

# Jana Trajtelová

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## Distance and nearness in the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross : a phenomenological study

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JANA TRAJTELOVÁ

## **DISTANCE AND NEARNESS IN THE MYSTICISM OF SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS. A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

**Abstract.** This article is concerned with a phenomenological exploration of Western mysticism, more concretely, the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross. This research lies within the context of broader phenomenological inquiries of the phenomenology of the person as well as the phenomenology of the religious experience. The first part briefly outlines the author's methodological and thematic standpoint. The article then clarifies the basic concepts of 'distance', 'nearness' and 'desire'. In so doing, it will be able to present the philosophical conclusions arising from the elaborated perspective: the crucial role of passivity, the question of appropriating identity and the essential character of mysticism. It concludes with an interpretation of mysticism as the most radical experience of interpersonality.

**Keywords:** mysticism, possession, dispossession, gift, interpersonal relations, loving

1. Introduction. 2. On distance and nearness in philosophy and mysticism. 3. Between distance and nearness: desire. 4. Conclusions. 4.1. The crucial role of passivity. 4.2. Appropriating identity. 4.3. Mysticism in a small scale. 4.4. Western mysticism and interpersonality.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, I discuss the set of issues that concern and contribute to the research of phenomenology of Western Mysticism. First of all, I would like to clarify the leading perspective of these considerations. The phenomenon of mysticism I treat here is a radicalized form of religious experience, which plays an important role in the understanding of the personal and interpersonal dimension of the human being, and

which reveals in an exemplary way its fundamental constitutive movements (as given within the Western cultural context).

The initial motivation for my phenomenological inquiry of Western mysticism stems from and consists in a basic assumption that the specific liminal character of the mystical life reveals more clearly the essential structure of certain phenomena, which are greatly significant in the constitution of the human being precisely as *personal being*. Therefore, in direct opposition to a standard view on mysticism as an obscure and rather exceptional occurrence, I present the authentic mystical life as the key to the meaning of crucial personal-life phenomena. These phenomena are disclosed here lucidly and with extreme intensity. This means, from the opposite point of view, that all the crucial phenomena essential for the process of the personal becoming (like openness, desire, dispossession, loving) are in mysticism led into their very extreme, and hence they can be characterized by extreme lucidity and bear an outstanding evidential force. Or to put it differently, I maintain that the experiences of the mystical life are (in a specific way explained thereafter) nothing more and nothing less than radicalized forms of the personal and interpersonal life experiences (taken to extreme).

I will therefore insist on a direct connection between the experiential field of mysticism and the experiential field of personal and interpersonal life, as well as between the proper understanding of the very core of mysticism and the understanding of the meaning of the “person,” the “Self,” and the “interpersonal relation” (again, peculiar to the Western tradition and comprehensible only within this context). Mysticism thus serves as a valuable and effective key for conceiving the essential movements involved in the constitution of the personal human being precisely as *human* and as *personal* in the most profound sense of these words. This leading insight also has an advantage available for a particular sort of phenomenological observations, especially for the phenomenology of the person, since the enhanced visibility and exemplarily “pure forms” of the revealed phenomena enables us to give a more distinctive structural account of these particular phenomena peculiar to personal life. After these clarifying re-

marks I do not hesitate to qualify the mystical experience not only as a radicalized form of a religious experience, but as a radicalized form of an experience of the person as person, of the human being as essentially personal and interpersonal (to outline the important co-relation and co-dependency between the two).

At this point, the solid experiential frame for my philosophical observations is provided by an exceptional work and piercing descriptions of one of the greatest mystical authors of the West, the Spanish Catholic mystic of the 16th Century, John of the Cross. I will, however, maintain that all the identified principal movements and essential structures described under his authority hold generally for the whole Abrahamic mystical tradition (notwithstanding the question of its unique guises peculiar for the each particular mystical author). And it is my view that precisely the same kinds of movements operate also within the process of the personal becoming of an individual.

I would like to add that in order to glimpse the overall view and to present here the condensed picture of the exceedingly rich and complex theme, I could not avoid some inevitable simplifications or schematizations (like the clear separation of the “dark” and the “light”, of the “distance” and the “nearness”, the “possession” and the “gift”) – as indeed, I dare to claim, already the mystic does (to some extent) in order to supply the better orientation in the extremely dynamic and “saturated” field of mystical life<sup>1</sup>. In our case, the simplification is useful for better visualizing and underlining the particular character of the decisive fundamental movements, its inherent dynamism and unavoidable tensions. Of course, it would be worthwhile to go into more detail about each of the distinctive phenomena of the mystical life (openness, desire, attachment – detachment, affliction, union, gift). All those phenomena (or rather movements – emphasizing its essentially dynamic character) deserve special place and attention, which cannot be satis-

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<sup>1</sup> St. John of the Cross dedicated two of his major treatises on mystical theology to the experience of the so called “dark night” (*Ascent of Mont Carmel* and *The Dark Night*) and the other two excellent treatises appertain to experiences of great intimacy and mystical union (*Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*).

fied in this paper<sup>2</sup>. Here I want to outline the basic structures, describe the fundamental movements peculiar to mystical life, and emphasize its proper place and relevance in the broader context of the personal life of an individual.

By way of a brief methodological clarification, I would like to specify that my exploration is mostly held (1) within the genetic phenomenological framework, which means within the perspective of a temporal continuity of individual monadic life, with a special regard to the process of its personal becoming; (2) within the broader phenomenological understanding of “experience,” which here includes the possibility of also taking into account the religious dimension of human being with its peculiar kinds of givenness (namely “vertical givenness,” and its various distinctive modes as were carefully elaborated by A. J. Steinbock)<sup>3</sup>. (3) And of course, since I also rely to a great extent on the original mystical texts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, I can not avoid careful considerations of the relevant hermeneutical aspects that are also inevitably at stake here.

## 2. ON DISTANCE AND NEARNESS IN PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM

My inquiry into the essential structures of the mystical life starts with focusing on the two most obvious complementary aspects of Western mysticism, which can be variously experienced as *nearness* and as *distance*. First, I would like to clarify what I mean with these terms and to what kinds of experiences they refer. I will illustrate both of the complementary aspects more deeply within the framework of the major writings of John of the Cross.

The concept of unavoidable “distance” is not novel in philosophy and theology. It is explicitly evoked in J. L. Marion or Simone Weil,

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<sup>2</sup> I treat the phenomena in more detail in my book *Vzdialenosť a blízkosť mystiky* [*Distance and Nearness of Mysticism*], FF TU, Trnava 2011.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism. The Verticality of Religious Experience*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2007, 1–43.

and plays the important role in thinking of E. Lévinas as well. Distance admittedly appears in Weil's thoughts on affliction (of a man and of Christ dying on the cross), on absence and the kenotic love of God<sup>4</sup>. Jean-Luc Marion in his early writing *Idol and Distance*, evidently inspired by mystical theology, points out the essential importance of distance for a non-idolatrous approach to the Divine<sup>5</sup>. Disregarding now the peculiar conceptual differences, the concept of distance points to the irrevocable separation and the essentially irreducible and ungraspable character of the Other. But this rather metaphoric expression is in no case a mere theoretical concept. Its existential meaning emerges from the religious and interpersonal experiential base, to which is testified, in an exemplary manner, in mysticism.

St. John of the Cross is notable for his well-known treatises and enchanting poems, which describe the uneasy journey of the soul to its union with God. The horror, anguish and suffering along the journey as well as the highest peaks of loving unity and bliss are both the integral parts of the same path. Both complementary (rather than sequential) aspects relate to the process of the deep essential transformation that accrues to the personal Self, when it rushes in desire to reach the Other. Let's take a deeper look at experiences of the mystic.

In a broad sense of the word, under the rubric of *distance* we can include all those experiences that St. John of the Cross qualifies as the experiences of "the night". He carefully distinguishes between the active part of the night (the night of the senses) and the passive night of the spirit where the person is deprived of every possible egoic activity. The decisive transformational experiences and the very core of his teaching concern the latter, namely "the dark night of the soul" and the experience of *affliction*.

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<sup>4</sup> S. Weil, *Waiting for God*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York 1973, 117–136 (Love of God and Affliction). However, the concept relates to more original Jewish teaching (by Isaac Luria) concerning the particular understanding of the act of the creation – as a "contraction" (and "distancing") rather than the "expansion" of God. Due to this "contraction" the physical world and the free will can exist.

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, Fordham University Press, New York 2001.

St. John of the Cross in *Ascent of Mont Carmel* and *The Dark Night*<sup>6</sup> presents the gradual accretion of distance up until its very apex depicted as a total abandonment and appalling affliction, the so-called “mystical death”. Here he describes a challenging existential process that can be interpreted in terms of increasing intensification of the gradual *dis-possession*. The mystical path (at least from this part) is thus understood as the thoroughgoing process of dispossession: starting from the basic sensual dimension and active asceticism, continuing through emotions and intellectual abilities, ending with the level of spirit and the radical passivity of affliction. The process may take on various different modalities and various grades of intensity. The mystic’s piercing descriptions suggest, in a very dramatic way, that the only way toward the authentic nearness leads inevitably across and within the distance.

The experience of the “dark night” or the mystical affliction, according to St. John of the Cross and other mystics, is absolutely necessary and decisive in the mystical life. The core of this experience is best understandable with respect to the broader view of mystical life, considering the overall existential orientation and the very aim of the mystical path, which stands behind all of the mystic’s efforts. The (principally unreachable) aim of the mystics is generally known as “mystical union”, and refers to the deep appropriation of the permanent loving presence of the Other (and not only the “union” in sense of the exceptional ecstatic experience of non-dualism that, however, can occur here, but never becomes an aim for itself). Regarding this clarification, the affliction of the dark night is experienced primarily as an unbearable distance, a complete absence or abandonment suffered from the Beloved, as a deep rupture in experience of the Other (besides all the other hardships that are borne, like physical suffering, repulsion from others, psychical distresses of any kind, etc.)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, it con-

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<sup>6</sup> *Dark Night of the Soul* or *La noche oscura del alma* is also the title of a poem by John of the Cross. The same named treatise was written as the commentary on the poem.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Dark Night* he writes: “When this purgative contemplation oppresses a

sequently brings a deep rupture in the experience of the Self itself, as it pertained to itself through the previous appropriated experiences, especially as it was given to itself before the Beloved Other. The mystic, so eager to disclaim everything for the Beloved (using John's terminology), loses everything perfectly by "losing God", thus he seems to be deprived now of any possible meaning he could still lean on, perfectly paralyzed and dispossessed in passivity: The pure "dark contemplation", the divine inflowing "into the soul" (as the mystic proclaims already in a safe distance from the horror of affliction): "saturated phenomenon" par excellence! However, the mystic experiences the mystical affliction as a complete negation of sense and as radical poverty, finds himself as sense-less and in that sense also self-less. And it even seems, after all, that the bare experience of the Self as given to itself, undergoes the painful disruption. John shortly writes of experiencing the „terrible undoing (*deshacimiento*) in its (soul's) very substance"<sup>8</sup> when he talks about the purification of the very "roots of the soul".

The "negation" ("negación") operating all the way to Mount Carmel is perfectly consistent. Nothing left. *Nothing* ("nada") accompanies the mystic all along the mystical path leading up to Mount Carmel; *nothing* seems to remain even at the very top of the ascent (or rather descent?): only the unbearable bareness and separation. There is no mastership, no active self-affirmation possible. I will briefly summarize the final result. Step by step, each one, even the most subtle form of the *possessive relation* is taken away: *my* sensual delights, *my* good deeds and virtues, *my* proficiencies, *my* knowledge and *my* intellect, and also

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soul, it feels very vividly indeed the shadow of death, the sighs of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of God's absence, of being chastised and rejected by him, and of being unworthy of him, as well as the object of his anger. The soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems that this affliction will last forever". (Book 2, Chapter 6, 2). "The soul experiences an emptiness and poverty in regard to three classes of goods (temporal, natural, and spiritual) which are directed toward pleasing it, and is conscious of being placed in the midst of the contrary evils (the miseries of imperfections, aridities and voids in the apprehensions of the faculties, and an abandonment of the spirit in darkness". (Book 2, Chap. 6, 4).

<sup>8</sup> *The Dark Night* (Book 2, Chap. 6, 6).

*my* prayer, *my* asceticism, *my* ways, and even *my* self-understanding, *my* identity and *my* God. It is evident that not the named goods are at stake here, but the *mine-ness* in all of them. As Eckhart says at various places of his writings, not the things are the obstacles along the way to unity, but *me* in all these things – hence the sense of his famous “detachment”. There is nothing left to affirm the identity of the “possessor” supplied by various kinds of possessions. The Self is led stepwise and radically to abandon every subtle *mine-ness* (that usually was being imposed on the constituted meaning). The bond of idolatry operating within the possessive relation toward all these entities tends to constitute the self-limiting reality of the possessor possessed by the possession he possesses. Omitting the dramatic charge of the transformational existential process outlined above, the so-called “mystical death” refers precisely to the effacement of such an ownership; it refers to the radically executed death of the “possessor”.

But the mystical life is not only such a dark portrayal of the complete dispossession of the possessive and self-possessing Self. It is in no case the aim of the mystical path for itself. The whole picture is much more complex, much more dynamic. St. John of the Cross has drawn several sketches of Mount Carmel. At the very top of the mystical ascent, there is written not the Spanish word “nada” (*nothing* – emptiness, meaninglessness), but “todo” (*everything*, namely “La gloria y honra de Dios”). The “nada” presents precisely the *way*, not the aim of mystic’s existential routing. The radical dispossession of the Western mysticism, the complete deprivation of any *mine-ness*, the radical existential poverty of the “nada” is paradoxically the only way to and the condition of possibility of appropriating *everything* “todo.” Since “when it (the soul) shall be perfectly dispossessed, it will remain with the perfect possession of God, in Divine union”<sup>9</sup>.

The other two major treaties (*Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*) are devoted to descriptions of “owning everything”. Experiencing the abundance of the loving presence in mysticism is (again) led

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<sup>9</sup> Here, John writes of dispossession precisely with regard to “hope” and “dispossession of memory”. *Ascent of Mont Carmel* (Book 3, Chap. 7).

to its mystical extremity; it is the *loving presence* in a deeply radicalized form. The extreme intensity and the overabundance of the living presence of the Other is the well-known essential feature of mysticism. The *gift* of the Other can be given in number of inexhaustible ways (from the quiet mutual sharing of inner life to the ecstasies of Unity). The lover (“Amada”) is perfectly preoccupied by the Beloved (“Amado”). Loving unity can be described as the perfect mutual gift-giving, where the gift, the gifted and the gift-giver coincide. Mystical unity by St. John of the Cross means the perfect unity of loving relation. By the words of the mystic: “the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is that in the union and transformation of love, each gives possession of self to the other and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love”<sup>10</sup>.

Taken as a mystical extreme, the lowest point of the “night” became the highest point of the essential transformation. St. John of the Cross emphasizes that the mystical dispossession disposes oneself for receiving the most radical gift – in Western tradition of mysticism – the Divine (given as the Other). Unfortunately, I cannot go into more detail with the immensely attractive descriptions of the highest apexes of the mystical life as described by John of the Cross. It is not necessary for my further conclusions. But I still want to emphasize what St. John of the Cross understands under the term “divinization”. Regarding the overall character of his mystical path, it is not a big surprise that he qualifies the *divinization* (“endiosamiento”; such a hardly discussed term in theology) with a breath-taking simplicity as the perfect “passing out of self to the Beloved”<sup>11</sup>. Thus the mystical *transformation* (“transformación”) refers to the transformation of the entire way of the fundamental existential orientation of the human being, of the very way of its self-giveness.

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<sup>10</sup> *Spiritual Canticle* (Chant 12, 7).

<sup>11</sup> *Spiritual Canticle* (Chant 26, 14).

The transformation of the possessor into the gifted has taken place here. In Western mysticism, the radical dispossession radically disposes for the radical gift (even though the existential weight of such radicalism can be borne by the already radically gifted). The extent of the dispossessing is the extent of the disposing for the awaited gift. The Self underwent the experience of its own painful death in order to be given to itself in an essentially new way, as the gifted. By the death of the possessor the gifted may be born. Dispossession releases for the gift, which solely overcomes the fundamental and irrevocable distance.

### 3. BETWEEN DISTANCE AND NEARNESS: DESIRE

At the basis of the careful observations of the mystic, we can follow the assumed “innocent” situation: the Self tends to secure itself and to affirm its bare being and identity through the closing and fixating movements of possessing. This is happening at all the levels of its objectify-able reality (volitional, emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual). In the depicted situation, the Self is given to itself through its mine-ness, through the possessive relation toward its various possessions with which it identifies itself. The inclusive possessive movement supplies the careful delimitation of impermeable borders of the appropriated domain. The intimate dependency of the Self on the possessively fixated meanings refers to the hidden perversion of the possessive relation: the possessor is being possessed by its possession rather than mastering it, and paradoxically involved in the constant fight for keeping this enslaved isolated position.

At the same time, remarkably, the human being experiences different kinds of movements, which run precisely contrary to the self-securing possessive movements. The experience of these disturbing forces is known as *desire* – the Augustine’s “*Cor inquietum*”<sup>12</sup> (in-quiet disposition of “heart”). And even without explicitly invoking the radi-

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<sup>12</sup> “*Inquietum est cor meum donec requiescat in Te*”. St. Augustine, *Confessions* (X, XXVII).

calism of the mystical experiences, the phenomenon of desire effortlessly testifies to the strangely strained situation of the human being; as if the whole mystical story (even the whole “story” of the human being) described above, was inscribed or embodied in this particular phenomenon.

The entire history of mysticism is the history of the restless call of desire. It keeps the leading and dominant position in spite of all the demands of detachment and all the ascetic claims. Actually, desire lies behind all the authentic religious efforts and nourishes all authentic forms of religious practices, asceticism and service. Only its tireless vivifying force motivates one to take on and to bear the entire burden of the mystical life. All the restless effort of the mystics would be inconceivable without it. Religious life devoid of its passionate and life-enjoying charge would become perverted into its frozen counterfeit and end up in existential sterility. And like all the mentioned phenomena, even the desire is led to its very extreme in mysticism: its seductive and inviting force is experienced in an unbearable intensity.

*Desire* is an extraordinary phenomenon with paradoxical, even impossible ways of givenness. We are acquainted with the piercing phenomenological analyzes of desire by E. Lévinas or with the careful descriptions of the phenomena by R. Barbaras<sup>13</sup>. I keep the essential distinction between desire and need (so visible in mysticism!), but in spite of Lévinas, I am ready to identify the restless movement of desire with the *pure* form of “eros”, too<sup>14</sup>. And contrary to Barbaras, I hold the position that desire does not refer to life originally bound to a world; or

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<sup>13</sup> I will not go into more detail with their conceptions and the comparison, neither with considering the serious conceptual differences between the two and its consequences. But I certainly owe a lot to both of them. Cf. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969; R. Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005.

<sup>14</sup> In the Greek mythology, eloquently enough, Eros is a capricious child of the impossible conjunction of Pores (of “lack”, “scarcity”) and Penia (“affluence”). Regarding the experiences of mysticism, eros seems to be the most expressive manifestation of the restless movement of the desire.

to put it differently, I maintain that a so-called “essential incompleteness” is not bound to life eager to embrace the world (essentially non-totalizable and un-presentable), but points far beyond itself, far beyond the world, toward an “other” (in the Western context, given primarily as personal Other, human or Divine).

Desire is experienced as an in-depth-originated existential movement. In relation to the possessive ego-oriented movements, it is given as dispossessing and disorienting counter-movement, which calls the unproblematic solitary reality of the possessor into question, even more, discredits it. There is nothing to grasp, nothing to possess in desire. It is a pure call to openness, to a trustful, all-expecting powerless awaiting; a welcoming invitation to nearness. The desire calls to and refers to nearness and thus paradoxically reveals it through its absence. *Desire* desires *nearness* and experiences *distance*. It lives by means of the same distance, which it longs to overcome. Moreover, the mystic alludes that the desire is a highly positive value since it is already the harbinger of the desired, the “touch” or “memento” of the desired Other.

The paradoxical mode of givenness refers to an everlasting thirst for the Other – in case of the mystic primarily (but not exhaustively) thirst for Divine Other. Everything that stands in the way of disclosing desire must be cleared away. Let me emphasize again: it runs contrary to the closing possessive movements depicted above. The desire possess only what is devoid of possession. The desire is thus already the movement of dispossession itself, and its very activity refers to the more original passivity. No wonder that in mysticism, it is precisely the desire that leads the mystic toward the “night” up until loosing itself in radical dispossession of the affliction.

Mysticism, with regard to the phenomenon of desire, reveals the strained existential position of the human being as being situated within the non-relievable tension between distance and nearness, and thus involved, as it were, with an unquiet existential “dancing” in-between the two. The *desire* promises (even touches) *nearness* and experiences *distance*. It operates as a dispossessing and as a gifting force at the same time. That is why

the radical desire of mysticism steps over itself, penetrates the distance, accepts its entire unbearable burden, and somehow intuitively searches for the authentic nearness *through* and *within* the distance.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

##### 4.1. The crucial role of passivity

Now I would like to outline briefly the crucial role of *passivity*. It is already evident that the intensity of passivity increases commensurably with the extent of dispossession (with the emphasis on significance of the dispossession, not the passivity itself). The dark night brings the irrevocable overabundance of passivity, which is experienced as the complete powerlessness and disability of the Self. The affliction of the dark night as pure passivity means a pure dispossession. More precisely, I am evoking here the passivity of “pathos”, the passivity of the “patient” in contrast with ego-agency, paralyzing it, and breaking the homogenous domain of the consciousness.

“Pathos” is dominating in experiences of suffering and affliction, as well as in experiencing of magnetizing force of love-allurements or “ecstasies”. And pathos is unavoidably present in desire, of course. For example, Lévinas in his paper on suffering writes that the “suffering in its in-spite-of-consciousness, is passivity”<sup>15</sup>. An unwelcome superfluity of inapprehensible meaning paralyzes the self-supporting activities

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<sup>15</sup> Lévinas in his paper on suffering, talks about the “datum” or “content” of consciousness given as in-spite-of-consciousness. Suffering he describes as a “way in which the refusal, opposing the assemblage of data into a meaningful whole, rejects it; at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself. It is not only the consciousness of rejections or a symptom or rejection, but this rejection itself: a backward consciousness, ‘operating’ not as ‘grasp’ but as revulsion (...) the way in which, within a consciousness, the unbearable is precisely not borne, the manner of this not-being-borne; which, paradoxically, is itself a sensation or a datum (...). Suffering in its in-spite-of-consciousness, is passivity. (...) But passivity which signifies independently and originally, not as a conceptual opposition to activity; passivity more profoundly passive than the receptivity, more passive than experience (...) un-meaning, the *not* of evil, absurdity (...)”. E. Lévinas, *Useless Suffering*, in: E. Lévinas, *Entre nous*, Continuum, London 2006, 78.

of the Self. St. John of the Cross observes that all the possible egoic activities, however good and disinterested can be easily turned into *my* activities and thus nourish the self-oriented identity of the possessor (*my* good deeds, *my* prayers and deserts, and so on). But it is hard, if not impossible, to find any mine-ness in the pure passivity of mystical affliction. There is nothing to grasp. The point is that the state of such *existential poverty*, in its bare submission and powerlessness, might turn into a significant means of self-transcendence, pointing beyond, far beyond the limits of mine-ness of the Self.

To point out briefly, it is remarkable that at the very apexes of the mystical life, namely, at the point of the mystical *affliction* of the “dark night” and by the ecstatic *loving encounters*, there is unconquerable overabundance of passivity. We can notice that in the both cases, the “pathos” of that passivity paralyzes the active ego and all its possible actions and masteries; thus both of the liminal experiences are purely dispossessive; both are given as inflicted unexpectedly, as a pure (welcomed or non-welcomed) gift; both are bearing an extraordinary effective transformative force; both are pointing to the ungraspable Other (in negation and absence as well as in ecstatic surplus of the loving presence); both completely disable the personal Self to possess itself, since it is rather being possessed. To conclude (regarding not only these liminal cases), the passivity of pathos thus shows itself as the accurate ambience for the possible essential transformation<sup>16</sup>.

#### 4.2. Appropriating identity

The experience of the mystical life according St. John of the Cross reveals the two ways of appropriating and sustaining one’s personal identity. Those are qualified by the two different kinds of antagonistic constitutive movements. The identity thus may be principally given in the two different manners, in the way of the possessor (creating the solitary, solid, impermeable egoic core, instituting the fixed borders

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<sup>16</sup> In no case I mean to dismiss the significance of activity (so peculiar to Western mysticism), but my point is that even activity (like genuine charity and service) arises out of the more profound attitude of receptive passivity and welcoming openness.

of the Self domain) and in the way of the gifted (instituting the open permeable ambience of the Self, supporting the vivid dynamism of the gift-giving exchange). These ways, however, seems to be qualitatively unequal.

Innocently self-concerned Self tends to affirm its identity by the possessive movements through which it identifies itself with its various kinds of possessions. Regarding the capricious character of the possessive relation, such an identity is menacingly restless and unstable, and in particular, self-limiting. But within the personal and interpersonal dimensions, where the dispossessive and invitational forces takes place, the human being is lead toward the deeper confrontation with and to the acceptance of the distance; hence the identity of the Gifted may be constituted. Within the dynamic field of inter-personality, the Self, freed from itself, receives itself anew as a gift. Let me add that the transformative force lies not in the dispossession itself, but in the received gift of the intimate ever-dynamic life of the interpersonal relation. The essential transformation is inconceivable outside the interpersonal field and its character may be qualified by disinterested openness and other-orientation.

The identity of the Gifted, however, can never achieve the ostensible stability or safety of the fixed or possessed meaning. Mystics are deeply aware of the precious but fragile position of the gifted: the slightest possessive grasp can pervert and kill the gift, can easily destroy the ever-open and non-graspable flow of its meaning. One Chasidic saying is piercingly depicting the path through this world like the razor of the knife: abyss from the one side, abyss from another; and the way of life in between. The slightest “possessive” step “aside” can already mean the betrayal of the gift and the decline back to the possessed identity and to the possessive way of being. The mystic’s awareness of this situation is already his triumph over it, a awareness of the Gifted.

#### 4.3. Mysticism in a small scale

In the mysticism of St. John of the Cross, and in radicalism of mysticism generally, we could observe the exemplary “pure forms” of the phenomena, which are so significant in the process of the personal

becoming. We can however trust mystics and admit that the radical acceptance of distance and perfectly executed process of the dispossession can lead to a complete transformation into the Gifted (or as close to its completion as it gets). Hence the extremism of mysticism! But our lives are hardly qualified by such an existential radicalism. In spite of the last comment, the same constitutive movements as described above remain valid – on a small scale or in an attenuated form. Certainly, the strict distinctions like distance – nearness, the possessor – the gifted, extracted from the radical experience of mysticism, which talk significantly of the genuine experience of mystics, cannot be so clearly distinguished when it comes to our “ordinary” personal life. Rather, we are witness to many “deaths” of our possessive self and many of our “births” each new day; rather we find ourselves involved in a constant tension of unpredictable interplay of distance and nearness; struggle to keep and to protect the vulnerable position of the gifted. The process of personal becoming shows rather as slightly graduated a never accomplished process of being dispossessed and of being gifted.

#### 4.4. Western mysticism and interpersonal

The Western tradition of mysticism has essentially an interpersonal character. The Divine is given primarily (but not exhaustively) as the personal Other within the dynamic field of the interpersonal interplay. Here I evoke the inner connection to a peculiar Western self-understanding and understanding of the term “person”, even if we consider the recently preferred asymmetrical term of the Other (accessible as inaccessible, as Infinity, etc.).

I have suggested that the genuine experiences of the mystical life can be qualified as the radicalized and exemplary forms of the personal life experiences (with emphasis on “personal” in its genuine sense as “relational”), with all its demands, losses and benefits taken to its extreme.

And, I have implicitly demonstrated what the essence of the Western mysticism is, or rather what is not: It is not only the effectual turning toward the inner life, nor only the peaceful state of mind, nor the

changed or expanded states of the consciousness; it is not any of the so-called extraordinary occurrences. It is not even the extraordinary and admirable life-form of some heroic individual. Mysticism is neither well characterized by the mystical Union and divine ecstasies of love, nor by Self-abandonment and the affliction of dark night. The core of the Western mysticism rests upon quite a different foundation. It testifies of the grade and the essential quality of the relationship. It appears as a simple and fascinating manifestation of interpersonality (given in its most deeply radicalized form). All the mystical phenomena named above, which usually stay in the center of the broader attention, are rather the side effects of this all-embracing interpersonal orientation, and can be properly understood only within its context. What is mysticism? “Cognitio Dei experimentalis”<sup>17</sup> – as the classical middle-aged definition says. What kind of experiment is the definition evoking? Mysticism is a radical existential experiment: it is the most radical experience of interpersonality.

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<sup>17</sup> “Experiential cognition of God” – an old definition know from and used by Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventura or Nicolaus Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa).

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