

# “MANY KNOW MUCH, BUT DO NOT KNOW THEMSELVES”: SELF-KNOWLEDGE, HUMILITY, AND PERFECTION IN THE MEDIEVAL AFFECTIVE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

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In an earlier paper, I described self-knowledge as a persistent and paradoxical theme in medieval mysticism: persistent insofar as the injunction to know oneself is ubiquitous in the contemplative tradition, paradoxical insofar as focusing on oneself seems inimical to the contemplative goal of losing oneself in God.<sup>1</sup> Self-knowledge is also a popular topic in medieval scholasticism – addressed in disputations by Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and any number of others – but scholastic and contemplative discussions differ widely in both how they approach this topic and what they say about it. In particular, scholastic discussions tend to focus on the mechanics of self-knowledge (whether and how we could know ourselves) and to embed these discussions within general epistemological frameworks, while discussions in the contemplative tradition usually concentrate on the importance of self-knowledge for the moral and religious life.

Today, philosophers interested in self-knowledge usually look to the scholastic tradition, where the topic is addressed in a systematic and familiar way. Contemporary conceptions of what medieval figures thought about self-knowledge thus skew toward the epistemological. In so doing, however, they often fail to capture the crucial ethical and theological importance that self-knowledge possesses throughout the Middle Ages.

This paper continues my efforts to complement existing discussions of medieval scholastic views of self-knowledge with resources from within the

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<sup>1</sup>“Self-Knowledge, Abnegation, and Fulfillment in Medieval Mysticism,” page 131, in *Self-Knowledge: a History*, ed. U. Renz (Oxford Philosophical Concepts Series, Oxford University Press, 2016) 131-145.

contemplative tradition. The scholastic focus on the possibility for and mechanics of self-knowledge cannot explain *why* we should seek to know ourselves, nor can it account for the widely-acknowledged importance of such searching and its outcomes. Human beings are not transparent to themselves: in particular, knowing oneself in the way needed for moral progress requires hard and rigorous work. Yet, medieval contemplatives insist, without this work we will never attain our final end. In this paper, I trace the connection drawn in this tradition between self-knowledge, humility, and self-fulfillment, arguing in section 1 that the humility that results from introspection needs to be understood in the context of contemplative expectations for eventual perfection. Self-knowledge is key for developing the relationship with God that leads to mystical union, but (as I show in section 2) in the affective tradition of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, which emphasizes the role of emotion and the body, such union with God tends to restore rather than annihilate us. In fact, I argue in section 3, the outcome of such union even in this life is often knowledge that benefits not only the individual who experiences it but also their broader community.

## 1. Putting the Self into Perspective

In the prologue to Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue*, Truth speaks the following words: "You ask for the will to know and love me, supreme Truth. Here is the way, if you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me, eternal Life: *Never leave the knowledge of yourself.*" This injunction might come as a surprise to modern readers, who might expect something more like "pray unceasingly" or "meditate upon my works", but by the time Catherine (who describes herself in the opening paragraph as "dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge") reports these words in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, this advice is completely commonplace in the contemplative tradition. Indeed, a persistent theme across the wide range of geographic regions and religious orders in this period is that the search for the truth about God requires first coming to terms with the truth about oneself.

An important source for this theme is the popular *Meditations*, attributed at the time to the 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux (although more likely written in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>2</sup> A text that consistently stresses the

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<sup>2</sup>For a brief history of the meditative tradition in medieval mysticism, see "Meditatio/Meditation" by Thomas Bestul, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 157-166.

importance of self-knowledge for *sapientia*, or “true” wisdom, the *Meditations* opens with the observation that serves as the title of this paper: “Many know much, but do not know themselves.” Following a path that can be traced back to the Delphic oracle’s command, the *Meditations* picks up on themes common to Pseudo-Dionysius and the Augustinian Victorines (particularly Richard and Hugh of Saint Victor); one of the most widely read pieces of devotional literature at the time, it has enormous influence on later contemplative movements, setting the stage for a persistent emphasis on the centrality of introspection and self-transparency in the journey towards God. If the final goal for medieval contemplatives and mystics is union with God, however, why should it matter if we know ourselves? Answers given to that question are complex and varied, but one common reply is that human beings aren’t the kind of creatures who can jump straight to contemplating God’s essence: we must start a little closer to home and hone the relevant abilities with respect to ourselves first. As the anonymous 14<sup>th</sup> century English *Book of Privy Counselling* explains, experience of God requires refinement beyond the original ‘rudeness’ of our spiritual feelings. “To let thee climb thereto by degree,” it advises, “I bid thee first gnaw on the naked blind feeling of thine own being.”<sup>3</sup> The progression towards union with God thus begins by learning how to contemplate the ‘naked blind feeling’ of our own existence.

One common reason given for why we need to gnaw on ourselves before we can contemplate God is that the single most serious impediment to spiritual growth (and, thus, mystical union) is inappropriate attachment to self. Self-knowledge is required for seeing the depth of our self-attachment, and it proves essential for releasing our hold on our egos. Meister Eckhart, an influential late 13<sup>th</sup>-early 14<sup>th</sup> century Dominican, sums up this two-fold role neatly when he issues the recommendation: “Examine yourself. And whenever you find yourself, take leave of yourself.”<sup>4</sup> Although at first glance paradoxical, the use of self-examination to recognize and then to overcome self-centeredness lies at the heart of the contemplative life. Catherine of Siena, for instance, counsels that only self-knowledge can

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<sup>3</sup>Text from *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 94.

<sup>4</sup>Counsel 3, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. E. Colledge, O.S.A. and B. McGinn, eds. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981), 250.

motivate us to “shed the cloud of selfish love” that obscures our vision of God.<sup>5</sup>

The apparent paradox of focusing on self in order to counteract obsession with self further dissolves when we see the extent to which contemplative introspection (grounded in prayer and undertaken as one practice among many in the spiritual life of the subject) differs from the self-satisfied navel-gazing of selfishness or self-pride. Understood as a spiritual discipline, self-knowledge has an inherently humbling effect. Indeed, according to this tradition, one of the main effects of self-knowledge is humility – a virtue central to both the moral and religious life. Humility is consistently portrayed as the inevitable consequence of frank introspection: when we see ourselves clearly, we recognize not just our particular failings and quirks but also the extent of general human finitude and our relative place in the grand scheme of things.

To modern ears, however, the humility that results from such introspection can sound more like self-loathing than self-knowledge. When Clare of Assisi consistently refers to herself as an “unworthy servant” and “useless handmaid” of Christ, for instance, when Julian of Norwich calls herself “a woman, lewd, feeble, and frail,” and when Mechtild of Magdeburg describes herself as a “filthy puddle”, we children of the positive self-esteem era recoil from what appears to be negative assessment of self-worth (particularly when it seems rooted in internalized misogyny). The impression that medieval contemplatives encourage intentionally dwelling on our shortcomings is only reinforced by comments like the following, from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec: “If you have self-knowledge you should always descend in a sense of unworthiness and self-disdain.”<sup>6</sup> Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete appear to go even further, counseling not just detachment but *annihilation* of the self. It’s highly tempting to read those injunctions in the framework of familiar narratives about ‘Medieval’ vs. ‘Enlightenment’ worldviews and relative conceptions of self-worth.

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<sup>5</sup>Catherine of Siena: *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), pg. 30. Catherine later describes three principal vices, the first of which is “selfishness, which in turn gives birth to the second, *self-conceit*. From this conceit comes the third, *pride*, with treacherous injustice and cruelty as well as other evil filthy sins generated by these.” (*Dialogue*, pg. 80).

<sup>6</sup>“Spiritual Abandonment and Consolation” in John Ruusbroec: *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, ed. and trans. J. A. Wiseman, O.S.B. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 196.

It would be a mistake, however, to reduce this emphasis on humility to the view that medieval religious movements fostered self-hatred or self-loathing. First, it's important to note that feelings of unworthiness and self-disdain are *not* taken to be states that we should seek for their own sake. Rather, they are portrayed as appropriate attitudes to adopt *when comparing ourselves with God*. Comparison with God functions in these texts as an important corrective to the human inclination towards pride and inflated self-worth; such an exercise should make it impossible to maintain an inflated sense of self-worth. Most contemplatives are clear, however, that it would be equally inappropriate to loathe oneself in the context of considering one's status as beloved by God or as a being capable of spiritual growth and union with the Divine.

Second, as I've discussed elsewhere, Eckhart's and Porete's push toward self-abnegation is motivated by the belief that our highest state is one in which we *become* God, and that this state is one we can achieve only if we relinquish our attachment to self as we currently conceive it.<sup>7</sup> God fills whatever space we open by removing selfish love and pride, and our selves become transformed as a result. As Eckhart puts it, "You should know that there was never any man in this life who forsook himself so much that he could not still find more in himself to forsake...But as much as you go out in forsaking all things, by so much, neither less nor more, does God go in" (Counsel 4).<sup>8</sup> Porete goes even further, explaining that in the process of conforming our wills to God's, we can reach a state *in this life* in which we no longer need to attend mass, partake in the sacraments, or even pray. The reason for this is that we have become so close to God that we no longer need the mediation of the church. (In the ecclesiastical context of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, it comes as little surprise that Porete was burnt at the stake in 1310 for refusing to recant this view.) The self-abnegation Eckhart and Porete recommend thus stems not from self-hatred but from deeply held views about the nature of human beings and of God – and about the power human beings possess to participate in bridging the gap between us.

Third, human beings demonstrate a wide range of shifting behavior, feelings, and attitudes, and we need to examine ourselves frequently in order to assess both where we are and where we want or need to be. Self-knowledge in this context will be humbling – we are rarely where we think we are, and even more rarely where we would like to be. Yet, this

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<sup>7</sup>See the discussions of the apophatic tradition in "Self-Knowledge" and "What Has History to Do with Philosophy."

<sup>8</sup>Meister Eckhart, pg. 250.

recognition is not the same as self-denigration. To see this, it helps to look at the advice the 13<sup>th</sup> century Flemish mystic Hadewijch gives to a fellow beguine:

If you wish to experience this [namely, God's perfect love], you must first of all *learn to know yourselves*: in all your conduct, in your attraction or aversion, in your behavior, in love, in hate, in fidelity, in mistrust, and in all things that befall you. You must examine yourselves as to how you can endure everything disagreeable that happens to you, and how you can bear the loss of what gives you pleasure...And in everything pleasant that happens to you, examine yourselves as to how you make use of it, and how wise and moderate you are with regard to it (Letter 14).<sup>9</sup>

Here it is clear that the rigorous work of introspection is ultimately aimed not at highlighting our inadequacies, but at allowing us to experience God's love in the most perfect way. Self-knowledge inevitably leads to humility, but humility is, as Hadewijch puts it elsewhere, "*the worthiest and purest place in which we receive love*" (Letter 12).<sup>10</sup> Self-knowledge leads to humble recognition of our dependent status, but it's the recognition of beings who are dependent on a God who loves them, and who can't fully appreciate that love in the absence of accurate self-appraisal.

The idea that self-knowledge puts the subject in a better position to love and be loved runs throughout the medieval contemplative tradition. As Truth says to Catherine of Siena: "You will find humility in the knowledge of yourself when you see that even your own existence comes not from you but from me, for I loved you before you came into being" (Prologue 4). Furthermore, as I discuss in more detail in section 3, love and knowledge are so closely linked in this tradition that the humility that results from self-knowledge and leads to recognition of God's love in turn yields greater understanding of God and self – an understanding which many contemplatives describe as increasing both practical and theoretical wisdom.

Finally, the emphasis on humility in the affective contemplative tradition must be understood in the context of its final end: ultimate perfection via union with God. While self-knowledge engenders humility, it is not a humility grounded in recognition of our static lack of worth, but rather a

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<sup>9</sup>Hadewijch: *The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Mother Columba Hart, O.S.B. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980.), 77.

<sup>10</sup>Hadewijch: *The Complete Works*, 72.

humility explicitly conceived as the starting point in a dynamic journey towards perfection. The 14<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan Angela of Foligno, for instance, recounts that in mystic union she sees herself as wholly fulfilled: “Moreover, in that state I see myself as alone with God, totally cleansed, totally sanctified, totally true, totally upright, totally certain, totally celestial in him.”<sup>11</sup> The confidence that we are capable of such perfection, whatever our current state, is central to medieval mystical and contemplative accounts of self-knowledge. Indeed, an honest assessment of self and our place in the created world is what grounds such radical reports such as the following, again, by Angela of Foligno: “On one occasion, when I was in that state, God told me: ‘Daughter of divine wisdom, temple of the beloved, beloved of the beloved, daughter of peace, in you rests the entire Trinity; *indeed, the complete truth rests in you, so that you hold me and I hold you.*’” (Memorial IX). This intimate and reciprocal experience of divine union is a far cry from self-abasement or annihilation, and yet it is made possible by the humility that results from self-knowledge.

## 2. When Self becomes God

Self-knowledge is often portrayed in the contemplative tradition as important preparation for experiencing God’s love in its most perfect form – and, thus, as important preparation for mystical union. In this section, I turn to a closer examination of the self in that union. Mystical union is often described in terms of self-loss or erasure, but many figures in the medieval affective tradition also speak of retaining a sense of self even as they become one with God. In what follows, I examine what seems distinctive about this second sort of mystical union before moving (in section 3) to showing how such union is portrayed as having transformative effects for the subject, particularly with respect to practical and theoretical knowledge.

To appreciate the relevant differences between apophatic or self-abnegating union and what I’ll call ‘affective’ or self-preserving union, it’s helpful to look at a few examples.<sup>12</sup> Angela of Foligno describes frequently

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<sup>11</sup> Memorial IX, in *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance, O.F.M. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 215.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard McGinn draws a similar distinction—namely, between a type of union in which the soul is “utterly” united to God and one in which the experience is of oneness, but with a remaining ontological distinction—in his chapter, “*Unio/Union*” in the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*. We differ, however, in whom we consider exemplars of each type of union. McGinn considers Hadewijch a prime

experiencing the ‘darkness’ of God: “When I am in that darkness, I do not remember anything about anything human, or the God-man, or anything which has a form. I see all and I see nothing.”<sup>13</sup> When she tries to speak about this sort of union from “outside” the experience, however, she complains that the words she uses “come nowhere near describing the divine workings that are produced in my soul.” In fact, she says, “My statements about them ruin the reality they represent.”<sup>14</sup> This inability to speak accurately about what one has undergone is paradigmatic of apophatic experiences.

An extreme form of this first type of mystical union is the radical self-abnegation described by Marguerite Porete in her *Mirror of Simple Souls* – the longer (and much more infrequently used) title of which is *The Mirror and Annihilation of Simple Souls*. On Porete’s account of mystical union, not only does the person’s knowledge and will cease to exist separately from God, but individual being itself appears to be transcended. “She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because He is sufficient of Himself, because He is and she is not,” Porete writes towards the close of her treatise. “Thus, she is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created.”<sup>15</sup> This desire to merge so completely with God that it is as though the individual person never existed also appears in Eckhart’s work and in the work of various other medieval contemplatives as well. In a letter to a fellow beguine, for instance, the 13<sup>th</sup> century beguine Hadewijch explains that one must lose oneself in love: “For when the soul has nothing else but God, and when it retains no will but lives exclusively according to his will alone; and when the soul is brought to naught and with God’s will wills all that she wills, and is engulfed in him, and is brought to naught – then...the soul becomes with God all that he himself is.”<sup>16</sup>

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example of the first type, for instance, whereas I think her case is much more complex and that she is actually someone who describes both types at different times; it’s also not clear to me how we should read Mechtild of Magdeburg’s reports along these distinction, whereas McGinn counts her as describing the first sort of union as well. I also do not count Angela of Foligno as a purely apophatic mystic, since she’s careful to herself distinguish between two different sorts of unitive experiences in her mystical life.

<sup>13</sup> *Memorial IX*, pg. 205.

<sup>14</sup> *Memorial IX*, pg. 214

<sup>15</sup> Chapter 135, Marguerite Porete. *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E.L. Babinsky. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993),

<sup>16</sup> Letter 17, in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 90.

This sort of identification of the self with God becomes central to contemplative spirituality in this period.<sup>17</sup> It is not limited to apophatic union, however. Although this has gone mostly unnoticed in the secondary literature, more ‘affective’ descriptions of union also frequently employ the language of self-identification with God. Catherine of Siena, for instance, claims that in humble prayer, “grounded in the knowledge of herself and of God,” the human soul is “united with God, following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection and the union of love *he makes of her another himself*.<sup>18</sup> At the same time a reference to Aristotle’s theory of friendship (in which the virtuous person considers her friend ‘another herself’) and a comment about our final end, Catherine’s words are carefully chosen to emphasize the sense in which appropriate emotions – e.g., desire, affection, and love – can make us one with God.<sup>19</sup> Angela of Foligno also describes this sort of identification with the embodied Christ: “[The God-man] draws my soul with great gentleness, and he sometimes says to me: ‘*You are I, and I am you.*’ I see, then, those eyes and that face so gracious and attractive as he leans to embrace me.”

The importance of the incarnate Christ for the affective tradition is paramount. Explicitly encouraged to develop a more emotional and embodied piety as a counter to the sort of gnostic tendencies which run through apophaticism, many contemplatives in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries describe mystical union as involving Christ’s humanity and co-corporeity. As Angela of Foligno goes on to say, “I am in the God-man almost continually. It began in this continual fashion on a certain occasion when I was given the assurance that there was no intermediary between God and

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<sup>17</sup>See, for example, the ‘Sister Catherine’ treatise, heavily influenced by Porreto and Eckhart, in which Sister Catherine wakes from a mystical death to proclaim that she has become God. (The treatise can be found in translation by Elvira Borgstädt, in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).) For further discussion of the tradition of identifying oneself God, although with primary emphasis on Eckhart, see Ben Morgan’s *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). In his *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (1300-1500) (vol. 4 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. New York: Herder and Herder, 2005), Bernard McGinn describes this movement as the result of a “widespread yearning to give expression to a new view of how God becomes one with the human person” (87).

<sup>18</sup>Prologue to the *Dialogue*, I.

<sup>19</sup>The opening words to the Prologue signal the importance of emotion for Catherine: “A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls.”

myself. Since this time there has not been a day or night in which I did not continually experience this joy of the humanity of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, although she also has profoundly apophatic experiences of mystical union, the experience Angela has of being one with the humanity of Christ is already unmediated.

In general, what I’m calling ‘affective’ or self-preserving union is characterized by an experience of merging with God in which the subject retains self-awareness, as opposed to becoming one with God in a way that involves self-erasure or the complete loss of personal experience. Descriptions of such union often sound highly erotic, partly due to the 13<sup>th</sup> century popularity of the Song of Songs, and partly for lack of other metaphors that involve two beings merging into one while retaining a sort of separateness. In a letter to a fellow beguine, for instance, Hadewijch describes the “wondrous sweetness in which the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other,” in terms of simultaneous self-loss and self-recognition: “They penetrate each other in such a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul, while one sweet divine nature flows through both, and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves.”<sup>21</sup> The mention of physical (mouth and body) and emotional (heart) as well as spiritual (soul) aspects of the human being is intentional – this union affects every part of the human being, not merely the soul.

Significantly, this state of self-preserving union is often portrayed as our final end. (Hadewijch ends the passage quoted above with: “Yes, and [they] remain so forever!”) The 13<sup>th</sup> century beguine Mechtild of Magdeburg, for instance, who at one point refers to herself as the ‘filthy ooze’ on which Christ will build his golden house,<sup>22</sup> is clear that we will be perfected in both body and soul in the life to come – and is also clear that the incarnate Christ provides the model for our future selves, as well as representing that to which we will be joined eternally. “When I reflect that divine nature now includes bone and flesh, body and soul, then I become elated in great joy, far beyond what I am worth,” she writes. Christ’s humanity is not shed when he ascends into heaven: rather, it constitutes the everlasting bridge between us and God. As Mechtild continues: “The soul with its flesh is mistress of

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<sup>20</sup> Memorial IX, 7<sup>th</sup> Supplemental Step, pg. 205.

<sup>21</sup> Letter 9, in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, pg. 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Flowing Light of the Godhead* II.26, in *Mechtild of Magdeburg, The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998), pg. 97.

the house in heaven, sits next to the eternal Master of the house, and is most like him. There eye reflects in eye, spirit flows in spirit, there hand touches hand, there mouth speaks to mouth, and there heart greets heart.”<sup>23</sup> As with Hadewijch, the reference to physical, affective, and spiritual aspects is highly intentional. Through union with God, every part of the self is transformed and fulfilled.

### 3. Knowledge as Perfecting the Self

This experience of transformation and self-fulfillment has lasting effects on its subjects, who also stress the need for ongoing introspection with their frequent use of the metaphor of the ‘tree of self’. This familiar image, which appears throughout Judaic, Islamic, and Christian religious literature (Psalm 103, e.g., describes the righteous person as “like a tree planted beside the streams of water which yields its fruits in season, whose leaves shall not fade”), is consistently used in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries to demonstrate both the importance and the effects of self-knowledge. In this section, I discuss what this metaphor tells us about the relation between self-knowledge, mystical union, and self-fulfillment, with particular attention to the ways in which mystical union is portrayed as increasing practical and theoretical knowledge in ways that grant their subjects authority to instruct and counsel others.

The very first vision that Hadewijch recounts – her initiation into the mystical life – involves being shown the ‘tree of self- knowledge’ by an angel. In her words: “I understood, just as he revealed it to me, that the tree was the knowledge of ourselves. The rotten root was our brittle nature; the solid trunk, the eternal soul; and the beautiful flower, the beautiful human shape, which becomes corrupt so quickly, in an instant” (Vision One).<sup>24</sup> The insight that this vision provides her about human nature guides her throughout her mystical life, and inspires her to advise others as well about the importance of self-knowledge for becoming able to fully receive God’s love. She counsels a fellow beguine in words that echo the tree vision: “Even if you do the best you can in all things, your human nature must often fall short; so entrust yourself to God’s goodness, for his goodness is greater than your failures. And always practice...doing your utmost to examine

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<sup>23</sup> *Flowing Light* IV.14, pg. 157.

<sup>24</sup> *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 263.

your thoughts strictly, in order to know yourself in all things” (Letter 2).<sup>25</sup> Human nature is so ‘brittle’ that we inevitably fail in our efforts to live in union with God; nevertheless, we should continue the practices that make this possible – including rigorous self-examination – in trust that God will assist us in our spiritual growth. Relying on God to provide what introspection tells us we lack in turn yields greater knowledge of God. “May God grant you to know yourself in all things what you are in want of,” Hadewich writes in another letter, “And may you thus attain to a knowledge of the sublime Love that he himself, our great God, is” (Letter 27).<sup>26</sup> On this account, self-knowledge thus relates directly to knowledge of God in a way that perfects us (in the medieval sense of ‘perfects’, which entails an ongoing process of completion according to one’s nature).

Toward the beginning of the *Dialogue*, Catherine of Siena also uses the metaphor of a tree to explain the relation between humility, self-knowledge, and love. First, she asks us to imagine a tree with a shoot grafted into its side, and that the tree is growing within a circle that’s drawn circumscribing the area of soil from which the tree gets its nourishment. Next, she advises us to think of our soul as that tree, “made for love and living only by love,” and as the graft as the gift of discernment. The soil that nourishes the tree is humility, and the circle in which the tree’s roots grow and are fed is “true knowledge of herself, knowledge that is joined to me [Truth], who like the circle have neither beginning nor end.” This sort of self-knowledge requires union with God, for “if your knowledge of yourself were isolated from me there would be no full circle at all. Instead, there would be a beginning in self-knowledge, but apart from me it would end in confusion.” The quest for knowledge (of self or anything else) is doomed in separation from God, but when love roots itself in humility and “branches out in true discernment,” we develop fruit that serves as “grace for the soul and blessing for her neighbors.” Most significantly, we also attain our ultimate end. When our souls have become one with Love via humility and knowledge of ourselves, we gain union with God: “And so [the soul] does what I created it for and comes at last to its goal, namely, to me, everlasting Life, life that cannot be taken from you against your will.”<sup>27</sup> Earlier in this passage, the speaker has also identified itself as Truth; what is being described here is radical self-fulfillment as a result of joining with Christ: “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

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<sup>25</sup>49.

<sup>26</sup>*Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, 107.

<sup>27</sup>Dialogue 10, pgs. 40-41.

In some contemplatives, the metaphor of the tree as self is explicitly extended to include fulfillment of the body as well as the soul. Marguerite of Oingt, for instance, a 13<sup>th</sup> century French Carthusian nun, describes a vision in which she is a withered tree with dry leaves that have the names of the five senses drawn on them. A stream (which she later makes clear represents Christ) then rushes down from a mountain so powerfully that the tree is turned upside down, representing the way in which relation between self and God becomes inverted – but with the result that the tree, rather than being washed away or absorbed into the stream, becomes healthy and green. As she describes the vision (in the third person):

It seemed to her that she was in a large deserted open space where there was only one high mountain, and at the foot of this mountain there stood a marvelous tree. This tree had five branches which were all dry and were bending down. On the leaves of the first branch there was written “sight”; on the second was written “hearing”; on the third was written “taste”; on the fourth was written “smell”; on the fifth was written “touch” ...And after she had looked attentively at the tree, she raised her eyes towards the mountain, and she saw a great stream descending with a force like that of the sea. This stream rushed so violently down onto the bottom of this tree that all its roots were turned upside down and the top was stuck in the earth; and the branches which had been bent downwards were now stretching towards heaven. And the leaves which had been dry were all green, and the roots which had been in the earth were all spread out and pointing towards the sky; and they were all green and full of leaves as branches usually are.<sup>28</sup>

Here, the effect of union with Christ both turns roots into verdant branches and also rejuvenates the body and its five senses. Moreover, as Marguerite makes clear in other letters, this vision takes place in the context of a spiritual life in which mystical experiences grant knowledge that she feels compelled to share.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>*Letters*, 66-67

<sup>29</sup>See, for instance, the following: “My sweet father, I do not know whether the things that are written in the book are in the Holy Scriptures, but I know that she who put them in writing was one night so enraptured by our Lord that it seemed to her that she saw all these things. And when she came back to her senses, she had all these things written in her heart in such a way that she could think of nothing else, and her heart was so full that she could not eat, drink, or sleep until she was so weak that the doctors thought she was on the point of death. She thought that if she put these things into writing in the same way that our Lord had put them into her heart, her heart would be unburdened. She began to write everything that is in this book, in the order that is was in her heart; and as soon as she had put the words into the book, everything left her heart. And when she had written everything down, she was

This causal connection between mystical union and increased knowledge plays an important role in the lives of many female contemplatives. Indeed, the relation between mystical union and subsequent wisdom appears throughout the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, and across a wide range of geographic regions, religious orders, and languages (scholastic Latin and a variety of early vernaculars, including Middle English, Middle High German, Middle Low German, Francoprovençal, Old French, and Umbrian and Tuscan dialects). Hildegard of Bingen, for instance, writes in her *Vita* of a pivotal experience in 1158 that leaves her with both a complete understanding of the gospel of John and the authority to write a commentary on it:

Just after this time I saw a mystical and marvelous vision, so that my whole frame was shaken and the sensation of my body was extinguished, for my knowledge had been transformed into another mode as if I no longer knew myself. And from the inspiration of God, drops as of gentle rain splashed into the knowledge of my soul – just as the Holy Spirit inspired John the Evangelist when he sucked the most profound revelation from the breast of Jesus, when his mind was so touched by the holy divinity that he could reveal the hidden mysteries and works...This vision taught me every word of the Gospel which treats of the work of God from the beginning and allowed me to expound it.<sup>30</sup>

These drops of inspiration also, she states, grant her understanding of philosophy as well as theology. Thus, when she expounds on topics usually left to formally educated men, her words are worthy of serious attention because they have been granted divine authority.<sup>31</sup> (The fact that her works – and the works of the other women cited in this paper – remain extant demonstrates that such claims were often taken seriously.)

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all cured. I firmly believe that if she had not put all this down in writing, she would have died or gone mad, because for seven days she had neither slept nor eaten and she had never before done anything to get herself into such a state. And this is why I believe that all this was written down through the will of our Lord.” *Letters*, paragraphs 137-138, from *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt, Medieval Prioress and Mystic* (d. 1310), translated from the Latin and Franoprovencal with an introduction, essay, and notes by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 64-65.

<sup>30</sup>Hildegard of Bingen *Vita* II.16, translation by Barbara Newman in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Mooney, Catherine (ed.) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pg. 25.

<sup>31</sup>See Catherine Mooney’s *Gendered Voices* for a collection of essays exploring this topic.

Angela of Foligno makes a similar claim about mystical union granting theological understanding. “Because my soul is often elevated into the secret levels of God and sees the divine secrets,” she says, “I am able to understand how the Scriptures were written; how they are made easy and difficult; how they seem to say something and contradict it; how some derive no profit from them; how those who do not observe them are damned and Scripture is fulfilled in them; and how others who observe them are saved by them.”<sup>32</sup> In short, in this state, Angela comprehends Scripture from a God’s eye point of view. This comprehension is complete but not lasting, however, in her case. Immediately after mystical union, she says, she can speak truly about such mysteries, but as the experience fades, she loses the ability to put her knowledge into words.<sup>33</sup> Yet, as we saw in section 2, she also claims that she is united with the God-man “almost continually” and that he often speaks to her in this state. As with Hildegard and with Hadewijch, Angela’s mystical experiences thus ground the knowledge from which she advises others.

Julian of Norwich, a late 14<sup>th</sup>-century English anchorite, reports being similarly enlightened by the mystical experience she recounts in the *Showings of Divine Love*. Indeed, she takes the short text of the *Showings*, which dates to shortly after the experience itself in May 1373, and reworks it over the next twenty to thirty years in light of the continued insights that vision continues to grant her. This long text, which is approximately six times as long as the earlier version, is theologically rich, complex, and offered to the reader as the work of an “unlettered” creature whose wisdom comes directly from God. Although she never left the cell in which she was walled up (and we have lost her original name – ‘Julian’ most likely coming from the church to which her cell was joined), her reputation grew to the point where people such as Margery Kempe (the author of the first autobiography written in English) came to visit her to seek counsel on theological and moral matters. Julian’s revelations did not render her speechless, but rather grounded an active ministry.

Catherine of Siena portrays the relation between mystic union and increased understanding as an upward spiral: “I have told you this, my dearest

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<sup>32</sup> *Memorial IX*, pg. 214.

<sup>33</sup> “When I return to myself after perceiving these divine secrets, I can say some words with security about them, but then I speak entirely from outside the experience, and say words that come nowhere near describing the divine workings that are produced in my soul. My statements about them ruin the reality they represent.” *Memorial IX*, pg. 214.

daughter, to let you know the perfection of this unitive state in which souls are carried off by the fire of my charity. In that charity, they receive supernatural light, and in that light they love me. For love follows upon understanding. The more they know, the more they love, and the more they love, the more they know. Thus, each nourishes the other.” (*Dialogue* 85). Earlier, we saw Catherine stress the importance of self-knowledge for engendering the humility and love for God that makes this union possible; here, she explains how the mystical union “in which souls are carried off by the fire of charity” leads to greater knowledge, which in turn increases love of God, which increases our understanding of God, and so on. Such union is linked explicitly to perfection and to ongoing fulfillment of self.

One particularly striking case of the practical effects of this sort of illumination is reported by Margaret Ebner, an early 14<sup>th</sup> century German Dominican nun (at the Monastery of Maria Medingen near Dillingen). In her *Revelations*, she reports an experience that has left her with a gift of “divine understanding”:

The next day I was very sick and began to wonder about what was happening to me. I perceived well what it was. It came from my heart and I feared for my senses now and then whenever it was so intense. But I was answered by the presence of God with sweet delight, “I am no robber of the senses, I am the enlightener of the senses.” I received a great grace from the inner goodness of God; the light of truth of divine understanding. Also, my mind became more rational than before, so that I had the grace to be able to phrase all my speech better and also to understand better all speech according to the truth. Since then I am often talked about.<sup>34</sup>

Margaret’s experience here is significant for our purposes along several dimensions. First, she demonstrates self-knowledge at the outset, which

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<sup>34</sup> Margaret Ebner: *Major Works*, trans. and ed. Leonard Hindsey (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), pg.100. Margaret reiterates this experience later, and expands it by describing a gift she was given that allows her to tell when someone is telling the truth or not: “The third time it was granted me after matins before receiving the Eucharist – again with great sweetness and with a new movement of interior grace in which many new gifts were given me. I could understand, read, and write what I could not before, as I have already written. In particular, a new understanding of truth was granted me, and with it I can often detect when someone speaks untruthfully in my presence. When that happens I can answer nothing except that I often have to say, “I believe that is not true.” Sometimes I notice that someone intends these things in the heart differently from what comes out of the mouth. Then I respond according to the intention and not to the words.” (155)

allows her to hear God's reassurance. Second, the reassurance that God is the 'enlightener' of the senses (a phrase which also appears later in the *Revelations*) is followed by a gift of wisdom. That is, God promises to fulfill rather than transcend the senses – a promise that echoes Marguerite of Oingt's vision of sensory, embodied self-fulfillment. Third, this gift of wisdom is not abstruse or mystical, but is explicitly linked to increased rationality, both with respect to understanding and with respect to speech. She even offers external support for her claims – namely, the fact that she is now "often talked about." And, as in the case of Hildegard, Angela, Julian, Catherine, and numerous others, her personal report of increased wisdom via mystical union is corroborated by the respect and veneration of the surrounding communities.

## 4. Conclusion

The idea that knowing God requires first knowing oneself runs throughout the medieval contemplative tradition. I began this paper by outlining the connection between self-knowledge and humility, arguing that the humility that results from introspection should be understood in the affective tradition as the ground for mystical union and in the context of eventual self-fulfillment. I then demonstrated that one characteristic of affective union is that such merging tends to restore rather than annihilate a sense of self – a fact which is deeply indebted to the incarnational piety and emphasis on Christ’s humanity prominent in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Finally, I examined the persistent metaphor of the ‘tree of self’ and its relation to the flourishing and self-fulfillment that often results from mystical union even in this life. As the affective contemplative tradition makes clear, the beneficial effects of self-knowledge can extend beyond the individual to their broader community, both theoretically and practically.<sup>35</sup>

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