

Articoli/3:

Humble Knowing: The Epistemological Role of Humility

di Karmen MacKendrick

Articolo sottoposto a peer review. Ricevuto il 13/09/2012. Accettato il 23/09/2012.

Abstract: Teresa of Avila's emphasis on humility, grounded in bodily finitude, is well known and much discussed. This paper argues that it is essential to her epistemology, first as a way of avoiding overconfidence in uncertain knowledge, and second as a reminder to trust in true knowledge; i.e., knowledge that comes from God. That this emphasis has genuine epistemological and not just religious value is demonstrated by close parallels in the epistemology of early modern philosopher Rene Descartes, for whom we can only find truth by restraining the will to rush to assertion.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) opens her idiosyncratic, occasionally frustrating, and sometimes brilliant *Life* with an unusual sounding complaint against the church officials who instructed her to write it:

Having been commanded and left at full liberty to describe my way of prayer and the favours which the Lord has granted me, I wish that I had been allowed to describe also, clearly and in full detail, my grave sin and the wickedness of my life. This would have been a great comfort to me, but I may not do so. In fact, I have been put under severe restrictions in the matter¹.

She cannot resist, nonetheless, a caution: «So I beg anyone who reads this account to bear in mind, for the love of the Lord, how wicked my life has been [...]»². As Teresa, like most monastics and a great many other Catholic saints, places a considerable emphasis on obedience³, one might well assume that this mention would mark an end to the matter: having acknowledged the difficulty of the order, she will nonetheless make the effort to follow it. Such an assumption would meet with surprise, however; there are not many pages in the *Life* that do not bear some mention of Teresa's

¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, Translated by J.M. Cohen, New York 1957, p. 21.

² *Ibid.*

³ «My first intention in writing is to obey», she says—though she adds, «my chief aim is to lure souls toward this sublime blessing» (p. 124). Similarly, she is careful to choose her confessors wisely, though once she has done so, she finds it important to be obedient, even if it means suffering (p. 185). Obedience is not blind, then, but it is nonetheless profound.

wickedness, inferiority, or deficiency. In fact, after this prefatory note, her text immediately begins, «If I had not been so wicked [...]»⁴.

She does not offer many details of her wicked behavior. The worst we find of her is that she tends to become very attached to friends and to some of her confessors, which she worries might interfere with her love of God; and that she has sometimes been tempted to read frivolous books (which, in our age of vanishing literacy, sounds more like a virtue than not). Even taking into account our era's greater valuing of personal warmth and leisure time, it is hard for us to find these very grave faults. Teresa's conviction of her wickedness seems to be more a fundamental certainty than an inference from her actions, but it is not quite the same as an awareness of original sin, which would have to apply equally to all — Teresa is at pains to note that nearly everyone is a better person than she.

Her emphasis on obedience to her superiors and her nonetheless amazingly frequent declarations of wickedness and inferiority, against their explicit instruction, may well appear to us as either a paradox or a peculiar but pronounced act of defiance — though Teresa, writing as a woman and a visionary mystic at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, is always cautious about the latter. Her dual insistence on obedience and the revelation of her wickedness, however, is probably not a defiant gesture, or at least not primarily so. It seems likely that it emerges, instead, out of the insistence on *humility* that runs deeply through Teresa's religious thought (and not, of course, only hers). Whatever her wickedness is, however it manifests itself, it is most essentially not a matter of action but of the very nature of her being—and, importantly, of the necessary limitations of embodiment. I want to suggest here that humility, not least in its connections to the body, has a surprising range of values in Teresa's *Life*—values that are not merely personal, but philosophical as well. I want to focus here on one of these: humility's philosophical importance to the possibility of true knowing.

For Teresa, the body is grounds for humility in a number of different ways. It is a source of constant temptations, particularly to vanity.⁵ Though Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions* is influential on Teresa's work (it is one of the few texts she specifically cites), Teresa, unlike Augustine, is not carefully ambivalent about the joys and beauties of materiality.⁶ For her, the temptation posed by the senses is negative, necessarily distracting us from the God who is our sole rightful focus and who is found in contemplative prayer. The body is flawed, then, as a source of desire, not because desire is itself bad—Teresa's is a very desirous and even erotic theology—but because the desires of the body are never wholly compatible with the far superior desire for God. The appetites of the body are too distracting, and too dis-

⁴ Ivi, p. 23.

⁵ For example: «I began to wear finery, and to wish to charm by my appearance. I took great care of my hands and my hair, using perfumes and all the vanities I could obtain [...]» (p. 26). Interestingly, there seems to be some link in Teresa's thought between the body and the book. Several times she shifts from discussion of one into discussion of the other (e.g., p. 26, p. 154), and both physical beauty and literary pleasures are temptations to frivolity and time-wasting.

⁶ See especially *Confessions*, Book 10, in which Augustine goes through a list of the pleasures of the senses and the temptations that they pose. However, the tension between finding God through the created world and being distracted from God by that same world is present throughout the entire text.

tractible, to lead us to the divine. Teresa argues that «the spiritual life» is diametrically opposed to «the joys, pleasures, and pastimes of the body», which distract us from prayer by «a thousand vanities»⁷. Pleasures, especially where the body is concerned, can be deceitful, introduced by the devil as well as by God—though after experiencing the latter, we are less likely to confuse them⁸.

It is not only in its urges that the body is flawed and thus rightly humbling. It is conspicuously transient and finite; because we tend to forget that «the world is vanity which quickly passes away»⁹, our worldly desires direct themselves to the impermanent and therefore toward the unimportant¹⁰. In our temptation to pride, we may neglect to notice too that the body is profoundly limited in its capabilities and its very being, and that even what is good in us becomes subject to our misuse¹¹.

In these claims we see the very complicated Platonic tradition that Teresa's Christianity inherits, and upon which it builds. Plato is a more subtle and elusive writer than he is generally credited with being, and the dominant readings of his texts may not do them justice. But the dominance of those readings is nonetheless influential, and the most common reading of the body in this tradition emphasizes that it is inferior to the mind or soul both in its transience and in its ability to provide knowledge: what we know through the senses is inferior in kind and is known less certainly than what we know through purely intellectual abstraction¹². Even the loves and desires of the body are, again on the most common reading, held to be inferior to less carnal versions of intellectual or spiritual desire (see especially Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-211b). Christianity is every bit as complicated and varied, of course, as the traditions it inherits, and even this seemingly neat dichotomy between good soul and bad body turns out to be a lot more complex within Christian thought, including Teresa's, than it at first appears.

This complexity is immediately apparent in the Christian dogma of the Incarnation. If we take the view that body is inferior to some more abstractly spiritual aspect of our being, then the Incarnation, in which an abstract and immaterial God takes on finite bodily form, can be read as a sign of divine humbleness. On Teresa's reading, this humility adds further to God's power to inspire awe:

It is impossible not to see from Your presence that You are a mighty Emperor, for the sight of Your majesty strikes awe. But I am more awe-struck, O my Lord, to see how You combine majesty with humility, and by the love that You show to a miserable creature like me¹³.

The consequences of this divine self-humbling are remarkable. By it, the understanding and value of humility itself are transformed. In ancient

⁷ *The Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 57.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 157.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 145.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 23, p. 25.

¹² For this reading, the most common citations are from Plato's *Republic*, especially the allegories of the divided line (509E-513D) and the cave (514A-520A). As is probably evident, I am actually inclined to disagree with this reading, but there is no denying the force of its influence.

¹³ *The Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 280.

senses of virtue, while arrogance is a vice, so too is a sense of humbleness that undervalues oneself or one's abilities. What is virtuous in classical antiquity is a properly perceived and judged understanding of oneself, not a willingness to devalue the self or to somehow place oneself beneath one's station¹⁴. On such a perspective, a God humbling itself would be not only bizarre, but non-virtuous. For Christianity, then, if we continue to assume that God is good, the value of humility itself must change¹⁵. Humility, and not accurate self-assessment, becomes the virtuous mode of self-perception.

But our capacity for it is limited. We cannot hope to undervalue ourselves as much as God does Godself (the move from infinite to finite is a greater one than any finite being can make), but we can strive to come as close to this act as possible. In this, the Christian is able to strive to be like God, held as the paragon of all that is good, without striving for the completeness of power and knowledge associated with the first person of the Trinity. That is, the humility of God as Son creates the possibility of striving to be like God without risking being like Lucifer, who, in non-canonical but powerfully influential stories, sought to take on God's power as an equal.

Thus, of course, the virtue of humility is immediately caught up on a paradox. On the one hand, it provides a way for humans to be more godlike, which is understood as a good, since God is defined as all-good. On the other, to think that one can succeed in being godlike is distinctly non-humble (particularly in the Western church, which has never accepted *theosis* as readily as Orthodox Christianity has). Humanity cannot (and, as we have noted, should not) imitate divine power, but it can strive to imitate divine humility (though always knowing that it cannot succeed in that imitation). Thus humility displays both the knowledge of our distance from any resemblance to God (we are humble because we are so limited) and our striving to close that distance (to be as humble as Christ). If, however, we presume that we can succeed in being God-like, even where this means Christ-like, then we have lost our humility.

Given this difficulty, it is small wonder that we often either lie to others or fool ourselves about how humble we are. Teresa warns repeatedly of the dangers of false humility, which she often links to the devil's deception—«I believe the devil is very successful in preventing those who practise prayer from advancing further by giving them false notions of humility»¹⁶, she warns; and «the devil can play plenty of tricks»¹⁷. We know true from false humility by effect—in false humility, there is anxiety and unrest, but in true humility, «there is no attendant turmoil or spiritual unrest. True humility does not bring darkness or aridity, but on the contrary gives the soul peace, sweetness, and light»¹⁸. We have to be alert to these effects, as knowledge and learning alone will not suffice to allow us to determine the distinction¹⁹.

¹⁴ For what is probably the clearest discussion of an ethics of right judgment and balance between vicious extremes, see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially Book 4, chapter 3 (on magnanimity) and Book 4, chapter 4 (the virtue concerned with small honors).

¹⁵ This change is well-documented. See, for a nuanced reading, Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects*, Philadelphia 2007).

¹⁶ *The Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 89; see also p. 134, p. 215.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 179.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 215.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 216.

In her quest for humility, Teresa furthers its paradoxicality as she turns what is broadly a great cultural disadvantage into an advantage instead. Sharing the conviction of most of her contemporaries, she regards women as being generally inferior to men: «the mere thought that I am a woman is enough to make my wings droop»²⁰. Only through obedience can she find peace, she writes, «not that it is right for us women to have any peace, since we have no learning»²¹. Being a woman makes it harder for her to write, she suggests—and it probably really did, but more for social and political reasons than out of the intellectual inferiority she improbably claims.

But this inferiority also gives women an edge, specifically an advantage in being humble. Thus Teresa's shared disadvantages of embodiment and gender, and what she presents as her unusual disadvantages of extreme susceptibility to bodily and sociable delight, are not altogether disadvantageous: they give her the material for a big soteriological boost. Again, in a tradition that values humility as a form of imitation of Christ, the lower one places oneself, the closer one is to God. Bárbara Mujica makes the point concisely: «For Teresa, women's inferiority was a help rather than a hindrance in the quest for spiritual perfection. The biblical teaching 'the last shall be first' (Matt. 20.16) was proof that God favored the lowly and humble»²². To be a body is already to be humbled; to be embodied as a woman is doubly humbling, but thus, also, doubly exalting or redemptive. And the initial and most fundamental source of this humility, for God and for Teresa alike, is the body. Embodiment takes on great complexity in this context: the body is inferior to soul, and is a primary source of much of that lamented "wickedness", but in its very inferiority, it provides a connection with the willed humility, via willed embodiment, of God.

There is another doubling or paradoxicality at work here. Whatever spiritual value she may have drawn from her own abnegation, Teresa's sense of women's inferiority has proven to be a source of no small exasperation and perplexity to feminist scholars—but Teresa does more than simply follow established theology and theological anthropology. In many ways, she is an exemplar for those who seek strong and capable women in history: she reformed the Carmelite order, founded convents, wrote important books, advised the powerful, and argued down the Inquisition successfully more than once. With Catherine of Siena, she is one of only two women designated a doctor of the Catholic Church, an indication of her theological importance. She was smart, politically astute, and fiercely determined. All of this sits oddly with her claims of her personal inferiority and that of her gender generally, especially given the frequency and vigor with which those claims are repeated. Her constant assertion of her own, bodily-based inferiority can frustrate or sadden female readers who would otherwise love to take her power as a model. But in a display of considerable political acumen, Teresa

²⁰ Ivi, p. 75.

²¹ Ivi, p. 185; see also p. 77, p. 87, p. 124, p. 167.

²² B. Mujica, *Was Teresa of Ávila a Feminist?*, in *Approaches to Teaching Teresa of Ávila and the Spanish Mystics*, edited by Allison Weber, New York 2009, pp. 74-82. Teresa notes that «the Lord grants these favours to many more women than men, as I have heard from the saintly friar Peter of Alcántara, and have also observed for myself. He used to say that women made much more progress on this path than men, and he gave excellent reasons for it, which there is no reason to repeat here, all in women's favour» (*The Life of Teresa of Ávila, by Herself*, cit., p. 309).

uses those very assertions not only in *imitatio Christi*, but as subtle support for her power. Scholars such as Alison Weber²³ and Gillian Ahlgren²⁴ influentially, and I think correctly, argue that Teresa's exaggerated humility is strategic. By insisting upon her inferiority, by constantly manifesting her humility, Teresa is also able to exert considerable spiritual authority without seeming quite so challenging to the men whose sense of ecclesiastical hierarchy might be threatened not only by a woman, but also by a mystic or visionary. Barbara Simerka, in *Feminist Epistemology and Pedagogy in Teresa of Ávila*, uses Elaine Showalter's phrase «double-voiced discourse» to describe this aspect of Teresa's texts. «Such discourse», she writes, «contains both "a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story. The scrutiny of gender and reading presented by Teresa of Ávila is dependent on such a double-voiced discourse, for her writings must be approved by male religious figures in order to circulate [...]»²⁵. There is particular value to such double-voiced discourse, of course, in the context of the Inquisition, for a politically powerful woman—she needs to appear unthreatening not simply so that her works can circulate, but so that she herself can continue to do so.

Teresa's humility is complex in its functions, then. It functions soteriologically and faithfully as an imitation of Christ, and it functions politically both as a mode of reassurance to the powerful and as a bit of misdirection in her writing, allowing her to be a little more politically and intellectually bold than might otherwise be safe for her. This is not to suggest that her humility is false, but that it is deeply complicated.

So for Teresa, and indeed for much of early Modern and pre-Modern Christian thought, the body has value even and precisely in its disvalue; its flaws and limitations ground our humility. In addition to the sort of personal humility already mentioned, the body is for Teresa a source of what we might call epistemological humility²⁶. This humility, too, has a considerable and somewhat unexpected value, one that will continue from the Counter-reformation into early modern philosophy, with important implications for epistemology afterward. To bring out the deeply philosophical nature of Teresa's theory of knowledge—to show, in part, that it is far from reducible to blind religious devotion—I shall draw comparisons here to the epistemology of her near-contemporary, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), who is a scientist and mathematician as well as a philosopher. He is also, importantly, Jesuit-educated, and the Ignatian and Thomist strains in his thought are frequently vivid. Teresa too is extensively involved in conversation with the Jesuits, whom she often chose as confessors and conversation partners; she

²³ A. Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Princeton 1996.

²⁴ G. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*, Ithaca 1998.

²⁵ B. Simerka, *Feminist Epistemology and Pedagogy in Teresa of Avila*, in *Approaches to Teaching Teresa of Ávila and the Spanish Mystics*, edited by Allison Weber, New York 2009, pp. 107-08 citing E. Showalter, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, in *The New Feminist Criticisms*, edited by Elaine Showalter, New York 1985, p. 266.

²⁶ Nancy Holland, in her forthcoming *Ontological Humility: Lord Voldemort and the Philosophers*, Albany 2013, argues for something like an epistemological humility as well. Though I am not precisely using her version of the concept here—she is more focused on the connection of epistemology to ontology—I doubt very much that that the idea would have occurred to me had I not read her engaging text.

and Descartes also, as Matthew Bagger points out²⁷, share a significantly Augustinian influence on their theories of knowledge.

Epistemic humility, as we shall see, is as complex as the personal or political variety. Learning is essential to some understanding, but humility is both more basic and more important: «In the sight of Infinite Wisdom», says Teresa, «a little study of humility and a single humble act are of more value than all of the knowledge in the world»²⁸. For Descartes, the humble acknowledgement of fallibility and intellectual limitation is the most important thing that we can contribute toward preserving ourselves from error²⁹.

For both thinkers, the body is our first source of knowledge—or, to be more exact, of information that might be or become knowledge. It remains the fundamental metaphor for all knowing. Teresa frequently uses the sensory imagery of seeing and hearing to describe her visions, even when they appeal exclusively to the understanding. That metaphor is equally fundamental for Descartes, who writes that the most certain knowledge, such as that of one's own existence, «is something that your mind sees, feels, and handles», demonstrating «the capacity of our soul for receiving intuitive knowledge from God»³⁰.

Yet here, as in her spiritual and ethical assessments, it seems that Teresa is again prepared to distrust and devalue the body, which she calls at one point the soul's "evil guest". Only a paragraph later, however, she urges that when the soul is unable to perform prayerful and charitable acts, «let it then serve the body, for the love of God, so that on many other occasions the body may serve the soul»³¹—suggesting a significantly less inhospitable relationship. God seeks body as well as soul—«He does not seem satisfied with actually raising the soul to himself, but will have the body also, mortal though it is, and though its clay is befouled by all the sins we have committed»³². Body as well as soul participates in spiritual transport and visions³³.

That the body is an important source of knowledge is evident in some part from the emphasis that Teresa places (again, sometimes subtly and often carefully) on experience. The authority of experience becomes important in the thinking of modern empiricists, who ground all knowledge in experience (usually, but not always, that of the senses), and in that of contemporary feminist thinkers, who note that a disregard for women's experience has long been linked to a disregard for women's thinking. Though she is respectful of, and indeed enthusiastic about, the accomplishments of learned men (certainly she prefers them as her confessors)³⁴, Teresa does see learning as having its limits, and she will not devalue her experience in the face of it. «It is strange what a difference there is between understanding

²⁷ M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, in «The Journal of Religion», LXXXII, n. 2, 2002, pp. 205-224.

²⁸ *The Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 108.

²⁹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Translated by Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis 1993, esp. Book IV.

³⁰ René Descartes, letter from 1648, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris 1964-1976, cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 209.

³¹ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 82.

³² Ivi, p. 138.

³³ Ivi, p. 139, p. 210.

³⁴ See e.g. Ivi, p. 94.

a thing and [...] knowing it by experience»³⁵, she muses. In fact, it is the experience and practice, far more than the understanding, of prayer that teaches us.³⁶ Not all experience, of course, is bodily, but the body remains the fundamental source of experience and experiential knowledge. It even plays a central role in spiritual rapture and contemplative prayer.³⁷ Spiritual distress is felt in the body as well³⁸, but so too is the sweet and joyful pain that may accompany a vision³⁹.

Despite the importance that experience has, bodily or sensory knowledge, for Teresa as for most of her philosophical predecessors, is uncertain knowledge, “knowledge” that might actually turn out to be false. Once more, the body is both a major source and an urgent reminder of our imperfection and grounds for our humility. For Descartes — who is decidedly not an empiricist—the body is nonetheless the first source of both knowledge and error that he recognizes in his *Meditations* — our senses, in which we place so much and such ready trust, can nonetheless mislead us⁴⁰. It is still not evident, however, why we should paradoxically value this reminder of imperfection for epistemological, and not only for spiritual or political, reasons.

I want to argue that humility, founded on corporeality, is actually foundational both in reminding us of the epistemological value of uncertainty and in allowing us to recognize the certain. To make sense of this argument, however, we need to back up a little, to comment upon the epistemological issue of certainty more broadly. The search for certainty is a philosophical quest of very long standing. We find it near the origin of Western philosophy: it is central to Plato’s thought, finding perhaps its clearest expression in the image of the divided line from his *Republic* (ca. 38-360 BCE), and it goes back still further, at least to Parmenides (fifth century BCE), whose *On Nature* is largely concerned with the distinction between an unchanging and singular reality and the world’s deceptively transient and multiple appearance, and with how we can manage to know truth when all of our senses are attuned to receive only deception.

We want to be certain that we know truly. We want to avoid being misled, to avoid mistaking false appearance for genuine truth⁴¹. To be sure, just what “truth” is, and just what it means to “know” — as opposed to what it means to believe, or guess, or hold an opinion — will be variously defined in different traditions. Regardless of definition, however, the ability to distinguish right knowledge from wrong, true knowledge from false, and imperfectly substantiated opinion from rightly-believed knowledge will be central to any non-skeptical epistemology. We want that distinction to be certain — or as nearly so as possible.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 93, see also p. 165.

³⁶ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, Translated by E. Allison Peers, New York 1972, 4.1.3, 1.1.7.

³⁷ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., e.g., p. 138, p. 140, p. 143.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 139.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 210.

⁴⁰ See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., pp. 14-15, pp. 49-51.

⁴¹ We should note that it is not always the case that knowledge is linked necessarily to certainty. Epistemological skepticism, the idea that we can *never* be certain of what we think we know, is a long-standing line of thought, but one that has always made many uneasy—it seems to be a dead end for the study of knowledge. More recent epistemologies may deal in probabilities rather than in certainties, or in questions of the degree of justification for a belief.

Teresa, as a religious and indeed theological thinker, is deeply concerned with ultimate truth. But for her there is as well an added personal and political urgency to the epistemic quest for what is certain. Among the greatest risks to Teresa's work and power was the accusation that her visions were not divinely, but demonically, inspired. This, in fact, is one of the issues behind the writing of the *Life*; her confessors (particularly Pedro Ibáñez) wish to have her detailed account for their own reassurance on this question. To preserve her powerful influence in the face of authorities, from her confessor up to the Inquisition, Teresa needs to be able to argue that the source of her visions is God⁴². Her certainty about this source turns out to be connected to the possibility of any certainty at all.

Descartes too is focused on the matter of certainty in knowledge, though for rather different reasons. His grounds are more narrowly philosophical, though they have a personal edge as well, and he does claim for them a religious importance. Concern about the errors in the history of his thinking begins the *Meditations*. He wants to bring to all knowledge the same clear, axiomatically based certainty he finds in mathematics, which makes the frequent mistakes he finds in the history of his thinking dismaying⁴³. In the letter of dedication that directs the *Meditations* to the attention of the theological faculty of the Sorbonne, he argues that if he can demonstrate by reason the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, then those who have not been drawn by faith may nonetheless be saved by reason⁴⁴.

Notwithstanding plenty of differences, then, the *Life* and the *Meditations* share important concerns with certainty, which are both theological and personal while remaining epistemological. Both begin the search for truth via the search for self-knowledge. For Teresa, this is motivated not by some strange narcissism but by the Augustinian conviction that God and the soul cannot be known separately — and a sense that we easily lapse into a self-deception that allows us to avoid humility⁴⁵. In his emergence from radical skepticism, Descartes' first certainty, the point of the fulcrum from which all the rest of the structure of knowledge will be raised⁴⁶, is that he must himself exist whenever he thinks that he does⁴⁷.

For Teresa, certainty is, as we've noted, especially important in regard to her visions. Though she sorts out different types of visions, declaring those that are purely conceptual or intellectual superior to those that involve sensory images, *clarity* is in every case an important distinguishing factor between true visions and false. The clarity of visionary images, as opposed to mental pictures that we conjure up by ourselves, is an argument in favor of their truth, because, Teresa notes, her own imaginative capacity is very limited and so cannot be the visions' source⁴⁸. It is impossible, in fact that imagination can create true visions⁴⁹. We may be more tempted to identify

⁴² *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., e.g., p. 162, pp. 177-78, p. 201, p. 206.

⁴³ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., pp. 13-14.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁵ See M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 219.

⁴⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., p. 17.

⁴⁷ As this claim first occurs, it is a very bare and stripped-down form of existence. Descartes declares that he exists as «a thing that thinks» (*Ivi*, p. 20), but asserts no more about himself—not even whether his thinking is trustworthy or has its origin within himself.

⁴⁸ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 68.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 201, see also p. 96f.

as visions from God what are really words and ideas created by our own intellects, but there too we can tell the difference: when we come up with these on our own, we feel the intellect at work, whereas a vision from God comes to us without any effort or action on our part⁵⁰. There is also a greater *clarity* not only to images that are genuinely visionary rather than produced by our imagination, but to concepts that are given by divine revelation rather than by our own intellects: «All that I have described I have learned sometimes by locutions and sometimes not; and yet I understood some things that were unspoken more clearly than others that were conveyed in words»⁵¹.

Even among clear visions, intellectual visions are most certain, in at least two ways. First, they cannot be doubted while one is experiencing them—though one could conceivably doubt them if reflecting upon them from a distance later on. Second, though the devil (or perhaps a demon) could interfere with visions of the outer or inner senses, God alone can bring about intellectual visions. True knowledge is from God⁵². But even reason is subject to the devil's intrusion⁵³ — and so the worry about demonic or Satanic inspiration recurs. Again, there is a Cartesian parallel. Descartes is not worried about visions, but about all ideas, and after very briefly considering whether God could be deceiving us (an idea he hastily rejects, quite possibly for his own political well-being)⁵⁴, he comes up with the methodological device of the evil deceiver, a demon whose sole role is to ensure that Descartes' thoughts are all mistaken: «I will suppose not a supremely good God, the source of truth, but rather an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever, who has directed his entire effort at deceiving me»⁵⁵. Even in this, however, his own existence remains a certainty⁵⁶ — and from that existence, his first logical derivation will be the existence of God⁵⁷. There are ideas that simply cannot be doubted — shown to him, says Descartes, by the light of nature⁵⁸ — but in order to trust even in these, we must know as well that «deception is incompatible with God», since «trickery or deception is always indicative of some imperfection»⁵⁹. For Descartes, too, truth is distinguished by the clarity of its indubitability: «I seem to be able to posit as a general rule that everything I very clearly and distinctly perceive is true»⁶⁰, and the source of that clarity is the source of truth; that is, God. For Descartes, clarity and distinctness will be fundamental to the certainty that distinguishes knowledge from falsehood or opinion. Not all clear and distinct perceptions are self-evident — some may be doubted if we do not understand the reasons for them — but some are evident as soon as we perceive them. Once called to mind, these clear and distinct perceptions cannot be doubted⁶¹; we perceive their truth irresistibly and without effort.

⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 174-75

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 307

⁵² Ivi, p. 189, p. 237

⁵³ Ivi, p. 216.

⁵⁴ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., pp. 15-17.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 16.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Ivi, pp. 27-35.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 36.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 24.

⁶¹ See M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 216.

For Descartes as for Teresa, clear and distinct perceptions come from God, the guarantor of their truth.

For Teresa, a true vision is characterized not only by effortless and clarity but, like true humility, by effect — effect which reveals the source. Only true visions bring bliss or peace. «If [a vision] proceeded from our own mind, not only would it not have the great effects that it has, but it would have none at all».⁶² The effects of a vision coming from a demonic force, though they may begin as consolations, are «quickly push[ed] [...] aside» by the soul⁶³. The source is what distinguishes a true vision, and we know the source by the vision's ease, its clarity, and its resulting consolations. Both in image and in idea, there is a clarity and distinctness to the true vision, and thus a lasting goodness to its effects⁶⁴.

Descartes makes use of the Augustinian notion of intuition, which is not imagination or, as often in contemporary English, a sort of indefinable hunch, but rather «the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no doubt about what we are understanding. Alternatively, and this comes to the same thing, intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason»⁶⁵. This clarity and distinctness make doubt impossible. Though Descartes will not use the term “intuition” in his later works, the concept remains — for important instance, the famous *cogito*, the proof of his own existence and the starting point of all certainty, is such a thought⁶⁶.

Intuitive knowledge is an illumination of the mind, by which it sees in the light of God whatever it pleases him to show it by direct impress of the divine clarity on our understanding, which in this is not considered as an agent but simply as a receiver of the rays of divinity,

he writes in a late letter⁶⁷. The role of the body in intuition is a bit complex:

[...] even in this body — he continues — the senses give it such knowledge of corporeal and sensible things, and our soul has already some direct knowledge of the beneficence of its creator without which it would not be capable of reasoning. I agree that such knowledge is somewhat obscured by the soul's mingling with the body, but still it give us a primary, unearned and certain awareness which we touch with our mind with more confidence than we give to the testimony of our eyes. You

⁶² *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 201.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Teresa also emphasizes the greater clarity and distinctness of divinely inspired intellectual visions in Ivi, p. 145, cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 216.

⁶⁵ René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols. 1-3, Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, Cambridge 1985, Vol. 1, p. 14.

⁶⁶ See M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 208f.

⁶⁷ AT 5:136, cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 209.

will surely admit that you are less certain of the presence of objects you see than of the truth of the proposition, "I am thinking, therefore I exist"⁶⁸.

This intuition has a divine source. As Bagger summarizes it, «In both the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, Descartes states that clear and distinct perceptions come from God. It is their divine provenance that guarantees their truth»⁶⁹. So the parallels to Teresa's epistemology are striking; what comes from God, whether image or idea, always has greater clarity than what does not⁷⁰. It comes to us without resistance; we cannot doubt it. For both thinkers, our own intellects and imaginations may mislead us⁷¹ (Teresa, 1957, 219; Descartes, 1993, especially Books 1 and 4), as may demonic interference, but God will not.

There is, however, a potential danger here, one that is quickly evident to contemporary readers. If a *feeling of certainty*, or a *perceived clarity*, is all that there is to epistemological sureness, then we seem to be thrown back into an individual subjectivity so pure that we might as well be either solipsists or skeptics. Most of us are well aware that we can feel pretty thoroughly certain about matters on which we later learn we were mistaken. That a pure subjective feeling could somehow be a truth criterion sits oddly for us.

Fortunately, it sat oddly for Teresa and for Descartes, too, and understanding why will lead us back to the importance of embodied humility. Both thinkers are deeply aware that we may wrongly feel certain, placing our faith in what seems to be knowledge but is not divinely grounded. This is why, for both, some evidence beyond a psychological feeling of certainty is necessary if we are to label knowledge true. Teresa emphasizes the good effects of true visions; Descartes does not similarly emphasize result. For both thinkers, however, effort becomes especially relevant here, and bears further discussion. Teresa, as we have seen, points out that the we may know by the effort we exert when we come up with ideas on our own; only when we know from God do we perceive both effortlessly (as we also do through the senses) and indubitably. Then we only, and without any exertion, consent. The same, again, is true for Descartes: self-evident clear and distinct propositions are such that «We cannot every think of them without believing them to be true»⁷². For both, then, truth compels consent, not forcibly or violently, but precisely without force, facing no resistance; the will surrenders to it immediately and lovingly: «the will [...] is occupied in such a way that it is unconsciously taken captive it simply consents to be God's prisoner, since it well knows how to surrender to One whom it loves»⁷³.

That we yet err, however, is irksome. For Descartes, the problem of error is a problem of the relation between intellect and will. The human in-

⁶⁸ AT 5:137-8, cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 209.

⁶⁹ M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 210, citing AT 6:38, 7:62, 5:160.

⁷⁰ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 219; cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 210.

⁷¹ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 219; René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., especially Books I and IV.

⁷² AT 7:145-6, cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 216.

⁷³ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 98.

tellec is limited in both its information and its abilities. The will, by nature, cannot be: while many factors can limit the range of choices available or influence our ability to put our choices into practice, we either are or are not able to make choices and decisions⁷⁴. Strictly speaking, the intellect does not err, since it only presents information; error comes about in its interaction with will. The function of the will in relation to the intellect is judgment, saying yes or no, true or false to a proposition:

The will consists solely in the fact that when something is proposed to us by our intellect either to affirm or deny, to pursue or to shun, we are moved in such a way that we sense that we are determined to it by no external force⁷⁵.

Unfortunately, the intellect is often very slow, or altogether unable, to supply what a wholly certain judgment would require; our wills tend to rush impatiently ahead and to make judgments even when they should not.⁷⁶ If we can withhold judgment except in cases of clear and distinct presentations, we will not err: «If I hold off from making a judgment when I do not perceive what is true with sufficient clarity and distinctness, it is clear that I am acting properly and am not committing an error»⁷⁷. We avoid error «by remembering to abstain from making judgments whenever the truth of a given matter is not apparent»⁷⁸.

The clear and distinct — that is, the certainly true — is characterized for us, intriguingly, by the will's incapacity for dissent. «Whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth», says Descartes⁷⁹. Teresa's claim is strongly similar, despite the different impression created by her more explicitly theological language:

[God] imprints so clear a knowledge on the soul that there seems to be no possibility of doubt. The Lord is pleased to engrave it so deeply on the understanding that one can no more doubt it than one can doubt the evidence of one's eyes. In fact it is easier to doubt one's eyes. For sometimes we wonder whether we have not imagined something seen, whereas here, though that suspicion may arise momentarily, so great a certainty remains behind that the doubt has no validity⁸⁰.

We should note that, although she qualifies it immediately, Teresa's exemplar for the undoubtable, for that to which we cannot but consent, is (visual) sensation. Though Descartes writes of sensory impressions as coming without his consent, it is clear in the context (he is distinguishing sense impressions from imaginative constructions) that he means not that they overcome some resistance, but rather that they are independent of his intentions; his assent to them is not of his own will⁸¹.

⁷⁴ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., p. 38.

⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 38-39.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 39.

⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 40.

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 41.

⁷⁹ AT 8A:21, cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 216.

⁸⁰ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 189; as cited in M. Bagger, *The Ethics of Belief: Descartes and the Augustinian Tradition*, cit., p. 217.

⁸¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, cit., p. 49.

I shall attempt in a moment to clarify the relation between this assent and humility. But we must note that we are first nudged toward humility not by such certainty, but by doubt. Our intellectual humility must begin where our soul connects to flesh — in that doubt that may attend even to the evidence of our eyes, no matter how it compels our consent. Teresa finds her thinking is improved when «I had quite lost my trust in myself and put all my confidence in God»⁸². For Descartes, wonder, as that which causes thought to pause and reconsider, is «situate[d] at the junction of the physical and the psychological», as Phyllis Kaminski notes⁸³: «when the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised»⁸⁴. For Descartes, wonder attracts us to «that which we have not yet encountered or made ours». It prompts the philosopher «to know how to stop in order to rest, to leave an interval between himself and the other, to look toward, to contemplate». Wonder thus marks a new place and prompts the beholder, in Descartes' own words, «to consider with attention the objects which seem rare and extraordinary»⁸⁵. This is not doubt in the sense of skepticism, but an openness to the unknown that is its own mode of uncertainty, its own epistemological humility of acknowledging not-knowing.

By this prompting, the tendency of the will to rush over-confidently ahead is disrupted. The body doubly reminds us to be uncertain. First, it reminds simply by itself providing evidence of its own error; second, it reminds and impels (though it cannot quite compel) by its attunement to the unknown, the uncertain, the unexpected. The body, source of our first and most basic information, is also the clearest source of our uncertainty.

For Teresa, too, the body provides evidence that is as uncertain as it is fundamental—that almost-indubitable, yet never quite certain, evidence of the eyes, evidence that reminds us that we cannot quite trust ourselves. The body plays for Teresa a considerable role even in her trustworthy visions⁸⁶.

But as the first means of knowing and the clearest source of error, it plays that role in a very complex fashion.

Epistemologists are, as I have said, devoted to their certainties. Both Teresa and Descartes seek *true* knowledge; untruth is what we stumble upon along the way, that which both endeavor strenuously to learn how to avoid. The role of uncertainty, however, is as important as it is (generally) overlooked. Without it, the will is arrogantly unrestrained, and the intellect cannot perform its proper work in the face of this absence of constraint — or rather, it performs that work to no point, with good judgment missing. The epistemological humility of knowing not what, but simply *that*, we do not know, is as foundational as knowing how we might know after all.

⁸² *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 67

⁸³ P. Kaminski, *Mysticism Embodied Differently: Luce Irigaray and the Subject of Incarnate Love*, in «Religious Studies and Theology», vol. XVII, no. 2, 1998, p. 61.

⁸⁴ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, Translated by Stephen Voss, Indianapolis 1989, pp. 52; cited in P. Kaminski, *Mysticism Embodied Differently*, cit., p. 61.

⁸⁵ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, cit., pp. 56-57; cited in P. Kaminski, *Mysticism Embodied Differently*, cit., p. 61.

⁸⁶ *Life of Teresa of Avila, by Herself*, cit., p. 210.

The role of humility in what we *do* know is just as important. To claim a divine source for true knowledge, and to emphasize the dubitability of corporeal senses, might well seem to disembodify knowing altogether, as if doubt were the body's sole epistemic contribution. But matters are more complex. It is relatively easy to see the limitations of bodily knowing, to see that we should be humble in the face of our sensory errors. But we must also consider the astonishing effect of clarity and distinctness upon the will: that of undoing its willfulness, compelling its consent without resistance. This is itself humility⁸⁷, this embrace of being overcome, this assent without resistance rather than an insistence on the superior power of one's own will. Thus certainty of truth, which would seem so readily to become a source of arrogance, can only come out of humility, the humility we have as finite and fallible corporeal creatures. The source of error is will, or more exactly, it is willfulness, will's prideful attachment to its own power. We recall that for all her certainties, Teresa is neither incautious nor simply pretending to modesty, and the same humility that protects her authority also protects her certainty — by reminding her of when to be uncertain (to resist what seems to be knowledge) and by assenting to divine will (when presented with truth); that is, by keeping her from mistaking opinion for knowledge and vice versa. Both doubt, which responds to uncertainty and the possibility of untruth, and assent, which emerges without effort in the fact of truth, are grounded in humility — emerging out of our limitations as finite creatures and our relation to God.

Humility is the will's self-sacrifice — to the will of God, for Teresa; to the truth, for Descartes (these are not fully distinct positions; God is Truth for Teresa, and truth's source and sustaining assurance for Descartes). Humility keeps us doubting when we should doubt — when we ourselves, in our imaginations or fallible intellects; or when the devil or demons, create thoughts. It requires humility not simply to assert that whatever our minds hold is true. But humility also allows us certainty, by submitting or consenting entirely and unreluctantly to what God presents. Indeed, it is by this exercise of humility that we know what is certain, that we recognize our inability to dissent from the truth: intellectually, perhaps, the happiest of our limitations.

Humility reminds us that we ourselves are not the source of truth, but at most those who perceive it. It comes to us first through the body — in its insufficiencies and flaws, in the uncertainty of its knowledge, but most fundamentally in its identification with the site of divine humility in the Incarnation. Though Descartes emphasizes the abstract perfection of God, he, like Teresa, believes in a divinity that or has been also incarnate, bodily. This is the God whose humility they believe we are called upon to imitate. And this imitation is not simply affective or ascetic, but is also, in a move as paradoxical as the exaltation of divine power through divine humbling, the very ground of the power of our minds to know the truth.

⁸⁷ See e.g. Ivi, p. 118