turned to the way that God’s presence can be discerned through the darkness of this lack of satisfaction. This progress through darkness orders the *Ascent* and the *Dark Night*. The first stage (the purification of the senses) is to be found in *Ascent* Book 1, the second stage (illumination by faith, hope and love, which purifies the spirit) in *Ascent* Books 2–3 and the *Dark Night*, while the third stage (union) is barely reached in the *Ascent* or the *Night* and waits for John’s fuller treatment in the *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*.

The focus of the *Ascent-Night* is on ridding the soul of every attachment of the senses and of the mind (or ‘spirit’ as John calls it) in its orientation to creatures. To ascend to the summit of Mount Carmel requires that ‘all appetites cease’. Perfect virtue ‘lies in keeping the soul empty, naked and purified of every appetite’ (A 1.5.6; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 129). John reassures the reader that he is referring only to ‘inordinate appetites’ which ‘defile’ the soul, not to the soul in itself, which is ‘a perfect and extremely beautiful image of God’ (A 1.9.1; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 138). But the soul as image of God is revealed only through this negation of the desires which otherwise obscure God. Near the end of *Ascent* Book 1, he expresses the paradox in some of his best known verses:

To reach satisfaction in all
desire its possession 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.

(*Ascent* 1.13.11; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 150)

‘Nothing’ (*nada*) is the way to the summit of Mount Carmel. The soul is to deny desire. ‘No quieras’, each alternate line begins: ‘do not desire’. The double negative in the Spanish, ‘No quieras tener gusto en nada’ (literally, ‘do not desire to have possession in nothing’), makes the denial more clear, though in English it must be translated ‘desire its possession in nothing’. There is nothing to desire because the desired object is not a created thing—it is ‘no-thing’. This is not nihilism, in which nothing is in some way ultimate. Rather, nothing is the condition in which desire moves beyond created things. For desire to be faced with a blank ‘no-thing’ in relation to creatures opens a new space. It is a space which, John affirms, attracts our attention: it is the ‘extremely subtle and delicate’ movement in the soul that we have seen, felt as an ‘interior quiet and repose’, which he now indicates can be attained deliberately, through this negation of desire. ‘*Todo y nada*’: the ‘nothing’ (*nada*) of the soul’s desire here becomes her ‘all’ (*todo*).

The affirmation of positive value in this lack of satisfaction informs John’s long treatment of the purification of the spirit in *Ascent* Books 2–3 and in the *Night*. Faith, hope, and love purify intellect, memory, and will, respectively. John says that they ‘void’ or empty these three powers of their created objects (the verb is *vaciar*; *Ascent* 2.6.1; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 166). It is emptiness not in the sense of plain vacuity, as if having

nothing in the mind is of intrinsic value. Rather, it is called emptiness in comparison with the desires that previously filled it. Intellect, memory, and will are empty in the respect that they have no created thing to desire or know. It is an emptiness which frees them for the unfettered movement of faith, hope and love towards God.

The problem is that intellect, memory, and will, which John calls ‘spiritual faculties’ in this orientation towards God, now that they are moved by the grace of faith, hope and love and not by desire for creatures, have no objects with which to mark out their movement. They are aware of advancing only in terms of the negation of their previous desire for created objects. John regards this purification as psychologically painful, involving acute mental suffering. It is the pain of what John calls ‘dispossession’, that is, of leaving behind creaturely attachments in favour of the desire for the creator (*Ascent* 1.13.11; 2.6.4; 3.15.1; etc.). He relates the experience to Christ’s abandonment (*desamparo*) on the cross. Christ did not need to be freed from sin, but he freed human nature from sin on behalf of others, experiencing the consequences in his flesh, which John draws out in psychological detail. He was abandoned by the Father, ‘who left him that way in innermost aridity in the lower part. He was thereby compelled to cry out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?”’. He was ‘certainly annihilated (*anihilado*) . . . without any consolation or relief’. Yet, John stresses, at the same ‘moment’, the Son was united with the Father and ‘brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God’ (*Ascent* 2.7.11; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 172). His abandonment by God existed at the same time as his divine union. For John, the point for the follower of Christ is that the inner annihilation (voiding, emptying, nothing, dispossession) experienced in the process of spiritual purification is not opposed to God’s presence (*Ascent* 2.7.12). God can feel painfully absent and yet be fully present. The pain is not to be confused with God’s presence, but is merely part of the denial of satisfaction at the level of creatures, which makes way for the all of God.

In what way, however, can such negation ‘make way’ for God, without implying that God is to be identified with the lack and the pain? Constance Fitzgerald uses the suggestive term ‘impasse’ to describe the key element in this transition (Fitzgerald 1984). It is an ‘impasse’ in that all avenues to an effective response—this is, one which would restore the lost satisfaction—are cut off. The whole trajectory of desire and satisfaction comes to an end, and there is nothing to fill the gap. God cannot be appropriated here in such a way as to fill the gap. Instead, there must be a transformation in the soul such that the soul seeks satisfaction in a different way. The dark nights of the *Ascent-Night* empty the soul of the old desire which seeks to fill the space with something like a created object. They disrupt the soul at the level of her capacity to desire. In the darkest part of the night, reached in the second book of the *Dark Night*, John says that ‘two extremes, divine and human’ are ‘joined’, as the ‘divine extreme strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it’. The pain is so intense that it is impossible for the soul to choose how to respond, rendering the soul wholly passive. It ‘so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance—absorbing it in a profound darkness—that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death’. It is like ‘hanging in midair, unable to breathe’ and going ‘down to hell alive’ (*Night* 2.6.1, 5, 6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 403–4). John adds that, like Jonah and Job, persons in this state ‘also feel forsaken and despised by creatures, particularly by their friends’ (*Ascent* Prol. 4; 2.7.11).

John says nothing about his miserable imprisonment at the hands of his Carmelite brothers in Toledo, which may have informed his treatment at this point (Matthew 1995, p. 10). Yet as Bernard McGinn points out, many late medieval spiritual writers gave spiritual value to ‘the state of a person whom God abandons, inflicting a sense of loss, pain and even the conviction of damnation’ (McGinn 2008, p. 76). John’s approach is distinctive in seeking to set out a psychological process from the pain to spiritual freedom. In the *Ascent-Night*, he only gets as far as to affirm that the profound negation of the soul’s desire in the dark nights has positive spiritual value. He reiterates that the darkness is offset by a ‘certain feeling and foretaste of God’, in which the soul ‘understands nothing in particular’ because ‘the intellect is in darkness’ yet there is an ‘enkindling of love’ in the soul (*Night* 2.11.1;

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 419). But he never develops the point in these works. How to reach the kind of desire for God which satisfies in the state of union waits for the *Spiritual Cantic* and the *Living Flame of Love*.

4. The Absent Lover

In John's *Spiritual Cantic*, he comments on his poem in a manner similar to Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, but from the start the difference from Bernard of Clairvaux is clear. Where Bernard begins with the experience of the kiss, announced in the first line of the Song of Songs, 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth' (Vulgate), John starts with the Beloved's absence:

Where have You hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling You, and You were gone.

(*Spiritual Cantic* 1.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 478)

As in the *Ascent*, John states that God is present in the soul's 'innermost being' (*el íntimo ser del alma*), as made in the image of God, yet God is hidden, because of God's transcendence as creator (*Cantic* 1.6; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 480). The soul's efforts to find satisfaction in her Beloved meet with failure. In the words of the Song of Songs, she is 'wounded with love' (Song 2.5, Vulgate), a wound received because of the way that the divine lover, like the hart or 'stag' of the Song who comes leaping on the mountains (Song 2.8–9, Vulgate), 'shows and then hides himself' (*Cantic* 1.15; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 484). She feels only his absence: 'I went out calling You, and You were gone (*eras ido*)'.

The Beloved's absence intensifies the soul's desires (*deseos*), affections (*afectos*), and moanings (*gemidos*), in longing for his return. John asserts that it is 'by means of these' that God 'communicates himself to her'; they are 'messengers' sent by God (*Cantic* 2.1–2; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 486–87). But there is no satisfaction. On the contrary, the Beloved's departure is a 'wound' that will 'afflict more than satisfy'; it 'quickens (*avivar*) the knowledge' that the soul has of what she lacks (*Cantic* 1.19; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 484). John works through the possible objects of the soul's desire, denying each in turn as capable of satisfying her: the beauty of creation, the knowledge and mysteries of faith, and even her own life (*Cantic* 7.2–4). He reiterates the point made in the *Ascent*, that this lack of satisfaction benefits the soul: it allows her to 'understand more distinctly the infinitude that remains to be understood' (*Cantic* 7.9; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 502). It helps the soul to focus more clearly on her object as infinite, but her lack in comparison with divine infinitude also becomes more painful.

The position changes dramatically when the soul recognises that desire has reached the kind of impasse identified by Fitzgerald. The soul realises that no amount of desire is going to bring her to God; every increase in desire only reveals how much further there is to go. The realisation provokes a crisis in which, John says, 'she has no other remedy than to put herself in the hands of the one who wounded her' (*Cantic* 9.1; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 504–5). She gives up her desire, feeling that the whole effort to reach God by desire has failed. At this point, the situation is transformed, however, for the effect is to free the soul for a different kind of movement, contrary to her attachment to her lack of satisfaction. In place of the paralysis of her sense of lack of God, she abandons herself in a sheer ecstasy towards God as the object of her desire. She then discovers that her 'soul lives where she loves more than in the body she animates ... [she] lives through love in the object of her love' (*Cantic* 8.3; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 503). She is not the person that she thought she was in relation to God, consisting in her lack, but conversely, sees that her life is rooted in this ecstasy which abandons the lack and moves freely forward. At first, this is disorientating. Repeating the image that he used in the dark night, John says that the soul feels that she is 'like one suspended in the air with nothing to lean on'

(*Canticle* 9.6; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 506). But in place of the former sense of this lack as debilitating pain, she now recognises that the movement, though confusing, has the character of a life-giving expansion into freedom.

This self which ‘is suspended in the air’, leaving both the subject and the object of her former desire behind, is dangerously exposed. She still cannot see the divine object, and still has not fully understood who she herself is as the subject of this new movement. God does not appear in the space that has been cleared. Instead of asking the soul to look for a new object, John, as the wise director, asks her to look at the movement which ‘calls out’ *within* her:

At this period the soul feels that she is rushing toward God as rapidly as a falling stone when nearing its center. She also feels that she is like wax in which an impression, though being made, is not yet complete. She knows too that she is like a sketch or the first draft of a drawing and calls out to the one who did this sketch to finish the painting and image. And her faith is so enlightened that it gives her a glimpse of some clear divine reflections of the height of her God.

(*Canticle* 12.1; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 515)

The new insight, on the far side of the impasse, is that in abandoning herself to the ecstasy of her desire for God, the soul is coming to the completion of her own self, as made in the image of God. Her lack is acknowledged—she ‘is not yet complete’—but the lack is now seen from the perspective of her completion, in terms of the greater fullness that will be received. It is the lack felt by a subject who is aware that they now possess this lack in a way that is being simultaneously filled. This gives her an indirect but positive view of God, for the first time—‘a glimpse of some clear divine reflections of the height of her God’—as the one giving this inner fulfilment.

John turns to an excursus on the role of ‘the propositions and articles of faith’ at this point in the *Canticle*, presumably in response to the objection that faith tells us that God is the true and final object of desire, without requiring such an existential crisis. John responds by noting that the articles of faith do not merely tell us about God but promise an intimate loving union between the soul and God. He cites the Song of Songs, that God will ‘give himself to her’ as the soul’s beloved (*Canticle* 12.4; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 517; Song of Songs 1.10, Vulgate). Faith is a matter of intimate desire, but, as propositions, the articles do not deliver this intimacy with God. Rather, they make the soul cry out,

Oh, if only the truths hidden in your articles, which you teach me in an inexplicit and dark manner, you would give me now completely, clearly and explicitly, freed of their covering, as my desire begs!

(*Canticle* 12.5; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 517)

The propositions and articles of faith must engage our desire. Earlier in the *Canticle*, John made the same point by contrasting ‘scholastic theology’, the theology taught in the schools, ‘through which the divine truths are understood’, with ‘mystical theology, which is known through love and by which these truths are not only known (*se saben*) but at the same time enjoyed (*se gustan*)’ (*Canticle* Prol. 4; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 470). Further, this enjoyment is not a mere feeling of pleasure or satisfaction in the articles as propositions, but to see that they ‘are sketched deep within her, that is, in her soul, in her intellect and will’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 12.5–6; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 517). The articles have the transformation of the soul as their inward reality (*Canticle* 12.7). To know them in this way requires an interior expansion of the soul’s desire, into the state of mutual desire and enjoyment in union with God.

All this paves the way for the first direct appearance of God in Stanza 13 of the *Canticle*, as the ‘wounded stag’: ‘the wounded stag is in sight on the hill’ (*Canticle* 13.1; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 520). The ‘wounded stag’ allies the stag of the Song of Songs with the ‘wound of love’ of the desire for God, which afflicts more than satisfies (*Canticle* 1.19, quoted above). The wound also recalls Christ’s wounds in taking humanity’s sufferings on himself. God as the stag is wounded because of God’s desire to share the human condition:

‘Beholding that the bride is wounded with love for him, because of her moan he also is wounded with love for her’ (*Canticle* 13.9; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 523). In asserting that God bears a wound of desire as well as the soul, John takes up the divine *eros* of Dionysius, which is shown in the incarnation (Dionysius, *Divine Names* 4.10–17 (708A–713D), as above), adding the note of insatiability, not present in Dionysius, with his emphasis on the metaphor of the ‘wound’. God responds to the soul’s desire by taking on the same desire, out of love for the soul. He feels a lack which corresponds to hers. However, in reciprocating the soul’s desire, the desire is transformed. John says, ‘among lovers the wound of one is a wound for both, and the two have but one feeling’ (*Canticle* 13.9; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 523). The two wounds become one wound, joined in love. The lack in human desire, without being removed, is transformed by being reciprocated in the manner of love. Seeing that her desire is no longer unrequited, the soul’s lack is transformed into the abundance of a shared love. At this moment, God, as the other of this love, becomes visible for the first time. God is not seen as an object outside the soul, but in direct relation with soul’s desire for God, by means of the union of love in which the soul participates. The soul is able to differentiate God as the other partner within the exchange of desire. She sees God as God sees her, through love. This is the beginning of true ‘contemplation’, John says, in which ‘God begins to communicate and show himself to the soul in this life’ (*Canticle* 13.10; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 523).

5. Satisfaction and Lack of Satisfaction

In place of the pain of God’s absence, John affirms that the soul now experiences ‘a state of peace and delight and gentleness of love’ (*Canticle* 14 and 15.2; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 525). In the exchange of desire with God, she possesses God. But it is possession sustained only by mutual dispossession in love, in which ‘each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other’ (*Canticle* 22.3; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 560). John continues to contrast the kind of knowledge that is found in this union with the knowledge of created things. It is knowledge of a kind ‘stripped of its accidents’, lacking the accidental features which would give the soul the possession of any created ‘thing’. To possess it, the soul moves ‘between the sleep of natural ignorance and the wakefulness of supernatural knowledge’ in a continuing ‘rapture or ecstasy’ (*Canticle* 14 and 15.16, 18; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), pp. 532–33). Only by continuing to let go of the accidents of particular ‘things’—by ‘natural ignorance’—is the union kept in motion. Again, John likens the state to the suffering of Christ on the cross: ‘dying with the desire to penetrate’ God’s wisdom, the soul suffers ‘even to the agony of death in order to see God’ (*Canticle* 36.11, 12; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), pp. 613–14). The desire is an ongoing ‘dying’ because, in order to see God, every ‘thing’ that the soul possesses of God and of herself must continue to be negated, even in the union of love.

This ecstasy of loving dispossession means that the soul is never simply satisfied. She could only be satisfied if she loved God as much as God loved her, John points out, and since God loves infinitely, this is never possible (*Canticle* 38.3; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 618). Nevertheless, in this endless lack, the soul is *also* satisfied, and satisfied in a way which far exceeds the dissatisfaction. As John says in the *Living Flame of Love*, ‘the more the soul desires (*desea*) God the more it possesses him’. Like the angels, these souls are ‘ever being filled by the object of their desire without the disgust of being satiated . . . As a result it seems that the greater the soul’s desire, the greater will be its satisfaction’ (*Living Flame of Love* 3.23; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 682). The lack of satisfaction, when it is shared with God in mutual love, satisfies by becoming the endless desire that is the possession of God. The soul sees God and her true self in the endless expansion of this desire, in the reciprocal relationship of union.

6. The Empty Subject

What kind of subjectivity does the soul have in relation to this new desire? To negate the soul’s desire for creatures in favour of an endless expansion of desire which takes the

soul out of herself in relation to God would seem to leave her without any subjectivity. John implies as much in his requirement for the soul to remain ‘empty’ and ‘nothing’ in relation to creatures. Yet he also affirms that this brings the soul to completion as an image of God, as we have seen. In the *Living Flame of Love*, he has more to say about the nature of this subjectivity, in his comments on the lines of Stanza 3 of his poem:

O lamps of fire!
in whose splendours
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.

(*Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 673)

The soul possesses ‘deep caverns of feeling’ (*las profundas cavernas del sentido*), which are the faculties of memory, intellect and will in their capacity to feel and know God directly in union. In their depth (*el fondo*), John says, the caverns feel and know God negatively, that is, in the sense that ‘anything less than the infinite fails to fill them’. They know God in as much as they lack God, with a knowledge in which ‘one contrary sheds light on the other’ (*Flame* 3.17, 18; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 680). They possess God by being ‘deep’ and ‘empty’ (*vacío*).

John restates the paradox with which we are familiar, but now in terms of his anthropology: the soul ‘deeply experiences (*siente*, feels) and enjoys (*gusta*, tastes) the grandeurs of God’s wisdom and excellence’, but only through the activity of dispossession in relation to creatures. The faculties in their ‘depth’ possess a ‘satisfaction, fullness and delight [which] will then correspond to their former hunger and thirst’ (*Flame* 3.68; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 702). He does not mean that God is known *as* hunger and thirst, but that the hunger and thirst of a soul emptied of attachment to creatures opens a new level in the soul, where desire can be affirmed in the soul’s ‘depth’.

John also calls this ‘deep’ level of the soul an ‘abyss’ (derived, as noted, from Flemish and German mysticism). Quoting the Psalm text, ‘One abyss calls to another abyss’ (Ps. 41.8, Vulgate), he says that the soul in its deep caverns is an ‘abyss of darkness’ in its lack of God. But, he adds, God is an abyss too, an ‘abyss of light’, and in union the soul is so illumined by grace that God’s abyss and the abyss of the soul become one, ‘each like evoking its like and communicating itself to it’ (*Flame* 3.71; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 703). The logic is as in the *Canticle*, where the mutual self-gift of the two partners in the union of love transforms the soul from the darkness of unrequited desire to the light of a desire that is mutual. But in addition, John names this as an interior possession of the soul in her transformed capacity. The abyss is both the divine self-gift to the soul in love and the soul’s self-gift to God, in an exchange in which they communicate, like to like. The abyss is the new *identity* of the soul in union.

John adds to this picture when he says that the soul ‘reflects the divine light in a more excellent way because of the active intervention of its will’ (*Flame* 3.77; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 705). In the *Canticle*, the soul surrendered to God initially out of despair at not attaining the object of her desire, forced by her failure (*Canticle* 9.1, as above). But here, John affirms that having entered the mutuality of love in union, the surrender can be made out of free will (*Flame* 3.79; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 706; free will is also affirmed in *Canticle* 27.2–3). The surrender is ‘voluntary’ not only in the sense of giving up human will in favour of divine will, but as a gift between equals, who communicate something of value to each other, emptying themselves freely. Then, John says, ‘the soul in this gift to God offers him the Holy Spirit, with voluntary surrender, as something of its own’. That is, God gives the soul ‘ownership’ according to the marriage union, in which the goods ‘are possessed by both together’, allowing the soul to give the Holy Spirit to God as her own gift (*Flame* 3.79; [Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991](#), p. 706). Her subjectivity is not collapsed into God by her surrender, but rather, her emptying, as an abyss, includes her full and free agency.

John asserts that this is to love ‘as the Father and Son love each other’ (*Flame* 3.82; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 707). It is a subjectivity which possesses God ‘not through itself but through him’, according to the mutual relations of the Trinity (*Flame* 3.82–83; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 707–8), and it also belongs to the soul. The soul ‘breathes’ the Holy Spirit so intimately in this union that she has been transformed into the trinitarian life, such that she is able to ‘understand, know and love . . . in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself!’ (*Canticle* 39.3–4; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, pp. 622–23; *Flame* 4.17). Rowan Williams argues for the continuing place of desire in John’s understanding of these trinitarian relations, in spite of the absence of lack in the divine nature. The love of the Trinity, for John, does not seek mere satisfaction and completion in the other, but to desire what the other desires. It is desire which is ‘deflected’ towards the excess of love, beyond the duality of self and other, towards a third—beyond Father and Son to the Holy Spirit. It overflows limitlessly in its excess, and in this sense it is the denial of mere satisfaction within the relationship. It is a desire which, in Christ, will freely choose abandonment and annihilation in relation to the world, to include others in its ambit. As Williams puts it, Christ ‘must love the absence of a love that is given to him as if from a consoling or satisfying other, because he must love the excess of the Father’s love, that which escapes being merely a mirror of his own identity’ (Williams 2002, pp. 121–22). It is a desire which includes negation, yet in the sense of excess, according to this ‘deflection’ beyond the partners to the desire, rather than as lack. The paradox of possession and dispossession, and of the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of desire, penetrates into the Trinity, according to the ‘deflective’ nature of trinitarian desire.

Thus, the lack that the soul feels in union, though it arises from creaturely finitude, is transformed in character by being identified with this trinitarian dispossession in love which is God’s nature. The last name that John gives to the ‘deep caverns of feeling’, in addition to the abyss, is the ‘centre’ of the soul (*Flame* 4.1). When the soul lives fully from this desire as her ‘centre’, the union overflows into the whole soul, including the soul’s relations to creatures (*Flame* 1.36; 3.7, 16; 4.5; *Canticle* 28.3). Before, the soul’s capacity was understood *only* negatively, as needing to be negated in order to free desire for relationship with God. John’s inclusion of negativity in the divine desire of the Trinity means that, once the soul is freed of attachment to creatures, there is no longer any conflict between human desire and divine desire. The soul’s orientation to creatures is now ‘centred’ in the soul’s self-emptying spiritual relationship with God. The negation is resituated according to the divine ‘deflections’ of desire, as part of the divine abundance. To desire God in union is to include the soul’s lack in this transformation, where lack becomes the desirous overflow of the Trinity beyond satisfaction in the other. It is an ecstasy which no longer leaves the soul ‘suspended in the air with nothing to lean on’ because of its lack, but which is centred in the deep, abyssal overflow of love from the union. John says, at this point, ‘the power to look at God is, for the soul, the power to do works in the grace of God’ (*Canticle* 32.8; Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1991, p. 601). In seeing God as the other in this trinitarian relationship of love, the soul overflows in works of love towards the world. Desire for God and desire for creatures are reconciled in this centre.

7. Conclusions

For John of the Cross, dissatisfaction is a vital part of the desire for God. It is not just that desire for God is damaged by the Fall and sin—that it is ‘possessive’ in its attachment to creatures—but that human desire could not reach God even if it were perfect. The problem of attachment is severe but, to understand how to respond to it, it is necessary to consider the greater question of how God can relate to humanity at all. The answer lies only through transformation, by attaining a new manner of relating to God at the level of the soul’s creation in the image of God. Desire for God can be affirmed here, but to find it requires a process which negates any object of desire that might stand in for God. It is a desire known as sheer ecstasy in relation to God. It is not a thing or an experience, but the

emptiness of a personal movement towards an object which simply is this movement—an ecstasy which also fulfils.

To call this desire and to affirm it as desire for God depends, for John, on the transformation of human lack. The spiritual ascent is a matter of desire because God crosses the divide between divine and human by incarnating divine desire in a form which shares in human lack. Human lack is not simply eliminated, as John makes clear by dwelling on the painful suffering of the incarnation. Rather, it is enlarged into a total dispossession of the subject in relation to God, which includes the denial of desire for God. In this dispossession, desire becomes something greater than human lack, and greater than the negation of desire, as it becomes part of the mutual dispossession of the loving relations of the Trinity. Though desire is constituted by lack in the human case and by plenitude in the divine case, the continuity between the two desires becomes visible because of the way that, through this process, the lack moves from mere dissatisfaction to total dispossession in the mutuality of love. The negation of desire then becomes part of this greater desire, showing the continuity between the human and divine, while also retaining the ontological discontinuity.

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Notes

- ¹ Quotations in Spanish from John of the Cross' works, here and below, are from [Juan de la Cruz \(1994\)](#).
- ² Lacan was influenced by Jean Baruzi's *Saint Jean de La Croix et le Probleme de l' Experience Mystique* (*John of the Cross and the Problem of Religious Experience*, 1924), in which a strong contrast is drawn between the symbolic mediation of the text and unmediated knowledge of God, in Kantian fashion. Yet Baruzi argues that John's poetic symbols are, as Hole puts it, 'intrinsically connected to an original experience, a translation of the experience which is at the same time the experience itself' ([Hole 2020](#), p. 41). Lacan takes up Baruzi's view of the possibilities of poetic symbols, but understands them in what Murphy calls an 'anti-experientialist' sense, as failing epistemologically.
- ³ The unpublished PhD dissertation by Tessa Holland ([Holland 2020](#)) asks a similar question, examining what she calls 'the apophasis of desire' in John's thought. Holland argues, for instance, that John's 'abyss' is a negative yet relational, desirous term. My approach here is to focus, more specifically, on the element of the lack of satisfaction of desire, through the process of transformation.

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