

Meister Eckhart –
The Man from whom
God hid Nothing

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promised Henry the restoration of whatever toll rights King Albrecht had removed from his diocese during the toll wars in the Rhineland area. All Henry was required to do was to inform him who was now in possession of those rights. With this John XXII hoped to persuade Henry to publish in Cologne his process against Lewis of Bavaria which he had hitherto failed to do.

In the light of the political dependence of the Papacy on the German Archbishop strikingly evident in this letter there can be no doubt therefore that it would have been very difficult for John XXII to refuse Henry the condemnation of Eckhart's work which he seems so greatly to have desired.

The Contemporary Significance of Meister Eckhart's Teaching

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Meister Eckhart's teaching is extra-ordinarily difficult to categorise. Where does he fit within the usual boundaries of philosophy and theology? First and foremost he was a preacher, belonging to the order of St. Dominic, the most powerful teaching and preaching order of the thirteenth century and the order which had produced geniuses such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus. Eckhart was for a time a Professor of Theology at the University of Paris, holding a Chair which would have given him enormous authority in matters of theological commentary. He must therefore have been highly regarded for his academic commentaries on Peter Lombard and for his scriptural exegesis. He went on to hold important administrative posts for his order and yet he ended up being accused of heresy and, as an old man, found it necessary to walk hundreds of miles to seek an audience with the Pope in a bid to clear his name. As it happens he died before his case could be heard, and we have the historically unusual situation of Eckhart's heresies being published and pursued after his death. In Eckhart's case, the wheel of fortune certainly had turned from fame to infamy.

Of course, St. Thomas too had suffered a similar post-

mortem condemnation in 1277, three years after his death. But Thomas's orthodoxy continued to be championed by the Dominican order and his writings were re-instated even within Eckhart's lifetime. No such good luck was visited on Eckhart who remained under official censure and was held in suspicion even by the Catholic revivers of Neo-Thomism in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Interest in Eckhart was kept alive among relatively marginalised mystical writers and later by the German Idealists in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the growth of unbiased historical scholarship in medieval philosophy has contributed to a reassessment of Eckhart. Eckhart is now best understood as the preserver of the Christian Neoplatonic tradition which came through the twelfth century to Albertus Magnus and later in the fifteenth century would be preserved in the works of Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). This Neoplatonic tradition had been dominant in Western Christian theology since Augustine, but it was strongly challenged by the nascent Neo-Aristotelianism of thirteenth-century philosophers such as Aquinas, and it was entirely neglected by Neo-Thomists in the nineteenth century who were attempting to take their direction from Thomas in accordance with the recommendation of Pope Leo XIII.

To say that Eckhart is a Neoplatonist is to say that he was committed to understanding the universe as gathered together by a first principle whose chief characteristic is its complete unity and simplicity. All things proceed from this One and all return to it again. The human soul retains an inner relation to this One and wants to return to it again, to "become one with the one." Eckhart's chief teaching involves explaining how humans can become one with their source which is God.

To see Eckhart as a Neoplatonist is to begin to locate him properly in the history of philosophy. But this must be only the first step to appreciate his enduring philosophical significance. Eckhart has an enormous appeal today far beyond the confines of academic philosophy and the interests of medieval historians. Eckhart is a living presence and guide for those interested in spiritual exploration. Even when he is reworking familiar theological themes in his sermons, there is always a sense of exploration in Eckhart's writing, he is

always making the familiar unfamiliar, pointing towards the unknown, inviting us to discover the unknown depths within ourselves. Eckhart appeals today precisely because his teachings are spiritual explorations which have the ring of authenticity and genuine discovery. His advice transcends sect and doctrine and offers an open path, the "way which is not a way".

One does not have to be a scholar to appreciate Eckhart, though clearly Eckhart's wisdom is articulated as a mosaic whose multi-coloured pieces are drawn from the diverse philosophical and theological resources of his own day. Indeed, Eckhart's sources are remarkably broad. He had no hesitation in quoting from the Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, or Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna, or pagan writers. In all of them he saw signs of the single truth.

It is helpful to know how Eckhart is reading Aristotle or Thomas, but he himself knew that this mattered little compared with the message he was trying to convey. What is this message? Eckhart is preaching how to achieve liberation. The key to attaining this liberation, for Eckhart, is expressed in his key concepts – concepts which are original with him and which have gained currency among philosophers ever since. These concepts are expressed in Eckhart's Middle High German as *abegescheidenheit* and *gelâzenheit*, detachment and letting be.

Human release from the imprisoning bonds of temporality and corporeality is achieved through the spiritual practice of letting go, releasing oneself, abandoning oneself, detaching oneself. In the remainder of this short essay I would like to examine more closely what I take to be Eckhart's central pre-occupying theme and the reason for his enduring significance both in philosophy and among those seeking spiritual intensification in their lives.

There is general agreement among scholars that Eckhart's central teaching is his teaching on "letting be", "detaching" oneself. This teaching has had an enormous impact on thinkers as diverse as psychologist, Karl Gustav Jung, the philosopher Martin Heidegger and D.T. Suzuki, the Zen Buddhist scholar. Indeed it is Eckhart's teaching on detachment that has drawn the interest of Buddhists who recognise in Meister

Eckhart an enlightened master equal to one of their own tradition. Detachment is at the heart of Eckhart's spiritual practice. The universal appeal of this practice of detachment helps to explain why Eckhart provides one of the few bridges between Eastern and Western thought.

In an important sermon, number 53 in the critical edition of Joseph Quint, a sermon which dwells on the Scriptural text: *Misit dominus manum suam*, Eckhart focuses on detachment as one of the central themes of his preaching:

When I preach, I am accustomed to speak about detachment, and that a man should be free of himself and of all things; second, that a man should be formed again into that simple good which is God; third, that he should reflect on the great nobility with which God has endowed his soul, so that in this way he may come to wonder at God; fourth, about the purity of the divine nature, for the brightness of the divine nature is beyond words. God is a word, a word unspoken.¹

Taking these themes in reverse order, it is clear that Eckhart as a preacher wants to talk about God but this cannot be done directly, because God is, in Eckhart's compelling image, "an unspoken word," and hence all speaking must somehow be in vain. God escapes human speech and concepts because of God's absolute unity, simplicity and purity. God is entirely opposite to the duality and multiplicities of human thought and speech. Duality enters because even the simplest human thought involves joining together a subject and a predicate, for example when we say "God is good". To make any statement already involves the duality of the subject and what is asserted of the subject. But God is one.

Elsewhere, Eckhart emphasises the purity, simplicity and transcendence of God to such an extent that he can even refer to God as pure "nothingness", as a "desert" without distinguishing characteristics.

Eckhart's first principle is always this extraordinary transcendent goodness and grace of God, but Eckhart immediately adds to this principle the wondrous claim that the human soul has an equally high-ranking noble origin and dignified nature – an intrinsic nobility, which means that

deep within each of us there is a perfect reflection of the divine purity; in Eckhart's terms: a "little spark" in the soul, an "interior castle," a "nobleman". Of course the assertion that the human soul carries something divine within it – something "uncreated" as Eckhart would often say, led to a suspicion that Eckhart was elevating human nature to the same level as God. This is very worrying to orthodox Christian theologians who emphasise the human remoteness from the divine. But Eckhart is thinking *sub specie aeternitatis*. He is thinking how things stand in the eternity of the divine nature. Here, man and God must stand absolutely together as one, man's uncreated essence cannot be distinguished from God's essence.

Eckhart has many reasons for making this equation between God and man in the timeless order, but his main reason is quite traditional: If God the Son became united to humanity in a temporal moment (in our time) as Christianity professes, then the implication from the point of view of God's eternity (God's "time") is that God is *eternally* related to human nature – because there is no time in God and hence God cannot simply *temporally* "adopt" human nature. Rather human nature in its ground is always in God and one with God, a unity that exists throughout all "timelessness," as we might say. The aim of Eckhart's preaching is for us to come into contact with this timeless side of ourselves, to discover ourselves in our eternal nature rather than in our temporal raiment. In this way we will lead this self back to God, become ourselves this unspoken Word.

What practical recommendation does Eckhart have which will enable us to carry out a transformation of our perspective from the temporal to the timeless? Eckhart recommends that we must stop looking at things in the "created" merely human way and begin to adopt the uncreated divine way of seeing things:

And if a man is to become equal with God insofar as a creature can have equality with God, that must happen through detachment.²

For Eckhart this means letting go of "images", that is, all aspects of merely temporal, merely human living. We must

“break-through” from the realm of our created selves back to the uncreated infinity of the divine nature. We achieve this break-through by practising detachment.

What is this detachment? To help us understand the concept, let us examine Eckhart’s short treatise, *On Detachment*. Here Eckhart characterises detachment as the highest virtue – higher than love or humility or charity. For Eckhart “detachment” and the related notion of “letting be” express the very essence of the Christian message, getting right to the heart of things. He interprets Christ’s injunction to Martha in the Gospel of Luke 10:42: “One thing is necessary” as meaning that one virtue alone should be practised: “whoever wants to be free of care and to be pure must have one thing, and that is detachment”.³ Even today such boldness is astonishing. We are accustomed to being told that the highest message of Christianity is love. But Eckhart believes that detachment is deeper even than love – detachment alone is necessary! Love still involves a kind of attachment, whereas detachment is completely free and empty and hence more God-like.

Of course, Eckhart did not simply invent the notion of detachment though he may very well have coined the German term. He was in fact drawing on the well-established Christian theological theme of resignation of the human will to the will of God, the practice of offering up our sufferings, and purging ourselves of our own desires. To that extent it might seem at first reading that his religious teaching is quite traditional. But Eckhart is radical in interpreting how we should understand this spiritual detachment, this poverty of the spirit. Whereas the traditional Church formulas involve practice of the virtues, love, humility, forgiveness, repentance, atonement, grace, good works, and re-integration into the Christian family, with the restoration of one’s essential human nature, Eckhart’s view is more radically dislocating. Even though he commonly makes use of traditional notions such as repentance and so on, he reinterprets them. He preaches being poor in spirit, and this means attaining a spiritual distance from all imprisoning images, distancing oneself even from the very concept of God itself. For this reason Eckhart recommends “I pray God to rid me of God”.

Eckhart does not lay any special emphasis on good works in attaining one’s salvation. He explicitly says that all the good works in the world have no effect on God’s detachment. Eckhart, however, is not telling people to stop doing good works. He does not believe good works are ever wasted or that we should abandon practising good works but we must come to recognise that temporal acts do not effect any change in God who is timeless. Here Eckhart is drawing on Augustinian views of God’s timelessness and of his grace. God is timeless and has no relationships outside himself. Because if God was related to anything else outside him then God would not be completely self-sufficient. God in Eckhart’s terms is detached, that is, God is detached from all things and unmoved by events that take place in time, even actions of great goodness and charity:

This immovable detachment brings a man into the greatest equality with God, because God has it from his immovable detachment that he is God, and it is from his detachment that he has his purity and his simplicity and his unchangeability.⁴

Note what Eckhart is saying here. It is precisely that property of detachment that makes God to be God, and from this property God derives his other properties or attributes of purity and unchangeability. As a principle, then, detachment is in a way prior to God, it makes God to be God. Eckhart wants the human soul to inculcate in itself this virtue which God himself has, so we too must become unmoved by events in time. We too must become detached.

For Eckhart, Christ himself was detached, even in his sufferings on the cross. Mary, too, was detached, even in the loss of her only son. Clearly he understands detachment as the essence of the highest spiritual natures. Eckhart himself poses the question of how a person who is suffering can at the same time be detached and unmoved:

Now someone might say: “Did Christ have immovable detachment, even when he said: ‘My soul is sorrowful even to death’ (Matthew 26:38) and did Mary, when she stood beneath the cross – and people tell us much about her

lamentations. How can all this be reconciled with immovable detachment?"

Eckhart answers this by drawing on the Pauline distinction the *outer* and the *inner* man. The inner man can remain entirely free and immovable even when the outer person is moved to pain or suffering. In Christ and Mary, then, their inner persons remained undisturbed even in their greatest tribulations. Eckhart offers the simile of a door-hinge which remains stable and unmoved while the door swings open and shut.⁶ In Christ then there is both God and man, and in the man there is both inner and outer. Eckhart is not just saying that as God Christ was detached but as a man he suffered. Rather Eckhart is saying that as God Christ is detached and in his inner humanity he is also always detached, but in his outer self he suffered. The inner remains free and detached while the outer man of the senses suffers. The implication for us is that we must be able to attain the inner man, i.e. the unmoving timeless essence which is covered up in our usual temporal preoccupations. Detachment is as radically human as it is essentially divine.

How are we to achieve this letting be, letting go, abandonment, detachment? In Eckhart's Middle High German language, his word for detachment, *Abegescheidenheit*, suggests the concept of departure. In Middle German, as in modern German too, the term refers to the deceased, e.g., the faithful departed. Being detached means being separated, departed, gone, dead to this world. Eckhart invokes this very Pauline theme of being dead to a world in the treatise *On Detachment*. He says:

And the man who has attained this detachment is so carried to eternity that no transient thing can move him, so that he experiences nothing whatever of what is bodily, and he calls the world dead, because nothing earthly has any savor for him.⁷

Here the detached person is detached from his body and from bodily impulses. He is pure spirit, above time. But detachment for Eckhart is much more complex than merely forsaking the body and certainly is not to be equated with

actual physical death. Eckhart is not so world-denying as wanting us to be dead literally. He does not recommend the extreme devotional practices of mortifying the flesh which reached psychotic heights during the very period in which he was preaching, when whole processions of naked penitents paraded through the streets flogging their bodies until the blood ran, nailed themselves to crosses and so on. For Eckhart this kind of behaviour was not detached from the body but rather obsessed with it in an inverted way.

Eckhart's concept of detachment is perhaps better expressed in the Zen Buddhist notion of non-attachment. To achieve non-attachment, we must free ourselves from all attachments, including the attachment to the pursuit of non-attachment itself! Eckhart is not against the body or recommending that we mortify ourselves. He is recommending a special relationship towards things, a special psychical relationship which does not let us get possessed by things.

Some critics have understood Eckhart here to be preaching the traditional Stoic virtue of imperturbability. It is true that some of the formulations Eckhart uses are close to those of classical Greek Stoicism which recommended practising "apathy" (from the Greek word, *apatheia*, which means absence of *pathos*, that is emotional reactions of any kind, passion). Thus the Stoics recommended a distancing from passion whether it be joy or suffering. The Stoics recommended practising *apatheia* by strengthening the will to resist the pull of the appetites. The Stoic is not swayed by desires, and remains in rational control all the time. Eckhart, on the other hand, recommends the very opposite – abandoning the human will, an abandonment which will make us open to receive the will of God. Eckhart's openness is rather different from Stoicism as is his recommendation to "let be" to somehow allow things to pursue their own course.

Nevertheless Eckhart does have Stoic-sounding recommendations concerning the practice of detachment. In the treatise *On Detachment* he says:

True detachment is nothing else than for the spirit to stand as immovable against whatever may chance to it of joy and

sorrow, honor, shame and disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands before a little breath of wind.⁸

On the other hand, Eckhart did not preach severe asceticism and self-denial. Rather he preaches an attitude of detachment in all things – even when confronted with fine food and other comforts. Eckhart has advice for those religious who too earnestly avoided pleasures of the flesh and worried about eating good food. His advice is reassuring. The monks need not worry about rejecting such foods, indeed they may accept them if offered. The interior should guide the exterior and not the other way round. You can receive things that are given willingly and gladly. In general, Eckhart recommends that we avoid extraordinary things because they are a distraction, but sometimes it will be necessary to indulge in extra-ordinary things too because the person of detachment is indeed extra-ordinary!

“Detachment is wholly free of all created things”. Eckhart normally expresses detachment as “detachment from things”. But he expands the categories from which we should be detached: we should also have detachment from the will, from time, and from images. Eckhart many times stresses that we must be free of things, free of createdness, free of creaturehood. What does this mean? How are we to achieve this letting go of all creatures, of oneself, even of God. In order to achieve this “letting go” Eckhart says we have to cultivate “nothingness”. Detaching the mind of images and overcoming attachment to things, this is surely a recommendation for a specific mental attitude, an attitude which goes beyond everything we are in our created individual lives, a special viewpoint such as one achieves after profound meditation.

We must let everything go. But this letting go has got to involve a letting go of both the doctrine and the method. If we are to be genuinely detached we cannot cling to any specific world-views or dogmas or belief systems. We cannot even cling to the Christian story or to Scriptures, in the sense that we must not treat these as closed entities into which truth is sealed. Rather we should read Scripture in the detached manner that Eckhart’s own sermons so magnificently typify.

For Eckhart the inner spiritual truth is on an entirely different plane from the literal text. Similarly our way of living in the world should not be ground down to the level of ordinary attachment to things.

Eckhart is thus preaching a way which is not a way, an open way which does not presuppose adherence to any special religious claim. This is precisely why philosophers and theologians as well as ordinary people today are especially drawn to Eckhart. His teaching does not divide us by our beliefs but rather unites us in our detachment. This is what is so strikingly contemporary about Eckhart – he is a non-dogmatist, an anti-fundamentalist, a non-literalist. He recognises and indeed encourages the multiple play of meanings. The multiple meanings of the world are a sign of God’s infinite goodness and wisdom. One should not be worried by this non-reducible plurality of meanings in the world, rather we should adopt the right attitude towards the plural meanings. Detachment, if it is a genuine possibility for humans, must be a genuine possibility no matter whether they are Christians or Buddhists or atheists. As Eckhart presents it, we can reason at least towards recognising that detachment is a possibility. Only practice will actually produce detachment. But I believe those interpreters are not remaining true to the radical nature of Eckhart’s message if they do not recognise how free and empty we must become. We must become so free and empty that we are not attached to Christianity or to Buddhism. While it is true that Eckhart’s spring board is always Christian scripture, he also wants us to lose any idea we have about God and about method. As he says in his *Talks of Instruction*:

A man ought not to have a God who is just a product of his thought, nor should he be satisfied with that, because if the thought vanished, God too would vanish. But one ought to have God who is present, a God who is far above the notions of men and of created things.⁹

¹J. Quint, ed., Meister Eckhart. *Deutschen Werke*, Band III, pp. 437–48. Here I am quoting the translation given in E. Colledge & B. McGinn, eds., *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defence* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 203.

²“On Detachment,” in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defence*, p. 288.

³“On Detachment”, in E. Colledge and B. McGinn, eds., *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defence*, p. 285.

⁴“On detachment,” in Colledge and McGinn, p. 288.

⁵“On Detachment,” in Colledge and McGinn, p. 290.

⁶“On Detachment,” in Colledge and McGinn, p. 291.

⁷“On Detachment,” in Colledge and McGinn, p. 288.

⁸“On Detachment,” in Colledge and McGinn, p. 288.

⁹*Counsels on Discernment*, 6, Colledge and McGinn, p. 253.

Sheila Cassidy on Meister Eckhart

(From *Good Friday People*)

And yet, ignore them we do. When our bodies are young and strong and beautiful we are full of a delicious animal vigour. The sap races in our veins, and, exulting in our humanity, we are tempted to spurn ideas of the world of the spirit as childish fantasy or old wives' tales. We work and play, eat and sleep, love and hate as if we would live for ever, blind as moles to the reality of the world beyond our horizon.

Then, for some of us, reality breaks through and we are blinded by a dazzling darkness, by the spiritual dimension of our existence. This encounter with the transcendent is not an intellectual event. We do not study theology and suddenly know that there is a God and that we should worship him, although that *can* happen. It is much more in the nature of things, however, that we meet God in the desert, in sickness, prison, bereavement or some other desolation. As the philosopher puts it, 'Pain is a holy angel which shows treasure to men which otherwise remains forever hidden' (Adalbert Stifter). Stifter's Holy Angel is echoed again and again in the writings of the poets and mystics, men like the fourteenth-century Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart: 'The faithful God often lets his friends fall sick and lets every prop on which they lean be knocked out from under them.' True, we say, in fact, too true to be funny. It happened to Job. It happens all the time. Why? 'Listen', says Eckhart. 'It is a great joy to loving people to be able to do important things such as