

## **Worldly Transcendence: The Divine Essence of Meister Eckhart's Thought**

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Dominican priest Meister Eckhart von Hochheim is one of the most peculiar and misunderstood Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages. This is in part due to the difficulty of determining his role as a mystic, theologian, or metaphysical philosopher. Eckhart has often been referred to as a mystic, yet his sermons are quite different from those of most mystics in that he does not attempt to provide explicitly vivid description of unique and extraordinary experiences that he has had in union with God. Eckhart's sermons have also been frequently misunderstood and labeled as heretical or unorthodox, for many of his various concepts, such as being free of 'God', or the 'I' which is one and the same as the Divine. The theology of St. Augustine is a foundational part of the Christian orthodoxy that Eckhart was seen as undermining, and on the surface the two thinkers appear quite different, though I will argue that while they operate in different modes of thought they are not as different as they seem. Augustine has also often been called a mystic for his experience in the garden at Milan and his vision with Monica at Ostia. For these reasons I will be considering Augustine's *Confessions* comparatively, while trying to better illustrate the theology of Eckhart's sermons. In this paper I will assess whether or not Meister Eckhart and St. Augustine can be considered mystics, and in doing so try to illustrate Eckhart's conception of what it is to know God directly and intimately. This discussion will require addressing the issues of knowing that which is beyond rational understanding, what it is to have direct knowledge, identifying the self or the ground of the soul with God, and mystical experience of said knowledge of identification. Based on

these discussions I will further attempt to refute the frequent interpretation of Eckhart's thought as wholly rejecting worldly life. I will instead argue that Eckhart simultaneously rejects and accepts the Will while affirming worldly action, though only through life in the light of God's grace and the nature of the Trinity.

Both Meister Eckhart and St. Augustine consider God to be beyond our rational grasp. Augustine states early on that we must "rejoice and delight in finding you who are beyond discovery rather than fail to find you by supposing you to be discoverable" (8), and his fault throughout much of the *Confessions* is that he attempts to will himself toward an understanding of God wherein his "earthly habitation drags down the mind to think many things" (127). It is curious to think that it is the act of thinking things which drags the mind into corruption and away from God, for it would seem that thinking is the very essence of the mind. But thinking is the action of the mind, while its essence is intellect. The concept of God as transcending rational attainment is also present in the writings of Meister Eckhart, who states that we "must be free of all the [rational] knowledge that lives in [us]," and that even if a fly had our capacity for reason "and, through reason, was able to seek the eternal abyss of divine being from which it had emerged, then we would say that God, together with all that he is as [an idea] 'God', could not satisfy the longing even of this fly" (205). He also states that "all [the prophets] saw in God was so great and sublime that they could derive neither an image nor a form from it in order to speak of it" (137). All this does not necessarily mean we cannot know or find God, but that we cannot know God through searching for and logically thinking our way towards some determinable entity. God is Being transcendent of any rational description.

Despite devaluing rational comprehension on some level, both Augustine and Eckhart say that it is the human intellect, wisdom, or mind which is the divine essence of the soul. In discussing how he strayed from God and Being St. Augustine says "I sought for you, my God... In seeking for you I followed not the *intelligence of the mind*, by which you willed that I should surpass the beasts, but the mind of the flesh. But you were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest *element* within me." (43, emphasis added). Meister Eckhart similarly refers to a light of the soul or intellect which, though it coexists in unity with the soul's faculties, is in its most naked and inward state capable of apprehending God without medium. He states in sermon 7 that "in that most inward place, where everyone [and *everything*] is a stranger, the light itself is satisfied and there it is more inward than it is in itself, for this ground is a simple stillness which is immovable in itself. But all things are moved by this immovability and all the forms of life are conceived by it which, since they possess the light of reason, live of themselves" (136). Here the light itself, or divine intellect, is eternal, immovable, wholly inward, and devoid of all things, while things, the *forms* of life, are conceived into a temporal realm where they possess, or are endowed with, the light of *reason*. In the introduction to Oliver Davies' translation of selected writings by Meister Eckhart he describes the "recognition that our human essence is 'intellect' or 'mind', as God is 'mind', and that the nature of 'mind' is a oneness that is above being. All 'intellect' in this sense is one, and so the soul in its essence and God are one," (XXVI) while also acknowledging that "like oneness itself, [this 'intellect'] is quite beyond conceptualization and that human thought can only delimit and negate it" (XXV). This 'intellect' or 'intelligence of the mind' does not refer to our rational or willful capacities, which are the actions of the mind, but is simply a metaphor for the very essence of the mind or light of the soul. It is but a metaphor for an

essence that is "free of all names and is devoid of all forms" (Eckhart 163). These names owe more to our state of existence than they do to the Divine, for, as Davies points out, "names and concepts belong essentially to the realm of created things" (XXI). It is through the unity of absolute inwardness, to the point of transcending all images and thoughts, that one directly knows God.

A mystic could be defined as one who knows God directly by way of some intimate experience of unity with the Divine. In his article "Knowing God Directly" Edward Pols discusses a 'U-factor' which "is absolutely universal power/order here limited by its immanence in a particular being or particular situation" and that "when we try to express it we shatter its unity by inventing/making such (particular) universals" (43). Direct knowledge of something comes from direct experience, that is to say directly experiencing it in and of itself rather than experiencing it through some medium, such as thought or the senses. Direct experience and knowledge of something other than ourselves thus comes from acknowledging the U-factor, or unity, which is immanent in all particular beings and from which these particulars derive their being: "each distinguishable entity in the P-factor has its self-identity [as a thing] by virtue of the U-factor's immanence in it" (Pols 44). The P-factor is our mode of existence, of created particulars. This U-factor is the unintelligible and eternal divine 'intellect' or 'light' to which I earlier referred and which, as it continuously manifests itself in the temporal created world of particular things, endows those things with their self identity: "The U-factor is a causal factor, and it endows the knower with selfhood by being intrinsic to that selfhood; but the U-factor is not the exclusive possession of the knower. The U-factor transcends the particularity of the knower because it is also intrinsic to the known" (Pols 46). This U-factor is transcendent of any particular rationalization, but is intrinsic to all being. It would

seem then that the direct experience of a mystic involves an undifferentiated apprehension of that which transcends particulars.

This sort of experience is very much what Meister Eckhart seems to describe in his sermons, (although he most aptly describes it by *not* deigning to attempt to describe it). For Eckhart the state of ultimate inwardness and direct knowing is said to be that of absolute undifferentiating unity. Eckhart strikingly says that "When I existed in my first cause, I had no God and I was my own cause. I willed nothing and desired nothing, for I was naked being and I knew myself by the savour of truth. Then I desired myself and nothing else... and I was free both of God and of all things" (204). It is easy to see how this would be seen as heretical. However, the 'I' here is not the 'I' of the ego, Eckhart is not referring to himself as an individual, or to an experience he had as an individual. This 'I' is the 'I' referred to by our metaphors of the 'intellect', 'light', or 'soul', and it is transcendent of created particulars, outside of time (eternal), and undifferentiated from the Divine essence. It is this 'I' which directly experiences God, for it *is* God. It is transcendent of I myself and 'God' himself, which are particular images, and is itself the essential ground of those particular created images. It is the U-Factor which is intrinsic to the P-Factor, in Pols' terminology. This 'I' is eternal and "has neither a past nor a future, and it is not something to which anything can be added... Therefore it does not possess any [conscious/rational] knowledge of the fact that God acts in it, rather it is itself that which delights in itself" and is "the *source* of both knowledge and love, although it does not itself know or love, as do the soul's [individual/particular] *faculties*" (Eckhart 206, emphasis added). This 'I' is not something endowed or added, but is something intrinsic and immanent in all created things. The 'I' of differentiation that we experience in our particular created state is the self-identity with which we have been

endowed by the immanent, intrinsic, and transcendent essence of Being, that "simple oneness, [which is] without mode or individual nature" (Eckhart 202).

This Divine 'light', this God beyond 'God', is ultimate naked Being, and in this sense is also absolute nothing. Eckhart states that while "it is a property of creatures to make one thing from another... it is a property of God to make something from nothing" (145). If we think of God as a *thing* which causes and exists outside of the creation of other things, then we are delimiting and negating God to a particular thing; we are assigning individual identity, which is a property of the created world, to the Divine. In this way we can conclude that God makes something from nothing but is also that nothing. God is the source of creation, and the creation of things emanates from nothingness: *creatio ex nihilo*. Thus, in the eternal state of Divine unity, Being and Nothingness are undifferentiated, just as are immanence and transcendence, for differentiation is a property of the rational beings of our created and temporal existence. Eckhart adeptly discusses this with the metaphor of the citadel:

So entirely one and simple is this citadel, and so far above all particular manner and all powers is this single oneness, that no power or manner can ever look into it, not even God himself. In full truth and as truly as God lives: God himself will never *look* in there even for a moment, nor has he ever done so in so far as he exists in the manner and *individual* nature of his Persons ... if God is ever to look in there, it must cost him all his divine names ... He must be simple oneness, without mode or individual nature, in which he is neither Father nor Son nor Holy Spirit in this sense and yet is still something which is neither this nor that (163, emphasis added).

God, or the ultimate Divine transcendence, here is both Being and Nothingness, in that there is no differentiation of this nor that within the simple oneness of the citadel, and insofar as God exists in his particular nature of the creative Trinity he does not *look* into the citadel which transcends the concepts of things.

There certainly seems to be a possible contention here between Meister Eckhart and St. Augustine. For Augustine nothingness is seen as the essence of corruption; as something descends into nothingness it falls away from ultimate Being, the Good or God. If things which have temporal existence "were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all" (124). In his article "The Self Before God? Rethinking Augustine's Trinitarian Thought" Matthew Drever describes Augustine's thoughts on the human descent and ascent to God:

Augustine describes the human imaging of God at creation as the turning of humans to God and compares it with the redemptive turning of humans back to God that occurs through the Word. In both instances, this turning is a movement away from nothingness. In the latter case, it is a turning from the moral nothingness of sin; in the former case, it is a turning from the nothingness out of which all finite existence arises (Drever, 241).

This mustn't be a view where nothingness is some substance or force opposed to God, but is a lack of Being, which is good and the essence of God. For Augustine our temporal created existence is good, insofar as it has been endowed upon us by God, while it is wicked and inferior to ultimate Being insofar as it is corruptible and can come to be, through "a perversity of will twisted away from the highest substance... towards inferior things, rejecting its own inner life and swelling with external matter" (126). For Eckhart God is also ultimate Being, while the created world's inferiority is the result of its

temporality and particular/individual nature. After the vision at Ostia, Augustine refers to "the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things" (172). Simply put, if the Divine transcends all things, wouldn't it necessarily be no-thing? The 'eternal wisdom' referred to here seems to be the 'intellect' or 'light' which I have referred to in my discussion of Eckhart.

Perhaps a solution to this apparent contention can be found in re-examining the metaphor of the citadel. Eckhart refers to a citadel that is absolutely unintelligible, undifferentiated, single and unified naked Being, which is essentially Nothing. But he also refers to the 'God' of the Trinity, which never looks into the nothingness. This God of the Trinity is the fructifying God, the essential and continuous creative force, the ultimate Being which endows being into the created world. Davies states that "God is always dynamic and he always reproduces himself within the Trinity and within the human individual. Eckhart stresses that this generative function of God is not incidental to his nature but is his very essence" (XXII). In this way God is indeed ultimate Being, the very essence of which is to eternally create temporal material being out of nothing. For Augustine the descent into nothingness is a turning away from ultimate Being. This can be appropriated into Eckhart's terms by saying that the fall into 'nothingness' is a turning away from, or failure to recognize, ultimate Being which is the source of all created beings and in which all beings are eternally and immanently unified. Bernard McGinn clarifies this distinction in his article "The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart":

When [esse/existence/being] is used primarily as a general metaphysical term applicable to created reality, as in the *Parisian Questions*, it implies division and posteriority and hence is less suitable to God than is the term



*intelligere* [or *unum*]. But when *esse* is understood transcendentally, that is, as signifying the reality of God and cosignifying the nothingness of creatures, it is legitimately affirmed of the ineffable God (7).

Here there is an inversion of terms, where 'nothingness' refers to corruptible created particulars. Being (*esse*) can be understood as the existence with which created things are endowed, but on the level of ultimate transcendent Being the being of creation is understood as having a potential nothingness. The turn toward 'nothingness' is a turn towards clinging to things, even though those things have been endowed being which is good, and swelling up with those things, rather than turning towards their ultimate source of Being, the God of the eternally creative Trinity. This description of nothingness corresponds with Augustine's thought.

While St. Augustine always seems to differentiate between God and the human soul, Eckhart is insistent on the unity of the human soul ('intellect', 'light', 'mind') with the Divine essence of Being. This difference is the result of Meister Eckhart and St. Augustine thinking on different metaphysical levels. Insofar as God is an eternal fructifying force of temporal creation from nothing, there is indeed a distinction between the created being we have been endowed and the creative force of the dynamic of the Father, Spirit, and Son, which endows us with our being. This is the level of differentiation and particulars, wherein the Divine can be known only as that which is transcendent and unknowable, and indeed it is here that 'God' is thought of as three distinct parts which work together as a creative dynamic. At this level our temporal existence keeps us from knowing the 'light' of eternal Being. Eckhart most certainly acknowledges this level of existence. I previously quoted Eckhart's description of eternal Being as 'I' where "I was my own cause ... I was free both of God and of all *things*"

(Eckhart 204 emphasis added). Following this he goes on to discuss the temporal and fructifying existence:

[W]hen I emerged by free choice and received my created being, I came into the possession of a God for, until creatures came into existence, God was not 'God', but was rather what he was. Then when creatures received their created [endowed] being, God was not 'God' in himself but in creatures (204-205).

This is the level of endowed identity and particulars, Pols' P-factor, but it is also the level of willfulness, of free choice. In the moment referred to here the Will of God and the will of the 'I' are one and the same, the simple creative Will, and this Will is God's Grace. But this is also the moment of the endowed will, the will of creatures to differentiate things and create things out of other created things. Here we see God's Grace as ultimate Being, which is the essential fructifying activity of the Divine. This is God, the dynamic relationship of eternal and temporal existence, where the temporal eternally emanates from the eternal Being. The citadel is undifferentiated, ineffable, eternal and absolute unity. Here God (or 'light, or Being), is undifferentiated from Nothingness, but insofar as it is an active Willful essence does not 'look' inward to the undifferentiating citadel. Its essence is actively and eternally *creatio ex nihilo*, but not a wallowing in the nothingness.

It can be seen from the above discussion that St. Augustine and Meister Eckhart are not as drastically conflicting as they might seem, and now that I feel I have adequately outlined Eckhart's conception of the Divine, I will briefly assess the mystical qualities of the two theologians. McGinn says that the mystical experience could be defined as "union with God, the universe, or some form of transformation or annihilation

of our present condition, [which] is beyond the power of human concepts or speech to describe" (1). I earlier defined it as direct experience involving an undifferentiated apprehension of that which transcends particulars. St. Augustine has often been referred to as a mystic for the vision at Ostia, where he and Monica "touched [Divine wisdom] in some small degree" (171). However, in "Ostia Reexamined: A Study in the Concept of Mystical Experience" John A. Mourant points out that "The phrase 'to touch upon' (*atingit*) means no more than to apprehend, to be aware of a divine presence, but surely not to convey that overpowering intimacy or sense of union that the mystics demand" (36). As previously stated, Augustine's experience is at the level where one attains an awareness of the Divine's immanent presence, but where the Divine can only be known as that which is transcendent. He does not reach a state of direct and intimate knowledge. This examination, along with Mourant's argument, indicates that Augustine clearly does not experience a mystical union of direct transcendent experience where "I was myself what I desired" (Eckhart 204). But it is unclear whether even Eckhart could be said to have had this sort of experience. In the example I have used from Sermon 22 (on page 204), the 'I', as I have already stated, does not refer to the I of the ego, to Eckhart's particular self-identity. As such, it does not seem here that Eckhart is vividly describing his own mystical experience but is using the term 'I' as a brilliant metaphor for illustrating the immanent unity of 'intellect', 'light', or 'soul' with the Divine in its state of absolute undifferentiated oneness. This metaphor's brilliance lies in its simplicity and accessibility, in that it appeals to the limits of our rational state, wherein particular things, or subjects, *have* particular experiences. Elsewhere Eckhart mainly focuses on the *possibility* that arises from the 'intellect', or essence of our mind. As Davies points out, his "appeal is always to what we could be, to our potentiality, although he fully

recognizes that *as earthly creatures* we cannot evade the confines of our embodied state" (XXVI emphasis added). Eckhart is not heretically saying that we *are* God, indeed insofar as we exist in our endowed particular embodied state we are most certainly and obviously *not* God, but that we have a potentiality in our 'intellect' for an active and dynamic turning towards God, just as God actively, dynamically, and eternally turns toward creation. This turning, though it is not a self-assertive or willful action, is represented in Christ, the returning aspect of the Trinitarian dynamic.

Bernard McGinn provides an alternate definition of Eckhart as a mystic, which I am inclined to agree with, that involves "penetrating the ordinary in order to reveal the extraordinary" (McGinn 18). I have already discussed that the essential nature of the Divine is the active, fructifying, creation out of nothing. By emphasizing the importance of God as endower of being Eckhart affirms the dynamic of the Trinity. McGinn claims that the distinction of the creative Trinity is essential to Eckhart's ideas:

If we wish to be true to Eckhart, we must admit the grounding priority of the hidden Unity of the Godhead, absolute and undetermined esse, the God beyond God, over the Trinity of Persons. But if we stop there and refuse to recognize that the *unum* dialectically demands expression as a Trinity of Persons we shall also be false to the Meister (13).

The unity of the Divine, ultimate Being, is said to be hidden to us, while the importance of the Trinity is re-emphasized, for this creative dynamic is God's essential nature. This creative dynamic in which the eternal "*temporalizes* in an ordered and telic fashion" (Pols 44), as represented by the Christian God of the Trinity, re-affirms that the Will and Good Grace of God is that very act of begetting, creation from nothing, which is ultimate Being.

This is an affirmation of the temporal world which eternally emanates from the ultimate Being, an affirmation that God is dynamically and essentially immanent in this world of particulars. Eckhart states that "the Spirit's blessedness resides where it is in the process [or, perhaps, eternal state] of being born" (158). This eternal creation is the Will of God, and the Grace to which we must submit. The essential importance of the creative aspect is emphasized in Sermon 13, where Eckhart says that, while the 'virgin' transcends all images and concepts, entering into the undifferentiated citadel, it is "far better that God should be *fruitful* in us, for only the fruitfulness of the gift shows gratitude for the gift... Many good gifts are received in virginity, but they are not born back into God in wifely fertility with *gratitude* and *praise*" (159 emphasis added). This passage illustrates Eckhart's affirmation of creation, while also serving as a jumping point for discussing his simultaneous rejection of the will and acceptance of the Will, through an opening to Grace.

Both Augustine and Eckhart see ultimate abandoning of our will as necessary for receiving God's Grace, yet also assert the importance of the Will. St. Augustine's valuation of the will is evident throughout the structure of *Confessions*, as he must use his will and searching intellect to overcome the various errors he found himself in, from Manichaeism to astrology. It is far more difficult to find some affirmation of our will in Eckhart. The Meister clearly states "do not intend anything particular by your works, and do not embrace any particular Why" (145), and thus absolutely rejects our inclination of willing ourselves toward something. Davies says that "Eckhart tells us that God 'must' give birth to himself in us fully and at all times ... this is simply his nature. If we do not receive the spiritual benefits of this birth, that is because we are not content to allow God to act in us," obstructing him by clinging "to the nothingness which is the true reality

of our creaturely being" (XXIX). By allowing the creative God to act in us, through accepting this creation with contentment and living in it but not of it, we are opening ourselves to God's Grace, and giving praise, gratitude, and thanks for this Will which has endowed us with our being. Understood as such, Eckhart is arguably parallel to Augustine when Augustine prays "Let these transient things be the ground on which my soul praises you, 'God creator of all'. But let it not become stuck in them and glued to them" (62). It would require a far more thorough examination and analysis of the writings of Eckhart and Augustine to be able to state with certainty that they are essentially saying the same thing about the Divine, but I feel that I have sufficiently shown that they are not as opposed as they seem, and the core goal of my argument is to illustrate their acceptance and affirmation of the created world, and their thankfulness for it. Both Eckhart and Augustine see that when we take action in the world willfully intending some particular *Why*, even if that *Why* is salvation, we are clinging to that *Why*. Through willing and wanting the created world to be other than it is we are not accepting the Will of God, and are not open to his Grace. We must will ourselves to gratitude and praise, but this cannot happen through an intention or *Why* to which we cling; it instead comes from opening ourselves to Grace and "it is crucial to note that the message of inner detachment and humble conformity with God's will can be found by learning to accept any situation, good or bad, in the proper frame of mind" (McGinn 17). Meister Eckhart says that we must be aware of the potentiality of our 'intellect' and the absolute unity of Divine transcendence, and at the same time we must accept our temporal, particular existence, realizing we are not God insofar as we are created beings and thankfully opening ourselves to creative Grace with gratitude and praise. This state of being is not

an extraordinary mystical oneness with transcendence, but a mystical oneness with Will and Grace, through an ordinary acceptance of ultimate Being.

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