

St. Theresa of Avila's Conception of Prayer as Philosophical Reflection

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It is difficult to imagine a Christian life without prayer. It is also difficult to imagine a non-Christian life consumed in prayer. Can one conceive of a non-Christian that is prayerful? In this paper, I propose an interpretation of prayer that allows us to answer this question positively. To understand this seemingly paradoxical outcome, we have to begin with some basic questions: What is prayer? Are all prayers the same? Does one have to recite a particular text or a given set of words to pray? In some religious circles, prayer is viewed as the pious act of either thanking God for the many gifts He has bestowed upon us, or as the act of requesting some favor of God, which will help us endure our sojourn in this world. One favor that is in high demand of God is Divine grace, usually to strengthen our flawed character traits. For instance, we sometimes pray for God's grace to give us more patience or wisdom than we could conjure up on our own. Not all interpretations of prayer, however, are so simplistic; some portray it as a form of freely conversing and dialoguing with God. In these intimate conversations, the locution may take on various forms: thanking God, asking favors of God, asking God for forgiveness, asking God for his mercy, sharing one's joys and sorrows with God, etc.

St. Theresa of Avila's (1515-1582) conception of prayer departs radically from these more narrow understandings of it. She spent an entire life consumed in prayer; her writings are primarily an attempt to teach her Carmelite sisters what she learned from her experiences. Her writings on prayer¹ have been commented on primarily from

the perspective of mystical theology, focusing on her religious and mystical experience of God. In this paper, I focus on her first three stages of prayer, which represent the foundation of spiritual life. I argue that the essence of this form of spirituality is also a form of philosophical reflection, one similar to the sort advocated by Socrates. The foundation of a spiritual life, according to St. Teresa, does not entail an encounter with the supernatural. Instead, it is constructed through the development and edification of three elements: 1) self-knowledge, 2) humility, and 3) virtue. I elucidate the meaning of these three elements in virtue of their function in St. Teresa's understanding of prayer and the spiritual life. I show that her foundation of the prayerful and spiritual life coincides with a Socratic philosophical life.

1. The First Three Stages of Prayer

My analysis of St. Theresa's conception of prayer will focus on her most mature work, *Interior Castle*.² She wrote the *Interior Castle* with the purpose of guiding her sisters of the reformed order of the Discalced Carmelites in prayer.³ For St. Theresa prayer encompassed many things. The purpose of this paper is not to present a comprehensive and exhaustive representation of her conception of prayer; instead, the purpose is to show how self-knowledge, humility and virtue play an essential role in the foundation of prayer. Thus, in this paper, I am not interested in the religious experiences of St. Theresa's life or in how these affect her conception of prayer. Moreover, I would add that to focus on these experiences alone, while representing important moments in her religious life, distort her teaching on prayer and spirituality.

In the *Interior Castle*, St. Theresa presents her conception of prayer through an analogy with a castle. The castle represents the soul. She describes a castle with seven mansions, each having many rooms. She says, "I begin to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions."⁴ There are seven mansions and each mansion represents a stage in one's spiritual journey (*camino espiritual*). One begins outside the castle and progresses inwardly from the first mansion to the seventh or last mansion. The seventh mansion represents the highest form of spiritual life, a spiritual marriage (*espiritual matrimonio*) between one's soul and God. Prayer, then, is a spiritual journey that progresses inwardly, moving deeper into the soul.

One may be surprised to learn that it isn't until one reaches the fourth mansion that one can expect to encounter anything concerning the supernatural. St. Theresa says at the commencement of the fourth mansion, "For we now begin to touch the supernatural ..."⁵ Thus, the work and effort that guides us through the first three mansions will be our own, based on virtuous work and arduous meditation. Moreover, she says that before reaching the fourth mansion "one must have lived for a long time in the others."⁶ These first three stages of spiritual life, therefore, represent a very difficult part of the spiritual journey. They are also essential for constructing a solid foundation upon which one is to build one's life of prayer and spirituality.

During these early stages the soul will encounter great challenges. One of the most difficult ones will be reforming one's habits and vices. This entails turning away from one's passions and all other worldly things. It seems a difficult thing to ask

someone to spend so much time in building a spiritual life, and to undergo such difficulties, if during this time they will have no contact with the supernatural. St. Theresa is aware of this difficulty. She even warns that there may be long periods of spiritual aridity. She warns her sisters not to expect any kind of spiritual favors from God, especially early on:

There is one thing so important that, although I have said it on other occasions, I will repeat it once more here: it is that at the beginning one must not think of such things as spiritual favours, for that is a very poor way of starting to build such a large and beautiful edifice. If it is begun upon sand, it will all collapse: souls which build like that will never be free from annoyances and temptations. For it is not in these Mansions, but in those which are farther on, that it rains manna; once there the soul has all that it desires, because it desires only what is the will of God.⁷

She adds:

If we go astray at the very beginning and want the Lord to do our will and to lead us just as our fancy dictates, how can this building possibly have a firm foundation?

At this pivotal moment of one's spiritual journey, she encourages us to embrace the importance of suffering. To suffer, she claims, is an important part of spiritual growth. The first three stages of prayer, therefore, represent a difficult part of the spiritual journey, one that is crucial for successfully reaching the more advanced stages spiritual life. In these early stages, the soul will witness terrible battles within itself. A war will rage that will tempt many spiritual travelers to leave the castle. In the second Mansion, St. Theresa describes the battle that ensues as follows:

... the assault which the devils now, makes upon the soul, in all kinds of ways, is terrible; and the soul suffers more than in the preceding Mansions; for there it was deaf and dumb, or at least it could hear very little, and so it offered less resistance, like one who to a great extent has lost hope of gaining the victory. Here the understanding is keener and the

faculties are more alert, while the clash of arms and the noise of cannon are so loud that the soul cannot help hearing them. For here the devils once more show the soul these vipers – that is, the things of the world – and they pretend that earthly pleasures are eternal: they remind the soul of the esteem in which it is held in the world, of its friends and relatives, of the way in which its health will be endangered by penances (which the soul always wants to do when it first enters this Mansion) and of impediments of a thousand other kinds.⁸

This bitter battle must be fought within one's soul. St. Theresa describes this state of war within one's soul as the greatest misery a person can experience. The soul cannot rest nor can it find peace until it ends this raging battle within. The solution is complex. In the first three stages of prayer, St. Theresa describes the way in which one must proceed. The fundamental elements that require cultivation are self-knowledge, humility and virtue. These are the three essential ingredients that will transport one to the inner mansions where one can then "touch" the divine. According to St. Theresa, without self-knowledge, humility, and virtue it is impossible to construct a prayerful or spiritual life. Before I discuss each of these in detail, a clarification needs to be made concerning the role of God in the first three stages.

2. God and the First Three Stages of Prayer

Even though we do not touch the supernatural until the fourth mansion, God, being always present in the inner most mansions, is never absent from one's soul. According to St. Theresa, His presence is not detected by everyone, nor is it easy to notice His presence, even by those who enter the castle. It requires great meditative effort as well as many other virtuous practices and habits. She distinguishes between "hearing God's call" and "touching God." While one does not touch the divine in the early stages, one can hear God calling. But even for those who enter the castle and hear

God calling, there is no security along the spiritual road. One will suffer more at hearing God's call and being unable to answer. She explains, "These souls, then, can understand the Lord when He calls them; ... and this voice of His is so sweet that the poor soul is consumed with grief at being unable to do His bidding immediately; and thus, as I say, it suffers more than if it could not hear him."⁹ Also, in this early stage of prayer, the battle within one's soul will rage greater.

On the other hand, God's radiance can be felt even at the first Mansion. His grace is what allows for one to traverse the early stages of prayers. It is also possible that a person may fall into such a state of sin that no splendor or light shines in their soul.

St. Theresa describes the state as follows:

...when the soul falls into mortal sin. No thicker darkness exists, and there is nothing dark and black which is not much less so than this. You need to know only one thing about it - that, although the Sun Himself, Who has given it [the soul] all its splendour and beauty, is still there in the centre of the soul, it is as if He were not there for any participation which the soul has in him, though it is as capable of enjoying Him as is the crystal of reflecting the sun.¹⁰

That the subject matter of prayer is the improvement of the soul is clear from the analogy described above. The objective of prayer is also clear: to travel through a long spiritual journey and arrive at the inner most mansions where God is. But how do we begin this spiritual journey? How does one enter the soul?

3. Entering the Soul and Self- Knowledge

When St. Theresa addresses the question concerning the entrance of the castle, she raises an interesting paradox that highlights her idea of the soul. She says,

Now let us return to our beautiful and delightful castle and see how we can enter it. I seem rather to be talking nonsense; for, if this castle is the

soul, there can clearly be no question of our entering it. For we ourselves are the castle; and it would be absurd to tell someone to enter a room when he was in it already!¹¹

She identifies the person with the soul. Even though we may not attribute to her a substance dualism, she views the soul as having much more importance than the body. Her world can be divided into material things and spiritual things. She uses the outside of the castle and all the creatures living there to represent the material world. This world includes all physical things and all affairs that concern physical things, such as reputation, honor, business, etc.. The spiritual world consists of all things relating to the soul.

In the citation above, she characterizes the person in such a way that entering or leaving the castle becomes irrelevant, since we are the castle and thus the idea of separating ourselves from it is impossible. However, she recognizes that even though we are always “in our soul”, we are not always responsive to it in the proper way; we sometimes are neglectful of it. She says, “But you must understand that there are many ways of ‘being’ in a place.”¹² Are there many ways of ‘being’ in one’s soul? There are at least two relevant ways of being in the soul: (1) attentively and (2) inattentively. St. Theresa is concerned that we are inattentive to our soul. Her critique is that we pay too little attention to the affairs of the soul and too much attention to the affairs of our body. She says: “All our interest is centered in the rough setting of the diamond, and in our outer wall of the castle – that is to say, in these bodies of ours.”¹³ However, negating the body and freeing oneself of the material world, passions, and worldly affairs requires more than prayer, it requires meditation. She says, “As far as I can understand, the door

of entry into the castle is prayer and meditation: I do not say mental prayer rather than vocal, *for if it is prayer at all, it must be accompanied by meditation* [my emphasis].”¹⁴ What is this meditation supposed to be like? What is the purpose and goal of this meditation?

St. Theresa directs her Carmelite nuns to look inward with a meditative attitude that seeks knowledge of oneself. Without acquiring self-knowledge, one cannot acquire humility or virtue. Humility and virtue develop from self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the first step in prayer. A successful prayerful life, therefore, must begin with rigorous and painstaking reflection and examination of the self, one that will pierce into our identity and reveal the naked self (i.e. our true nature).¹⁵ Who are we? This is the first question in St. Theresa’s instructions for a fruitful prayerful life. This is the question with which one should begin prayer: Who am I? St. Theresa claims that the answer to this question must be sought through reflection and not through faith. We need to come to *understand* ourselves, and not simply believe as a matter of *faith* certain claims about ourselves. This sort of reflection is philosophical in nature, since its method is one of prodding, with vital questions, towards a better understanding of ourselves and our condition in the world. She says,

It is no small pity, and should cause not little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are. Would it be a sign of great ignorance, my daughters, if a person were asked who he was, and could not say, and had no idea who his father or his mother was, or from what country he came? Though that is great stupidity, our own is incomparably greater if we make no attempt to discover what we are, and only know that we are living in these bodies, and have a vague idea, because we have heard it and because our Faith tells us so, that we possess souls. As to what good qualities there may be in our souls, or Who dwells within them, or how precious they are - those are things we seldom consider and so we trouble little about carefully preserving the soul’s beauty.¹⁶

In part, the purpose of self-knowledge is to come to know our defects as individuals, as well as those that arise from our nature. This knowledge will be essential in the more advanced stages of prayer. It will help one discern between uncorrupted natural desires and passions and sinful desires and intentions. The process of reflection undertaken in acquiring self-knowledge will continually provoke one to understand better one's condition; one's purpose in life; one's mortality; one's limitations; one's incomprehensibility of the world, God and oneself; of one's relationship with others; one's relationship with God; the meaning of one's joys and suffering, etc. St. Theresa believes that a result of these meditations will be the discovery of our base nature and the sacrifice the Lord made for us when he gave his life up on the cross. This form of meditation is a form philosophical reflection. It is so essential for one's spiritual development that without it not even God can help you.

How necessary that [self-knowledge] is (and be sure you understand me here) even to those whom the lord keeps in the same mansion in which He Himself is! However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it, and this is will never be able to neglect even should it so desire.¹⁷

St. Theresa goes so far as to say that without this kind of meditation and philosophical reflection it will be impossible to attain salvation.

It is absurd to think that we can enter Heaven without first entering our own souls – without getting to know ourselves, and reflecting upon the wretchedness of our nature and what we owe to God, and continually imploring his mercy.¹⁸

Arriving at self-knowledge will unveil our true worth. It will, on the one hand, reveal our unworthiness in relationship to God, and, on the other hand, our value as creatures created in the image of God.

4. *Humility*

First, let us attempt to say something about humility itself. Defining humility, or the state of being humble, is not an easy task. I do not pretend to arrive at a definitive and exhaustive definition here. Instead, what is necessary for our purposes is to determine what St. Theresa means by the term. Humility concerns, in part, the worth one bestows on oneself and one's accomplishments. To be humble is to bestow upon oneself the importance and worth that truly corresponds to one. Accordingly, one who bestows excessive worth upon himself believes he is more important or superior than he really is. On the other hand, one who bestows less worth upon himself than what corresponds with reality believes he is less important or superior than he really is. In neither case would we say that this person is humble; in both cases he lacks humility.

However, what if someone is very important or superior in reality? In this case, one may argue that being humble may require that he *not* believe that he is as important or as superior as he really is? This, however, confuses behavior with belief. In addition to proportioning one's believe about oneself to reality, being humble may require certain types of behavior, such as not acting as if one were superior even though one is. St. Theresa was a master at manifesting humility in her language and writings. Yet her goal and achievements were not humble at all. I will not go further into this discussion here. What is important for our purposes is to understand that humility for St. Theresa

can be associated with self-knowledge and truth insofar it is a *true* belief about *our* worth and the worth of our accomplishments. We may view humility as the result of self-knowledge and acquired in the “room of self-knowledge.” St. Theresa says,

I do not know if I have explained this clearly: self-knowledge is so important that, even if we were raised right up to heavens, I should like you to never to relax your cultivation of it; so long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility. And so I repeat that it is a very good thing – excellent, indeed – to begin by entering the room where humility is acquired rather than by flying off to the other rooms. For this is the way to make progress...¹⁹

However, St. Theresa points out that the meditation necessary to discover humility does not end with self-knowledge; it requires some knowledge and meditation of God. It is from the dialectic meditation between the nature of God and the nature of person that an accurate estimation of one’s worth is discovered and true humility is acquired. St.

Theresa explains:

As I see it, we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God: let us think of His greatness and then come back to our own baseness; by looking at his purity, we shall see our foulness; by meditating on His humility, we shall see how far we are from being humble.²⁰

As can be gathered from the citation above, humility, according to St. Theresa, like self-knowledge, is necessary for progress throughout one’s entire spiritual journey. Indeed, she says humility is *the* most important thing. Without humility spiritual progress will be impossible. She adds, “Humility must always be doing its work like a bee making its honey in the hive: without humility all will be lost.²¹” Acquiring humility, however, is not as easy as it seems. Many times the danger is not so much in overvaluing one’s worth but in under valuing it. St. Theresa’s discussion of this error, which I will here refer to as “false humility,” shows her gifted ability to penetrate into

the human psychic. It represents one of the most brilliant discussions on this topic, and one of the most interesting of the *Interior Castle*.

St. Theresa warns her sisters that a prevalent mistake among the many religious people is that they under value their true worth and capacities. This causes a false humility which has devastating consequences. The fundamental cause of this false perception is meditation that focus' only (or too much) on the lowly status of the person, especially when compared to the Divine. She explains the consequences of false humility as follows:

...-so long as we are buried in the wretchedness of our earthly nature these streams or ours will never disengage themselves from the slough of cowardice, pusillanimity, and fear. We shall always be glancing around and saying: 'Are people looking at me or not?' 'If I take a certain path shall I come to any harm?' 'Dare I begin such and such a task?' 'Is it pride that is impelling me to do so?' 'Can anyone as wretched as I engage in so lofty an exercise as prayer?' Will people think better of me if I refrain from following the crowd?' 'For extremes are not good,' they say, 'when in virtue; and I am such a sinner that if I were to fail I should have only to fall; perhaps I should make no progress and in that case I shall only be doing people harm; anyway, a person like myself has no need to make herself singular.'²²

As is evident from the examples St. Theresa presents, false humility creates apprehensiveness in one's character to act and to excises one's imagination in setting objectives and goals. False humility creates a sense of trepidation which looms over all of one's projects; it paralyses one from acting and setting out to do the miraculous work that God expects from us. This condition of the soul is caused by a lack of self-knowledge. "Oh, God help me, daughters, how many souls the devil must have ruined in this way! They think that all these misgivings, and many more that I could describe, arise from humility, whereas they really come from our lack of self-knowledge. We get

a distorted idea of our nature, and, if we never stop thinking about ourselves, I am not surprised if we experience these fears and others which are still worse.”²³

One may lack humility because he bestows more worth upon himself than corresponds to reality and thus believes he is more important or superior than he really is. People who lack humility in this way usually manifest a false sense of desert. They believe they deserve more than they actually do, especially from God. St. Theresa addresses this problem with her usual irony and humor: “Do not ask for what you have not deserved. For we have offended God, and, however faithfully we serve Him, it should never enter our heads that we can deserve anything. Oh, humility, humility! I do not know why I have this temptation, but whenever I hear people making so much of their times of aridity, I cannot help thinking that they are somewhat lacking in it.”²⁴ She also speaks about those who become disgruntled with God, because, after they begin a life of prayer, they receive no spiritual favors from Him. She assures us that no one deserves spiritual favors and moreover spiritual favors are not necessary for a successful spiritual life. One can achieve tranquility and peace without spiritual favors. She says: “Be sure that, where there is true humility, even if God never grants the soul favours, He will give it peace and resignation to His will, with which it may be more content than others with favours.”²⁵

Humility introduces an interesting paradox.

5. *Virtue*

As we have already seen, humility grows out of self-knowledge. I will argue that virtue, too, grows out of self-knowledge. According to St. Theresa, virtue and prayer are inseparable. One way to understand the relationship between virtue and prayer is to think of virtue as the practical side of prayer, and prayer as the spiritual or contemplative side of virtue. One cannot exist without the other. St. Theresa makes a distinction between two aspects of the virtuous life. The first concerns abandoning vice and evil acts. The major difficulty here concerns the temptations of the material world. The second concerns doing good and charitable acts. The first is essential, but the second is more important for the Christian. I will discuss both in order.

Virtue, in the sense of abandoning vice and evil acts, grows out of understanding the difference between the physical world and the spiritual world, and noting the difference in beauty and goodness. This distinction is not an easy one to make, for material things will appear to us very profitable, beautiful, and good. But, according to St. Theresa, the interest in worldly things has devastating consequences; it causes one to ignore the soul, and, by ignoring the soul, we negate it and become more like the physical things in the world. She explains:

... , there are souls so infirm and so accustomed to busying themselves with outside affairs that nothing can be done for them, and it seems at they are incapable of entering within themselves at all. So accustomed have they grown to living all the time with the reptiles and other creatures to be found in the outer court of the castle that they have almost become like them."²⁶

One's attachment to the material world will prohibit one's progress in the spiritual world. St. Theresa alludes to the Gospel story of the young man that goes to Jesus and tells him that he has followed all the commandments but would like to be perfect. Jesus

says to him that he needs to gather all his material possessions, give them to the poor, and follow him. The young man cannot do what Jesus asks because he is very wealthy and has many possessions. St. Theresa says, "Ever since I began to speak of these Mansion I have had that young man in mind, for we are exactly like him and this as a rule is the origin of our long period of aridity in prayer,..."²⁷

Only by a conscious effort to embrace a virtuous life, to take on virtuous habits and abandon vices, can we accomplish this ethical transformation. Virtue, therefore, is the means by which we turn ourselves over completely to the spiritual life. This process can only begin after one has begun the process of reflection and self-knowledge. It is only when one understands one's potential spiritual nature and learns how little of that potential nature one has actualized, that one can begin the struggle towards the virtuous life.

Relinquishing the things of the material world is difficult and in the first mansion St. Theresa expects that many will continue their bifurcated life between the spiritual and material world. However, she warns that eventually, if the soul is to progress to the other mansions, it will have to give up the things of the material world. She says,

This seems to me to be the condition of a soul which, though not in a bad state, is do completely absorbed in things of the world and so deeply immersed, as I have said, in possessions or honours or business, that, although as a matter of fact it would like to gaze at the castle and enjoy its beauty, it is prevented from doing so, and seems quite unable to free itself from all these impediments. Everyone who wishes to enter the second Mansions, will be well advised, as well as his state of life permits, to try to put aside all unnecessary affairs and business. For those who hope to reach the principal Mansion, this is so important that unless they begin in this way I do not believe they will ever be able to get there.²⁸

On the other hand, if one can manage to overcome the temptations of the material world, there will be great rewards. The detachment and freedom of vices and material possessions will end the conflicts in the soul and bring peace and tranquility to it. How important is it to have peace within one's own soul?

'Peace, peace,' said the Lord, my sisters, and many a time He spoke words of peace to His Apostles. Believe me, unless you we have peace, and strive for peace in our own home, we shall not find it in the homes of others. Let this war now cease. By the blood which Christ shed for us, I beg this of those who have not begun to enter within themselves; and those who have begun to do so must not allow such warfare to turn them back.²⁹

Detachment from all material things and affairs related to the material world constitutes a big leap forward in one's spiritual journey. It may also be the most difficult one. If it can be accomplished and one can sustain the soul in this peaceful state, then St. Theresa believes that one will reach the seventh Mansion She says, "This is a very good beginning; and, if we persevere in it, instead of going back, even if only in desire, to consort with the reptiles in the first rooms, there is no doubt that, by persevering in this detachment and abandonment of everything, we shall attain our object."³⁰

The second aspect of virtue is also necessary. It concerns doing good and charitable acts. St. Theresa says, "let us realize, my daughters, that true perfection consists in the love of God and of our neighbour, and the more nearly perfect is our observance of these two commandments, nearer to perfection we shall be."³¹ If these are the optimal goals of Christian life, then the most important aspect of virtue is the second, namely, to love God and our neighbors. We may understand the first aspect of virtue as a means towards this end. But what does it mean to love God and our

neighbors? Is it sufficient to comport oneself in such a way as to not offend them? A positive answer assumes that if we do no evil, we are good Christians. But St. Theresa, says,

I once heard a spiritual man say that he was not so much astonished at the things done by a soul in mortal sin as the things not done by it. May God, in His Mercy deliver us from such great evil, for there is nothing in the whole of our lives that so thoroughly deserves to be called evil as this, since it brings endless and eternal evils in its trains. It is of this, daughters, that we should walk in fear,...³²

The evil here is not an immoral act; instead it is no act at all. The question to determine your moral unworthiness, then, is not so much what terrible acts have you committed but rather what beautiful and good acts could you have committed but did not do so. In the third Mansion, she warns her fellow sisters of the danger of complacency and the importance to action. She says,

Oh!, Jesus! How could anyone ever say that he has no desire for such a wonderful thing [union with God in the last stage or prayer], especially when he has got over the most troublesome stages leading to it [the first and the second]? Surely no one could do so. We all say we desire it; but if the lord is to take complete possession of the soul more than that is necessary. *Words are not enough* [my emphasis], any more than they were for the young man when the Lord told him what to do if he wished to be perfect.³³

But, someone may argue that the greatest commandment is to love God and one's neighbor and not necessarily to perform any particular acts of any kind. For St. Theresa, to love is to act and the meaning of the intentional attitude of love is determined by the acts one performs, or by the will's resolution to perform such acts. She says, "And this love, daughters, must not be wrought in our imagination but must be proved by works.

Yet do not suppose God has any need of our works; what he needs is the resoluteness of our will."³⁴

6. Conclusion

We have looked at how self-knowledge, humility and virtue play a foundational role in St. Theresa's conception of prayer. We have seen that these three elements are necessary, not only to have a solid foundation upon which a great spiritual edifice can be built, but to reach the end of the spiritual journey. St. Theresa viewed everyone as equal in their ability to develop and cultivate these three elements. She viewed all three as being interconnected, self-knowledge being the door and the path to humility and virtue. Virtue is the practical side of self-knowledge. The relationship is dynamic and interactive, insofar as progress in one allows progress in the other. The more virtuous one is the more self-knowledge one acquires. Similarly the more self-knowledge one has the more virtuous one becomes. Humility is a form of self-knowledge and it is also essential for the virtuous life. Of the three, St. Theresa thinks that humility is the most important. She says,

And believe me, what matters is not whether or no we wear a religious habit; it is whether we try to practise the virtues, and make a complete surrender of our wills to God and order our lives as His Majesty ordains: let us desire that not our wills, but His will, be done. If we have not progressed as far as this, then, as I have said let us practise humility, which is the ointment for our wounds; if we are truly humble, God, the Physician, will come in due course, even though he tarry, to heal us.³⁵

NOTES

¹ St. Theresa wrote various works. The three major one were: *Libro de La Vida* (1562), *Camino de Perfección* (1562), and *Las Moradas* (1577). The dates of the completion of *Camino de Perfección* is not known. It is only known that she began the book a few days after the completion of *Libro de La Vida*. There were two dates to which they may refer, either to the completion of the first draft in 1562 or the completion of the final draft in 1565.

² Santa Teresa de Jesus, *Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior* in *Obras Completas* 9th Edición (Madrid: Biblioteca De Autores Cristianos, 1997). For the English Translations see: Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, translated and edited by Allison Peers, Doubleday, 2004.

³ St. Theresa was asked by her spiritual advisor, Jerónimo Gracián, to write this book on prayer because her autobiography, *Life*, was being held by the inquisition and could not be published. She began the book in Toledo in June 2, 1577 and completed it in Avila in November 29, 1577.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3. “...-se me ofreció lo que ahora dire para comenzar con algún fundamento, que es considerar nuestra alma como un Castillo todo de un diamante u muy claro crystal, adonde hay muchos aposentos, ansi como en el cielo hat muchas moradas.” [*Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior*, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 1 (1), p.472]

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.53. “...porque comienzan a ser cosas sobrenaturales, ...” [*Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior*, Cuartas Moradas, Capitulo 1 (1), p. 495.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54. “se ha de haver vivido en las otras mucho tiempo.” [*Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior*, Cuartas Moradas, Capitulo 1 (2), p. 495.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9 “...que es Dios, cuando cai en un peado mortal. No hay tinieblas más tenebrosas ni cosas tan oscura y negra, que no lo esté mucho más. No queráis más saber de que, con stares el mesmo sol que le dava tanto replandor y hermosura todavía en el centro del alma, es como si allí no estuviere para participar de El, con ser tan capaz para gozar de Su Majestad como el cristal para resplandecer en él el sol.” [*Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior*, Primeras Moradas, Capitulo 2 (1), p. 475.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6 “Pues tornando a nuestro hermoso y deleitoso castillo, hemos de ver cómo podremos entrar en él. Parece que digo algún disbarate; porque si este castillo es el ánima, claro está que no hay para qué entrar, pues se es él mismo; como parecería desatino decir a uno que entrase en una pieza estando ya dentro.” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 1 (5), p. 473.]

¹² Ibid., p. 6. “Mas havéis de entender que va mucho de estar a estar:” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primeras Moradas, Capitulo 1 (5), p. 473.]

¹³ Ibid., p. 4. “todo se nos va en la grosería del engaste u cerca de este Castillo, que son estos cuerpos.” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 1 (2), p. 473]

¹⁴ Ibid., p.7. “Porque a cuanto yo puedo entender , la puerta para entrar en ese castillo es la oración; no digo más mental que vocal, que como sea oración he de ser con consideración. [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 1 (7), p. 474]

¹⁵ There are many similarities between these early stages of prayer and basic philosophical reflection. One could argue that for St. Theresa the early stages of prayer entail a Socratic kind of philosophical reflection.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 4. “No es pequeña lástima y confusión que por nuestra culpa no entendamos a nosotros mismos un sepamos quién somos. ¿No sería gran ignorancia, hijas mías, que preguntasen a uno quién es y no se conociese ni supiese quién fue su padre, ni su madre, ni de qué tierra? Pues si esto sería gran bestialidad, sin comparación es mayor la que hay en nosotros cuando no procuramos saber qué cosa somos, sino que nos detenemos en estos cuerpos, y así, a bulto, porque lo hemos oído y porque nos lo dice la fe, sabemos que tenemos almas; mas qué bienes puede haver en esta alma u quién está dentro en esta alma u el gran valor de ella, pocas veces lo consideramos, y así se tiene en tan pocoprocurar con todo cuidado conservar su hermosura.”[Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 1 (2), p. 472-3.]

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13. “... , que con cuan necesario es esto [propio conocimiento] – miren que me entiendan - aun a las que la tiene el Señor en la misma morada que El está [propio conocimiento], que jamás, por encumbrada que esté, le cumple otra cosa ni podrá aunque quiera.”[Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 2 (8), p. 477.]

¹⁸ Ibid., 30-31

¹⁹ Ibid., 14. “No sé si quesda bien a entender, porque es cosa tan importante este conocernos, que no querría en ello hubiese jamás relajación, por subidas que estéis en los cielos; pues mientras estamos en esta tierra no hay cosa que más nos importe que la humildad. Y así torno a decir que es muy bueno y muy rebueno tratar de entrar primero en el aposento adonde se trata de esto, que volar a los demás; porque éste es el camino,...” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 2 (9) p. 478.]

²⁰Ibid., p. 14. “Y a mi parecer jamás nos acabamos de conocer, si no procuramos conocer a Dios; mirando su grandeza, acudamos a nuestra bajeza, y mirando a su limpieza, veremos nuestra suciedad; considerando su humildad, veremos cuán lejos estamos de ser humildes.” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 2 (9) p. 477.]

²¹ Ibid. p. 13. “... que la humildad siempre labra como la abeja en la colmena la miel, que sin esto todo va perdido.” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 2 (8) p. 477.]

²² Ibid., p. 15

²³ Ibid., p. 15

²⁴Ibid. p. 39. “No pidáis lo que no tenéis merecido; ni había de llegar a nuestro pensamiento que por mucho que sirvamos ale hemos de merecer los que hemos ofendido a Dios ¡Oh humildad, humildad! No sé qué tentación me tengo en este caso, que no puedo acabar de creer a quien tanto caso hace de estas sequedades, sino que es un poco de falta de ella.” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Terceras Moradas, Capitulo 1 (6) p. 489.]

²⁵ Ibid., p. 41. “y creed que, adonde la hay de veras [humildad], que aunque nunca dé Dios regalos, dará una paz y conformidad can que anden más contentas que otros con regalos.” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Terceras Moradas, Capitulo 2 (9) p. 490.]

²⁶ Ibid., p. 7. “..., que hay almas tan enfermas y mostradas a estarse en cosas exteriores, que no hay remedio ni parece que pueda entrar dentro de sí; porque ya la costumbre la tiene tal de haver siempre tratado con las sabandijas y bestias que están en el cerco del castillo, que ya esta hecho como ellas,...” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 1 (6) p. 474.]

²⁷ Ibid., p. 39

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17 “Ansí me parece debe ser un alma que, aunque no está en mal estado, está tam metido en cosas del mundo y tan empapado en la hacienda u honra u negocios – como tengo dicho – que aunque en hecho de verdad se querría ver y gozar de su hermosura, no lo dejan ni parece que pueda descabullirse de tantos impedimentos. Y conviene mucho para haver entrar a las segundas muradas, que procure dar de mano a las cosas y negocios no necesarios, cada uno conforme a su estado; que si no comienza hacer esto lo tengo por imposible;” [Las Moradas Del Castillo Interior, Primera Moradas, Capitulo 2 (14), p. 479.]

²⁹ Ibid., 29-30

³⁰ Ibid. 40

³¹ Ibid. p 19.

³² Ibid., 11

³³ Ibid., 38-38

³⁴ Ibid. p. 40.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 45