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Metaphysics and Identity in Meister Eckhart's Theology

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Submitted to fulfil all requirements for the degree of
Masters by research in the Department of Theology
and Religion at the University of Durham

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Abstract

Meister Eckhart's theology is indisputably controversial and the Papal Bull *in agro dominico* demonstrates the concern that the church had in Eckhart's own time. Several scholars however, notably Bernard McGinn and Frank Tobin, have presented a more orthodox reading of Eckhart's theology that reveals his commitment to the church and to Christian doctrine. It is unusual therefore that scholars continue to view Eckhart's teaching on the ground and the soul's 'indistinct' union with the Godhead or essence, as the pinnacle of his theology. These themes are undoubtedly a major part of Eckhart's unique contribution to Christian thought, as McGinn and Tobin have pointed out. However, they are most often cited by scholars who focus primarily upon the German sermons and tractates, often at the expense of the Latin commentaries and sermons and also at the expense of other equally significant features of Eckhart's theology.

This thesis questions the emphasis placed upon Eckhart's teaching on the soul's 'indistinct' union with the Godhead or essence and upon the essence itself. Drawing on the Latin and German works, it will demonstrate that Eckhart is deeply trinitarian and show that he views the Trinity and essence in a way that does not prioritise one over the other. Only once we recognise this non-hierarchical metaphysics can we also understand how Eckhart conceives of the soul's existence and identity which, this thesis will show, is not absorbed or lost through the soul's union with God, but perfected and fulfilled. The soul's identity and indeed, all distinction – everything that exists – is properly understood, therefore, only in terms of the freedom and grace that defines God's own identity in eternity; as a Trinity of persons whose distinction is not in terms of their separateness from one another, but in terms of their relations to each other.

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Abbreviations

DW (*Deutsche Werke*) and LW (*Lateinischen Werke*) in J. Quint et al., eds., *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke* (Stuttgart and Berlin: W. Kohlhammer, 1936-).

MHG Middle High German

Latin Works:

<i>In Eccli.</i>	Commentary on the book of Ecclesiasticus
<i>In Ex.</i>	Commentary on the book of Exodus
<i>In Gen.</i>	Commentary on the book of Genesis
<i>In Ioh.</i>	Commentary on the Gospel of John
<i>In par. Gen.</i>	The book of the Parables of Genesis
<i>Op. tri.</i>	General Prologue to the Opus Tripartitum
<i>Q. Par I</i>	The First Parisian Question
<i>In Wis.</i>	Commentary on the book of Wisdom

German Works:

Pr. and Prr.	Predigt and Predigten, refers to German sermons.
<i>Discourses</i>	The Discourses of Instruction

Translations:

<i>Essential Eckhart</i>	Edmund College and Bernard McGinn (trans.), <i>Meister Eckhart: the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense</i> (London: SPCK, 1981)
<i>Teacher and Preacher</i>	Bernard McGinn et al., <i>Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher</i> (New York: Paulist Press, 1986)

Introduction

I am claiming that Meister Eckhart's teaching on what essence and Trinity are in God and how they relate to each other provides the ontological structure that defines all distinction and, specifically, *human* existence and identity. To make this claim I will demonstrate that Eckhart's theology is inherently trinitarian and that he does not subordinate Trinity to essence in his metaphysics.

To understand Eckhart's teaching on the soul's union with God we must read his teaching on God's identity and human identity together, since it is only according to God's Triune personhood that the soul exists as she is and has individual identity at all. This will be shown through a reading of Eckhart's theology which views his teaching on apophysis and detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) as 'tools' which reorientate the soul's perspective towards a theocentric view of reality – i.e. towards a view of reality connected to God's existence as *both* essence and Trinity. The soul only knows herself, God or reality truly, when she views all things from within this theocentric perspective; when she negates from her thinking, speaking and living, all of the habitual ways in which she does not let God be Himself with her.

Looking at how Eckhart understands the dichotomy between what is true – what is theocentric – and what is nothing or attachment, this thesis will reveal how, for Eckhart God's existence as essence and Trinity provides a framework for a completely transformed concept of distinction. This transformed distinction is viewed according to how God has distinction, as a Trinity of related persons. It is only from within this transformed concept of distinction that we can understand how Eckhart views human identity and how he subsequently views the human relationship with God, not as one of absorption or ontological self-loss, but one of relation and ontological self-discovery. In

other words, because he sees reality theocentrically Eckhart views human existence and identity as gifts received without merit and granted freely from God.

Only if we identify this transformed concept of distinction can we also understand how Eckhart conceives of the soul's individual identity. The self is identified as something essentially expressed and received rather than possessed and distinct from the other and in that sense it has distinction in the same way as the Trinity, through relation. I will be suggesting in this thesis that to conceive of the self other than this is, for Eckhart, to conceive of it as nothing, or to conceive it from within a perspective of reality where God is not being 'allowed' to be Himself. It is a perspective moreover where, in a certain sense, everything subsequently becomes a kind of nothing because it does not depend upon the *fact* of God's existence. It therefore becomes meaningful to consider Eckhart's theology and especially his teaching on apophysis and detachment, as a negation of atheism – or a denial that Godlessness can be anything but an illusion – since through apophysis he consistently negates or denies meaning to any perspective of, speech about, or activity which indicates commitment to, a reality where God is not what He necessarily is. Eckhart does not simply negate this through an apophatic approach to language however, his teaching on detachment shows that negation in fact relates to *all* habits of human action and perspective.

The soul is thus viewed by Eckhart as an individual from the point of view of the same eternal 'now' as God is Himself, because she is related to God as her source and end (her first and final cause). She is however also herself in time and in that sense detachment and apophysis – which themselves signify truths about God (that He is) and humanity (that we absolutely depend on God) – are revealed in Eckhart's teaching as practices in life by which the soul's perspective is reoriented, enabling her to enter her truest existence and move finitely towards her perfected and eternal existence as a soul

in a perfectly loving and reciprocal relationship with God. For Eckhart, if somebody longs for the self to be other than what it is in this relationship with God, they are really longing to *possess* the self and thus to inhabit a perspective which prevents both selfhood and God from being conceived of as they truly are. I therefore hope to show that for Eckhart, understanding the self apart from God is literally a fantasy and any meaningful interpretation of what Eckhart thinks about individuality or selfhood must be conceived from within his theocentric perspective.

I will conclude my thesis by suggesting that in a certain sense the self does ‘disappear’ in Eckhart’s theology, but that this lost self is, by Eckhart’s definition, non-existent, a fantasy defined to a greater or lesser degree by attachment to things other than God. The truly existing individual is identified through the negation of this false self, in just the same way as the truly existing God is signified through the negation of negation. The individual self is then affirmed in the strongest possible sense, as something which definitely exists but the distinct existence of which is encountered in a different sphere to where we normally define distinction. We usually view distinction in terms of objects in the world or objects of thought defined by their separateness from other objects. Distinction for Eckhart is trinitarian; it is fundamentally relational, self-giving and free. In other words distinction is not possessed but expressive and receptive, distinction, or identity, only exists through reciprocity. The individual exists in terms of its movement to and from the other, and in that sense its distinction mirrors God’s own distinction, His Triune self-expression. Bearing this in mind, it is clearly important that the Trinity is not subordinated to the essence in Eckhart’s theology since doing so would remove the principal ‘category’ in God that defines distinction and thus provides the metaphysical structure behind Eckhart’s understanding of the soul’s existence and identity.

Chapter 1 will focus upon Eckhart's teaching on God's essence. By examining some of the secondary literature which prioritises essence over Trinity, alongside Eckhart's *First Parisian Question*, the *General Prologue to the Opus Tripartitum*, and the *Commentary on Exodus*, I will show how a proper grasp of Eckhart's teaching on God's essence depends upon his understanding of analogy and apophasis. We shall see that according to Eckhart, the truest signification of God is the negation of negation, since our method of signification must itself negate all creaturely attribution to ensure that what we are actually speaking about is God. In light of this I shall illustrate, drawing primarily on the *Commentary on Exodus*, that Eckhart apophatically signifies God's necessary existence, thus identifying godlessness, or atheism, as nothingness in light of this necessity. In support of this, we will also begin to see how the apophatic signification of God does not negate the Trinity, but signifies God's necessity and creates an opening within the way we normally know things – i.e. in a creaturely way – through which, through the negation of creaturely knowing, we can see the Trinity as the self-expression and activity of the same God who necessarily exists, whose essence is his existence. Eckhart's apophasis, in other words, does not leave us with nothing, it leaves us with everything – or rather, everything as it is conceived theocentrically, from a perspective of true faith in the Christian God who is both one and three, essence and Trinity.

In chapter 2 I will explore in detail how Eckhart understands the Trinity and its equality with God's essence. Building on the view of the Trinity suggested in chapter 1, 2a will further illuminate how apophasis affirms the Trinity as something true about the God who exists and upon whom all subsequent existence depends. The Trinity is not negated because it is not one of the creaturely concepts or categories negated through the first negation. Instead it is something about God which is true in the truest sense, i.e.

it could not not be and is in that sense included in the apophatic affirmation – the negation of negation. In 2a we will look again at the *Commentary on Exodus*, where Eckhart shows that relation, a category which defines the persons of the Trinity, is not absorbed into the essence like other properties, perfections or accidents.

In 2b we will then look at Eckhart's teaching on the boiling up (*bullitio*) and boiling over (*ebullitio*) of the Trinity and the emergence of creation (*creatio*) from God's Triune self-expression. In this section I will go into more detail on the connection between creation and the Trinity. I will show how Eckhart teaches that while things only exist because God is existence itself – where his essence is identical with his existence – that is not a complete picture of how or why they exist. The universe and everything in it *also* exists in the way that it does because God causes existence through the overflowing of his self-expressive and self-giving Trinity which is equal with his essence.

Finally, in 2c, I will consider how Eckhart employs 'potentiality' and 'actuality' as terms which help to describe the coequality between the essence and persons and how these two are not actually two in God, but two expressions of a single reality which cannot be captured simply in human language because, by God's very nature, he transcends the limited categories of distinction and unity which we apply to creatures. The three sections of chapter 2 are sufficient to prove that Eckhart's concept of God allows for a very different understanding of distinction and of personhood than the one which exists in the non-theocentric or atheistic perspective which Eckhart negates through apophasis (in the Latin and German works) and detachment (one of the principle themes of Eckhart's German works). For Eckhart, creaturely distinction and personhood are conceived of in terms of the flow from and towards God (*exitus* and *reditus*), where both distinction and personhood are caused by and perfectly epitomised

in the relations of the Trinity. This trinitarian understanding of distinction, which takes into account God's necessary existence and the manner in which creation flows from his self-expressive triune act, will in turn form the basis for my argument about how, for Eckhart, human identity or individuality is only possible *because* of our relationship with God. Relationship with God is the precondition of human existence and enables true self-discovery and fulfilment, it does not therefore stand for a union where the soul's uniqueness is lost or absorbed into God.

In chapters 1 and 2 I will be drawing primarily upon several of the Latin works. In chapter 3 I will turn to the German works more specifically to consider Eckhart's teaching on detachment. I shall explore Eckhart's concepts of detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) and the ground (*grunt*), interpreting them in light of the understanding of God's essence from chapter 1 and the Trinity from chapter 2. The soul's ground and God's ground are the same ground says Eckhart, and in this sense he affirms the primordial existence of the soul in the indistinction of the essence 'before' (logically not ontologically) the boiling up of the Trinity. In the course of this analysis of the ground I shall show that the process of detachment is the means by which the soul enters or is (re)united with its ground and suggest that detachment therefore performs a similar, if not identical function as apophasis in the Latin works. I will show how Eckhart himself suggests as much by identifying the soul's ground as a place of 'potential receptivity' to the life, will and activity of the Trinity. The breakthrough (*durchbrechen*) to the ground is the soul's opening up of her potential to share in the divine life and unsurprisingly, considering the apophatic principle outlined above, she does this by negating all of the nothings or attachments which block her from God's life, or which block God from her life. Detachment, like apophasis, is both the negation of these nothings and the affirmation of God's being. However, in the German works

detachment is also more obviously related to praxis than apophasis was in the Latin works, as one might expect from the German sermons and tractates, considering their genre.¹ The ‘attachments’ which are negated define the way in which the soul habitually approaches activity, things in the world, herself, and God, in a manner that does not see these from the point of view of their connectedness with who and what God actually is. Attachments are therefore the habits of thought, speech and action which represent and perpetuate the soul’s view of things as if they were something in and of themselves, separate from God. Detachment reorientates the soul’s perspective away from this habitual fantasy view of reality and towards a theocentric perspective. This reorientation in turn overflows into the soul’s activity, where the soul’s detachment is now expressed in her activity and where that activity is no longer understood as the soul’s own but as God’s own activity working through the soul.

In 3b, we come finally to the crux of the argument about the affirmation rather than denial of the soul’s individual selfhood. I will suggest here that detachment and apophasis, since they negate every way in which God is removed from the centre of the soul’s perspective – its speech, thought and activity – represents a certain loss of control, an acceptance of existence and identity as something received rather than owned, something freely given rather than something deserved. By exploring Eckhart’s teaching on grace, primarily in sermon XXV, I will suggest that the habits of mind and body, of speech, thought and action, which are perpetuated thoughtlessly by the soul in every area of her life and understanding – create an ignorance of the grace and freedom that defines God’s existence and activity and within which he enables all reality and every individual self to come to be. It is within this doctrine of grace, where the soul’s

¹ As McGinn points out, Eckhart is both ‘Lesemeister and Lebemeister’ and our interpretation of his theology must pay proper regard to the differences between the contexts in which Eckhart wrote and preached. *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: the Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2001), Ch. 1.

every act, every ‘motion’ of body or mind is understood as dependent upon grace, that we can most understand what it means to be a distinct self. This understanding cannot however be purely noetic, since to engage with it as a reality, means actually undergoing the transformation or reorientation which Eckhart teaches and preaches. To understand what it means to be an individual created, sustained and defined by a relationship with God, one must actually allow oneself to *be* that individual, or one’s understanding of it will always be precisely the kind of limited and false understanding which Eckhart negates. In other words, Eckhart fundamentally affirms the necessity of faith to discover truth about reality, about the self and about God. In this theocentric reality being an individual person is defined in the same terms as God’s triune personhood: in terms of the perfectly trusting, free and grace-filled reception of identity and existence from relation with the other, where the other is all that fills the perspective of the person who receives full personhood from that other and who thus receives distinction through relation alone.

I will suggest in the conclusion that the soul’s individuality is not preserved (however much we want it to be) as an ‘object’ which she knows and possesses distinct from other ‘objects.’ Her individuality is instead revealed as existing in a reciprocal relation *from* God and *towards* God. The soul’s distinct identity is therefore most fulfilled and most truly individual when she is oriented wholly towards God, because only then does she acknowledge the truth about what she is. According to my thesis, just because the soul sees God alone, even when she looks at herself, does not mean that she ceases to have individuality. In reality, by viewing God alone she responds to the fact of her individuality in the truest possible way – by being an individual oriented towards God. This, as I will suggest throughout, makes sense of passages in sermons such as Pr. 52, where Eckhart speaks about the soul knowing herself in the unity of the

primordial ground or essence.² Distinction and identity are therefore viewed from the same point of view as God's own flow of triune relationality which exists in the same detachment, the same freedom and grace, wherein the soul exists, has her identity and finds her beatitude.

² Pr. 52, p.421.

Chapter 1

'The brilliant darkness of a hidden silence'

Introduction: The Inscrutable Meister and 'I'

Bernard McGinn points out that the question of whether God's essence is prioritised over the Trinity is one of the major problems that interpreters have to face when approaching Eckhart's theology.³ In his work, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, he suggests that understanding Eckhart's 'mysticism of the ground' is a helpful window into Eckhart's entire teaching, both the Latin and German works.⁴ McGinn's careful analysis of Eckhart's 'master metaphor' of the ground includes a close reading of Eckhart's concept of God as both essence and Trinity.⁵ However, despite the work of scholars such as McGinn, it remains common in the secondary literature to focus upon passages from Eckhart's works – in particular the German sermons – which seem to imply that God's essence, also referred to as the unity or ground, is somehow more important than the Trinity. This subsequently becomes the basis on which Eckhart's teaching on the soul's union with God is interpreted. This union is then often viewed primarily as an indistinct union with God's essence, since the divine category of distinction within which the soul's individuality could be sustained, the Trinity, is negated by the interpreter. The denial of the Trinity does not therefore simply risk misunderstanding God's nature in Eckhart's theology, it risks removing the eternal

³ He states, "the second major problem with the Meister's ways of speaking about God, [is] the priority he gives to the hidden Godhead, the God beyond God. It would be foolish to deny that Eckhart holds to such a priority, just as it is evident that he did not feel that this in any way conflicted with his Christian belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were each fully God in the most proper sense of the term. His Avignon judges and Pope John XXII, however, did not agree that his account of the equality of the three Persons with the divine essence was an adequate theological explanation of Christian faith, for they included two articles relating to it in the Bull of condemnation." McGinn (2001), p.35.

⁴ Although he adds that in the German works the 'ground' is focused upon more explicitly and is 'a central object of [Eckhart's] preaching'. p.41.

⁵ See p.37-8. See also Ch.5 for his examination of Eckhart's metaphysics relating to the structure of God's existence as essence and Trinity in relation to the *exitus-reditus* cycle of medieval neoplatonic thought.

category of God's distinct personhood by which Eckhart understands the existence of creation and the individual identity of the human soul within creation. It is worth briefly exploring this tendency in scholarship since it will give a sense of the context in which I believe the need has arisen for a more specifically trinitarian reading of Eckhart's theology. I am claiming that it is wrong to suggest that Eckhart's teaching on the soul's union with God is primarily in terms of her union with God's essence, unity or oneness. I am also suggesting that this inevitably leads to the suggestion that Eckhart denies distinct selfhood to the human individual in her relationship with God. Both of these mistaken conclusions can be avoided if we pay closer attention to how Eckhart thinks about the Trinity, since it is the Trinity which provides Eckhart with a vocabulary to talk about God's distinct identity, with which the soul can have a relationship and because of which the soul's individuality is created, preserved and perfected.

Eckhart's teaching on detachment in the German sermons is often presented by scholars, and sometimes by Eckhart himself, as if the first 'step' in the soul's detachment is the stripping away of images and the soul's subsequent union with God's essence in the ground. In accord with this logical (though not ontological) order, I will begin my argument by considering how Eckhart conceives of God's essence.⁶ This will allow us to consider Eckhart's teaching on God's necessary and self-sufficient existence, something that distinguishes him from creatures and from creaturely signification. It also provides insight into how Eckhart understands language – specifically in his use of analogy and apophasis to show how language must be applied differently to God and creatures if it is to be truthful. It is also useful for the order of my argument to begin by trying to understand what Eckhart means when he talks about God's Essence, since it is through an examination of how Essence and persons relate

⁶ The reason why I have called this simply a logical order will be clear from the rest of the thesis.

that I shall later demonstrate his commitment to the Trinity – a commitment that refutes the mistaken suggestion that Eckhart prioritises essence over Trinity in God.

The suggestion that Eckhart prioritises the soul's union with God's essence over the Trinity is not without reason. In one of the frequently cited sermons used to make this claim, Pr. 2, Eckhart states:

So one and simple is this citadel in the soul, elevated above all modes, of which I speak and which I mean, that...for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside, should He ever look in there. But only insofar as He is one and indivisible, without mode or properties (can he do this): in that sense He is neither Father, Son, nor Holy Ghost, and yet is a Something which is neither this nor that.⁷

This passage, taken alone, suggests that the soul's union with God is primarily in terms of something 'beyond' the Trinity in the mutual ground which God and the soul share and where the soul is so indistinct from God that she can conceive of herself as her own cause.⁸ The citadel of the soul, an image which Eckhart uses to represent the soul's ground, is inaccessible to God as Trinity, but receives him in his 'somethingness' where he is one, indivisible and without mode or properties. In other words, in their mutual ground God can only be present in the soul as essence. Passages such as this are often cited as evidence that Eckhart places the Trinity somehow 'below' the essence. However in 2c, when we look at how Eckhart speaks about potentiality and actuality in

⁷ Pr. 2, p.81.

⁸ Pr. 52, pp.421-2.

God and the soul we will see quite clearly that this ordering of the Trinity and essence is logical, not ontological.⁹

It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, that some of the most frequently cited sermons in the secondary literature, for instance Prr. 2, 10, 15, 48 and 52 also contain some of Eckhart's most complex and controversial statements.¹⁰ Scholars who focus upon passages like that quoted above from Pr. 2 frequently view Eckhart's teaching on the soul's union with God in terms of the unification of the soul with God's indistinct essence. The essence is seen as higher than, prior to or more important than God's triune existence and the soul's relationship with the persons of the Trinity.¹¹ These features of Eckhart's teaching are often used for a particular point of comparison with Buddhist or Hindu mystical teaching.¹² They are also a common feature of the

⁹ Frank Tobin also points out the problem with the reliability of the sermons authorship because they were noted down by members of the congregation and not by Eckhart himself. The condition of the texts as well as this possible issue over their accurately representing Eckhart's own teaching should make us wary of using single texts as clear example of Eckhart's broader theological teaching and instead we should search for a deeper theological consistency across the primary material in *Meister Eckhart, Thought and Language* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1986), p.19.

¹⁰ One possible reason for this is that Prr. 2, 6, 48 and 52 are contained in the volume *Essential Eckhart* which was for a long time, and remains still, one of the most reliable translations into English of a number of Eckhart's texts and is cited by almost all scholars who do not make their own translations from the German.

¹¹ For examples of works which understate the centrality of the Trinity in Eckhart's theology see Albrecht Classen 'Meister Eckhart's Philosophy in the 21st Century', *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No1/2 (March/June 2003) pp.6-23 (pp.11-12); David E. Linge, 'Mysticism, Poverty and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (December 1978) pp.465-488 (p.472); John D. Caputo, 'Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism', *The Thomist*, 42 No.2 (1978) pp.197-225 (p.213); James Kellenberger, *Dying to Self and Detachment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) Ch.1-5. See also Robert Dobie, 'Meister Eckhart's "Ontological Philosophy of Religion"', in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 82, No.4 (Oct., 2002) pp.563-585 (pp.581-2).

¹² As Beverly Lanzetta comments, "Both Buddhist scholars and contemporary philosophers resonate deeply with the Meister's anarchic use of language and his obvious prescinding from the standard metaphysical categories of the day. Each sees reflected in Eckhart's mysticism a partner with his or her own thought, albeit slightly veiled by his Christian roots, and each holds that Eckhart in some way leaves behind metaphysics for a radical and liberating nothingness." 'Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (April, 1992) pp.248-268 (p.249)). Analyses such as these are of immense value for interfaith dialogue and the parallels between Eckhart's mysticism and the Eastern mystical traditions cannot be denied. However, Lanzetta rightly criticises this approach when it comes to trying to grasp Eckhart's teaching in and of itself. To do this requires us to see the centrality of Christology and soteriology, as well as to understand that the mystery of God's simultaneous Oneness and Threeness, cannot in any way be 'solved.' She states, 'The startling power of Eckhart's mystical theology rests squarely on this dynamic relationalism that is not subverted or compromised in lieu of a final, metaphysical *end*,' refuting the suggestion that the indistinction of the Godhead is somehow the pinnacle of Eckhart's concept of God. (p.259). Oliver Davies points to Rudolf Otto's *Mysticism East and West* as the origin of the strand of Eckhart scholarship that focuses on eastern mystical parallels in

existentialist and post-modern appropriation of Meister Eckhart's theology, as in the case of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.¹³ Since the quantity and complexity of Eckhart's theology prevents simple overarching analyses, it is perhaps unsurprising that the works of certain scholars are limited by brevity and must focus on certain texts at the expense of others to construct some kind of argument. The result, however, has been a tendency amongst some scholars to undervalue the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for Eckhart's theology. This is not perhaps so significant when a scholar aims specifically to analyse certain of Eckhart's works. However, these close analyses are sometimes then used as the basis for more general claims about Eckhart's theology. For instance, David Linge's article begins by focusing on the *First Parisian Question*, a text which is not concerned with the Trinity but with the question of whether being and understanding are the same in God.¹⁴ As we shall see below, he then turns towards general claims about Eckhart's theology which, through omission, undervalue the role of the Trinity, and which are rooted in a reading of this single text.¹⁵ If our concern is to understand Eckhart on his own terms it is essential to view individual works, even particularly controversial examples such as Pr. 2, in the broader context of Eckhart's theology. If we do not, then we are left with scholarship that frequently overlooks the centrality of christology, soteriology and trinitarianism (as for instance Linge's article does) in Eckhart's works. Scholarship, moreover, which gives such a fundamentally

Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian (London: SPCK, 1991), pp.16-17. For examples of other comparisons of Eckhart with Buddhist and Hindu thought, see for instance Joseph Politella, 'Meister Eckhart and Eastern Wisdom', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April, 1965), pp.117-133; Charlotte Radler, 'Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 26 (2006) pp.111-117; Robert E. Carter, 'God and Nothingness', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (January, 2009), pp.1-21. For an extensive list of literature connecting Eckhart to Buddhism and Hinduism, see Lanzetta, (1992), p.248, note 1.

¹³ For Heidegger see Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (Fordham University Press: New York, 1986) Ch.3 and 4. For Derrida see Ian Almond, 'How Not to Deconstruct a Dominican: Derrida on God and "Hypertruth"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol., 68, No. 2 (Jun., 2000) pp.329-344 (pp.339-340). See also Caputo, 'Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart', in H. J. Silverman ed., *Derrida and Deconstruction* (Routledge: New York, 1989) pp.24-38.

¹⁴ *Q. par. I*, p.43.

¹⁵ pp.471-5.

unbalanced view of Eckhart's theology and so deeply undervalues the distinctly Christian nature of his faith and teaching that claims made subsequent to this error are difficult to accept.

Despite this Eckhart's emphasis on negation, which in turn relates to his teaching on detachment,¹⁶ has unfortunately lent itself to the mistaken view that God as Trinity is something ultimately negated as well, something to pass beyond to get to the 'true God.' John D. Caputo's article 'Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism' is a case in point. Through a close reading of Pr. 52, he suggests that Eckhart seeks to show us a form of rare religious experience.¹⁷ The pinnacle of this experience is, according to Caputo, union with God in his unnameable oneness: 'For Eckhart, the highest name one can give to God is to call Him a nameless One, a unity in which all the divine attributes interfuse. To call God the One is to admit our inability to name God.'¹⁸ The Trinity is subordinate to this oneness, this unnameable God since it is, Caputo suggests, a set of properties which cannot be applied to the one and are absorbed into the unity of the one.¹⁹ This suggestion that the Trinity is a distinct set of properties falls down in the face of a closer reading of Eckhart's teaching on analogy and apophasis, which I will offer below and which in turn clarifies Eckhart's position on what properties and perfections are, how God has all properties and perfections indistinctly in the unity of his essence and how the Trinity *differs* from these as

¹⁶ Turner for instance suggests that detachment is an 'apophatic anthropology'. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) p.168.

¹⁷ '[Eckhart's] sermons introduce us to a rare and exalted religious experience. Meister Eckhart is no theoretician of this experience; he does not speak "about it", but "from out of it".' p.225.

¹⁸ p.197.

¹⁹ "one of the most astonishing features of Eckhart's thought is that the Godhead is said by him to lie deeper than the divine Trinity. The 'trinity' of persons is subordinate to the 'unity' of being or nature. Now the standard teaching of Aquinas and the other Christian masters had been that the unity of God's being was a rational or philosophical attribute of God which could be known by all men, whether Christian or Jew or Moslem. But the trinity of persons is a revealed truth which uncovers the hidden workings of the divine life and is accessible only to those with the light of the Christian faith. 'Unity' is overt, but the Trinity is hidden. Eckhart, however, takes the opposite position. The trinity of persons is a multiplicity whereas God's inner being is a unity. The Trinity names God's properties, His power (the Father), wisdom (the Son) and love (the Holy Spirit), whereas the true God is unnameable...The Trinity is a set of knowable properties. The divine unity is a mysterious recess." pp.211-2.

something placed ‘alongside’ not ‘below’ the essence. Caputo’s claim that the Godhead lies deeper than the Trinity depends upon this understanding of Trinity as ‘multiplicity’ in contrast to the inner unity of the true God. However, Eckhart’s use of the term Godhead is far from clear, and its relationship with essence is left unexamined by Caputo, despite its obvious significance for his claim.²⁰

Caputo’s view that Eckhart radically denies the equality between the Trinity and the one enables his characterisation of Eckhart as a speculative thinker, or ‘mystical atheist.’ He states:

To unite with God we must overcome the distinction between God and the soul. But to overcome this distinction we must be rid of God. Here Eckhart's mystical speculation reaches its climax. Eckhart proposes a kind of mystical atheism in which God Himself will disappear, in which we will be rid of God.²¹

This claim that the indistinct union with the Godhead, or essence (the two are the same here) is the ‘climax’ of Eckhart’s speculative thought leaves little room for the trinitarianism that I will examine throughout this thesis. As several scholars have pointed out, the view that Eckhart advocates some form of mystical experience also undermines his whole approach to activity or charity – whether human or divine – and grace.²² The suggestion, albeit hopefully rhetorical, that Eckhart’s theology is a ‘kind of

²⁰It is not clear whether by Godhead (*Gotheit*) Eckhart means God in general, or whether it means essence, as McGinn points out in *The Mystical Thought*, note 60, p.223. From the Latin texts, McGinn translates *in divinis* as ‘Godhead,’ but it is important to remember the difference between the Latin use of this term which is employed consistently and the German term *Gotheit* used in various different, and sometimes contradictory ways in the sermons.

²¹ pp.210-211.

²² For an example of scholarship which suggest Eckhart advocates a form of mystical experience, see Michael Stoeber, ‘Introvertive Mystical Experiences: Monistic, Theistic, and the Theo-Monistic’, *Religious Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (June 1993) pp.169-184 (p.178). Robert K. C. Forman also suggests the notion of Pure Consciousness Event as a way of discussing Eckhart’s mystical teaching, in ‘Mystical Knowledge: Knowledge by Identity’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 61, No. 4

mystical atheism' is also a confusing description of his apophatic teaching, which does not negate things that are true about God – including the Trinity – but negates, sin, evil, ignorance of God and the false ways in which humans try to know God or seek to follow God in their lives. Bernard McGinn responds directly to Caputo's article by suggesting that while Eckhart's use of language is certainly provocative, he is not questioning the orthodox equality between God's Trinity and essence – he does not *intend* to make the Trinity inferior to God's essence.²³ Since my thesis is built on precisely this claim, that Eckhart does not ultimately deny the Trinity or subordinate it to God's essence, in the course of my argument I will have to address the problem of how to interpret Eckhart's trinitarianism in the face of its apparent denial in the sermons where this occurs. I will suggest through my argument that Eckhart's 'radical apophaticism' is in fact a radical and persistent negation of atheism, not of trinitarianism, which leaves literally no space for the individual soul to be attached to nothings and nothingness – or godlessness and godless ways of viewing things – if she is to live in a way that accepts what is true about her self, reality and God.

There are two major hurdles that I hope to identify and overcome during the course of my thesis, which may prevent a modern reader from immediately grasping how Eckhart understands personhood and how individuality is not lost through the soul's relationship with God. The first is to do with ontology. It is simply not true, as Caputo's approach suggests, that Eckhart's 'speculation' begins with some kind of

(Winter, 1993) pp.705-738 (pp.711-12). For an example of a reductive approach that limits mysticism to pure psychological experientialism separated from God through the author's assumption of His non-existence, see Evan Fales, 'Can Science Explain Mysticism?', *Religious Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (June 1999) pp.213-227. Two scholars whose work on Eckhart criticises the views of the above works are Richard Kieckhefer, 'Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3/4 (July – October 1978) pp.203-225 and Amy Hollywood's truly conclusive account of this union between contemplation and activity, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame; London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

²³ McGinn 'The God Beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart', in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January, 1981), pp.1-19 (p.10).

Cartesian first principle, where the thinking subject exists autonomously from God who is the object of their 'study' or 'speculation.' For Eckhart, there is no 'ontological scaffolding' outside of God.²⁴ There is no autonomous self who exists prior to God and who, after establishing who or what she is and how she knows truth, can then approach God. The ontological scaffolding within which Eckhart thinks is theocentric. To be a self and to seek to understand anything at all is to be and to seek understanding in a context in which God *already* exists. Not only that, but he exists in a certain way, as a non-hierarchical essence and Trinity where this is itself the structuring principle behind reality and behind human existence and individuality.

The second hurdle helps to define the first and could be characterised as anthropological. What it means for Eckhart to be a self and to 'seek truth' is inextricably tied up with the humble admission of dependence upon God's grace for existence and salvation. For Eckhart, as I just suggested, there is simply no such thing as a self who knows what or who they are and from that pre-position then goes out to ask questions about God, such as 'does God exist?' and 'what is God like?' The fact of God's existence is premised in the first 'I am' of the human individual, in the first act of being and the first stirring of thought or speech in that individual's mind. As Eckhart says in his *First Parisian Question*, there is an absolute distinction between creaturely being and divine being, a distinction defined by dependence, such that 'nothing in the creature is in God except as in its cause'.²⁵ He states this even more plainly in the Latin sermon XXV:

²⁴ L. Stafford Betty uses the term ontological scaffolding in his article, 'Towards a Reconciliation of Mysticism and Dualism', in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (September, 1978) pp.291-303 (p.295). I will return to Betty's article in the conclusion.

²⁵ *Q. Par.* I, p.48.

Everything that exists praises what it is and proclaims its source. ‘From it’ efficiently, ‘through it’ formally, and ‘in it’ finally is ‘what is and ‘what it is.’ For this reason ‘what is’ is always material, potential, and a subject [of accidents]; the source itself is never material, never a subject, is always a predicate.²⁶

The existence of anything is, in other words, dependent upon God as its efficient, formal and final cause, where these three define everything that exists and define the specific existence of each individual thing. As such, any signification of ‘what is,’ i.e. any speech or thought that arises from an encounter with something in the universe, is always limited to creaturely categories of distinction. These categories, as we shall see in this chapter, cannot be applied to God, and as such, God – the source – is always the predicate of everything that exists and of each individually existing thing, in fact, he exists behind and before the speech act which seeks to signify him, enabling the existence of that speech and its speaker even if the content of the speech is something that seeks to deny God. Considering this, it is not surprising perhaps that Eckhart’s teaching can be misread in our own time, when these features of his perspective are likely to be alien both to the ontological ground upon which we are taught to do our knowing and the anthropological context in which we learn to understand ourselves. But it is the case for Eckhart and I will show that a reading of his theology which acknowledges this can illuminate how he affirms the soul’s individual identity as something created, sustained and saved through a relationship with God, a claim which in turn depends upon his doctrine of the Trinity.

²⁶ Sermon XXV, p.216.

1a. (i) Analogy and the *First Parisian Question*

Beginning with an examination of Eckhart's teaching on God's essence immediately presents us with a problem. There is a clear discrepancy between his earliest extant text, the *First Parisian Question*, and his *Opus Tripartitum*, which he never completed but to which he wrote the *Prologues* as well as several parts of the *Book of Commentaries*.²⁷ In the *First Parisian Question*, 'Are Existence and Understanding the Same in God?' Eckhart states quite plainly: 'it is not my present opinion that God understands because he exists, but rather than he exists because he understands. God is an intellect and understanding, and his understanding itself is the ground of his existence.'²⁸ He later adds, 'existence does not belong to God, nor is he a being, but he is something loftier than being.'²⁹ In apparent contradiction to this, in his summary of the prologues to the *Opus Tripartitum* he states repeatedly that 'Existence is God'.³⁰ He also explores this at great length in his *Commentary on Exodus*, drawing on Exodus 3:14.³¹ This discrepancy between the *First Parisian Question* and the texts comprising part of the *Opus Tripartitum* could have been indicative of a radical change in Eckhart's theology if the *Opus Tripartitum* were taken, as it was by Tobin in 1978, to be a much later work than the *First Parisian Question*.³² Even then however, Frank Tobin convincingly argues otherwise with a careful analysis of how Eckhart uses analogy. He points out that the different use of *esse* in reference to God in the *First Parisian Question* and in the *Commentary on Exodus*, depends upon an analogy of attribution:

²⁷ See Tobin, pp.3-29. The *First Parisian Question*, states Maurer, was written between 1302-1303, suggests Maurer, during Eckhart's first period as *Magister* in Paris. Maurer, p.11.

²⁸ *Q. Par.* I, p.45.

²⁹ *Q. Par.* I, p.50.

³⁰ *Op. tri.*, pp.77, 85-7.

³¹ *In Ex.*, p.45. See Ch. 1 below for full examination of Eckhart's treatment of 'esse est Deus' in the *Commentary on Exodus*.

³² Tobin suggests that the plan for the *Opus Tripartitum* and the *Prologues* were probably written quite late, either in Strasbourg between 1314-1322 or Cologne, after 1323. pp.8 and 20.

If we attribute *esse* to creatures, then we must use some other term for God, such as *intelligere* or *puritas essendi*. If, on the other hand, we call God *esse*, then creatures cannot in any real sense also be included in the term. They are rather in themselves pure nothing. Nowhere does Eckhart mention any kind of analogy in which both objects have an attribute *formaliter*. When he speaks of analogy, he means analogy of attribution.³³

We do not therefore have to see a contradiction between Eckhart's *First Parisian Question* and his *Opus Tripartitum* (or the *Commentary on Exodus*) because the two are using analogy in a different way – in the first case primarily signifying being of creatures and thus denying it of God and in the second place signifying being of God and denying it of creatures.

As Markus Enders points out, scholarship now suggests that the *Opus Tripartitum* was in fact written as early as 1305.³⁴ If this is true, it refutes the suggestion that Eckhart underwent a transformation in his theology and further supports this view of his theology as dialectical, rooted in his use of analogy and apophasis as tools to speak truthfully of the relationship between God and creatures.³⁵ We also do not have to accede to the position of scholars such as Linge who, based on a reading of the *First Parisian Question* alone, moves to a general analysis of Eckhart's theology as a

³³ pp.44-5. See also O. J. Keenan, "Theological Epistemology in Eckhart's First Parisian Question", *Medieval Mystical Theology*, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (June 2013) pp.27-44. Keenan points out that disentangling the apparent contradiction between the *Parisian Questions* and the *Opus Tripartitum* which state, God is not essence (*Q. Par. I*) and *esse est Deus (Op. tri.)* requires an 'understanding of Eckhart's nuanced appropriation of the doctrine of analogy'. p.39.

³⁴ See Loris Sturlese "Meister Eckhart in der Bibliotheca Amploniana. Neues zur Datierung des 'Opus tripartitum,'" (Miscellanea Mediaevalia) 23 (1995) pp.434-46. Cited in Markus Enders, "Meister Eckhart's Understanding of God," in Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), *Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition: A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, Vol.36 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013) p.369, note 34.

³⁵ Tobin gives clear evidence that Eckhart's theology is intentionally dialectical. He points to Eckhart's Second Lecture on Ecclesiasticus, Ch.24, where Eckhart uses the example of how health is predicated of food and urine in an analogy of attribution where health refers properly to the human being and only secondarily to food or urine whose healthiness is always relative to the health of the human. This defines the analogy of attribution. Tobin refers to In Eccli. N. 52: LW II, 280-1 (p.44).

‘metaphysics of intellection’ which subordinates the Trinity to ‘intellect’, in this case a term synonymous with essence.³⁶ When, in the *First Parisian Question* Eckhart draws upon Exodus 3:14 to state that God cannot be called existence, only *puritas essendi*, Linge reads this as ‘purity *from* being.’ He is then able to suggest that Eckhart prefers this formula because ‘a metaphysics of intellection offers greater possibilities for protecting the absolute unity and oneness of God.’³⁷ He supports his claim that this view is representative of Eckhart’s theology more generally by referring to Pr. 9 which states that being is the ‘forecourt’ of God’s habitation, but intellect is the temple in which he truly dwells. Linge then states ‘The intelligibility of Eckhart’s mystical teaching depends on this doctrine of divine intellection, for in the mystical experience the Christian penetrates the inner stillness of God and participates in God’s self-knowledge’.³⁸ There are a number of problems with this claim and the most obvious is Linge’s dependence upon minimal source material. Tobin, like Linge, quotes Pr. 9, but almost immediately points to Pr. 19 which refers to God’s house as “‘the unity of his being” (*diu einicheit sînes wesens*; Pr.19; DW I, 314, 1-2),’ and thus contradicts Pr. 9 directly and calls into question Linge’s dependence upon this source in support of his claim.³⁹

Linge also totally overlooks Eckhart’s teaching on analogy and apophasis which Tobin uses to justify the congruence between the *First Parisian Question* and the *Opus Tripartitum* and which supports my claim that essence, or in this case the synonym ‘intellect’ which still refers to God’s unity or oneness, is not the deepest or highest part of God, but something that must be understood alongside Eckhart’s trinitarianism as well. The importance of analogy is difficult to overstate, not least since Eckhart himself

³⁶ pp.471-2, 476.

³⁷ p.472.

³⁸ p.473.

³⁹ pp.38-39.

felt that it was misunderstood and said as much in his defence at Cologne. He refers to the Latin term ‘in quantum’ (*insofar as*) stating:

To clarify the objections brought against me, three things must be kept in mind. The first is that the words ‘insofar as,’ that is, a reduplication, exclude from the term in question everything that is other or foreign to it even according to reason. Even though existence and understanding are the same in God, still we do not say that God is evil although we can say that he understands evil. Although in God the Father essence and paternity are the same, he does not generate insofar as he is essence, but insofar as he is Father, even though the essence is the root of generation.⁴⁰

As we shall see later, this is actually a restatement of precisely the same point that Eckhart makes in the *Commentary on Exodus*, n.56. It is very useful for understanding how he thinks that analogy relates to the apophatic signification of God’s necessary existence and for how essence and Trinity relate to each other. For now it is simply useful to show that Linge’s position does not take full account of the subtlety of Eckhart’s theology. If we look at the *First Parisian Question* as an analogy of attribution we can see that what is being denied of God, or subordinated to intellect/essence, does not have to be God’s being in itself, since this still exists in an absolute and necessary sense and is, according to the *Commentary on Exodus* n.58, identical with his understanding. Instead it is creaturely being that is denied of God. God is not ‘a’ being, but is prior to everything that constitutes the existence of particular beings in the distinct universe. He is prior to it as first and efficient cause, and above it

⁴⁰ *Defense*, p.72.

or ahead of it as final cause.⁴¹ Linge is right to identify the use of intellect as an affirmation of God's unity and oneness, but he misses the crucially dialectical nature of Eckhart's teaching on God's existence and the relationship between God and creation. This dialectical method depends upon Eckhart's use of analogy, which, as Tobin notes, is the means by which Eckhart affirms God in himself and negates all of the false ways in which humans erroneously signify God:

For Eckhart to say that God and creature are analogous to each other is to say that there is no single positive quality, be it existence, goodness, truth, justice, or any other, which they both possess. The being that creatures possess bears no essential similarity to anything in God. If creatures can be said to be, then some entirely different term must be used to refer to God. In a verbal context where creatures are being, God is above being, the purity of being. Or, more frequently, God alone will be said to be being. Creatures, in themselves, or insofar as (*in quantum*) they are creatures, are simply nothing. However, since nothing exists outside God, besides being 'analogous to' or separate from God, creatures are also indistinct from or one with him. What has become distinct from God through creation remains at the same time indistinct from him with regard to everything that raises it above its own nothingness. As separate from God, a creature is just a sign pointing to what is real. As one with God, a creature really is, is good, is just, and the like. As separate from God it is subject to change and is extended in time. As one with God, it immutably is, was, and will be eternally.⁴²

⁴¹ as we saw in Sermon XXV p.216 above.

⁴² pp.63-4.

Here Tobin clearly outlines the dialectical quality of analogy and also points to its apophatic character. When we speak about God analogously with creaturely terms nothing positive can be said truly, but when we reverse the analogy of attribution and signify from the point of view of what is true about God, i.e. apophatically, then creatureliness is identified as that which possesses nothing positive and creaturely terms become nothing in the face of God's everything-ness. What analogy says about God and creation does not however simply end with the negation of creaturely knowing or being. Because creatures do in fact exist and receive their existence from God, they are not disregarded in Eckhart's theology, nor does he deny the value of creaturely distinction. This is again shown through analogy, where a creature is a 'something' insofar as it receives its somethingness from God and, when conceived of separately from God – i.e. when we make positive statements in purely creaturely terms and thus view the creature separately from God – it is 'nothing.' Analogy and apophasis are therefore used to say something about how the soul should orientate herself ontologically, not just grammatically, towards her creator. The apophatic becomes a category by which the soul structures her life, a tool by which she acknowledges God as being itself and as cause of her own being. When she does this she identifies the ways in which she makes God less than he is by viewing him through the lens of her creaturely perspective, her creaturely knowledge, speech, actions and desires. As I will argue throughout this thesis, the apophatic therefore becomes the safeguard of the authenticity of the soul's relationship with God. If this is correct, then it is obviously also true that a better understanding of Eckhart's position on God's essence is one that takes account of the dialectical method inherent in his theology and presented in his understanding of analogy and apophasis.

Anastasia Wendlinder offers another in depth approach to Eckhart's use of analogy in her analysis of how it functions 'non-contrastively.' Like Tobin, she claims that Eckhart employs analogy as a tool to speak simultaneously about God's transcendence from and immanence to, the whole of creation and especially to the human soul.⁴³ The distinction Wendlinder draws in analogy is a significant one for Eckhart's metaphysics, since the dialectical relationship of simultaneous transcendence and immanence between God and creation is defined by God's existence as *both* essence and Trinity. As Eckhart makes clear in sermon XLIX, God does not create or indwell insofar as he is essence, but insofar as the persons of the Trinity 'boil up' (*bullitio*), 'boil over' (*ebullitio*) and create (*creatio*) in a single flow from the essence.⁴⁴ In other words, it is only because God is an essence, which overflows from itself as self-expressive and creative Trinity, that creation exists at all. The self-expressive flow of the Trinity is the precondition for creation and thus the precondition for the possibility of human existence and human speech about God. In a sense, Eckhart's own teaching therefore recognises its creaturely condition and dependence upon the pre-condition of the Trinity for its own existence. If God were only or primarily essence then all speech about God, including analogy, would lose its truth value, since what it fundamentally points to is God's creative activity, not his indistinct essence. But God is not simply or primarily essence, he is fundamentally self-expressive and eternally active. This is clear from the German sermons where Eckhart repeatedly states that God 'always' gives birth to the Son in the same eternal now in which he is himself,⁴⁵ it is also clear from the *bullitio-ebullitio-creatio* flow, mentioned about and which we shall examine at length in

⁴³ Anastasia C. Wendlinder, 'Beyond Analogy: Articulating God's Transcendence and Immanence According to Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2004), p.32.

⁴⁴ Sermon XLIX n.511 pp.236-7. See 2b for a fuller account of this sermon and the trinitarian teaching therein.

⁴⁵ See for instance, Pr. 101, p.29. See also *In Gen.*, n.7, p.84.

2b. Moreover, it is through this giving birth, or through the ‘boiling up’ of the whole Trinity that God is able to create, and thus the existence of creation is a sign of God’s triune activity.

God does not actively or communicatively relate to creation as essence, since as the *First Parisian Question* makes quite clear, God’s essence is totally separate from creaturely ‘being’.⁴⁶ His self-expressive and creative triune existence however, boils up from this essence, and in the same eternal boiling, boils over into creativity. The Trinity is therefore the dimension of God which makes analogy meaningful, because it is only God as essence *and* Trinity who creates and who in creating opens up within the distinct universe the possibility for a relationship between God and humanity.

In this opening discussion (1a), I am therefore suggesting, as Eckhart himself pointed out in his defence at Cologne, that a proper understanding of what he is trying to show in his theology, depends upon his use of analogy and apophasis, which makes possible an understanding of his concept of God that does not prioritise the essence over the Trinity. This claim in turn provides us with a framework in which the soul’s union with God need not be viewed in terms of an ontological (and eternal) absorption of her individuality, but can instead be seen as a perfected relationship, where the false view of distinction as the separateness between things, is overcome by the divine view of distinction, where things are distinct through their relationship with one another, just as the persons of the Trinity receive their distinction relationally. This point is central to my argument and I will return to it several times throughout this thesis.

For Eckhart, as I stated earlier, a proper understanding of reality is theocentric. In a certain sense this means, as C. F. Kelley suggests, that the detached soul views

⁴⁶ Another example from *Par. Q. I*, can be found when Eckhart shows how human knowing depends upon the existence of things, but divine knowing causes the existence of things. As such, Eckhart states: “A principle is never the same as that which follows from a principle, as a point is never a line. Now God is the principle or cause of existence or being itself; hence he is not the being or existence of his creature. Nothing in the creature is in God except as in its cause, and it is not there formally.” *Q. Par. I*, p.48.

everything from God's point of view.⁴⁷ However, to make sense of this statement requires a careful interpretation of how the soul relates to God as a whole; to his essence *and* to his persons. God's perspective is the truest perspective of everything that is since it is the cause and end of creation and also because only God can know himself perfectly. This is shown by Eckhart, as we shall shortly see, through the negation of negation which functions as the highest form of affirmation of God's existence, utterly negating all falsehood or limitation from what God is and from what he knows – where his being and understanding are not, properly (or rather, apophatically) speaking, distinct from one another. The soul, insofar as she sees what is true about God through apophasis, shares in God's self-knowledge. Even though she simultaneously negates the creaturely categories with which she formerly thought she knew things, she still has a kind of knowledge, an apophatic knowledge, which sees God as that which he is. It is only from the point of view of this apophatic knowledge that the soul comes to a true understanding of her own self as well, for what she is, is inextricable from what God is since he is her cause and end and his identity is the reason for the soul's own distinction and individuality.

It *might* seem as if sharing in God's knowing in this way precisely suggests the kind of absorption or disappearance of individual identity into God that I am trying to show is not part of Eckhart's theology. We must however think carefully about what a theocentric ontology or perspective really means. For Eckhart, this accusation of absorption is only meaningful if we think that there is truth value in a perspective of reality that does not view absolute theocentricity as the highest good of human being and understanding. Eckhart however, does not attribute value to a perspective which is in any sense less than theocentric. Indeed, it is fair to suggest that such a perspective

⁴⁷ *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (First published New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977; repr., California: Frog Books, 2008) pp.1-14.

would be precisely the kind of ‘nothingness’ or ‘attachment’ which he negates through the apophatic signification of God in the Latin works, and the teaching on detachment in the German works.⁴⁸ To understand why the soul’s sharing in God’s knowledge does not negate her identity or the uniqueness of her individual perspective therefore requires us to attend carefully to Eckhart’s theocentric perspective. To say that the detached soul sees everything from God’s point of view means simply that she sees truly, where seeing truly means, from the perspective of eternity, seeing God alone, and from the perspective of time, seeing God in all things. In time the soul must approach God in her activity, ethics, and creaturely relations, whereas in eternity she approaches God through the unity of divine relationality.⁴⁹ In one sense the eternal perspective, which is identical with God and the temporal perspective, which more clearly identifies the soul as an individual, are the same, since God as existence itself contains everything in himself and is the cause of all things.⁵⁰ But just because the soul’s perspective is aligned to God’s does not mean that she no longer ‘inhabits’ her own perspective or ‘viewing point,’ it means rather that she sees truly. In other words, for Eckhart any true perspective must include the fact of God’s existence and to include this fact properly in the way the soul thinks and acts means recognising it in everything, since all things are what they are through their dependence upon God. The soul’s viewing point is therefore the self-expression of her existence, and the closer she moves to God, the more fully her existence is affirmed and expressed and the more fully her perspective is filled with God. She is not absorbed into God through her relationship with him; she is perfected by it and becomes more fully existent and self-expressive the closer she moves towards God. As I shall suggest in the conclusion to this thesis, the reason why this seems to us

⁴⁸ I will provide ample evidence for this in chapter 3.

⁴⁹ c.f. Pr. 103, p.59. In a future study it would be essential to spend more time on the distinction drawn here. Due to the constraints of this thesis, I am not however able to do so.

⁵⁰ For God as existence itself, see analysis of *In Ex.* below.

as if the soul's individuality disappears, is because we habitually define distinct personhood or individuality as if they are separable from God, but from the point of view of Eckhart's teaching that means we are viewing them precisely in terms of the 'nothingness' and 'attachments' negated through apophasis and detachment. The opposite of this is to view the soul's individuality according to the true categories of distinction and personhood which are triune, defined by relation and self-expression, not separateness and self-possession. In other words, if we are to take Eckhart at his word, we must admit that we express *our own* attachment to our self, or to nothingness, when we think that Eckhart's concept of the soul's union with God denies her individuality. We do not therefore express something ontologically true about the detached soul whom we observe in Eckhart's theology. The only ontological claim we make in this case is to highlight the creatureliness of our own perspective.⁵¹

This prioritising God's existence as a necessary predicate of all subsequently existing beings, or of human speech and thought about God, is one of the hermeneutic obstacles identified in my introduction. Robert Dobie also comments upon this in his analysis of Eckhart's approach to the authority of revelation. He states:

The goal of any talk about God is not to describe God or to give us speculative knowledge about God, for all such talk is ultimately futile. It is rather to lead the believer into a *new mode of existing in God*, one that is possible, paradoxically, only when the human intellect has been stripped of any and all preconceptions about the nature of God, so that there is a new basis for knowing God not as this

⁵¹ In the conclusion to this thesis I will return to the view presented in this paragraph after having interpreted Eckhart's theology, and thus tie it in more securely with Eckhart's own teaching.

or that object of reason but as the very basis of all of one's knowledge of both God and creatures.⁵²

The emphasis here is upon gaining understanding through participation in something true, in a real relationship with a real God who is both one and three. The understanding that comes through this relationship is not something the soul can know through its reason alone, since its reason is also subsequent to God who causes the soul's existence and reasonable capacity. As Eckhart himself states:

The work of grace, because it is supernatural, is superior to every created work. Because it is above nature as something higher...the operation of God's grace is also unknown to an intellect that is based only on the natural light of reason. (And so children who die without baptism know nothing about the glory of the blessed, and this seems to be the real reason why they do not grieve that they have not received grace or the glory of the blessed).⁵³

This interesting passage from sermon XXV highlights the difference between a modern approach to truth and Eckhart's 14th century Christian perspective. He considers God as above or prior to everything else, identifying God's primordality not only to all existing things, but also specifically to the capacity of natural reason.⁵⁴ The example of the unbaptised child may sound unreasonable to a modern interpreter, however it stands as a perfect example of the fact that Eckhart's theology grants genuine authority to God's

⁵² *Logos and Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010) p.64.

⁵³ Sermon XXV, n.268, p.221.

⁵⁴ a point Thomas Aquinas makes in the very first article of the *Summa*: 'It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason.' *STh* 1a. 1. 1.

revelation in scripture and in the church and engages with their teaching through faith, not simply through reason. The soul therefore does not primarily know God *with* her reason, she knows God by recognising him as *prior* to her reason, as that from which she flows; as the underlying cause of the fact that she can reason in the first place. In other words, for Eckhart all being and knowing exists in the context of a universe where God exists and where God's existence, because of the nature of his relationship with creation as its creator, is in fact a necessary predicate of everything that exists, including every act of knowing. There is no clearer statement of this in Eckhart's theology than in his answer to the question 'Does God exist?' in the *Opus Tripartitum*:

I reply that he does...If God does not exist, nothing exists. The consequent is false and therefore the antecedent is also false, namely that God does not exist. The inference is proved as follows: If existence does not exist, no being exists, or nothing exists, as nothing white exists if whiteness does not exist. Now existence is God, as the proposition states. Hence, if God does not exist, nothing exists. The falsity of the conclusion is proved by nature, the senses, and reason.⁵⁵

The difference between a modern philosophical concept of reason and truth, and Eckhart's, dependent as it is upon God's necessary existence, could not be plainer. It is only when we recognise the inseparability of faith and reason for Eckhart that we can properly understand his metaphysics which, despite at times sounding similar to Eastern mysticism and 20th century post-modern or existential philosophy, should not be carelessly compared if our aim is to understand Eckhart on his own terms as much as possible. Without making explicit the role that his Christian faith has in his ontology, it

⁵⁵ *Op. tri.*, n.13, pp.86-7.

is easy to omit Eckhart's commitment to the Trinity from our interpretation of his theology and we saw Caputo do just that above. However, when we take Eckhart's faith commitment seriously, such an omission appears highly unusual, if not patently absurd. Having now established some of the essential principles of Eckhart's teaching – the importance of apophasis, analogy and dialectical language – and suggested how the difference between Eckhart's medieval perspective and a modern perspective might be one cause of the disregard of the Trinity in his theology, I will turn to Eckhart's *Commentary on Exodus* to consider how he understands God's necessary and essential existence.

1b. God's Essence in the *Commentary on Exodus*

As I discussed above, Eckhart's *First Parisian Question* is dialectically opposed to the *Opus Tripartitum* and the *Commentary on Exodus* in terms of how it considers God's intellect and being. As we saw, David Linge suggested that Eckhart's use of the term *puritas essendi* meant purity 'from' being.⁵⁶ Paying more careful attention to the dialectical nature of Eckhart's theology, Markus Enders points to the same term, but suggests instead that it signifies a kind of being above being. It is, in other words an apophatic statement; it is not about what God is not but about what God most superabundantly is, as signified through the negation of negation.⁵⁷ In the *First Parisian Question* Eckhart uses the term *puritas essendi* when he draws on Exodus 3:14 to support his argument about God's being-lessness as first cause or principle of creation.

⁵⁶ p.472.

⁵⁷ Enders comments: "Eckhart sees the refusal to ascribe any creaturely forms of Being to the divine intellect as a genuine statement of negative theology, which, like negative theology as a whole, is in reality a superabundantly affirmative statement about God, since it does not deny to him anything that would be his by nature, but merely asserts 'that he contains everything in himself antecedently in purity, fullness, and perfection, more amply and more broadly, since he is the root and cause of all things.' [*Q. Par. I, n.12 LW V, 48, 4-8*]." p.365.

For Eckhart, this purity of existence is expressed directly in the statement ‘I am who [I] am’. He comments:

When someone who wants to conceal his identity and name is asked at night ‘Who are you?’ he replies, ‘I am who I am.’ So the Lord, wishing to show that he possesses purity of existence, said, ‘I am who I am.’ He did not say simply ‘I am,’ but added ‘who I am.’ Therefore existence does not befit God, unless you call this purity [of] existence.⁵⁸

If we view this in a more specifically apophatic sense as Enders suggests, then Eckhart’s point here is two-fold: first, that God is not not his own being (‘I am who I am’) and second, that he is not creaturely being (‘I am’ on its own). As we saw above, it is creaturely being, not divine being, that Eckhart seeks to remove from our definition of God and it is therefore creaturely being, not divine being, which is negated from God in the negation of negation.⁵⁹ If Enders is correct to suggest this – in direct opposition to Linge’s interpretation of *puritas essendi* – then the kind of being apophatically signified here is the same as the being which ‘God is’ in the *Opus Tripartitum* and the same as the being of which Eckhart speaks in the *Commentary on Exodus*, where he draws on Ex. 3:14 again to consider, once more through apophasis, how God’s existence and essence are in fact identical.

In the *First Parisian Question*, Eckhart wanted to show that creaturely signification could not be applied to God, since human knowing depends upon the existence and experience of an object, whereas God’s knowing of objects *causes* their

⁵⁸ *Q. Par I*, p.48.

⁵⁹ Enders, p.370.

existence.⁶⁰ This fundamental distinction is the essence of analogical speech, since analogy, when it signifies from time, is always limited and ultimately false inasmuch as creaturely categories are used to speak about God, since God is, properly speaking prior to and the cause of, creatures and their categories. On the other hand, because of his existence as primordial cause, God *can* be signified through the negation of speech, through the pointing behind or beyond language to its necessary source. This is the point when apophatic speech enters theological discourse and enables human speech – necessarily analogous – to point beyond itself, highlighting its own limitation whilst still point to God as that which he is. This apophatic mode of signification is one of the key ways in which Eckhart talks about God and his relationship to creation in the *Commentary on Exodus*. There are three main points from this text that I wish to discuss for the sake of my thesis. The first is, as we have already begun to explore above, God’s necessarily existent and self-sufficient essence, and his primordality or priority to creation. The second is the way in which this is signified apophatically. The third point is how the Trinity is still in fact included in Eckhart’s signification of God’s eternal existence. This third point will be the focus of chapter 2, and I will not therefore consider it here.

One of the most interesting passages from the *Commentary* is Eckhart’s exegesis of Exodus 3:14. We have already seen that Eckhart referred to this passage in the *First Parisian Question*. This time, in the *Commentary*, Eckhart begins his analysis of the passage by drawing on Avicenna’s *Metaphysics* 8.4. He claims that the ‘I am who am’ of Exodus 3:14 is a statement of the synonymy between *what* God is and *that* God is:

⁶⁰ Eckhart states: ‘our knowledge is different from God’s. His knowledge is the cause of things whereas our knowledge is caused by them.’ *Q.Par.* I, p.48.

note the term ‘am’ is here the predicate of the proposition when God says ‘I am,’ and it is in the second position. As often as it occurs, it signifies that pure naked existence is in the subject, from the subject, and is the subject itself, that is, the essence of the subject. It also signifies that essence and existence are the same, which belongs to God alone whose ‘what-it-is’ is his ‘that-it-is,’ as Avicenna says, and who has no ‘what-it-is’ beyond the ‘that-it-is’ alone which signifies existence.⁶¹

The subject here is God, so the identity between God’s what-it-is and his that-it-is, is a statement of the identity between his nature and the fact of his existence. In other words he exists necessarily. This is only true of God, since God, as we saw in the *First Parisian Question*, is the cause of all that exists and, as such, does not depend upon any kind of caused existence for his own existence, or he would have the same kind of existence as creatures and would not be God. Eckhart makes this point clearly in the *Commentary*:

in every created thing existence and essence, differ, the former coming from something else and the latter not coming from something else, the question whether something exists, which asks about the ‘that-it-is’ or existence of a thing, is different from the question about what it is, which asks about the ‘what-it-is’ or essence of a thing. That is why it is foolish to answer someone who asks what a man or an angel is by saying ‘He is,’ or that a man or an angel exists. But

⁶¹ *In Ex.*, n. 14, pp.45-6.

in God where ‘that-it-is’ is the ‘what-it-is’ itself, a fitting answer to someone asking who or what is God is ‘God is,’ for God’s existence is his ‘what-it-is.’⁶²

We can see here that the synonymy between God’s essence and existence identifies an ontological difference between God and creatures. As Vladimir Lossky, suggests, this passage signifies God’s unity and his uniqueness.⁶³ This indicates the limitedness of creatures, whose essence and existence are different from one another and the limitlessness of God, who is his own self-sufficiency and is cause of creaturely existence. The statement ‘God is’ which is, as we shall see, affirmed through the negation of negation, identifies the causal dependence of creatures (and speech) upon God and, subsequently, points to God as that which is beyond language and creaturely existence. Speech about God and indeed *all* speech is only completely true when in itself it acknowledges both of these points; signifying God as the creator beyond creatures, and signifying creaturely dependence upon God as necessary cause. This may seem like Eckhart is begging the question of God’s existence in his approach to speech about God and, in fact, he is, since God’s existence is for Eckhart the truest or most basic fact about reality as we saw in the *Opus Tripartitum*, a fact, moreover, encountered through faith and apophasis, as much as through reason. The simple fact that creation exists and we are in it is evidence enough for Eckhart of the fact that God exists – so implicit is faith in Eckhart’s perspective of reality.

In accordance with the Aristotle’s principle of the prime mover which moves itself,⁶⁴ Eckhart names God as self-sufficient existence:

⁶² *In Ex.*, n.18, pp.46-7.

⁶³ “Pour Maître Eckhart, la révélation de l’Exode signale non seulement l’unité, mais aussi l’unicité de l’Être qui est Dieu : *solus Deus proprie est ens.*” *Théologie Négative et Connaissance de Dieu, Chez Maître Eckhart*, (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1960) p.98.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* book Λ, 1071a – 1072a in Hugh Lawson-Tancred (trans.), *Aristotle, The Metaphysics*: (London: Penguin, 2004) pp.365-370.

to need something and not to be self-sufficient is totally foreign to God's essence. 'The First is rich through itself.' Therefore, when he says 'I am who am,' he teaches that the subject 'I am' itself is the predicate 'I am' that comes second, and that the denominator is what is denominated, the essence is the existence, the 'what-it-is' is the 'that-it-is,' the essence is self-sufficient and its own sufficiency. That is to say he 'does not need any creature's essence or anything outside himself to establish him or perfect him, but his essence is self-sufficient' to all things and in all things. Such sufficiency is proper to God alone.⁶⁵

Eckhart distinguishes here between God's essence and creaturely essences as things outside of God. Creaturely essence depends upon something exterior to itself to cause change or movement in it, or to actualise its potentiality for something – e.g. its reception of a particular perfection, such as goodness or wisdom. God alone is self-sufficient, meaning that he depends upon nothing but his own essence for his existence. For Eckhart, this represents a truth about God as creator, since everything that exists depends upon God as the cause of its existence.⁶⁶ Having said this he goes on to consider the difference between God and creatures in more detail:

⁶⁵ *In Ex.*, n.20, p.47.

⁶⁶As we shall see later, for Eckhart God also does not rely on any cause or source for the distinct dimension of his existence as self-expressive and creative Trinity since the Trinity boils-up (*bullitio*) from the essence eternally, in such a way that its 'emergence' from the essence does not create an order of priority between essence and persons. It is this non-priority that Eckhart is perhaps referring to in his German sermons when he states 'God's ingoing is his outgoing' (Pr. 53, p.152) and 'the unity is the distinction, and the distinction *is* the unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the unity, for that is distinction without distinction'. (Pr.10, p.338).

In everything that is beneath God, the essence is not self-sufficient to and in all things. For example, an artist's nature is not sufficient for his work unless the will to work, and the power and knowledge and the like (things which are not the artist's nature itself) accompany it. Therefore, substance and power, existence and operation are different in everything that is beneath God.⁶⁷

In this passage Eckhart begins to consider how God and creatures possess perfections differently according to their different essences – dependent and self-sufficient. Creatures are shown here to have perfections, substance, power, etc., which are distinct from one another. However, in God these perfections are contained indistinctly in his essence:

We are wise through one property, have power through another, and will through a third. It is not so in the Creator, but in him wisdom is power itself and is will itself, so that he does not have wisdom through one property, power through another, will through a third, but is wise powerful, and willing through the same thing, namely his substance.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *In Ex.*, n.20, pp.47-8.

⁶⁸ *In Ex.*, n.42, p.56. Eckhart sometimes uses the term 'substance' to refer to the same aspect of God as 'essence.' We can see this at the beginning of *In Ex.* n.14, "Discretivum pronomen meram substantiam significant: meram, inquam, sine omni accidente, sine omni alieno, substantiam sine qualitate, sine forma hac aut illa, sine hoc aut illo." (LW II, p.20, 3-5). He describes substance here in terms of the same negation of qualities with which he describes the essence which is existence itself. In n.14-15, *essentia*, *substantia* and *esse* are synonymous. He seems to be using substance in the same way in the passage above, and, as such, it appears that relation is a category which remains outside of the essence which is existence, and which is *not* identical with the Godhead (in *divinis*) in this Latin text. He also states this quite clearly in n.65: "In deo autem idem est et hoc ipsum esse quod essential sive substantia. Igitur omnia praedicamenta accidentalium in deo transeunt in substantiam secundum genus suum et modum praedicandi, quem sortiuntur a subiecto et ex habitudine ad subiectum." (LW II, p.69,13-16). Here Eckhart states that substance and essence are the same and that it (substance or essence) absorbs all accidental categories into itself. I am making this clear here to show that both essence/substance and relation (or persons as we shall see below) are categories which describe God and are contained together in the Godhead (*in divinis*) a term which Eckhart uses simply to denote God as he truly is, or God in his entirety.

In this passage Eckhart suggests that creatures depend upon the reception of a particular perfection to grow in wisdom, or power, or will, whereas God has all of these essentially and as such he lacks nothing. This lacking nothing is the same as being existence itself and Eckhart therefore points out that God's fullness is itself the sufficiency of all things, since

if existence is full, then it is also life and wisdom and every other perfection. Just as he exists for himself and for all things, so too he is sufficient for himself and for them all; he is his own and everything's sufficiency. 'Our sufficiency is from God' (2 Cor. 3:5).⁶⁹

For this reason, perfections, which actualise potentiality in creatures, depend upon God, who is existence, for their own actualisation (or existence) as perfections: 'because each of them in and of itself is essentially a mode of existence itself, depending upon it and inhering in it, and also because it would be nothing without existence, neither wisdom nor anything else, but pure nothing.'⁷⁰ Because perfections are contained within God's essence, they are contained without the distinction with which we perceive them, for the essence cannot in any sense contain creaturely multiplicity. God contains perfections in a higher way than creatures, indistinctly as their cause, a fact represented through this negation of the distinction between perfections. Eckhart's understanding of how God and creatures possess perfections therefore depends upon his use of the analogy which we saw in the first part of this chapter, since the negation of perfections from God is not a denial that God is perfect, but is instead a statement about God as cause of the

⁶⁹ *In Ex.*, n.21, p.48.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

distinction and existence of perfections in creatures.⁷¹ Eckhart himself identifies the analogous nature of how humans signify perfections in God when he answers the question of whether human signification of perfections actually says something true about God:

From this the true answer of that knotty and famous question whether there is a distinction of attributes in God or only in our intellect's way of grasping is clear and evident. It is certain that the distinction of divine attributes, for example, power, wisdom, goodness, and the like, is totally on the side of the intellect that receives and draws knowledge of such things from and through creatures. Creatures, by the fact that they are from the One but below the One, necessarily fall into number, plurality, distinction, guilt, and fault, a condition by which they are numbered among all the things that are.⁷²

We find here a clear identification of multiplicity as less than God's essence, and can therefore identify the same negation of creaturely signification that we saw in the *First Parisian Question*. Eckhart states that signification in creaturely terms or in terms of multiplicity cannot be properly applied to God. When we understand perfections by observing them in creatures, we understand them in a creaturely way which is completely different from how God possesses perfections eternally.

God's possession of perfections is in fact causally opposite to creatures, whose possession of perfections is as the actualisation of their potential. Creatures act in creation and actualise their potentiality, or move towards their own perfection, through their reception of perfections which they receive accidentally, i.e. as something added to

⁷¹ The perfections are however expressed distinctly from God, but only through his self-expressive act as Trinity. We will consider this in chapter 2.

⁷² *In Ex.*, n.58, p.63.

them, not as something identical with their substance. These accidents or perfections in turn depend upon the existing individual for their own existence as accidents of that individual and as such, ‘their existence is inhering existence, that is, existence in a subject, and their existence is in the existence of the subject, for they do not have an existence apart from that of their subject.’⁷³ God however, exists completely beyond accident or distinct perfection since all accidents or perfections are absorbed into his essence:

[In] God Existence Itself is the same as the essence or substance, and therefore in him all the accidental categories are absorbed into the substance according to the genus and manner of predication which they receive from the subject and from their connection with the subject.⁷⁴

According to this, we cannot therefore truthfully apply perfections to God in a creaturely way, since God possesses perfection in an opposite sense to creatures. God’s essence completely surpasses the creaturely mode of existence in every way and is prior to all existing things as the cause of their existence, since he is existence itself. God is thus signified through the negation of creaturely signification. The difference between God and creatures is identified in the double meaning of the apophatic affirmation. On the one hand it affirms God in his necessity, and on the other it identifies all creatures and creaturely signification as non-existent, nothing, or false, insofar as creatures and speech are conceived of apart from existence itself, that is, apart from God.

This view of God’s absolute freedom and independence from cause, his indistinct containing of perfections within his oneness or essence, and his dependence

⁷³ *In Ex.*, n.65, p.65.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

upon himself, as well as his subsequent necessity is drawn from Aristotle, Augustine and from Eckhart's predecessor as *magister regens* at the University of Paris, Thomas Aquinas.⁷⁵ Like Thomas, Eckhart uses these Aristotelian principles apophatically in his theology.⁷⁶ For Aristotle these principles describing the first cause or prime mover describe things that are true about the universe which is an effect of that first cause. They remain so for Thomas and Eckhart, but they are also axioms about God's being which highlight – because they are descriptions of things that are true about God – the problem of how human language can point meaningfully to God; a problem which scholastic (and mystical) theology frequently sought to comment upon, often with recourse to the Dionysian cycle of *reditus-exitus*, or *cataphasis-apophasis*.⁷⁷

By exploring Eckhart's teaching on God's essence we have seen how he views the complete otherness of God from creatures. God is that which necessarily exists, apart from all creaturely dependence upon causation and properties – since God is self-sufficient – and his existence is his essence. God's necessary and self-sufficient

⁷⁵ For evidence of Eckhart's use of Augustine, Aristotle and Thomas as sources see the footnotes to pp.45-70 in *Teacher and Preacher* (pp.131-136). Eckhart's first term as magister was in 1302 when he wrote his *Parisian Questions*. He then returned on May 14th 1311, as McGinn says, 'the General Chapter held at Naples posted him back to Paris for a second stint as *magister* – a rare privilege, hitherto granted only to Thomas Aquinas. Eckhart spent two academic years at Paris (autumn 1311 to summer 1313).' (2001), pp.4-9.

⁷⁶ According at least to the reading of Thomas through the 20th century Thomist revival. See for instance the treatment of Thomas's 'five ways', arguments taken from Aristotle's concept of the Prime Mover, by Herbert McCabe, who states: "We should...be misled if we took it that his [Thomas's] arguments for the existence of God start from a 'nominal definition' of God, as though he said: 'This is what people use the word 'God' to mean, this is how we can at least pick out God from other things, now let us see if there is one.' It is, to my mind, of the greatest importance that his arguments *end* with, but certainly do not *begin* with: 'and this is what people call "God".' The arguments do not presuppose any view of the nature of God, they simply begin with philosophical puzzles arising from features of the world that we understand and take us to what we do not understand. They start with questions we can answer and lead us to a question we cannot answer...in this case we know that we cannot give the answer for that would be to know God's nature which is beyond the margins of our ways of grasping meanings." Herbert McCabe, "The Logic of Mysticism", in Martin Warner ed., *Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) p.48.

⁷⁷ David Knowles rightly points to the Pseudo Dionysian legacy in this regard. He notes the far-reaching effect of Dionysian theology in the Middle Ages, which "accepted...many of the characteristic doctrines of Neoplatonism. God is above all attributes and qualities, even above Being itself, and to attain to a true expression of what He is we have to pass through assertion and denial to a re-assertion at a level above all that we can know or comprehend". (David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1962) pp.55-8). This cycle of assertion, denial and re-assertion above denial is, as Denys Turner points out, the cycle of cataphasis, apophasis which resolves not in the final apophatic denial, but in the denial of apophaticism, the negation of negation. "Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002) pp.11-34 (pp.19-20).

existence is identified as a principle undergirding the existence of all things and upon which all things subsequently depend. While these statements do in one sense refer to things that are true about God, the primordial structuring principles of all reality which they signify are not indicated in the normal manner of human speech, they are signified apophatically. As with Thomas Aquinas and in accord with the Dionysian cycle of cataphasis-apophasis which transcends itself through the negation of negation, we find that these statements about God's essence are simultaneously apophatic statements about the quality of creaturely knowledge and language.

In a very real sense then, the apophatic affirmations of God's necessary existence and the subsequent synonymy between his existence and essence are principles which determine the rest of speech, since all existing things depend upon this necessary and apophatically signified reality for their own existence. It is not simply speech which is negated through apophasis however, nor is it knowledge alone. The apophatic affirmation of God's ultimate somethingness and the identification of all things apart from this as nothing, is a statement about the ontological status of creaturely being just as much as it is a statement about the status of speech or understanding.⁷⁸ Apophasis therefore points to God as the principle which determines the truth value of speech and defines the real somethingness of existence, since dependence upon God is the causal structure within which both existence and understanding, and therefore also speech, become possible.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ This is perhaps an obvious point, since speech and thought are themselves events within the ontological reality of human existence, but the ontological, rather than just the hermeneutic, nature of what is negated through apophasis is not always considered. A good example of this can be found in Rik Van Nieuwenhove, *Jan van Ruusbroec, Mystical Theologian of the Trinity* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). Nieuwenhove criticises Denys Turner's treatment of apophasis in *The Darkness of God*. Turner, suggests Nieuwenhove, makes apophasis into a purely hermeneutic category separate from the ontological reality of God. He states, 'Turner's interpretation seems to open up a reductionism of its own: mystical theology ends up revealing something about the limitations of our language, rather than revealing something of God and his relation to the world.' p.36.

⁷⁹ Bruce Milem points this out in his examination of the self-referential quality of Eckhart's preaching style, where the sermons indicate their own status as created events. He shows this with Eckhart's

As we have seen, distinction between perfections cannot be applied to God, since he possesses all perfections essentially. The negation of human speech which signifies God in a creaturely way does not however negate the reality of perfections. Instead, perfections continue to exist indistinctly in God's essence. God still possesses perfections in a certain sense, but only when we view his possession of perfection apophatically, that is, from the point of view of God himself – from eternity – rather than from a creaturely point of view. Eckhart is therefore able to state:

that 'knowledge, goodness, and the like, which are in the other genera of accidents' are not distinguished by opposition to substance because the genera by reason of which they were distinguished from substance are absorbed into substance so that it serves in place of the genera for all of them. Hence it is clear, secondly, that knowledge in the Godhead is substance whereas in us it is a quality. And it is evident, thirdly, that just as the same thing in us makes us wise and that very thing and not another makes us like to and in possession of this quality, so in the Godhead the Father knows by means of the same thing by which he is and by which he is God, namely, his substance. The same is true of the Son and Holy Spirit. Therefore, knowledge and substance in God belong to a single mental category, which is the idea of substance in both cases, just as in us knowledge and quality are of one mental category.⁸⁰

We see here the same identification of essence as that which absorbs the distinct categories of perfection, accident and, in this case, genera as we saw above. But Eckhart

sermons when he considers their self-referential quality, identifying themselves as speech events in time, dependent upon the God about whose simultaneous immanence and transcendence they try to speak about. *The Unspoken Word, Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart's German Sermons* (Washington: CUA Press, 2002), pp.149-59.

⁸⁰ *In Ex.* n.68-9, p.66. See also n.62, p.64.

also suggests here that the essence then acts as the genera or category which contains united in itself all accidents, perfections and genera which are negated for the sake of speaking truthfully about God as he is in himself. Eckhart therefore states that God's substance (here synonymous with Essence) is the same as knowledge in the Godhead, whereas in us it is an additional quality or accident which actualises some potentiality within us. Still using *in divinis* (Godhead) as a term signifying God's wholeness and including the Trinity within it, Eckhart adds to what we saw in his discussion of perfections earlier in the *Commentary on Exodus*, by considering how these perfections relate to the Trinity. In direct contrast to Caputo's suggestion that the Trinity is an attribute absorbed into the Godhead, Eckhart here states that the Trinity possesses the same perfections as the essence and that each person of the Trinity possesses these perfections through their mutual essence or unity. If we view this in terms of our reading of apophasis, we can see that it is because God is essence, or rather, because he necessarily exists and is the self-sufficient cause of creation, that the Trinity possesses perfection through its substance. The Trinity, like the essence, does not have qualities added to it, and neither is it a quality or property of the essence itself. Rather, the Trinity is shown to be identical with the essence in terms of its reception of perfections, since the Trinity, as we shall see in chapter 2, is the self-expression of the same God who remains, as it were, unexpressed and indistinct in his essence.

The purpose of bringing out this trinitarian teaching in relation to the perfections in God is to show quite clearly that the negation of creaturely categories of perfection does not leave us with nothing, quite the opposite in fact, because the negation of negation is really the negation of nothing. It therefore leaves us quite literally with everything, since the negation of negation is the highest form of affirmative speech which we can apply to God who is existence itself and through whom all things "live

and move and have their being” (Acts 17:29)’.⁸¹ Eckhart makes this point in a passage on the negation of negation, where he refers to the ‘ego sum qui sum’ as the reflexive returning of the subject upon the predicate in precisely the same way as he does in the *Commentary* in n.16, which as we shall see in 2b, is concerned with the emergence of the Trinity in the Godhead through the boiling up (*bullitio*) and boiling over (*ebullitio*) of the divine life. For now we shall only consider the passage from n.74:

He says, ‘I am who am,’ because he is nothing else but pure existence. The conclusion is that the affirmation that consists in the existence and identity of the terms properly belongs to God...Everything that is less than God, since it is less than existence, is [both] being and nonbeing, and some kind of existence is denied to it since it is below and less than existence. And so negation is a part of it. But to existence itself no existence is denied, just as to the genus animal no particular animal, such as lion, is denied. Therefore, no negation, nothing negative, belongs to God, except for the negation of negation which is what the One signifies when expressed negatively. ‘God is one’ (Dt. 6:4; Ga. 3:20). The negation of negation is the purest and fullest affirmation – ‘I am who am.’ It returns upon itself ‘with a full return’; it rests upon itself, and through itself it is Existence Itself. So no negation belongs to God – ‘He cannot deny himself’ (2 Tm. 2:13). Existence cannot deny that it is Existence Itself: ‘Nothing abandons itself.’ Nor can it deny itself to anything, according to the maxim ‘The First is rich in itself.’ Further it cannot deny anything, according to the text ‘He works all in all’ (1 Co. 12:6). He says ‘in all’ because he denies it to none; he says ‘all’ because he denies none. Just as nothing is denied to Existence Itself, so too

⁸¹ See *In Ex.*, n.40, p.55.

existence denies itself in nothing ('It cannot deny itself') and denies nothing. It accepts and gives freely.⁸²

In this passage Eckhart specifically identifies the negation of negation with Exodus 3:14. The Exodus passage and the apophatic method both affirm the same synonymy between God's existence and essence. He also plays upon the double meaning of *nihil negatum* as both affirmative and negative, signifying God's complete distinction from what is not, and his absolute connectedness with everything that is and which receives existence from God who, as existence itself is completely distinct from nothing and non-existence. The final section of the paragraph can therefore be read as an apophatic double entendre encompassing negations of nothings and non-existence and affirmations of actual existence which comes from God and is identical with God who is existence itself.⁸³ Creatures are also defined as both 'being and nonbeing,' depending upon God for the reception of their existence, but also possessing some kind of nothingness by virtue of existing in the multiplicity of creation. The negation in apophasis therefore refers only to this aspect of nothingness, which exists in creatures but not in God, and is thus necessarily negated from him. There is also however a second sense of necessity which appears in this passage. God is necessarily existent as we have already seen, but as existence itself, he cannot deny himself to anything that exists. Or rather, he *has not* denied himself from existing things, as shown through the fact that they exist. Eckhart states this both affirmatively, 'Nor can it deny itself to anything, according to the maxim "The First is rich in itself",' and negatively, 'Just as nothing is denied in Existence Itself, so too existence denies itself in nothing ("It cannot

⁸² *In Ex.* n.74, p.68.

⁸³ "Iterum etiam nihil negare potest, secundum illud: 'operatur omnia in omnibus', 1 Cor. 12. 'In omnibus' inquit, quia nulli negat; 'omnia' ait, quia nihil negat. Sicut ergo ipsi esse nihil negatum est, sic et ipsum esse nulli se negat – 'se ipsum negare non potest' – et nihil negat. Gratis accipit, gratis dat." *In Ex.*, n.74 (LW II, p.78, 4-7).

deny itself’).’ God therefore necessarily gives himself to creatures freely, or in other words, everything that exists and that is not nothing therefore receives its existence and particularity from God. As we shall see in the following chapters, the freedom in which God chooses to grant existence to everything that is, is the same as the bestowal of grace or the giving of gift, which, in the passage above, defines the freedom of God’s own activity and existence, and which also defines God’s triune life and the truest activity and existence of the soul which mirrors the relational identity of the Trinity.

Concluding Remarks for Chapter 1

Eckhart’s apophaticism in the *Commentary on Exodus* gives us an understanding of the different ways in which we can truthfully use language to talk about God and creatures. But it is not a purely ‘negative’ theology in the sense that it leaves us with nothing; it is not, in other words, some kind of atheism because it leaves us with reality as it actually is, where God is recognised as connected to everything that exists. God is not himself apophatic, he does not contain negation but is the negation of negation – he is absolutely existing, and is existence itself. Negation that does not negate itself and become affirmation is therefore an entirely human category, since only creatures are made up of both somethingness and nothingness, a fact which we shall see in chapter 2, is presented by Eckhart in accordance with the Christian teaching of *creatio ex nihilo*. For Eckhart, true speech about God begins with the apophatic affirmation; that God exists in the way that he does and not in the way the human soul might falsely imagine him to exist. Apophasis therefore functions in Eckhart’s theology as a way of speaking and a way of knowing which de-centres the soul’s self-focus and creatureliness in her approach to God and acknowledges God as he actually is in relation to the soul that he creates, sustains and fulfils. By using the principle of negation as a form of affirmation Eckhart

therefore ensures that the soul's habits of speech, thought and action, which represent, inform and structure her perspective and being, are rooted in what is actually true about God and about reality. Negation thus provides the soul with the possibility of a real vocabulary and a real knowledge because it points out what is not real – that is, anything which does not acknowledge, or arise from the fact of God's necessary existence.

We have seen from this chapter that for Eckhart negation is a necessary habit to employ in human speech and human thought if the God whom we seek to know, and about whom we wish to speak, is to truly be God. It is only when analogical speech incorporates apophasis that it says things which are true about God, since the apophatic acknowledges the status of the soul (and of creation) in relation to the creator she seeks to know. For Eckhart negation is the principle by which we can avoid the mistake of replacing God with an idol in the way we speak, think, act and perceive. Apophasis ultimately ensures that God, with whom the soul has a relationship and whom she can identify as the source of her existence and identity, is truly God. Allowing God to be himself, and engaging with him as he actually is in his relationship with the human soul, is the imperative which Eckhart seeks to imbue in the hearts of all whom he addressed in his works. As he states in Pr. 5b: 'My dear friend, what harm can it do you to do God the favour of letting Him be God in you?'⁸⁴ In direct contrast to Caputo's article cited at the beginning of this chapter, Eckhart's apophasis is not therefore in any sense part of a 'mystical atheism' that negates the Trinity.⁸⁵ Instead, the apophatic can be meaningfully thought of as a negation of atheism and Eckhart's theology can be viewed in one sense as a continual attempt to identify and respond to the ways in which human beings deny God in their thoughts, words and deeds. To understand more fully what Eckhart thinks

⁸⁴ Pr. 5b, p.110.

⁸⁵ Caputo (1978) pp.211-2.

about this God, we must turn to consider in greater depth how the apophatic affirmation leaves space for a real discussion of God's triune existence, since the Trinity is in no way the same kind of thing as the creaturely distinctions which are erroneously applied to God and negated through apophasis.

Chapter 2

‘Trinity! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness!’

Introduction: Letting God be Himself

In this chapter I aim to demonstrate that Eckhart does not subordinate the Trinity to the essence, which can now be viewed in light of the discussion from chapter 1. A proper understanding of essence and Trinity, I shall suggest, is dialectical, where each is defined in terms of the other and together they form a complete expression of what God is. The first part of the chapter, 2a, will consider how Eckhart shows this by placing ‘relation’ alongside essence as a real category in the Godhead. One unusual implication of this is that it could appear to imply that essence and relation are somehow two ‘parts’ of God, distinct from one another. The next two sections of this chapter should help to remove this sense of distinction between the essence and the persons of the Trinity. The first (2b) is on the *bullitio* and *ebullitio* dynamic and the second (2c) presents Eckhart’s novel understanding of how potentiality and actuality apply to God’s essence and persons in eternity. Both of these ways of speaking about God, 2b and 2c, appear in the *Commentary on Exodus* and as such it is reasonable to read them alongside and in accord with Eckhart’s teaching on relation seen in 2a. These three examples presented in this chapter are not the only ways in which Eckhart talks about the Trinity, but they are frequently connected to each other, especially in the Latin texts. They also combine well to give a strong sense of the dynamism of God’s life as Eckhart perceives it, a dynamism that is not conveyed so clearly by each alone and where a reading which combines the three is in accord with Eckhart’s own intention in his exegesis. As he says in the *Commentary on John*:

Please note that the preceding words have been interpreted in many ways so that the reader can freely take now one and now the other as it seems useful to him. I use the same method of multiple exposition in my many commentaries.⁸⁶

While he is speaking here about numerous interpretations of single passages of scripture (in this case, 'In the beginning was the Word'), this principle applies just as much to his approach to metaphysics from across his works. To a certain extent this attitude might explain the variety of imagery Eckhart uses and why he does not seem to offer concern at any point that what he says in one work might contradict his own teaching in another work. This interesting insight Eckhart offers into his method accords well with a description of metaphysics offered by Austin Farrer in the 20th century. Farrer suggests that real metaphysics depends upon the metaphysician allowing their encounter with the other, the object of their attention (or their faith), to determine their choice of terminology rather than clinging to particular concepts or words and fit the other into these conceptual or linguistic preconditions. At each point, the metaphysician should identify the falsehood in the language chosen, seek better terms, and in the process be drawn deeper and deeper into the attempt to describe and encounter that which ever more absorbs their attention and shapes their life.⁸⁷ Only then does the metaphysician give real respect to the object of their enquiry, to the God of their faith. It is only by allowing God – or the other more generally – to break down the concepts the soul houses him within, that she allows him to be himself and only if she lets him be himself can she have a real relationship with him. As Farrer says:

⁸⁶ *In Ioh.*, n.39, p.135.

⁸⁷ Austin Farrer, *The Bampton Lectures for 1948: The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), p.68.

[I]f our experiencing of things and persons is limited to the trying on them of pre-arranged tests devised by ourselves, full respect for their being is excluded from the first. If we respect any being, we allow it to make its own impressions, and, as it were, to formulate its own claims upon us. Just as a man confessing his sins cannot choose what he will confess, and what he will hide, but must confess all, because he is not making a judgment, but submitting to judgment: so a man who feels respect for any being cannot choose what he will explore and what ignore in the object of respect, but must give to his thoughts the most self-denying adaptability, ready to apply or improvise whatever thought-forms the nature of the object may require, if the aspects it insists on presenting are to be appreciated. He cannot even be content to appreciate every given aspect; he will endeavour to integrate the aspects in the unity of their being, for it is being, not the abstracted aspects of being, which is properly to be revered.⁸⁸

This is akin to what I am suggesting we should acknowledge in our reading of Eckhart if we are to understand why the Trinity is not subordinated to the essence and from that grasp what Eckhart thinks about the soul's identity in her relationship with God. It is only by recognising how God's identity makes him available for a relationship with the soul through the eternal act of triune self-expression, creation and salvation, that we can properly grasp what, for Eckhart, the soul *is* in her relationship with God. Moreover we can then identify the transformative effect that this relationship has upon her being and understanding when she chooses to recognise her own self and God for what they truly are. It is not therefore Eckhart's words themselves which house the truth about God and convey it to his congregations, to the novices, to his confreres or to his spiritual

⁸⁸ Farrer, pp.66-7.

directees.⁸⁹ Rather, the speech of Eckhart's sermons and the words of his scholastic works and German tractates are intended to prompt the believer to enter properly into a *relationship* with the Christian God.⁹⁰ More than anything else, Eckhart wants his readers to listen to God's Word. This requires them to identify the habits of thought and action which prevent them from knowing God as he is in himself; as he is signified through apophasis which does not negate but actually makes possible a true understanding of his triune life:

There are three things that prevent us from hearing the eternal Word. The first is corporeality, the second is multiplicity, the third is temporality. If a man had transcended these three things, he would dwell in eternity, he would dwell in the spirit, he would dwell in unity and in the desert – and there he would hear the eternal Word.⁹¹

We have already seen one sense in which Eckhart believes these blockades of corporeality, multiplicity and temporality are overcome in the soul's knowing: through habitually viewing God apophatically, allowing him to be himself beyond these creaturely categories. As we shall see below, Eckhart seeks to show how the apophatic 'allowing God to be himself' transposes into the practice of detachment which identifies

⁸⁹ For information on Eckhart's responsibilities as a Dominican in the various roles he fulfilled throughout his life see Walter Senner O.P., "Meister Eckhart's Life, Training, Career, and Trial," in *Companion to Eckhart* Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), pp.7-84 (pp.11-44).

⁹⁰ A good example of Eckhart's commitment to the Christian teaching on salvation and the incarnation of salvation is Pr. 78, p.175. Eckhart here distinguishes himself slightly from Bede's position, suggesting that the incarnation is simply part of God's entire activity, directed towards uniting humanity, and creation, with himself. It is not something that begins in the incarnation, but the incarnation is itself an expression (in time) of this same eternal reality that defines God's entire activity and self-expression: his desire for distinct self-expression through relation, with himself and with creation which is part of this same self-expressive act of triune boiling up and over, as we shall see in this section.

⁹¹ Pr. 12, p.295.

what the soul is in her union with God, whose nature is detachment.⁹² Apophasis is not therefore a ‘flight out of history and the flesh’.⁹³ Instead, it identifies what the soul is in time where she must journey towards her beatitude and ‘unlearn’, or ‘unknow’ the habits of attachment or of creaturely understanding which prevent God from being himself and thus prevent the soul from being herself most fully – that is, as she is in her relationship with God, since ‘she is far more with what is His than with her own, and so too her bliss is more dependent on His action than on her own’.⁹⁴

2a. Essence and Relation

As I stated in chapter 1, Eckhart does not subordinate the Trinity to the essence in his understanding of God, except insofar as the two are placed in an order for the sake of presenting an understanding of God according to human logic which Eckhart still deliberately subverts to prevent us from believing that our linear logic and static verbal signification of God actually represent God truly.⁹⁵ In this first part of chapter 2 we will explore more closely Eckhart’s teaching in the *Commentary on Exodus* on the inappropriateness of applying names to God. We will then look at how Eckhart employs the term ‘relation’ (*relationis*) to signify the presence of the Trinity in the Godhead without contradicting his negation of creaturely signification from God.

In his exegesis of Exodus 15:3, where Eckhart is specifically concerned with how we use names to signify God, he once again denies that God can have perfections or attributes applied to him.⁹⁶ He divides this discussion into four sections: first, ‘what

⁹² For Eckhart on God’s nature as detachment, see *On Detachment*, p.569.

⁹³ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004) p.1.

⁹⁴ Pr. 102, p.44.

⁹⁵ This is clear in his apophatic style which is deliberately self-subverting, and also the use of language in the German sermons, which, through the use of paradox, chiasmus, hyperbole and various other poetic effects, creates images, breaks through them and rebuilds them to mean something beyond what they previously signified. For an analysis of this use of language in the German works see Tobin, pp.147-83.

⁹⁶ *In Ex.*, n.28-32, p.50.

some philosophers and Jewish authors think of this question and of the attributes which name God.’ Second, ‘a brief summary of what Catholic writers think of these predications or names.’ Third, ‘why do Boethius and the theologians generally teach that only two kinds of categories, substance and relation, can be used of divinity?’ and fourth, a discussion of the name ‘Tetragrammaton’.⁹⁷ The first section (n.34-53) is distinctly apophatic in nature and considers God’s complete separateness from creaturely perfections and signification:

all positive statements about God are improper expressions, since they posit nothing in him. To posit nothing in something and still to speak positively about it is unsuitable, improper, and not in keeping with the truth. Hence all things that are positively said of God, even though they are perfections in us, are no longer so in God and are not more perfect than their opposites.⁹⁸

Eckhart here agrees with the view of Rabbi Moses Maimonides. However, as Lossky points out, he brings to his apophatic signification of God’s essential and self-sufficient existence a dimension of metaphysics which his Jewish (and Muslim) sources do not use – the doctrine of the Trinity.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *In Ex.*, n.34, p.53. This fourth section actually forms his Exegesis on Ex. 20:7 and I will not be considering it in this thesis.

⁹⁸ *In Ex.*, n.44, p.56.

⁹⁹ “A present c’est la Monade elle-même qui se nomme, en affirmant son identité dans un ‘retour complet’. Nous avons eu l’occasion de constater que cette réflexion sur soi-même, dans l’affirmation redoublée de *Ego sum qui sum*, était rapprochée par Eckhart de la maxime ‘hermétique’ sur la monade engendrant la monade et réfléchissant sur elle-même son ardeur. Le texte de l’Exode recevait ainsi un sens trinitaire qu’il ne pouvait avoir pour ‘Raby Moïses’.” Lossky, *Théologie Négative et Connaissance de Dieu* (1960), p.97. Lossky here refers to the passage from *In Ex.* n. 16 (p.46), when Eckhart uses the *bullitio* and *ebullitio* image to speak about the reflexive return of existence, or the monad, upon itself, where the monad reflects back upon itself with love or ardent desire.

Eckhart concludes the first part of his exegesis of Exodus 15:3 by drawing upon what he considers to be the root of Rabbi Moses' argument about God's separateness from creation or multiplicity:

The universal rule is that in God there neither is nor can be any addition of dispositions whatever. But all affirmative names predicate or imply some addition which they posit about God; otherwise they would not be positive expressions. Therefore, nothing affirmative is properly and aptly said about God, but only unsuitably said.¹⁰⁰

On the basis of this total denial of the value of affirmative speech about God, Eckhart constructs seven proofs that demonstrate God's total separateness from creaturely distinction, disposition, or multiplicity. In order they seek to demonstrate: 1. God's simplicity,¹⁰¹ 2. God's fullness,¹⁰² 3. That God possesses no disposition or accident and cannot therefore be a subject dependent upon something exterior to himself,¹⁰³ 4. God's oneness and infinity,¹⁰⁴ 5. his unity,¹⁰⁵ 6. That since God is existence and everything apart from God is nothing, he cannot therefore possess disposition as a medium between him and creatures,¹⁰⁶ and 7. (this proof leads on from 6) that one of two things cannot be a medium between the two, since it cannot be in between the two and at the extreme.¹⁰⁷ Eckhart then adds an 8th proof of his own, where he identifies multiplicity or number – and thus also accidents or dispositions – as a sign of a defect, that is, a sign of

¹⁰⁰ *In Ex.*, n.47, p.58.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, n.48.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, n.49.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* n.50, pp.58-9.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.59.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

a subject's dependence upon something exterior to itself for the actualising of its potentiality: 'dispositions and numbers...in created things are not perfections, but are the remedies and reinforcements of the imperfection and defect of some act of existence.'¹⁰⁸ He then states that God possesses no multiplicity or number since he is necessarily his own sufficiency and thus not in any sense defective.¹⁰⁹ At this stage of Eckhart's argument, these eight proofs really put the final nail in the coffin for cataphatic speech about God in this part of the *Commentary on Exodus*, as Eckhart states:

Therefore, the root and ground of what went before is evident and also how all affirmations or positive names in no way belong to God and how there is no disposition at all in him, either substantial or accidental, even those that are perfections in us, such as power, wisdom, life, and the like. Hence some wise man said that God is 'powerful in his substance, alive in his substance,' intelligent in his substance and the like. For this reason the saints commonly said that God's greatness is his existence and his knowledge is his existence, and the same of the other attributes. The reason is that he is powerful, lives, is wise, and the like by his very substance.¹¹⁰

We have here a restatement of the same argument seen in the *Commentary* in chapter 1 above, where the nature of God's essential existence excludes from him all creaturely attributes. Our signification of God must therefore be apophatic if it is to speak truthfully of him. Eckhart goes on to consider what Christian teachers say on this topic. This follows in a similar vein to the first part of the exegesis of Exodus 15:3 and

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, n.51, p.59.

¹⁰⁹ 'This [disposition, multiplicity or number] does not pertain to God, both because he is existence, because he is Existence Itself (Ex. 3), and because that is the First. "The First is rich in itself".' *In Ex.*, n. 51, p.59.

¹¹⁰ *In Ex.*, n.53, p.60.

Eckhart draws upon, amongst others, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, to further deny that we can apply categories or genera of properties to God.¹¹¹ Having considered God primarily in terms of the apophatic signification of his essence, Eckhart then makes an interesting shift in his argument. In the third section of his exegesis of Exodus 15:3, he identifies relation as a category which is not absorbed into essence (or substance, as it is referred to in the passage above). This simple distinction opens up the possibility for Eckhart's discussion of the Trinity in the Godhead which here receives its longest treatment in the *Commentary* so far.

By examining how Eckhart understands the category of relation, we can see quite plainly that, in this text at least, he is fundamentally *not* subordinating the Trinity to the essence in the Godhead. Eckhart states:

From what went before, where we said that God is and does all things by his substance, it is clear that in him there is only one category, namely the substance by which he exists, is powerful, wise, good, and the like. In creatures these things belong to the nine categories of accident. But then comes the question how Augustine, Boethius, and the saints and teachers in harmony say that there are two categories, substance and relation, in the Godhead. The response is from what was noted above. We said that we speak in one way about beings and things, in another way about categories, and also that the truth of a predication corresponds first and in itself not so much to the things as to the conceptions of things and the ways of signifying. Relation, even though it is an accident, still does not signify in the manner of an accident, because it does not do so as inhering in a subject or substance. You can see an example in the case of

¹¹¹ *In Ex.*, n.54, p.60. The argument from Christian authors runs from n.54-61.

whiteness and the white thing. Although whiteness exists in a subject and is an accident or something inhering in a subject, the term does not signify whiteness as something inhering. Just as the word ‘white’ signifies the quality alone (as does ‘whiteness’), it co-signifies or connotes the subject also, and for this reason signifies itself as an accident and something inhering.¹¹²

Relation (*relationis*) Eckhart says here, exists alongside essence, again referred to here as substance (*substantiae*), in the Godhead (*in divinis*).¹¹³ Other perfections, dispositions, accidents and genera are all absorbed into the unity of the essence which is existence itself and which thus causes the distinct existence of everything that is absorbed into its indistinction. As such, the essence cannot contain the distinct existence (which is an effect) of any of these things in themselves, since it is the prior cause of their existence and distinction.¹¹⁴ Eckhart points out above that most categories of accident depend upon the existence of a subject for their existence as accidents of that subject – as we saw in chapter 1.¹¹⁵ This is not the case for relation, which does not signify in such a way that it inheres in a subject but instead,

by reason of its genus and the fact that it is a relation, relation posits nothing at all in the subject and does not say that anything exists or inheres [i.e. that the subject has particular accidents], but it posits that the thing that exists comes from another and is directed to another, that it originates there and dies there, and that it is ‘simultaneous in time nature and intellect’ with, in, and through that thing. Because relation as such is nothing positive in a subject, and because it

¹¹² *In Ex.*, n.62, p.64.

¹¹³ *In Ex.*, n.62, (LW II, p.67, 5).

¹¹⁴ This is the same reasoning we saw in *Q. Par. I* when Eckhart states: ‘a principle is never the same as that which follows from a principle, as a point is never a line.’ p.48.

¹¹⁵ See note 73.

signifies only what was said and in that way (this is true of relation alone among the nine categories), and because as such it is not the principle of any of the subject's operations (for God is wise, good, almighty, and the like, by reason of his substance, but by his substance is not related to any other thing whatsoever), hence relation perdures in the Godhead according to the mode of signifying and predicating which constitutes its own genus as a category. It is different with all the other eight kinds of accident, as is evident to one who considers them. Therefore, this is the reason why every kind of accident except for relation is absorbed into the substance in God.¹¹⁶

In this passage we see that, unlike other categories of accident which signify something inhering in a subject and actualising the subject's potentiality for the possession of that accident or perfection, relation signifies a kind of 'movement' between subjects. For Eckhart relation is not therefore like other categories of accident which are absorbed into the essence. These categories depend upon a substance for their inhering existence, but relation, alone amongst the categories, simply signifies something to do with the movement of substance, either towards another substance – one creature relating to another, where the two have separate substances – or towards itself, as is the case with God's substance.¹¹⁷ Eckhart thus distinguishes relation from the other categories of perfection, which have inhering existence, by showing that relation receives its genus as a category by ordering a subject to its opposite:

Relation alone does not receive its genus as a category from a subject nor through ordering to a subject, but rather to its opposite. For this reason relation

¹¹⁶ *In Ex.*, n.64, p.64-5.

¹¹⁷ *In Ex.*, n.16 p.46.

is the only kind of category that is not absorbed into substance in the Godhead, but it remains as it were standing on the outside.¹¹⁸

Eckhart here makes two points significant for my argument about the Trinity. First, as I have already said, he identifies relation as a category which exists outside of essence in God and second, he places these two categories, essence and relation alongside each other within the Godhead (*in divinis*), a term which he uses once again as an all-encompassing term for the whole of God.¹¹⁹ By employing the category of relation he distinguishes his exegesis of Exodus 15:3 from that of Moses Maimonides who emphasises the total apophatic separation of the *unum* from all categories of accident, including relation. As we saw in chapter 1, Eckhart's apophasis does not leave us with nothing, but with everything, or with the divine 'somethingness',¹²⁰ which is neither this nor that ('non esset haec vel illa').¹²¹ In this section of the *Commentary* Eckhart places relation *within* the sphere of apophatic signification by, as Markus Enders suggests, employing the category of relation 'to safeguard God's Trinitarian mode of Being'.¹²²

Eckhart then goes on, once again, to show the difference between how creatures have substance and perfections and how God's essence/substance contains his perfections, however, this time he reveals that by relation, he is in fact talking about the

¹¹⁸ *In Ex.*, n.65, p.65.

¹¹⁹ He then reinforces this point again, stating, 'every accidental form of category by its very idea is absorbed into substance except for the idea proper to relation (as has been said) because it does not receive this idea from a subject.' *In Ex.*, n.67, p.66.

¹²⁰ The term 'somethingness' is sufficiently open for Eckhart that it signifies God's essential existence apart from all creaturely something's which he describes as this or that 'esset haec vel illa' (*In Ex.*, n.57 (LW II, p.63, 5)) or 'esse hoc vel hoc' (e.g. *In Ion.*, n.44 (LW III p.36, 9)) in the Latin and 'diz und daz' (e.g. Pr. 77 (DW III p.336, 2-6)) or 'daz und daz' (e.g. Pr. 71 (DW III p.215, 1)) in MHG. As McGinn points out, in a footnote on *In Ioh.*, 'The difference between the simple existence (*esse simpliciter*) of God and the limited particular existence (*esse hoc et hoc*) of any created thing is fundamental to Eckhart's thought.' *Essential Eckhart*, note 59, p.329.

¹²¹ *In Ex.*, n.57 (LW II, p.63, 5).

¹²² Enders, p.385.

Trinity.¹²³ He suggests that the persons of the Trinity have perfections, in this case *knowledge*, according to their self-sufficient essence, not according to their distinct personhood. The Trinity is here acknowledged in its position within the Godhead because the category of relation, which defines the connection between the persons of the Trinity, is equal with essence, not absorbed into it or subordinate to it. Eckhart makes this clear by considering how relation exists as a genus within the Godhead:

It is different with Paternity and similar relations in the Godhead, for the idea of substance and that of relation are not the same in the way that the ideas of knowledge and quality are in us. The relation in God keeps the genus of relation and is different from the idea of substance, just as in us the ideas of quality and of substance are different. Therefore, God is not simply and by the same idea God the Father and God as substance, but he is God as substance by one idea and Father by another. I say that different ideas are distinguished according to different genera, not only in the way species is distinguished from genus (e.g., knowledge from quality) where the difference is only imperfect. Further (and ingeniously) note that the idea of relation is a genus, but since it is not existence or inhering existence, as said above, it creates no distinction of existence and essence, because insofar as it is a relation it does not regard existence, essence, or substance, but rather what is totally opposite to itself. For this reason the existence of the Father and that of the essence are one in the Godhead, and the same is true of the relations that distinguish the persons of the Son and Holy

¹²³ See note 80.

Spirit. These relations are not directed to existence; they distinguish neither substance nor existence, but the mutually opposed persons.¹²⁴

Relation here retains its status as genus within the Godhead, and is separate from substance/essence. God is therefore Father and essence by two different *ideas*. However, this difference is not like the difference between qualities or dispositions that we have already seen Eckhart negate from God. It is instead a difference that is sustained within apophatic discourse. It is, in other words, something true about God which cannot be negated but which is signified in the apophatic process which negates the limitations of human signification whilst still gesturing beyond itself towards God as that which he is. The ‘mutually opposed persons’ are therefore as real a feature of God’s eternal existence as God’s essence is. Since Eckhart utterly denies that God possesses multiplicity or distinction in the creaturely sense, yet affirms the presence of Trinity as relation in the Godhead, the distinction of the persons must be a different kind of distinction from that of creaturely distinction, a distinction, but not a multiplicity. Because relation is not a genus of accident in the sense that it indicates quality or property, but instead implies some kind of ‘flow of relation’,¹²⁵ it does not inhere upon existence, or create distinction between essence and existence. The apophatic signification of God’s essential existence can therefore, according to this definition of relation, co-exist alongside relation in the Godhead, since the presence of relation as a genus or category in the Godhead does not steer us away from the apophatic affirmation of God’s existence.¹²⁶ The Trinity, as we shall see more clearly in 2b and 2c, is

¹²⁴ *In Ex.*, n.70-1, pp.66-7.

¹²⁵ Speech about ‘motion’ or ‘flow’ in God is perhaps only possible in terms of relation, because Eckhart, Thomas and Aristotle would all be a little uncomfortable with the careless suggestion that God ‘moves’ like other things!

¹²⁶ As we shall see later, this has a tremendous effect upon Eckhart doctrine of creation, since it enables a transformed concept of ‘divine distinction’ whereby God has a kind of category within himself, relation,

therefore a divine category of distinction which exists beyond creaturely distinction and is thus signified through the same method of apophasis which negates human knowing whilst still signifying God. This argument about relation therefore shows that the Trinity exists in the same eternity as the essence. In his exegesis of John 1:1 Eckhart again makes this quite clear:

Here we must make special note of the fact that the intellect is completely and essentially intellect (totally pure understanding), especially in God, and perhaps in him alone insofar as he is the First Principle of all things. Reality and intellect are the same in him. Therefore, ‘the relations which accompany the activity of the intellect’ in the Godhead are real. And so ‘the Word,’ that is, the Son, ‘who proceeds in an intellectual way’ from the Father ‘is not a relation of reason alone, but a real relation, because intellect itself and idea’ are realities, or ‘are a single reality.’[Aquinas, *STh* Ia.28.1.ad 4] Thus Augustine says: ‘The realities that make us blessed...are the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’¹²⁷

Here Eckhart reaffirms the unity of being and understanding (reality and intellect) in God, i.e., the fact that God’s existence and knowledge are identical.¹²⁸ As we saw in chapter 1, this unity between being and knowing is identical with the negation of negation, which affirms God’s necessity. The difference here is that Eckhart affirms the ‘real relations in the Godhead’ alongside this same affirmation of the unity between reality and intellect. The relations of the Trinity, as we saw in the *Commentary on Exodus*, are therefore real relations, not ancillary properties which can be negated or

where the distinct persons exist eternally and, because of their existence, their self-expression and love of one another, creation itself is able to exist. See discussion below on Eckhart’s use of *bullitio* and *ebullitio* and what this means for creation.

¹²⁷ *In Ioh.*, n.34, p.133.

¹²⁸ As we saw in chapter 1, in *In Ex.* and in the *Op. tri.*, and in apparent contradiction with *Q. Par. I.*

absorbed. In the process of identifying different interpretations of ‘In the principle was the Word’, Eckhart therefore affirms the absoluteness of God’s triune being. As he states in the *Commentary on John* immediately before the passage just quoted:

There is still a fourth way to explain ‘In the principle was the Word,’ by noting that the Word, the Son in the Godhead, has four properties. First, that he is innermost – ‘Receive the innermost Word’ (Jm. 1:21). Second, that he is the Firstborn of the whole creation – ‘The image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of the whole creation’ (Col. 1:15). Third, that he is always being born and always has been born, as was explained above. Fourth, that he proceeds from the Father according to the intellect, just as the Holy Spirit proceeds according to love. This is what is said in this passage: The ‘in’ signifies the first property; ‘the principle’ signifies the second; ‘was’ indicates the third, because it is a substantive verb in the past imperfect; and ‘Word’ stands for the fourth, because the Word is the Idea.¹²⁹

The first of these points indicates that the Son is related to God as he is in himself, being innermost he ‘pertains to God and to divine things insofar as they are divine’.¹³⁰ The Son then is a real part of God’s immanent existence. The second point concerns how the Son is the ‘Word’ or ‘idea’ of God,¹³¹ and Eckhart here follows the Christian neoplatonic teaching that God creates through the Word, since the Word, or Son, is the exemplar of every creature according to whom all existence is patterned.¹³² The third

¹²⁹ *In Ioh.*, n.33, pp.132-3.

¹³⁰ *In Ioh.*, n.34, p.133.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² We will see this in greater detail in 2b, but one example of this teaching is sermon XLIX, n.506, p.235. This passage uses the metaphor of a painter setting something before an apprentice to copy. Eckhart uses the same painter metaphor in *In Ioh.*, when he states: “A fifth reason is that the Word itself, the exemplar

point here identified is one of the principle themes of his German sermons, that of the eternal birth of the Son in the Godhead.¹³³ This is significant, since it identifies the Son's birth as an eternal act thus showing how it is in fact part of the single reality which God eternally is in himself. The final point we saw above is that the Word proceeds from the Father according to the intellect, because it is the idea or exemplar according to which God creates. By identifying the Son or Word as proceeding according to intellect, the category of relation is again affirmed alongside the essence within the Godhead, not as something absorbed into it or surpassed by it.

We have seen from this section that in creatures the flow of relation occurs between two separate subjects and in creatures these subjects have a separate substance/essence from one another. In God the persons of the Trinity still have the flow of relation between one another, where the relating subject acknowledges the otherness of that to whom it relates (the Father acknowledges the Son as other than the Father by recognising him as begotten from the Father), but in this case the other to whom the subject relates shares the same essence and thus is not distinct from the subject in the way that creatures are distinct from one another. The relating subject in God therefore relates *to itself* and in so doing acknowledges the other as truly other, truly distinct, whilst also still sharing the same essence. The distinction between persons cannot therefore be validated in the creaturely terms of separateness between substances

of created things, is not something outside God towards which he looks, as in our case the figure on the wall is related to the painter who looks to its exemplar, but the Word is in the Father himself." (*In Ioh.*, n.41, p.136). He follows this passage in *In Ioh.* with an affirmation that Christ is innermost, suggesting that an exemplar or image that comes from what is inward is greater than an external image: "it is better to remember that an exemplar that is beheld from without is never the principle of the artist's work unless it comes with the idea of the inhering form. Otherwise, a dabbler could make a picture as well as an artist" (*In Ioh.*, n.41, p.136). This affirms that the Son, to function as the exemplar of creation, must exist *within* God, not as something *outside* of him. Despite existing in himself as Son and by inference, as Trinity, God still therefore maintains the same unity and self-sufficiency that we have seen in *In Ex.*, since the presence of the Son within, rather than outside the Godhead, means that God does not depend upon anything outside of himself to express himself as creator.

¹³³ See McGinn (2001), Ch. 4, pp.53-70. The birth of the Word will be the main focus of part of chapter 3. I will not therefore examine it here.

or between objects, since the persons who are distinct from one another, still have a mutual essence and are one God.¹³⁴ In God therefore, the category of relation signifies something true, but which is beyond the creaturely definition of distinction between two relating persons or things, since all creaturely categories of distinction are negated through apophasis, or rather, absorbed into the unity of the essence. God's relationality, or rather, the Trinity, is therefore signified in the same way as his essence, in the apophatic sphere of signification which points to the 'something' that exists beyond creaturely categories and causes them.

2b. *Bullitio* and *Ebullitio*

In Eckhart's theology, the terms *bullitio* and *ebullitio* form – along with *creatio* – the 'three stages of productive *exitus*' from the Godhead,¹³⁵ that is, three stages of God's active and creative self-expression as Trinity. This section will help to show how the essence and persons are actually equal to one another, not two separate 'parts' present in the Godhead. It will also identify some points about the nature of God's connection with creation which will be very important as we turn in chapter 3 to consider how what we have learned about the structure of God's existence and identity relates to the structure of the soul's existence and identity in detachment.

Eckhart makes it very clear that God, whose essence is his existence, cannot withhold himself from that which exists: 'Just as nothing is denied to Existence Itself, so too existence denies itself in nothing ("It cannot deny itself") and denies nothing. It accepts and gives freely.'¹³⁶ This view, that God necessarily gives himself to creatures, is already present in Eckhart's earliest text, the *Discourses of Instruction*, delivered to

¹³⁴ C.f. *In Ioh.*, n.6, p.124.

¹³⁵ McGinn (2001), p.72.

¹³⁶ See note 82.

the novices and confreres in Erfurt, between 1294 and 1298.¹³⁷ He states in the very first chapter, that God must necessarily give himself to a truly obedient soul:

Wherever a man in obedience goes out of his own and gives up what is his, in the same moment God must go in there, for when a man wants nothing for himself, God must want it equally as if for Himself. So in all things that I do I do not want for myself, God wants for me.¹³⁸

Here God enters the truly obedient soul which goes out of itself, but Eckhart then states even further, that God would not be God if he did not want for the soul everything that he wants for himself, no more or less.¹³⁹ God is thus incapable of not giving himself to the human soul which orientates itself towards him. While the *Discourses* are here concerned with human will and obedience, this necessary divine self-giving correlates with God's conferring of existence to things discussed in the *Commentary on Exodus*, since it is precisely God's giving of himself, his self-expression, whether through creating humanity or uniting himself to an obedient soul, that he cannot withhold from creation or from the soul. For Eckhart, the evidence of this necessity is the fact that God *has* given himself; he has created and has already granted salvation to humanity. Eckhart's suggestion that God necessarily gives himself does not undermine God's freedom, rather, it states that regardless of what God *might* be, revelation shows that God *is* related to creation. God must therefore communicate himself to creation because he has revealed himself to be self-communicative through creating the universe and saving humanity. If we do not recognise that God must be the way he has revealed

¹³⁷ Dagmar Gottschall, "Eckhart's German Works," in *Brill's Companion to Eckhart*, Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), p.146.

¹³⁸ *Discourses of Instruction*, p.486.

¹³⁹ *Discourses of Instruction*, p.486-7.

himself to be, then we are effectively questioning the authenticity of God's revelation. Apophasis and detachment both work to negate even the possibility of this questioning God's authenticity, since they are processes by which the soul re-orientates her knowing and being in such a way that the existence of the Christian God of revelation becomes a basic principle of the soul's existence and understanding. The necessity of divine self-communication which Eckhart speaks about, does not therefore undermine God's freedom, it accepts God's revelation. Importantly for us here, this validates the Trinity as something that must be true about God because God's self-expression is always triune, as we shall see from Eckhart's description of the *bullitio-ebullitio-creatio*. God's being himself and relating to creation and to the human soul thus depends upon his existence as Trinity, since it is only as Trinity that he expresses himself and has any kind of relationship with creation and with humanity.¹⁴⁰

In the *Commentary on Exodus* Eckhart states quite plainly that God as existence itself denies himself in nothing, he gives himself wholly, as existence, to everything that is and in that sense all things receive him fully. Unlike the *Discourses*, based on Cassian's *Collations* and intended to instruct novices and confreres,¹⁴¹ the *Commentary* – as one would expect from its scholastic genre which differs in structure and intent from the *Discourses* – aims to specifically outline the way in which God relates to creation, hence its deliberate and clear use of apophatic formulae in the language. Through apophatic signification Eckhart distinguishes between God's essence and persons with regards to the free giving of existence to creatures. He makes it clear that the conferring of existence is not done *by* the essence, even though the essence is existence itself, since the essence in and of itself does not act, generate or create. The

¹⁴⁰ I have tried to give a brief view of how God's freedom is not being questioned by Eckhart, despite his unusual teaching on divine necessity, however, it is a significant issue in Eckhart's theology and requires further examination in a future study.

¹⁴¹ McGinn (2001), p.4.

essence is still the cause of existence since, as we shall see in 2c, the essence is the power (*potentia*) of begetting in the Father, not the Father himself, yet it is still the Father who performs the act of begetting and the triune self-expression which enacts the creation of the universe from nothing.¹⁴² As we have seen, when Eckhart considers God's essence, he does so in a way that expresses God's necessity and self-sufficiency, the Trinity however is, for Eckhart, an expression of the fact that God is self-communicative and that his act of communication both creates the universe and points to his relation with creation:

Third, note that the repetition (namely, that it says 'I am who am') indicates the purity of affirmation excluding all negation from God. It also indicates a reflexive turning back of his existence into itself and upon itself and its dwelling and remaining fixed in itself. It further indicates a boiling or giving birth to itself – glowing in itself, and melting and boiling in and into itself, light that totally forces its whole being in light and into light and that is everywhere totally turned back and reflected upon itself, according to that saying of the sage, 'The monad gives birth to' (or gave birth to) 'the monad, and reflected love or ardent desire back upon itself.' Therefore John 1 says, 'In him was life' (Jn. 1:4). 'Life' expresses a type of pushing out' by which something swells up in itself and first breaks out totally in itself, each part into each part, before it pours itself forth and 'boils over' on the outside. This is why the emanation of the persons in the Godhead is prior ground of creation.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Eckhart makes this clear in *In Ex.* n.28 p.50-1. I will return to this passage in 2c, when we explore Eckhart's use of the terms potential and actual, or potency and act, in relation to God's essence and persons.

¹⁴³ *In Ex.*, n.16 p.46.

In this text Eckhart again uses the term *in divinis*.¹⁴⁴ It refers to the Godhead which is here shown to ‘contain’ the Trinity in itself but not in an order of priority with the monad (again a synonym for essence, signifying God’s unity or oneness). The lack of hierarchy between essence and Trinity here is clear, since the same statement ‘ego sum qui sum’ which apophatically signifies the essence as identical with God’s necessary and self-sufficient existence also signifies the reflexive turning of this existence – the essence – into itself, boiling up and over into the triune life and self-expression. The essence and Trinity are thus both signified in this single statement of Exodus 3:14 and *in divinis* therefore signifies the wholeness of God’s being, as non-hierarchical essence and persons.¹⁴⁵

Eckhart describes the nature of this Godhead with the *bullitio* and *ebullitio* imagery. The ‘ego sum qui sum’ of Exodus 3:14 is here taken as an expression of the reflexive intra-divine flow into, up and over from itself where the God’s essence turns in upon itself and boils up into the Trinity, relating to itself. In that self-knowing and self-loving or ‘ardent desiring’ of itself God’s triune category of divine distinction or personhood emerges and expresses itself. It overflows, swelling up and over from itself and from there flows into the act of creation. Creation which is itself an effect of God’s self-expression, therefore becomes a sign, not only of God’s necessity, as we saw earlier, since existing things point to existence itself as their cause, it is also a sign of the Trinity as the act which had to express itself if creation was to exist. We are therefore reminded again of the passage from the *Discourses* where God ‘*must* want for the soul everything that he wants for himself,’ since it is precisely as self-expressive act that God

¹⁴⁴ ‘Hinc est quod emanatio personarum in divinis ratio est et praevia creationis.’ *In Ex.*, n. 16, (LW II, p.22, 7-8).

¹⁴⁵ See note 20.

creates the soul and thus relates to her and therefore, inasmuch as the soul exists, she reveals that God is self-communicative, creative and relational.¹⁴⁶

This unity between the self-expression of the Trinity and the divine act of creation is consistently used in Eckhart's theology and it is worth considering one other instance where he makes the same point, in the *Commentary on John*, before going on to consider the *bullitio* and *ebullitio* in more detail:

God speaks once and for all, but two things are heard, as the Psalm says. Job declares, 'God speaks once and for all; he does not repeat the same message a second time' (Jb. 33:14), because by means of a single action he both generates the Son who is his heir, light from light, and creates the creature that is darkness, something created and made, not a son or an heir of light, illumination, or the power of creating.¹⁴⁷

The speaking once and for all is God's single act in the single now of eternity. It is both the begetting of the Son, who is light from light and the creation of the universe, from darkness or nothing. The unity of the two things heard in the single act of speech is reminiscent of the *bullitio-ebullitio* passage from the *Commentary on Exodus*, where the monad (or essence) turned into itself reflexively (Ex. 3:14) and where the emergence of the persons was the precondition for the boiling over of creation from God, who expresses himself in the universe through the single divine act of creation, revelation and salvation.¹⁴⁸ The Trinity is not therefore negated, but remains present and is, in a

¹⁴⁶ See note 139.

¹⁴⁷ *In Ioh.*, n.73, p.148.

¹⁴⁸ I do not think it is too much inference to refer here to salvation and revelation, since, as always, Eckhart's theology emerges through exegesis of scripture, and his use of the term 'lux de luce' in *In Ioh.*, n.73 (LW III, p.61, 3) to talk about the generation of the Son from the Father is probably a deliberate reference to the creed.

sense, signified through the apophatic affirmation of God as he is in himself, since it is the Trinity which acts, not the essence, even though the essence is, in a sense the power, or potency (*potentia*) of that divine action. By signifying, apophatically, the way in which God, as existence itself, relates to that which exists, (i.e. as the necessary cause of creation, which, since creation is the visible effect of God's activity, also signifies God's existence), we discover not only the essence but also the Trinity; the self-communicating act through which God expresses himself and freely creates. Once again, the Trinity is not therefore negated through apophasis but rather affirmed in its equality with the essence.

Eckhart's clearest use of the boiling imagery is in sermon XLIX on Matthew 22:20. The sermon is an extended treatment of the concept of 'image' and begins with a discussion of how an image is related to that of which it is an image.¹⁴⁹ The image in the sermon refers to Christ, the image 'of "the invisible God"',¹⁵⁰ who is 'also "first born" before all created things'.¹⁵¹ It also refers to creatures who are created according to this Christological image, which 'is set before every creature as the exemplar to whom they are to be patterned'.¹⁵² In this sense the image discussed in the sermon has the same two-fold sense as the 'boiling', first in terms of the persons of the Trinity, and second, in terms of the emergence of creation from the same single act of triune self-expression. The image, states Eckhart, is the 'form of life' which emanates as 'a simple formal emanation that transmits the whole pure naked essence'.¹⁵³ Eckhart is considering here how creatures receive the Word, the image of God and from this

¹⁴⁹ Sermon XLIX, n.505-510, pp.234-236.

¹⁵⁰ Sermon XLIX, n.507, p.235.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, n.506.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, n.511, p.236.

reception come into their own individual existence.¹⁵⁴ The divine image, Christ, does not have particular creaturely existence, identified through the possession of attributes, but is rather the primordial swelling up of life itself: ‘It is a form of life, as if you were to imagine something swelling up from itself and in itself and then inwardly boiling without any “boiling over” yet understood.’¹⁵⁵

There are a number of points which Eckhart makes about Christ-as-image, which help to clarify its relation to that from which it emanates – i.e. from the power (*potentia*) of the essence by which it emerges in its relation, as begotten from the Father. The image is ‘similar to God’, indeed, equal to him since ‘equality belongs to the perfection of the image’.¹⁵⁶ It is also ‘the expression and emanation of its source’.¹⁵⁷ This second point needs clarifying since the source of the image is in fact the same divine essence which turns in upon itself and was signified in the apophatic affirmation of Exodus 3:14.¹⁵⁸ The essence is therefore logically the source of this emanation of the image or Word, since it is through the turning of essence in upon itself that the image is generated. This first stage of ‘production of existence’ is therefore

that by which something from itself, out of itself, and in itself, produces a pure nature, pouring it forth formally without the cooperation of the will, but rather with its concomitant activity. This is the way the Good diffuses itself. This is

¹⁵⁴ This depends upon the Christian neoplatonic teaching of divine ideas, whereby God transmits existence to creatures through his knowing of them. I unfortunately do not have space in this thesis to expand upon the doctrine of divine ideas, but it is an integral part of Eckhart’s teaching and would most certainly help to clarify and deepen our understanding of much of Eckhart’s teaching discussed in this thesis.

¹⁵⁵ Sermon XLIX, n.511, p.236.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, n.509.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ See note 143.

also how the power of willing can be a principle even if the end is not yet grasped.¹⁵⁹

The *bullitio* of the primordial image produces a pure nature which is the source of creaturely existence, but whose purity is a reflection of its identity with that from which it boils. If we compare this with the *bullitio* passage from the *Commentary on Exodus* n.16, we have a strong sense of the relation between this initial *bullitio* in the Godhead, and the essence. The essence is the source of the *bullitio* in the sense that it is through God's turning in upon himself, 'the reflexive inward turning of the monad' (*In Ex.* n.16), that he boils up from himself, in himself, and out from himself, producing a pure nature or image which is similar, indeed, equal to, that of which it is an image. In other words, the Son is a perfect expression of the essence which turns upon itself and the Son shares this essence mutually with the Father who gives birth to the Son. Two points about image that Eckhart identifies earlier in the sermon help to clarify this:

it follows that the image and its exemplar are not separately numbered as two substances, but the one is in the other. 'I am in the Father, and the Father is in me' (Jn. 14:11)...This is the sixth property of the image. Seventh, it is consequently necessary that the image be found only in intellectual nature where the same reality returns to itself in a 'perfect return,' and where the one that

¹⁵⁹ Sermon XLIX, n.511, p.236-7. On this passage McGinn notes a contradiction in Eckhart's application of terms to the Godhead: "In most of his writings *esse* and *unum* are the terms properly predicated of the Hidden Godhead; but on the basis of such texts as Sermons XXIX and 9, as well as the *Parisian Questions*, we cannot exclude *intellectus* as preeminently belonging to the divine ground. Even though for Eckhart, as for any good Neoplatonist, *bonum* always signifies what is 'self-diffusive' (*diffusivum sui*) and thereby implies if not duality, at least duality's root (a reason for statements denying that God is good...), there is a passage in Sermon. XLIX.3 that identifies *bonitas* with the inner life of the Godhead involved in the emanation of Persons. Thus, on the question of the most proper eminent predications for the divine being, there seem to be two tendencies in Eckhart's thought. It is not clear that he ever successfully reconciled them." *Teacher and Preacher*, pp.25-6.

gives birth is one and the same with the child or offspring, finding oneself in the other and the other in oneself.¹⁶⁰

This passage identifies some significant parallels between the *bullitio* and the category of relation explored in 2a which defines the persons of the Trinity. In the above passage, the image and its exemplar (in this case referring to the Son and the Father) have one mutual essence (referred to in the above passage as substance).¹⁶¹ The category of personhood, in this case discussed in terms of image rather than relation, as we saw in 2a, is not therefore contrary to the category of essence, since the persons all possess the same essence. To emphasise this essential unity between image and exemplar, Eckhart again refers to the perfect return of ‘intellect’ upon itself, an introversion which mirrors the description of the movement of the self-reflecting monad in the *Commentary on Exodus*. The synonymy between essence and intellect is clear since both function as ‘that which reflects upon itself’ turning in on itself with ‘a perfect return’ (*reditio complete*) whilst all the time ‘remaining one.’¹⁶² This synonymy is further indicated in the passages from the *Commentary on John* n.34 that we saw above, where the Word is identified by Eckhart as intellectual in nature since it proceeded from the Father by way of intellect, where the intellect turns in upon itself in the same perfect return with which the monad turned in upon itself and from which the *bullitio* of the Trinity ‘emerges.’¹⁶³ Whether it is intellect, monad or essence returning perfectly upon itself, Eckhart is still making the same point about God: namely, that it is when the essence, or any of the

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, n.510.

¹⁶¹ *In Ex.*, n.70-1, pp.66-7.

¹⁶² Sermon XLIX n.510, (LW IV, p.425, 5-8). Eckhart here refers to the ‘reditio completa’ *Liber De Causis* prop. 15, (14: 177,6) which he also drew upon in *In Ex.*, n.16, (LW II, pp.21, 7-12;22, 1-3), and again in n.74 (LW II, p.77, 12).

¹⁶³ See notes 127 and 129 – 131.

synonyms which Eckhart uses to signify essence, turns in upon itself, or 'relates' to itself, that the Trinity emerges.

It is essential to remember at this point that the Trinity is something that God is eternally, to refer to the 'emergence' of the Trinity is for the sake of expression only. When we talk about the Trinity 'emerging' from the introverting of the essence, we must remember that this is not an ontological statement about the dependence of the Trinity upon some pre-existent essence, but an exploration of human reason into how oneness and threeness are eternal and identical in God. The essence turns in on itself and in so doing generates an image of itself of which it is immediately the exemplar. The Father exists as exemplar at precisely the same eternal 'now' as the Son exists as image. As I have asserted throughout this thesis and will continue to demonstrate, Eckhart views the Trinity as an eternal reality, existing in the same eternity as the essence about which he also speaks. We saw in the analysis of the *Commentary on Exodus*, that one of the properties of God's eternal existence, or his essence, is that the eternal is unchanging. In other words, what is eternal, always was, is and will be since its eternity is, by definition, a term which signifies complete otherness from time and thus from the linearity of human reasoning of cause and effect. Bearing this in mind, when the essence turns in on itself, it does not do this at a particular moment. Rather, inasmuch as it is essence, it is also turning in on itself and thus also giving rise to the Trinity. Inasmuch as God exists and is one, or essence, he is therefore also Trinity, because 'as soon as' (where 'as soon as' really means 'always') he is essence he is turning in on himself and emerging from essence as activity, or rather, as Trinity. The problem we come across is really one of the limitation of human language and intellect. In an analogous sense to how we cannot properly conceive of how an electron is both a wave and a particle, we cannot conceive of how God is both one and three, both

potential and actual, both indistinct and distinct. The non-duality between these terms is signified in ‘eternity’ for precisely the reason that eternity transcends the creaturely or temporal view of distinction and indistinction, of object and subject and of linear causation. In a sense, eternity is to time what apophasis is to language, it signifies a sphere of ultimate truth and reality where the limitations language and logic within our normal processes of understanding are transcended. However, its internal logic – eternity’s view of itself, or God’s view of himself – is thus impenetrable to the reasoning mind which persists in defining things in terms of the lesser system, in this case time or language, that is surpassed in truth, meaning and even in reality, by a greater system, in this case eternity, which brings together features, in this case Trinity and essence, or distinction and indistinction, that otherwise remain contrary when conceived of from within the former system.

The Trinity and the essence are not therefore two separate ‘parts’ of God, contained together in the Godhead, but are one and the same thing. This will become most clear when we consider how Eckhart speaks about potentiality and actuality in God, since the terms potential and actual can apply to a single object while differentiating between absence and presence of a feature or quality in that object, in this case, of unexpressed and expressed existence. We will look at this in depth in 2c, but it is worth noting here Markus Vinzent’s claim, that one of Eckhart’s seminal insights is his suggestion, as we have seen above, that the power or potential for begetting lies not with the Father, but with the essence.¹⁶⁴ Eckhart makes this claim quite plainly in the *Commentary on Exodus*:

¹⁶⁴ Markus Vinzent, *The Art of Detachment*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), p.11.

as the better authorities say, the power [potentia] of begetting in the Father is in the essence rather than in Paternity, and this is why the Father begets God the Son but does not beget himself the Father. He gives the Son divine existence and the existence, wisdom, and power of the Father, but not the fact that he is the Father. Rather he gives him the fact that he is Son by reason of a relation of opposition to the Father.¹⁶⁵

In this passage the Son shares the same essence as the Father and the essence is the *potentia* for the emergence of the Father-Son relation. It is therefore only insofar as God is essence that he can turn upon himself and emerge as the persons of the Trinity in the *reditio completa* which turns and pushes into itself, boils up and overflows as the Trinity and as cause of creation. The persons of the Trinity are, in turn, defined by the eternal category of distinction. Their distinction is affirmed apophatically, after the shift from temporal signification to eternal signification. It is a distinction beyond creaturely spatio-temporal categories and is thus described by Eckhart, as we saw in 2a, as a distinction in terms of relation, a distinction defined by mutual unity and connectedness, not by autonomy, hierarchy or logical priority. The distinction of persons therefore always points towards their unity (their mutual essence) since they are the self-expressive dimension of that unity. In plainer words, the Trinity is what happens when the essence expresses itself, but the essence always expresses itself since it is eternal, so also the Trinity always is. Moreover, this triune self-expression occurs in such a way that it does not undermine the oneness of the essence which in turn does not nullify the real distinction of the personal relations of the Trinity within the Godhead. The Trinity also does not emerge one person at a time, but as a whole, since all the persons have the

¹⁶⁵ *In Ex.*, n.28, pp.50-1.

same essence or potentiality and no person could exist distinctly outside of the relation of opposition which defines their distinct personhood.

Considering how difficult it is to describe or understand what Eckhart is trying to say here, it would not be unreasonable for interpreters to persist in suggesting that the *bullitio* still appears to set up a kind of priority of essence over Trinity, since it *seems* to be only due to the prior existence of essence that the *bullitio* can take place. However, as I suggested above, Eckhart makes it quite clear that this is only a logical ordering and that the reflexive turning of essence upon itself happens eternally. In other words the term ‘prior’ simply cannot be applied to any feature of God’s existence or identity in relation to itself. Just as the essence cannot not be since it is existence and the cause of all that exists so also the Trinity cannot not be since it is the means by which God’s essence eternally acts, creatively and self-expressively and the existence of creation points to the Trinity as a real feature of God’s eternal existence. For Eckhart, the kind of hierarchy that would place the Trinity below essence simply cannot be applied in eternity since such hierarchies are a category of order singularly limited to time where time is already an effect of the God whose existence, because it *is* the way it is, has created even time itself.¹⁶⁶ God is prior to ‘prior’ and his priority is itself the cause that enables us to exist, to speak and thus to mistakenly apply ‘prior’ to God. True knowledge of God therefore depends upon our admission of dependence upon him as eternal cause. The significance of revelation here becomes inescapable, since it is only through revelation – through which this eternal other has chosen to express himself – that human knowing could have any knowledge of him at all, for apart from his self-

¹⁶⁶ Pr. 38 (p.178) offers a good insight into the difference between time and eternity for Eckhart. Eternity is a single now, totally separate from time. In fact, it contains all of time within itself in the single now, just as God contains all perfections within himself in his oneness and in the unity of his activity. For the soul to engage with God as he is, she must do so by falling away from time. Time then, or at least, a temporal perspective of the divine where God is defined in terms of spatio-temporal categories rather than according to his eternal existence, is one of the attachments which the soul must release through detachment in order to relate to, and be united with God as he actually is.

expression, human reason is incapable of penetrating eternity, of knowing God's knowing of himself. Instead we must recognise him as the other which he is, an other which actually communicates itself and desires to be heard.

Because Eckhart views the Trinity as eternal, he is able to view the birth of the Word as something that happens eternally. God therefore *always* begets and the essence *always* turns in upon itself in a perfect return, an introverting which in its turn, points to the Trinity's eternal emergence and thus also to the birth of the Word, the begetting of the Son. We can see this clearly in a passage from the *Commentary on John* which begins with a discussion of two ways in which the term 'idea' can be understood, an argument we have already come across in the *First Parisian Question* when Eckhart distinguished between human and divine knowledge.¹⁶⁷ He suggests in the *Commentary on John* that an idea can be posterior to a thing from which it is abstracted, and it can be prior to a thing as its cause. This second sense is what the Word is as idea in God, and it is this divine idea which defines all creatures since as exemplar it gives them their existence. It is also therefore the intrinsic principle that the human intellect grasps in the effects, i.e. creatures, that it sees produced by this primordial and causal idea.¹⁶⁸ In this second sense of idea, the agent who, in having the idea, causes an effect, is able to contain this idea within itself even after the effect has been produced.¹⁶⁹ This agent is of course God, and the idea is Word which is begotten of the Father, where the Father actualises the *potentia* for begetting from the essence which he shares with the Son. The Father therefore receives his fatherhood in the act of begetting, and is not the person of the Father prior to the birth of the Son. As such, he cannot have the power of begetting as a personal property, since the moment he was Father, he had begotten the Son and

¹⁶⁷ See note 60.

¹⁶⁸ *In Ioh.*, n.29, p.131.

¹⁶⁹ 'On this basis you should realise that every agent, whether in nature or in art, makes what is like itself and for that reason always has within itself that upon which it models its effect.' *In Ioh.*, n.30, p.131.

was begetting the Son eternally. Eckhart states this in the *Commentary on John* where he shows that the Son, or idea, was present in the first intellect and was *always* begotten as Son by the Father. God, who begets the Son as a perfect image of himself eternally and so the persons of the Trinity are also eternal.¹⁷⁰ An even clearer example of this comes from the German sermon Pr. 53, which considers this same sense of the Son as a spoken and unspoken Word of God, as something which comes forth and has effects but also remains wholly within that from which it was spoken. This sermon also connects this teaching about the Son to creation and thus provides a useful bridge for us here in 2b, to turn back and consider the *ebullitio* which Eckhart uses to describe how the Trinity relates to creation, which we must consider to complete the analysis of sermon XLIX. In this German sermon Eckhart states:

God is a word, an unspoken word...He is something, but who can utter this word? None can do so but He who is this Word. God is a word that utters itself. Where God is, He utters this Word – where He is not He does not speak. God is spoken and unspoken. The Father is a speaking work, and the Son is the speech at work. Whatever is in me has to come out: as soon as I think of it, my word makes it known, but it remains within. Thus the Father speaks the Son unspoken, and he remains within. I have also said before, God's outgoing is His ingoing. In proportion to my nearness to God does He speak Himself in me. It is thus with all rational creatures, that, the more they go out of themselves with their work, the more they go into themselves. This is not the case with physical things; the more they work, the more they go out of themselves. All creatures wish to speak God in all their works; they all speak as well as they can, but they

¹⁷⁰ *In Ioh.*, n.31, p.132.

cannot speak Him. Willy-nilly, whether they like it or not, they all want to speak God, and yet He remains unspoken¹⁷¹

The first line of this passage reminds us of the apophatic principle at work in Eckhart's thought, who can utter the unspoken Word which God is? The answer, of course, is God alone, only God knows himself or can speak himself forth. God, as a Word that utters itself is therefore a self-sufficient speech act, reminding us of the self-sufficient essence, as it was described in the *Commentary on Exodus*. The word that utters itself thus also mirrors the turning of the essence in upon itself, or reflecting upon and understanding itself. Since this reflection occurs eternally then wherever God is 'He utters this Word.' He does not speak this Word where he is not, i.e. the Word is unspoken in that which does not exist, in the nothingness negated through apophasis. As we saw with the example of the agent in the *Commentary on John*, the Word as idea is spoken and unspoken, it emerges as the self-expression of God through the reflection of essence upon itself, but it also remains within that essence which is its own essence and which it shares with the other persons of the Trinity.¹⁷² The Father, is a speaking work, because he only exists as Father insofar as he begets the Son and has a relation of opposition with the Son. The Son is the speech at work because as exemplar of creatures, it is only through the Father's speaking of the Son, or more generally, through God's existence as Trinity, that he creates.¹⁷³ Eckhart then refers again to the act of speaking where the idea of what is spoken comes forth in speech but remains within the speaker as idea and identifies this once more with the Father's speaking the Son who comes forth but, as idea also remains completely within. The Son does not 'run out' in his being spoken, like some finite resource, but remains perfectly present as an idea in the Father which

¹⁷¹ Pr. 53, p.152.

¹⁷² See notes 168-9.

¹⁷³ See note 143.

the Father contains within himself even while speaking the Son forth. The simultaneity between outgoing and ingoing which defines the intra-divine life of the Trinity, is identical in structure to the eternal introverting and self-expressing of the essence. It is only as essence, as that which is most inward and is its own existence, that God turns in upon himself and expresses himself as Trinity. Only through the ingoing of essence upon itself does the outgoing therefore occur or in the terms discussed above, only insofar as the essence turns inwards in the *reditio completa* does the Trinity boil up and emerge as God's outgoing.

The Sermon then turns to creation itself, relating it to the triune life which gives rise to it. Creatures, it seems, share in this same 'ingoing-outgoing' synchrony as God, where the more they go out of themselves, expressing themselves in the activity of their work, the more they go into themselves. This simultaneous outgoing and ingoing is only a property present in rational creatures, i.e. the human soul, since for Eckhart, it is the presence of reason in the soul that identifies her as both the image and likeness of the filial exemplar, and because of which she receives both the grace of creation, *and* the grace of salvation, as we shall see in sermon XXV in 3b.¹⁷⁴ The rational soul's sharing in the same ingoing-outgoing structure as God then leads Eckhart to refer to the soul's absolute dependence upon God for her existence, this time relating it not simply to God because he is existence itself, but to God as that which creates through his speaking of the Word. Thus, the human soul receives God's speech within her in proportion to her nearness to him. Her participation in true existence is associated directly with her

¹⁷⁴ See chapter 3. See also *In Wis.* for the connection between the Son as image and the soul's existence according to this image: "There is still a sixth principal reason why it is necessary that 'quiet silence keep all things' so that God the Son may be born in us by coming into our mind. The Son is the Father's image, and the soul is [created] according to God's image. By its concept and property an image is a formal production in silence of the efficient cause and final cause which both properly look to the external creature and both signify 'boiling over.' But the image insofar as it is a formal emanation properly smacks of 'boiling.' This is what it says here, 'When quiet silence kept all things'; and below, 'Your Word,' that is, your Son, the Word, O Lord, came." *In Wis.*, n.283, pp.172-3.

closeness to God as both essence *and* Trinity, which, as we shall also see in chapter 3, is part of the orientation of the soul's will towards God's will for her, an orientation which does not negate her will, but allows her to be herself and to exist most fully, since it is both the orientation towards her cause and end as well as the orientation away from attachments and nothingness. This passage therefore identifies, in one fell swoop, the flowing interplay between God's essence and persons, the intra-divine relation of Father and Son and the connection between this divine nature and the soul. The life of the Trinity is inextricably woven into God's essential existence, and this in turn overflows into the connection between God and creation, both enabling creation and defining it.

We must now turn to consider more closely this connection between God and creation which is described by Eckhart through the second stage of productive existence identified in sermon XLIX, the *ebullitio*:

The second stage is like the 'boiling over' in the manner of an efficient cause and with a view toward an end by which something produces something else that is from itself, but not out of itself. This production is either out of some other thing (and then it is called 'making'), or it is out of nothing (and then it is the third stage of production which is called 'creating').¹⁷⁵

God's agency as the efficient cause of creation is expressed through the *ebullitio*, the 'boiling over' of the triune life from itself, into the act of *creatio* (*ex nihilo*), whereby our universe is created and directed towards God as its end. Creation is distinct from God and dependent upon him, since it comes from nothing. This doctrine of creation from nothing concurs with Eckhart's identification of God as the absolute 'something'

¹⁷⁵ Sermon XLIX, n.511, p.237.

according to which all creatures receive their existence or somethingness and apart from which they are nothing.¹⁷⁶ The creation from nothing, is itself the third stage of productive emanation, and it identifies creation as that which is most ‘other’ from God, ‘something else that is from him, but not out of him’ as the passage above stated. Despite this apparently insurmountable separateness, Eckhart also affirms an inescapable connectedness between creator and creation, since the *bullitio-ebullitio-creatio* cycle of production, is one single eternal act of divine self-expression:

It is clear how the Image, the Son, the ‘Firstborn,’ with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the one Principle ‘of every creature.’ For it is necessary for something first to ‘boil’ itself totally and then finally to ‘boil over’ so that it can be completely perfected in itself while overflowing [with a fruitfulness] that is more than perfection. (See Avicenna, *Metaphysics* 8.6 at the beginning) This is why nature first nourishes, then gives increase, perfects, and thus produces another being like itself.¹⁷⁷

Eckhart here identifies the *bullitio* as sufficient for God’s perfection. If we imagine the essence like an un-plunged French press, the introversion of the press pushes down on the fluid which in turn pushes up, the *bullitio*, the flowing of the fluid representing the intra-divine relational ‘movement’ of the triune persons. The Trinity reaches the brim of the container without overflowing, thus ‘actualising’ God’s self-expression fully, which would otherwise remain unexpressed if he were simply or primarily essence.¹⁷⁸ Since God is eternal, i.e. the essence and the relationally distinct persons are the same single

¹⁷⁶ This was the defining feature of the apophatic affirmation of God in the ‘ego sum qui sum’ of *In Ex.*, n.74 (LW II, pp.76, 13 – 78, 8) which we saw in chapter 1.

¹⁷⁷ Sermon XLIX, n.512, p.237.

¹⁷⁸ See 2b for ‘actual’ and ‘potential’ dichotomy.

reality, the container and its brimming-ness are simultaneous, the cafetière of God's being a self-knowing and self-loving Trinity is never not being pressed,¹⁷⁹ and the essence is never not the structure which pressed into itself, i.e. the single unified structure of God's divine existence and simplicity. The plunging of the press which gives rise to the *bullitio* of the coffee never stops, it is an infinite press, but it also goes further than simply reaching the brim of the container, since it overflows in the *ebullitio*. In his overflowing God is more than just perfect, more than just self-sufficient and self-contained, since he allows creation to exist as a something outside of himself. Creation, in other words, is then identified as an extension of God's self-expression, something we have already considered when we saw that creation, as God's effect, signified God as cause. This is not the only point worth noting however, for the final line of the passage above suggests that *because* God is the way he is, as that which expresses itself in the *bullitio-ebullitio-creatio* flow, creation itself mirrors this same structure of creative self-expression, i.e. the triune distinction defined by relation, in the way it nourishes, gives increase, perfects and reproduces. The structure of life in creation is therefore a mirror image of the flowing self-expression of God's own perfect identity. There could be no clearer sign that for Eckhart, creaturely distinction is therefore, above all things, fundamentally triune in its structure and thus relational in its distinction.

An unusual conclusion in Eckhart's theology that arises from this point is that the existence of nothingness (or attachment), evil, sin and also more generally of creatures, who are less than perfect existence itself, is an expression of God's own superabundance. In allowing evil, sin or nothingness to exist, i.e. things that are truly other than him, God expresses himself more abundantly, since he allows that which is

¹⁷⁹ For self-knowing and self-loving sermon XLIX, n.512 suffices: "it is evident that the Son 'is not made or created.' Also, the Son does not exist nor is he produced by will, but by nature or naturally...the Son, as perfect likeness, breathes forth love, the Holy Spirit, who is also truly uncreated inasmuch as he remains in the image and the image in him, as Augustine teaches in the ninth book of the Trinity." p.237.

other than him to exist and as such expressing himself as more than perfectly and self-sufficiently contained. He expresses himself as creative, and thus his self-expression is even more fruitful, since it flows into the life of creatures that are, to the extent that they are attached to nothingness, genuinely other than God.¹⁸⁰ Eckhart was in fact condemned for this in article 4 of the *Papal Bull*,¹⁸¹ but it is a logical conclusion of the way in which he describes God's eternal existence and activity as Trinity as well as God's connection with creation. The fact that for Eckhart the *bullitio* of the Trinity within the immanent Godhead, and the *ebullitio* of the Trinity which overflows from the Godhead into *creatio (ex nihilo)*, is all one act, was also condemned in the Papal Bull, articles 1-3.¹⁸² However, for Eckhart, the unity between the act of creation and the self-expression of the Trinity, is again, a logical conclusion from the fact that God creates according to the Word, who is idea, and that creatures possess existence, and human souls receive salvation, according to their image (and likeness) to this idea. As he states in the *Commentary on Genesis*:

the 'beginning' in which 'God created heaven and earth' is the first simple now of eternity. I say that it is the very same now in which God exists from eternity, in which also the emanation of the divine Persons eternally is, was and will be. Moses said that God created heaven and earth in the very first beginning in which he himself exists, without any medium or time interval. So when someone once asked me why God had not created the world earlier, I answered that he

¹⁸⁰ *In Ioh.*, n.494, LW III, p.426 (*Essential Eckhart*, p.316, note 5). McGinn also refers to *In Gen.*: "Seventh 'He created heaven and earth,' that is, good and evil. 'Creating evil and making peace' (Is. 45:7). The existence of evil is required by the perfection of the universe, and evil itself exists in what is good and is ordered to the good of the universe, which is what creation primarily and necessarily regards." *In Gen.* n.21, p.90.

¹⁸¹ 'The fourth article, Also, in every work, even in an evil, I repeat, in one evil both according to punishment and guilt, God's glory is revealed and shines forth in equal fashion.' *In agro dominico*, art. 4, p.78.

¹⁸² *In agro dominico*, art. 1-3, pp.77-8.

could not because he did not exist. He did not exist before the world did. Furthermore, how could he have created earlier when he had already created the world in the very now in which he was God? It is false to picture God as if he were waiting around for some future moment in which to create the world. In the one and the same time in which he was God and in which he begot his coeternal Son as God equal to himself in all things, he also created the world. 'God speaks once and for all' (Jb. 22:14). He speaks in begetting the Son because the Son is the Word; he speaks in creating creatures, 'He spoke and they were made, he commanded and they were created' (Ps. 32:9). This is why it says in another Psalm, 'God has spoken once and for all and I have heard two things' (Ps. 61:12). The 'two things' are heaven and earth, or rather 'these two,' that is, the emanation of the Persons and the creation of the world, but 'he speaks' them both 'once and for all'; 'he has spoken once and for all.'¹⁸³

This passage affirms Eckhart's apophatic teaching that all way can say about God in himself apart from all human signification is that he is, and that he is in a prior and infinitely higher sense than creation. However, when we include God's triune life alongside his essential existence, we must recognise that to try and talk about God's self-expression apart from his creative activity is to talk about God as other than he is. This does not mean that he could not be Trinity in and of himself separate from creation, rather it means that he reveals himself as Trinity to be connected to creation.

¹⁸³ *In Gen.*, n.7, pp.84-5. This passage in one sense, is really a restatement of Augustine's own argument from *Confessions* Book 11, where he talks about the creation of time, and the subsequent meaninglessness of trying to talk about what God did or was 'before' creation, when there was no 'before' in the sense that we understand it. (Augustine *Confessions* Book 11, xi-xiii, in Henry Chadwick (trans.) *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: OUP, 2008)). It is also in accord with Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, bk. Λ, 1071b, where he states: "It is...impossible that movement should either come-to-be or be destroyed. It must always have been in existence, and the same can be said for time itself, since it is not even possible for there to be an earlier and a later if time did not exist." p.369.

To ask what God is apart from his creativity does not make sense in face of the fact, asserted in the passage above, that God, as Trinity, *has* created. God *has* expressed himself as Trinity both immanently and economically, and in so doing, he has also created according to the image of the Word as the exemplar of all creation. Eckhart is really calling for people to understand God according to the manner of his revelation, as we saw in the *Opus Tripartitum* where the fact of God's existence is signified by the existence of creation and where the soul must acknowledge this about God if she is to know him according to how he has revealed himself.¹⁸⁴ In this case it is not only God's existence or essence being signified, Eckhart is pointing to his particular existence as self-expressive Trinity which overflows with creativity. The reason creation is created from the same single now of eternity in which God is himself – as both essence and persons – is precisely because it is created from nothing. Apart from the now within which God is himself, there is nothing and nowhere from which creation could come to be. In that sense, insofar as creation exists at all as the product of its creator, it exists from the same now in which God is himself.

When Eckhart therefore states in the passage above from the *Commentary on Genesis*, 'when someone once asked me why God had not created the world earlier, I answered that he could not because he did not exist,' we should not assume that he is suggesting somehow that there was ontologically a point when God did not exist. Rather, Eckhart is showing us that if we understand God as he is according to his own revelation, to separate him from the act of creation which he *has* performed, is to separate him from the way in which he has expressed himself, in other words, to view God as other than he is and in that sense he can be understood not to exist. It is really a rather obvious statement, that God does not exist in a view of the universe which is

¹⁸⁴ See note 55.

other than the universe actually is, since God's existence reveals itself in the real universe whether or not the individual human allows themselves to perceive this reality. This is a very significant point for some of the passages from the German sermons often cited as examples where Eckhart prioritises the soul's union with God's essence as above God's existence as Trinity. For instance in Pr. 52, he states:

While I yet stood in my first cause, I *had* no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth. Then I wanted myself and wanted no other thing: what I wanted I was and what I was I wanted, and thus I was free of God and all things. But when I left my free will behind and received my created being, *then* I had a God. For before there were creatures, God was not 'God': He was That which He was. But when creatures came into existence and received their *created* being, then God was not 'God' in Himself – He was 'God' in creatures.¹⁸⁵

Eckhart here refers to the primordial existence of the soul in eternity, before it was created, but rather than doing it from the point of view of affirming God in the highest sense through a straightforward negation of negation, he considers it from the soul's perspective, where the soul sees herself *as* God whose essence contains everything indistinctly and who absolutely and necessarily exists, above all distinction and attribute, above multiplicity, time or creation. The soul, coming forth from the essence then has 'a God' whose existence, as we just saw in the *Commentary on Genesis*, is tied up with the existence of creation. This 'God' is the 'God' whom the soul must pass

¹⁸⁵ Pr. 52, p.421.

beyond to reach the ‘God beyond God’ that we saw McGinn refer to, and that Caputo suggested was the pinnacle of Eckhart’s teaching on the soul’s union with God.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, in the next passage of Pr. 52, Eckhart himself seems to suggest as much:

Now when we say that God, inasmuch as He is ‘God,’ is not the supreme goal of creatures, for the same lofty status is possessed by the least of creatures in God. And if it were the case that a fly had reason and could intellectually plumb the eternal abyss of God’s being out of which it came, we would have to say that God with all that makes Him ‘God’ would be unable to fulfil and satisfy that fly! Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there where the highest angel, the fly, and the soul are equal, there where I stood and wanted what I was, and was what I wanted.¹⁸⁷

If we interpret this according to the assumption that Eckhart is happy to ontologically subordinate the Trinity to God’s essence, it would be easy to suggest that the ‘God’ which the soul must overcome and be free from is the triune God and that the soul’s ultimate union is therefore with the God beyond God, the essence, wherein the soul saw herself as identical with her first cause, and was in fact her own cause. It is perhaps especially important in a passage such as this, that we do not lose sight of the difference that Eckhart identified between human knowing and divine knowing, between the demands of human logic and ontological reality (reality as God sees it), or between the different perspectives of God and the soul which knows him apophatically. Considering how Eckhart employs apophasis as an affirmation of God’s existence, we should recall here that negation, i.e. the denial of limitedness in speech and knowing – specifically

¹⁸⁶ See chapter 1, introduction.

¹⁸⁷ Pr. 52, p.422.

when related to God – is an entirely human category. God does not possess negation in himself, except as the negation of negation which is an affirmation and which, as we saw in the Latin works, does not exclude the Trinity. Here the soul is called to negate from its perspective the kind of knowing of God that it encounters in creatures (‘when creatures came into existence and received their *created* being, then God was not ‘God’ in himself – he was ‘God’ in creatures’). This, as we have seen from the *ebullitio*, is God’s existence as Trinity. If Eckhart therefore seeks to ontologically deny the Trinity here, he would be directly contradicting everything we have seen from the Latin works explored thus far in this chapter.

It is not however necessary to interpret this passage in quite such a radical way, although the way in which Eckhart speaks is of course, deliberately provocative. We should once again consider the apophatic affirmation, which signifies God’s absolute ‘somethingness,’ or rather, the necessity of his existence. When the soul views herself from within her first cause and indeed, as her own first cause, this can be seen in light of this apophatic orientation of her perspective. The soul, in seeking the God beyond God, identifies God as that which absolutely cannot not be and she recognises her dependence upon this God – upon God’s essence – by perceiving that she exists indistinctly in the essence, which contains all creation and perfections indistinctly and un-expressed within itself. The soul is not denying the Trinity *per se*. Rather, she is moving *through* her perception of God as ‘God’ (Trinity) in creatures, seeing behind this the fact that God’s existence is *necessary* and that her existence is contained primordially in this necessarily existing God. The breaking-through of the soul is thus nobler than the emanation, since it is precisely in this breaking-through that she realises just how absolute her dependence upon God is and how absolute his existence is. But it is precisely insofar as the soul actually exists as a creature in the universe that the

Trinity is not denied ontologically. Her perspective, as we have seen, is reoriented, but her being still depends, as it always did, upon God's creativity in the self-expression of the Trinity. The radical denial of 'God' in Pr. 52 therefore enacts the reorientation that the soul undergoes, it is a rhetorical presentation of the soul's realisation of God's necessary existence which she recognises through the reorientation of her life towards God through detachment, which is, as we shall see in chapter 3, a practical form of apophasis. In this passage from Pr. 52, we therefore see the logical summit of the soul's theocentric orientation, her realisation of God's necessary existence, but we do not have to view this as the ontological denial of the Trinity. At the end of Pr. 52, Eckhart adds:

A great master says that his breaking-through is nobler than his emanation, and this is true. When I flowed forth from God, all creatures declared, 'There is a God'; but *this* cannot make me blessed, for with this I acknowledge myself as a creature. But in my breaking-through, where I stand free of my own will, of God's will, of all His works, and of God himself, *then* I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature, but I am that which I was and shall remain for evermore. There I shall receive an imprint that will raise me above all the angels. By this imprint I shall gain such wealth that I shall not be content with God inasmuch as He is God, or with all His divine works: for this breaking-through guarantees to me that I and God are one. *Then* I am what I was, then I neither wax nor wane, for then I am an unmoved cause that moves all things. Here, God finds no place *in* man, for man by his poverty wins for himself what he has eternally been and shall eternally remain. Here, God is one with the spirit, and that is the strictest poverty one can find.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Pr. 52, p.424.

In this passage it is not the flowing forth of creatures, the *ebullitio*, or *exitus*, which makes the soul blessed, since as Eckhart states, that is simply a statement of the soul's existence. Blessedness depends upon the soul's returning to God, the *reditus*, when she recognises where she has flowed from and where she is flowing towards. The soul breaks-through into God, and is free from her will, from God's will, from his works and from him. In this breakthrough the soul is neither God nor creature, she becomes what she was and will remain for evermore, she becomes, or rather she recognises that she eternally *is* what God has assured her that she will be through the promise of salvation and this is the highest form of affirmation of the soul's existence and identity. Eckhart uses the same language here to talk about the soul's self-understanding as he did to describe God as 'that which he was' earlier in the sermon, and which is reminiscent of the 'Something which is neither this nor that' from Pr. 2.¹⁸⁹ He could not affirm the soul's identity in stronger terms than these, the terms used to describe God's own being. We then see, within this affirmation of the soul's existence in the highest possible terms, that she receives an 'imprint.' It is almost certain that by imprint Eckhart here means the birth of the Word in the soul, a theme which virtually always accompanies his teaching on detachment or breakthrough. As Beverly Lanzetta suggests:

The foundation of Christian metaphysics must be 'let go' and 'let be' in order to enter the most indistinct of indistinctions, to be One. However, Eckhart never dispenses with [his] theistic substructure, but views it as mutually affirming with the Desert of the Godhead. According to the Meister, the Trinity is such only in

¹⁸⁹ Pr. 2, p.81.

relation to its own indistinction, its own death, as the Unity is such only in relation to its own distinction, to its own birth.¹⁹⁰

It is precisely because this birth *always* occurs, in the desert of the Godhead, that the soul's union with the essence cannot be the pinnacle of its union with God, and as such, must mean something different. It is for this reason that I have interpreted it as an apophatic statement about the soul's realisation of God's absolute necessity. The denial of the Trinity in Pr. 52 is really the soul's discovery of God's necessity, after which she once more encounters the Trinity as it truly is, not as some property that God possesses and reveals through his creation, but as a category of distinct relation which exists eternally and is identical with the fact of God's necessary existence. The Trinity is seen as the boiling up and over that caused creation and, as we shall see in 2c, as the actualised self-expression of God, who would otherwise remain in the essence as an unactualised *potentia*. This initial breaking-through of the soul into the Godhead is noblest, because it is identical with the first step of apophasis, a step taken for the sake of human knowing and for the sake of reorienting human being, but it is not an ontological statement about God's eternal being.

It is, of course, possible to deny that this interpretation has value. However, we would then have to face the inherent contradiction between some of Eckhart's sermons, such as Pr. 52, and the metaphysics taught in his Latin works – which offer much more extensive treatments of Eckhart's thought and which, if push came to shove, could be argued to have equal if not greater weight as representations of 'what Eckhart really thinks' than the few sermons when his preaching reaches its most provocative. I do not believe that our interpretation of Eckhart need come to this, and the integrated reading

¹⁹⁰ *The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.41.

of Pr. 52 with the Latin teaching on the Trinity that I have offered in 2b hopefully stands as a reasonable argument in support of that claim.

2c. Potential and Actual

As we saw in 2b, the Trinity and essence do not exist in the Godhead as two separate parts of God; instead they are two expressions of a single whole. The essence is the reality of God unexpressed, inactive, indistinct and contained within itself. The Trinity is the same reality expressed, active, relationally distinct and flowing perpetually towards the other; both the other within itself, in the perfect relations of the triune persons, and the other outside of itself, humanity and the whole created universe. One of the ways in which Eckhart expresses the difference between the Trinity and the essence whilst still maintaining the sense that they are the same reality, is with his use of potentiality and actuality in reference to God. As Vinzent points out, Eckhart identifies the potentiality (*potentia*) for personhood as a property not of the persons themselves, but of their mutual essence.¹⁹¹ McGinn indicates the same point in his analysis of Eckhart's trinitarianism:

The distinction between *grunt* as precondition (i.e., pure possibility) for emanation and the Father as actual source for the God who becomes is reflected in Eckhart's frequent appeal to what to many may seem a rather obscure axiom of scholastic trinitarian theology. In his *Commentary on Exodus* Eckhart says: 'The better authorities say the potentiality of begetting in the Father is in the essence rather than the Paternity, and this is why the Father begets God the Son, but does not beget himself the Father.' This means that the root of all the Son's

¹⁹¹ Vinzent, pp.6-22.

divine existence, wisdom, and power is from the ground or essence; but the ground itself does not beget, only the Father as Father does.¹⁹²

McGinn's work convincingly shows the prevalence of the theme of the ground in Eckhart's theology, even though the term *grunt* only specifically occurs in the German works. Drawing on this thesis in the quote above, he identifies the ground with God's essence and describes it as the pure possibility for emanation. However, he deviates here from his own translation of *potentia* as 'power' in *Teacher and Preacher*,¹⁹³ instead referring to 'potentiality' and thus giving a stronger sense of Eckhart's teaching that the Trinity exists, in a sense, unexpressed and indistinct in the essence. Eckhart makes the same point in the *Commentary on Exodus* when he considers how the persons of the Trinity exist relationally in God:

The third preliminary notion is that act proceeds from essence according to the ideas and properties of the attributes. For example, Paternity in the Godhead is that thing which is the essence, and the essence in the Son is really that which is Filiation. Nevertheless, we truly and properly say that the Father begets, not the essence, and that the Son is begotten, not the essence.¹⁹⁴

The 'attributes' which define the distinction of the persons, i.e. paternity, filiation and spiration, are not possessed by the persons in and of themselves; instead they are received through the essence. These attributes describe the nature of the relation between the persons but the power for the possession of these attributes is in the indistinct *potentia* of the essence or ground, not in the relationally distinct persons

¹⁹² McGinn (2001), p.82.

¹⁹³ *In Ex.*, n.28, p.50.

¹⁹⁴ *In Ex.*, n.56, p.62.

themselves. God is therefore three only insofar as he is one since the one is the *potentia* for the distinction of the three. He is also only one insofar as he is that which always emerges into threeness as we saw above, for the one always turns in on itself and relates to itself and its oneness is, in this sense, always expressing itself as three.

The essence should not therefore be conceived of as static or passive. It is static in one sense, as the unmoved mover of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Λ , 1071b – 1073a), but it is also defined by the brimming potentiality within it and by the eternal actualising of this *potentia* in the self-expressive and creative life of the Trinity. Eckhart says as much in the *Commentary on Exodus* referring to Moses Maimonides teaching that 'in God there is no mutability, no potentiality that is not act',¹⁹⁵ and again in the *First Parisian Question*: 'In God there is no passive potentiality. But there would be unless understanding and existence were the same in God.'¹⁹⁶ As we saw in 2b, God always begets the Word, the persons of the Trinity always emerge in the *bullitio* and *ebullitio*, and the essence therefore is never un-actualised or passive potentiality. Eckhart describes it as potentiality in itself for the sake of illustrating its relation as *potentia* to the persons. The distinction between potential and actual is therefore a logical distinction for the sake of human knowing, not an ontological distinction in God, whose potentiality is *always* actualised, and whose actuality *always* emerges from its *potentia* in the essence. There is therefore a sense in which we literally cannot picture the 'object' being described, since it possesses the properties of potential and actual which we always either perceive as distinct from one another, as something that will happen or something that has happened, or in some kind of order of causation. But God's potentiality and actuality are neither of these things. He possesses them eternally, in the same realm of truth that apophysis signifies and thus completely beyond the bounds of

¹⁹⁵ *In Ex.*, n.45, p.57.

¹⁹⁶ *Q. Par.* I, p.44.

our normal comprehension. As I shall suggest in the conclusion to this chapter, it is for this reason that I believe apophasis is not simply a noetic category, a way of understanding, since understanding falls down in the face of God's reality. Rather, it is a way of understanding through *being* with God, as we saw in Farrer's description of metaphysics at the start of this chapter, where the soul does not know God as a concept or an idea, but as a real something which she relates to in her existence, who, through that relation, reveals himself to her understanding and shapes her existence according to his own.

One of the unusual results of placing the potentiality for distinction in the essence is that the persons each possess the same potentiality, their mutual essence, but which is actualised in each in the particular distinction of their personhood. However their personhood is itself defined wholly in terms of their relations with one another, not in terms of an autonomous distinction of each person from the other. It is as such not 'possession' but 'sharing,' 'giving' or 'reciprocity' which defines God's distinction as persons who boil up together from the *potentia* of the essence from within the now of eternity and overflowing from itself in the economic acts of creation and salvation. As Eckhart states in the *Book of the Parables of Genesis*:

The one activity that belongs to the Father also belongs to the Holy Spirit and the Son. Thus the words 'God created,' for God is one in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The activity is one, for Moses says 'created' in the singular. The one God and his one activity are not divided into many things, but they unite many things and gather together what has been divided. Thus, the One or Unity is not divided into numbers, but unites numbers in itself.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ *In par. Gen.*, n.15, p.98.

God has persons, but not as multiplicity, since the single act of self-expression by which God is triune and through which he creates, is distinct from all creaturely activity and multiplicity by its unity, a unity expressed by Eckhart's identification of the essence rather than the persons as the source or *potentia* for this act. As Eckhart states in the *Commentary on John*, 'the power [potentia] of generating in the Godhead directly and more principally belongs to the essence rather than to the relation that is paternity,'¹⁹⁸ and again in sermon XXV but inverted, 'The divine essence...neither generates nor creates, only the divine subject.'¹⁹⁹ Here the 'subject' refers to the persons of the Trinity and, as McGinn points out, the passage is

a paraphrase of a technical scholastic formula in which the word here rendered as 'subject' is actually 'supposit,' i.e., the concrete subject of the predication...The divine essence as such is never the concrete subject of the predication of divine actions, within the Trinity or without, but only the divine Persons, taken singly or together.²⁰⁰

It is thus the Trinity and never the essence which acts. God begets and is begotten as Trinity, even though the essence is, properly speaking, the *potentia* for all divine activity and he also creates as Trinity. The essence is not begotten, it does not beget and it does not create. As such, it is only as Trinity that God can create and remain truly God. For Eckhart, since God *has* created – since the universe actually exists and we are in it – the existence of the Trinity is affirmed necessarily, since its effects are evident. McGinn also points us to another instance of the same formula in the *Commentary on*

¹⁹⁸ *In Ioh.*, n.43, p.137.

¹⁹⁹ Sermon XXV, n.258, p.218.

²⁰⁰ *Teacher and Preacher*, note 18, p.222.

John where Eckhart distinguishes between God's relations (where the subjects or persons relating to each other have the same nature or substance) and analogical relations, i.e. creaturely relations to God, where

what is produced derives from the source, but is nevertheless beneath the principle and not with it. It is of another nature and thus is not the principle itself. Still, insofar as it is in the principle, it is not other in nature or other in supposit. A chest in its maker's mind is not a chest, but is the life and understanding of the maker, his living conception.²⁰¹

Eckhart here refers to one of the logical principles which leads to his particular use of potentiality and actuality in God; namely that 'what is produced or proceeds from anything is precontained in its source,' a point that is 'universally and naturally true, both in the Godhead (the topic here) and in natural and artificial things'.²⁰² We have seen this already in the Son's being spoken and remaining unspoken. Here however, Eckhart presents four conclusions regarding this point: '[1] What proceeds is in its source; [2] it is in it as a seed is in its principle, [3] as a word is in one who speaks; and [4] it is in it as the idea in which and according to which whatever proceeds is produced by the source.'²⁰³ The logic of causality, which defines Eckhart's examination here of the divine ideas – God's creating of things according to his idea of them contained in the Word which is itself the 'image of the invisible God' and the exemplar of all creation – is the same logic which he uses to explain how God's essence and Trinity relate to each other and to creation. However, while God is connected to creation as its cause, he is not subject to the same 'rules' of logic which define creaturely existence.

²⁰¹ *In Ioh.*, n.6 (see also n.5), p.124.

²⁰² *In Ioh.*, n.4, p.123.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

When Eckhart applies this logic to God it differs in precisely the sense in which God's substance differs from creaturely substance, as self-sufficient cause of all subsequently existing things, whose substance, perfections, attributes etc., are distinct in creatures but contained indistinctly in the self-sufficient essence of God. However, as we have also seen, this affirmation of God's existence includes the Trinity as equal and (as we now see) identical with the essence. As such the logic which in creation sets up an order of causation and dependence of creatures upon their creator, does not instigate the same sense of dependence within God himself, since the Trinity and essence are in fact the same reality, identified as expressed and unexpressed, or actual and potential. The distinction between these two 'dimensions' of God's being is also, as we have seen, a creaturely distinction, made for the sake of understanding how God relates to creation as its cause, and not for the sake of describing an ontological distinction between the essence and Trinity as two separate parts in God.

Eckhart thus utterly distinguishes God from creation, by showing how his distinct persons and indistinct essence exist beyond creaturely categories of distinction or multiplicity. This fact is shown here through the teaching on potentiality and actuality, and also shown as we saw in chapter 1, through Eckhart's apophatic method. However, in accord with his dialectical style, Eckhart also points to the total connectedness of creatures with God, since the existence of creation is one with the same act by which God expresses himself as Trinity. The problem that this creates in Eckhart's theology is not therefore simply that interpreters (in our time and Eckhart's) view him as subordinating Trinity to essence; it is also the unusual over-connectedness between creation and the Trinity. As Vinzent points out:

Without differentiation between the divine essence's potentiality for fatherhood, sonship and spiritness, there is no distinction between these and the divine essence's potentiality for creation. Criticised during the Cologne Process for this daring concept, Eckhart maintains that there cannot be any differentiation within the divine substance, as it is nothing but pure potentiality – another name for God's nature of detachment.²⁰⁴

We therefore encounter the same implication with Eckhart's teaching on potentiality and actuality that we saw with the *bullitio-ebullitio-creatio* process; that the Trinity and creation seem too connected in Eckhart's theology, through the same apophatic method with which Eckhart demonstrated their separateness.

Concluding Remarks for Chapter 2

When we compare the affirmation of the Trinity seen in this chapter to any of the German sermons where Eckhart appears to prioritise essence over Trinity it might seem like a brazen contradiction. However, as Frank Tobin points out, Eckhart's concern to emphasise the simultaneous unity and separateness between God and creatures in the truest way possible, often leads him to prioritise certain features of his thought over others for the sake of making his point:

what distinguishes Eckhart's thought from more traditional Christian thought is, in particular, his insistence that neither the division nor the union between God and creature had been sufficiently expressed. Indeed, he himself cannot do both elements justice in a single utterance, and he attempts to remedy this in part

²⁰⁴ Vinzent, p.20.

through dialectical juxtaposition of statements. One cause of confusion concerning his total view is that in many contexts he treats only one side of his thought: either the unity of creature and God or their separateness from each other.²⁰⁵

Eckhart therefore takes metaphysics to a previously unexplored extreme, advocating both absolute separation between God and creation, and absolute union, but always, implicitly or explicitly, depending upon his apophatic method and his analogical safety net, *in quantum*. I would like to add to Tobin's point that we can see a similar dialectical language with Eckhart's concept of God, when sometimes he seems to deny and at other times affirm the Trinity as a reality in God as he is in himself. This is connected to Eckhart's teaching on simultaneous separateness and unity between God and creation, but it is a point that I believe can be dealt with in and of itself, and which, in so doing, helps to clarify the nature of the connection and separation between creator and creature that Tobin identifies.

This dialectical method is perhaps one explanation for the difference between the affirmation of the Trinity we have seen in this chapter and the apparent denial of the Trinity that we come across in some of the German sermons.²⁰⁶ We have seen in the *Commentary on Exodus* that Eckhart apophatically affirms the identity between God's existence and essence. He then goes on to discuss the Trinity – God's relational distinction – and shows that it exists in the Godhead without apparently contradicting the simplicity, unity, necessity, self-sufficiency and priority (with regards to creation) of God's essence. The Trinity in other words does not stand in the way of the unity of the

²⁰⁵ Tobin, p.63.

²⁰⁶ See chapter 3.

essence, while, as we saw above, one essence in no way inhibits the Trinity. Instead, the Trinity is affirmed alongside the essence, as Eckhart states in Pr. 10:

I once preached in Latin (it was on Holy Trinity Day), and I said that the distinction in the Trinity comes from the unity. The unity is the distinction, and the distinction *is* the unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the unity, for that is distinction without distinction.²⁰⁷

In this quotation, we see the synonymy Eckhart indicates between the unity (of the essence) and the distinction (of the Trinity) in God. However, Pr. 10 is also one of the frequently cited sermons to support a view of detachment as a union between the soul and the Godhead or essence, in other words, a union with God ‘beyond’ the Trinity. After the passage above Eckhart goes on to state: ‘If there were a thousand Persons there would still not be more than one unity.’²⁰⁸ This can easily be read to imply that the number of persons in the Trinity is irrelevant in the face of God’s unity. As Bernard McGinn points out, it would be wrong to ignore passages like this where Eckhart seems to prioritise God’s unity or essence as that towards which the soul aims in its detachment, but he adds, ‘if we stop there and refuse to recognise that the *unum* dialectically demands expression as a Trinity of Persons we shall also be false to the Meister.’²⁰⁹ As we have seen throughout this chapter, there is a very real sense in which the Trinity cannot be negated or absorbed into the essence. The sceptic might suggest that Eckhart is simply paying lip service to church teaching, as Caputo seems to imply, distinguishing in Eckhart’s theology between the ‘*doctrine* of the divine unity’ and the

²⁰⁷ Pr. 10, p.338.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ (1981), p.13.

‘*Christian dogma of the Trinity.*’²¹⁰ Such a view however, once more overlooks the dialectical quality of Eckhart’s teaching.²¹¹ McGinn is right to indicate the priority Eckhart gives to the hidden Godhead, it is certainly a feature of his preaching that distinguishes his thought from that of his contemporaries and predecessors. However, I would like to suggest that, just as the apophatic negates the application of creaturely categories to God but does not deny what God is in himself, so also, the prioritisation of the essence in his teaching on detachment is primarily Eckhart’s attempt to instil an apophatic ‘habit’ in the minds of those whom he preached to and taught, not an attempt to make ontological statements about God that deny the Trinity.²¹² In other words, he advocates the need for the human soul, the mind, indeed, the whole human individual, to logically prioritise the essence in her approach to God, as a way of recognising the fact that God necessarily exists and recognising the truth about her relationship with this God. The purpose of such an apophatic habit is simple. As I suggested in chapter 1, the apophatic affirmation is in fact a radical negation of atheism and atheistic habits of thought and speech, or rather, a radical statement of the absoluteness and truth of God’s existence, as that which simply cannot not be. If, as I believe, this is one of the primary functions of apophatic discourse in Eckhart’s theology, then it does not need to be interpreted ontologically as a statement negating or subordinating the Trinity to the essence. Instead, it might be the case that for Eckhart the apophatic is the first step that the human mind or soul takes towards real faith.

²¹⁰ (1978) p.112 (my italics).

²¹¹ Not to mention the attitude it implies towards the specific tenets of Christian faith.

²¹² He makes it quite clear in his *Discourses of Instruction* that he considers ‘habit’ a defining feature of what he describes as detachment later in his life: “a man must learn to acquire an inward desert, wherever and with whomever he is. He must learn to break through things and seize his God in them, and to make His image grow in himself and in essential wise...All he needs to know is that he intends to exercise his skill, and even if he is not paying full attention, wherever his thoughts may stray, he will do the job because he has the skill. Thus a man should be pervaded with God’s presence, transformed with the form of his beloved God, and made essential by Him, so that God’s presence shines for him without any effort; rather he will find emptiness in all things and be totally free of things. But first there must be thought and attentive study, just as with a pupil in any art.” *Discourses of Instruction*, p.492.

Denys Turner suggests that, unlike Dionysius who is content to let ‘theological language break down under the weight of its internal contradictoriness’, Eckhart ‘wants to force the imagery to *say* the apophatic’.²¹³ While Turner is referring primarily to the German works, the same point could be made of apophasis generally in Eckhart’s theology if we are reading his Latin and German works as consistent with one another. I would like to suggest as we finish this chapter, two ways in which Eckhart does precisely what Turner suggests, but not, I think, in the way that Turner means it. Firstly, Eckhart definitely goes out of his way to subvert his own discourse: as is commonly attested to in analyses of his German works,²¹⁴ and, as we have seen, also in his Latin, works where he sets up dialectical opposites according to his theory of analogy and uses apophasis, itself a self-contradictory mode of discourse, to signify not simply the limitedness of human language and the nothingness of creatures in and of themselves, but also the absolute somethingness of God’s being as both essence and Trinity. The first way in which he therefore ‘says the apophatic,’ is that he uses the negation of negation to signify God’s separateness from creatures, but does not, in the course of this negation, deny the Trinity. The apophatic affirms the truth of God’s nature whilst identifying and negating the falsehood of creaturely categories applied to God. In other words it does not leave us with nothing, but with everything, conceived from the standpoint of absolute theocentricity, and thus by its very nature it seeks to signify the unsayable, to point to its necessity and to enable the soul to relate to it as her God.

This leads onto the second point which is not in fact to do with ‘saying’ the unsayable at all. Instead, as I just suggested, the apophatic is used by Eckhart to verbally signify the kind of perspective or habits of perspective which lead the soul into a real relationship with a real God, a perspective moreover, where the soul perceives God in

²¹³ (1995), p.151.

²¹⁴ See Tobin, ch. 5, pp.147-183 and Davies (1991), pp.179-193.

all things and all things in and from God. She does not only seek to know God, she understands herself and the whole of creation theocentrically and this form of understanding is the truest form of understanding the soul could have.²¹⁵ Apophasis thus signifies the perspective which accompanies a particular way of life, it is not understood as an object of thought, but known through a way of living.²¹⁶ This way of life, as we shall see in chapter 3, is in fact detachment, the soul's breaking-through (*durchbrechen*) into her silent ground where she is united with God in the pure essentiality of his being and also united with the boiling up of the triune life.²¹⁷ She recognises her unity with her primal cause,²¹⁸ and in that unity with God's essence she appears separate from the Trinity.²¹⁹ However, in the silent ground or citadel,²²⁰ the uncreated spark of the soul,²²¹ (which she has broken-through into and wherein she is united with the indistinction of

²¹⁵ Pr. 103, p.59.

²¹⁶ Pierre Hadot makes a similar suggestion in his analysis of Stoic philosophy. He suggests that theory and practice are never separated and that our understanding of Stoic philosophy should not be simply in terms of the philosophical concepts, but in terms of how the truth of these concepts is encountered through their incorporation into the individual adherent's perspective through spiritual exercises.

Philosophy as a Way of Life (Oxford and New York: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), pp.60; 82-86.

²¹⁷ Pr. 29, DW II, pp.76-77. "This [human] spirit must transcend number and break through multiplicity, and God will break through him: and just as He breaks through into me, so I break through in turn into Him. God leads this spirit into the desert and into the unity of Himself, where He is simply One and welling up in Himself. This spirit is in unity and freedom." Walshe, pp.124-5. Here in the German, the welling up in himself has the same sense as the boiling up of the Trinity in the essence or monad that we saw in Latin in *In Ex.*, n.16, p.46.

²¹⁸ "While I yet stood in my first cause, I *had* no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth. Then I wanted myself and wanted no other thing: what I wanted I was and what I was I wanted, and thus I was free of God and all things. But when I left my free will behind and received my created being, *then* I had a God. For before there were creatures, God was not 'God': He was That which He was. But when creatures came into existence and received their *created* being, then God was not 'God' in Himself – He was 'God' in creatures." Pr.52 p.421.

²¹⁹ "this One alone lacks all mode and property. And therefore, for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside, should He ever look in there. But only insofar as He is one and indivisible, without mode or properties (can he do this): in that sense He is neither Father, Son, nor Holy Ghost, and yet is a Something which is neither this nor that." Pr. 2, p.81.

²²⁰ "So one and simple is this citadel of the soul, elevated above all modes, of which I speak and which I mean, that that noble power [will] I mentioned is not worthy even for an instant to cast a single glance into this citadel; nor is that other power I spoke of [intellect], in which God burns and glows with all His riches and all His joy, able to cast a single glance inside; so truly one and simple is this citadel, so mode- and power-transcending is this solitary One, that neither power nor mode can gaze into it, nor even God Himself!" *Ibid.*

²²¹ "I have sometimes spoken of a light that is in the soul, which is uncreated and uncreatable. I continually touch on this light in my sermons: it is the light which lays straight hold of God, unveiled and bare, as He is in Himself, that is, it catches Him in the act of begetting." Pr. 48, p.310.

God's essence) she receives the birth of the Word.²²² In fact, she receives the Word in precisely the same way as it is eternally begotten from the Father.²²³ This reception of the eternally begotten Word, identified by Eckhart repeatedly in his German sermons, is the same act as the *bullitio* of God's eternal, creative and self-expressive actualising of the Trinity which, as we saw in 2b, Eckhart describes in terms of the begetting of the Son as the Word or idea of the Father and as the exemplar of creation. Through detachment the soul is therefore united with God's essence in the ground and in the same ground she is united with the Trinity. She is, in effect, caught up into the whole life of God, because she relates to God *as he is in himself*, as essence and Trinity.

The breakthrough of detachment thus resembles the negation of negation in the sense that it removes bounded ideas and signifiers from the soul's approach to God, but it does not leave her with nothing. Instead her perspective is reoriented to become theocentric. This perspective, which the soul gains through detachment, overflows into the whole of her being such that her activity is itself an expression of the same theocentricity that she possesses inwardly in her understanding – theocentric perspective is therefore not simply an intellectual understanding of truth, it is fundamentally entwined with the soul's being and acting.²²⁴ The soul thus resembles God, in that she possesses inwardly the same reality that she expresses outwardly. Her inward union in the ground and her activity in the world express the same synchronisation of potentiality

²²² “When the will is so unified that it forms as single *one*, then the heavenly Father bears His only-begotten Son in Himself – in me. Why in Himself, in me? Because then I am one with Him, He cannot shut me out, and in that act the Holy Ghost receives his being, his becoming, from me as from God. Why? Because I am *in* God. If he does not receive it from me, he does not receive it from God: he cannot in any way exclude me.” Q.25, p.92.

²²³ ‘Note this: God has no place more His own than a pure heart and a pure soul. *There* the Father begets His Son, just as He begets him in eternity – neither more nor less.’ Q. 5a, p.105.

²²⁴ “For all the truth learned by all the masters by their own intellect and understanding, or ever to be learned till Doomsday, they never had the slightest inkling of this knowledge and this ground. Though it may be called a nescience, an unknowing, yet there is in it more than in all knowing and understanding without it, for this unknowing lures and attracts you from all understood things and from yourself as well.” Q. 101, p.36.

and actuality as God's own being as one and three.²²⁵ The unsayable that Eckhart seeks to say is therefore the *act* of being with God. Apophasis and detachment 'say the unsayable' by pointing to being itself as a sphere where the soul gains understanding and the truth about God, the soul and reality, is not therefore only encountered through intellect or language. It is the act of living and of relating, not simply of knowing, where a real union between the soul and 'something' other than herself is possible, just as it is the act of self-expression that gives rise to the relational other in God's intra-divine life, and the created other in the universe which he causes and relates to. The apophatic perspective leads the soul outside of purely intellectual or linguistic exercises and into the territory of change, of growth, where understanding and releasing herself from illusory habits of thought and action is the primary focus. It is not the comprehension and contemplation of scholastic metaphysics or epistemology that matters, it is the *participation* in the reality that they signify that Eckhart aims to teach.

Turner appears to predict this argument, stating that if we are concerned with what Eckhart's speech 'does' and 'only secondarily with what what he says *means*' then the speech becomes less like poetry, and more like propaganda: 'in which no restrictions on truth or meaning are permitted to inhibit the achievement of belief in the propogandised: and this is propaganda regardless of whether the belief induced is true or false.'²²⁶ His warning is an important one. But we should not, for the sake of avoiding the charge of propaganda, interpret Eckhart's scholastic metaphysics without its implicit faith commitment. Just because certain aspects of Eckhart's teaching accord with our modern (or post-modern) perspective, we should not thoughtlessly bypass Eckhart's commitment to Christian doctrine, to church practice, to his Dominican

²²⁵ I will mention this point in chapter 3, where I will consider how in the German works Eckhart talks about the soul's union with God through detachment. Unfortunately, due to the constraints of this thesis, I will not be able to explore properly how the inner-outer structure of the soul's being resembles the same potential-actual structure of God's nature.

²²⁶ pp.151-2.

lifestyle and to the authority of scripture, all of which coloured and indeed gave birth to his thought. Turner's comment highlights a problem with how one should approach interpreting Eckhart. We can either recognise that the first step, the apophatic step in Eckhart's thought, is the orientation away from self-focus and towards God-focus, or theocentricity, and our reading of his theology might then do justice to his intentions in writing it. Or we can avoid this commitment and risk misinterpreting his thought, while perhaps increasing its usefulness for inter-faith dialogue, post-modern analysis, or discussions of mystical experiences. This is a difference which Robert Dobie highlights:

The difference between theology and philosophy, therefore, is not one of content; the difference lies in the way in which the truth of that content is appropriated. The one truth can be appropriated as an abstract objective truth, a revealed Law that is scrupulously to be fulfilled, or as a truth lived in the concrete particularity of the subject. It is this third mode of appropriation, the *truth as lived*, that interests Eckhart without, however, losing sight of its abstract, objective implications nor, most of all, its basis in the exegesis of the revealed Law.²²⁷

It is truth as embodied which matters to Eckhart, not truth as theoretically conceived but unverified. The issue is not therefore one of propaganda. It is of accepting that a proper understanding of Eckhart's metaphysics and anthropology requires the interpreter to engage with the theocentric way of life Eckhart wishes to teach, not simply viewing his theology as a series of conceptual statements about the theocentric perspective that this way of life frames. Even more, it is an issue of recognising what effect the Christian

²²⁷ (2010), pp.61-2.

God, who is both one and three, has upon creation and human individuality, precisely because, for Eckhart, God is the way he has revealed himself to be.

The significance of this chapter for my thesis is twofold. First, we have seen extensively and with reference to several of the controversial sermons, how Eckhart does not in fact deny the Trinity as a real feature of God's eternal existence, despite the fact that Eckhart states, in Pr. 52 for instance, that the soul's breaking through to the ground wherein she receives God as he is essence rather than Trinity, is the noblest aspect of the soul's union. I have interpreted this according to Eckhart's apophatic method, where what is being identified here is in fact a logical affirmation of God's necessary existence, not a subordination of the Trinity to the essence. As we shall see later, it is through the identification of God's nature as *detachment* that Eckhart goes on to show how the soul's identity exists in precisely the same freedom of self-expression as the eternal act of the Trinity, something we have already seen in this chapter in the mirroring in creaturely life of the flow of *bullitio-ebullitio-creatio*.

Secondly, we have seen in this chapter that for Eckhart, God does in fact possess distinct identity or personhood within himself, but this distinct personhood is only identifiable in an apophatic context, where all limited creaturely signification which defines distinction in terms of multiplicity, in terms of nothingness or attachment, has been negated. God's identity is distinct through its unity, a distinction defined by self-expression and relation, not by self-possession. God's distinction is a distinction *with* the other not distinction *from* the other and this, since it is God's own nature, is the fullest and highest form of distinction that exists. It is therefore the fullest and highest form of distinction that anything else can possess, since it is according to God's actualised self-expression as the relationally distinct persons of the Trinity that everything else exists distinctly, including the human soul and it is according to this

divine category of distinction that we must consider the soul's identity in Eckhart's theology.

The purpose of my thesis from here is no longer to show that Eckhart does not subordinate the Trinity to the essence, this has been sufficiently demonstrated. My aim now is to show how the soul's detachment and union with God, as we have seen him identified in chapters 1 and 2, does not actually destroy her individuality. Instead it is through her union with God the soul's identity is created, sustained and saved. It is given to her in the most full and free sense possible, as a gift which she does not possess in herself, just as God's persons do not have their own distinction as a possession in and of themselves. Her identity is in fact something which she has through her communion with God. My claim from here on therefore, is that the soul's distinct identity in its truest form is structured according to the kind of identity that God has. It is not something possessed by the soul, but something received through relation and expressed into relation. The soul's distinction exists most fully when she relates to God and expresses herself, or pours herself, more and more fully into that relation, just as God does in himself.

Chapter 3

'Lead us up beyond unknowing and light'

Introduction: Being a Soul

I have argued in chapters 1 and 2 that Eckhart does not deny the Trinity or subordinate it to God's essence. My reason in doing so has been to preserve the Trinity as a real and eternal category which applies to God, without which we cannot grasp how Eckhart conceives of the soul's union with God or how he understands the soul's identity. Without this we also cannot establish in a way that is fair to Eckhart's teaching, whether or not the soul is lost or absorbed into God in her union with him.

As I have claimed above, Eckhart's trinitarian theology presents us with a transformed understanding of distinction. Beginning with the apophatic affirmation which identifies God as that which truly exists and whose essence is his existence, we have seen how Eckhart goes on to consider God's trinitarian life as the actualised self-expression of this essence which, without the self-expressive act of the Trinity, would remain unexpressed and indistinct within itself. The Trinity is distinct where the essence is indistinct, there are three distinct persons within it who have distinct existence, however, their distinction for Eckhart, as I have shown, is not something they possess in and of themselves, but something they possess through their relation with one another. Relational distinction thus points to the unity which combines the persons. This unity *is* their mutual essence and is therefore the *potentia* for their boiling up as self-expressive and creative Trinity. The unity also points to the persons as the active self-expression of God; the actualisation of the potential for self-expression in the essence. This potential-actual dichotomy, we have seen, is not like it would be in time, where the potentiality would be prior to the actuality and require a cause to become actualised. Instead, in

God, who is his own cause and his own self-sufficiency, the potentiality is always actualised. The Son is always begotten, the Father always begets, and the Spirit is always breathed forth.²²⁸ God's relational distinction as Trinity is therefore an eternal reality, as real and eternal as the essence.

The Trinity is also intimately tied up with creation, since the boiling up of the persons always overflows into creativity, by which our universe came forth from God in the same act in which he was himself as Trinity. Here we have a similar teaching on the absolute connection between God and creation that we saw in the *Opus Tripartitum*, when Eckhart claimed that the existence of creation was itself evidence that God exists.²²⁹ This argument was given in the context of affirming God's necessity, since God is existence itself. When it comes to the Trinity, we see a similar connectedness: creation exists insofar as it comes forth from the single act of triune self-expression. This seems to tie God's triune life up with the life of creation, and indeed Eckhart suggests as much in some of the sermons, and was criticised at Cologne for precisely this claim. However, as I suggested above, in accord with Eckhart's apophaticism viewed as a negation of atheism, this can be seen in the context of what I am suggesting is Eckhart's broader theological request, that people engage with God as he has chosen to reveal himself. It is a request that God's revelation, in scripture, in the incarnation, and in creation, be taken seriously and viewed as they actually are for Eckhart – as signs that point first and foremost to God, by virtue of its existence as an effect of his self-expressive and creative triune act. Eckhart makes this point in a passage which considers the synonymy between distinction and indistinction in the *Commentary on Exodus*:

²²⁸ I will not be analysing Eckhart's pneumatology in this thesis. However, it is a topic that has not been seriously discussed in scholarship, not least because of the focus in his sermons of the theme of detachment and the birth of the Word, which has itself drawn a great deal of scholarly attention, perhaps at the expense of some of Eckhart's other teachings.

²²⁹ *Op. tri.*, pp.86-7.

What is as dissimilar and similar to something else as that whose ‘dissimilitude’ is its very ‘similitude,’ whose indistinction is its very distinction? God is distinguished from everything created, distinct, and finite by his indistinction and his infinity...Therefore, because he is distinguished by indistinction, is assimilated by dissimilitude, the more dissimilar he is the more similar he becomes. Thus, the more that one tries to speak about the ineffable, the less that one says about it as ineffable, as Augustine says in *Christian Doctrine*. Again, someone who denies time actually posits it, as Averroes says, because to deny time happens in time.²³⁰

Here the distinction and indistinction synonymy refers to the connection between God and creation, but as we saw in chapter 2, it applies equally well to the connection between essence and persons in the Trinity. In the final sentence Eckhart identifies precisely the point I have made about human speech throughout my thesis, that the act of speaking actually assumes the conditions which enable it to exist as speech – in this case time – and thus signifies those conditions through its own existence, even if the speaker seeks to superficially deny them with words. Eckhart uses this logic in the passage just quoted, as an analogy to clarify the penultimate sentence in the quote; that the more an individual tries to speak about the ineffable, the less they actually say. It is through unsaying then, through apophasis, that an individual therefore encounters what is true about the ineffable, since the silence of negation itself identifies the ineffable God as that with which the soul always has a connection. The point about speech in relation to time that Averroes makes is thus also true of speech in relation to God. It is

²³⁰ *In Ex.*, n.117, p.82.

for precisely this reason that apophatic speech functions as a negation of atheism; apophasis is merely the alignment of speech, through its self-denial, with what Eckhart believes to be a revealed truth – God is the creator and salvation of humanity. Both in his teaching on the essence and in his teaching on the Trinity, Eckhart is therefore trying to create in his audience a sense of what it really means to take God as he actually is, as he has revealed himself.

Eckhart calls his readers to let God be himself in their souls, to take him there where he is what he is, and to begin their relationship with him from that point. It is, I shall suggest below, precisely insofar as the soul does this, that she enters into her identity most fully, and the identity which she enters into – and indeed, which she already is insofar as she exists at all – is structured according to God’s identity from which she received her identity in the first place. By this I mean that she has her own identity according to the same relational distinction which defines the Trinity and which, in fact, defines all distinction, but which the soul only recognises when she aligns herself to the truth of God’s existence through detachment. The distinct persons of the Trinity are self-expressive, not self-possessive, defined by their movement towards the other rather than ownership of themselves and in this sense they are perfectly free. It is in this sense that the soul also has her own identity. She is herself the more she gives herself away, the more she communicates herself and receives the other in that same relation of reciprocal communication and acceptance. She thus has identity in precisely the same freedom in which God has his identity, a freedom defined by self-giving uninhibited by mistrust. She is herself through the unmerited reception of grace and through the response to this grace in the only way that acknowledges its reality – accepting it as it is given, freely and abundantly.

It is thus precisely insofar as we preserve God's triune identity in Eckhart's theology that we can also see how Eckhart preserves the soul's identity in her union with God, since it is only according to the triune identity that the soul exists as she is and has individual identity at all. It is perhaps also precisely insofar as the soul participates in this triune life that we as modern readers see her identity disappearing, since the more she is viewed from the point of view of relational distinction, the further she is from the way in which we commonly view distinction today; as distinction *from* rather than distinction *with* the other.²³¹ Were Eckhart to comment upon our reading of his theology today, he might point out to us that it is precisely insofar as we view the soul's participation in God's life as a loss of self, that we exhibit the kind of perspective which does not view God as he is, which does not allow God to be himself in us. This is why Eckhart's theology begins and ends with detachment, because without detachment – from ourselves, from the habits of our perspective and activity, from our routine ways of knowing and 'doing' God – we will never realise the extent to which we do not let God be himself, since he cannot be present in the soul if there is even 'a single image' between her and God.²³²

Eckhart's teaching on detachment has been eloquently and insightfully examined by a number of scholars, as has his teaching on the birth of the Word in the soul. Due to the constraints of this thesis and of my argument, I am not able to go into as deep an analysis as I would like to, and as such I will not be able to explain some of the points about Eckhart's teaching on detachment which have, after all, already been identified in much of the secondary literature that I have referenced. In my analysis I will draw heavily upon a cycle of four sermons on the eternal birth of the Word, Pr. 101-104, where Eckhart outlines some of the key points about how the soul becomes

²³¹ This is a claim that I will explore in depth in a future paper.

²³² Pr. 5b, p.110.

detached, enters its ground, and receives the eternal birth of the Word in its ground.²³³ I will interpret the teaching of detachment found in these sermons in accordance with the view of God that we have gleaned from chapters 1 and 2. I will then look at how the soul's identity seems to disappear in her union with God. I will look at how, through the birth of the Word she shares in God's identity by letting go of 'self.' It is this loss of self and sharing in God's identity which might at first seem like a loss of individuality in the soul. However, I will suggest that Eckhart is in fact presenting us with the truth of what the soul in fact is, and how she perceives, from *within* her relationship with God, a relationship defined by the reception of grace. The loss of self is therefore simply an orientation of perspective away from self-focus or falsehood and towards theocentricity or truth. Drawing upon several German sermons and upon the Latin sermon XXV, we will see that through no merit of her own the soul receives existence and salvation from God. The only response she can make to this is to receive the two graces (existence and salvation) as they are given – freely. Only when she responds thus, does she acknowledge her own existence and identity as it truly is, and in precisely the same moment she also acknowledges God as he is. She recognises that a true understanding of herself and of God depends upon an acknowledgment of the relationship that *already* exists between them and towards which she must direct her understanding and activity if she is to live and to perceive in a way that accords with what is true. As such she must not try to possess or control the graces she receives which include her existence and

²³³ McGinn notes the grouping of these sermons (likely dated c. 1303-1305) as a cycle, planned to be delivered in the Christmas season, hence the appropriateness of an extended treatment of the birth of the Word (McGinn p.54). He also points to their significance more generally as representative of Eckhart's mystical thought since they deal with many of the most important themes of his preaching. "These four sermons form an extended meditation on the meaning of Christ's birth based on key texts from the liturgy of the Christmas season. Though the birth of the Son in the soul is found almost everywhere in the Dominican's preaching, nowhere else does he make it a subject of a sermon cycle. Because the eternal birth takes place in the fused identity of the *grunt*, these sermons also contain one of the Dominican's most extensive explorations of the language of the ground (the term and its derivatives appear no less than thirty-three times). In addition, so many other of the major themes of Eckhart's preaching appear in this Christmas cycle that it can be described as a vernacular *summa* of his mysticism." (2001), p.54.

individual identity. She must not try to possess and turn them into objects which she falsely believes belong to her. Instead, through detachment she accepts them as graces freely and abundantly given to her from beyond the bounds of her control.

3a. Detachment and the Eternal Birth

In this section I will examine Eckhart's teaching on detachment, the ground, and the birth of the Word. It is somewhat artificial to distinguish between them, since Eckhart does not speak about the ground of the soul without also speaking about the birth of the Word that occurs there. Even one of the most extreme examples of Eckhart's denial of the Trinity in the soul's union with the Godhead in the silent citadel of the soul in Pr. 2, ends with a prayer that 'we may be such a citadel to which Jesus may ascend and be received to abide eternally in us in such wise as I have said'.²³⁴ He thus refers back to the first part of the sermon where the soul, to become detached, had to become free and virginal so that she could overflow with a fruitful wifeliness, bearing fruits back into God just as he bore them through the birthing of the Word in the ground of the soul.²³⁵

As I suggested in chapters 1 and 2, the prioritisation of the soul's sharing in the unity of the Godhead (in the essence) in Eckhart's sermons is not an ontological denial or subordination of the Trinity, it is in fact a logical affirmation of the first 'step' of detachment – the recognition of God's necessity. Eckhart's discussion of detachment is, in other words, a poetic but logical (in the sense that it accords with what is true about the universe) consideration of the 'process' the soul must go through to be united with God. Eckhart's teaching on how the soul knows God through detachment is therefore identical to the apophatic approach we saw in his Latin works as we see from this passage in Pr. 104:

²³⁴ Pr. 2, p.80.

²³⁵ Pr. 2, pp.78-79.

The intellect can only find rest in ‘pure unmixed being itself...’ which is God. Therefore, in this life, the intellect cannot find rest...However much God may reveal Himself in this life, yet it is still as nothing to what He really is. Though truth is there in the ground, it is yet veiled and concealed from the intellect. All this while, the intellect has no support to rest on in the way of a changeless object. It still does not rest, but goes on expecting and preparing for something yet to become known, but so far hidden. Thus there is no way man can know what God *is*. But one thing he does know: what God is *not*. And this a man of intellect will reject.²³⁶

In this passage Eckhart identifies the apophatic nature of human knowledge of God. The intellect cannot know God like it knows objects in creation. In creation the soul knows through its powers when they make contact with something in the world, ‘set to work and make an image and likeness of the creature, which they absorb.’²³⁷ This creaturely knowing is precisely the kind of knowing which we have already seen in the Latin works, where Eckhart suggested that creaturely knowledge occurs through encountering things that exist in the world, whereas God’s knowledge occurs beyond ‘things’ and is in fact their cause. For the soul to know God, she cannot therefore do it with creaturely knowing, but must pass beyond all images and likenesses of creatures. She must even pass beyond the powers of the soul themselves: intellect, memory, love, will, these are all means by which the soul effects things and approaches truth in a creaturely way.²³⁸ They enable the soul’s activity in space-time, and as such her ‘every external act is

²³⁶ Pr. 104, pp.50-1.

²³⁷ Pr. 101, p.31.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.30.

effected by some means.’²³⁹ To know God through detachment however, means to know him without means, to know him from the soul’s essence, from her ground:

in the soul’s essence there is no activity, for the powers she works with emanate from the ground of being. Yet in that ground is the silent ‘middle’: here nothing but rest and celebration for this birth, this act, that God the Father may speak His word there, for *this* part is by nature receptive to nothing save only the divine essence, without mediation.²⁴⁰

The soul’s real knowing of God here comes from her unknowing of creaturely categories when she enters into the indistinction of the ground through detachment.²⁴¹ It is in this same silent middle of the soul, in her ground where she knows God essentially and without mediation that she also receives the birth of the Word. In fact, this passage identifies the silent ground as a place of rest and celebration for this birth. As we shall see later on, the soul in her ground thus resembles God’s own intra-divine life, where from the essence or indistinction, the Word is born and spoken forth as part of the triune activity.

For Eckhart, detachment is thus the stripping away down to the barest of being, down to the ground where the soul is the same as God’s essence. The defining feature of the ground is apophatic; it is separate from creatureliness, from multiplicity and from the self:

we will take the words, ‘In the midst of silence there was spoken within me a secret word.’ – ‘But sir, where is the silence, and where is the place where the

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.30-1.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

word is spoken?’ – As I said just now, it is in the purest thing that the soul is capable of, in the noblest part, the ground – indeed, in the very essence of the soul which is the soul’s most secret part. There is the silent ‘middle,’ for no creature ever entered there and no image, nor has the soul there either activity or understanding; therefore she is not aware *there* of any image, whether of herself or of any other creature.²⁴²

When Eckhart speaks here about the absence of images or creatureliness in the ‘middle’ or ground of the soul, he is referring specifically to the way in which the soul knows things in time. This creaturely knowing is precisely the kind of knowing which we have already seen negated in the apophatic affirmation of the Latin works, where Eckhart distinguished between nothingness – creaturely knowledge that occurs through encountering things that exist in the world – and somethingness – God’s knowledge which occurs beyond ‘things’ and is in fact their cause. The total absence of any image in the ground, either of creatures or of the soul herself, leaves space for God to be himself in the ground and, as such, the soul’s ground is identical with God’s own ground:

As surely as the Father in His simple nature bears the Son naturally, just as surely He bears him in the inmost recesses of the spirit, and *this* is the inner world. Here God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground. Here I live from my own as God lives from His own.²⁴³

²⁴² Pr. 101, p.30.

²⁴³ Pr. 5b, p.109.

Thus, in the ground, the soul does not only pass beyond creaturely knowing, she seemingly passes beyond her conception of a distinction between herself and God, since their ground is in fact one and the same. If we bear in mind the similarity here between Eckhart's teaching on detachment and his apophatic teaching in the Latin works seen above, then the soul appears to be perceiving her participation in precisely the same unity between God and creation embodied in Eckhart's claim that God is existence itself, as we saw in 1b, and also in the unity between creation and the Trinity, where the birth of the Son in the Godhead boils up with the other persons and overflows into creation, being born in creation as the exemplar in the same now in which he is born eternally in God, as we saw in 2a-c. As Eckhart states in the first lines of Pr. 101: 'Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature.'²⁴⁴ He states it again at the start of Pr. 102, 'I say as I have often said before, that this eternal birth occurs in the soul precisely as it does in eternity, no more and no less, for it is *one* birth, and this birth occurs in the essence and ground of the soul.'²⁴⁵ When Eckhart says that the birth in the soul is the same as the birth in eternity in God, he therefore speaks completely in accord with the teaching on the Word as exemplar of creation which we saw in 2b.

Just as apophasis was not actually a negation but an affirmation, so also detachment is not simply a stripping down to the ground or to the essence. Detachment, like apophasis, is also a process by which the soul's being and knowing is reoriented towards her exemplar. In other words, through detachment the soul is reoriented such that her perspective is in accord with the truth of her existence. Like apophasis, detachment therefore aims to align the soul's perspective with this truth and to do so she

²⁴⁴ Pr. 101, p.29.

²⁴⁵ Pr. 102, p.39.

must cease to define knowledge in terms of creaturely categories:

in truth, if you would find this noble birth, you must leave the crowd and return to the source and ground whence you came. All the powers of the soul, and all their works – these are the crowd. Memory, understanding, and will, they all diversify you, and therefore you must leave them all: sense perceptions, imagination, or whatever it may be that in which you find or seek to find yourself. After that, you *may* find this birth but not otherwise – believe me!²⁴⁶

Detachment, as we saw with apophysis, is not simply a statement about union with God's essence, it is concerned fundamentally with the birth of the Word, and thus with the self-expressive life of the Trinity.²⁴⁷ To become detached the soul must pass beyond creatureliness completely, but the telos of detachment is not emptiness, it is fullness through the reception of the birth of the Word. The ground is thus identical with God's ground, not simply through their mutual indistinction, but through their mutual potentiality for the birth. As Lanzetta suggests:

For Eckhart the quest for the naked Godhead is essential to rejoin the inner life of divinity at the well of renewal and regeneration where new spiritual life comes forth. While the Trinity reveals the divine in its activities of interpenetration, interrelation, and mutuality, the Desert of the Godhead, as the womb of nothingness, is an undifferentiated and inactive source of all potentiality.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Pr. 103, p.55.

²⁴⁷ Since the distinct existence of the Word that is born is received from the Father as begetter of the Word.

²⁴⁸ Lanzetta (2001), p.41.

The ground thus resembles the essence as the potentiality for the Godhead, indeed, Eckhart defines the ground as “potential receptivity,” which certainly does not lack being nor is it deficient, but it is the *potential* of receptivity in which you will be perfected’.²⁴⁹ The soul’s ground, like God’s essence, is defined in terms of its potentiality. Unlike God’s essence however, which is self-sufficient, the soul’s full potentiality is actualised by reception of the birth of the Word. God does not need to orientate himself towards himself in a particular way to actualise his own potentiality as Trinity, but does this ceaselessly and eternally, whereas the soul *must* orientate herself, or rather, be oriented, towards God if her potentiality is to be actualised.

The soul does not reorient herself by her own power however, since her powers have been abandoned through detachment (not abandoned ontologically, i.e. she has not ceased to be a soul, but the value of her own powers as things which can grasp truth has been negated). In Pr. 104 Eckhart distinguishes between the passive and active intellect. The active intellect experiences things in the world and introduces them to the passive intellect by turning them into images which the passive intellect can then reflect upon.²⁵⁰ Through detachment, as we saw, the soul must pass completely beyond her creaturely ways of knowing and defining things. As such, she must let her active intellect become silent: ‘Indeed, when a man is quite unpreoccupied, and the active intellect within him is silent, then God *must* take up the work and must be the master workman who begets Himself in the passive intellect.’²⁵¹ When the intellect is silent, God himself takes on the role of the active intellect in the soul in an analogous if not identical way to how he became the genus for all things whose genus or categories are dissolved in the indistinction of his essence, as we saw in 1b. Through detachment the

²⁴⁹ Pr. 103, p.56.

²⁵⁰ Pr. 104, p.49.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

soul is also so united to God that all her activity and will becomes his.²⁵² It is therefore not by the soul's power that she receives the birth of the Word, or acts in accord with God's will, or even knows things in the world with her active intellect. It is by God's power that she exists thus in detachment, and their unity is such that God cannot not enter the soul when she exists like this:

You would like to partly prepare yourself and partly let God prepare you, but this cannot be. You cannot think or desire to prepare yourself more quickly than God can move in to prepare you...you should know that God *must* act and pour Himself into you the moment He finds you ready. Do not imagine that God is like a human carpenter, who works or not as he likes, who can do or leave undone as he wishes. It is different with God: as and when God finds you ready, He has to act, to overflow into you, just as when the air is clear and pure the sun has to burst forth and cannot refrain. It would surely be a grave defect in God if He performed no great works in you and did not pour great goodness into you whenever He found you thus empty and bare.²⁵³

The soul, Eckhart makes quite clear, cannot by her own power prepare herself for God to enter her. The soul can only become detached and that is not, as we have seen, an affirmative act; it is not a means or a knowledge, but an unknowing and a negation of means. Insofar as the soul does this she is united with God to such an extent that he *must* overflow into her. Eckhart here uses the double negative of apophatic affirmation, indicating that it is in fact necessary for God to enter the soul who empties herself down

²⁵² C.f. Pr. 52, pp.420-423. The theme of this sermon is how God takes the soul's activity upon himself. The soul, who is truly poor, is completely detached from all things, that God's activity and the soul's activity are one. The whole sermon is in fact an extended treatment of how the soul wants, knows and acts when it is truly detached. It is as such a perfect example of the perspective of a detached soul.

²⁵³ Pr. 103, p.58.

to the ground. Inasmuch as he is God, he must do this, since he and the soul are so united. This necessity that Eckhart identifies in God is once again a way for him to show that our understanding of God must be in accord with how he has revealed himself. God *has* created, and he *has* offered creatures their beatitude through salvation. To say that God must enter a soul who opens herself to him, is therefore really to affirm that God has expressed himself honestly through revelation; he must do this because he has revealed this to be something eternally true about himself.²⁵⁴ It is, once again, an attempt on Eckhart's part, to show us that our approach to God should be one that allows him to be himself. In fact, as we see again shortly when we look at sermon XXV, Eckhart is effectively requesting that the soul views herself and God in terms of the grace and freedom in which God exists, through which he creates and in which the soul therefore finds her own existence most fully.

3b. The Loss of Self?

As we saw above, to become detached the soul must stop trying to approach God with her creaturely actions and her creaturely knowledge and instead enter into her ground, becoming a silent nothing, waiting for God to speak into her. The ground is not however empty, it is fraught, as we saw above, with potential receptivity for God, which God must act to fulfil. As such, the silencing of the soul's creaturely knowing and of her selfhood resembles a kind of attentive listening – a negation of distraction rather than a negation of everything – since it is only by giving complete attention to the possibility of God's presence through detachment that the soul will be able to receive that presence. She receives it in a manner which accords to the true structure of God's own

²⁵⁴ We therefore find ourselves up against a broader discussion of predestination which Eckhart explores in his work *On Detachment*, but which we do not have sufficient space to consider here. See *On Detachment*, pp.569-7 for Eckhart's discussion of predestination in relation to the effectiveness of prayer.

being, both through the union with his essence in their mutual ground, and through the reception of the birth of the Word:

our Lord says, ‘no one hears my word or my teaching unless he has abandoned self.’ For to hear the Word of God demands absolute self-surrender. The hearer is the same as the heard in the eternal Word. All that the eternal Father teaches, is His being and His nature and His entire Godhead, which He divulges to us altogether in His Son and teaches us that we are that same Son. A man who had gone out of self so far that he was the only-begotten Son would own all that the only-begotten Son owns. Whatever God performs and whatever He teaches, all that He performs and teaches in His only-begotten Son. God performs all His works that we may become the only-begotten Son. When God sees that we *are* the only-begotten Son, He is in such haste to get to us and hurries so much as if His divine being would be shattered and destroyed in itself, that He may reveal to us the abyss of His Godhead and the plenitude of His being and His nature: God then hastens to make it our own just as it is His own. Here God has delight and joy in abundance. That man stands in God’s ken and in God’s love, and becomes none other than what God is Himself.²⁵⁵

It is at this point in detachment where one could claim that soul’s identity seems to disappear most completely, not only through the initial negation of self in detachment but also through the birth of the Word where the soul is no longer herself separate from God for she has become identical with the Word.. The passage above can be interpreted in light of the teaching about God that we saw in chapters 1 and 2. God expresses

²⁵⁵ Pr. 12, pp.295-6.

himself in the soul through his triune life and especially through the begetting of the Son who, as the exemplar of creatures, communicates God to creatures directly in their substance, in other words it is because of the Son that they are creatures at all. This is especially the case for the human soul, who alone receives the birth of the Word in her ground,²⁵⁶ a point that indicates her uniqueness amongst creatures because she has intellectual nature.²⁵⁷ When the Father thus gives birth to the Son, he communicates the entire Godhead, since it is through the essence that he has the *potentia* for begetting, not through himself as Father. Thus the activity of the Trinity communicates God's unity, oneness or essence even though it speaks through the act of the relationally distinct persons. The difference in this passage from the Latin works we examined above, is the specific identification of the soul as the Son, an identity that occurs through the birth and it is in this sense that her own identity seems to disappear. How can the soul still be considered as the same individual when she has let go of all creatureliness, all powers, all selfhood? Or when she has had her powers, her active intellect, will, knowledge and desire – replaced with God's own? Or when she has in fact become identical with the Word? For Eckhart, as we shall shortly see, to be inwardly passive and thus to receive/suffer (*liden*) God's presence within the soul is the greatest beatitude. It is precisely this sense of self-loss and union with God that makes Eckhart's theology so fruitful for comparison with Buddhist and Hindu mysticism.²⁵⁸ The soul appears completely united with and indistinguishable from all that is God's, and in this sense her own selfhood seems to disappear. As Eckhart states in a beautiful passage in Pr. 1:

²⁵⁶ 'No creature but the soul alone is receptive to this act, this birth, Indeed, such perfection as enters the soul, whether it be divine undivided light, grace, or bliss, must enter the soul through this birth, and in no other way.' Pr. 102, p.39.

²⁵⁷ See for instance sermon XXV, p.218. Note, I have not been able to examine this particular feature of Eckhart's teaching on how the soul relates to the Word and receives the Word as the imprint of intellectual nature within itself. It is a common scholastic belief, but it receives a new slant in Eckhart's teaching on the absolute separateness and unity between God and creatures. It is in fact due to the teaching on divine ideas that enables Eckhart to emphasise this paradox so strongly.

²⁵⁸ See Charlotte Radler, (2006), p.112, where she connects Eckhart's theology to the Buddhist teaching of *anattā*, or 'not-self.'

God alone is free and uncreated, and thus He alone is like the soul in freedom, though not in uncreatedness, for she is created. And when she emerges into the unmixed light, she falls into her Nothingness and in that Nothingness so far from the created Something, that of her own power she cannot return to her created Something. God with His uncreatedness upholds her Nothingness and preserves her in His Something. The soul has dared to become nothing and so cannot of herself return to herself, for she has departed so far from herself before God comes to the rescue. That must be so, for, as I said, Jesus went into the Temple and cast out those who were buying and selling, and said to the others, ‘Take this hence!’²⁵⁹

The createdness of the soul is an insurmountable fact, and it remains so even when the soul perceives herself from within her first cause. Entering the ground is not a cessation of the soul’s createdness; instead it is the means by which the soul bypasses the limitations in her creaturely understanding of God. In the ground she thus falls away from all createdness, including her own self – she negates herself and becomes nothing. In doing this, she lets go of all her creaturely power and understanding by which she would otherwise be able to come back to herself, but she does not cease to be existent, for God is still able to enter into her, the negation does not therefore negate the fact that she is. God in turn, must enter into her and in so doing he upholds the soul in his somethingness, he sustains her with his own being because she can no longer sustain herself. He does this, as we just saw in Pr. 12, by making her identical with his Son. She appears to have completely disappeared as she was in herself, but reappears within the

²⁵⁹ Pr. 1, p.69.

divine categories of personhood. In a certain sense this passage is really about the soul's recognition that she was never able to sustain herself and always depended upon God for her existence and sustenance whether she recognised it or not. The soul's reorientation is therefore not really a change or a transformation in the soul nor is it a denial that she is a creature. Instead it is about the soul's recognition in her understanding and her being, that apart from God she is nothing. Detachment then is the way in which the soul recognises the truth about reality and about her dependence upon God. It is also the way in which she lives according to this truth which, having recognised it through detachment, she no longer has the capacity to ignore without ceasing to become detached.

In Pr. 67, a sermon rarely cited in scholarship, Eckhart identifies Christ as the category in which the soul possesses personal being after the act of detachment. He states that the indistinction of the ground is 'the highest perfection of the spirit to which man can attain spiritually in this life', where the soul 'grasps the pure absoluteness of free being, which has no location, which neither receives nor gives: it is bare 'self-identity' which is deprived of all being and all self-identity'.²⁶⁰ But he then adds,

This is not the highest perfection: that which we shall possess forever with body and soul. Then the outer man will be entirely maintained through the supportive possession of personal being, just as humanity and divinity are one personal being in the person of Christ. Therefore I have in that the same support of personal being in such a manner that I myself *am* that personal being while totally denying my awareness of self, so that I am spiritually one according to my ground, just as the ground itself is one ground. Thus according to the outer

²⁶⁰ Pr. 67, p.358.

being I should be the same personal being, [but] entirely deprived of *my own* support. This personal man-God-being outgrows and soars above the outer man altogether, so that he can never reach it...Thus, just as the inner man, in spiritual wise, loses his own being by his ground becoming one ground, so too the outer man must be deprived of his own support and rely entirely on the support of the eternal personal being which is this very personal being.²⁶¹

This passage identifies a critical point I have been making about detachment, that it is not an ontological change in the soul, not an ontological loss of self or an ontological denial of the Trinity. It is instead a reorientation, a theo-centering of the soul's entire existence where this theocentricity is really just an admission of what is true about reality, since everything that exists depends totally upon God and not upon itself. Our manner of knowing God should thus resemble the manner of our existence – depending upon God and not upon ourselves and detachment is the process by which the soul recognises this. Through detachment the soul removes her dependence upon herself and turns instead to God, losing herself in the process, but also gaining through this apparent self-loss, a union with the Son, through his birth in her ground, which resembles – in time – the same union with the Son that Eckhart here identifies as the eternal perfection of the soul. This eternal perfection is in turn identified as a reception of grace, since the soul referred to in this passage, to be able to exist in possession of personal being, must be 'directed by the gracious being by which, through grace, he is supported'.²⁶² The soul is thus ordered according to God's being and shares in the personhood of the Son, not through any means of her own, but through a total dependence upon grace.

²⁶¹ Pr. 67, p.359.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

In sermon XXV, Eckhart identifies two graces which the soul receives from God through no merit of her own. The first of these, ‘usually called “grace freely given”,’ is received by all creatures and is the grace of existence. The second is ‘saving grace’, and that is ‘proper only to intellectual and good creatures’, i.e. to the human soul.²⁶³ The soul thus receives existence and salvation through no merit of her own and by them she both flows out from God, and returns to him, in precisely the same flow of triune life with which he boils up in himself, boils over into creativity, and unites creation to himself through his Son, as we shall see below when we return to Pr. 67. Apophatic theology and detachment are both processes of orienting the soul’s understanding of herself and her universe in such a way that she recognises this grace. She acknowledges that she has done nothing to deserve either of them and she only receives them insofar as she is ordered towards God:

no creature seems to be able passively to receive grace or any kind of perfection, especially a common one, insofar as it is a creature, or insofar as it is this and that; but only insofar as it is ordered to God, and thus excluded and removed from every order and relation either to itself or to another created thing – to a this or that.²⁶⁴

The soul’s only appropriate response to the reception of grace is the one embodied in detachment and apophasis – she must orient her being and understanding in such a way that she acknowledges these graces for what they are – the ordering principles of her existence – and allows them to define who she is and what she does. She therefore responds to grace with the same freedom in which it is given, by freely receiving, and

²⁶³ Sermon XXV, n.258, p.218.

²⁶⁴ Sermon XXV, n.266, p.220.

her life thus resembles the same perfect freedom and reciprocity that defines God's own triune existence and self-expression.²⁶⁵

The birth of the Word in the soul is therefore directly in accord with this teaching on grace and, as such, with the teaching on salvation that the second grace of sermon XXV implied. It is precisely through the soul's participation in God's life through the union with the begotten Son which happens eternally in God, temporally in the incarnation, and continually in the human soul, that the soul is united with God in both her inner and outer dimensions – in other words, in the whole of herself, her ground and her activity.²⁶⁶ This is made even clearer by Eckhart in Pr. 67, where he talks about the soul's union with God in terms of the hypostatic union which he discusses with reference to God's non-dual existence as essence and Trinity:

We have now therefore two kinds of being. One 'being' is according to the Godhead, bare substantial being, the other is personal being, and yet both are one 'substance.' Now since the same substance whereby Christ is a person, as the bearer of Christ's eternal humanity, is also the substance of the soul, and yet there is one Christ as regards substance, as regards both being and person, so too we must be the same Christ, following him in his works, just as he is one Christ as regards his humanity. For, since by my humanity I am of the same genus, therefore I am so united to his personal being that, by grace, I am one in that personal being and *am* that personal being. So, since God dwells eternally in the ground of the Father, and I in him, *one* ground and the same Christ, as a single

²⁶⁵ As Eckhart suggests in the *Commentary on Exodus* immediately after affirming God apophatically and identifying creatures as nothingness apart from their connectedness in God, the essence which is existence itself 'accepts and gives freely'. *In Ex.*, n.74 p.68.

²⁶⁶ I have not had time to examine inner-outer dimensions of the soul. Eckhart does however discuss it at length and in a future study I would like to consider this properly in light of the argument I have made in this thesis.

bearer of my humanity, then this (humanity) is as much mine as his in one substance of eternal being, so that the being of both, body and soul, attain perfection in one Christ, as one God, one Son.²⁶⁷

These two kinds of being are the essence and Trinity that have been the subject of this thesis and in this passage, as we saw in chapter 2, the bare substantial being (essence) and the personal being (Trinity) are one substance, they are united with each other and also with the soul. The soul's union with Christ through the substance she shares with him and which Christ assumed in the incarnation is the means by which she shares in the same personal being that Christ is himself as the Son in the Trinity. The beatitude of the soul is thus placed in its participation in this Christological identity, which draws the soul into the life of the Trinity and thus into the eternal reality of God who is both essence *and* Trinity.

The soul's beatitude, insofar as she can attain it in time, is therefore dependent upon this same union with God, where, through grace, she no longer supports herself, but is supported by God's personal being and, more importantly, recognises that she is supported thus by receiving that grace in a state of detachment, of non-possession. The passage above from Pr. 1 where the soul became a nothing and God supported her with his somethingness, is thus revealed as a statement about the soul's reception of personal being and existence itself, from God through grace. As such her beatitude depends upon her allowing God to be himself in her:

Our bliss lies not in our activity, but in being passive to God. For just as God is more excellent than creatures, by so much is God's work more excellent than

²⁶⁷ Pr. 67, pp.359-60.

mine. It was from His immeasurable love that God set our happiness in suffering, for we undergo more than we act, and receive incomparably more than we give; and each gift that we receive prepares us to receive yet another gift, indeed a greater one, and every divine gift further increases our receptivity and the desire to receive something yet higher and greater. Therefore some teachers say that it is in *this* respect that the soul is commensurate with God. For just as God is boundless in giving, so too the soul is boundless in receiving or conceiving. And just as God is omnipotent to act, so too the soul is no less profound to suffer; and thus she is transformed with God and in God. God *must* act and the soul must suffer, He must know and love Himself in her; she must know with His knowledge and love with His love, and thus she is far more with what is His than with her own, and so too her bliss is more dependent on His action than on her own.²⁶⁸

The activity which does not grant the soul her bliss is all the creaturely knowledge and self-focus present in the soul's perspective before detachment. By negating her attached activity through detachment and becoming passive to God, she acknowledges herself as she truly is, receiving God as he is in himself – as her cause and as her beatitude. She passively suffers him to be in her ground and therein receives gifts from him. Her passive reception of God is thus comparable to her possession of personal being in eternity, where the inner and outer dimensions of her being were also supported through grace. God's identity is here shown as boundless giving and the soul's identity as boundless receiving. Inasmuch as she receives God she is therefore herself, inasmuch as she acknowledges grace as the defining feature of her identity and her universe she

²⁶⁸ Pr. 102, p.44.

enters into her individuality most fully. In this sense the soul's identity resembles God's own, since her distinction is not defined as something separate from God, but as something received through her relation with God and the 'place' where we must therefore look if we seek to find the soul's individuality, where her identity exists and is sustained, is within her relationship with God. Her identity then is not *in her per se*, it is *in God's* reception of her – in their relation. The soul subsequently has this relational identity more and more truly, the more she passively receives God and enters into this relation. This is the kind of union that Eckhart seeks to convey through the birth of the Word and, as I have suggested throughout, it is both enabled and signified through a theocentric orienting of the soul's perspective.

Concluding Remarks for Chapter 3

In Pr. 103, Eckhart responds to an imagined question from his congregation, it might even be the same question that we have been asking him in the course of this thesis: 'Well sir, since you are always assuming that some day this birth will occur in me, that the Son will be born in me – now, can I have any sign by which to recognise that this *has taken place?*'²⁶⁹ This is a difficult question, since, if the soul loses itself in the birth, how can it know that it has received the birth? The fact that the question creates this paradox should itself cause us to pause before *assuming* that Eckhart believes the self is lost or denied in her union with God. Eckhart's response speaks for itself:

Yes indeed!...I am often asked if a man can reach the point where he is no longer hindered by time, multiplicity, or matter. Assuredly! Once this birth has really occurred, no creatures can hinder you; instead, they will all direct you to God

²⁶⁹ Pr. 103, p.59.

and this birth. Take lightning as an analogy. Whatever it strikes, whether tree, beast, or man, it turns at once toward itself. A man with his back toward it is instantly turned round to face it. If a tree had a thousand leaves, they would all turn right side up towards the stroke. So it is with all in whom this birth occurs, they are promptly turned toward this birth with all they possess, be it never so earthy. In fact, what used to be a hindrance now helps you most. Your face is so fully turned toward this birth that, no matter what you see or hear, you can get nothing but this birth from all things. All things become simply God to you, for in all things you notice only God, just as a man who stares long at the sun sees the sun in whatever he afterward looks at. If *this* is lacking, this looking for and seeking God in all and sundry, then you lack this birth.²⁷⁰

In this chapter I have attempted to show that detachment is concerned with the soul's perspective and not with its ontological status as a self or of the Trinity and this is in fact precisely what Eckhart implies in this passage, where the presence of the birth in the soul is evinced in the theocentricity of the soul's perspective. She sees so theocentrically that even those things which previously hindered her are now an aid towards her vision of God.

We will see more clearly the significance of this analysis of the German works in the general conclusion below and also look at how it fits with the general concerns of my thesis. At the end of this chapter however, I would like to acknowledge that my analysis of these German works has been brief to say the least, and a proper interpretation of Eckhart's trinitarian teaching on detachment will be a project for the future. I fully admit the brevity with which we have explored detachment, the birth of

²⁷⁰ Pr. 103, p.59.

the Word, the ground of the soul, how the soul knows through its powers and all the other points mentioned above. There are also some points which relate directly to my thesis which I have not had the opportunity to draw out, for instance: predestination; the relationship between the soul's inner and outer being and the connection of this to the active-passive dichotomy; the fact that detachment is not an ideal of contemplation or mystical experience but relates just as much to the fruitful overflow of activity from the soul; the figure of the just or noble man who features as an ideal of the detached soul in several of Eckhart's works; the living without a why which defines the soul's existence when it is detached; Eckhart's teaching on sin and evil, which are examples of attachment but do not exhaustively define all of attachment; Eckhart's approach to church practice and especially to the sacraments; a closer analysis of christology and soteriology as well as an engagement with Eckhart's pneumatology which is often overlooked but which relates significantly to his teaching on love. This list is not exhaustive, but my aim in naming a number of my major thematic omissions is to make it clear that I know how limited my analysis has been. It was merely my intention in this chapter to show how we might read Eckhart's teaching on the soul's identity and her union with God in the German works when we accredit more value to his trinitarian theology and to his understanding of apophasis as a habit of mind which prioritises God and, precisely insofar as it allows God to be himself, also negates the habits of normal human thought and activity which stand between the soul and her true union with God.

Conclusion

'Christ is all and in all!'

In Ben Morgan's recent work *On Becoming God*, he criticises the existentialist and post-modern use of mysticism and mystical language as a tool, used to try and break out of the structures of the rationalist philosophy of the enlightenment and early 20th century. He suggests specifically that the post-modern critique of the Cartesian concept of selfhood is still rooted in precisely that form of selfhood. The philosophers Morgan criticises view truth and reality from within the Cartesian assumption of autonomous individualism, even whilst trying to critique the assumptions therein of how an individual relates to truth or to reality. They do this without realising that the problem is not with the concept of the truth but with the understanding of what the self is who seeks that truth and how one should understand that process of seeking.²⁷¹ Morgan suggests a different model and shows that a relational understanding of what it means to be a self provides the kind of structure which responds to the post-modern rejection of the Cartesian self and also provides us with a different kind of framework within which we can better understand Meister Eckhart's theology.²⁷²

The concept of selfhood which Morgan presents has certain similarities with Eckhart's teaching on the Trinity of interrelated persons which in turn define all identity and distinction in the universe. Morgan does not make this connection but it is a useful parallel with my argument. Drawing on how Eckhart speaks about relation and personhood in the Trinity I have aimed to provide a critique similar to that which Morgan makes of the Cartesian self, but in the context of Eckhart's rejection of nothingness and attachment, or rather, as I have also called it, his negation of atheism.

²⁷¹ *On Becoming God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), p.33.

²⁷² pp.33-55.

The habits of the soul who focuses on nothingness and attachment have startlingly similar features to the model of selfhood that Morgan critiques. In both cases identity is defined more in terms of separateness from the other rather than in terms of relation and reciprocity.

Morgan stops short of identifying God's existence as a feature of reality which ontologically changes the status of the individual's relationship to themselves and to truth. Instead he treats God more as something which has a noticeable effect upon the individual's perspective, but the question of whose existence remains nonetheless unanswered. Eckhart has no qualms about assuming God's existence, or at least, arguing for God's existence in a way that seems, from a modern perspective, to beg the question. In fact his whole theology hinges on this question begging, since it is God's real existence alone that gives salvific importance to the de-centering of self and the re-centering of God. This is why I think it is helpful to consider apophaticism as a negation of atheism and why Morgan's reading is not therefore sufficient. For Eckhart, God is an inescapably real principle behind everything that exists, the structure of whose being moreover – as one and three – lends itself to the ordering of reality. To suggest that an understanding of what the self is should be viewed from within this all-encompassing view of God, does not advocate salvation through absorption and loss of individual identity, it identifies a perfectly theocentric view of reality – a perfectly faithful view – as the true way of viewing the universe. It may seem astounding to readers of Eckhart that he begins with the assumption of God's existence, but what is really more astounding is that some scholars interpret Eckhart's theology from outside of the context of this belief through the assumptions that they make about what it means to be an individual and what it means to exist in the universe. Eckhart is, after all, a devout Christian who devoted his whole life to what he believed he was called to do in accord

with his faith in God and his obedience to the church.²⁷³ To doubt the integrity of his commitment therefore, or to overlook the real effect that faith in a living God has upon his thought, means that we interpret Eckhart's theology as other than it was intended to be. That is perfectly acceptable, as long as scholars acknowledge that they are doing this and as long as there is a fruitful reason for doing so.

As I have suggested in this thesis, even though the soul's point of view is filled with God such that she cannot perceive herself as distinct from God, that does not mean that the soul does not have some kind of distinct identity in her relationship with God. In actual fact she has that identity *because* she has a point of view from which to perceive God as all-encompassing. If Eckhart's apophaticism genuinely led to silence and nothingness then the soul would herself become a silent nothing. But Eckhartian negation does not do this. Instead it leads to the Christian God who contains indistinction and distinction, essence and Trinity, indistinctly from each other. A God who graciously gives individual existence to all creatures whose in-formed existence boils-over from God through no merit of their own but through God's own self-expressive freedom and grace. L. Stafford Betty's article "Towards a Reconciliation of Mysticism and Dualism" is useful for explaining this point.²⁷⁴ He suggests that Eckhart confuses the distinction between anthropology and ontology by identifying himself with his Lord without acknowledging the prior condition of his own selfhood as that which enabled this experience:

There is no good reason that there should *not* be two beings ultimately involved in the experience of mystical unity. I do not mean to deny the mystic his claim to

²⁷³ As we see in his trial and condemnation, at no point does he aim to be disobedient to the church and was willing to denounce his teachings if they were condemned: 'I can be in error, but I cannot be a heretic, because the first belongs to the intellect, the second to the will.' *Defense*, p.72.

²⁷⁴ Though perhaps not in the way that he intended!

a unitive experience. Granted that he loses all awareness of himself as subject confronting object. Granted that he loses even his awareness of...the fact of the absorption itself. Granted that for the mystic there is only the immediate fact of the Reality. In other words, the experience is one of...*undifferentiated* unity. But it is one thing to describe an experience and quite another to analyse the factors underlying the experience. To me it seems – and it always has seemed – perfectly plausible to posit *two entities* as constitutive of the experience. Why, after all, should we retreat from the obvious explanation – that the mystic and his Reality are ultimately as different from each other as the swimmer and the ocean ‘enveloping’ him, or the thinker and the problem ‘consuming’ him...[Eckhart] fails to distinguish the experience itself from the – how shall I put it? – ontological scaffolding of the experience.²⁷⁵

Betty then adds

the anti-dualist is correct in saying that there is no subject and object *experienced* at the height of mystical unity. But to conclude on the basis of this that there is therefore no subject and object *in fact* is...to base an ontological claim exclusively on an experience, and not on the experience *in addition to the context* of the experience. Moreover, it is illogical in a far more basic sense to hold that dualism stands or falls on the question of a *perceived* subject-object dichotomy.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ p.295.

²⁷⁶ p.296.

Betty's work might seem an unusual choice for defending my argument but it is a helpful one. Betty is right to identify the difference between the ontological facts of union between the individual and God and the experience of that union. He is right also to suggest that just because the individual no longer perceives their own individuality does not mean they do not possess individuality or inhabit an individual position in space-time.²⁷⁷ The problem with his claim when we apply it to Eckhart's theology is that the 'ontological scaffolding' of Betty's perspective includes assumptions about how we should approach God, or reality, which differ radically from Eckhart's own. His assumptions in fact overlap with the habits of attachment which define the self in terms of the nothingness which Eckhart's teaching on detachment intends to negate from the soul's perspective and self-understanding.²⁷⁸ Eckhart does not confuse anthropology with ontology and he has a very real ontological scaffolding within which his discussion of the soul's identity and union with God occurs. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Eckhart's ontology views reality in terms of God's structure as one and three, the intra-divine relations between persons, the connection between persons and essence and the relationship between God and creatures. Understanding these features which undergird and give rise to the whole of everything transforms our concept of distinction, since what is truly distinct is distinct in terms of its relation to God. In this sense the creature-creator relationship mirrors the intra-divine relations of the Trinity, where distinction does not exist in a materially dualist sense, i.e. one object separate from another in space and time, but solely in terms of relatedness between the persons. None

²⁷⁷ He states: "Common sense tells us that if we see before us side by side ten mystics lost in the ecstasy of union, there are ten mystical experiences and not one. For each of us has learned a thousand times over that we simply cannot abstract from bodily difference, as Stace would have us do; we all know that the surest way of determining where one experience begins and another ends is precisely this differentiation between bodies." p.298.

²⁷⁸ Betty does admit this in a certain sense when he states, "I am not especially interested, however, in the mystics' interpretation of their experiences. Nor was Stace. The fact is that we find theistic mystics using both the language of duality and identity, some few using both in the same passages. How are we to know which are the better philosophers?...we are left with nothing but the mystical data, our own powers of analysis, and, of course, our own biases." p.294.

of the persons of the Trinity is distinct in and of themselves, they *receive* their distinction from each other, from the relationship between them. The *bullitio*, the intra-divine self-expression of the Trinity, is inseparable from the act of divine self-expression outwards from itself – the *ebullitio* and *creatio*. Creation itself is therefore seen by Eckhart in the context of this same flow of divine distinction that defines the persons of the Trinity who overflow from themselves in the self-expressive act of creation and it is according to this category of distinction that Eckhart views the soul's individuality.

This theocentric vision of reality is what the soul encounters through her detachment. She thus recognises God in all things, even in her own self, which in a very real sense can be understood wholly in terms of God since everything about her selfhood has been received without merit through grace and according to the structure of God's own being and self-expression. The soul thus sees only God, even when she looks at herself. Why should she not, since such a theocentric vision is surely the truest view of a universe understood according to the Christian ontology which structures Eckhart's experience and description of reality? But, as Betty suggested, the soul's individuality does not disappear simply because her perspective is filled with God. God's persons do not have their individual personhood in and of themselves but in each other, received from the other through relation, and in that sense held and given by the other. There is a perfect reciprocity in the Trinity where each person receives their personhood wholly and perfectly from the other in precisely the same *moment* or *now* in eternity – all boiling simultaneously from the essence – and none exists separately from the other prior to or outside of this *now* of simultaneous relating. God boils up into the full relational reciprocity all at once – or rather, he never hadn't, never didn't, and never doesn't boil up in the single eternal self-expression of existent and active Trinity. Since

God's distinction and personhood is like this and God is the defining principle of reality, we must therefore view Eckhart's teaching on the soul's identity and existence in accord with his concept of God's distinction-through-relation. Identity cannot therefore be an object which the soul possesses in and of itself, it is something she receives from God continually and in receiving – insofar as she sees reality truly, through detachment or apophasis – she continually looks to and sees God alone, even when she considers herself. What could be more completely satisfying for the soul in her being and knowing, than to have her vision so filled with her beloved God that she no longer spares a thought for herself? If God is a real feature of perspective, as he is for Eckhart, what else should or could the soul do that would more truthfully fulfil her own being and identity? As Eckhart says:

Should anyone ask what God is, this is what I should now say, that God is love, and in fact so loveable that all creatures seek to love His loveableness, whether they know it or not, or whether they wish to or not. So much is God love, and so loveable, that everything that *can* love *must* love Him, whether it will or no. There is no creature so worthless that it could love anything evil; for whatever one loves must either seem good or be good.²⁷⁹

Betty has a very different view to this, even though he provides a useful structure to help our understanding of Eckhart. While he may not wish to prove or disprove the question of God's existence, it is nonetheless viewed *as* a question which rational human enquiry can approach and respond to in a meaningful way through the application of reason. Betty is not, in other words, trying to place God at the centre of

²⁷⁹ Pr. 65, p.62.

ontology and anthropology in the same way as Eckhart does. It is not therefore surprising that he advocates dualism as a necessary description of mystical union, since his approach assumes the kind of subject-object or object-object framework required for the kind of rational analysis his enquiry depends upon. But this framework necessarily defines the uniqueness of things in terms of their separateness from each other. Eckhart does not do this because the God who created reality and in whom he believes, exists in such a manner that this definition of how things are in reality is false, since it allows things to be defined in and of themselves in a sense separate from their creator. This is not possible within Eckhart's 'ontological scaffolding.' It is impossible to approach God in a manner that begins with "*I am*, and I wish to explore whether or not God is." For Eckhart, God's existence is predicated in that very first 'I am' as its cause, its end and its salvation.

How then is the soul still distinct from God when the whole of her existence is understood in terms of God? A different and more telling way of asking the same question is to say, "How can we keep part of ourselves separate from God in a theocentric universe?" The answer for Eckhart is, as we have seen, by considering ourselves from the point of view of nothing. In other words, for us to desire to retain some part of ourselves apart from God as if this were somehow a preservation of individual identity, is, in the ontological and anthropological system within which Eckhart's teaching functions, to desire for a part of our self to *literally be nothing*. If there were a part of us separate from God in this way, it would not preserve the self at all, it would negate the self since it is only in terms of her relation to God that the soul exists and has identity.

We might continue to ask why this is hard to accept. Eckhart's theology suggests that this is because our habits of thought, our habits of self-understanding, our habits of

activity and language, are rooted in the kind of possessiveness that has no place in freedom or grace and no place in God. Why, Eckhart would ask, would we want the self to be these things that are imperfect? Why do we want our perspective to be defined and fractured by its experience of suffering, of evil, sin and nothingness? These are not true things, they have a deficient cause,²⁸⁰ they are negations of what is true and good – negations of what is fully God – and they ignore God’s self-expression. As Eckhart says in Pr. 86, it is essential to understand these things as real features of human existence but also to recognise that they are opposite to human beatitude and our response to them should be to pass beyond them, not to define ourselves in terms of them.

This raises an interesting problem with the ‘nothings’ Eckhart negates since, according to his metaphysics, thought about nothings is itself a kind of nothing, separate from God’s knowing, and the object known by that thought is also nothing. Nothingness is therefore distinct from God but it has a real effect upon temporal human existence in the sense that it misleads us. Our response to this has to be to identify the kinds of nothings, the kinds of habits of mind and body, that distract and damage us; that cause us to treat ourselves and reality as if it was other than it actually is. Eckhart acknowledges this and his teaching on detachment is both an affirmation of God’s true being and a kind of apophatic ‘process’ which reforms our damaging habits of thought and action, stripping them away and through the vision of God, who is both essence and Trinity – with everything we now know that this implies – leads the soul into a new habitual way of living and perceiving, where she sees things truly and sees God in all things, even those things which previously distracted her.²⁸¹

Insofar as the individual is detached, she leads a transformed existence which mirrors her eternal existence with God. Individuality is therefore preserved in the flow

²⁸⁰ *In Ex.*, n.33, p.53.

²⁸¹ Pr.103 p.59.

towards God. Insofar as the soul flows towards God, and is caught up in the flow of relation that is God's triune life, she has selfhood, but she does not have it as a possession. Instead, she has it in the same way that the persons of the Trinity have self – as a gift from the other, a gift of perfectly reciprocal identity and distinction defined by God's own freedom and grace. The moment the soul turns away from the flowing out of her free gift of identity from God and tries to look at that gift, to possess the gift rather than simply to *be* the gift, she ceases to actualise herself as a real self and starts to tend towards her own non-existence. Eckhart repeatedly points out, that humans mistakenly try to be a kind of self that cannot and indeed does not, exist in a theocentric universe. We want to be the kind of static possess-able object which has no place in a reality where identity is always defined by reciprocity or relation and never defined by possessiveness.

So the self, in a sense, is lost. There is no object I can possess and identify as me, as mine, and from which I think I know things, where my knowledge is also a personal possession. There is no space for such an object in a perspective that is filled with divine light – with the brilliant darkness of the Dionysius poem.²⁸² However, even though she cannot see herself, the soul's selfhood still exists and she exists by being that point of view which turns itself always towards God and which expresses itself in creation through an activity which also reflects God's existence and expresses the reality of his relationship with the soul. To deny that this is a meaningful form of personhood, is to deny that the persons of the Trinity possess a meaningful form of distinct personhood since it is the triune life which gives the soul this individuality and to deny that the persons of the Trinity say something meaningful about God is really to deny the Christian God. Objectively speaking, this might not be something that worries

²⁸² Pseudo Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, 997b, in Colm Luibheid (ed.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p.135.

us today, but if we suggest that Eckhart's concept of identity does not sufficiently sustain the individuality of the soul in her union with God, whilst also denying that the God in whom Eckhart believes actually exists, we are applying an ontological criticism to something that has only been granted the status of theory. However, for Eckhart God is not a theory. Eckhart knows God exists and that he exists in a certain way. It is according to *this* particular way in which the Christian God exists that Eckhart's concept of human identity makes sense. He views identity from within the paradigmatic Christian model of death and rebirth, transformation or resurrection, since the soul dies to its attachment to a false Godless view of reality, of the universe and of self. What is born is a renewed vision and activity in creation which reflects the promised renewal that, for Eckhart, God genuinely offered to the world through his Son.

The question of how we should read Eckhart thus requires us to assess our own concept of selfhood. Do we seek to possess ourselves and thus necessarily exclude ourselves from Eckhart's perspective – at least, on its own terms – since Eckhart identifies our habit of self-possession as a fantasy which blocks us from the existing God? Or do we allow ourselves to conceive of selfhood in a different way, in Eckhart's way, where what it means to exist distinctly is to let go of possessiveness, of control, to live according to the way in which our lives have been received from the God in whom Eckhart believes, freely as a gift of grace which we did nothing to deserve? In this perspective, identity is reciprocal rather than self-contained: it receives itself and gives itself back in thanks. The soul that does not see itself does not lose itself, it gives itself away and in that act of giving it possesses its identity in the only way that makes sense, as something always expressed towards the other and received from the other.

To really understand how Eckhart views reality rather than to simply filter his teaching through our own 21st century assumptions means to try and change those

assumptions in our reading of Eckhart, or at least to identify their effects upon our interpretation as much as we can. Strangely, our way of understanding must therefore follow the path of detachment. We must begin with a ‘going in,’ a turn away from our current assumptions about what is true and about how we should know things and be ourselves. We should orientate ourselves in a different way, imagining what it must be like to view reality in the way that Eckhart does. We must begin with detachment and apophasis just as Eckhart does, for only then can his teaching on God’s identity and the soul’s identity begin to make sense. It may seem to be a considerable risk to open ourselves in this way, to allow our intellect to be informed by a grace and a relationship that is beyond our control, but in fact, we are assured, it *will* make sense if we are willing to become detached, for Eckhart promises:

God cannot leave anything void or unfilled, God and nature cannot endure that anything should be empty or void. And so, even if you think you can’t feel Him and are wholly empty of Him, that is not the case. For if there were anything empty under heaven, whatever it might be, great or small, the heavens would either draw it up to themselves or else, bending down, would have to fill it with themselves. God, the Lord of nature, does not allow that anything be empty or void. Therefore, stand still and do not waver from your emptiness; for at this time you can turn away, never to turn back again.²⁸³

²⁸³ Pr. 103, p.59.

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