LOVE FOR GOD AND SELF-ANNIHILATION

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Abstract: In *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete, a 14th century mystic, there is a straightforward path from claims about what love for God in its purest form entails to the conclusion that a kind of *self-annihilation* is the ultimate goal for a Christian. There is, furthermore, an implicit argument in her work for the conclusion that achieving self-annihilation through love for God is *superior* to and better *for us as individuals* than achieving conformity with God's will through the (mere) cultivation of virtue as it is traditionally conceived. Taking inspiration from Porete's work, this paper defends both of these counterintuitive claims.

On June 1, 1310, Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake as a heretic. One of the most significant and salient doctrines for which she was condemned, developed and defended in her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, was that the best mode of life for a person devoted to God would involve "taking leave of the virtues". Her idea, in short, was that whereas a fully virtuous person is one ruled by reason, the true lover of God would ultimately be ruled not by reason but simply by their all-consuming love for God. Furthermore, she argued that, in loving God so completely, a person would be so positioned as to automatically live in accord with God's will—the best possible life for a human being—without any need for virtue as an aid to so living.

It is obvious from our contemporary vantage point that, properly understood, this doctrine of taking leave of the virtues does not rise to the level of (Christian) heresy, grounded as it is in the common and deeply Christian idea that love for God is the ideal motivation for a worshipper of God. In fact, I suspect that to modern Christian ears, Porete's doctrine has a clear ring of truth and wisdom. But there is a straightforward and explicit path in her work from claims about what love for God in its purest form entails to the conclusion that a kind of self-annihilation is the ultimate goal for a Christian. There is, furthermore, an implicit argument in her work for the conclusion that achieving self-annihilation through love for God is *superior* to and better *for us as individuals* than achieving conformity with God's will through the (mere) cultivation of virtue as it is traditionally conceived. This argument is latent in her reasons for elevating the ideal of taking leave of the virtues, together with her views about how God's will operates in the life someone consumed with love for God. My goal in this paper is to develop these two arguments and, at the end, to highlight the significance of their conclusions.

Although I say (and believe) that I am developing *her* arguments, this is not really a work of Porete exegesis; nor is it aimed at settling controversies about what she might have intended. My project is more one of retrieval and reconstruction, setting a relatively neglected and deeply interesting historical figure in dialogue with some of the issues and concerns in contemporary analytic theology and philosophy of religion. I have tried to be as faithful to Porete's own views as a I can be in developing her arguments; but at certain points in defending them, I have deliberately and significantly diverged from what seems to be the scholarly consensus about what sort of view she is actually trying to articulate in her text. I will note these divergences where they appear.

The idea that love for God leads, or ought to lead, to self-annihilation is counterintuitive.[1] On a fairly natural interpretation of what self-annihilation would involve, it also runs counter to claims that many philosophers and theologians have tended to rely upon in other theological enterprises. In responding to the problem of evil, for example, many philosophers actively affirm the value of human freedom and, in doing so, they seem partly to be affirming the value of human beings having wills that are to some degree *independent* of God's. But the picture of self-annihilation that Porete paints is one that seems, at its limit, to leave no room for independence of will. Similarly, those who defend the view that God authorizes human beings to protest against God commonly rely on the idea that God values and actively works to preserve human dignity and individuality,[2] an idea that is prima facie at odds with Porete's notion that growing in love for God would involve progress toward the annihilation of self. The apparent tension here will seem especially problematic to those who think that finding room in one's theology for the affirmation of human individuality, freedom, and dignity—even, as some would have it, to the point of authorizing angry protest against God—is absolutely vital for taking seriously the spiritual and material lives of the oppressed and for addressing their material and spiritual needs.

A crucial premise in the argument for the conclusion that the ultimate telos of Christian love for God is self-annihilation is that worshipful love, in its fullest form, involves maximal devotion to the good for and union with one's beloved. In the first section I will offer brief remarks to clarify this idea. Then, in the second section, I will present a Porete-inspired conception of self-annihilation and offer reasons for thinking that this form of self-annihilation is indeed the proper telos of love for God. In the third section, I argue, again drawing inspiration from Porete, that, contrary to initial appearances, annihilation leaves not only room for but a unique and interesting path toward affirming and preserving human freedom, dignity, and individuality. In the fourth and final section, I briefly draw on some of L. A. Paul's ideas about "transformative experience" to highlight the significance of this paper's Porete-inspired conclusions, and I also point to ways in which those conclusions might have utility in theorizing about the problem of evil.

1. Love and Worship

Love comes in a variety of different forms—erotic, filial, parental, "agapic", and so on—and love for God, it seems, can be inflected in several of these different ways. Many of the medieval mystics, especially the so-called "affective mystics" of the 13th and 14th centuries, for example, seem to have a strongly erotically inflected love for God.[3] Jesus, in one of his post-resurrection

[1] Despite this, it has a surprisingly significant place in the Christian mystical tradition. See Marin, "Annihilation and Deification," McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, and Newman, "Annihilation and Authorship." Although there are surely connections to be drawn between Porete's conception of annihilation and other conceptions in the tradition, this paper will focus simply on Porete.

[2] See Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, ch. 8, and Rea, "Protest, Worship, and the Deformation of Prayer," and relevant references therein.

[3] See Van Dyke, "'Many Know Much but Do Not Know Themselves'" and *A Hidden Wisdom*.

encounters with Peter, asked if Peter had agapic love for him, and eventually accepted Peter's declaration of "phileic", or friendly, love. (Jn 21: 15–17) Eleonore Stump (*The Image of God*) has recently argued that the love for God we find in (properly constituted) worship is a response to the beauty and goodness of God and is thereby inflected with awe and admiration. I do not want to take a position on whether any of these inflections is essential to what we might call "worshipful love", the form of love that constitutes, or manifests itself in, worship of one's beloved.[4] But I do want to rule out inflections that presuppose any kind of superiority on the part of the lover of God, as well as those—if these can even characterize forms of *love*—that locate the "love" in question in the realm of the sort of merely instrumentalizing and highly contingent relationship that Aristotle called "utility friendship". So, for example, worshipful love for God will not be properly construed as a form of parental love for God; nor will it be the kind of mere means-ends devotion that seems to have characterized ancient pagan piety.

Whatever its particular inflections, worshipful love as I shall understand it is a kind of love that exists on a continuum, the limiting case for which is what I have elsewhere called "ideal love". (Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, 67–69) It is the sort of love that we tend to describe with terms like "devotion" and "orienting one's life around". Worshipful love is also hierarchically inflected in the sense that it presupposes actual or perceived superiority along some important dimension of the object of worship over the worshipper.[5] The persons of the trinity presumably have ideal love for one another, but precisely because their love for one another is not hierarchically inflected, it seems infelicitous to say that their love is worshipful.

Full-blown worshipful love, then, is hierarchically inflected ideal love. But what is ideal love? Eleonore Stump (*Wandering in Darkness*) has identified the following two desires as the constitutive desires of love: (i) desire for the good of the beloved, and (ii) desire for union with the beloved. Stump is not alone in identifying these as the constitutive desires of love; but not everyone who agrees that at least one of these is among the constitutive desires of love would go on to agree that *both* are essential to love. We can ignore this controversy here, however, because once we have concluded that worshipful love is the kind of love that centrally involves hierarchically inflected devotion, it seems quite plausible to suppose that it will include both desires at least to some extent. Moreover, it will include pursuit and prioritization of those desires; for it is hard to imagine saying that x *worshipfully loves* y if x *merely* desires the good for and union with y but has given the pursuit of those desires little or no priority in their life. Accordingly, we should say that worshipful love for someone will involve desiring and pursuing the good for and union with one's beloved to a significant degree; and, adapting my own characterization of ideal love (*The Hiddenness of God*, 69), I will say that *ideal worshipful love*

[4] I am inclined to think that worship is best analyzed as a form of love; but that claim is not essential to my project in this paper.

[5] This is not necessarily to say that a worshipful lover is *subordinate to* their beloved, though that may well be the case in the relationship. Nor is it to say that it is impossible for two people to worshipfully love one another. It might be the case, for example, that X and Y are (actually, or in the minds of each) unequal in multiple important respects, some favoring and some favoring Y, and, as a result, they orient their lives around one another in ways that are hierarchically inflected in different respects, again with some elevating X in the hierarchy and some elevating Y.

for someone will involve desiring and pursuing these things to a maximal degree, a degree that eclipses in priority and strength desires focused on anyone or anything else.[6]

One might think that talk of "desiring the good for God" is somewhat strange. God is, after all, perfectly good and endowed with infinite resources. What could possibly benefit God? But what I want to suggest is that at least part of what it is to desire in a worshipful way someone's good is to desire that your will conform to theirs at least to the extent that they seem to have a clear vision of what is in their own best interests. In God's case, this will reduce to simply desiring conformity with God's will. This ties both love and worship of God to obedience, which is important for doing justice to the biblical association of love for God with obedience to God's commands.[7] (Cf. Jn 14:15, Ex. 20:6)

It likewise makes sense to construe the desire for union in terms that reference the will of the beloved. Desiring union with God is more than desiring God's presence in one's life (we get that trivially via omnipresence); and it is different from desiring the experience of God's presence (which, obviously, is most fundamentally a desire for an *experience* rather than for something plausibly described as union). We do better to construe it as desiring deep interpersonal connection, which, in turn, seems best understood as a desire for deep acquaintance-knowledge and harmony of will.[8] In the case of a pure spirit (like God),

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[6] Note that, although I think that my characterization of "ideal love" in Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* is faithful to at least one way a person might sensibly use that term in ordinary discourse, it should ultimately be regarded (both in that book and in the present paper) more as a stipulative definition for the sake of argument rather than a conceptual analysis. Thus, it is a substantive philosophical question whether having toward someone what I am *calling* "ideal love" is in fact either genuinely ideal or a fitting form of love. See Rea, *The Hiddenness of God,* 67–69 for discussion.

[7] A complication: I think it is clearly possible to love in a worshipful way without having opportunity to obey. I think the thief on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him in paradise may well have come to have such love for Jesus while there on the cross; yet, of course, he would have had little or no opportunity to serve or obey Jesus. (And even those who might doubt that the thief on the cross was in this position, it is easy to imagine someone coming to love God in a worshipful way but having no opportunity to serve or obey.) But I think that such cases provide all the more reason to identify worship with a kind of *love* rather than with any kind of *action* (or even with alternative attitudes, like respect or admiration). In coming to love in a worshipful way, I think one thereby comes to acquire dispositions to pursue the good of one's beloved (which, again, in the case of God will involve obedience); and this, I think, suffices for worship even if the opportunity to manifest those dispositions never presents itself.

[8] A referee points out that, in the eastern Christian traditions, union with God is typically understood as involving much more than the sort of desire I am describing here. But since the referee goes on to note that the eastern "understanding of union with the divine certainly includes the aspects of interpersonal connection noted [here]", and since all I really need for present purposes is the claim that the desire for union involves *at least* the sort of desire that I have described here, I have chosen not to digress into the details of how notions of union with

furthermore, it is quite plausible to say that acquaintance-knowledge of God just *is* acquaintance with and understanding of God's will.[9]

2. Self-Annihilation

I turn now to the question of how worshipful love might lead to self-annihilation. The reasoning is quite similar to the reasoning that gives rise to what Robert Adams calls "the problem of total devotion". Adams poses the problem as a question: "If love to God is to occupy all our heart and soul and strength, what will be left to love or care about our neighbor?" ("The Problem of Total Devotion," 169) Love for God that truly occupied all our heart and soul and strength would, of course, be ideal love as characterized above; and, obviously, love for neighbor is just one among many loves—or even mere desires—that we would seem to have no further room to pursue if we did manage to attain ideal love for God. Thus, it looks as if full-blown worshipful love for God implies something very much like the eradication of any distinctively human pattern of desiring, which sounds like a kind of self-annihilation.[10]

That said, my own approach here will be to develop the Poretian route from worship to self-annihilation in conversation with Susan Wolf's work on "moral saints". (Wolf, "Moral Saints") Elsewhere (*The Hiddenness of God*, ch. 5) I have argued that, for precisely the same reasons that Wolf thinks moral sainthood leads to a kind of self-annihilation, so too ideal love leads to self-annihilation; and, obviously enough, that is a path down which no perfect being would go. I propose now to adapt some of those same ideas to the present purpose.

Wolf characterizes a moral saint as someone who is maximally devoted to improving the welfare of others (i.e., to promoting the good for others) to the exclusion of the promotion of their own interests. And sainthood, she argues, is not something it would be rational, good, or desirable for a human being to strive for. The reason, she thinks, is that our conception of a good life demands room for pursuits that necessarily exclude absolute prioritization of other

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God available eastern mysticism might differ from the conception of union with God that I am focusing on here.

[9] Does it follow from this characterization of the desire for union with God that the two desires of love collapse into one another when they are directed toward God? Not quite; for the desire to *understand and have harmony with* someone's will neither entails nor is entailed by desire to *conform* to their will. But the two desires are obviously intimately connected. Desire for conformity with someone's will is one form that desire for harmony with their will can take; and, even if there is no entailment, it makes little sense to desire conformity with someone's will without at the same time also desiring to understand their will.

[10] Adams's solution to the problem of total devotion is, roughly, to say that part of loving God is (genuinely) sharing God's own loves and interests; so, while there is a sense in which the person totally devoted to God will simply be a conduit of *God's* love for the neighbor, there must be *something* genuinely human, and genuinely theirs, about their love for the neighbor simply by virtue of what is involved in loving God. This, as readers can verify, bears strong affinities with my own account, in the next section, of what a Poretian response to that problem would look like. But I think that, for better or worse, Adams ultimately attributes more distinctive agency and self-hood to the person totally devoted to God than Porete would.

people's good. A moral saint will, due to their priority structure together with inevitable limits on time and energy, have no space in their life for becoming an excellent guitarist, a marathon runner, a lover of theater, a champion skateboarder, a fun party host, a person who fixes up old cars, or even the sort of person who regularly enjoys the company of good friends at the local bar or coffee shop. But all of these things and more enter into lives well-lived; and we tend to think that a life that has no room for any such things is significantly impoverished. If this is right, then ideal love for *anything* by anyone will be neither rational nor good unless it could somehow be argued that the goods present in the life of the lover as a result of their ideal love somehow match or outweigh the goods sacrificed as opportunity costs of their love.

Moreover, says Wolf, "[the pursuit of moral sainthood] seems to require either the lack or denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self." ("Moral Saints," 424) She does not develop this latter idea in detail—she seems to take it is obvious. But I take it the reason it is true is that orienting one's life around the welfare of others in the way the moral saint does would necessarily involve abandoning whatever other deeply held values one might have had. It involves the renunciation of anything distinctively "one's own" at the level of what Wolf in other work ("Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility") calls one's "deep self".[11] The reason is that having something distinctively one's own at that level—having a particular pattern of values, desires, pursuits, and projects that one prioritizes for their own sake or for one's own enjoyment or satisfaction rather than for the sake of promoting the general good—presupposes the possibility of conflict with the interests and desires of others. Thus, if one is absolutely prioritizing others' interests, then one has quite literally renounced everything at one's own core.

Moral sainthood as Wolf defines it obviously isn't the same thing as worshipful love for an individual; but, because both moral sainthood and worshipful love for an individual involve *maximal devotion* either to another person or to others collectively, the concerns Wolf raises about moral sainthood straightforwardly transfer to worshipful love. Thus, we are now in a position to start to draw connections between worshipful love of God and the notion of self-annihilation.

Worshipful love of God will include maximally prioritizing understanding of and conformity with God's will. This way of thinking about worshipful love for God and how that love will manifest in its limiting case maps quite nicely onto what Porete herself says about how we ought to love God, and about what "the Soul in Love with God" will look like. Thus, for example, she writes:

> …we should love God with our whole heart—that is to say that our thoughts should always be truly directed towards him: and with our whole soul, that is that we should say nothing but what is true, even though we die for it; and with our whole strength, that is that we should perform all our works solely for him; and that we should love ourselves as we ought, that is that doing so we should not look to our advantage but to the perfect will of God; and that we should love

[11] Compare, for example, Agnes Callard's discussion (in *Aspiration*, 47–48 , 179–193) of *self-cultivation* and *self-creation*, and her characterization of these processes as involving (respectively) the intentional altering of one's preferences and inclinations and the creation of new values within oneself.

> our neighbors as ourselves, that is that we should not do or think or say towards our neighbors anything we would not wish them to do to us. (Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Marler translation, 13. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Porete's *Mirror* henceforth will be from this translation.)

Accordingly, the Soul in Love with God

> finds no comfort, sets no affection or hope in any creature made by God, not in heaven or on earth, but only in the goodness of God. Such a Soul begs or asks nothing from any creature. She is the solitary phoenix, for this Soul is alone in Love, and satisfies herself with herself. (24)

The upshot of these two passages together seems to be that lovers of God ought to be maximally oriented around God, maximally devoted to pursuing conformity with God's will (a precondition of which, presumably, is understanding of God's will).

On Porete's view, however, the natural (and welcome) consequence of this is that the Soul in Love with God ultimately becomes the Soul Brought to Nothing, losing all desire for and all capacity to will anything other than the will of God. Thus, she writes:

> If anyone were to ask such free souls [i.e., souls in love with God]...if they would want to be in Purgatory, they would answer No; if they would want here in this life to be assured of their salvation, they would answer No; if they would want to be in Paradise, they would answer No . Why would they wish for such things? They have no will at all; and if they wished for anything, they would separate themselves from Love; for he who has their will knows what is good for them, without their knowing or being assured of it. (19)

The idea that wishing for "anything" involves separation from "Love" (i.e., God) is grounded in the idea that the ultimate and limiting case of love for God is desire for nothing but God, not even paradise and, indeed, not even *that God's will be done*. (60, 67 - 68) Thus, later in *The Mirror* she says the Soul Brought to Nothing "is concerned for nothing, not for herself or for her neighbors or for God himself" (105). The Soul in Love with God desires, in the limiting case, only God—she "knows nothing except him, and loves nothing except him, and praises nothing except him" (146); and The Soul Brought to Nothing "can have no will at all...except only the divine will" (106). This perfect conformity to God's will and the corresponding disappearance of one's own independent will is precisely what, for Porete, annihilation consists in.[12]

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[12] One might wonder what Porete's views here imply about Jesus's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. One of the standard arguments for the conclusion that there are two wills—one human, and one divine—in the incarnate Christ appeals to the fact that, in the Garden, it appears that Jesus' human will is to some extent out of step with the divine will (even though the human will ultimately submits). Ought we then to say that, qua human, even Christ did not manage to love God perfectly? Perhaps so. After all, Christ was tempted "in all things as we are, yet without sin"; so presumably Christ had quite a number of desires that, if acted on, might have led him into sin. If desires are taken to reflect the inclinations of our will, as the argument from Christ's prayer in Gethsemane to Christ's having two wills seems to presuppose, it follows from the fact that Christ was tempted that Christ's human will diverged from his divine will just as the wills of ordinary human beings diverge from the divine will. Why not then say that it is only qua divine that Christ managed to love God perfectly? It is hard to see why

It is not immediately obvious in Porete's text just how strongly she intends her talk of annihilation and loss of will to be understood. A person who is overly submissive to and dependent upon their spouse might be said to have lost themselves in their spouse, or to have no will of their own; but when people say such things about another person, they are usually speaking only loosely or hyperbolically. They don't mean that the person about whom they are talking has somehow completely merged with the spouse, or lost all independent agency. The scholarly consensus on what Porete means, however, seems to be that she intends for her talk of loss of will and being brought to nothing to be read quite strongly indeed. Joanne Maguire Robinson, for example, says that, for Porete, "[i]t is will…that distinguishes the soul from God" and, later, that the union brought about by annihilation is "union of [ontological] indistinction". (*Nobility and Annihilation*, 67, 79) And, more recently, Christina Van Dyke hones in on passages in which Porete seems to say that the Soul Brought to Nothing simply ceases to exist:

> Marguerite Porete explains that union with God requires the complete elimination of the conscious self. In the perfect state of such union, "All things are one for her, without an explanation (*propter quid*), and she is nothing in a One of this sort." All the individualizing activities of the soul—thought, will, emotion cease: "The Soul has nothing more to do for God than God does for her. Why? Because He is and she is not. She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because He is sufficient of Himself, because He is and she is not." In the ultimate expression of annihilative union, "She is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created." (Van Dyke, *A Hidden Wisdom*, 12; see also p. 154)

Although Van Dyke grants that it is debatable whether the self-annhilation described in medieval Christian mysticism generally "involves ontological as well as phenomenological and epistemological erasure", she reads Porete as going "the furthest toward advocating this possibility." (154) These two interpretations of Porete are fairly typical in the literature, and I have not encountered anyone advocating a significantly weaker reading of Porete's doctrine of annihilation.

Fortunately, nothing in the present paper depends on my following Porete down this particular road (if indeed Robinson, Van Dyke, and other commentators are correct in thinking that it is the road she is on). It is entirely natural to say that perfect conformity with God's will is a kind of annihilation even if it does not result in "ontological indistinction" from God (as per Robinson) or "ontological erasure" (as per Van Dyke). That said, however, I think that there are textual grounds for adopting a weaker (and, accordingly more plausible) reading of Porete's doctrine of annihilation; and since the texts that I think push in this direction serve as the inspiration for claims I will make later about the attractiveness of the notion of annihilation I

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that should be a problem, especially since it seems to resonate with the portrayal of Jesus in Gethsemane that we find in the synoptic gospels. Alternatively, we might instead read Gethsemane through the lens of the Gospel of John, where Jesus' prayer appears rather less anguished and more an exemplar of perfect human surrender to the divine will. Either way, then, there is a way of making sense of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane that does not pose a problem for Porete's view. (Thanks to Laura Callahan and David Lincicum for help on this point.)

am interested in here, I think it is worth a very brief detour to explain why I read Porete differently from scholars like Robinson and Van Dyke.[13]

Robinson seems to construe perfect conformity with God's will as duplication.[14] But this won't do. There are aspects of God's will that are entirely beyond the power or grasp of any creature.[15] One cannot will what one obviously cannot possibly do or understand; and so no creature could possibly match God's will with respect to (say) the creation of the universe, the sustaining of all things in being, whatever acts of willing explain the dependence of the very laws of logic, mathematics, and morality upon God, and so on. And Porete's text does not say that the Soul Brought to Nothing wills *everything* God wills. As noted earlier, she says that this soul knows nothing, loves nothing, and praises nothing but God, and ultimately has no will but the divine will. But this "nothing but" language does not suggest anything so strong as complete duplication, or indistinguishability from God. It is consistent with the Soul's merely having a disposition to will what God wills, either spontaneously or whenever she becomes aware of something as willed by God.

In the passages that come closest to discussing the "metaphysics" of annihilation, Porete generally gravitates to metaphors of dissolution or the mixing of liquids.[16] Bernard of Clairvaux famously characterized union with God on analogy with a drop of wine dissolved in water.[17] Writing much closer to Porete's time, Beatrice of Nazareth employed the analogy of a drop of water sinking into the ocean.[18] Apparently adapting these earlier metaphors, Porete describes the Soul Brought to Nothing as being like a river that "loses its channel and its name" as it flows into the sea. (107) She also, following Hadewijch (a contemporary of Beatrice's), talks about the annihilated soul as being "dissolved" or "melted" into God. (89, 107, 173) Juan Marin ("Deification and Annihilation") takes the "river" analogy as evidence that Porete understood annihilative union with God as a radical form of deification. Bernard's metaphor was of wine dissolved in water; so it was a metaphor in which one substance (wine) is mixed into another (water), takes on some of the attributes of the latter (most notably, its clarity), but only *appears* to fully take on the *nature* of the latter. But a water-to-water analogy, he notes, is suggestive of total deification of the soul: "Just as a drop of water is of the same nature as the ocean and once dissolved in it cannot be separated again, so is the annihilated soul permanently one with God." (95)

But to my mind, Marin's reading is overly reliant on modern chemical knowledge of water, wine, and seawater. From the point of view of Aquinas (who was writing just a few decades before Porete), wine, seawater, and, indeed, all liquids are ultimately just *water* mixed

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[13] I defend this reading a bit more fully in Rea Forthcoming.

[14] See Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation*, 67, 79 and 96–97, noting in particular her remarks about "becoming what God is" and the language of *indistinction* and *indistinguishability* that she uses in explicating Porete's understanding of divine union.

[15] Thanks to Jc Beall for pressing me to reflect on this issue.

[16] For general discussion of mixed-liquid analogies in late medieval mysticism, with some detailed attention to Porete, see Lerner, "The Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought."

[17] See *On Loving God*, in Clairvaux, *Selected Works*, 196.

[18] Marin, "Annihilation and Deficiation," 93–95.

with other stuff. So, although I am aware of no basis for assuming that Porete was influenced by Aquinas's views on this topic, I likewise see no reason to think that she meant for us to scrutinize the nature of river water and seawater in coming to an understanding of her analogy. What seems much more likely is that, like Bernard, she simply meant for us to focus on the fact that the soul uniting with God is like just a little bit of one kind of liquid being dumped into a vast quantity of another. What seems most important for the interpretation of her analogy is not the relative chemical composition of river water and seawater, but (i) the behavior of ingredients in a mixture once they have been mixed together, and (ii) Porete's reference to the loss of the river's "channel and name".

On (i), we might note that Aquinas, in *De Mixtione Elementorum* (written in 1273, according to Bobik (*Aquinas on Matter and Form and the Elements*)) maintains that when elements are mixed, they (in some sense) *continue to exist* within the mixture. In other words, they do not become literally indistinguishable from what they are mixed into; nor do they simply cease to exist. Granted, Aquinas was talking specifically about mixed *elements*—air, fire, water, etc.—rather than just any sort of mixture, such as ingredients in a cake. But he was also defending an Aristotelian "commonsense" view on the matter; and it is equally commonsensical to suppose that ingredients like salt and sugar somehow persist even after the cake is baked. For Aquinas, "what is preserved [in a mixture of elements] is their power". (Bobik, *Aquinas on Matter and Form and the Elements*, 122) And if we were to apply *this* idea to Porete's analogy (albeit again acknowledging that there are no *evident* lines of influence from Aquinas to Porete on this matter), we would arrive at a view according to which the distinctive powers of the soul persist even after union with God.

There is still more to say about the river analogy, especially on the reference to the "channel and name"; but for that I refer readers to Rea Forthcoming. What I want to note here is simply that, if the foregoing is correct, the case for thinking that Porete's river metaphor is meant to point us toward the view that union with God involves something like cessation of existence seems a lot less compelling.

Indeed, even apart from all of this it is clear from Porete's various descriptions of the Soul Brought to Nothing that she does not equate "being brought to nothing" with anything like cessation of existence. Granted, she uses the *language* of non-existence; but she does so while at the same time talking in terms that *presuppose* the Soul's continued existence. This juxtaposition appears quite strikingly, for example, in Babinsky's translation of chapter 135 (partially quoted by Van Dyke in a passage cited earlier):

> Thus the Soul has nothing more to do for God than God does for her. Why? Because He is, and she is not. She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because He is sufficient of Himself, that is, because He is and she is not. Thus she is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was. Thus she has from God what he has, and she is what God is through the transformation of love, in that point in which she was, before she flowed from the Goodness of God. (Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* Babinsky translation, 218)

The thing to notice here is that *immediately after* saying that the Soul is "without existence", Porete talks about what the Soul *is like*, what she *has*, and how she has been *transformed*. If all one had from Porete was this passage, one might be stymied. It would be hard to know

whether the language of non-existence (or "non-being" in, e.g., Marler's translation [Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* Marler translation,172]) should be given priority in interpreting the passage, or whether one should try to understand it in a way that is compatible with the soul's continued existence. But the surrounding chapters (esp. 133 – 134 and 136 – 138) seem to me to make it quite clear that she is thinking of the *annihilated* soul as *existing* in a state of complete harmony of will with God. Those passages talk, for example, about Divine Love "taking its rest" in the annihilated soul (Ch. 133), about the perfection and freedom this soul has attained (Ch. 134), about how this soul "takes what she receives from divine goodness" (Ch. 136), and so on. None of this makes any sense on a reading that gives pride of place to the language of non-existence.[19]

In my view, then, the weaker reading of "perfect conformity with God's will" that I suggested above, together with what one might call an "as-if" reading of the language of non-existence, is to be preferred. The Soul Brought to Nothing is so disposed to will nothing but God's will that it is *as if* she herself no longer exists, even though, of course, she *does exist*. Fleshing out the view a bit more (and at the same time going beyond what can sensibly be attributed to Porete), we might say that what is annihilated, on this picture, is not the *person*, but rather what Korsgaard might call her *practical identity*, what Wolf might call her *deep* or *real self*, or what I would call her (narratively constituted) *autobiographical self*.[20] In being brought to nothing, the Soul's values, preferences, desires, and ultimately her dispositions to will come to be perfectly integrated with God's—again, in much the same way in which we might imagine mixed liquids (chocolate and milk, say) to be perfectly integrated with one another once they are stirred together.[21]

The Poretian path from worshipful love to annihilation, then, may be summed up as follows. By the very nature of worshipful love as I understand it and as she seems to as well, it follows that the ultimate telos of the worshipful lover of God is to love God ideally. But in loving God ideally, one has no will at all apart from God's will, since, in loving God ideally, one's desire for God's good—i.e., one's desire to see God's will be done—eclipses in priority and strength any other desire or pursuit. But to have no will at all is, on Porete's view, to desire or value nothing but God, and to will nothing but what God wills. Thus, one's "self"—even if not *oneself* as a person—is indeed brought to nothing, as one's own will comes to be completely integrated with God's will.

The question, however, in light of my earlier brief reflections on Wolf, is whether it could be at all rational or good for a creature to desire such a thing. A further question, in light

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[19] Likewise for many of the passages discussed in section 3 below.

[20] Again, for somewhat fuller defense, see Rea Forthcoming. On the various notions of self and identity just mentioned, see Korsgaard, *Self Constitution*, 21–24 , Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility" and *Freedom Within Reason*, ch. 2, and Rea, "The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self," respectively. Note, too, that my suggestion is *not* that practical identities, Wolf-style real selves, and what I would call an autobiographical self are all the same sort of thing. They aren't. Rather, my point is just that these are much better candidates for what undergoes Poretian annihilation than, say, persons or Cartesian or Thomistic souls.

[21] Again, for somewhat fuller defense of these ideas, see Rea, "Self-Annihilation in Marguerite Porete."

of Jesus' summary of the Law and the Prophets earlier, is how it could at all be Christian to desire such a thing. This is, again, just the problem of total devotion: It is hard to see how one could love one's neighbor as oneself, or how one could dedicate oneself to the pursuit of justice and mercy that (e.g.) Micah 6:8 enjoins us to, if one sets off in pursuit of Poretian annihilation.[22] These are the issues I take up in the next section.

3. On Behalf of Annihilation

For all its apparent bleakness, the notion of annihilation holds great attraction for Porete. In listing the "twelve names" of the Soul in Love with God, for example, Porete characterizes her not just as being brought to nothing and wishing for nothing except God's will, but also as wonderful, enlightened by knowledge, adorned by love, at peace in the divine being, the one upon whom the whole Church is founded, and filled wholly and replete and lacking no divine goodness. (21-22) Elsewhere, she describes this soul as "the Soul Set Free". (See Chs 12–16, for example.) Furthermore, the freedom enjoyed by the Soul Brought to Nothing comes precisely in her puzzling lack of will. Clearly, then, in Porete's mind, the state of annihilation is good, beautiful, and—most importantly for present purposes—good *for the one who has been brought to nothing*. How can we understand this?

Porete herself expects that most people will not be able to understand her doctrines, and she seems to expect them to be particularly difficult for philosophers and theologians. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is prefaced with the warning that few people will find its teachings intelligible, and those governed by Reason are supposed to face particularly grave challenges. The book is written as a conversation between three main characters, Reason, Love (or: God), and the Soul, with Truth and other characters occasionally contributing; and throughout the book Reason is continually chiming in with some variation on "Alas, Lady Love, what are you saying? How can this be?" Despite all of this, however, the characters Love and the Soul have a lot to say to Reason by way of explanation; and I think that reflection on some of the explanations offered there will allow us to make some progress at least toward seeing some of the positive aspects of annihilation as Porete conceives of it, even if full understanding of what she is up to continues to elude us.

Porete says repeatedly that the Soul in Love with God "has everything and has nothing". Thus, for example, she says "such a Soul, having become nothing, at once has everything and has nothing, wishes for everything and wishes for nothing, knows everything and knows nothing." (17–18) Reason, understandably enough, finds this completely baffling and asks the question that has surely come to mind for most readers by this point: "How is it possible…that this Soul can wish for what this book says, when it has already said before that she has no will at all?" Love's reply is telling:

> Reason, says Love, it is not at all her will which wishes this, but rather it is the will of God which wishes it in her…it is Love who dwells in her, who has taken her will from her, and so Love works her own will in the Soul, and Love performs her works in her without her help, as a result of which no anxiety can remain in her. (18)

[22] Thanks to Avital Levi for raising this concern.

This claim about "the will of God [wishing] in her…" is developed further as the dialogue continues:

> Ah, for the love of the God of love, says Reason, what are you saying? Are you saying that this Soul has no will at all?
>
> Ah, truly, no [says Love]. For everything which she wills by her consent is that which God wills that she should will, and this she wills so that the will of God may be accomplished, not at all her own will; and she cannot will this of herself, but it is the will of God which wills it in her; and so it is clear that this Soul has no will at all that she has to will. (27)

The basic idea here seems to be that the Soul Brought to Nothing does not *lose* her will altogether, nor (if this is different) is her will simply *replaced* by God's will. Rather, as I indicated in the previous section and will explain more fully below, her will becomes integrated with God's own will. This idea is key to constructing an unproblematic notion of self-annihilation on the foundation laid by *The Mirror of Simple Souls.*

Both the content and the import of the claim that the will of the Soul Brought to Nothing becomes integrated with God's will can be better understood by contrasting it with other ideas about what might be involved in conforming one's will to God. Let us, for the moment, set aside the notion that God's will for us might include what I have called ideal love for God and *perfect* conformity to God's will. (If we don't set this aside, then, trivially, any project of aiming to conform to God's will is going to have Poretian annihilation as its proper telos.) Now suppose one takes conformity to God's will to be a matter of cultivating virtue, with the ultimate or ideal telos being a perfectly virtuous life. On a standard Aristotelian conception of what it is to conform one's will to virtue, coming to be virtuous involves habituating the will in accord with reason. Human reason is not perfectly reliable, of course; but, in the Christian tradition, divine command serves as proxy. On some views in the Christian tradition, furthermore, at least some virtues can be, and are, "infused" by God, which is to say that God simply endows the person with the relevant virtuous habit instead of the person having to acquire it through training and repeated action. Either way, however, whether virtue is infused or acquired through habituation under the governance of reason or divine command, conforming to God's will by manifesting virtue is *not* the natural culmination of the pursuit of one's own "heart's desires". I borrow the term "heart's desires" from Eleonore Stump who, in turn, borrows it from Psalm 37:4–5. (See "The Problem of Evil and the Desires of the Heart," *Wandering in Darkness*, and *The Image of God*) On her characterization, a person's desires of the heart are (roughly) commitments—to persons or projects presumably—that matter greatly to them, that lie "at or near the center of the web of desire for [them]", without being absolutely essential to their flourishing. ("The Problem of Evil and the Desires of the Heart," 198 – 199) Although the pursuit of some such desires may obviously be compatible with the life of virtue, these are precisely the sorts of desires the pursuit of which cannot in all cases be *expected* to culminate in virtue. Indeed, they may need to be deliberately suppressed in order to make way for virtue.

Likewise and all the more so if one takes conformity to God's will to involve *submission* to God, either in a purely voluntary way or under some kind of threat or coercion. (It is commonly asserted—especially in the literature on the problem of evil—that God is not at all coercive and, in fact, greatly desires relationships with human beings that they have freely

chosen. I don't doubt that these claims are true, but they are commonly deployed in a way that greatly underestimates the coercion that comes from the looming threat of divine punishment, a threat that often beleaguers the psyches even of those who have chosen to enter relationship with God in as voluntary a way as possible.) The person who submits to God is one who consciously and deliberately renounces at least some of what they most truly and perhaps centrally desire in the service of what they take God to desire.

Since we have deliberately set aside for now the notion that God's will for us might include ideal love for God, there is no immediate threat of Poretian annihilation in these conceptions of submission to God. But, except in the exceedingly unlikely case of someone whose natural heart's desires are already in conformity with God's will, there remains in both of these conceptions an important sense in which a person's self does undergo a kind of annihilation *en route* to sanctification. That this is so should come as no surprise. The idea that Christians undergo a kind of death in coming to follow Christ and undergoing the process of sanctification (e.g., death to sin, crucifixion with Christ, etc.) is baked into the New Testament. The question is whether the kind of death or annihilation that comes with these more traditionally acceptable modes of conforming to God's will is any more "self" preserving or otherwise preferable to the kind of annihilation that Porete describes. I think that it is not.

For Porete, and in stark contrast to the other ideas just discussed about what conforming to God's will might involve, the will of the Soul in Love with God is transformed precisely by embracing and pursuing, rather than renouncing, her heart's desires. There is nothing coercive in this transformation, nor does it involve submission in any typical sense of that term. This latter point is, I think, a crucial insight. There is, obviously, nothing particularly novel or revolutionary in the idea that obedience to God—a kind of conformity to God's will—is easier when one is motivated by love rather than by fear or even pure reason. Among other things, this idea lies at the heart of "moral exemplar" theories of the atonement.[23] But it is altogether common for the notion that love for God provides the best route to sanctification to sit side by side with the notion that sanctification is also at least partly a process of continual submission to God and renunciation of self. Accordingly, it is likewise common for the various passages about denying oneself, dying to sin, being crucified with Christ, and the like to be interpreted in terms of submission and renunciation rather than other terms. But, in contrast to all of this, what *is* novel and revolutionary in Porete is the idea that submission (particularly to reason) is an inferior path to sanctification and that those who follow the path from worship to annihilation not only retain and see fulfilled their hearts' deepest desires, but (on my reading) manage to retain all that is distinctively good about themselves even as they undergo "annihilation". Eleonore Stump (*The Image of God*, Ch 3) makes a similar distinction between submission to God and surrender, in love, to God; and she cites the importance of the latter in contrast to the former in the life of a worshipper, especially in connection with facilitating union with God and the flourishing of the worshipper. Moreover, Stump finds these same ideas in Aquinas, who preceded Porete by several decades. However, neither Stump nor Aquinas seem to want to go on to make the further, distinctively Poretian, point that submission to reason is fraught with the same sorts of problems that make submission to God (in contrast to

[23] See, e.g., Quinn 1993. On exemplarism in Porete, see Robinson, *Nobility and Annihilation*, 62–64, 66–71.

surrender) an inferior path to conformity with God's will. The remainder of this section is devoted to explaining *why* submission to God is inferior to surrender.

One of the passages that loomed large in Porete's condemnation is the following, wherein she talks about taking leave of the virtues:

> Virtues, I take my leave of you for evermore,
> And so my heart will have more joy and be more free;
> Your service is a lifelong yoke as well I see.
> Once I set all my heart on you with never no or nay;
> You know that I was pledged to you, to me it seemed for aye.
> There was a time I was your serf but now I break away.
> All of my heart was set on you, the truth is clear to me.
> There was a time when all my life seemed nought but misery.
> Suffering so many cruel pains, so many torments welaway.
> That it is marvel I escaped alive for in such servitude I lay.
> But so it is, I have no cares, your ransom now I pay.
> And the great Lord above I thank that I might see this day.
> Now I have left your bondage, I have paid you my last fee.
> I never knew till free of you that there could be such liberty.
> Your bondage have I left, I am at peace, and peaceful shall I be. (16)

There is much to unpack here; but the main takeaway for present purposes is simply the contrast she draws between the life of submission (in this case, the submission to the rule of reason that is involved in cultivating virtue) and the life of being in love with God. The former is a life of serfdom, bondage, suffering, and misery; the latter is a life of peace and liberty. It is in this respect that the life of being in love with God is superior to—and, apparently, in conflict with—a life that involves submission and renunciation.[24]

But how is it that the Soul in Love with God retains her heart's desires and, indeed, all that is distinctively good about herself? The key to understanding this lies particularly in the passages about the love relationship between human beings and God, and about how God's will works in us. Notably, Porete doesn't talk so much about what God wills *simpliciter*, or about what God wills *for* us; nor does she talk *at all* about conforming our will to God's in spite of our desires. Rather, she talks about how the Soul in Love with God ultimately desires only God, and, in discussing God's will insofar as it concerns us, she talks about what God wills *through* us, which, as I have already said, suggests integration rather than renunciation. Admittedly, this talk of God willing "through" us might seem to suggest divine appropriation or

[24] A referee suggests that there are interesting and important conceptual connections between Porete's views on how submission to reason in the pursuit of virtue compares with surrender to God in love on the one hand, and Luther's contrast between law and gospel. The referee notes that "the Lutheran tradition puts huge emphasis on surrender to God, throwing oneself on the divine mercy in abandonment of any hope on one's own works and intentions"; and this does bear interesting similarity to Porete's ideas. I thank the referee for making this connection, though space does not permit me to explore the matter in detail here.

even override of our will; but I think that, in light of the love relationship between us and God, it is both better and more plausible to understand it as implying deep *and mutual* integration.[25]

> Recall the following remark at the end of a passage I quoted earlier:
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> They [i.e., souls brought to nothing] have no will at all; and if they wished for anything, they would separate themselves from Love; for he who has their will knows what is good for them, without their knowing or being assured of it. (20)

The idea here seems to be that, precisely because God *loves us*, our own interests—including our hearts' desires—are included and reflected in God's will. Thus, even as we come to "lose" all of our distinctive desires and our will to pursue them in our ever increasing love for God, we at the same time get them, or at any rate the good ones, back (including the will to pursue them) because of how they are reflected in God's will and willed by God *through* us.

(Stump (*The Image of God*) similarly grapples with the worry that worship can lead to a loss of self; and, as with the account here, she addresses it by arguing that the best mode of worship will involve surrender rather than submission, and that surrendering in love to God is not only consistent with but requisite for preserving one's true self (understood in a particular way) and attaining the fulfillment of one's heart's desires. At this level of generality, then, there are strong affinities between Stump's view and the one I am developing here. But I will simply note—and leave it to readers to verify, if they wish—that, despite agreement on the claims just mentioned, there are important differences in the reasons Stump and I offer for endorsing them, and even in some cases—e.g., my phrase "can lead to a loss of self"—what the two of us would mean by them.)

Perhaps also genuine differences between us and God can arise out of the fact that we occupy a different perspective from what God occupies. Perhaps the difference in perspectives makes certain desires more salient for example. And perhaps some of the desires reflected in God's will that we "get back" even when we are "annihilated" will be desires uniquely inflected that perspective. For example, God desires the salvation of our loved ones, and so do we; and if God's will is to let them freely choose whether to enter into relationship with God and to experience whatever grief comes should they choose rejection, so too this will be our will if we are in conformity with God on this. But perhaps, owing to the mutual love between us and God, God's desire for the salvation of our loved ones is inflected by our unique perspective on that desire, and perhaps this unique inflection is part of what we "get back" even as we move toward perfect conformity with God's will.[26]

None of this is to say, however, that there is no loss whatsoever at the level of heart's desire. As in sanctification through submission, we will lose or see transformed whatever bad or sinful heart's desires we might have; but whereas submission involves simply renouncing them

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[25] The notion of God willing *through* us is the most salient point of contact between my account of Porete's answer to the problem of total devotion as it arose at the end of the previous section and Robert Adams's solution to that problem. But even if (as I assume) Adams would be happy speaking broadly of the mutual integration of God's will and ours, I do not see in his paper anything resembling the particular story about the way in which that integration occurs that I am developing here.

[26] Thanks to Laura Callahan for this suggestion, and also for objections that led me to draw the distinction that I draw below between good and insidious forms of integration.

or making our own efforts to transform them, love enables us much more naturally to transform them or let them simply slip away as we pursue an even greater desire. There is still loss, but the difference is precisely the very important difference between what is voluntarily and without regret forsaken or allowed to slip away and what is reluctantly undermined or abandoned, or coercively wrested away.

Another way of putting all of this is to say that God's love, on Porete's view, is not objectifying: We are not instrumentalized by God; we are treated as ends in our own uniqueness, and, as a result, the preservation of everything about us is included and reflected in what God wills through us. This, I think, is part of how we ought to understand her claim that, even in having "nothing", the Soul in Love with God nonetheless has everything. It is also key to understanding how she can conceive of annihilation as a state of peace and liberty. And, finally, it is key to understanding why the self-annihilation one achieves in (perfect) worship of God is good, rather than insidious. To lose your self via integration with the will of someone who loves you less than perfectly, or not at all, is to lose your distinctive values and desires in a way that leaves no hope for getting them all back in the ways described above. Granted, people often still sustain such losses voluntarily; but, especially when they do so as a result of manipulation, the integration they come to have with the will of their manipulator is no better than the pseudo-integration they would have had with that person had they been coerced into submission.

4. Concluding Reflections

I have argued in this paper that the proper telos of worshipful love for God is self-annihilation understood as Marguerite Porete conceives of it—perfect conformity of one's own will to God's will. Relying on key claims in Porete's *Mirror*, I have also argued that the route to Poretian annihilation that runs through love of God is superior to, and better for us as individuals, than routes to similar conformity with God's will that run through submission either to the rule of reason, or to God, or both. I want now to close by commenting briefly on the lessons I think we can draw from this conclusion.

The first, and perhaps most interesting, lesson is that both worshipful love for God and the cultivation of virtue are significantly more fraught than is typically acknowledged. Again, Porete thinks the best life for a human being involves *taking leave of the virtues* rather than culminating in full attainment of the virtues; and she thinks the reason for this has to do, in part, with the fact that the virtuous life is a life of bondage in contrast to the life consumed by love for God. Although I do not have the space to develop this claim here, I think these two ideas together suggest (paradoxically) that choosing a life ruled by reason is not straightforwardly rational. In fact, even if (contrary to what Porete seems to think) results may vary, so that for some a life of submission to reason is experientially better whereas for others it is not, the fact that the decision of which path to pursue is a transformative one in L. A. Paul's sense greatly complicates the choice. (See Paul, "Who Will I Become," and *Transformative Experience*)

For similar reasons, despite all of the positive press the life of ideal love for God receives in Porete's *Mirror*, her argument for the conclusion that the telos of this life is self-annihilation goes a long way toward explaining why rational creatures might choose *not* to pursue a life

devoted to God. Again, the notion of transformative experience is useful here. According to Paul, a personally transformative experience is one that "chang[es] or replac[es] a core preference, through changing something deep and fundamental about your values." ("Who Will I Become," 17) In the face of such experiences, she says, it is natural and reasonable to experience "fear of preference capture"—i.e., fear of developing the very preferences that one reasonably expects to develop (and even to be happy about, once they one has developed them) as a result of the transformative experience. And, she argues, it is not irrational to allow current preferences and meta-preferences to guide one's decision-making about whether to undergo experiences that threaten preference capture. Writing about the decision to have a child, for example, Paul says:

> What a person cares about can change, hugely, when they have a child, and this happens in virtue of the psychological and biological changes that make them a parent. If so, then your concerns about the choice are perfectly legitimate. … Your worry is not about whether you'll be happy with who you've become *after* you've been transformed. Your worry is that, right now, what you care about—now—isn't consistent with being transformed. Becoming a parent would change you in ways that, right now, you reject. If you do not want to have a child, then, in your current childless state, you don't care about the things you'd care about as a parent, and, even more importantly, you don't want to care about them. You want to preserve who you are *now*, and what you care about *now*. In these circumstances, it's perfectly reasonable to resist the pressure you are getting from the experts. That's because there is no implication that somehow, becoming a parent would be better for the self you are now. Rather, becoming a parent would *replace* the self you are now with a different self, an alien self: a self that, right now, you don't want to become. ("Who Will I Become," 35)

If Porete is right about what worshipful love for God ultimately leads to, then the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the decision to cultivate that sort of love for God. The point here is not to defend the claim that might be rational to choose to separate oneself from God, or even that it might be perfectly reasonable to choose not to devote oneself fully to God. Perhaps it can't be. Rather, the point is simply that, given a certain preference structure, it may well be perfectly reasonable to *reject the testimony of others* who are telling you that the life devoted to God is the best life for you; and, furthermore, reason alone might not supply any other motivation to turn toward God. If that is right, then the puzzle of "the ex nihilo origin of evil" becomes more tractable (since there is less pressure to suppose that God would have had to create human beings with *defects* in their rationality in order for them to be capable of choosing against God's will), and Pascalian wagering starts to seem at the same time more important *and* less universally compelling as a route to faith than it is often taken to be.[27]

Finally, I believe that the conclusions of this paper have interesting implications for the development of free-will defenses and theodicies in response to the problem of evil.[28] Suppose

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[27] On the ex nihilo origin of evil, see Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*. On the way in which Pascal's Wager might become less universally compelling, see Chan, "Transformed by Faith."

[28] A referee suggests that perhaps the things I say here about the problem of evil might also be relevant to the problem of divine hiddenness, and encourages reflection along these lines. I do

it is true that submission-involving routes toward conformity with God's will are problematic for the reasons offered here. If God loves us perfectly, then, it seems that God would want for us to conform to God's will through (ideal) love rather than through some kind of submission. The trouble, however, is that, if what I have said about annihilation of self here is correct, a person who *starts* in a state of ideal love for God would have no distinctive self. That is, there would be no heart's desires, projects, or pursuits that are distinctively theirs. And so, again, it is hard to see why a God who loves us would want anything like this for us. Much better *for us* to start off in a state wherein our will is different from God's, and to persist for a while in a state that allows us freely to develop our own values, goals, and heart's desires and to thereby achieve both distinctness from God and the capacity to conform to God's will freely in love, in a way that doesn't result in a much deeper kind of self-annihilation.[29] The risks, of course, are obvious; but the point is just that the risks to us of the alternative—apparently the only alternative to creating mere submissive servants or automata—are plausibly much greater, especially if we add that God has the power to defeat (in Marilyn Adams's sense; see *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*) the evils that we suffer, but not the power to "defeat" the "evil" of never having a distinctive self in the first place.[30]

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think that the considerations here might offer a promising supplement to some of the things I have already said in *The Hiddenness of God*, but I wouldn't be inclined to build an entire solution to the problem around these sorts of considerations. (For that matter, I am also not inclined to solve the problem of evil by way of a free will defense or theodicy; but that does not change the fact that I think the considerations here would be of help to those are so inclined.)

[29] The same sort of goal—allowing for robust development and flourishing of our own individual values and heart's desires—may be part of what underlies God's authorization of lament and various kinds of protest. (Cf. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God*, ch. 8.) Indeed, it is plausible that having the freedom to both develop one's own values in this way *and* to express them to God by way of protest is an important component in becoming the sort of person who is *able* to achieve conformity with God's will in a way that doesn't involve a problematic kind of submission.

[30] For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper and conversations about the ideas herein, I am grateful to Avital Hazony Levi, Eleonore Stump, Dar Triffon-Reshef, and especially Laura Callahan and Amber Griffioen. Versions of this paper were presented at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, the Logos Seminar at the University of St. Andrews, and Talbot Seminary. I am grateful to the audiences on those occasions—and especially to Josh Barthuly, Jc Beall, Jane Heath, David Lincicum, Katie O'Dell, Stephen Ogden, Jonathan Rutledge, Alli Thornton, and Shlomo Zuickier—for their helpful questions and comments. Finally, I thank two anonymous referees for this journal for their useful advice.

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