

A Plea for Elusiveness: On Vocation and Identity in Western Mysticism

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Abstract The contribution explores the meaning of vocation and identity in the experience of mystical and contemplative life. While searching for the most profound sense of personal identity, certain self-identifying experiences are disclosed as inadequate and misdirecting. Doing this, the proper meaning and main constitutive aspects of identity and vocational experience are uncovered. The text presents several complementary perspectives that mutually elucidates each other (traditional religious experiential perspectives, existential and psychological observations). Paradoxically, “elusiveness” turns up to be the sole genuine and firm standpoint for the appropriation of one’s own true self, for approaching the sense of one’s true personal identity, and for discovering and developing his or her vocational dimension. “Vocational identity” is the identity discovered, appropriated, and sustained in and through the experience of the “primordial call.”

1. Introduction

In my paper, I search for the meaning of vocation and identity in religious experience, more concretely in the experience of genuine mystical and contemplative life.¹ I focus on a theistic type of mysticism or the so-called “Abrahamic tradition” (even though my main mystical authors here are specific – John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart). While searching for the most profound sense of personal identity, 1) I qualify which self-identifying experiences cannot stand as a solid base for approaching the problem of personal identity and individuation. 2) I then uncover the meaning and main constitutive aspects of vocational experience. To embrace this overly complex issue, I present several complementary perspectives that elucidates each

¹ The two coincide in its essential structures and movements. Genuine mysticism leads into and involves contemplative life (contemplative consciousness), genuine contemplation leads into and uncovers the depths of a mystical life. The two corroborate each other.

other (like employing existential and psychological observations); however, the main experiential field is the descriptions of the mystics themselves.

2. The Deepest Structures and Constitutive Movements of the Human Person: Mystical Life Experience

The genuine mystical life is, first of all, a challenging existential process of profound personal *transformation*. John of the Cross, the Spanish mystic of the 16th Century, calls this process the experience of the “dark night.” Nowadays, the theologians, philosophers, spiritual teachers and seekers, psychologists and psychotherapists are rediscovering its essential and universal anthropological significance. Let me explain the meaning of this experience (or experiences) in the mystic’s own terms at first.

2.1 Mystical Dispossession: How to get “everything” out of “nothing”

John of the Cross distinguishes between the active part of the night (the “night of the senses” like active asceticism) and the passive night of the spirit (mystical affliction). He understands active asceticism (the sensual night) as the preparatory stage for the truly decisive event of the dark night of the spirit, which brings the essential transformation, the profound renewal of the personal core, the radical existential refocusing of the whole personal orientation.

Following systematically the transformative process in the mystics’ writings,² we witness how each *possessive relation*, even the most subtle form of it, is negated (e.g. taken away): *my* sensual delights, *my* good deeds and virtues, *my* intellectual abilities, *my* knowledge and judgements, *my* prayers and piety, *my* friends or enemies, *my* meaning of life, even *my* identity and *my* God. Obviously, the named goods are not at stake here, but the *mineness* in all of them. As Meister Eckhart teaches, things are not obstacles along the way to

² St. John of the Cross has dedicated two of his major treatises to the systematic explanation of the experiences of the so called “dark night” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*) and the other two to the mystical experiences of divine intimacy and union (*Spiritual Canticle*, *Living Flame of Love*). The Spanish “*nada*” (nothing) – experienced as the dispossession, distance and affliction, and the “*todo*” (everything) – experienced as the loving, nearness, and bliss are the two complementary (rather than strictly sequential) aspects of the same mystical path.

Unity, but *me* in all these things – hence the sense of his famous “detachment” (*Abgeschiedenheit*). This *dispossessive mechanism* is quite simple and reveals the existential meaning of passivity: passivity in the etymological sense of “pathos”/ “passio”; it has the sense of the passivity of the patient (like in Bernhard Waldenfels), which also means complete existential powerlessness and poverty. An unwelcome superfluity of inapprehensible meaning paralyzes the self-supporting activities of the ego. But in the affliction of the dark night, there is no enhancing self-supporting activity possible, no expectation of the redemptive meaning or relief. The mystic is left with the painful “nothing” (“*nada*”), which means sheer dis-possession, dis-ability, and control-less-ness: and precisely at this point, it is hard, if not impossible, to find any mine-ness in the overabundance of “pathos,” of the receptive passivity of mystical affliction. Through rather a violent manner, the natural egoic activities seem to resign and are put out of play. However, the following effect is amazing: the radical experience of dis-possession, for a mystic, can turn into a significant means of self-transcendence and transformation, pointing beyond the limits of mine-ness set by the possessive tendencies of the untransformed self.

The essential meaning of the whole mystical process lies in the possibility to empty, to open, and to dispose a mystic for the new way of receptivity. Meister Eckhart presents this as a simple “mystical” principle: the more emptying, the more fulfilling. What is to be received, we can call the “gift” (to speak with Eckhart, for example). The gift (as opposed to “possession”) is given beyond the realm of possessiveness and controllability; mystics and contemplatives insist on its principally *ungraspable* and *elusive* character.

2.2 The Meaning of the Gift

John of the Cross teaches that radical dispossession radically disposes oneself for the radical gift: mystical union. He says that if “the soul” were perfectly dispossessed of itself, it would “possess” “the Beloved” (God), even more; it would *be* Him as fully indrawn into loving divine communion. This is why he praises the painful process of transformation in his famous poem:

“O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!

O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transformed the beloved in her Lover.”³

It is important to emphasize that the transformative meaning of the mystical “*nada*” can emerge only within the overall perspective of loving. I showed elsewhere that precisely loving sustains the possibility of transformation through affliction.⁴ Otherwise we would be dealing with a mere personal destruction and disintegration through suffering.

Meister Eckhart writes that all the gifts that God has ever given to someone are given as a preparation (or disposition) for the one and only Gift – God Himself. Both mystics describe the mystical unity as overly dynamic and creative: it is a perfect mutual gift-giving, where the gift, the gifted and the gift-giver coincide; where the Lover, Beloved and Loving are almost indiscernible, and still not totalizing or being reduced to each other.

John of the Cross, for example, in *Living Flame of Love*, describes the *immediate* sharing of the Divine Life in the deepest “center” of the “soul,” “touching of the bare cores.”⁵ Loving as “mutual substantial sharing” brings the bliss and sweetness that the mystic is trying to depict by various images, none of which is static. For John of the Cross, the perfection of divine union lies in the perfection of mutual self-offering and receiving in loving. The extent of mystical likeness and unity is the extent of the perfection of loving

“... The Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is that in the union and transformation of love each gives possession of self to the other and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love.”⁶

³ St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, revised edition, eds. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), p. 51.

⁴ Cf. Jana Trajtelová, *Vzdialenosť a blízkosť mystiky. Fenomenologická štúdiá fundamentálnych pohybov v mystike západnej tradície* (Trnava: Filozofická fakulta Trnavskej Univerzity, 2011).

⁵ “Toque de sustancias desnudas.” Cf. San Juan de la Cruz, *Obras completas* (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1993), p. 817.

⁶ St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, p. 518.

Let me also mention that John of the Cross explains *divinization* (“endiosamiento” – such a brainteaser for philosophers and theologians!) with breath-taking simplicity as the perfect “passing out of self to the Beloved.”⁷ The meaning of this mystical *transformation* (“transformación”) is nothing other than the perfect existential conversion of the fundamental personal orientation: from the self to the Beloved, from the “possession” to the gift, from individual egoic isolation and limitations to co-creative participation on the profound interconnectedness of all the created beings in and through its mysterious divine Source.

At this place, we do not need to go into more detail with the descriptions of the highest apexes of the mystical life. What I have described here is sufficient for exposing the main mechanisms that will remain in play while thinking of the problem of identity. Still, let me sketch the philosophical-anthropological basis for the further considerations about the human person, as opened up in mystical life.

2.3 Question of the Ground

I will sketch the mystics’ description of the most intimate sphere of a human person. Perhaps needless to say, every mystic struggles with describing or conceptualizing the experience of “something” that is beyond words and concepts, even beyond any suitable image and metaphor (however helpful and necessary they are for us). However, using various images and metaphors, paradoxical or contradictory language expressions, they attempt to speak about the “unspeakable,” and uncover what can be structurally referred to as the deepest “essential core” or “center” of a person.

Mystics claim that entering that boundless immanence (and transcendence – at the same time) means entering the mystery of God *and* one’s own true self. This deepest “ground” seems to have no “bottom” or boundaries, and in no way can be understood in static terms. Let me give you few examples:

John of the Cross, using the traditional Christian concepts, writes: “It should be known that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden by essence and his presence (“esencial y presencialmente”) in the innermost being of the soul.”⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 578.

⁸ Ibid., p. 480.

The whole creative loving divine community (the Trinity) is essentially present in the deepest center of a human person. Elsewhere he speaks more loosely about the “most hidden dwelling” where the Beloved hides and where He wants to be found and encountered. He speaks of the “center” (“centro”), “substance” (“sustancia”), “bottom” or the “ground of the soul” (“el fondo del alma”), “infinite center of the substance of the soul” (“el infinito centro de la sustancia del alma”), “living point” (“el vivo punto”) where the “living divine flame” burns, or “the center of love” (centro del amor). Here, in the “center of love,” John of the Cross describes in a very dynamic way the immediate sharing of the divine life, or “essential sharing,” the “touching of the bare cores” (“toque de sustancias desnudas”). “Here” the lovers play “the tender games of love”; here “the divine fire sweetly burns,” here comes to the “mutual co-breathing” where the Breath is the divine Loving itself. All the mystic’s descriptions are strikingly dynamic, all trying to express something of the ever-creative movement of the life-giving divine life within the person’s most intimate “core.”⁹

Edith Stein in her study on mysticism of John of the Cross comments on the mystics’ “center of the soul” in traditional terms as the sheer dimension of spirit that is beyond any form, image or concept, freed from any determinations of the natural psycho-physical life, and which must be the very source of all unique personal life and freedom. She continues by saying that only from this deepest interiority we can truly comprehend and justly evaluate our own being and understand/appropriate the uniqueness of our personal vocation.¹⁰ Similarly, Thomas Merton often emphasizes that entering into unity with God means entering one’s own identity in the sense of his or her vocation. He adds that “vocational identity” (my term) seems to be unique but is never a private matter, and always has much broader impact:

“One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out

⁹ Drawing on another example, Meister Eckhart uses the famous image of eternally bearing God’s own Son in the center of one’s soul and the eternal bearing of “myself” as God’s own Son. Johannes Tauler speaks of the divine ground in the depths of the soul and employs the compelling metaphor of the abyss. “Abyssus abyssum invocat” (Ps 41:8) (“Der Abgrund ruft dem Abgrund”) – *Abyss calls out to abyss* – to express the intimate union of the created and uncreated “longing” and their intimate mutual communication and loving interchange. He speaks similarly of the Eckhartian “sparking” (*funken*) that is bursting into a fire of longing for God and is the creative divine Longing itself.

¹⁰ Cf. Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross* (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2003).

of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love... The more we are one with God, the more we are united with one another.”¹¹

My point in recounting all these experiential insights is to show that the most intimate immanence of a person cannot be at all qualified as ontological stillness or isolation; rather, it can be qualified as having *trans-subjective, dynamic, creative* and *elusive* character and efficacy. The deepest sense of personal identity must be sought here.

3. Meaning of Idolatry

To proceed further with the identity issue, let me link the previous exposition with the theological, psychological, philosophical, and spiritual question of idolatry. In the following, I will sketch several interrelated perspectives to reveal the essential meaning of idolatry and its fundamental structures. Finally, I will expose the same deceptive mechanisms with regard the investigated problem of identity.

3.1 Loosing the Connection

Going back to biblical experience, idolatry refers to worshiping false gods or gods made up for the sake of worship (“... make us a god who would walk before us” Ex 32: 1). The idol is a man-made construct, “maase jad haádám” (“work of the hands of man”) representing certain supernatural powers and services. Prophets constantly warn of serving idols – false gods, man-made illusions of the real. A French theologian and philosopher Claude Tresmontant suitably defines idolatry as the “ontological fallacy,” “ontological mistake,” or “ontological deceit,”¹² e.g. as the misunderstanding and misuse of the beings in their proper identity and order. However, idols are easy to be reached for and possessed, easily visible, well-defined, exclusively and exhaustibly given: they have their names, characters, stories, and functions (-

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1972), pp. 65-66.

¹² Cf. Claude Tresmontant, *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1953).

unlike Yahve, The One Who *Is*, whose name is so sacred that it cannot even be uttered and whose image cannot be made).

This mechanism is brought into view in the mystical experience of *dispossession* (above). The mystic is led to abandon every subtle mine-ness, every subtle subjective construction that he tended to impose on the meaning of things and events and thus contaminate and obscure the reality as it is in itself. The simple mystical imperative of dispossession speaks of the biblical destruction of idols, including the images of God or oneself. In this sense Eckhart speaks provocatively of abandoning God for sake of God. Here S. Kierkegaard, M. Scheler and V. E. Frankl speak of absolutizing the relative, and K. Jaspers of the “absolutization of the particular,” “quantification of the qualitative” or “reification of the cipher.”¹³ *Stagnation, fixation, mortification* of meanings or attachment to an *exclusive* meaning are all the signs of idolatrous possessive grasp, ontological perversion, counteracting the free flowing character of the gift. The unbound, creative, all permeating “flowing” of the divine mystery, according to mystics, is principally elusive – when it comes to a possessive grasp, it is experienced as an *elusiveness* itself. This is what I try to allude to with the term “elusiveness”¹⁴.

In terms of intentionality, the idolatrous possessive movement is principally self-referential. That is why by the *ego* we can understand primarily the centered accumulation or density of self-concerned and self-absorbed intentionality which, given the sustaining aspect of psychological time (personal narrative), creates the isolated self-oriented illusion of personal identity. On the contrary, genuinely *transcending intentionality* aims always at

¹³ Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz* (München: Piper, 1970). Similarly for Steinbock, idolatry means the destruction of the vertical orientation, as closing off and perversion of vertical relations and thus as arbitrary ontological depletion. Here *idolatry* contradicts *verticality*, which he qualifies as a “vector of mystery and reverence.” He identifies three interrelated forms of idolatry: pride as the idolatry of the Self; secularism and fundamentalism as the attachment to the “world”; and “delimitation” (here in the sense of limitation or restriction) as a mode of idolatry, which is understood here as the exclusive orientation to a particular thing or dimension of existence. Cf. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 211–240.

¹⁴ Mystics and contemplatives are able to radically execute a type of “egoic reduction” – the reduction of “mine-ness” normally imposed on phenomena. This is the meaning of all meditative and contemplative praxis: to learn to see the “things themselves.” There is no imposition of the possessive self on phenomena, no arbitrary restriction of a sense to *my* sense: Hence the meaning of Eckhart’s “*Abgeschiedenheit*” (detachment) or of the way of “*Nada*” (nothing) advised by John of the Cross, that is, the sense of self-abandonment as the most well-known religious imperative. That is why the contemplative consciousness is alert, open and integrated; subjective constructions set upon the reality are recognized and abandoned.

otherness, outside or *beyond* the isolated self-referential circle in which untransformed consciousness usually gets trapped, and thus opens and liberates it. That is why Frankl recognizes every truly trans-personal mode of attention, or any other-than-myself directedness of intentionality as the basic human mode of transcendence.¹⁵

Philosophically, the simple mechanism of idolatry can be found arising with objectifying thinking, “reflexive ego-awareness.”¹⁶ The “Cartesian” thought reaches for God, for the other or oneself as for an “object,” and so *loses immediate connection* with Being, and all that it gets are its own conceptual constructs deepening the separation from the real: thinking mirrors only itself. That is why “Cartesian” consciousness remains imprisoned in itself, there can be no real transcendence.¹⁷ This is the main point that K. Jaspers, G. Marcel, E. Levinas or J. L. Marion articulated in their own ways with philosophical mastery. If we looked into broader social context and structures (of course – good and necessary in themselves), we would find the same mechanisms in the collective form. That is why Thomas Merton claims that in order to liberate (transform) our consciousness, we need to lose our cultural and religious identities, all our “un-true” selves.¹⁸ “The tragedy is that our consciousness is totally alienated from this inmost ground of our identity.”¹⁹

3.2 Possessive Ways of Self-Appropriation

It is clear now that the same claim of breaking-off with idols applies for the issue of self-identification and personal identity. Let me develop the theme further with several useful

¹⁵ These observations are based loosely on Frankl’s pondering on intentionality and transcendence; see for example Viktor E. Frankl and Pinchas Lapide, *Gottsuche und Sinnfrage Gebundene Ausgabe* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005).

¹⁶ – Said with Thomas Merton. Cf. Thomas Merton, *Zen and The Birds of Appetite* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1968), p. 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton speaks about contemplative consciousness, which goes beyond the ‘social and cultural self’ and which is the ‘ground of openness.’ *Ibid.*, p. 25. That is why Zen, for Merton, is only the radical consequence of the spiritual claim of dispossession. “Zen is consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness. It is therefore in a sense ‘void’. But it can shine through this or that system, religious or irreligious, just as light can shine through glass that is blue, or green, or red, or yellow” (*Ibid.*, p. 4). For Sufis, for example, “*fana*” demands also such “extinction of social and cultural self, which would be determined by the structural form of religious customs” *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12. Christian tradition speaks here in terms of “original sin” or “fall.”

concretizations; these should highlight the “commonality” and great practicality of mystical insights in our everyday lives.

The universal significance of the dispossessive and unitive experiences of mystics and contemplatives is recently being rediscovered not only by philosophers, but psychologist and psychotherapists who reflect the old teachings and “methods” in therapy. They implicitly or explicitly acknowledge that authentic spirituality has something to do (essentially) with the mental health and psychological well-being of a human person. At this place I will only mention observations of the psychiatrist Gerald G. May (views of others, like Frankl, or more specific studies would be elucidating as well), who was trying to set the foundations for what he called contemplative psychology.²⁰ I find his observations relevant and useful for understanding the close connection between the timeless teaching of mystics and psychology’s search for the “key” of the mental health and personal wholeness, which philosophically points to (ontologically relevant) constitutive structures of a human person.

Gerald G. May explains that the way of appropriating one’s individual identity possessively is at the basis of the “natural” mechanism of addiction.²¹ In the new light that modern psychology and neurology have shed on attachments and addictions, given his own therapeutic experiences with addicts, he recognizes striking similarities between addictive comportment (and its treatment) and the teaching of the dark night by John of the Cross.²² The

²⁰ He reconnects the science of “psyche” and traditional wisdom, and applies the research in therapeutic praxis. Cf. Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit. Contemplative Psychology* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982) esp. chap. 2. “A contemplative psychology is an approach to human experience that maintains that wisdom depends upon a full cooperation of all ways of knowing: Observation, logical inference, behavioral learning, and intuition. It acknowledges that the purest form of knowing is intuition and it seeks to expand the innate human capacity for intuitive perception. The goal of a contemplative psychology is not the separate autonomy of the individual but the realization of one’s essential rootedness in God and relatedness in creation. Its means are not willful mastery but willing surrender. Its resources lie in the comparison of spiritual traditions of both East and West. And its laboratory is the stillness of the human mind in silence” Ibid., p. 27. May himself experienced much suffering and was traumatized by his service during the war in Vietnam. He was known for his gentle spirit and his own inexhaustible spiritual search and yearning. Most of his life, he was working as the therapist of the worst kinds of addictions.

²¹ The complex mechanisms of addiction he observes closely in his book *Addiction and Grace* from psychological, neurological and theological point of view. These mechanism, biologically necessary and good, becomes problematic when it comes to specifically human personal growth. Cf. Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace. Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

²² Cf. Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace*; Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of The Soul* (New York: HarperOne, 2004).

16th Century mystic revealed and described roots and structures of the enslavements of the addicted mind, and offered the way of “healing,” which he himself went through.²³

For us, the most interesting of May’s recognition is that one of the strongest attachments containing heavy addiction mechanism is an attachment to mental images that we sustain about ourselves in our search for self-definition and self-assertion. May recognizes various forms of self-identifications, and describes their inherent mechanism and persistence. He defines an “idol” as a mental image which is taken exhaustively *as* reality and not only as image (normally because it is psychologically safer, because our representations of reality are relatively controllable). May says: “If we are relatively free from mistaking image for reality in other areas, we at least idolize our self-images. When I speak of myself I am almost always referring to the image I have of myself, and I habitually assume that I am talking about something solid and objectifiable.”²⁴ Self-image, May reminds, is a product of the “dualistic,” objectifying mind. It is constructed by the reflective act of self-definition, which is a “specific mental process that occurs whenever one does, thinks, or senses something that differentiates oneself from the rest of the world.”²⁵ Experiences opposed to this would be unifying contemplative awareness, and in extreme, mystical states of non-duality.

“Self-image is the product of a complex process of self-definition associated with one’s sense of body, of will, of relationship with others, and of desire or aspiration. It includes intricate combinations of memories and behavior patterns, habits and needs – everything that one could use to describe or characterize oneself.”²⁶ Self-image is always connected with the

²³ The liberating aspect of suffering through acceptance and loving was pointed out also by the Austrian psychiatrist V. E. Frankl or theologian P. Tillich (*The Courage To Be*, 1952). Speaking about compulsory thinking and behavior, about compulsory emotional responses, is only another way of expressing the same addictive mechanism of mind processes and patterns (which can grow pathologically into neurosis or other psychical disorders, especially when it regards self-definition and self-assertion).

²⁴ Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit*, p. 111.

²⁵ He goes on clarifying that “self-image is an ongoing composite of conscious and unconscious conceptions and feeling-tones that are identified as the sense of ‘me’.” Self-definition can occur without bringing self-image into awareness, but reflection on self-image always involves self-definition” Ibid., p. 334.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

“The act of self-definition constantly creates self-image which has four fundamental components:
Body: the image we have of our physiques, combined with the sense of being ‘in’ our bodies and the perception of our geographical location in relation to ‘other’ people and things.
Will: the sense of volition, how we manage ourselves and our lives; our perceptions of what we can and cannot control in ourselves and in the environment.
Desire: what characteristically attracts and repels us; the things we hope for and the things we fear; what gives us pleasure and pain.

image of the world that the person appropriates, including the highest personal ideals and values. When an essential part of a self-image is threatened, all the habitual (addicted) ways in which one views and comports oneself are endangered. Loosely in Frankl's words: when a relative meaning which was absolutized in person's life is perishing or lost, it is usually personally/psychologically devastating – e.g. the absolutized meaning made a great part of one's identity.²⁷

Indeed, May's therapeutic praxis and his own experiences taught him that breaking off from this attachment is the most painful; the egoic mind cannot bear facing the "nothing" of what is left of oneself, of one's putative identity (literally no-thing, e.g. beyond the reach of objectification). Let's recall how John of the Cross writes about the worst point of the "night," "mystical death": the terrible undoing ("deshacimiento")²⁸ "in its (the soul's) very substance" and the purification of the very "roots of the soul."²⁹ May uncovers the deeply rooted fear from the loss of self-definition. For the naturally self-centered self, every collapse of self-image is a real painful death (comparable to, for example, ending up with the serious life-endangering addiction like on drugs or an emotionally abusive relationship). However, for the deeper vocational sense of self, true self, it is the most liberating movement.

Of course, we normally approach ourselves through self-images, and in everyday life it is quite effective and necessary; it is the practical way we are in the world, and the main way for coping with it. One can define oneself as a good citizen, faithful believer, good teacher or successful writer, devoted lover, caring partner, loving father or mother, or even as a zealous or detached spiritual seeker. And he or she, in certain sense, really "is" all of this. The problem arises when the image, which plays an essential part in self-identification (given aspirations, desires, or values of a person), is threatened, since the complete identification with the role, e.g. with one's own conceptual image of oneself was made; when the

Relationship: our basic sense of alone-ness or together-ness; our confidence and fear with others; our sense of relatedness to other people, society, and the world and cosmos around us.

These four components, with various refinements and elaborations, make up that complicated and intricate mental production called self-image" Ibid., p. 104.

²⁷ See for example Viktor E. Frankl, *Homo Patiens: Versuch einer Pathodizee* (Vienna: Deuticke, 1950).

²⁸ Juan de la Cruz, *Obras completas* (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1993), p. 532.

²⁹ "When this purgative contemplation oppresses a soul, it feels very vividly indeed the shadow of death, the sighs of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of God's absence, of being chastised and rejected by him, and of being unworthy of him, as well as the object of his anger. The soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems that this affliction will last forever." John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, p. 404.

psychological (individual and cultural) conditioning, which we normally use for coping in our habitual or obsessive ways of behaving and thinking, becomes questioned, in-effective or out of play. And it is precisely the point of all contemplative praxis: to learn to let them go, to “see” the real beyond the mental constructions, to hear the stillness beyond the mental noise, to transcend one’s own mind conditionings within which the self-definitions are created.³⁰

After reducing all the conditioned forms of self-identification, is there anything left of a “person”? May says, yes, and “if one could but give up the struggle for self-definition, being would spring forth in fullness and truth.”³¹ Mystical and contemplative experience suggests that precisely through this loss of self-definition one can glimpse the un-conditioned, most profound sense of his or her identity. There seems to be *something* more permanent and truly essential, out of where a true identity of a person may arise (if identity is a proper word at all) – unlike everything that social and relational constellations can provide.³²

4. Experience of Vocation

Up to now, it seemed to be easier to approach the deepest meaning of identity of a person in a negative way: what it is *not*, what does *not* essentially constitute it. Self-images and related personal narratives which are dependent on the external circumstances, according to mystics, are not who one *is* the most deeply.

And still, even the self-appropriations via our personal narratives cannot be claimed to be completely irrelevant, which is more obvious (or emphasized) in the Western tradition. Again, the situation seems much more complex and needs to employ another significant religious experience, the experience of *vocation*. Taking into account the experience of the

³⁰ Contemplation then “is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive.... It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.” Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1.

³¹ Gerald G. May, *The Open Way* (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 11.

³² Zen tradition speaks about an emptiness and a “mirror.” “The trouble is that as long as you are given to distinguishing, judging, categorizing and classifying – or even contemplating – you are superimposing something else on the pure mirror.” Thomas Merton, *Zen and The Birds of Appetite*, p. 7. Merton discusses here the Daisetz T. Suzuki’s view on Meister Eckhart: „In any case this passage reflects Eckhart’s Zen-like equation of God as infinite abyss and ground (cf. Sunyata), with the true being of the self grounded in Him; hence it is that Eckhart believes: only when there is no self left as a „place“ in which God acts, only when God acts purely in himself, do we at least recover our „true self,” (in terms of Zen, “no-self.”) Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

call in the following, I will try to elucidate the complexity of dynamics of personal identity in mystical and contemplative experience.

4.1 Vocation as *Telos* and Orientation

Anthony Steinbock in his article “Phenomenology of Vocations” rightly notes that question of personal identity is rooted in vocational experience.³³ Without it, the philosophical account of the problem remains incomplete or necessarily stays at the surface of our experience of ourselves (I as a construct of a mere narration, no-self doctrines, for example). To open the complex meaning of this experience, let’s turn first again to traditional biblical expressions of it, following its philosophical implications. The English word, “call” or “calling,” serves as the eloquent equivalent of the term. The Latin, “vox” (voice), “vocare” (to call), “vocatus” (called) stands at the root of the English word. From the early 15th Century it was intended to express a “spiritual calling,” “consecration” (in the sense of a divine call to a religious life). Only later it appeared in its secularized form to express a personal devotion to a certain occupation or profession.

Within this tradition, we can recall the theological and philosophical meaning of well-known biblical stories, like the call of Abraham, Samuel, and other prophets. Here we would need to speak at great length about the philosophical significance of the *call – response structure* and we would need to consider the philosophical meaning of a personal name and the Name (“I have called you by name; you are mine” Is 43:1). I only briefly recall the most relevant implications.

It is important to note that the Abrahamic religious experience includes uniqueness and diversity in its specific sense of identity and vocation (this is obvious even by such

³³ Anthony Steinbock, “Phenomenology of Vocations,” in *The Yearbook On History and Interpretation of Phenomenology 2016: Vocations, Social Identities, Spirituality: Phenomenological Perspectives* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 17–46. Anthony Steinbock’s phenomenological investigations into the meaning of vocational experience carefully maps the broad problem field. He recognizes the specific experiential structures and essential distinctions among various phenomena which – in common experience and common language—are commonly (and rather misleadingly) aligned with the phenomenon of vocation itself. These distinctions are essential for the recognition of the genuine meaning and constitutive aspects of this specific human experience.

doctrinally-unbounded authors as Thomas Merton).³⁴ C. Tresmontant speaks of the biblical “metaphysics of the name” (e.g. metaphysics of individual uniqueness),³⁵ in which wholeness and integrity, variety, diversity and uniqueness are fundamental ontological categories and always bear a positive value (in contrast to Platonic metaphysics or most of the Eastern traditions).

Claude Tresmontant loosely interprets the call of Abraham (a great example and an exemplar) as the call to genuine and creative (self)-transcendence of a person. The call represents here an *invitation to transcend*, first of all oneself: to step out of an anonymity without name, home, meaning of life, identity; to step out of individual and cultural pre-determinations; to step out of the “mythical” and its determining pre-given meaning; to abandon all the self-constructed idols. The call includes the constant invitation to self-transcendence and transformation (dispossession).

The call gives the called a proper name and points toward the peculiar *unique* meaning of an individual existence, always in interconnectedness with a broader inter-personal community. The call moves him or her forward throughout the individual and collective historicity toward the open future (history is not a mere arbitrary narration anymore, but discovers its “telos,” its essential orientation and deeper meaning).

The significance of the “name” embraces: 1) The *perfection (wholeness) of individual uniqueness and concreteness of the person* (in flesh and blood, not as a mere mysterious or vague “spiritual substance”) in his or her fullest possible actualization; it is being actualized in and as a free co-creation within the dynamic relation with God and in unity with Him). 2) His or her *unique external narrative* or “mission” (and its unique “telos”), which bears a deeper *transformative* meaning for the person *and* for wider community (see the story of Jonah), and which is to be accomplished in a way that only she or he can accomplish. This way, the individual uniqueness enters history and co-creates the broader generative context.

³⁴ “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree,” writes Thomas Merton and claims that the perfection of the creation lies precisely in uniqueness of individual identity of each particular created being. “This leaf has its own texture and its own pattern of veins and its own holy shape, and the bass and trout hiding in the deep pools of the river are canonized by their beauty and their strength... The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God’s saints. There is no other like him.” Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 29-30.

³⁵Cf. Claude Tresmontant, *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque*. It is also interesting to note the changing of names in certain cases so that the new name can be expressive of the specific unique vocation; when the called person appropriates the “new” identity, it always goes in the direction of the transformative vocational experience (from Abram to Abraham, from Sarai to Sarah, from Simon to Peter, or from Saul to Paul).

Vocational experience is never aimless or inert. It has its “telos,” sets the unique personal orientation, and bears a great creative potential. The very notion of the “call” refers to a movement, event, dynamism, teleology; it is quite the opposite of emptiness, inertia or some dissolving stillness. For mystics, the call emerges from the deepest “center,” which is qualified rather with ceaseless though peaceful dynamics of the overflowing creative emergence of divine Being (as Loving).

4.2 Vocation as the Primordial Call and the Precedence of Being

It seems that there is an even deeper, *foundational* “layer” of the meaning of the vocation than the one which is expressed in an experience of being called to action, or even in discovering one’s own unique life orientation, appropriating the personal life-meaning and telos. Let’s try to look closer how these, including the individual narratives or the external roles, relate to the bare, image-less sense of the self that I have previously emphasized.

When we commonly speak about “vocation,” we usually think about certain specific life task, deed or work for the goodness of oneself or community, or some specific way of life (being a monk or eremite). But this is precisely the point, in my view, which can be misleading, obscuring the real meaning of vocation and the relation between our external identities and the deepest self.

If we turn our attention to the mystics again, we will find that the profound *call* they experienced within all their lives, was first of all *not* a call to *do* something, but a call to *be* (using more Eckhartian terminology). In other words, it is not so important what one does, but *how* one *is*. The individual search for vocation is not the search for *what of doing*, but of *how of being*.³⁶

³⁶ From the perspective of phenomena, the “how of being” implies also the “how of seeing”. Living out of the deepest vocational dimension brings one the liberation for the world and the things themselves in their peculiar identities (contemplative consciousness). On the contrary, living out of one’s restricted possessive self means not only to blur or obstruct one’s own vocational possibilities, but also to restrict the identity of things to my possessive demands, mirroring mine-ness in and through them. Only the free, open, inclusive contemplative view can really “see” and appreciate the things *as what they are themselves* and *as they are meant to be*; in this sense it is also legitimate to speak about a unique *vocational identity* of each finite being. Everything has its unique place in the order of being, everything in own unique peculiar way radiates the “breath of its Creator.”

Thinking over and explaining Anthony Steinbock’s notion of de-limitation [Cf. Jana Trajtelová, “On Verticality and De-Limitation,” in *The Yearbook on History and Interpretation of*

Mentioning the “call to be,” or “call to love,” we hit the whole new and broad area essentially relevant for our problematics, reaching to the profound dimensions of a *divine calling*, which I treat in a great length elsewhere.³⁷ the phenomenon of *desire*, and what I termed *primordial call* or *primordial vocation*. I mentioned that Meister Eckhart writes that all the gifts that God has ever given to someone are given as a preparation (or disposition) for the one and only Gift – God Himself. He goes on saying that all the acts God takes in a person’s life-story are taken only for the one and only Act – God’s own loving self-offering and self-surrendering.³⁸ For the mystics, this is the definite “telos” of desire and the whole transformational process. Everything else seems to be just additional. *The deepest unity with the Source of Being is the “foundational center” of any unique personal vocational experience.*

The vocational question is then not the question of *doing* (as mere external deeds, ways or “identities”) but primarily *being*. And I showed before that *being* here must be understood in a very dynamic, creative and transpersonal way; *being* as *becoming*, as a creation and co-creation constantly bursting forth. It seems to coincidence The Sacred Name in Hebrew also refers to this unceasing creative dynamics of the divine life itself (“Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” Ex: 3.14 – from the verb “hayah” usually translated as “to be,” but more properly “to be becoming.”) The turn toward the *precedence of being*, e.g. the turn toward the ground of loving, is itself recognized by mystics as the *primordial call*.

Being a teacher, a philosopher, a painter or a mother can in itself remain in-essential to who we really are (independently of the inherent inter-personal value these have in themselves), and it does, unless these roles are freely lived out of the Source of all being, doing and goodness. Every life-enhancing, truly creative *doing bursts out of being*, not the

Phenomenology 2014: Normativity & Typification (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 131-159], I showed elsewhere how the subjective impositions of sense “limits” phenomena so that they are disabled to reveal themselves in their original *specificity* as what they are themselves *and* as they are originally *more* than themselves (*as de-limited*) while they point iconically beyond themselves precisely *through being what they are*. Contemplative consciousness is always opened for “more” of phenomena and refers to their original *polysemy* (e.g., phenomena as having open “iconic” character with possibly inexhaustible creative emergence of sense emerging precisely through their specificity, distinctiveness and uniqueness).

³⁷ In my book on desire (in preparation) I am examining its *vocational, dis-possessive* and *ambiguous* character, and present desire as the phenomenon bearing irrevocable existential tension of ontological and metaphysical controversies (Infinity-within-finitude).

³⁸ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Reden der Unterscheidung*, See Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckharts Reden der Unterscheidung* (Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1913), section 23.

other way round. Only such doing bears the genuine vocational impact and becomes generatively relevant, like standing up for justice (M. Luther King, Jr.) or serving the poorest (M. Theresa).³⁹ Even more, anything that a person would do out of her or his vocational dimension, has itself vocational significance and weight (even the “pots and pans” for St. Teresa of Avila may become the vocation for that particular present moment). Every single life event, however ordinary, can become vocationally relevant; even the sin (as Augustine or Julian of Norwich claim).

The meaning of the personal vocation then refers to the *primordial call* which is to be, as the *infinite claim*, creatively realized within the finite, restricted life conditions of an individual. The primordial call is the heart of all creative vocational potential, shapes and guides the unique personal telos and orientation. Primordial calling is realized within the concrete individual, cultural and historical conditions, realized *in* and *through* and *as* the complete uniqueness of an individual person (e. g. the complete individual incarnation of the divine perfection).

The deeper the union, the more an external context, roles or narratives become the *essential* means of and for the realization of the infinite claim. The life paths we choose, functions we accept, and the roles we appropriate bear the real vocational significance – without ever being identified (attached) to them (and precisely because of not being idolatrously identified with them). In this way, the roles no longer become limiting and restricting, but enabling, opening, enhancing, nourishing the vocational experience; they become irreplaceable means for the authentic social communication and interpersonal loving. Only this way (as we see in lives of mystics, contemplatives, artists, true reformers or genuine lovers) the infinite claim is realized within the finite restrictions in an infinitely creative and

³⁹ However, even deeds, styles or comportment can, in turn, sustain the vocational orientation. For someone, going to a monastery or developing the painting techniques, can provide nourishing conditions for evolving of her or his vocational identity. Nevertheless, living in a monastery or being a painter would not be a matter of mere doing, but of a peculiar and integrated *way of being*, and still is expressive of who the person *is* (not what he or she does). Being a painter then does not point to doing, but toward a personally *unique kind of relating to* and *expressing of* the reality – in a way that no one else does and can express – which also means a unique revelation of the Divine, hence the unique co-creation. (This was depicted with mastery in Tarkovsky’s film character, Andrei Rublev, and in a “negative way” in his counterfeit, prideful Kirill, who stressed on “doing,” external identity, his self-image and self-importance. Cf. Jana Trajtelová and Anthony J. Steinbock, “Transcendence as Creativity: Vocation in Andrei Tarkovsky,” in *The Yearbook On History and Interpretation of Phenomenology 2016: Vocations, Social Identities, Spirituality: Phenomenological Perspectives* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 139 – 175.).

unbounding way. This is the universal meaning of vocation for each human person – to *be* freely (consciously) an essential constituent of co-creation in an absolutely unique, profoundly personal way, re-connecting the others and the world with its unifying divine Source.

5. Conclusions

Allow me to summarize my paper in several points:

- 1) The deepest sense of who I am cannot be derived from the external roles and has nothing to do with self-images and self-definitions. In order to reach the deepest sense of identity, one has to lose and transcend all of these.
- 2) The mechanism of dispossession must also be applied to the ways in which a person relates to herself or himself. The rule of idol-less-ness first of all holds for our self-images and arbitrary “identities” (e.g. attachments on our personal situational roles, social status, professions, religious or political beliefs, ideologies, political beliefs, and so on).
- 3) Genuine personal identity, the most profound sense of personal identity, is revealed and realized “from inside out” (and not backwards), that is, out of the “deepest core” of the personal life.
- 4) In the deepest dimensions of a person there is nothing to grasp: only creative transsubjective dynamics of the ever-elusive emergence of divine being (loving), which is the source of the most profound vocational experience, of the *primordial call*.
- 5) *Vocational identity* – is the identity discovered, appropriated, and sustained in and through the experience of the primordial call.
- 6) The primordial call is *foundational* for all the other external vocational “specifications.”

7) Vocational experience implies a unique personal orientation, and bears a great creative potential, which is realized “from inside out” (radiating from the Source) as a free co-creation in an absolutely unique, profoundly personal way. The *infinite claim* is creatively realized within the finite, restricted cultural and historical conditions of an individual (via his or her personal narrative).

8) Keeping the principle of “precedence of being over doing,” personal narratives, and accepted roles and functions must be nourished by and rooted in Being in order for them to stay vocationally significant and efficient. Cut from the Source, they fall back to *mere* narratives and roles.

9) Experienced as the gift, arising out of the ungraspable free dynamics of the most intimate immanence of the person, vocational identity can never be closely defined, limited, or restricted in any arbitrary subjective manner. Similarly, vocation can never be exhaustibly apprehended nor accomplished. The slightest arbitrary fixation of sense, holding on to self-made self-images or accomplishments would already mean withdrawing from or missing one’s vocational orientation. It remains ever open and elusive.

10) Mystical elusiveness is paradoxically the only, genuine and firm standpoint for the appropriation of one’s own true “self,” for approaching the sense of one’s true personal identity, and for discovering and developing his or her vocational dimension (vocational identity).

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