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From human desire to divine desire in John of the Cross

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Abstract: John of the Cross presents a spiritual journey of desire in which desire changes from a painful yearning for an infinite other, always out of reach (human desire), to the satisfaction of desire in mutual love and rest (the goal of union with God, conforming human to divine desire). John asserts a continuity of desire between these two states, and that it is possible for human desire to grow from one into the other. Yet they are very different. John's treatment of desire and how he asserts this continuity are assessed through a critical reading of his *Spiritual Canticle*.

Introduction

In many respects, John of the Cross reiterates the standard Neoplatonic approach to desire taken up by Christians such as Augustine and others in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition. As Talbot Brewer has noted, this tradition of thinking about desire, which is not significantly challenged until the modern period, relates all human desire to a fundamental longing for God, which 'takes very different and progressively less illusory forms' in the course of the spiritual life. Desire is a life quest, told in personal terms, with successive articulations which aim to reach a more adequate conception of the ultimate good which is God (Brewer (2006), 270). Brewer points out that Augustine in his *Confessions* claims that in his early life he pursued this desire in 'sex, aesthetic pleasure, philosophic insight, public honour, purely worldly friendship, and other ends', only later realizing that it was more adequately directed towards God. In retrospect, Augustine regards his earlier pursuits as 'unsatisfying displacements' of a desire whose real nature was at that stage 'opaque to, or at least unacknowledged by, its possessor' (*ibid.*, 269). In the Christian conception, as compared with

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non-Christian Neoplatonic accounts (such as Plotinus), this illusory character of the desire, which is gradually dismantled in the process of spiritual growth, is especially important because of the additional emphasis placed on sin, according to which the desire for God inevitably goes wrong without the saving action of Jesus Christ. For Augustine, desire for God is universally present but it is pathologically flawed, leading astray until it is deliberately surrendered to God by the individual in conversion. There is then a particular challenge in grasping what this desire is and how it is to be pursued, which is a work of undeception, requiring grace. How human desire is desire for God, when it is construed antagonistically in relation to God, requires finding something hidden in desire which is obscured by its initial manifestations.

John of the Cross distinguishes between desire in its deceptive and true forms in a way that is recognizably part of this Augustinian tradition. There is a process of transformation in which the nature of desire and the desirer's perception changes. At some points, the change is so great that the desire feels as if it is being lost or, conversely, feels unbearable in its contradictions. The question for John is how to identify true desire in these hostile conditions. When the desire for God feels, alternately, like pain, pleasure, and nothing at all, a means is needed to uncover its hidden reality. God is hidden as ontologically other than creatures, which removes any clear correspondence between God and creatures as objects of desire, and by the sinful tendency of desire to substitute created objects for God, even though they do not satisfy. The means is then both to detach the desire from objects in creation, and to receive the divine revelation of God's desire in the incarnation, which, John claims, reveals a meeting point in human experience between human desire for God and God's desire for creatures (divine desire). Without this theological continuity of human and divine, he suggests, human desires, even when directed towards God, are irreconcilably diverse and frustrating. The reason for thinking that human desires are, at root, a single desire, is that they participate in a single desire which is divine, but this only becomes known with the help of the saving grace of the incarnation.

In approaching these questions, John provides an original perspective that departs from Augustine's account in his emphasis that the continuity that we seek can be intelligibly recognized *as desire* in this life. For Augustine, human desire and divine desire remain more antagonistically construed, not reaching this meeting point in experience. John is more optimistic, pursuing desire for God not just through this phase of antagonism, but as capable of uniting with divine desire in the state of 'union with God' – a goal which is possible in this life, rather than waiting for heaven as for Augustine (Babcock (1994), 190).[1] This difference is partly explained by the influence of Dionysius, who adds another element from the Christian Neoplatonic tradition of desire, namely the identification of the saving action of Christ with the presence in creation of divine *eros* or desirous love (Dionysius (1987), 4.10–17 (708A–713D); McGinn (2017), 249). Then, in a further step, John develops this link between divine *eros* and human

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desire using the mediaeval commentary tradition on the Song of Songs, seeing the process of engagement between divine and human desire as like the growth of passionate love between the lovers in the text, leading to the consummation of desire in union or spiritual marriage.[2] Human desire reaches its goal in a desire which is mutual between the individual and God, a claim which John justifies with reference to the love bond of divine *eros* (the Holy Spirit) that is between the Father and the Son in the Trinity, where desire is mutual in character, and in which humanity shares through the hypostatic union of human and divine in Christ (John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* [hereafter C] 13.11).[3]

In the course of this analysis, John addresses vital issues concerning the nature of desire. First, he contrasts merely appetitive desire, exemplified by the human appetites such as hunger for food, with the desire for God, while also seeking to show that these two kinds of desire ultimately lose their antagonism through the meeting of human and divine desire in union, while remaining distinct. Second, having contrasted the two kinds of desire – not least in terms of satisfaction, saying that the desire for God is marked out by the fact that it cannot be satisfied, even temporarily – he later asserts that the desire for God brings a greater satisfaction, though of a different kind, without an end to desire. These two points, though distinctively handled by John, are also to be found in others in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, but a third is more original.[4] John is concerned to show that human desire unites with God's desire without eliminating the element of lack that remains even when human desire is transformed. Human desire continues to be lacking in relation to the perfection and infinitude of God, but it takes a form that is compatible with the divine abundance. Desire is transformed so that that it is defined by divine abundance, but human lack is included without doing violence to it, becoming part of this transformed desire.

The emergence of desire

John begins from a low view of human capacity in relation to God, on account of the Fall and sin. Fallen desire seeks sensory gratification in preference to God.[5] In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John deals with the outward ascetic response to this problem relatively quickly in Book 1, in terms of the purification of the sensory appetites. He is more concerned with the inward roots of the problem, in the way that the fallen human spirit tries to reduce God to finite mental images, that is, to make God into a creature, which he treats at greater length in Books 2 and 3. In both the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night of the Soul*, which share a single structure, he focuses on the spiritual problem of what he calls the 'disproportion' between created things and God as creator (John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.8.2–3; 2.11.3; 3.12.1). While the mental faculties of intellect, memory, and will can relate to created objects naturally, when they seek God it is not obvious what kind of relationship is required. As made in the image of God, the soul desires God naturally, but as Talbot Brewer

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noted in the case of Augustine, the nature of the desire is inchoate and hidden. John thinks that this requires a purgative process in which the mind is emptied of the mental images and forms of created things, according to the scholastic dictum that 'two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject' (A 1.4.2, p. 78).[6] In fact, as he makes clear elsewhere, the mind cannot literally be emptied of its knowledge of creatures; rather, we are concerned with the ordering of the mind such that its operation in relation to created objects does not obstruct the deeper, more hidden relation that the mind has with God (C 26.16). It is a matter of shifting attention so that God's presence can emerge into awareness. John calls this inward growth of awareness a 'dark inflow' – dark according to Dionysius' notion of God as a super-sensible 'ray of darkness', that is, without the features of created objects, yet utterly present (A 2.6.2; 2.8.6; N 2.5.3; C 14/ 15.16; F 3.49).

The *Ascent of Mount Carmel* dwells on this process of purgation. John gives an example from the process of spiritual direction, which he regards as typical though not normative (the transition is normative, but there are also other ways of going through it). The spiritual director is faced at this stage with individuals who report that that they no longer feel the same desire for God. John says that they can have the feeling of 'not being satisfied with anything' and even of 'distaste for the things of God'. They may feel unable to continue with their spiritual exercises, because of a sense of being 'lost' and 'powerless' (N 1.9.2–3, p. 313; A Prol. 4, p. 71). Bad directors seek to play down these experiences, by ordering souls to greater efforts in their exercises, implying that it is their fault for not trying hard enough (A Prol. 4–5; F 2.30–62). But in fact, correctly discerned, this is a moment of grace, in which 'God transfers his goods and strength from sense to spirit' (N 1.9.4, p. 314). These souls mistakenly identify the warm feelings that they have previously had in spiritual exercises with God's actual presence, and when these disappear, they think that they have lost God. But they are just losing their 'spiritual sweet tooth', John says (A 2.6.5, p. 122; A 2.7.11; A Prol. 8). God is beginning to communicate with the soul 'by an act of simple contemplation, in which there is no discursive succession of thought' (N 1.9.8, p. 315).

The important feature to note is that beneath the feeling of loss, John is pointing to a more authentic, hidden desire that is growing, recognizable not in warm feelings but in the continuing desire to seek God 'solicitously and with painful care' (N 1.9.3, p. 314). This is the beginning of John's 'dark nights'. The way to progress is to concede that the divine object will feel, at this stage and before further transformation, like 'nothing'. It is not that either God or the desire actually is nothing, but rather that the mind's awareness has not caught up with the character of the desire as greater than any particular feeling, interpreting it as nothing out of unfamiliarity. What appears as 'nothing' must then be treated as something: this 'nothing' is to be consciously sought. As he puts it early in the *Ascent*, 'To reach satisfaction in all, desire (*quieras*) its possession in nothing (*nada*) | To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing | To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing | To come to the

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knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing' (A 1.13.11, pp. 103–104).[7] Every known feeling of desire is to be denied but, notably, desire continues: by desiring 'nothing', John means allowing that one could desire something that is not yet known, and in a way not yet known, but which will become known increasingly.

Three initial distinctions of desire have been made. First, desire for creatures and desire for God are distinguished not as competing but as showing their difference by their incompatibility. The difference is marked by an apparent loss of desire, which turns out only to be the loss of the first kind of desire, not of desire entirely. Second, the way to recognize this new desire is to look initially at where desire is lost, in the expectation that the new desire will emerge gradually, in the space that has been made. Third, in answer to the question why this negation of desire should be identified with desire for God, John's response is that the difference between God and creatures is so great that the two desires cannot be simply compared. We can say that we experience both as desire, but what they have in common is not available to observation at the merely creaturely level, and will take time and grace to emerge.

In the *Ascent* and *Night*, the feelings of loss and disorientation dominate. The 'dark nights' mark the shift, through this loss, to the discovery of authentic desire for God. There is some valuable material on John's psychology and anthropology in these works (Howells (2002), 9–59), but for reasons of space I shall move directly to John's later work, the *Spiritual Canticle*, which provides a fuller treatment of desire, moving beyond the stage of loss to the growth of desire and its meeting with divine desire in the state of union. The *Living Flame of Love* covers much of the same territory, but it is shorter, lacking some of the *Canticle*'s significant transitions, and the focus will therefore be on the *Canticle*.

The *Canticle* begins by taking up the experience of desire for God as 'nothing' from the *Ascent*, but the story has moved on, in that the desire is more positively felt, while only its object is obscure. The *Canticle* poem (on which the work is based, taking the form of a commentary on the poem) begins: 'Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?'. God feels absent, but as one who has departed, leaving the soul 'moaning' with desire, rather than simply as 'nothing'. God still seems 'far off and hidden'. The desire is inchoate and troubling in its lack of a clear object. The soul is aware that the desire cannot be satisfied by turning back to creatures (C 1.1, p. 416). Only death and the next life then seem to offer the promise of satisfaction (C 1.4, p. 417). John refuses this conclusion, however, turning to what it means to be created in the image of God. God is to be found within, he says, both as God ('by essence'), and personally, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – not absent, therefore, but merely 'hidden' (C 1.8–9, p. 419). He returns to the non-creaturely nature of God, which requires faith, hope, and love as 'blind man's guides' to lead through the darkness to the divine object. Faith recognizes that God is 'higher and deeper than anything you can reach', beyond the grasp of the natural intellect (C 1.11–13, p. 420). Hope and love affirm that satisfaction does not lie 'in the possession of things, but in

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being stripped of them all in poverty of spirit' (C 1.14, p. 421; 2.6–7). Yet at this point, the most that can be said is that the desire is not for creatures; that it is to be pursued by turning away from creatures, in which faith, hope, and love are the guide; and that the object is situated not outwardly but 'within'. Its more positive nature is still to emerge.

Looking forward, John says that the soul's desire is now inflamed by a 'fire' that drives it to 'go out of itself', which 'wholly renews it, and changes its manner of being', like the phoenix which rises from the ashes (C 1.17, p. 422). A personal transformation is implied, in other words, by this shift from desire's focus on created objects to the hidden divine object, requiring a new 'inward' way of desiring. The new 'desires (*deseos*), affections (*afectos*) and moanings (*gemidos*)' then serve to show what is in the soul's heart, pointing to the way that the desire is rooted in the soul's being rather than belonging to objects outside (C 2.1, p. 425/750).[8] Again John contrasts the desire with the desire for creatures: desire for the things of creation will only 'increase her desire (*ansias*) and suffering rather than bring satisfaction (*satisfacen*)' (C 1.2, p. 436/762). The new desire is differently constituted. But how? The soul cries,

> It seems you are about to give me the jewel of possessing you; but when I become aware of this possession, I discover that I do not have it. . . . Now wholly surrender yourself by giving yourself entirely to all of me, that my entire soul may have complete possession of you. (C 6.6, p. 437)

The problem is that whenever the soul tries to pinpoint *what* it is that she desires, she identifies a created type of object which cannot be God. She cannot yet understand the desire. In consequence, she experiences deep frustration: she feels she is 'dying of love' (C 7.1, p. 438).

The pain is of yearning to possess what is desired, while not knowing any other way of satisfying the desire than in an external (that is, created) object, which is not what she wants. Looking more closely at the desire, she recognizes that it gives life, in spite of the pain: this 'love, in killing her, makes her live the life of love' (C 7.4, p. 438). Her awareness of the desire is growing through this 'death', for 'she dies the more in growing aware that she does not wholly die of love' (C 7.4, p. 439). She has progressed in recognizing that the desire puts her in contact with what she desires, even though she cannot grasp it. She 'lives through love in the object of her love' (C 8.3, p. 441). This, John says, is to discover that 'the image of her Bridegroom' resides within, offering a 'sketch' of God's presence, through which she can at least move towards the object of her desire, a sketch of her goal 'into which the soul desires to be transfigured through love' (C 11.12, p. 453).

This realization frees the desire to grow without obstruction, having grasped the different orientation of the desire, if not its object. It moves out ecstatically towards God in an unlimited movement: she feels 'like one suspended in the air with nothing to lean on' (C 9.6, p. 444). 'She is rushing toward God as impetuously as a falling stone', and she 'calls out to the one who did this sketch to finish the painting and image' (C 12.1, p. 453). The desire takes her in an ecstasy towards

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God but it is also tracked by the inward awareness that this is a movement towards the soul's completion, like a sketch that is being turned into a finished painting. However, at this stage, the ecstatic movement, whose force is now intense, feels as if it will divide the soul and destroy it. 'It is incredible how ardent the longing and pain is that the soul experiences', John says (C 12.9, p. 456). The problem is that while she understands the desire better, she can also 'understand more clearly the infinitude that remains to be understood' (C 7.9, p. 440). How can she ever reach the goal for which she longs, when God is infinite? The reflection plunges the soul into despair. Will the desire simply go on increasing until she is torn apart, between the divine object and the embodied constitution of her soul? John says: 'the torment she experiences at the time of this visit and the terror arising from her awareness of being treated in this supernatural way make her cry: "Withdraw them, Beloved . . . !" ' (C 13.4, p. 459). She asks God to withdraw. She fears that the desire will tear her soul from her body, since it 'causes her to go out of her senses' and is 'beyond what the sensory part can endure' (C 13.1–2, pp. 457–458).

At this point, it becomes clear that the problem is with the soul's conception of desire as based on human lack rather than on the divine abundance. She thinks that her desire for an infinite other implies that there is an infinite lack within her to be filled. This is highly threatening, for she cannot reconcile her infinite lack with her finitude. John says: 'The misery of human existence is such that when the communication and knowledge of the Beloved, which gives more life to the soul and for which she longs so ardently, is about to be imparted, she cannot receive it save almost at the cost of her life' (C 13.3, pp. 458–459). What the soul does not yet know is that her finite desire can participate in divine desire in such a way that she possesses God in the union of love, without threat to her humanity. John thinks that in her fallen state she has lost this knowledge of the continuity between human and divine desire, requiring the incarnation to make it known. This is his cue for introducing the incarnation. Without this divine act, the soul's desire for God, though she now knows it to be the source of her life, is so threatening to her natural existence that she would rather it were removed than continue to pursue it in her human weakness (C 13.3–5).

In the *Spiritual Canticle*, the vital transition of desire occurs in Stanza 13. Once the soul has asked the divine bridegroom to withdraw, to save her from destruction, God replies:

> Return, dove,
> The wounded stag
> Is in sight on the hill,
> Cooled by the breeze of your flight. (C 13.1, p. 458)

The 'wounded stag' is a combination of scriptural metaphors, recalling the stag who longs for water in desire for God, from Psalm 41(42).2–3, and the swift movement of divine desire, like the stag who leaps on the mountains in Song

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2.9 (C 12.9; 1.15). 'Wounded' carries the resonance of the wounds of Christ in the incarnation – this is the incarnate Christ – while the 'wound of love' from the Song of Songs is also implied, referring to the human bride's longing for the bridegroom, and God's desire for the bride.[9] By means of these scriptural connotations, John is orchestrating a set of dramatic connections between human desire and divine desire, revolving around the notion of desire as a 'wound'. God's appearance in the incarnation responds to the 'wound' of humanity's suffering with Christ's own 'wound'. The wounded stag, John says, 'if he hears the cry of his mate and senses that she is wounded . . . immediately runs to comfort and coddle her' (C 13.9, p. 460). It is vital to notice that the wound on both the divine and the human sides is not merely suffering, but desire. The soul's wound is the ecstasy of desire for God, which as we have seen is felt as unbearably painful at this stage. On God's side, God's desire for the creature means that he seeks to share in the wound of her suffering, to be with her. Thus, John says: 'the Bridegroom . . . beholding that the bride is wounded with love for him, he also, because of her moan, is wounded with love for her' (*ibid.*). This talk of desire as a wound brings to mind the 'wound of love' of the Song of Songs, which is not pain but the reciprocal desire of lovers. The wound is transformed for, as John puts it, 'among lovers, the wound of one is a wound for both' (*ibid.*). The wound of God turns the pain of human desire for God into the joy of shared love. Desire for God ceases to be understood as a painful lack, becoming a delightful sharing in God's desire, in love, in which there is no lack. This is union with God. John is suggesting a major shift in the character of desire. The desire changes from the solitary searching of human desire for God who seems absent, or at least unreachable because of the divine infinitude, to the divine desire that is shared between two partners who are in love.

Implications for John's understanding of desire

It is worth reiterating the changes that have occurred to desire, in order to answer the critical questions more fully. First, the antagonistic relationship between human and divine desire, which John has emphasized up to this point, is reversed by the meeting in the wound. As he goes on to say, we experience God's desire (the Holy Spirit) as a refreshing 'breeze' which 'cools' our desire (C 13.11, p. 461). Desire is cooled in the sense that the pathological construction of desire for God as implying infinite lack is removed. 'Rapture' in this sense, John says, ceases: the soul is not torn from the body, but is 'intercepted' in this destructive movement by the movement of the Spirit from the divine side, who meets the soul in her humanity (C 13.6). This allows the soul to 'return' to herself (C 13.8, p. 460). Her desire is detached from its destructive movement and attached to a divine movement that replaces competition with mutuality between the partners. There is still ecstatic desire on both sides, but it is newly constituted, as they move towards each other in a desire that unites human and divine rather than opposing

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them. They join in the 'breeze' of the Holy Spirit, still as the mutual ecstasy of *eros*, but in a peaceful sharing, like the stag who finds refreshment in cool waters (C 13.9).

Second, God is now known within the desire, rather than as an object beyond the desire that desire lacks. John says: 'For just as love is the union of the Father and the Son, so it is the union of the soul with God' (C 13.11, p. 461; C 39.3–5). The distinction of the soul from God is modelled on the distinction of Father and Son in the Trinity, in which the soul knows God from within the union of love, rather than by reference to an object outside it. Thus, God is 'seen' when the wounded stag appears 'in sight on the hill', as soon as God's love for the soul is experienced and the mutual character of the desire becomes known (C 13.10, p. 461). As John says later in the *Canticle*, 'with God, to love the soul is to put her somehow in himself and make her his equal. Thus he loves the soul within himself, with himself, that is with the very love with which he loves himself' (C 32.6, p. 536; C 38.4). Through inclusion in divine desire, God is known not as an object outside the desire, but from within it. This is to develop a new epistemological capacity, in that God can be known primarily according to the distinction between Father and Son, not primarily from the distinction of creatures from God (F 4.5). The continuity between human and divine becomes clear, and the difference is found as an internal distinction within this continuity, putting continuity ahead of difference.

Third, John sees this change in desire as transformative of the self. The self is now conceived no longer as solitary and alienated from God, but as equal with God in love, and constituted by this sharing. The transformation is evident in her dealings with the world. The mutuality of desire 'overflows' beyond the desire for God to desire for others and for creation as a whole. To desire God is now *also* to desire creatures, for the two desires spring from the same root, seeking further others with whom to share the desire. Union, John says, 'overflows into the effective and actual practice of love, either interiorly with the will in the affective act, or exteriorly in works directed to the service of the Beloved' (C 36.4, p. 547). The dynamic of this overflow is from the inside to the outside, first engaging the faculties of intellect, memory, and will, reviving and filling them, so that they become 'deep caverns of feeling' (*cavernas del sentido profundo*), capable of 'feeling' (*sentir*), 'possessing' (*poseer*), and 'tasting' (*gustar*) the 'wisdom and love and communication of God' (F 3.69, p. 637/1016). The overflow then moves outwards, to include the sensory parts of the soul and the body too, engulfing the whole soul (C 28.3–5). Then, John says, 'all the ability of my soul and body (memory, intellect and will, interior and exterior senses, appetites of the sensory and spiritual part) move in love and because of love' (C 28.8, p. 522). The overflow continues until the whole world is seen as rooted in God, where 'all things seem to move in unison' (F 4.4, p. 644). Rather like Ignatius of Loyola's goal of seeing God in all things, or in Gerard Manley Hopkins's phrase seeing the world 'charged with the grandeur of God', John

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treats this as the inevitable consequence of the growth of desire, which sees all others from within its embrace (Ignatius of Loyola (1996), 235). It also issues in virtuous activity, because the 'power to look at God [from within this desire] is, for the soul, the power to do works [expressing the desire] in the grace of God' (C 32.8, p. 536).

What is this new desire? Introducing the state of union in Stanza 14/15 of the *Canticle*, John says:

> Not only do her vehement yearnings and complaints of love cease, but . . . a state of peace and delight and gentleness of love begins in her. . . . She no longer speaks of sufferings and longings as she did before, but of the communion and exchange of sweet and peaceful love with her Beloved, because now in this state all those sufferings have ceased. (C 14/15.2, p. 463)

The sufferings and longings of her pathological desire cease. The disturbances of the bodily appetites are subdued by this change, because the senses and the spirit have been put in order, bringing peace (C 16.2, 9, 10). The soul no longer desires further spiritual progress, for she possesses God with a vision that is painless (C 20/21.11). Her peace and rest in God are stable (C 35.1, 4). In what sense, then, is the new desire still desire? There are two problems for John to answer. On the one hand, divine desire must be construed as not in need of anything, because it is perfect and complete, yet it is still desiring, and out of abundance rather than lack. On the other hand, human desire must be transformed by divine desire without ceasing to be human, showing how lack is sustained on the human side while the union is defined by abundance, without contradiction.

Rowan Williams fills out how John understands divine desire as abundance, with reference to his view of the Trinity. A distinctive feature of John's view of the love between the Father and the Son is that it is not a 'closed mutuality' (Williams (2002), 118). The procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, and the further sending of the Son and the Spirit to creation, indicates that the love is not an 'enclosed' love between them, but is always 'open to a further otherness' (*ibid.*). Their love does not reach a terminus in the object loved; the Father and Son not only love each other but, Williams says, *desire the desire* of the other, desiring a greater, shared desire that proceeds in an 'excess' or 'deflection' beyond them. Trinitarian love is a 'ceaseless or circling deflection' in which love 'is always directed to but never determined by a specific other' (*ibid.*, 119–120). In this sense, we can speak of desire as continuing rather than coming to an end in its object. God desires not because God lacks anything, but because it is desire's nature in God both to be shared, and through this sharing, to expand limitlessly. Human desire responds, as we have seen in John's account, by taking on the divine characteristics of mutuality and 'overflow' towards further others, without ceasing to desire. The desire also shares the divine characteristic of endless expansion, in that 'the more the soul desires God the more it possesses him' (F 3.23, pp. 618–619).

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Human desire is transformed into the pattern of divine desire, but it is not identical with it. It remains unlike divine desire in two respects: it is finite rather than infinite, and it is morally imperfect. The lack of perfection is seen most pressingly for John in the fact that we continue to suffer, along with the whole of creation. We no longer suffer from an unrequited desire for God, now that the desire is requited and God is seen in union, but other kinds of suffering continue. This turns John to further reflection on how human lack in general is met by God in union. The vital concept is that of 'surrender', which extends his earlier treatment of the 'wound'. In love, God surrenders to the soul by choosing to join her in her suffering, to show his desire for her. For the soul, this invites a reciprocal surrender, having learned that God desires her even in her imperfect state, and because, as we have seen, she has reached an impasse in her desire, in which she has 'no remedy other than to put herself in the hands' of God (C 9.1, p. 442). Human imperfection is drawn into the union by this means. It does not define the union, for as John continues, 'each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other' such that there is a 'reciprocal love . . . like the marriage union and surrender, in which the goods of both . . . are possessed by both together' (C 22.3, p. 497; F 3.79, p. 641). The divine abundance trumps human imperfection. But lack is met as lack which, John adds, makes suffering, for the soul, the 'means of her penetrating further' into the 'delectable wisdom of God . . . even to the agony of death in order to see God' (C 36.12, p. 549). The experience of human suffering 'even to the agony of death' has become a point of access to divine desire. On the human side, the desire continues to be motivated by lack, even while being more fully defined by the abundance of divine desire that invites this lack into it, in order to overcome it.

Conclusion

John's understanding of the journey of human desire in relation to God is of a gradual transformation through a wide variety of manifestations of desire, which reaches a crisis, introducing a decisive change, linked to God's action in the incarnation, in which desire for God shifts from desire conceived as lack to desire as abundance. To this extent, his account is a conventional Christian Neoplatonist one. But he is distinctive in placing the mutuality of the lovers of the Song of Songs at the heart of his conception of divine desire, and in focusing the decisive change in the shift from solitary, unrequited desire to shared, reciprocal desire. This is further developed by the notions of the 'wound' and 'surrender' as showing how human weakness and suffering are positively invited into this union and included in it. Yet the continuity between human and divine desire also comes to outweigh their antagonism: John is optimistic about the transformation of human desire into the likeness of divine desire, taking on divine characteristics. God can be known from within the desire, in the manner of the Father and Son in the Trinity, rather than as a quasi-creaturely, external object; the same desire points to God's presence in all human relations, making God available

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in the world; and there is satisfaction in the continuation of the desire without end, which detaches the pain of lack from human growth.

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Notes

1. Babcock argues that desire in Augustine is 'an active exercise that serves to expand the capacity of the self and make it capable (*capax*) of the vision it awaits' (Babcock (1994), 190). But in contrast to John, the vision is awaited, rather than already present (other than in brief flashes on which Augustine does not dwell), and consequently how it becomes *human* desire is not spelled out.
2. John's positive view of *eros* follows Dionysius as well as the tradition of commentary on the Song of Songs begun by Origen and represented at its height by Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (1135–1153). Contrast its more recent denigration by Nygren (1937–1938).
3. See my comments on this pivotal passage below; also see C 39.3; F 3.79; 4.16–17.
4. The notion that there is a new kind of satisfaction in endless desire is most strongly associated with Gregory of Nyssa, though also present in some others; and the way that human desires are included in divine desire in union, losing their former antagonism, is also to be found in Bernard of Clairvaux's treatment of union, for instance.
5. There are few treatments specifically of desire in John of the Cross. I have found two unpublished works useful: Hole (2016); Aloysius (2017).
6. I have added page number(s) where I have quoted directly, here and below. John of the Cross's individual works are abbreviated as follows:

   A *Ascent of Mount Carmel*
   C *Spiritual Canticle* (B redaction)
   F *Living Flame of Love* (B redaction)
   N *Dark Night*.

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7. See John's diagram (John of the Cross (1979), 66–67).
8. The second page number refers to the Spanish (original language) edition of John's works (Juan de la Cruz (1994)), and hereafter. John has a wide range of words associated with desire: *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 e.g. by McGinn (2017), 257.
9. The 'wound of love' is introduced at C 1.14. These scriptural metaphors for desire recall Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, the most influential source for the interpretation of the Song of Songs in this period, in which they are all to be found, though John putsthem in a new combination.

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