

## **The Direction of Desire**

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### *Abstract*

In recent years Spiritual Direction has become increasingly sentimental and synonymous to emotional certainty and integrative, psychological wholeness and thus lost some of its past priorities and the resultant vigour. In the name of Spiritual Direction what happens today is a sort of therapeutic relationship between a client/patient and psychologist. Terms like 'Healing' and 'Individuation' have become key words via which spiritual direction now operates. Spiritual direction as it happens now is creating a sort of spiritual satisfaction and certainty for those who seek out directors. Lacanian psychoanalysis has its roots in a more orthodox conception of mystical theology and spiritual direction than other forms of psychology due to Lacan's understanding the structural reality of human desire. A recovery of the significance of desire in spiritual direction can be accomplished by engaging in the theoretical work of Lacan and John of the Cross.

### **Introduction**

This paper is intended to demonstrate how existing methods of spiritual direction have become 'therapy-focused' to the extent that the 'affective experientialism' has become one of the main ways in which a relationship with God is measured. At the same time I hope to demonstrate that as certain forms of spiritual direction have become therapeutic in nature, how Lacanian psychoanalysis, due to a common ground in Christian Mystical theology, has many resources which can reinvigorate the kernel of spiritual direction which concerns exploring the subjects direct relationship to "truth" and "desire" rather than "meaning", "demand" and "knowledge". Throughout the essay I will

demonstrate some of the theoretical similarities and differences between Lacan and John of the Cross, a mystic whose writings on spiritual direction formulate the core of the Catholic tradition before tentatively outlining the possibilities of a Lacanian and 'Johanine' informed notion of spiritual direction based on Lacan's Four Discourses.

### **The problem with spiritual direction today**

In this section I will look at modern definitions of spiritual direction and trace how such classifications have changed from earlier times. What will become clear is that the discipline of spiritual direction has become closer in its aims to therapeutic psychology. However, this proximity to psychology has come at a sacrifice, whereas past forms of spiritual direction once had a solid focus on the importance of detecting and directing human desire toward God, this has now been substituted for a predilection toward "emotional certainty and integrative, psychological wholeness". In the course of the paper I will also demonstrate the paradox that both psychoanalysis and spiritual direction started out as technologies of desire, which eventually rejected this goal.

### **Modern spiritual direction and its sentimental focus**

Connolly defines Christian Spiritual direction as follows:

Christian spiritual direction is the help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship [1, p. 8].

The terms used in this definition: 'communication, intimacy, response' are all terms which are used within the discipline of psychology to define therapeutic relationships. It is no surprise then that aspects of spiritual direction have also used such psychological definitions to elucidate and clarify what it specifically means to state that one should develop a relationship with God. Not only this but there is also a demand laid on spiritual direction to clarify what the therapeutic benefits of such a relationship and how they should be measured. It is no surprise then, that term like 'Healing' and 'Individuation' have become key words via which spiritual direction now operates. Some pastoral theologians have argued that although spiritual direction and psychology are both healing traditions, their approaches to healing are ultimately different. Healing for psychology is about identifying a psychological symptom and eradicating it whilst healing for spiritual direction is about

reintegrating a believer back into a system of belief<sup>1</sup>[2, p. 215]. That said these distinguishing traits between these disciplines become blurred in practice. One only has to look at how spiritual directors make use of personality schemes as a method for diagnosing how a person should be integrated into their Christian community. Tilden Edwards has pointed out that the tendency in spiritual direction to use the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory is dangerous when it becomes prescriptive rather than descriptive as it covers up the, ‘hard to bear mysterious evolution... of uncontrollable grace at the core of our lives [3, p. 25-26]. Tilden further points that what distinguishes psychology from spiritual direction is its practical focus on ‘emotions’ and their manipulation [3]. One can see how a psychotherapeutic theory of emotions along with their practical manipulation within the clinical setting is adopted by practitioners of spiritual direction especially when one takes emotional stability and placation as being a definitive interpretive sign of successful spiritual direction. Take for instance this passage from Bruce Tallman’s book *Archetypes for Spiritual Direction*:

Directors identify with the hopes, dreams, fears and longings of others, and this allows them to interpret others’ thoughts, feelings, motives and moods... [4, p. 144]

This capacity for emotional resonance and identification is thought to be integral to the work of spiritual direction. Moreover, if one becomes cut off from these emotions then it will ultimately hinder ones vocation as a director:

Directors disconnected from their feelings, have no real motivation to do spiritual direction. At best they might feel as that they are living in an emotional fog... In any case they are emotionally impotent [4, p. 194]

Reflecting this tendency, Barry and Connolly actually argue that emotional warmth is an absolute requisite for spiritual direction today. Indeed, they argue that this “demand” for emotional warmth is similar to the theory of Trygve Braatoy who suggests that all psychoanalysts should be screened for this emotional capacity. Similarly they argue that spiritual directors should be screened otherwise spiritual direction would become a difficult task [1].

### **When and how spiritual direction lost its desire**

Nevertheless, this requisite for spiritual directors to have the capacity for emotional and empathetic resonance is a modern invention. Traditionally,

1 Although this is the predominant paradigm for most schools of psychology, it is not Lacan’s conception.

spiritual direction, as an aspect of mystical theology and therefore having its basis in neo-platonic and scholastic theology, was concerned less with understanding our emotions, personality and the capacity for psychological healing than it was concerned with detecting how we deal with our desire for God<sup>2</sup>. Spiritual direction, from this orthodox perspective, is about a person turning toward an experienced guide who is to help facilitate the desire of the other toward contemplation. It is a tradition of dependence and participation which has its precedence in the accounts of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. As Brown explains in his seminal work *The Body and Society*, the novice went to their spiritual fathers and mothers in order to learn about their own heart and the mass of “will” which lay coiled at its centre. It was only through the gentle analysis of their own *logosmoi* (chain of thought) through the technique of *diakrisis* (discernment) that could one locate “what one could not call one’s own” within their stream of consciousness. To be sure, the novice was expected to lay bare everything which lay in their heart before the old men and women [5]. In contrast to modern times these desert dwelling spiritual directors were remarkably reticent in the advice they give, indeed from a modern perspective this approach would be antithetical to the cordiality and emotional warmth of the modern spiritual director trained in counselling and other psychotherapeutic techniques who will undoubtedly listen and give gentle advice tailored to fit the current emotional disposition of the directee. In stark contrast to this:

the language of the desert was marked by an austere economy, rooted in an oral tradition that valued the concise, the immediate, and the provocative, “Give us a word, Father” was the formula generally used to introduce the apophthegmata or sayings of the desert monks. Often the response was little more than single word, a teaching rich in ambiguity and suggestiveness, serving to disturb as frequently to inspire” [6, p. 167].

The point here is that such an oracular reticence does not work directly at the level of “sentiment” rather it works on the premise that emotion or sentimentality is predicated on the “will” and it is only by a sparse linguistic intervention which almost “punctuates” the novices discourse to the extent that he can realise that the answer to his own desire lies not in some knowledge of the Abba but in their own heart. Indeed Brown further articulates “The monks own heart was the new book

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2 This is not to say that it was not concerned with it full stop. Neo-platonic thought and scholastic thought gives detailed theories of the human emotion which were utilised by spiritual directors like John of the Cross. For a detailed account of John’s theory of the emotions and its value for psychology see [25].

what required infinitely skilled exegesis" [5, p. 229]. Ultimately it is from this aided form of contemplation that the novice entered more deeply into the life of Christ.

De Certeau argues that a major turning point for spiritual direction took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when much of the scholastic world view was revised. Beforehand spiritual direction was equated with a scholastic 'hierarchy of knowledge'. Mystical theology (spiritual understanding) was intimately connected with both symbolic theology (sensible understanding) and scholastic theology (intellectual understanding). In contrast to the modern period, the medieval approach was one that understood mystical theology as a culminating discipline within the field of theology. However during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it is here that we find that the term mysticism comes into use, it became a competitor against other forms of theology rather than an integral aspect of it [7]. Furthermore, because of the waning of the interpretative framework through which much mystical theology was expressed, spiritual direction was more and more understood in terms of a stringent moralism [8][9]. It became concerned with controlling our wayward human desire which was eventually perceived as being merely an aspect of our nature. Even before this direct severing, one can trace its beginnings in the theology of Catejan who interpreted Aquinas's theology to imply a direct separation between the natural and the supernatural [10]. One can see that because of the severing of scholastic categories which perceived human desire in teleological terms; over time this focus on desire became less an ontological category which connected us to the order of the universe and to the gratuitousness of God and perceived simply as a category which was immanent to human existence<sup>3</sup>.

So whilst spiritual direction was understood mostly in terms of moralism for Catholicism right through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century another seismic pastoral theological shift took place in the focus from *Eros* to *Agape* in protestant theology during the same time. This was due to the theology of Anders Nygren who concluded that *Agape* was the only legitimate love for Christianity, as *Eros*, being concerned with individualism, turns us away from God. Nygren argues that *Eros* has more in common with vulgar Hellenistic philosophy and less to do with the pure love of Christianity<sup>4</sup> [11]. However, it would be foolish to conclude that *Eros* was rejected

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3 Nevertheless, In spite of its dangers this psychological interpretation of spiritual direction is crucial as it has balanced a tendency from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to reduce spiritual direction to mere moral guidance [8].

4 Again reflecting De Certeau's thesis that the severing of scholastic and by implication Hellenistic philosophy led to a transformation of mystical categories

altogether from western society. Although at the time, *Eros* existed in the margins of Christian theological thought it certainly had a central place in the blossoming discipline of psychoanalysis<sup>5</sup>. It is important to note here is that although Freud emptied *Eros* of transcendence he retained its ontological significance.

However, this did not mean that psychoanalysis was free of controversy in regards to human desire as eventually its focus was replaced with developments from analytic psychology which reinterpreted the Freudian concept of *Eros* as a desire for gnostic wholeness, integration, healing and satisfaction rather than a desire for an escape from the reality principle which culminated in the death drive [12, p. 45-46]. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century we find that 'desire' was transformed again, a transformation from being an inclination toward emotional and psychic wholeness to simply being an emotion itself. Indeed, psychologists today argue that desire is simply an emotion alongside other emotions:

The basic components of a typical emotion are cognition, evaluation, motivation, and feeling (see *The Subtlety of Emotions*). All these features are clearly present in sexual desire. [13, p. 1]

However, this description of desire either as an emotional capacity or a longing for therapeutic integration is not, as we will see, how mystical writers like John of the Cross understood it.

Certainly there are differences between these early 'erotic traditions' what with psychoanalysis being based in Freudian materialism and spiritual direction wedded to neo-platonic and scholastic thought. However, one would expect that in the dialogue between psychology and spiritual direction there would be an avid focus on human desire and its importance for both the human psyche and the spirit. Unfortunately, this is not the case due to the transformation of desire in Christianity and developments in psychology which reduced the status of human desire and its importance within the psychotherapeutic scheme of things. This brings us to the central question of this paper "can there be a dialogue between spiritual direction and psychology which keeps its focus on human desire and its centrality for both disciplines?" To explore this I will now look at the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan for two reasons:

1. His work keeps a constant focus on the absolute centrality of human desire

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5 Freud reinterprets human desire divorced from a transcendent myth and instead utilises a materialist framework which understands *Eros* in relation to the pleasure principle [30].

2. His concept of desire owes itself to the work of mystical theologians and spiritual directors of the past.

Hopefully this shared genealogy between spiritual direction and psychology will open up a new dialogical space for a new concept of spiritual direction which keeps human desire firmly in focus.

### **John of the Cross and Lacan: renewing the place of desire in psychoanalysis and spiritual direction?**

Recently there has been much interest in Lacan's relationship to systematic theology, with the work of Clayton Crocket and Marcus Pound mapping the territory for dialogue. But what has Lacan got to say in regards to spiritual direction and by extension mystical theology? In other words, what would be the coordinates for a dialogue between psychoanalysis and its engagement with an aspect of pastoral theology? To do this, in this next section we will explore Lacan's general attitude toward spiritual direction and mystical theology. After this we will move on to exploring aspects of Lacan's work and its possible convergence with some of the ideas of John of the Cross.

### **Desire and the roots of psychoanalysis, spiritual direction and mystical theology**

Lacan's main contribution to the field of psychoanalysis was one which introduced the linguistic theory of Ferdinand Saussure into the field of Freudian psychoanalysis. The ramification of this amalgamation was Lacan's focus on the primacy of language as being the root of thought, feelings and the unconscious. Language was not merely the access point to the unconscious rather it was the unconscious. Moreover language was not merely the expression of our hidden inner self rather it was the very fabric of the fragmented self [14]. Language did not just disguise our hidden desires; instead it was the driving force of our desire. In a word, Lacanian psychoanalysis gave a whole new meaning to the talking cure.

One knows that Freud rejected religion as a type of neurosis and argued that mysticism was nothing more than a child-like wish to return to the womb, however, one has to ask if Lacan's return to Freud equates the same negative attitude toward mystical theology and spiritual direction? In answering a similar question Amy Hollywood states that

For Lacan, mysticism is linked [...] partially to [...] Freud's radical understanding of the unconscious... [7, p. 151]

Hollywood is underlining that Lacan, in accessing the ‘hiddenness’ of the unconscious utilised techniques of the mystics:

Psychoanalysis is like Mysticism [...] Just as the Christian mystical tradition moves between cataphatic attempts to name the divine and apophatic “unsayings” of those divine appellations, so Lacanian psychoanalysis both purports to know the unconscious and apophatically unsays that knowledge... [7, p. 153]

Marcus Pound also points out that Lacan defended John of the Cross from accusations of being psychotic for the reason that he occupies the realm of the symbolic [15]. In other words John’s work was not based in a psychotic gnostic individualism rather it was based in liturgical social uncertainty; it had a social reality. This is further reflected in seminar XX where he states that mysticism is not everything, that is not politics, it is serious. He further articulates that this serious business is taught to us by people like John of the Cross [16, p. 76]. What is serious about John’s work that struck Lacan? Well from the perspective of seminar XX it is the fact that John’s discourse, along with others, has the ability to disrupt other modes of thinking which claim to have a monopoly on truth (a point I will return to later in this paper). So far we can see that that Lacan is positive both about mysticism and its practitioners, but what does he have to say specifically in regards to the practice of spiritual direction? In *Ecrit*, Lacan has this to say about spiritual direction<sup>6</sup>:

...the perplexities of spiritual direction which have been elaborated over the centuries along the path of a demand for truth - a demand linked to no doubt a cruel personification of this Other, but which did a fairly good job of sounding the folds in striving to clear out every other affection from people’s loins and hearts.” [17, p. 381]

What Lacan is possibly stating here is that spiritual direction operated as a type of precursor to psychoanalysis as it focused on that which is ‘hidden’<sup>7</sup> but instead of focusing on the unconscious as the hidden root of desire, spiritual directors focused on the hidden reality of God within a directee’s life. More importantly, according to Lacan, these early spiritual directors understood that desire cannot be equated with mere

6 Thanks to Marcus Pound for pointing this section out to me.

7 Traditionally the word mystical comes from the Greek *mustikos*, which refers to that which is hidden. The hiddenness does not necessarily mean the hiddenness of ‘inner experience’ it can have just as much reference to exegetical or even liturgical practice, which simply involves making explicit the implicit reality of Godself within a Christians life [9]. From this perspective, psychoanalysis is a secular mystical theology as it involves making explicit the implicit reality of the unconscious.



affection or emotion. In the next line he suggests that psychoanalysts should return to the teachings of spiritual direction:

This suffices to force the psychoanalyst to evolve in a region that academic psychology has never considered except through a spy-glass. (17, p. 381)

Keeping true to his word, Lacan has admitted that his psychoanalytic texts have long been influenced by the works of mystics and spiritual directors. He makes note of this fact in seminar XX where he states that the writings of the mystics are not simply empty verbiage but some of the best reading's one can engage in. Not only this, but he locates his own work in the same genre of the mystics: "Add to that list Jacques Lacan *Ecrit*, because it is of the same order" [16, p. 76]. Even on a practical level Lacan has stated that the work of an analyst is much like the work of a monk in the desert [18]. We can take this to mean that like the monk of the desert, the psychoanalyst creates desire in the other by using words carefully and scarcely to guide his novice. Nobus points out that this makes the psychoanalyst something like a modern Zen Master [14]. However, one has to be careful, in extrapolating Lacan's meaning here. It would be foolish to suggest that he is secretly admitting he believes in God. On the contrary, it seems that his main point is to demonstrate that these ancient texts, although archaic, have genuine psychoanalytic insight for the analytic practitioner. Indeed, unlike others who create a false dichotomy between the mystical and the scientific, Lacan saw the value in mystical texts as a means by which psychoanalysis would eventually underline the scientific value of psychoanalysis [7]. This insight is one which is concerned with the inherent incompleteness of human language discovered through the science of linguistic, its effects on desire and by proxy the human psyche. Later, Lacan states that unlike aspects of mystical theology which aims at unsaying the false attributes of God, psychoanalysis aims at removing the false attributes of man which are an illusion of Language:

The Goal of analytic discourse is not strip God of certain attributes but to show that man that he himself has never really possessed them [7, p. 168].

So, it seems that we have a strange but healthy engagement with the works of mystics in the oeuvre of Lacan but what are the implications of this engagement? Ultimately, the question here is one concerning coherence and whether or not Lacan's interpretation of desire has the same trajectory as those found in mystical texts. Before getting too enthusiastic we have to point out that there are obvious differences between Lacan's materialist interpretation of desire and one based

in spiritual direction. Without going into too much detail, Lacan's desire is mono-directional; it is an effect of the materialist process that reflexively gives rise to human subjectivity [19]. Whilst for most mystics, like John of the Cross whom we will explore shortly, our human desire is matched by God's desire for us as it is based in a scholastic realism [20]. In this next part of my paper I wish to explore the specific work of John of the Cross and its possible convergence with Lacan's ideas. I propose that there are three points upon which John and Lacan would probably agree:

1. Desire is not Imaginary; meaning that it is not an emotion and to reduce it to an emotion goes against the ethics of psychoanalysis and spiritual direction.
2. Desire is Symbolic: meaning that it attaches itself to a larger reality whether this is based in Lacan's socio-linguistic unconscious or in the scholastic framework through which John works out his relational mystical theology.
3. Desire is Real; meaning that it is antagonistic and traumatic: this is bore out in what Lacan called subjective destitution and John of the Cross named the Dark night of the soul. They both demonstrate the importance of trauma and anxiety and its importance for the transformative power of human desire.

### **Desire is not Imaginary**

Firstly, desire, for Lacan, is the key to the unconscious and therefore cannot be an emotion since emotions are located in the ego [14]. Lacan loathed the fact that much psychoanalysis and different forms of therapy were becoming embroiled in what he saw as a gross sentimentalism based on the constructions of the ego [21]. For Lacan his return to Freud, was equally a return to the structural significance of the unconscious which is anything but a sea of swelling emotions. For Lacan the depth of humanity reveals itself in its linguistic structural complexity as opposed to intuitive simplicity [22]. Much of the difficulty of his work stems from his effort to demonstrate the structural and ontological basis of desire first through linguistic theory and later through mathematical topology. If this seemed to be completely anti-intuitive, mission accomplished, Lacanian psychoanalysis is not interested in anything remotely intuitive as there is nothing natural about our linguistic desiring nature [19]. Therefore, psychoanalytic intervention has to take place at the level of human subjective structure rather than the mere effect of that structure. In Lacanian terms psychoanalysis works on the level of the symbolic and avoids the imaginary at all costs. So any work analysts do, at the level of intervention, must be at the level of language and nothing more

as language is the unconscious linguistic field which is shared between analyst and analysand<sup>8</sup>.

The problem here is that Lacan, with his engagement with mystical writers, seems to be contradicting this basic tenant of his work, what with engaging in an imaginary, emotive interpretation of desire via the mystics? On the contrary, Lacan was first to point out that if he was going to use religious and mystical concepts like Grace within the body of his work, it would be stripped of all emotional content as the concept itself is beyond emotion itself:

The measure in which Christianity interests us, I mean at the level of theory, can be measured precisely by the role given to Grace. Who does not see that Grace has the closest relationship with the fact that I, starting from theoretical functions that certainly have nothing to do with the effusions of the heart, designate as... the desire of the Other. [23, p. VIII 1]<sup>9</sup>

One can surmise that in order to interpret Grace at the level of the unconscious Lacan utilised aspects scholastic theology<sup>10</sup>. Certainly, Aquinas argues that it is impossible for a person to know conclusively that he has been given God's Grace. Granted there may be times when a person is blessed with feelings of peace during hardship. Nevertheless because God by reason of his excellence is unknown to us, "so therefore his presence or his absence cannot be known with certainty"<sup>11</sup> (ST II, Q112, a.V).

What Lacan wants to do is essentially revive this theological framework, albeit emptied of its transcendence through Freud and modernised via Saussure:

In the Freudian field, the words notwithstanding, consciousness is a characteristic that is as obsolete to us in grounding the unconscious - for we cannot ground it on the negation of consciousness (that unconscious dates back to Saint Thomas Aquinas) - as affect is unsuited to play the role of the protopathic subject, since it is a function without a functionary. Starting with Freud, the unconscious becomes a chain of signifiers that repeats

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8 It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in detail how this operation takes place but for an excellent piece of work on how this works within discourse analysis please see *From the Conscious Interior to an Exterior Unconscious: Lacan, Discourse Analysis and Social Psychology (Lines of the Symbolic Series)* by David Pavón Cuéllar, Danielle Carlo and Ian Parker.

9 I would like to thank Marcus Pound for this research.

10 For a solid overview of Lacan's use of scholastic ideas see [31].

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and insists somewhere (on another stage or in a different scene, as he wrote), interfering in the cuts offered it by actual discourse and the cogitation it informs [17, p. 676]

What Lacan is essentially saying is that we cannot ground the work of psychoanalysis simply in the realm of consciousness and from there look to the unconscious as a secondary function. Put differently it is not consciousness that creates the conditions under which one can have an unconscious, it is the other way around. The unconscious, and therefore desire, are the a priori conditions for the ego. The subject, as opposed to the ego, has to be located in the chain of metonymic signifiers which interferes in the gaps and cuts of conscious signification. The ramification of this insight is that if psychoanalysis is to focus only on the reality of desire, then we must relegate satisfaction as being simply an illusion of the ego. Grace then, as a matrix for interpreting desire, is not to be reduced to a quasi-sentimental object to be experienced or studied. Grace if it has value for Lacan, and it clearly does, is found in its ability to transform the very framework via which 'emotional objects' are created (a point I will return to in discussing trauma).

Grace similarly, for John of the Cross, has less to do with our emotional states and more to do with God's unremitting desire for us. John, in the *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, states clearly how Grace is to be opposed to emotional states:

The more completely a soul is wrapped up in the creatures and in its own abilities, by habit and affection, the less preparation it has for such union; for it gives not God a complete opportunity to transform it supernaturally. The soul, then, needs only to strip itself of these natural dissimilarities and contrarities, so that God, Who is communicating Himself naturally to it, according to the course of nature, may communicate Himself to it supernaturally, by means of grace [20].

Grace can only operate to the extent that one is:

stripped of all things created, and of its own actions and abilities – namely, of its understanding, perception and feeling – so that, when all that is unlike God and unconformed to Him is cast out, the soul may receive the likeness of God (20).

Grace for John was caught up with the reality of desire and in turn desire was caught up with our very ontological fabric as we are defined by our desire for God, this is expressed in his *Dark night of the soul*:

One dark night, fired with love's urgent longings – ah, the sheer grace! [20].

Indeed, Alan Cugno sums up John's theory of the soul as being ontologically defined by its desire for God [24]. As De Lubac would probably say, we are desire for God and not merely the holders of a desire for God [10]. John understood spiritual direction and contemplation as the development of techniques to detect and nurture this primary desire, which can sometimes be a traumatic and painful experience and not merely a positive one [25][24]. Mystical theology and spiritual direction from this perspective is concerned with directing people to this ontological necessity of desire. It is not about using desire primarily as an indicator of a coming emotional wholeness, as if God is to be understood solely in terms of His utility for human satisfaction. Rather, John echoing De Lubachere, can be perceived as understanding desire as a gift in itself and since we are desire, ultimately, we are gift. It is not about stripping away our being until we can understand what we truly desire, it's about stripping away the contingent aspects of our being until we understand ourselves as desire for God. The point here is that if we are desire for God, then union and satisfaction would entail either the extinguishing of our human nature, or a complete ontological change. However, since human beings are made as desire, its eschatological fulfilment, or union is found, in desires fullest realisation as desire and not merely as satisfaction. Furthermore, the complexity of mystical writers, like John, was due to the difficult task of separating a premature satisfactory experience from this ontological requisite, since such a premature experience can kill off this desire [25].

### **Desire is Symbolic**

Peter Tyler points out that John's basic spiritual anthropology is one which aims at "excavating the caverns of the heart" to allow God's desiring spirit to act in us, therefore all spiritual direction needs to constantly refer back to this intervening desiring Other of God to allow him to work between director and directee [25]. Reflecting this relational triadic reality Iain Mathews points out that:

...John intends to open a path to Joy, and that his priority is not self-realisation (perfection) but relationship [26, p. 36-37].

Apart from reflecting a deep Trinitarian theology within John's work, this also demonstrates the importance of not placing idols in the way of this relationship [3]. Lacan, like John, understood the importance of the Other, but unlike John he moves the radical externality of God to the unconscious. The unconscious is our desire, and our consciousness attempts to preclude our desire [19]. In the analytic situation the analysand will do all they can to thwart one's relationship with their

unconscious by making demands on the analyst. These demands for satisfaction ultimately destroy unconscious desire and move the relationship back to the level of egos [19]. To the ego, the unconscious presents itself as non-sense so it is no surprise that repression becomes the order of the day. The job of the analyst is to present this non-sense to the analysand and to help highlight the moments when the unconscious reveals itself within their discourse [19]. What both John and Lacan had in common was the absolute focus that a triadic 'relationality' should never be extinguished by seeking emotional and spiritual goods even though we feel that is the natural course of our desire [25]<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, for Lacan desire can only ever give birth to desire in the eternal slipping of one signifier to the next, whilst for John the realisation of desire can only ever be found in the afterlife [22][20]. Ultimately, the danger of reducing spirituality to positive emotional experience is just one side of the coin as there is equally the danger of focusing on negative emotional experience. This focus on negative emotional experience is prevalent in certain interpretations of John's Dark Night of the Soul. Indeed, some theologians falsely and mistakenly interpret this as a negative state which would be synonymous with a type of depression [25]. However this is not to say that the dark night has no psychological relevance whatsoever, on the contrary, I believe it acts as a perfect supplement to the Freudian concept of Trauma as interpreted by Lacan [15].

### **Desire is Real**

Peter Tyler points out that John gives us guide lines for us to detect this Dark Night [25]. He explains that during this moment all things of interest begin to be swept away, all those things that brought comfort make no sense anymore, we are hit with the power of nothing, and all the way God is acting on our powerlessness and this absolute sense of foreignness:

To reach satisfaction in all, we must desire its possession in nothing, to come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing, to come to be what you are not, you must go by a way which you are not [25].

Likewise the main goal of psychoanalysis, for Lacan, was what he called 'subjective destitution' a point where all the imaginary constructions

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12 Lacanian desire differentiates itself from Jungian desire as it does not desire wholeness or satisfaction, desire simply desire's to further itself and nothing more. What is more where Jung can be typified by emptying the structure of Christian theology and keeping its affective mystical content, Lacan seems to do it the other way around! He is not interested in mystical theology at the level of affective content rather he is interested in it at the level of structure.

have been wiped away and all that is left is the pure 'void' of human subjectivity [14]. In other words, it is only through the eventual confrontation with trauma that one can confront the transformative power of desire. This same point is explicitly made in John's spiritual canticle and his depiction of the three fold wound. The third wound being a powerful metaphor which consumes the soul: "It is dying a living death until love, having slain it, shall make it live the life of love, transforming it in love" [20].

The connection between Lacan and John of the Cross from a practical perspective is salient here. In Lacanese, it is only through the analysand confronting their true cause of desire or what Lacan termed the Thing or '*object a*' that they can shatter their previous historic symbolic coordinates which will eventually create the possibilities of a new desiring subject [21]. Similarly, the way John perceives our desire as pointing toward God (the three fold wound John speaks of in his spiritual canticle is basically a symptom of this primary desire) Lacan interpreted our desire as pointing toward a traumatic moment of linguistic integration which leaves behind traces of itself within our history which becomes, like John would suggest, a wound in our being that we constantly try to heal with imaginary constructions [15]. An argument of this thesis is that spiritual direction and psychoanalysis both take this 'woundedness' seriously, and it is only by addressing this root cause of human desire can we attempt to address the very real effects of our desiring nature. Ultimately psychoanalysis and Christian spiritual direction, from John's and Lacan's perspective, are disciplines which have no intention to close this wound; rather it is about opening it until what has caused it overwhelms us.

To summarise what I have attempted to do here is by no means exhaustive; all I wish to demonstrate is that both Lacan and John hold in common a deep focus on the radical and transformative power of human desire and its connection to the Other; for John this Other is God and for Lacan it is the unconscious. Both thinkers perceived human desire as being more than a simple emotion just as both perceived desire as being a power which is to be used and manipulated but ultimately does not belong to us. Furthermore, both thinkers were deeply suspicious of a demand for satisfaction and the imaginary constructions which people have the tendency to think are initially good but ultimately end up clouding our true desire and its connection to the Other. Furthermore, I believe that the dialogue between psychology and spiritual direction is a fruitful and helpful one but it has had some negative side effects which demonstrate that the previous focus

on desire, prized by mystical theology and spiritual direction, has ultimately been reduced. Nevertheless, I believe that by continuing a dialogue with Lacanian psychoanalysis one can recover the practice of desire which paradoxically originates in the practice of spiritual direction and mystical theology something which Lacan recognised. In opening this dialogue we also retain the important developments of the post-Freudian tradition and their value for spiritual direction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The four discourses and spiritual direction: a Lacanian approach to spiritual direction.**

In this section I will explore the possibility of a Lacanian informed spiritual direction which is inspired by many of the themes in the work of John of the Cross. We have seen so far that Lacan and John have important points of convergence as both focus on the transformative power of human desire. Furthermore, I have argued that both spiritual direction and psychoanalysis aim at facilitating this desire without putting objects in its way. For many years Lacan tried to articulate how this method of conversation was to take place. In trying to formulate the goal of psychoanalysis, Lacan argued that it was radical mode of communication that differentiates itself from other modes of communication. This theory is somewhat like Wittgenstein's notion of language games, inasmuch that certain language games have terms which function very differently from others. Problems of communication take place when a person takes a term and expects it to function the same way in a different language game, a bit like using the word love in tennis to express emotions of deep affection toward the umpire.

Certainly, as we have seen, people come to psychoanalysis expecting it to operate in a certain way; some people come expecting it to function according to their language game. As stated, Lacan called this expectation 'Demand'. However, as Lacan understood it, if psychoanalysis was to let the unconscious speak, or more precisely to let desire speak, it must aim to subvert this demand at every moment. Lacan wanted to underline the fact that human discourse is essentially an impossible task as we are, at every moment, barred by the real of human language which not only fragments our very being but also separates us from each other. Put differently, in communicating with one another we essentially say more than what they are trying to say and sometimes less than what we want to; language, at different times, is both an excess and a deficit. We experience this when trying to tell our partner that we love them or quickly attempting to correct ourselves at



a business meeting after realising that a glib pun could be taken as being drastically offensive because it was said out of context. Nevertheless, it is at these moments of excess or deficit that we find the unconscious comes into play. Our language is essentially created from a battery of signifiers which we use at a given time to construct our meaning. However, the meaning which we are going to construct via conscious thought or speech is essentially pre-determined by the unconscious which limits our meaning in via its selection of certain signifiers over others. To use an analogy, the unconscious offers us a freedom of expression which is akin to the freedom one finds with a coupon in a supermarket, you are free to buy anything you want with the proviso you only buy a certain brand. The unconscious selects certain terms for us to communicate but we can only express ourselves within the facticity of these linguistic limits. The unconscious is essentially the patterned construction of signifiers which we use to communicate to ourselves and each other. This, however, leaves the analyst with a problem, what sort of communication can reveal this unconscious and how does it differ from other modes of communication? Since the 1950s Lacan has stressed that the unconscious is intrasubjective but is only in the 1960s that Lacan begins to speak of a discourse in the sense of a social bond [21]. In attempting to explain how this works Lacan stated that there were four modes of discourse which operate on a scheme of communication based on impossibility and impotence which characterises all communication:

**Figure 1:**

<b>Agent</b> ----->	<b>Other</b>
<b>Truth</b>	<b>Product/ Loss</b>

The agent in communicating to the other always loses something in the process (impossibility) which falls irretrievably below the bar. This product or loss then operates as an impotent truth which cannot be realised in conscious discourse (it cannot cross the bar above it). Within these four positions are also four modes of communication which are represented by algebraic symbols, they are as follows:

(S1 master signifier)

(S2 knowledge, which can only make sense of itself via its relation to the master signifier) (Object a: the object of desire which allows us to speak from the outset)

(\$ the split subject of the unconscious which results from the impossibility and impotence of human language).

The following is a representation of the master discourse which shows that the four positions are occupied by the four modes of communication:

**Master Discourse**

**Figure 2**

(master) S1 ----->	S2 (slave)
(subject) \$	a (cause)

S1 (the master) is in the position of the agent who communicates to the other S2 (who is now in position of the slave). The employee in working for the master creates surplus value which is utilised by the master. However in this process, the slave attains new knowledge about the situation which the master does not and cannot care about. This product leads to the truth of the situation, which is basically the split subject of hegemony who knows the castration of the master but acts as if they should not or does not know.

**The university Discourse**

**Figure 3**

(knowledge) S2 ----->	a (surplus)
(master signifier) S1	\$ (divided subject)

We see in this discourse that the agent is occupied by S2 which implies that knowledge now takes the place of the master. The other is then occupied by the object of desire, which implies, for example, that scholars in universities work tirelessly in creating new objective truths to back up the position of that knowledge. However, this knowledge is secretly backed by the truth of S1. One can argue that the university discourse is really a legitimisation of the master discourse through rational argument. The product of this process is the divided subject since the absolute focus on objective knowledge excludes subjective knowledge altogether. One can see this division between humanities and the sciences.

### The hysterical Discourse

**Figure 4**

(split subject) \$ ----->	S1 (master)
(cause) a	S2 (knowledge - Jouissance)

In this discourse, the split subject operates as the agent who perpetually interrogates the master and their repressed weakness. The hysterical discourse is the opposite of the university discourse in that the master is asked to justify their knowledge. The product of this discourse is a limited satisfactory knowledge, but since it is at the level of S2 it must constantly reproduce other S2's. This perpetual process is instigated by the analysand's desire for the "real" which sits in the left hand corner.

### The Analysts discourse

**Figure 5**

(Analyst) a ----->	\$ (Analysand)
(knowledge) S2	S1 (new master signifier)

We see in this discourse that the analyst plays the part of the pure desiring object of the analysand. By taking this position the analyst allows the unconscious to speak in the slipped words and bungled actions of the patient. By doing this the analysand works to make new connections and eventually discovers the operating master signifiers in the symptoms of their life<sup>13</sup>. S2 (knowledge) is in the place of truth in this discourse. However, one must not mistake this knowledge for the same knowledge which is produced in the university discourse as it is the knowledge of the unconscious. This knowledge is produced by the analysand through their master signifiers which are then reintegrated into their historic symbolic coordinates of their life.

I wish to suggest that this model of communication can demonstrate some of the prevailing attitudes people have when coming to spiritual direction. Moreover by misreading Lacan through John I want to tentatively suggest that the work of the spiritual director is also to

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13 A simple example of this would be someone who has an unnatural fear of the devil that cannot be explained as they are not religious. This analysand spent much time exploring demonology and was fascinated about the hierarchy of demons. This would be an example of a non-sensical Master Signifier. However during the course of analysis we find that the father of the analysand used to hit the child regularly with a spirit level, at the level of metaphor the fear of the spirit level became associated with 'devil'. The true master signifier was the father who used the spirit level to instil discipline into the child.

subvert the prevailing discourse which one is trapped in and it is only by shifting the directee to the 'contemplative discourse' that one can further the desire of the analysand.

**(Master discourse) The Dogmatic discourse as spiritual direction.**

**Figure 6**

(Director as master) S1 ----->	S2 (directee who ethically complies)
(alienatedsubject) \$	a (spiritual desire)

Dogmatic discourse is obviously inspired by Lacan's master discourse, but it is also inspired by John's writings. There is a definite tendency for many to reduce spiritual direction to mere morality. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, this took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with gross misinterpretations of John's work at the hand of theologians who arguably reduced the radical message of Christian spiritual direction to one of crass moral integration [8]. One of the reasons for this is due to the aforementioned interpretation of Grace as being beyond experience; hence the only signifiers which represented its presence were examples of revelation and moral doctrine which led to evocations of piety [9].

Certainly, it is easy to understand why many seeking out "masters" would be attracted to the monastic life in John's time. One can easily imagine a zealous student seeking out the Carmelite monastery with a hankering for following austere life grounding rules. Furthermore, according to Lacan's understanding of the master discourse it is by following the rules of the master that one produces a satisfaction which grounds them in a tentative certainty. However, as successful this as this process is in creating an obedient Christian, something will always feel lacking for the directee, this is the unconscious realisation that spirituality cannot be reduced to moralism.

Today this tendency is found in those who come to spiritual direction who mistake it for catechetical training or mistake spiritual direction as spiritual legalism. Following John and Lacan one should resist this demand placed on a director to give rules to the directee. Indeed, it is only by frustrating these demands that one can allow them to detect the reality of their own desire.

**(University Discourse) Doctrinal discourse as spiritual direction.**

**Figure 7**

(teacher as guardian of knowledge) S2 ----->	a (directee who produces learning)
(director still as master) S1	\$ (divided subject through theological knowledge)

Doctrinal discourse roughly corresponds to Lacan’s notion of the university discourse. Within this scheme, knowledge takes the place of the master. Spiritual direction is perceived in terms of demonstrating that one has learnt the specific theological implications of a certain teaching. This discourse usually takes place when people mistake academic knowledge for spirituality. Writing from a personal perspective, I have seen many earnest students who embark upon a course in theology to strengthen their own personal faith only to leave the course as it does not bear the fruit they expect it to. Indeed, rather than strengthen their faith, the reduction to objective historical or philosophical knowledge subverts their expectations and they usually leave unless they reevaluate their expectations. Indeed McIntosh rightly points out that there should be a natural coherence between mystical theology and academic theology, but the specific role of mystical theology is to subvert the tendency in academia to totalise their knowledge [9]. This is a notion which correlates directly with John’s teachings about the role of the *affectus* and the *intellectus*, and why such mystical knowledge presents itself as darkness to the intellect [25].

Again the aim of the spiritual director would be to frustrate these demands for knowledge. In fact the spiritual director would do well to actually cast doubt on the certainty one attributes to such theological knowledge. I am not advocating heresy, I am simply stating that rather than simply affirming or giving an objective piece of theological knowledge, one should question its place within the economy of the directee’s life. If the directee places this knowledge on a pedestal then it is the director’s duty to throw such certainty into doubt.

**(Hysterical discourse) (liberal spiritual direction)**

**Figure 8**

(Directee as interrogator) \$ ----->	S1 (Director as interrogated)
(Cause of our desire) a	S2 (emotional certainty as Jouis-sance)

This discourse is probably the most prevalent today. Its basic structure is one which sees the role of the director as a purveyor of spiritual goods. Demands are placed on the director to demonstrate his credentials whether in the form of past testimonies from other clients or prestigious awards; there is a healthy disrespect of the director as master in this discourse. Other demands are usually found in the form of clarifications of experience: “if I do A B and C will I experience X Y and Z?” Unlike the university discourse, the directee does not mistake spiritual direction as academic knowledge, instead spiritual direction is judged on the level of experience. Mystical theology is understood as being superior to academic theology but equally ‘mysticism’ is understood at a purely experiential level, usually equated with scholars like William James who would argue that the institutional doctrinal element of religion is predicated primarily on this noetic experience. The problem here is that although the director might supply the directee with objects of emotional certainty S2, they can never exist at the level of S1, meaning that the process will become a constant hysterical demand for these objects. As stated earlier in this essay John of the Cross would not understand spiritual direction in terms of searching for objects of emotional gratification, on the contrary he would understand it in terms of disruption and the stripping away of emotional certainties in order for God’s grace to work within us.

**(Analysts) discourse Contemplative discourse.**

**Figure 9**

(Director) a ----->	\$ (directee)
(theological knowledge) S2	S1 (new ways of relating to God)

This discourse roughly corresponds with Lacan’s notion of the analyst discourse. This discourse is similar to the hysterics discourse. For this discourse to work; the directee must be hystericalised; there must be demands put on the director if he is to subvert them after all. So whereas the hysteric would question a given master and the validity of a certain body of doctrinal knowledge whilst placing demands for emotional certainty on the director, the contemplative discourse would turn this questioning around so that it is aimed at oneself.

As the director becomes more and more removed from the imaginary dyadic relation, this gives space for the directee’s unconscious to speak. The unconscious discourse is simply reflected by the director toward the directee. This is what is known as returning empty speech for full speech

[14] However, in this discourse, what the directee usually perceives is the analyst talking nonsense which therefore gives the hysteric every reason to doubt what is conveyed to them. The shift from the liberal discourse to the contemplative discourse takes place when the directee realises that this nonsense is actually the inherent ambiguity which exists within the structural theological certainties which are conveyed to the director and the radical questioning which is taking place is actually restructuring their perception of God and how he functions within their life. This method of 'decentering' is nothing new; it has always been the goal of in many spiritual and mystical texts, including that of John of the Cross. Peter Tyler suggests that spiritual direction is a "form of discourse that subverts other forms of discourse which destabilises 'knowing' in a process of 'unknowing' and points to the strangeness of the mystical as a form of discourse" [25, p. 70]. So unlike modern definitions of mysticism which are predicated on a universal extra-linguistic noetic experience which is then translated through the contingency of religious symbols, traditional definitions are based more on a technique of interruptive paradoxical language which is defined by its performativity as opposed to its descriptive value.

The tendency to use categories such as desire and *Eros* to guide inward journeys of self-discovery betrays John and Lacan's original notion that the message of Christian mysticism is one of relational external encounter which is to be opposed to this illuminist inward journey. Žižek sums it up thusly:

...the inner journey of spiritual self-purification, the return to one's true Inner self, the self's "rediscovery", [is to be held] in clear contrast to the Jewish-Christian notion of an external traumatic encounter (the divine call to the Jewish people, God's call to Abraham, inscrutable Grace - all totally incompatible with our "inherent" qualities, even with our natural" innate ethics) [27, p. 37].

In the same passage he points out that this gap is one which separates Freud from Jung. Freud's insight was one which associated the unconscious with an external traumatic encounter whilst Jung interpreted it as the standard Gnostic journey of self-discovery [27]. With specific reference to the difference in the writings of the mystics Lacan later came up with his idea of the non-all [16]. This further development introduced the idea of sexuation into discourse. The basic idea is one which is based on a further analysis on the impossibility of language to create conditions of certainty for the subject. Lacan repudiates discourses which are orientated toward an external limit which create the conditions of a false totalising knowledge, but with an exception

which is usually glossed over. Žižek uses the example of Wittgenstein to underline this point. In his early philosophy Wittgenstein conceived the world as a totalised enclosed set of facts which presupposes an ineffable mystery which functions as its limit. However, in his Later philosophy this limit vanishes whilst at same time so does the notion that there can be a universal meta-language which can underpin our ability to think about the world [28, p. 83]. With this in mind, to understand the goal of spiritual direction as a way of totalising our certainty on the world can be seen as an illusion. It presupposes effacing the impossibility which always exists within any form of communication. To efface this impossibility is to move the discourse back into the false certainty of the imaginary. Lacan ultimately saw the goal of analytic discourse as one which utilises the discourse of the non-all and in a word so did John. The very fact that he prized the poetic over the rational demonstrates his utilisation of a language of the non-all. Furthermore, one can vision John, in giving spiritual direction, would always create a space to allow God to speak within the relationship between Director and Directee. We have seen in the text above that John would also do his best to stop this space being filled with empty idols which would distract one from the goal of spiritual direction, which is to further one's desire for God.

This brings me back to my earlier point in the essay which demonstrates why Lacan thought that the work of mystics like John and Teresa of Avila, as proponents of the non-all, were so important for the work of psychoanalysis which, if this argument is correct, takes the radical discovery of the mystics and translates them into a secular discourse. Lacan's Return to Freud was a return guided by the hand of mystics and theologians. Indeed, throughout Lacan's writings one can detect this mystical reality constantly threatening to break in and it is only through Lacan's constant reformulation of what he termed Thing and later the Real that he can efface its latent theological content.

My argument here is one which hinges on the preservation of this radical discovery for spiritual direction. I tentatively suggest that a Return to Spiritual direction as understood by the mystical writers of the Catholic Church would be aided by a Return to Lacan.

## **Conclusion**

From all of the above, I have tried to demonstrate that spiritual direction needs to recover the radical practice of desire which existed in the great mystical writers of the Catholic Church. I have attempted to trace how changes in the concept of mysticism via the discourse of psychology have also changed the practical methods of spiritual direction to



the extent that it now focuses on creating spiritual satisfaction and certainty for those who seek out directors. Against this perspective I have suggested that a recovery of desire for spiritual direction can be accomplished by engaging in the theoretical work of Lacan and John of the Cross. By doing this I have continued the dialogue between psychology and spiritual direction whilst at the same time demonstrating that Lacanian psychoanalysis has its roots in a more orthodox conception of mystical theology and spiritual direction than other forms of psychology due to Lacan understanding the structural reality of human desire. Because of this genealogical commonality I argue that a Lacanian form of spiritual direction would not be a theological deviation, rather it would allow Lacanian psychoanalysis to recognise its theological roots, whilst possibly demonstrating that Lacanian psychoanalysis finds its precedence and possible fulfilment in the practice of spiritual direction. The latter part of this paper was an attempt at outlining the possibilities of such a spiritual direction with direct reference to Lacan's four discourses and his idea of the non-all.

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