



Knowledge of God Through Union of the Wills: A Teresian Perspective

Conocimiento de Dios a través de la unión de las voluntades: una perspectiva teresiana

Juliana Ocampo Guzmán*

Abstract

This paper starts with the question of how can mystical experiences provide knowledge of God, if they are beyond our intellectual capabilities. I decided to approach this question from the thought of Teresa of Avila. To explain the plausibility of my thesis, I give some general context about *The Interior Castle*, to conclude that Teresa speaks of two different levels of knowledge and to present how the will is the one that grasps knowledge of God. About my starting question, I answer that from a Teresian point of view we are capable of acquiring knowledge of God from mystical experiences because there are two levels of knowledge and one of them is not dependent on the intellect. I then explain how this non-intellectual knowledge might work with the will being, able to grasp this second level of knowledge* by achieving union through a supernatural experience.

Keywords: Teresa of Avila, will, intellect, mystical experience, knowledge

Resumen

Este artículo comienza con la pregunta de cómo las experiencias místicas pueden proporcionar conocimiento de Dios, si están más allá de nuestras capacidades intelectuales. Decidí abordar esta pregunta desde el pensamiento de Teresa de Ávila. Para explicar la plausibilidad de mi tesis, doy un contexto general sobre *El castillo interior*, para concluir que Teresa habla de dos niveles diferentes de conocimiento y para presentar cómo la voluntad es la que capta el conocimiento de Dios. Sobre mi pregunta inicial, respondo que desde un punto de vista teresiano somos capaces de adquirir conocimiento de Dios a través de experiencias místicas porque hay dos niveles de conocimiento, y uno de ellos no depende del intelecto. Luego explico cómo podría funcionar este conocimiento no intelectual con la voluntad siendo capaz de captar este segundo nivel de conocimiento, al lograr la unión a través de una experiencia sobrenatural.

Palabras clave: Teresa de Ávila, voluntad, intelecto, experiencia mística, conocimiento

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Filósofa de la Universidad de La Sabana. Interés académico en las áreas de Filosofía de la religión y Epistemología. Perteneció al grupo de investigación Zetesis: filosofía de la mente.

I would like to start this paper by giving a broad characterization of what mystical experiences are. Alston (1993) says that some common features of mystical experiences are that they report an experiential awareness of God, that the awareness is direct and is reported to be of God. The author provides several examples of mystical experiences; I have chosen one to help the reader better understand what a mystical experience is. If interested, Alston offers more examples in his book *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*.

[...] all at once I [...] felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. [...] I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in humility and poverty, leaving him, the Almighty God, to judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted [...]. I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communication with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization [...]. But the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him. (Anonymous report in James, 1902, quoted by Alston, 1993, pp. 12-14)

For the purposes of this paper, mystical experiences are going to be understood as a true but not necessarily complete experience of the divinity (for our purposes, of the Christian God). Such experiences leave the person who has them with the certainty that they have been with God. In this sense, at least based on the testimonies, we can say that through mystical experiences one arrives at some sort of knowledge of God, incomplete, but apparently certain. For example, in the experience quoted above, the person has come to know that God does not fall under the senses but can yet be perceived. It is not

a complete knowledge of God, nevertheless it's still some kind of knowledge about him.

With that general characterization of how a mystical experience is being understood, I can present the question that prompted this research, which rests on four premises. The first premise is that certainty is a property of knowledge. I take this from the modern Cartesian perspective because Descartes himself is, chronologically speaking, the closest philosopher to Teresa of Avila, the main author with whom I am going to work on this paper. The second premise is that mystical experiences are real (and not just an illusion) and therefore, by definition, they are supernatural and escape our intellectual abilities. The third premise is that God, along with mystical experiences, is beyond our intellectual capabilities. The last premise is that people that have had mystical experiences claim that, after those experiences, although they might not completely understand what happened, they are left with the certainty that it was real and that it was an experience of God, among other certainties proper of the content of each experience. If these four premises are true, then the question arises: How can mystical experiences of God provide certainty if it is a property of knowledge and, by definition, mystical experiences and God are beyond our intellectual capacities? Another way of phrasing the question is: How can mystical experiences provide knowledge of God, if they are beyond our intellectual capabilities?

I will approach this question from *The Interior Castle* of Teresa of Avila. I have selected this author because she is one of the greatest exponents of Christian mysticism, and *The Interior Castle* is her deepest and most mature work. In this paper, I propose that in Teresa's thought the knowledge of God is grasped by the will and not by the intellect. To explain the plausibility of my thesis, I begin in section I by giving some general context about *The Interior Castle*. In section II, after presenting some of her ideas I conclude that Teresa speaks of two different levels of knowledge. Afterward, in section III, I explain how the will is the one that grasps knowledge of God. Lastly, I present some questions that remain unanswered in this research.

Teresa of Avila: Influences and context

We know by Teresa's own writings (*The Book of Life*) that she read Augustine, Gregory the Great, Francisco de Osuna and Bernardino de Laredo, between others. I will present a short version of the

history of mysticism in which Teresa was immersed, based on the knowledge of what she read.

Teresa's mystical influences are traced back to Neoplatonism, with Plotinus' proposal about the One. Plotinus influenced Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite. Augustine's interpretation was closer to Christian beliefs, while Dionysius presented a version of Plotinus that exacerbated the importance of God as Eros, of love and affectivity, and its dialectic nature. Augustine influenced Gregory the Great, who delved deeper into the topic of contemplation, the importance of the love of God in contemplation, and the love of the neighbor in active life. After Gregory, John Eriugena synthesized them all. Eriugena took the dialectical affectiveness of Dionysius and blended it with the teachings of Augustine and Gregory.

After Eriugena, there were some centuries that didn't produce great mystics, but the monks had the important job of transmitting and living the teachings of the authors mentioned above. In the twelfth century, mysticism between monks reached its peak with the Cistercians and the Victorines. Cistercian monks contributed with the development of a theory of contemplative life, in which the affective part was of great importance. The Victorines contributed with systematization of the mystical proposals, which meant they had to adopt the methods of scholasticism to succeed as a school in that "new era".

Afterwards, Thomas Gallus helped synthesize the teachings of the Victorines within the new order of the Franciscans. This is of great importance, since the Franciscan order got to know the twelfth century mysticism and their influences thanks to Gallus. Through the Franciscan order, mysticism got to Bernardino de Laredo and Francisco de Osuna, Franciscan friars to whom Teresa read firsthand and that influenced her mystical thought.

This is the reduced version of the history of mysticism that best tracks Teresa's intellectual influences. Even so, there are some authors that could have played an important role in Teresa's development that are not mentioned in here, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure.

Before getting into the matter, I would like to briefly explain some methodological decisions. Teresa's way of writing may be obscure to the philosophical eye, filled with metaphors, analogies, and allegories that helped her explain some phenomena but also kept her safe from the scrutiny of the Spanish Inquisition. According to Weber (1990), Teresa decided to use a rhetoric of obfuscation to avoid

ensorship. She wrote in such a way that she would not be committed to anything. She intentionally belittled her position as a woman to avoid being taken as an authority and hence avoid being censored. Because of that obfuscation, I decided to use textual passages so that the readers can judge for themselves if my interpretation of Teresa's words is plausible and coherent. In addition to that, I have chosen to use as a primary source the Spanish original of *The Interior Castle*. To facilitate the reading, the textual passages I use are from an English translation that I sometimes modify to better fit the Spanish version.

The Interior Castle is a book where Teresa intends to give a guide to her Carmelite sisters on how to forge a relationship with God. In doing so, she describes her own experience towards God: even though it is her own experience, she believes the path she has taken is available to every human being. She proposes that God lives in the deepest part of our soul and that this gives us humans a special access to him.

Teresa uses a castle¹ as a metaphor to explain the process the soul must follow to forge a relationship with God. The metaphor consists of the soul being like a castle where God dwells. The castle is divided into seven dwellings, and the soul must travel through them all in order to reach the seventh or central dwelling², which is where God lives and where "spiritual marriage", the highest degree of union between God and the soul, is achieved. The book is divided in the same manner; there are seven sections that correspond to the dwelling places, each dwelling place divided into chapters, and each chapter into paragraphs. Thus, Teresa's standard citation and the one I use in this paper is, e.g., IV: 1, 2; in which "IV" refers to the dwelling place, "1" to the chapter, and "2" to the paragraph.

Two levels of knowledge

The first three dwellings of the castle are achieved with one's strength and are meant to get us to three objectives: the soul's constancy in prayer, the intellect's effort to understand that it is better to be with God than in the pleasures of the world, and getting to know oneself (what is my place in the world?, how far do the capacities of my faculties go?, etc.).

In Teresa's time, the Devil was believed to be more powerful than humans, to have more and better knowledge than us, therefore he knows how to manipulate and deceive us. Teresa says (II: 1, 5) that the Devil knows her condition and her habits so well that he will

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The allegory of the castle may have been inspired by Teresa's readings of *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* by Francisco de Osuna and *The Ascent to Mount Sion* by Bernardino de Laredo. Osuna devotes a chapter to talk about how we should take care of our heart like a castle; while Laredo explains the Celestial City as one with crystal walls where all its inhabitants, both angels and humans, are illuminated by the Paschal light coming from the center of the city that represents Christ. According to McGinn (2017, p. 182), although it may seem that Teresa found an inspiration in these authors, the development and depth she gives to the allegory of the castle reveals a profound originality.

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A strange duality of the soul may be implied: the soul is the castle that has to be traveled and, at the same time, is the one that travels through the castle. Edward Howells (1999) has made an interesting proposal in which he tries to solve the duality by explaining the different degrees of the soul's faculties. Teresa, in I: 1, 5, says that it is not redundant to ask the soul to enter within itself, because there are souls that are so far outside that they do not know how it is inside their castle, nor how far their capacities reach.

always be one step ahead of her to make her stumble. But then, how can we walk a path towards God if there is a Devil that knows best, can deceive us without us realizing it, and make us think we are on the right path when we are not? Teresa's solution is to be humble, understanding humility as "recognizing my place in creation". By being humble, we recognize that by our means we cannot avoid the Devil's deceptions; instead, we should accept our lowliness and implore God's help and mercy, since the Devil can do nothing against him. Humility, in other words, is the self-knowledge of our limitations and our human condition; is recognizing that we need God more than we need whatever the world can give us, since worldly things have at least the same or more limitations than us. Humility can only be acquired by being constant in prayer, since it is the only way in which one can realize the human intrinsic need of God. This is, roughly, how the objectives of the first three dwellings are achieved and the soul can move into the fourth dwelling place.

Teresa says that from this point on it is very difficult to explain what happens to the soul, because supernatural things begin to appear that can only be explained if God wants them to be explained and understood³ (IV: 1, 1). That is, from this point on, the intellect is not able to understand some things on its own, but needs God's help. How does God help? By giving experiences. Teresa says:

There are things to see and understand so delicate that the intellect is incapable of devising a way to explain them, although something might turn out to be well put and not at all obscure to the unexperienced; and anyone who has experience, especially when there is a lot of it, will understand very well. (IV: 1, 2)

In the fifth dwelling place, Teresa presents the prayer of recollection (*recogimiento*), which is one example of the type of prayer that the intellect is incapable of devising. Teresa says:

When seeking God within, it is of great help when God grants this favor (*merced*). *Don't think this recollection is acquired by the intellect striving to think about God within itself*, or by the imagination imagining Him within itself. Such efforts are good and an excellent kind of meditation because they are founded on truth, which is that God is within us. But the prayer of recollection is not this, because it is something each one can do —with the help of God, everything is understood. But what I'm speaking of comes in a different way. Sometimes *before*

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Some scholars, such as Castro (2020), suggest that the first three dwellings are an ascetic prayer that is achieved with ordinary grace, and in the fourth dwelling the mystical prayer begins, and is entirely a gift of God. Others, such as McLeane (2003), suggest that the first three dwellings are part of the purgative stage of prayer, while from the fourth dwelling forward is the illuminative stage of meditation.

one begins to think of God, these people^A are already inside the castle. I don't know in what way or how they heard their shepherd's whistle. It wasn't through the ears, because nothing is heard. But one noticeably senses a gentle drawing inward, as anyone who goes through this will observe, for I don't know how to make it clearer. (IV: 3, 3; italics are mine, I slightly modified the translation to better fit the Spanish original)

Teresa suggests that recollected prayer is not achieved through the intellect, because even before we begin to think about God our soul is already recollected in itself. That is, achieving recollected prayer does not depend on my understanding, nor strictly on my intellectual effort. She goes even further:

When His Majesty desires the intellect to stop, He occupies it in another way and gives it a light in the knowledge so far above what we can attain that it remains absorbed. Then, without knowing how, the intellect is much better instructed than it was through all the soul's efforts, that only makes harm. (IV: 3, 6; modified translation)

I want to note that Teresa seems to be speaking of two levels of knowledge: on the one hand, there is the knowledge that we can access through the intellect or through “the soul's efforts”; on the other hand, the knowledge* that can be acquired by spiritual delights and supernatural experiences, in which the intellect does not have the credit, since it was stopped and absorbed and somehow still ended being “better instructed”. Having two levels (I will keep referring to the second as knowledge* to maintain the distinction) allows us to conclude that things that cannot be known by employing the intellect are not necessarily unknowable, but just require a different approach for us to be able to access them. This approach should not depend on the intellect, although that does not imply that it has no role whatsoever.

We started this paper by presenting some premises that led me to the question of how can mystical experiences provide knowledge of God if they exceed our intellectual capacities. At this point, we can start sketching an answer to this question. In Teresa's thought, there seems to be two levels of knowledge and the second one, referred here as knowledge*, is something that does not remain within the limits of the intellect. Thus, the knowledge of God provided by mystical experiences should be of this second kind. One may ask, if

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With “people” Teresa means the senses and the powers of the soul: “Let us pretend as if these senses and powers that I have already said, that are the people of this castle—that is what I have taken to say something” (IV: 3, 2; translation is mine).

it exceeds the intellect why do you insist on calling it knowledge? I am aware that this probably does not fit the standard definition of knowledge, but I still categorize it in that way because it has epistemic repercussions in the subject that are proper of knowledge, such as providing certainty⁵. It seems that the knowledge* acquired by mystical experiences adds something to the subject that, although escapes one's understanding, does increase one's knowledge of the world and the way one relates to it, taking into account the second premise in which we take mystical experiences to be real, and not just illusions of some kind.

Knowledge* of God is grasped by the will

Now that we have identified two levels of knowledge in Teresa's thought and placed the knowledge provided by mystical experiences in the second level, we still have to deal with a difficult question. If this kind of knowledge* exceeds the capacities of the intellect, then how do we grasp it? My suggestion is that it is grasped by the will. Teresa says:

If what it feels within itself absorbs it, well and good. *But let it not strive to understand what it is, for it is given to the will.* Let the will enjoy it without any endeavors other than some loving words, for even though we may not try to go without thinking of anything, we often are not, even for a very brief moment. But as I said elsewhere, the reason why in this kind of prayer [...] the soul restrains itself or is restrained in its realization that it doesn't understand what it desires; and so the intellect wanders from one extreme to the other, like a fool unable to rest in anything. *The will has such deep rest in its God that the clamor of the intellect is a terrible bother to it. There is no need to pay any attention to this clamor,* for doing so would make the will lose much of what it enjoys, *but one should leave it and surrender oneself into the arms of love,* for His Majesty will teach the soul what it must do at that point. That is mainly finding oneself unworthy of so great a good and in being occupied with giving thanks. (IV: 3, 8; italics are mine, modified translation)

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“you now see that *God has made this soul a complete fool so to better impress upon it true wisdom. During this time it neither sees, nor hears, nor understands* [...]]. God so places Himself in the interior of that soul that when it returns to itself *it can in no way doubt* that it was in God and God was in it. *This truth remains with it so firmly* that even though years go by without God's granting that favor again, the soul can neither forget *nor doubt that it was in God and God was in it*” (V: 1, 8; italics are mine, modified translation).

Although it is not a knowledge that remain within the limits of the intellect, it does leave in the subject a truth that cannot be doubted: to use Descartes' terms, it leaves a certainty.

When the soul is given a supernatural experience, she should not try to understand it because it is given to the will to enjoy, not to the intellect. The intellect is agitated because it does not understand what it's happening and by trying to understand the only thing it achieves is

to distract the will from its joy, so the will should ignore it and rather concentrate on the experience of God's love that is being given.

Take, for example, when a car breaks down and has to be towed. Imagine that the driver is a calm person who trusts the tow truck driver and that he has properly secured the car, while the passenger is a nervous person who fears that the car will roll or that something will happen to them. The passenger is just going to make a fuss and make the ride stormier, while the driver decides to stay calm, accept that whatever happens is out of his hands, and trust that the tow truck driver knows what he is doing and that it is just something that has to happen so that they can fix the car. Something like that happens with the will and the intellect, as long as the intellect shudders because it does not understand what is happening, while the will surrenders completely and trusts that God will do his work in the soul. For the metaphor to work, let's assume that it is completely legal to ride in the car while it is being towed, also that the driver has a more important role than the passenger in making the towing successful.

What is being shown is that the will is in a better position than the intellect to enjoy supernatural experiences. But one thing is to enjoy the experience and another is to reach knowledge*, so what does the will have to do to reach this knowledge* of God? Teresa suggests that it is God who brings us into the center of the soul with him, "and that He may show His marvels more clearly, He doesn't want our will to have any part to play, for it has been entirely surrendered to Him. Neither does He want the door to be open to the powers and senses, for they are all asleep" (V: 1, 11; modified translation). For the soul to enter the central chamber, God's dwelling place, it must do at least two things: surrender its will to God and distance itself as far as possible from its powers and senses. When the soul achieves this, the possibility arouses for God to make the soul enter his chambers and get to know* him. Although the possibility is open, whether it happens or not depends on the divine will.

Since that soul now surrenders itself into His hands and the great love makes it so surrendered that it *neither knows nor wants anything more than that God does with her whatever he wants* [...]. He desires that, without the soul understanding how, it comes out impressed with His seal. For indeed the soul does no more than the wax when another impresses a seal on it. The wax doesn't impress the seal upon itself; it is only disposed—I mean by being soft. And even in order to be disposed it doesn't soften itself but remains still and gives its

consent. O goodness of God; everything must be for You! *All You want is our will* and that there be no impediment in the wax. (V: 2, 12; italics are mine, modified translation)

When our will dies to itself, that is, by abandoning the ego and its own desires, it is left as a soft wax ready to be impressed by the divine seal. The supernatural experience would be the moment in which God decides to take that soul that is already disposed and impress its seal in the soul's will, without her understanding how. What must be done is surrender the will to the divine will, to forget ourselves and only desire for God to do with us as he wills. To know* God we must be like a soft wax, where he can put his seal and although we do not understand how we were marked, we remain molded by his will⁶. I will elaborate more on this.

There comes a point in the soul's path to the center of the castle when it becomes so detached from her own will that she is already like a soft wax that can be molded with the seal of God's will, in that way the soft wax is molded as the divine will. And what is the divine will? That we are completely perfect, that we are one with Him (V: 3, 7): "The Lord asks of us only two things: love of His Majesty and love of our neighbor. These are what we must work for. By keeping them with perfection, we do His will and so will be united with Him".

I consider that for Teresa to know* God is to unite the will of the soul with the divine will. Union or spiritual marriage, the whole goal of *The Interior Castle*, is achieved when the soul becomes one with God, that is, when God puts his stamp on the soul so that it desires what God desires and does what God would do. I propose that in Teresa the only way in which we can know* God is by molding our will to his. We will not understand how he has molded us, but to be molded like him is to know* what God is like, for to be molded like God implies that we know* what God's will is. He who knows* what God wills, however incompletely, knows* God better than he who knows him only by the means of the intellect.

To the question of how the will grasps knowledge* of God, I answer that through the supernatural experience the soul's will is molded like God's will. To have our will molded as God's implies that we have special access to a part of Him, to His desires and possible ways of acting:

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The Teresian idea that we can know God through the will and not through the intellect has its origins in the affective mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite. The central point of Dionysius' theology is to explore how the unknown God manifests himself in the creation and how everything can be united to this unknown God. In short, the answer is that God is Eros/love and expresses in creation through *procession* and *reversion*. Thus, God loves everything created and everything created has the desire to return to its Source, to surpass multiplicity, and become again united with God. Union with God is achieved through love, desire, and will, and not through understanding. Like many other ideas, this one evolved throughout history until it reached its highest point with Teresa's proposal.

works are what the Lord wants! He desires that if you see a Sister who is sick to whom you can bring some relief, you have compassion on her and not worry about losing this devotion; and that if she is suffering pain, you also feel it; and that, if necessary, you fast so that she might eat —*not so much for her sake as because you know it is your Lord's desire. This is true union with His will.* (V: 3, 11; italics are mine)

Having access to this divine “information” (what he wills and desires) is a way of knowledge* superior to the one that can be given by the intellect on the same matter. It would be a knowledge close to the one we have of how it is to be a human just because we are humans. A human knows more about humans by being a human than a super-intelligent alien would ever know. It is not a perfect example, but that's more or less how I believe the knowledge* of God by the union of the wills would work in Teresa's thought.

Conclusion

To my starting question of how can mystical experiences provide knowledge of God if they exceed our intellectual capacities, I have answered that from a Teresian point of view we are capable of acquiring knowledge of God from mystical experiences, because there are two levels of knowledge and one of them is not dependent on the intellect. I then proceeded to explain how this non-intellectual knowledge might work with the will being able to grasp this second level of knowledge* by achieving union through a supernatural experience.

Still, some gaps and questions remain for further investigation. Because of Teresa's religious beliefs, I think she would not defend the spiritual marriage as an identity union, the soul's will is not going to be identical to God's will. Although the image of the wax being molded by the seal illustrates something of what she means, it does not tell us much about the ontological status of that union. Understanding this might be important to fully commit to the idea that the will can grasp knowledge* of God. Another question that remains is about the definition we should accept to include what the will grasps as knowledge. Questioning if experiences provide knowledge might give us a hint as to what is the proper definition we should defend. Does experiencing the color red give me knowledge about red? Does experiencing God gives me knowledge about God? Is that knowle-

dge better or broader than the one I get by studying all the possible arguments about its attributes without experiencing union?

Intuitively, we have the idea that knowledge is something active, and in Teresa's path, the will is essentially passive. The will is active in its preparation toward union, but the union *per se* requires the soul to be completely passive. Is there any definition we can accept in which knowledge may come from a passive experience? Or do all knowledge require a degree of activity? Can we defend that in Teresa's union the soul is active in some way? These are some of the issues I shall keep thinking about to better understand the phenomenon of knowledge and mystical experiences.

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