

# BEING AND NOTHINGNESS IN MEISTER ECKHART AND THE TRADITION

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*forthcoming*

Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch, Band 17 Meister Eckhart und die Phänomenologie, 2023.

## Das Sein und das Nichts bei Meister Eckhart und der Tradition

*Abstract:* This article explores the use of Meister Eckhart in both classical phenomenology (Husserl, Scheler, Stein, Heidegger) and more recent post-phenomenologists, Reiner Schürmann, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion, who wrestle with the meaning of negative theology in the tradition of Dionysius the Areopagite. Eckhart conceives of both God and human nature as ›nothingness‹ in different ways. I explore the Eckhartian notion of nothingness and connect it with that of Eriugena. I suggest that phenomenology could benefit from a more thorough appreciation of the Dionysian tradition of negative theology and its account of being and nothingness.

*Keywords:* Being, nothingness, negation, God, soul, Meister Eckhart, Eriugena, phenomenology

*Kurzfassung:* Dieser Aufsatz untersucht die Verwendung von Meister Eckhart sowohl in der klassischen Phänomenologie (Husserl, Scheler, Stein, Heidegger) als auch in neueren Postphänomenologen wie Reiner Schürmann, Jacques Derrida und Jean-Luc Marion, die mit der Bedeutung der negativen Theologie in der Tradition von Dionysius dem Areopagiten ringen. Eckhart begreift sowohl Gott als auch die menschliche Natur auf unterschiedliche Weise als ›Nichts‹. Ich erforsche den Eckhartschen Begriff des Nichts und verbinde ihn mit dem von Eriugena. Ich schlage vor, dass die Phänomenologie von einer gründlicheren Würdigung der dionysischen Tradition der negativen Theologie und ihrer Darstellung von Sein und Nichts profitieren könnte.

*Schlagworte:* Sein, Nichts, Negation, Gott, Seele, Meister Eckhart, Eriugena, Phänomenologie

## Phenomenology and the Retrieval of Medieval Mysticism

In this paper I examine Meister Eckhart's<sup>1</sup> influence on the phenomenological tradition, focusing especially on Reiner Schürmann (1941–1993),<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946). Eckhart, of course, is clearly not a phenomenologist.<sup>3</sup> But his conceptions of being and nothingness,<sup>4</sup> in relation to both divine and human being, have significant relevance for phenomenology, which could greatly benefit from a more serious engagement with them. Phenomenology has always had an interest in Medieval Philosophy, largely due to the influence of Franz Brentano and his revival of the Scholastic concept of intentionality.<sup>5</sup> Eckhart, however, was never more than a passing interest among phenomenologists. Aside from Martin Heidegger, very few of the classical phenomenologists, i.e., Husserl, Scheler, Stein, Conrad-Martius, von Hildebrand, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, or Levinas) engaged with Eckhart in any serious way. Husserl never discusses Eckhart in writing, although he was aware of him and told Dorion Cairns that he had read him over a weekend.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For English translations of Eckhart, I rely primarily on *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. Walshe and McGinn; *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatise and Defense*, ed. Colledge / McGinn; *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, ed. Davies; and *Parisian Questions and Prologues*, ed. Maurer. The German sermons will be cited using the Quint (= Q) numbering (DW I–III).

<sup>2</sup> Schürmann, *Maitre Eckhart et la joie errante*, translated as *Meister Eckhart. Mystic and Philosopher*. Schürmann translated and commented on just five sermons, including: »Jesus Entered« (»Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum«); »Woman, the Hour is Coming« (»Mulier, venit hora«); and »See What Love« (»Videte quale caritatem«). See also Schürmann, *Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Releasement*.

<sup>3</sup> See O'Donohue, *The Absent Threshold*, p. 270: »[Eckhart's] way contrasts sharply with the style of phenomenology. In Eckhart's thought-world intentionality would be inadequate and untrustable. The Divine is not to be grasped. The heart of phenomenology is the explication of the structuring capacity of consciousness. [...] This constructionist capacity would find no echo in Eckhart.« Nevertheless, O'Donohue does find parallels between Eckhart's overcoming of intentional subjectivity and Marion's approach to saturated phenomena (discussed below).

<sup>4</sup> Eckhart discusses the fundamental determinations of being and nothingness already in his Prol. gen. n. 4, LW I, p. 150; *Parisian Questions*, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> See Tommasi, *Phenomenology and Medieval Philosophy*.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl read Eckhart during the Great War, according to Moore, Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement, p. 234. Ochsner seemingly told Bernhard Welte that he would meet with Husserl occasionally during the Great War. Moore records: »One day, Husserl told him that Natorp had recently discovered Eckhart and had drawn Husserl's attention to him.« See Welte, *Meister Eckhart: Gedanken zu seinen Gedanken*, p. 21. Husserl later told Dorion Cairns in 1932 that »[w]hole pages of Meister Eckhart [...] could be taken over by him [Husserl] unchanged« (Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, p. 91).

As Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) attested,<sup>7</sup> Eckhart belongs to the Latin Dionysian tradition of negative theology<sup>8</sup> that stems from Johannes Eriugena (9th century) and particularly emphasizes the divine transcendence and the unity of human and divine. Deliberately paradoxical,<sup>9</sup> Eckhart is a dialectical, hermeneutical thinker, who adopts or abandons points of view, sometimes setting out his claims in the dogmatic propositions of the Scholastic tradition in which he trained, and at other times bewildering his readers by testing their capacity to understand him.<sup>10</sup> Étienne Gilson is surely correct: »Eckhart speaks the language of St. Thomas without being a Thomist just as he speaks that of Denis without adhering to a strict theology of the One.«<sup>11</sup> Claiming insight into the truth of Christianity, he presents himself primarily as a Scriptural interpreter, situating himself in the tradition of Augustine (354–430), Pseudo-Dionysius (6th century), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–1280).<sup>12</sup> Especially in his sermons, he sought to shock his hearers to acknowledge the transcendent divinity and the divinity in their own natures, empty and open to the divine.<sup>13</sup> Meister Eckhart is

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<sup>7</sup> See Haubst, Nikolaus von Kues als Interpret und Verteidiger Meister Eckharts. Although he later said that, at the time of writing ›De docta ignorantia‹ (1440), he had not yet read Dionysius. See Cusanus, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, h II, p. 12; Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck, p. 50. Cusanus characterizes his Platonism as stemming from Dionysius but he also draws on Dionysius' Latin translators and commentators, including Eriugena (›Johannes Scotigena‹), Albertus Magnus' Commentary on the Divine Names, Robert Grosseteste (whose translations of Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* and *Celestial Hierarchy* he owned in manuscript), Thomas Gallus, and Meister Eckhart.

<sup>8</sup> Dionysius (primarily in John the Saracen's translation) is cited 62 times by Eckhart, chiefly ›De divinis nominibus‹ (36 times, including 1 from Eriugena's translation). Surprisingly, ›De mystica theologia‹ is cited only 8 times. See Rubino, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart. Eckhart's sources were primarily Scriptural and Christian (St. Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Albertus), but he regularly cites pagan authors such as Aristotle (›De anima‹ is cited 180 times), Seneca, and of course Jewish and Islamic philosophers, see Palazzo, Eckhart's Islamic and Jewish Sources.

<sup>9</sup> On the meaning of paradox in Eckhart, see Mojsisch, Meister Eckhart. Analogy, Univocity and Unity, p. 100, n. 19; and Zapf, Die Funktion der Paradoxie im Denken und sprachlichen Ausdruck bei Meister Eckhart. Eriugena uses the term paradox in relation to God in his *Homilia ch. 7: Per generationem quippe dei uerbi ex deo principio facta sunt omnia. Audi diuinum et ineffabile paradoxum, inrecreabile secretum, inuisibile profundum, incomprehensibile misterium. Per non factum, sed genitum, omnia facta, sed non genita*, see Jean Scot: *L'Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, ed. Jeaneau, p. 232, 7–11.

<sup>10</sup> Burkhart Mojsisch puts it well when he writes: »Eckhart's thought is difficult to approach because it thrives on the vital spontaneity of momentary conceits« (Meister Eckhart. Analogy, Univocity and Unity, p. 6). Eckhart often challenges his listeners not to understand. See Q. 83, (›Renovamini spiritu‹): »So, if you want to be without sin and perfect, don't chatter about God. Nor should you (seek to) understand anything about God, for God is above all understanding [›ver allis verstan‹]« (Pr. 83, DW III, p. 442, 6; Walshe, p. 463).

<sup>11</sup> Gilson, Preface to Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> See Senger, Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolaus Cusanus und seinem italienischen Umfeld; and Duclow, Nicholas of Cusa in the Margins of Meister Eckhart: Codex Cusanus 21. See also Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum*, and D'Amico, *Plato and the Platonic Tradition in the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*.

<sup>13</sup> As Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity*, p. 98, has emphasized, Eckhart, whose father was a knight, grew up at the end of the Romance tradition of courtly love. He was rebelling against Church extravagance

intent on emphasizing the unmediated closeness, indeed, identity, of the relation between the divine and the human to the extent that the human soul is the unique place of appearing of the divine.<sup>14</sup> The soul that empties itself out fully in detachment becomes filled with the divine, and, ultimately, one with the One. All things, and especially the soul, wants to be like the One, one with the One. As Eckhart writes in the ›Daz buoch der göetlîchen tröestunge‹:

*Und wan glichnisse vliuzet von dem einen und ziihet und locket von der kraft und in der kraft des einen, dar umbe engestillet noch engenüget niht noch dem, daz dâ ziihet, noch dem, daz dâ gezogen wirt, biz daz sie in ein vereinet werdent.*<sup>15</sup>

In the early twentieth century, there was a revival of interest in Meister Eckhart<sup>16</sup> among philosophers (e. g., Paul Natorp, Heinrich Rickert, Karl Jaspers), theologians (e. g., Rudolf Otto, who compared him with Vedanta),<sup>17</sup> and comparative religionists (e. g., Mircea Eliade). Unfortunately, the commencement of the Eckhart critical edition coincided with the National Socialist drive to promote him as a truly ›German‹ thinker and this may have led to some reluctance among phenomenologists to invoke Eckhart. Among phenomenologists, the most explicit treatment of Eckhart is found in Martin Heidegger, who, from very early on (1915) was reading Eckhart, and called him »the old master of life and letters.«<sup>18</sup> Partially inspired by Heidegger, a serious discussion can be found in subsequent thinkers inspired by Heideggerian phenomenology, notably, in Germany, Bernhard Welte (1906–1983); in France, Reiner Schürmann (1941–1993), Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1947);<sup>19</sup> and, in the USA, John D. Caputo (b. 1940).

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and trying to reinstall Christian values. Eckhart made use of the Scholastic mode of argumentation and also Scriptural hermeneutics. A main goal was to show that the insights of philosophy were already implicit in Scripture.

<sup>14</sup> For Eckhart, God lives in the soul (Pr. 67, DW III, p. 129,3). God enters the soul in its depth (Pr. 5b, DW I, p. 87,6). God is in the depth of the soul in all his divinity (Pr. 10, DW I, p. 162,5 sq.; Pr. 21, DW I, p. 360,5 sq.). Ultimately, the soul mirrors God and the two can return to be the one they once were.

<sup>15</sup> BgT, DW V, p. 33,1–5; Walshe, p. 536: »And since likeness flows from the One, drawing and attracting by dint of and in virtue of the One, so there is no stilling or satisfying either that which draws, or that which is drawn, till they are united in the One.«

<sup>16</sup> Mostly they relied on the first edition of Eckhart by Pfeiffer, that included an edition of 110 sermons, 18 treatises, reported sayings, and other materials attributed to Eckhart. Pfeiffer did not know Eckhart's Latin texts and some of his ascriptions are incorrect, see Walshe, pp. 23–25.

<sup>17</sup> Otto, *Das Heilige*; Otto, *Meister Eckeharts Mystik in Unterschiede von östlicher Mystik*; Otto and Quint, *Die gegenwärtige Problemstellung der Eckehart-Forschung*.

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Der Feldweg*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, Meister Eckhart is not mentioned in Jean-Luc Marion's ›L'Idole et la distance: cinq études‹, translated as ›The Idol and Distance: Five Studies‹, or in other majors works, e. g.,

Max Scheler has brief references to Eckhart scattered throughout his works, e. g., ›Formalism in Ethics‹ (1913, 1916), where Eckhart is mentioned once,<sup>20</sup> Scheler's context here is solitude as an essential feature of human existence:

[...] the sphere of solitude is an essential social category [...] However, solitude does not exclude one communal relation, namely, the relation to God, who by definition is neither an individual nor a collective person, but one in whom both individual and collective persons are solidary.<sup>21</sup>

Scheler's ›Ressentiment‹ (1915) cites the wish of Meister Eckhart »that he would rather be in hell with Jesus than in heaven without him«. <sup>22</sup> For Scheler, generally speaking, Eckhart exaggerates the closeness of the human-divine relation.

Husserl's student, Gerda Walther (1897–1977), published a study, ›Zur Phänomenologie der Mystik‹ (1923), that treated mystical experience as a sui generis form of givenness. Walther mentions Eckhart just once, in discussing how pantheism allows one to experience God as the inflowing (›einströmend‹) of the divine spirit, and as a spiritual power behind all things, »as

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›God Beyond Being‹, ›Givenness and Revelation‹, etc. Marion is primarily focused on Dionysius the Areopagite and, more recently, on John Scottus Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa.

<sup>20</sup> A search of Scheler's *Gesammelte Werke* (= GesW) produces the following references, almost all of them mere mentions of Eckhart: *Vom Umsturz der Werte. Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, GesW III, p. 80; *Nation und Weltanschauung* (1923), in: *Schriften zur Soziologie und Weltanschauungslehre*, GesW VI, p. 136 and p. 208; *Christentum und Gesellschaft* (1924), in: *Schriften zur Soziologie und Weltanschauungslehre*, GesW VI, p. 281; *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, GesW VII, p. 88, n. 2; *Probleme einer Soziologie des Wissens* (1926), in: *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft*, GesW VIII, p. 70; *Die Formen des Wissens und die Bildung* (1925), in: *Späte Schriften*, GesW IX, p. 102, n. 1; *Evolution: Polygenese und Transformation der Menschwerdung* (1925–1927), in: *Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, Bd. 3: *Philosophische Anthropologie*, GesW XII, p. 110; *Zur Metaphysik des Menschen* (1924–1927), in: *Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, Bd. 3: *Philosophische Anthropologie*, GesW XII, p. 219 and p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*, in: GesW II, pp. 549 sq.; *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, p. 563. Eckhart is referenced in a note: »Mysticism tends to exaggerate this particular relatedness of every person to God (e. g., Meister Eckhart's writings) to such an extent that the idea of solidary salvation in the church becomes secondary, and the source of experience, which for religious subjects resides in historical revelation, is reduced in value vis-à-vis the so-called inner illumination and grace of the intimate person. But just as one must not reject a special source of religious experience in the case of the intimate person – lest his nature be denied and dissolved – one cannot hold that this ›mystic‹ subordination corresponds to the *true* order of religious values and their sources in experience« (Scheler, *Formalism*, p. 563).

<sup>22</sup> See Scheler, *Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen* (1912), GesW III, p. 80, n. 1.

perhaps in Eckhart and in Buddhism«. <sup>23</sup> Heidegger, however, dismissed Walther's book as an example of the current irrationalism in phenomenology. <sup>24</sup>

Husserl's student, Edith Stein (1891–1942), never refers to Eckhart, even after her conversion to Catholicism, neither in ›Endliches und ewiges Sein‹ (›Finite and Eternal Being‹) or in ›Potenz und Akt‹ (›Potency and Act‹), <sup>25</sup> or indeed in any of her writings on medieval philosophy. <sup>26</sup> There is no doubt, however, that there are many elements in Stein's outlook which resonate with Eckhart, e. g. her concept of the divinity as ›fullness‹ (›die Fülle‹), her concept of creatures as pure nothing: ›all being, save divine being, is tinged with nonbeing [etwas von Nichtsein beigemischt]‹ <sup>27</sup>, her notion of the ›ground of the soul‹, <sup>28</sup> of the ›seed of the person‹ (›Persönlichkeitskern‹) that ›unfolds‹ (›enfaltet‹), and her notion of the need for the soul to empty itself to be receptive to God. But, ignoring Eckhart, she herself gravitates towards Dionysius the Areopagite, whose work she translated into German, <sup>29</sup> and on whom she wrote an important article, and the Spanish mystics, John of the Cross (1542–1591) <sup>30</sup> and Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). In 1941, she also wrote a penetrating article on the ›Symbolic Theology‹ of Dionysius the Areopagite, ›Wege der Gotteserkenntnis‹. <sup>31</sup>

Although Stein never mentions Eckhart directly, many aspects of her later Christian mysticism are reminiscent of the German master, including her sense of the human

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<sup>23</sup> Walther, *Zur Phänomenologie der Mystik* (Halle 1923; second expanded edition, Olten and Freiburg i. Br. 1955), first edition, p. 156. In the 1955 second expanded edition, Walther discusses many other forms of mysticism.

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger does not even mention Walther by name; see Heidegger, *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)* (GA 63), pp. 73 sq.; trans. John Buren, *Ontology – Hermeneutics of Facticity*, p. 58. Heidegger was possibly upset because Niemeyer was the renowned publisher of phenomenology.

<sup>25</sup> Stein, *Potenz und Akt. Studien zu einer Philosophie des Seins*; trans. L. Gelber and R. Leuven, *Potency and Act: Studies Towards a Philosophy of Being*. Hereafter ›PA‹.

<sup>26</sup> Stein, *Endliches und ewiges Sein. Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*; trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt, *Finite and Eternal Being. An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*. I am grateful to Andreas Speer for confirming that Stein does not appear to draw on Pfeiffer's edition of Eckhart and never cites him.

<sup>27</sup> PA, p. 8; GA 10, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> There are clearly overlaps between Stein and Eckhart in their conceptions of the ground of the soul, e. g., his sermon, ›Dum medium silentium teneret omnia‹, ›God enters here the ground of the soul. None can touch the ground of the soul but God alone‹ (Pr. 101, DW IV,1,

p. 345 f.; Walshe p. 31). Stein also invokes the ›ground of the soul‹ (›Grund der Seele‹) in her ›Aufbau der menschlichen Person. Vorlesungen zur philosophischen Anthropologie‹, p. 71. For the history of the term, see Heidrich, ›Seelengrund‹; and Fischer, *Fond de l'âme*.

<sup>29</sup> See Stein, *Wege der Gotteserkenntnis Studie zu Dionysius Areopagita und Übersetzung seiner Werke*.

<sup>30</sup> Stein, *Kreuzeswissenschaft. Studie über Johannes vom Kreuz*; trans. Josephine Koeppel: *The Science of the Cross*.

<sup>31</sup> Stein, *Ways to Know God: On the Symbolic Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. Rudolf Allers, in: *The Thomist* 9 (1946), pp. 195–222, retranslated by Walter Redmond in: Edith Stein, *Faith and Knowledge*, pp. 83–118.

spirit's ›openness‹. In ›Potency and Act‹, Stein writes, commenting on Conrad-Martius: »›Being open [Geöffnetsein]‹ means being able to engage what is other than oneself, stand over against it, turn toward it intentionally.«<sup>32</sup> She maintains that »being open for oneself and for what is other is the highest and hence also the most proper form of spirit whereto all other spiritual being harks back«. <sup>33</sup> Stein, moreover, has a concept of pure being as fullness:

*Pure being*, which has nothing of nonbeing [nichts von Nichtsein] in itself, is in such wise eternally infinite that no nonbeing is before it or after it, and it contains in itself, all that is and can be. This being is all that it is in the highest measure of being, or more correctly, it is measureless (it is the very measure by which all else is measured) – it is pure *act* [reiner Akt]. In it nothing is shut, nothing remains non-unfolded [Unentfaltetes]; it is in absolute openness [Erschlossenheit], illumined in itself and through itself; that is, it is light itself – it is *pure spirit*.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from Scheler, among classical phenomenologists, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) pays the most explicit attention to Eckhart, and even promised a book on Eckhart in his 1915 Habilitation thesis.<sup>35</sup> He subsequently discussed Eckhart, especially in his 1944–1945 ›Conversations on a Country Path‹ (›Feldweggespräche‹) and in his 1955 essay ›Gelassenheit‹.<sup>36</sup> I will not discuss Heidegger's use of Eckhart further here, as it has been studied by Reiner Schürmann,<sup>37</sup> Werner Beierwaltes,<sup>38</sup> John D. Caputo,<sup>39</sup> and, most recently, exhaustively, by Ian Alexander Moore.<sup>40</sup> Although Heidegger draws on some of Eckhart's concepts, e. g., ›Godhead‹

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<sup>32</sup> PA, p. 254; GA 10, p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> PA, p. 255; GA 10, p. 169.

<sup>34</sup> PA, p. 414; GA 10, p. 269, trans. modified.

<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, *Die Kategorien- und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus*, in: *Frühe Schriften* (GA 1). Heidegger opposes the usual contrast between ›Scholastic‹ and ›mystic‹ and talks of the need for a phenomenological account of life. Heidegger writes: »I hope to be able to show on another occasion how Eckhartian mysticism is given its proper philosophical interpretation and assessment only from this point of view and in connection with the metaphysics of the problem of truth« (*Frühe Schriften* [GA 1], p. 402, n. 2). See Moore, *Eckhart, Heidegger and the Imperative of Releasement*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*; trans. John Anderson and E. Hans Freund, *Discourse on Thinking*. For a discussion of the meanings of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* (›releasement‹, ›letting-be‹, ›allowing‹), see Moore, pp. 133–137.

<sup>37</sup> Schürmann, *Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Releasement*. See also Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit; and Ruin, The Inversion of Mysticism – Gelassenheit and the Secret of the Open in Heidegger*. Ruin writes: »*Gelassenheit* for Heidegger is not something that lies beyond thinking and the exercise of reason. On the contrary, it designates a transformed practice of reason, an exercise in a different kind of thinking.« Heidegger's focus is the difference between calculative and meditative thinking.

<sup>38</sup> Beierwaltes, *Heideggers Gelassenheit*.

<sup>39</sup> Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*.

<sup>40</sup> Moore, *Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement*.

(»Gottheit«), »detachment« (»Abgeschiedenheit«), »letting be« or »releasement« (»Gelassenheit«), »presencing« (»Wesung«, »Anwesung«), and living »without a why« (»ohne Warum«), he distances himself from Eckhart's strong sense of the presence of the personal God in the soul. Heidegger's focus is on the nature of ground and groundlessness and the capacity of thinking to be open to the event of being. Heidegger's Marburg student, Käte Oltmanns (1906–1999), wrote her doctoral thesis on Eckhart, published as »Die Philosophie des Meister Eckhart« (1935), utilizing Pfeiffer's edition of the German texts.<sup>41</sup> She reads Eckhart in terms of the existential categories of »Dasein« in »Being and Time«, seeing freedom as the essence of the human (although she admits that the word »freedom« itself plays no role in Eckhart. Eckhart does talk about the »will«).<sup>42</sup> Though highly praised by Heidegger, Oltmanns' book was reviewed somewhat negatively at the time; scholars claiming that she was somewhat cavalier in her acceptance of certain disputed Eckhart manuscripts and ignoring the Latin manuscripts (mostly unpublished at that time).<sup>43</sup>

## Eckhart in French Phenomenology: Derrida and Marion

### 1. Reiner Schürmann (1941–1993): Reading Eckhart after Heidegger

Reiner Schürmann (1941–1993), began as a German Dominican, who studied at the Sorbonne in the nineteen sixties, and published an important work on Eckhart in French in 1972.<sup>44</sup> In a subsequent essay in 1973, he summarizes Heidegger's use of Eckhart:

Whenever Heidegger mentions Meister Eckhart, the context is a development of Heidegger's own essential thought: Being that lets beings be (*Gelassenheit*); the thinging of the thing (*dinc*) understood as the nearing of the world; man's essence (*Wesen*) needed by

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<sup>41</sup> Oltmanns, Meister Eckhart. Oltmanns continued to attend Heidegger's lectures in Freiburg until 1934. Her presentation in Heidegger's 1927–1928 seminar on Schelling, »Wesenheit, Dasein und Grund bei Eckhart«, is translated in Moore, Eckhart, Heidegger, and the Imperative of Releasement, pp. 191–194. Oltmanns discusses the problem of »ground« and »groundlessness« (»Abgrund«) in Eckhart and the fact that as creatures are entirely dependent, their existence is non-being. Esse in the full sense belongs only to God. She goes on to discuss the human soul as image of God and claims that, for Eckhart, the soul and God are one and indistinct in their ground.

<sup>42</sup> Oltmanns, Meister Eckhart, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, the review by Gwynn, in: Mind XLVI, No. 181 (January 1937), pp. 105 sq.

<sup>44</sup> Schürmann, Maître Eckhart et la joie errante. Schürmann was deeply influenced by Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache (1892–1983), author of Maître Eckhart et la mystique rhénane, and by Bernhard Welte.



Being to uphold its truth; thinking as thanking (*Gedanc*); the unspoken speech (*ungesprochene Sprache*) that bestows a world; and last but not least, life without why (*ohne Warum*).<sup>45</sup>

While studying in Freiburg with Bernhard Welte, Schürmann wrote to Heidegger on January 16th 1966, asking him some questions about Eckhart:

There are two questions that I particularly wish to ask you. The first one concerns Eckhart's relevance to the situation in which thinking finds itself today: did he perhaps think being as self-sending, as only eventfully experienceable? Meister Eckhart's ›sole thought‹ is aimed at the unification of the ›separated soul‹ with God. Insofar as the soul lets all things be, it breaks through to the ground where the Godhead continually creates all things, and which in this breakthrough also becomes my ground. The unity is a unity of the ›fabric‹ in which God operates and I become – become son, that is. Being is thus thought as course of experience, and not represented as ontic ›standing reserve.‹ Closer to the soul than any created thing, the ›unknown God‹ is experienced in the event of words, beyond this and that, and, for that reason, it always remains a ›nil of all things.‹ Might not Meister Eckhart's thinking help us along in a meditation directed at being which always withholds itself and, in this very withholding, addresses itself to us?<sup>46</sup>

Schürmann went on in his letter to Heidegger to make this penetrating observation:

I have in mind above all this one word, ›thou.‹ The mystery of the gift could be experienced as mystery of the ›thou,‹ without thinking's having to fall into representation (for example, the repetition of a source of being revealed to it), while it remains within the boundaries set to it as thinking. Even in the break through all of God's titles (such as ›the good‹ or ›truth‹), there still subsists for Meister Eckhart the inkling of the ›thou.‹ Might not the proposition ›being is given‹ (*Es gibt Sein*) be expressed in the form ›thou gives being‹ (*Du gibst sein*) without injury to the mystery?<sup>47</sup>

Schürmann was asking Heidegger if Eckhart's experience of Being was really a Thou. Heidegger seems not to have taken up this suggestion, which is closer to Levinas's conception. Heidegger replied on February 4th 1966 inviting Schürmann to his house on March 11th 1966. Before his

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<sup>45</sup> Schürmann, Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Releasement, p. 96.

<sup>46</sup> Schürmann, Reiner Schürmann's Report of His Visit to Martin Heidegger, p. 67.

<sup>47</sup> Schürmann, Reiner Schürmann's Report, p. 68.

visit, Schürmann had been advised by the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar – who said that Heidegger engaged in anti-Christian polemic and could not be relied on to interpret Eckhart. Schürmann's subsequent two letters to an anonymous correspondent summarize his visit. In his second letter, written just after his visit, Schürmann recalls:

In my letter, written nearly two months ago (he was away), I had attempted to formulate two questions, one concerning Meister Eckhart's conception of being, the other concerning the possibility of saying ›thou‹ to what in some of his texts Heidegger calls ›gift of being,‹ a phrase formed after the expression ›es gibt Sein‹ [...] ›there is being.‹<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, Schürmann does not relate what Heidegger had to say about Eckhart.

## 2. Jacques Derrida's Critique of Negative Theology as Still Ontotheology

Primarily through the influence of Heidegger's writings on Eckhart, there was an undercurrent of interest in Eckhart in French phenomenology.<sup>49</sup> Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958), a student of Étienne Gilson, and Maurice de Gandillac (1906–2006), set the stage for the French reception of Eckhart.<sup>50</sup> Another influential figure was Stanislaus Breton (1912–2005), who taught at the Institut Catholique in Paris and also at the École Normale Supérieure.<sup>51</sup> Breton comments on Eckhart in one of his papers:

In a sermon, Meister Eckhart ventures to say that God is nothing less than the necessity to go beyond, not stopping at any of his names, and it is because he has no single name, being unnameable, that he becomes all-nameable.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, Breton is an important source of Eckhart for Derrida. Jacques Derrida, a deconstructionist who remained close to phenomenology,<sup>53</sup> explicitly addressed negative

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<sup>48</sup> Schürmann, Reiner Schürmann's Report, p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> See Pattison and Kirkpatrick, *The Mystical Sources of Existential Thought*. See also Baring, *Converts to the Real*.

<sup>50</sup> Lossky wrote his doctoral thesis on Eckhart. It was eventually published, edited by Maurice De Gandillac and Olivier Clément, as *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*. See Ware, *The Nearness yet Otherness of the Eternal in Meister Eckhart and St Gregory Palamas*.

<sup>51</sup> Breton, *Deux mystiques de l'excès: J.-J. Surin et maître Eckhart*.

<sup>52</sup> Breton, *The Passion of Christ and its Power*.

<sup>53</sup> For Derrida as a phenomenologist, see Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, pp. 456–461.

theology (and specifically Dionysius and Eckhart) in his 1964 essay on Levinas,<sup>54</sup> and, again, late in his career, in essays in the 80s and early 90s.<sup>55</sup> In ›Violence and Metaphysics‹ (1964), an essay criticizing Levinas, he interprets Eckhart as still caught up in ontotheology (although replacing God [got] with deity [gotheit]).<sup>56</sup> Derrida writes:

That the Deity of God, which permits the thinking and naming of God, is nothing, and above all is not God himself, is what Meister Eckhart, in particular, said this way: ›God and the deity are as different from one another as heaven and earth. [...] God operates, deity does not operate, has nothing to operate, has no operation in it, has never any operation in view‹ (Sermon *Nolite timere eos*). But this deity is still determined as the essence-of-the-threefold-God. And when Meister Eckhart seeks to go beyond these determinations, the movement which he sketches seems to remain enclosed in ontic transcendence. ›When I said that God was not a Being and was above Being, I did not thereby contest his Being, but on the contrary attributed to him a more elevated Being‹ (*Quasi stella matutina* ...). This negative theology is still a theology and, in its literality at least, it is concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite existent, »Being above Being and superessential negation«.<sup>57</sup>

In a note in his 1967 ›Writing and Difference,‹<sup>58</sup> he reiterates this assessment of Eckhart in discussing Bataille's ›atheology‹:

Meister Eckhart, for example. The negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology. ›God is nameless [...] If I say God is a being, it is not true: he is a transcendental essence, a superessential nothing‹ (*Be ye renewed in the spirit*). This was only a turn or detour of language for ontotheology: ›But when I say God is not being, is

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<sup>54</sup> Derrida, *Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas*, reprinted in: *L'Écriture et la différence*, pp. 117–228; trans. Alan Bass: *Violence and Metaphysics*, in: Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 97–192. Derrida also mentions Eckhart in his essay *Postscriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices*, in: Derrida and *Negative Theology*, ed. Coward and Foshay, pp. 283–324; and in: Derrida, *De l'esprit*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby: *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*.

<sup>55</sup> See Derrida's articles in: *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Coward and Foshay. For a full list of the places where Derrida discusses Eckhart, see Meessen, *Percée de l'Ego*, pp. 426 sq.

<sup>56</sup> The distinction between God and Godhead is Scholastic in origin and not a novelty of Eckhart.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, in: *Writing and Difference*, pp. 182 sq. It is notable that Derrida refers here to the sermon ›*Quasi stella matutina*‹ (Pr. 9).

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 340.

superior to being, I do not with that deny him being: I dignify and exalt it in him' (*Like the morning star*).<sup>59</sup>

In other words, although Eckhart points towards the transcendent, he still affirms God as being.

In his most important essay on negative theology, ›How to Avoid Speaking: Denials‹ (›Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations ...‹), originally delivered as a lecture in Jerusalem in 1986,<sup>60</sup> Derrida feels drawn reluctantly into what he regarded as an inevitable confrontation with negative theology. His concern is primarily to explicate his deconstruction (and its central notions of »différance«, trace, dissemination, etc.) as a methodology which is adjacent to, but essentially different from, negative theologies (to which he had been compared). In this Jerusalem lecture, Derrida focuses on Dionysius, but he also invokes Eckhart, especially his sermon ›Quasi stella matutina‹.<sup>61</sup> Derrida's approach to negative theology remains cautious, restrained and tentative.<sup>62</sup> He rightly suspects that ›negative theology‹ does not name one thing but is an umbrella term enfolding a number of different tendencies.<sup>63</sup> He begins from the reproach to his own work that he had been borrowing the procedures of negative theology in positing terms such as »différance«. Derrida wants to resist the idea that negative theology is a technique; it escapes technique because of its prayer and its address to the other:

I will try to show how negative theology at least claims not to be assimilable to a technique that is subject to simulation or parody, to mechanical repetition. It would escape from this by means of the prayer that precedes apophatic utterances, and by the address to the other, to you, in a moment that is not only the preamble or the methodological threshold of the experience.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Again, Derrida references Eckhart's German sermon n° 9 (›Quasi stella matutina‹).

<sup>60</sup> Derrida, *Comment ne pas parler: dénégations*, trans. Derrida: *How to Avoid Speaking: Denials*, in: *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*. Derrida points out that the very title ›comment ne pas dire ...‹ is, in French, ambiguous. It can mean ›how to not speak‹ or ›how can one not speak of‹.

<sup>61</sup> Pr. 9, DW I, pp. 138–158; Walshe, pp. 341–346. See Caputo, *Mysticism and Transgression: Derrida and Meister Eckhart*.

<sup>62</sup> See Nault, *Déconstruction et apophatisme: à propos d'une dénégation de Jacques Derrida*.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida writes: »Perhaps there is within it [negative theology], hidden, restless, diverse, and itself heterogeneous, a voluminous and nebulous multiplicity of potentials to which the single expression ›negative‹ yet remains inadequate« (*Languages of the Unsayable*, p. 12).

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking: Denials*, p. 5.

As in his 1964 essay, Derrida still wants to resist the transition to superessentiality, since this is, in his view, essentially a reintroduction of the affirmative.<sup>65</sup> For Derrida, negative theology involves a »dénégation«, a denegation, or »negation of the negation« that ultimately affirms the unnameable God. Derrida continues to see Eckhart (and Dionysius) as committed to the hyperessentiality of the divine who is »above being« (*hyperousios*), citing »Quasi stella matutina«:

Whatever has being, time, or place, cannot reach God: He is above it. God is in all creatures, insofar as they have being [*als sie wesen hânt*], and yet He is above [*daz ist er doch dar über*] them. By being in all creatures, He is above them: what is one in many things must be above those things [*waz da in vil dingen ein ist, daz muoz von not über diu dinc sin*].<sup>66</sup>

Derrida is suspicious that the invocation of negative theology can have the effect of making all negative discourse about God:

Every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God's name opening up the very space of this enigma. If there is a work of negativity in discourse and predication, it will produce divinity.<sup>67</sup>

Derrida in fact sought to avoid linking his deconstruction to negative theology, since that itself would violate deconstruction:

I thought I had to forbid myself to write in the register of »negative theology«, because I was aware of this movement toward hyperessentiality, beyond Being. What *différance*, the trace, and so on »mean« which hence does not mean anything – is »before« the concept, the name, the word, »something« that would be nothing, that no longer arises from Being, from presence or from the presence of the present, nor even from absence, and even less from some hyperessentiality.<sup>68</sup>

But Derrida also recognizes the inevitability of the dialectic (he calls it »economy«) that thought embarks on when it seeks to speak about that which transcends speech.<sup>69</sup> In this sense, negative theology operates the same way all speech operates, by promising more than it can deliver.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> But see Darley, *Hyperousios: God »Without Being«, »Super-Being«, or »Unlimited Being«?*

<sup>66</sup> Pr. 9, DW I, p. 142,120–143,4; Walshe, p. 341.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> See Derrida and Negative Theology, ed. Coward and Foshay.

<sup>70</sup> See Caputo, *The Good News About Alterity: Derrida and Theology*.

Derrida is acutely aware of Dionysius' injunction to Timothy not to reveal the secret of the hidden deity beyond being to those who are unprepared (he quotes from the ›Mystical Theology‹). One must first be purified. There is, further, what Derrida calls a ›double inscription‹ of the seer's knowledge:

Here Dionysius evokes a double tradition, a double mode of transmission (*ditten paradosin*); on the one hand unspeakable, secret, prohibited, reserved, inaccessible (*aporreton*) or mystical (*mystiken*), ›symbolic and initiatory‹; on the other hand, philosophic, demonstrative (*apodeiktiken*), capable of being shown.<sup>71</sup>

There is not a simple hierarchy. The inexpressible is woven together with the expressible. Derrida recognizes that, for Dionysius, even the power of speaking about God comes from God, is a gift bestowed by God.<sup>72</sup> But, for Derrida, there is also no possibility of not speaking about God, of avoiding speaking, because »language has started without us, in us and before us«.<sup>73</sup> There are always traces, and these traces are finite. Indeed, Derrida attests, »the structure of the trace is in general the very possibility of an experience of finitude«. Derrida, referencing Plato's *epekeina tēs ousias* in the ›Republic‹ and the discussion of the nature of non-being in the ›Sophist‹, concludes that there cannot be an absolutely negative discourse: a logos necessarily speaks about something; it cannot avoid speaking of something; it is impossible for it to refer to nothing (*logon anagkaion, otanper ē, tinos einai logon, mē dē tinos adunaton*, Sophist 262e).<sup>74</sup>

In discussing the antecedents to negative theology, Derrida invokes Plato's *khora*, the amorphous receptacle in the ›Timaeus‹, which is neither positive nor negative and cannot be spoken about or even named: »*Khora* is nothing positive or negative. It is impassive, but it is neither passive nor active.«<sup>75</sup> Derrida notes that Eckhart refers to this *khora* in his sermon 83 (›

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<sup>71</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 24.

<sup>72</sup> For example, *De divinis nominibus* XIII.4, 981C.

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 34.

<sup>75</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, pp. 37 sq. See also Derrida, *Khôra*, where he describes *khora* as a *logos* other than the *logos*.

*Renovamini spiritu*›)<sup>76</sup> as also belonging to the ›mind‹ (*mens, gemûte*) as the receptacle (*sloz*) where forms or images reside.<sup>77</sup>

Later in the essay, Derrida insists that the negative theological journey begins with ›the seriousness of a prayer.‹<sup>78</sup> Derrida sees in Dionysius the need for a translation or passage between the affirmative and the negative:

An experience must yet guide the apophasis toward excellence, not allow it to say just anything, and prevent it from manipulating its negations like empty and purely mechanical phrases. This experience is that of prayer. Here prayer is not a preamble, an accessory mode of access. It constitutes an essential moment, it adjusts discursive asceticism, the passage through the desert of discourse, the apparent referential vacuity which will only avoid empty deliria and prattling, by addressing itself from the start to the other, to you.<sup>79</sup>

Derrida stresses that Dionysius says (›Divine Names‹, Ch. 3, 680d) it is necessary to begin with prayer,<sup>80</sup> in order to be lifted up towards the source, towards the Good. Indeed, this is very reminiscent of Schürmann's speculation to Heidegger concerning the address to the Thou, as somehow allowing for the movement from affirmative to negative and prevent it from being a merely circular motion. Prayer is an address, a reaching out to the other: »for the pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, receive it, be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, call, and even cause of prayer.«<sup>81</sup> Derrida distinguishes the prayer, as supplication to the other, from the *encomium*, the act of celebration, commemoration, the song of praise, *hymnein*, which is not directly an address to the other but rather is about the other.<sup>82</sup> The encomium is not a prayer (he

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<sup>76</sup> Pr. 83, DW III, p. 448,1–9; Walshe, p. 462.

<sup>77</sup> Pr. 83, DW III, p. 437,4–7.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 41.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*: »That is why we must begin with a prayer before everything we do, but especially when we are about to talk of God« (Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, p. 68).

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking – Denials*, p. 42.

<sup>82</sup> It is interesting that, in this essay, in relation to *hymnein*, Derrida has recourse to two Catholic thinkers – Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion, notably his chapter on the encomium in ›The Idol and the Distance‹ (a book that Derrida admits to just having read, following his talk in Jerusalem in 1986). Marion quotes Aristotle's ›De Interpretatione‹ 17a to the effect that prayer is neither true nor false (›all'oute alethes oute pseudēs‹). Derrida corrects Marion. Aristotle says prayer is a logos and hence it is apophantic and preserves the style of the assertoric in that it ›says something about someone‹ (*Languages of the Unsayable*, p. 67, n. 16). As Derrida puts it, the performative does not exclude predication.

accused Marion of confusing the two) but is at best a supplement to prayer (inciting prayer or following it). Let us now turn to Jean-Luc Marion.

### 3. Jean-Luc Marion: Overcoming Idolatry and Restoring Distance

Eckhart remains at best a background figure for Jean-Luc Marion (\* 1946), a religious phenomenologist, who belongs to the ›theological turn‹ (›tournant théologique‹) in recent French phenomenology.<sup>83</sup> Seeking to overcome what he regards as the Husserlian fixation on intentional objectivity, and inspired by Emmanuel Levinas,<sup>84</sup> and by Heidegger, and Marion moved slowly in the direction of negative theology.<sup>85</sup> Marion was perhaps the first French phenomenologist (after Derrida's ›Violence and Metaphysics‹) to pay specific attention to Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>86</sup> especially in his first book, ›The Idol and the Distance‹ (›L'Idole et la distance. Cinq études‹, 1977) where he sees Dionysius, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche as exploring ›distance‹ or transcendence.<sup>87</sup> Marion opposes ›idolatry‹ that turns God into a being, a concept, a notion, and so on. Rejecting traditional ontotheology, he develops the notion of ›God without being‹ (›Dieu sans l'être‹), clearly in the tradition of negative theology.<sup>88</sup> More recently, Marion has expanded his focus on the *via negativa* to include John Scottus Eriugena (c. 800 – c. 877)<sup>89</sup> and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464).<sup>90</sup> Thus, in a discussion of Nicholas of Cusa's ›De visione dei‹, a text that explicitly defends Dionysius' mystical theology, Marion invokes Eckhart as part of this tradition of *visio dei*: seeing implies that one can be seen.<sup>91</sup>

Marion's point of departure is Husserl's ›principle of all principles‹ (expressed in ›Ideas I‹, § 24) that everything is to be accepted in relation to the manner of its ›givenness‹ (*gegebenheit*,

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<sup>83</sup> Janicaud and Courtine (eds), *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*.

<sup>84</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis.

<sup>85</sup> Rorem, *Negative Theologies and the Cross*.

<sup>86</sup> For the French reception of Dionysius and negative theology, see *Œuvres complètes du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite*, ed. Maurice de Gandillac; Roques, *L'Univers dionysien: structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys*; and, especially, Zum Brunn and de Libera, *Maître Eckhart. Métaphysique du verbe et théologie négative*.

<sup>87</sup> Marion, *L'Idole et la distance. Cinq études*, p. 22 and pp. 139–141.

<sup>88</sup> Marion, *Dieu sans l'être: hors-texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson: *God Without Being. Hors-Texte*, p. 123. Marion draws heavily on Levinas's discussions of transcendence in ›Totality and Infinity‹, ›Otherwise Than Being‹, and in ›De Dieu qui vient à l'idée‹.

<sup>89</sup> Marion, *Veluti ex nihilo in aliquid*. Remarks on Eriugena's path from apophasis to *diuina philosophia*.

<sup>90</sup> Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis.

<sup>91</sup> Marion, *Seeing, or Seeing Oneself Seen: Nicholas of Cusa's Contribution in De visione Dei*, p. 318.



»la donation«), as well as on the procedure of reduction. He focuses on forms of givenness (e. g., laughter, amazement) or ›being given‹ (»étant donné«)<sup>92</sup> where the intention is not object-directed but involves an experience that exceeds objectification, what he terms the ›saturated phenomenon‹ – an excess of intuitive givenness that escapes capture in concepts.<sup>93</sup> As Marion attests:

The saturated phenomenon is a kind of phenomenon that is characterized by a deficit in concept vis-a-vis intuition: such phenomena include the event, the idol, the flesh, and the other. In all these cases, there is a surplus of intuition over intention.<sup>94</sup>

Religious phenomena are saturated phenomena and perhaps the highest saturated phenomenon is God understood as »that than which nothing greater can be thought.« As Marion writes, »In every case, recognizing the saturated phenomena comes down to thinking seriously *aliquid quo majus cogitari nequit*«. <sup>95</sup> Saturated phenomena reverse the direction of intentionality. It is not consciousness that constitutes, but being that gives itself freely to intuition. For Marion, Eckhart's paradoxical assertion *Gott der wirt und entwirt* (»God becomes and unbecomes«<sup>96</sup>) is an expression of the saturated phenomenon.<sup>97</sup> Marion interprets Dionysius's superessential terminology as neither affirmation nor negation but as a kind of ›denomination‹ (»dénomination«)<sup>98</sup> which is better to be understood as a hymn of praise. We are not in the realm of naming understood as conceptual categorization, pinning down the entity with a name. Rather Marion attests: »The name is not said, it calls.«<sup>99</sup> Thus, crucially, Marion identifies Dionysius' *αἰτία* (*aitia*) not as a cause but as a surpassing of all that can be named:

Here it is important to note that αἰτία does not by any means claim to name or to deny a name of God; it breaks with every predicative or designative function and is limited to what each creature, as it is what it is, aims at-which is indicated by a passage to the

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<sup>92</sup> Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*.

<sup>93</sup> See Marion, *The Saturated Phenomenon*. Husserl has to be overcome in order for the saturated phenomenon to enter phenomenology, for Marion.

<sup>94</sup> See Kearney, *Interview with Jean-Luc Marion: The Hermeneutics of Revelation*, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Marion, *The Saturated Phenomenon*, p. 124. See also Marion, *Is the argument ontological?*, see Moran, *Neoplatonic and Negative Theological Elements in Anselm's Argument for the Existence of God in Proslogion*.

<sup>96</sup> Pr. 109, DW IV,2, p. 768,37; Walshe, p. 293.

<sup>97</sup> See Kearney, *Interview with Jean-Luc Marion: The Hermeneutics of Revelation*, p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> Marion is playing on the ambiguity in the French ›dénomination‹ that can mean to pick out and also to strip away the name. He also plays on the closeness in sound between ›nom‹ and ›non‹. The ›non‹ of negative theology is not a name in the affirmative sense.

<sup>99</sup> Marion, *In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking*, p. 42.

infinite [...] *αἴτῖα* in no way names God; it de-nominates him by suggesting the strictly pragmatic function of language – namely, to refer names and their speaker to the unattainable yet inescapable interlocutor beyond every name and every denegation of names. With *αἴτῖα*, speech does not say any more than it denies – It acts by transporting itself in the direction of Him whom it denominates.<sup>100</sup>

Marion is articulating Eckhart's view: if God is the cause of being, then God is not being.

Eckhart often cites the ›Liber de Causis‹: the first created thing is being. As he states in the ›Parisian Questions‹, the cause has to be greater than the effect and different from it.<sup>101</sup>

Marion questions whether Eckhart's concept of God's overflowing, *bullitio*, can be identified with *causa sui*.<sup>102</sup> Overall, Marion embraces Dionysius as a walk to unify with God who is not eclipsed in ontotheology, who is a transcendent non-being. Marion's approach to negative theology has been criticized by Derrida, Wayne Hankey among others, for trying to force Dionysius away from the Neoplatonic tradition which he exemplifies.<sup>103</sup> Here, however, I have focused solely on his invocation of Meister Eckhart, which is minimal.

#### The Pursuit of Nothingness: ›Meontics‹

Having reviewed how the phenomenologists and their followers have interpreted Eckhart, I will now turn to Eckhart's discussion of nothingness, where I shall suggest how the Dionysian tradition of God as nothingness might provide a new resource to invigorate phenomenology distinct from the Heideggerian appropriation. The topic of ›nothingness‹ (*nichil, niht, nitheit*) in Eckhart has been much discussed,<sup>104</sup> often in relation to Indian Sankara and Japanese Zen Buddhism,<sup>105</sup> although it clearly belongs in the Dionysian Latin Christian tradition.

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<sup>100</sup> Marion, *In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking*, p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> *Nihil est formaliter in causa et causato, si causa sit vera causa* (Quaest. Paris. I n. 8, LW V, p. 45,1 sq.; Parisian Questions, p. 54).

<sup>102</sup> Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 222, n. 47.

<sup>103</sup> See Hankey, *Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic*.

<sup>104</sup> See Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, pp. 122–124. See also Mojsisch, *Nichts und Negation. Meister Eckhart und Nikolaus von Kues*. See most recently Gabriel and Priest, *Everything and Nothing*.

<sup>105</sup> See Roy, *Some Japanese Interpretations of Meister Eckhart*; Nambara, *Die Idee des absoluten Nichts in der deutschen Mystik und seine Entsprechungen im Buddhismus*; and Ueda, *Der Zen Buddhismus als Nicht-Mystik. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Vergleichs zur Mystik Meister Eckharts*; and Ueda, ›Nothingness‹ in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism. See also Jung, *Die Funktion des Nichts in Meister Eckharts Metaphysik*.

The tradition of speaking about nothingness can be traced back to Parmenides and Plato, but especially to post-Plotinian Neoplatonism, i.e., Iamblichus and Proclus, his student Pseudo-Dionysius, and Dionysius' successors in the Latin West,<sup>106</sup> notably his translator and commentator, Johannes Scottus Eriugena, and later Meister Eckhart. Nicholas of Cusa, in his ›Apologia doctae ignorantiae‹ and in ›De li non aliud‹ situates himself in a tradition of ›negative theology‹ (indeed, Cusanus is the source of the term *theologia negativa*), that flows from Socratic ignorance, through Plato and Dionysius,<sup>107</sup> to Proclus, and later to Albertus Magnus,<sup>108</sup> and Eckhart.<sup>109</sup>

Eckhart is not elaborating a metaphysics of being or ontology in any usual sense.<sup>110</sup> He is not concerned with being qua being understood in terms of the Aristotelian categories.<sup>111</sup> He relegates such categorial ontology to more junior teachers (baccalaureates in theology):

»Junior masters [*Kleine meister*] teach in the schools that all beings are divided into ten modes [*zehn wîse*], all of which they deny to God. None of these modes affects God, but He lacks none of them. The first, which has most being, in which all things take their being, is substance [*substancie*], and the last, which has least being [*wesen*], is called relation [*relatio*] [...].«<sup>112</sup>

If anything, Eckhart is articulating a Neoplatonic metaphysics of unity that might also be called a metaphysics of nothingness. Indeed, Shizuteru Ueda, the renowned scholar of both Eckhart and

<sup>106</sup> See Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys*; Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*. Strictly speaking, Dionysius does not explicitly call God ›nothing‹, but speaks of God as ›not among the things that are‹ (μηδέν τῶν ὄντων [De divinis nominibus I.1, 588B]), as ›all of beings‹ (πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ οὐδέν τῶν ὄντων [De divinis nominibus I.5, 596C]), as ›beyond being‹ (ὑπερούσιος [De divinis nominibus V.4, 817 C]), and so on.

<sup>107</sup> Cranz, *Nicolaus of Cusa and Dionysius Areopagita*, pp. 109–136 and pp. 137–148.

<sup>108</sup> See Wéber, *Négativité et causalité: leur articulation dans l'apophatisme de l'école d'Albert le Grand*.

<sup>109</sup> Cusanus lauds Dionysius in his ›Apologia doctae ignorantiae‹ (1449), ›De li non aliud‹ (1461) and ›De venatione sapientiae‹ (1463). Proclus and Dionysius are the highest of negative or mystical theologians.

<sup>110</sup> Mojsisch writes: ›Eckhart advocates a theology of the Gospel which is metaphysics and whose sole object is beings as beings, but he does not remain bound to Aristotelian metaphysics‹ (Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 10). Mojsisch says Eckhart is founding a new metaphysics, but I believe he really is just using a set of paradoxes, aporiai, and conundrums (in a manner similar to Cusanus' use of mathematical analogies) to illuminate the infinitude and transcendence of the divinity, as well as the infinite depth of Godlike human nature.

<sup>111</sup> Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 120, says it is a metaphysics of essence: ›Eckhart's metaphysics is thus not primarily a metaphysics of being, but instead one of essence.‹ I think this is somewhat misleading. Like Eriugena, Eckhart thinks of God's essence as infinite and incircumscribable.

<sup>112</sup> Pr. 9 (›Quasi stella matutina‹), DW I, p. 147,3–8; Walshe, p. 342.

Kyoto School Zen Buddhism, speaks of Nicht-Metaphysik.<sup>113</sup> Schürmann and De Libera, among others, read Eckhart as overcoming ›ontotheology.‹<sup>114</sup>

The Freiburg phenomenologist Eugen Fink (1905–1975), a student of both Husserl and Heidegger, ventures the terms ›meontology‹ or ›meontics‹. Fink introduced the term ›meontics,‹ or the study of ›non-being‹ (*to mē ōn* [τὸ μὴ ὄν]), in the Foreword to his ›Sixth Cartesian Meditation‹, where he speaks of a ›meontics of absolute spirit.‹<sup>115</sup> The term ›meontics‹ is also found earlier in Schelling, who postulates a kind of anarchic free pre-being prior to the divine self-emergence in creation.<sup>116</sup> There is strong evidence of the influence of Fink on Derrida.<sup>117</sup> Fink wants to capture the idea of the transcendental ego as source of all meaning and being and hence, necessarily, lying outside being as a kind of ›pre-being‹ or ›non-being‹. Fink even speaks of ›meontic phenomenology.‹<sup>118</sup> For Fink, the human being as transcendental subject is ›meontic‹, i.e., prior to being and, in some sense, constitutive of being. Indeed, I believe Meister Eckhart expresses, especially in his ›Parisian Questions‹, a similar idea of the intellect (*intellectus*) as a kind of non-being or pre-being. There is, however, no evidence that I can find of Fink directly discussing Eckhart.

Of course, Eckhart in one sense is quite traditional. He too characterizes Divine Being as *esse, esse absolutum*, or, in German, as ›is-ness‹ (*istichheit*).<sup>119</sup> He freely affirms that ›God is *esse*‹ (*Esse est deus*).<sup>120</sup> In standard Scholastic terminology, for God, essence and existence are one

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<sup>113</sup> Ueda, *Der Zen-Buddhismus als Nicht-Mystik*, pp. 291–313.

<sup>114</sup> See Schürmann, *Neoplatonic Henology as an Overcoming of Metaphysics*.

<sup>115</sup> The concept of the meontic is hinted at in Fink's 1934 essay ›Was will die Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls?‹ (Studien, p. 161), translated as ›What Does the Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl Want to Accomplish?‹, see Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink*, p. 366, n. 158, where Fink speaks of ›the impossibility of thoroughly determining the spirit ontologically: be it in the ancient form of the disturbing question of the connection of *ousia* and *psyche*, *noein* and *einai*‹ (p. 16). Fink maintained that the transcendental subject itself is ›meontic‹ in that it is ultimately unreachable in its being. It is an absolute ground and therefore prior to all constituted being. See Giubilato, *Freiheit und Reduktion. Grundzüge einer phänomenologischen Meontik bei Eugen Fink (1927–1947)*.

<sup>116</sup> Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Love / Schmidt, p. 40 and p. 69.

<sup>117</sup> See Terzi, *The Relevance of Fink's Notion of Operative Concepts for Derrida's Deconstruction*.

<sup>118</sup> Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink*, p. 200.

<sup>119</sup> Eckhart, in the earliest part of his career, i.e., ›*Collatio in libros sententiarum*‹, followed the Augustinian-Thomist tradition in identifying God with being, but distanced himself from this view in his ›Parisian Questions‹ and subsequently. God is beyond being and goodness. See also, Beccarisi, *Istichheit nach Meister Eckhart. Wege und Irrwege eines philosophischen Terminus*. Beccarisi confirms that *istichheit* is used by Eckhart to explicate the dynamic nature of divine being and the relation between divine and human being (Beccarisi, *Istichheit nach Meister Eckhart*, p. 315).

<sup>120</sup> Prol. gen. n. 11, LW I, p. 156,15.

(*essentia est esse*).<sup>121</sup> But Eckhart also wants to speak of God as One. First and foremost, God is one. There are no distinctions in God: »He who sees duality or distinction does not see God.« (*Qui enim duo vel distinctionem videt, deum non videt.*)<sup>122</sup> God is One and indistinct, *unum quia indistinctum*.<sup>123</sup> Difference and otherness belong to the created realm. All creatures are different from one another. The One is changeless and eternal and without novelty:

The property of eternity [*Der ewikeit eigenschaft*] is that being [*wesen*] and youth are in it the same, for eternity would not be eternal if it could become new and were not always so.<sup>124</sup>

The divine nature is infinite and has ›plenitude‹ (*ein vüllede*), or abundance: it flows out from itself into itself.<sup>125</sup> This abundant overflowing belongs to God as his goodness. Eckhart quotes the hermetical ›Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers‹: »God is the opposite of nothing by means of the mediation of being.« (*Deus est oppositio ad nihil mediatione entis.*)<sup>126</sup> God's being is omnipresent or ›common‹. What is common is God, whatever is not common is the creature.

For Eckhart's ›Parisian Questions‹, God's essence is primarily intellect understood as prior to being.<sup>127</sup> God exists because He understands: »Intellect is the temple of God. God dwells nowhere more truly than in His temple [...]. God knows Himself in himself.« (*Vernünfticheit ist der tempel gotes. Niergen wonet got eigenlicher dan in sînem tempel. [...] Got in sîn selbes bekanntnisse bekennet sich selben in im selben.*)<sup>128</sup> God is transcendent above being, above goodness, essence, and other predication or relation. God also has selfhood or ›I-ness‹ which is not-distinct from the I of human persons or from all things (*ungescheiden ist von allen dingen*).<sup>129</sup> Following the Dionysian tradition, Eckhart explicates the nothingness of the divine ›beyond being‹ both in his Latin and German works. In his Latin writings, Eckhart

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<sup>121</sup> In Exod. n. 20, LW II, p. 26,4.

<sup>122</sup> In Exod. n. 58, LW II, p. 65,4 sq.

<sup>123</sup> [*U*]num et indistinctum (In Sap. n. 155, LW II, p. 490,11 and p. 491,3); *li unum idem est quod indistinctum* (In Sap. n. 144, LW II, p. 482,4).

<sup>124</sup> Pr. 83, DW III, p. 439,3–5; Walshe, p. 462.

<sup>125</sup> Pr. 21, DW I, p. 363,9; Walshe, p. 468.

<sup>126</sup> Sermo 6,1 n. 53, LW IV, p. 52,2; McGinn, Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher, p. 213.

<sup>127</sup> *Tertio ostendo quod non ita videtur mihi modo, ut quia sit, ideo intelligat, sed quia intelligit, ideo est, ita quod deus est intellectus et intelligere et est ipsum intelligere fundamentum ipsius esse* (Quaest. Paris. I n. 4, LW V, p. 40,5–7; Eckhart, Parisian Questions, p. 45).

<sup>128</sup> Pr. 9 (›Quasi stella matutina‹), DW I, p. 150,3–4.8; Walshe, p. 343.

<sup>129</sup> See Mojsisch, Meister Eckhart, p. 121.

employs *nihileitas*<sup>130</sup> and *nulleitas* to characterize the divine.<sup>131</sup> He speaks of ›nothing‹ (*niht*),<sup>132</sup> but also of the ›desert,‹ ›wasteland,‹ or ›wilderness‹ (*die wüeste*).<sup>133</sup> In ›Renovamini spiritu‹, Eckhart says:

*Du solt in minnen, als er ist Ein nit-got, Ein nit-geist, Ein nit-persone, Ein nüt-bilde, Mer: als er ein luter pur clar Ein ist, gesvndert von aller zweiseite [...].*<sup>134</sup>

Similarly, in Sermon Q. 71, ›Surrexit autem Saulus‹, commenting on St. Paul, he declares:

»I cannot see what is one. He saw nothing, which was God. God is nothing [*ein niht*] and he is a something. Whatever is something is also nothing.«<sup>135</sup>

Following Dionysius, he says God is »unknown« (*unbekannt*) a »hidden darkness of eternal concealment« (*verborgen vinsternisse der ewigen gotheit*) where He takes refuge and »remains in himself« (*blibet dâ in im selber*).<sup>136</sup>

Eckhart thinks of the divinity first and foremost as not related to creation. Eckhart states simply many times: »God is God« (*got ist got*). Moreover, God is God »without creature« (*âne creature*).<sup>137</sup> As with Eriugena, for Eckhart, if creatures have being, then God is not being, and vice versa. Eckhart is, in my view, following the Dionysian tradition of God understood as ›transcendent nothingness‹ (*Eriugena's nihil per excellentiam*). Eckhart's discussion of the ›nothingness‹ of the divine nature and of the intellect, which mirrors the divine, does seem to come very close to Eriugena. There is a close spiritual affinity between the two thinkers,<sup>138</sup> as Alois Haas has attested.<sup>139</sup> Already in the fifteenth century, Nicholas of Cusa explicitly linked

<sup>130</sup> Sermo 37 n. 375, LW IV, p. 321,1. See Jung, *Die Funktion des Nichts in Meister Eckharts Metaphysik*, p. 60.

<sup>131</sup> In Eccl. n. 61, LW II, p. 290; Sermo 15,2 (›In novitate vitae ambulemus‹) n. 158, LW IV, p. 150.

<sup>132</sup> See Welte, *Das Licht des Nichts*.

<sup>133</sup> The desert – an area without demarcation or properties – indeed, for early Irish Christians, including Eriugena, the desert is the sea. See McGinn, *Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition*.

<sup>134</sup> Pr. 83 (›Renovamini spiritu‹), DW III, p. 448,7–9; Walshe, p. 465: »You should love Him as He is: a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image; rather, as He is a sheer pure limpid One [...], detached from all duality [...].«

<sup>135</sup> *Ich enmac niht gesehen, daz ein ist. Er sach niht, daz was got. Got ist ein niht, und got ist ein iht. Swaz iht ist, daz ist ouch niht* (Pr. 71 [›Surrexit autem Saulus‹], DW III, pp. 222,11–223,2); McGinn, *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, p. 323.

<sup>136</sup> Pr. 22 (›Ave gratia plena‹), DW I, p. 389,7–9; Walshe, p. 281; Colledge / McGinn, p. 196.

<sup>137</sup> Pr. 38, DW II, p. 241,2 sq.; Walshe, p. 180.

<sup>138</sup> See Liebeschütz, *Mittelalterlicher Platonismus bei Johannes Eriugena und Meister Eckhart*.

<sup>139</sup> Haas, *Eriugena und die Mystik*.

together Eriugena and Eckhart as thinkers of the negative way. Indeed, it was Nicholas who first employed the term ›*theologia negativa*.‹<sup>140</sup>

#### A Predecessor: Nothingness in Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 800 – c. 877)

I have discussed elsewhere Johannes Scottus Eriugena's hidden role in the phenomenological tradition.<sup>141</sup> Eriugena is the first major exponent and interpreter of the Dionysian tradition in the Middle Ages.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, the most extensive discussion of ›nothingness‹ in the Dionysian tradition occurs in his ›Periphyseon‹ (c. 867).<sup>143</sup> Meister Eckhart probably knew some of Eriugena's writings, but exactly what is not clear.<sup>144</sup> Eriugena's ›Homilia (*Vox spiritualis aquilae*)‹ had been translated into German and survives in two manuscripts and it is likely to have been available to Eckhart.<sup>145</sup> Possibly Eriugena influenced Eckhart's ›Expositio Sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem‹. As Hamburger suggests:

Rather than speaking of a revival of interest in Eriugena, it would, perhaps, be more appropriate to think in terms of a reinvigorated cult of the Evangelist, which led, in turn, to a renewed interest in Eriugena on John.<sup>146</sup>

Eckhart may also have had access to Eriugena through the twelfth-century summary by Honorius Augustodunensis, ›Clavis Physicae‹. Thus, in a manner echoed by Meister Eckhart, Eriugena says that God is »not this nor that nor anything« (*nec hoc nec illud nec ullum ille est*).<sup>147</sup>

Eriugena's most radical claim is that God may be considered ›non-being‹ (*nihilum, non esse*) and that this appellation is even sanctioned by Scripture. In his discussion of the divine transcendence and non-being Eriugena navigates between and synthesizes harmoniously Greek Eastern Christian authorities (chiefly Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus Confessor), on

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<sup>140</sup> It is the title of chapter in Book One of Nicholas of Cusa's ›De docta ignorantia‹ (1440).

<sup>141</sup> Moran, Christian Neoplatonism and the Phenomenological Tradition: The Hidden Influence of John Scottus Eriugena. A key figure was Husserl's student Dietrich Mahnke.

<sup>142</sup> Théry, Hilduin et la première traduction des écrits du Pseudo-Denis.

<sup>143</sup> See Duclow, Masters of Learned Ignorance: Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusanus. The critical edition of Eriugena's ›Periphyseon‹ is: Iohannis Scotti seu Eriugenae Periphyseon curavit Eduardus A. Jeauneau, 5 Vols, (CCCM 161–165), trans. by Sheldon-Williams / O'Meara, Hereafter abbreviated ›Peri.‹

<sup>144</sup> Hamburger, Johannes Scotus Eriugena deutsch redivivus. See also Ruh, Johannes Scotus Eriugena deutsch.

<sup>145</sup> See McGinn, The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart, p. 178.

<sup>146</sup> Hamburger, Johannes Scotus Eriugena deutsch redivivus, p. 484.

<sup>147</sup> Peri. I.510C, ed. Jeauneau, p. 95.

the one hand, and Latin Roman Christian sources, especially Augustine, on the other (possibly Alcuin or Fredegisus).<sup>148</sup> ›Periphyseon‹ Book Three contains a short ›tractatus de nihilo‹.<sup>149</sup> For instance, in ›Periphyseon‹ Book Three, Alumnus asks at the beginning of the ›treatise on nothing‹ (the chapter entitled ›de quali nihilo fecit deus omnia‹):

»Alumnus: But when I hear or say that the Divine Goodness [*diuinam bonitatem*] created all things out of nothing [*omnia de nihilo creasse*] I do not understand what is signified by that name, ›Nothing‹ [*nihil*], whether the privation of all essence [*privatio totius essentiae uel substantia*] or substance or accident, or the excellence of the divine superessentiality [*diuinae superessentialitatis excellentia*].«<sup>150</sup>

Nutritor says that he does not easily concede the God is called ›nothing‹ by privation but that God is legitimately called ›nothing‹ because is He is ›more than being‹ (*plus quam esse*).<sup>151</sup> God's ›ineffabile excellence and incomprehensive infinity‹<sup>152</sup> means that He can be said not to be, but it does not follow that he is ›nothing at all‹ or ›mere nothing‹ (*omnino nihil*), nothing understood through the stripping away of all predicates (qualities, essence). God is not *omnino nihil* or *nihil per privationem*, but *nihil per excellentiam*. In general, Eriugena argues that all things can be thought of as participating in ›nothingness‹ in one form or another: God, the Primordial Causes (*causae primordiales*), created entities, corporeal things, unformed matter (*materia informis*). Eriugena further says that there are ›five modes‹ (*quinque modi*) for understanding being and non-being.<sup>153</sup>

In ›Periphyseon‹ Book Three, Eriugena asserts that God can be understood as ›Not-being‹ (*Nihilum*, glossing the Greek οὐδέν [*ouden*]).<sup>154</sup> Here Eriugena writes:

<sup>148</sup> See Carabine, *The Unknown God*, and the classic study by Koch, *Augustinischer und Dionysischer Neuplatonismus und das Mittelalter*.

<sup>149</sup> Indeed, there is a chapter title, ›*de nihilo*‹, in Peri. III.634 A, according to Versions One and Two; the titles were added in the hand of i2 (Jeauneau thinks i1 is Eriugena's own hand) and it becomes ›*de quali nihilo fecit deus omnia*‹ (›concerning the kind of nothing from which God made all things‹) in Version Three (Rheims, Ms. 875, is the basis for Version Two, to be found in Jeaneau's edition, CCCM 163, p. 244). See Jeaneau, *Néant divin et théophanie*.

<sup>150</sup> Peri. III.634 A–B; ed. Jeaneau, p. 244.

<sup>151</sup> Peri. III.634B; ed. Jeaneau, p. 244.

<sup>152</sup> Peri. III.634B; ed. Jeaneau, p. 244.

<sup>153</sup> See Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena*, pp. 212–240; and Moran, *Eriugena on the Five Modes of Being and Non-Being: Reflections on his Sources*.

<sup>154</sup> Eriugena is translating the neuter pronoun and adverb οὐδέν (*ouden*) meaning ›in no way‹, ›not at all‹, or ›nothing‹ as *nihil*. Forms of οὐδέν appear in the New Testament 85 times (in the 4 Gospels), so Eriugena has some scriptural basis but of course he exaggerates it to suit his own needs.



*In theologicis siquidem regulis ad inuestigandam diuinae naturae sublimitatem et incompre- hensibilitatem plus negationis quam affirmationis uirtus ualet. Quam si quis intentus inspexerit, non mirabitur eo uocabulo, quod est nihilum, ipsum deum uocari.*<sup>155</sup>

Note that Eriugena thinks that the Scriptures ›often‹ (*saepe*) call God ›not being‹ and the ›theologians‹ (Dionysius? Maximus?) gloss this as meaning ›beyond being‹ or ›more-than-being‹ (›*hyper ousia*‹ or ›*hyper-ōn*‹, *superessentia*).

Later, in ›Periphyseon‹ Book Five, Eriugena says he is inspired by Dionysius' ›De divinis nominibus‹ to call God ›non-being‹: ›for it shall return into Him, who, because He transcends being, is called Not-Being.« (*In ipsum enim, qui propter superessentialitatem suae naturae nihil dicitur, reuersus est.*)<sup>156</sup> More generally, following the Dionysian tradition, Eriugena speaks of God as ›above being‹ (*super esse, superessentialis*).<sup>157</sup> And again: ›according to the superessentiality of His nature, He [God] is called ›nothing‹« (*propter superessentialitatem suae naturae nihil dicitur*).<sup>158</sup> God is ›beyond all that is and is not‹ (*ultra omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt*).<sup>159</sup> According to ›Periphyseon‹ Book One, God's superessentiality is understood as the ›negation of essence‹ (*negatio essentiae*):

*Nam cum dicitur ›superessentialis est‹, nil aliud mihi datur intelligi quam negatio essentiae. Qui enim dicit ›superessentialis est‹, aperte negat quia essentialis est.*<sup>160</sup>

For Eriugena, superessentiality does not restore affirmative theology at a higher level. Indeed, he continues to negate the negation without affirming a positivity. For him, the term *superessentialis* is actually not a return to the affirmative but a further negation. God is indeed nothingness, or can only be approached negatively. The Greek ›*hyper*‹ and the Latin ›*super*‹ both really mean ›more than‹ (*plus quam*):

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<sup>155</sup> Peri. III.684D–685A; ed. Jeaneau, p. 93: ›For according to the rules of theology the power of negation is stronger than that of affirmation for investigating the sublimity and incomprehensibility of the Divine Nature; and anyone who looks into it closely will not be surprised that often in the Scriptures God Himself is called by the name Nothing.«

<sup>156</sup> Peri. V.897D; ed. Jeaneau, p. 385.

<sup>157</sup> Peri. V.898B–C; ed. Jeaneau, p. 387 sq.

<sup>158</sup> Peri. V.897D; ed. Jeaneau, p. 385.

<sup>159</sup> Peri. III.681C; ed. Jeaneau, p. 446.

<sup>160</sup> Peri. I.462B; ed. Jeaneau, p. 31: ›For when it is said: ›It is superessential‹, this can be understood by me as nothing other but a negation of essence. For he who says: ›It is superessential‹, openly denies that it is essential.«

*Non est ousia quia plus est quam ousia, et tamen dicitur ousia quia omnium ousion id est es- sentiarum creatrix est.*<sup>161</sup>

Dionysius similarly says, in ›The Divine Names‹ that »non-being is really an excess of being«. <sup>162</sup> Charles Stang makes the same point: the Greek privatives *a* and *hyper* both have the sense of ›other than‹ and ›more than‹. <sup>163</sup>

Let us now revisit Meister Eckhart's conception of nothingness – not only of God but of creatures.

### Nothingness of God, the Soul, and the Creature in Meister Eckhart

Eckhart holds – with Eriugena (without naming him) – that the nothing from which God creates is His own intellect (see especially ›Quasi stella matutina‹):

»Everything works in [its] being [*in wesene*], nothing can work except in its being. Fire cannot work except in wood. God works beyond being [*über wesene*], in breadth, where He can move, and He works in nonbeing [*in unwesene*]: before there was being, God was working: He wrought being where no being was [*er worhte wesen, dô niht wesen enwas*].«<sup>164</sup>

Following both St. Augustine and Eriugena, Eckhart asserts that all creatures considered in themselves are nothing, i.e., their being is entirely dependent being, from another, and without the support of their divine ground, they are nothing. Eckhart says according to Proposition 26 in the Articles condemned in the Bull of John XXII:

*Omnes creature sunt unum purum nichil. Non dico, quod sint quid modicum vel aliquid, sed quod sint unum purum nichil.*<sup>165</sup>

Eckhart, like Eriugena, also prioritizes all things as products of mind or intellect. Created nature is the product of mind: »The work of nature is the work of intelligence« (*Opus naturae est opus*

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<sup>161</sup> Peri. I. 464 A, ed. Jeaneau, p. 34: »So it is not ousia because it is more than *ousia*, and yet it is called *ousia* because it is the Creator of all *ousiai*.«

<sup>162</sup> De divinis nominibus IV.3, 697A; Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works, trans. Luibhéid, p. 73. This passage is cited by Derrida, How to Avoid Speaking – Denials, p. 175.

<sup>163</sup> Stang, Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite, p. 124.

<sup>164</sup> Pr. 9 (›Quasi stella matutina‹), DW I, p. 145,5–8; Walshe, p. 342.

<sup>165</sup> Acta Echardiana (Proc. contra mag. Echardum) n. 65, LW V, p. 599,87 sq.; Walshe, p. 26; my translation: »All creatures are one pure nothing. I do not say that they are in some way or other, but that they are one pure nothing.«

*intelligentiae*). In his first ›Parisian Question‹, Eckhart asked whether the existence (*esse*) of God is identical as His act of intellectual understanding (*intelligere*).<sup>166</sup> Eckhart maintains that intellect is ›higher‹ (*altius*) than being as its ground or condition.<sup>167</sup> According to this first ›Parisian Question‹, the intellect is a kind of ›pre-being‹ or ›non-being‹. Anything that belongs to the intellect is in a certain way a non-being.<sup>168</sup> If the human being empties or annihilates himself, then he creates a space from which God cannot withhold Himself.<sup>169</sup>

John D. Caputo, an American phenomenologically-inspired thinker, has compared the nothingness of the intellect in Eckhart's ›Parisian Questions‹ to Sartre's conception of the nothingness of consciousness.<sup>170</sup> For Sartre, being is ›massive‹, ›opaque‹, a Parmenidean plenum devoid of determination and meaning. It is completely »de trop«, absurd, meaningless. Consciousness, on the other hand, is completely translucent and empty. It is a ›lack‹ and desire of the fullness of being. Consciousness, for Sartre, is defined by intentionality – a pure élan towards what is other. Meister Eckhart in fact has a similar view of the intellect. Eckhart's ›Parisian Questions‹, of course, had no direct influence on Sartre.<sup>171</sup>

Rather than being a Scholastic as such, Meister Eckhart is best thought of as developing a credential and existential way of relating to God. His central theme is that God is the only true super-essential reality and all his metaphysical exercises are a way to promote recognition of the one, infinite, unchanging, all-powerful God to whom we must open our souls and our hearts through a practice of ›letting-go‹ (*gelâzenheit*), ›detachment‹ (*abgescheidenheit*), and ›living without the why‹ (*âne warumbe*).<sup>172</sup> In Sermon Q. 21, ›*Unus deus et pater omnium*‹, he states: »The ground of the soul can be penetrated by nothing but the pure Godhead.« (*In den grunt der sêle enmac niht dan lûter gotheit*).<sup>173</sup> In this sermon, Eckhart insists on God as one: »God alone has oneness. God's property is oneness; it is on this basis that God is God; otherwise God would not be.« (*Einicheit hât got aleine. Gotes eigenschaft ist einicheit; an dem nimet got, daz er got*

<sup>166</sup> For detailed discussion of this central idea in Eckhart, see Jung, Meister Eckharts philosophische Mystik.

<sup>167</sup> *Assumo primo quod intelligere est altius quam esse et est alterius condicionis* (Quaest. Paris. I n. 5, LW V, p. 42,1 sq.).

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Quaest. Paris. I n. 7, LW V, p. 44,6.

<sup>169</sup> Pr. 48, DW II, p. 415,1–3; Colledge and McGinn, p. 197.

<sup>170</sup> John D. Caputo, The Nothingness of the Intellect in Meister Eckhart's ›Parisian Questions‹.

<sup>171</sup> The ›Parisian Questions‹ were not even discovered until 1927 when Martin Grabmann and Ephrem Longpré came upon them simultaneously although independently.

<sup>172</sup> Pr. 29, DW II, p. 80,2.

<sup>173</sup> Pr. 21, DW I, p. 360,5 sq.; Walshe, p. 467.

*ist, er enwære anders got niht.*)<sup>174</sup> In the same sermon he explains this divine One as the »negation of the negation and a denial of the denial«. (*Ein ist ein versagen des versagennes und ein verlougen des verlougennes.*)<sup>175</sup> As he puts it in Latin, echoing Eriugena, God is the *negatio negationis*.<sup>176</sup> One is the negation of the negation (*ein ist ein versagen des versagennes*).<sup>177</sup>

Everything depends on the One and the One is dependent on nothing.<sup>178</sup> God's being is the negation of everything else. Furthermore, each individual being, by being itself, is a negation of other beings:

*Alle créatûren hânt ein versagen an in selben; einiu versaget, daz si diu ander niht ensî. [...] Aber got hât ein versagen des versagennes; er ist ein und versaget aller ander, wan niht ûzer gote enist.*<sup>179</sup>

All being belongs to God and in God is a remarkable Oneness that precedes being. In his German sermon 83 (»Renouamini spiritu«), God is not »a being« (*ein wesen*), he is (again following Eriugena) a »nothing above being« (*ein uber wesende nitheit*).<sup>180</sup> Similarly, Eckhart says that the Masters say (*Die meister sprechent*) God is a being (*ein wesen*) and a rational being (*vernünfftic wesen*), but Eckhart says he is not a being nor an intelligent being, not a »this or a that« (*niht diz noch daz*).<sup>181</sup> God is »superessential« (*überwesenlich*).<sup>182</sup>

Furthermore, the soul has an essential inner unity, likeness, and identification with God, based in its ultimate nature. As Eckhart writes in »Intravit Jesus in templum«:

*Als glîch hat er des menschen sêle gemachet im selber, daz in himelrîche noch in ertrîche von allen hêrlîchen créatûren, diu got sô wûnnlich geschaffen hât, keiniu ist, diu im als glîch ist als des menschen sêle aleine.*<sup>183</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Pr. 21, DW I, p. 368,8 sq.; Walshe, p. 469.

<sup>175</sup> Pr. 21, DW I, p. 363,1 sq.; Walshe, p. 467.

<sup>176</sup> Prol. op. prop. n. 15, LW I, p. 175,13 sq. The concept of »negation of negation« is of course found also in Eriugena's »Periphyseon« and derives from Dionysius. For the history of the concept, see Hedwig, *Negatio negationis*.

<sup>177</sup> Pr. 21, DW I, p. 361,10.

<sup>178</sup> Walshe, p. 469.

<sup>179</sup> Pr. 21, DW I, p. 363,5–8; Walshe, p. 467: »All creatures have a negation in themselves: one negates by not being the other. An angel negates by not being another. But God negates the negation: He is one and negates all else, for outside of God nothing is.«

<sup>180</sup> Pr. 83, DW III, p. 442,1 sq.; see also Pr. 9, DW I, p. 142,5–9.

<sup>181</sup> Pr. 52, DW II, p. 497,3–5.

<sup>182</sup> Pr. 82, DW III, p. 382,6 sq.

<sup>183</sup> Pr. 1, DW I, pp. 5,9–6,1; Walshe, p. 66: »So like Himself has God made man's soul that nothing else in heaven or on earth, of all the splendid creatures that God has so joyously created, resembles God so much as the human soul.«

In God there is no division,<sup>184</sup> and no ›otherness‹ (*In deo enim non est aliud*).<sup>185</sup> Indeed, Eckhart was accused in ›In agro dominico‹,<sup>186</sup> Article Twenty-Four of claiming essentially this:

*Qui enim duo videt vel distinctionem videt, deum non videt. Deus enim unus est extra numerum et supra numerum nec ponit in numerum cum aliquo. Sequitur: »<Nulla> igitur in ipso deo distinctio esse potest aut intelligi.*<sup>187</sup>

Building on the unity of the divine, Eckhart maintains that human beings become like God and even merge with God, becoming one with the One, through overcoming difference and duality:

*Die liebe, die ein mensch gibt, do ensind nit zwey, me eyn und eynung, und in der liebe bin ich me got, dann ich in mir selber bin.*<sup>188</sup>

In sermon 83, he speaks about how one should love God such that the soul empties itself and becomes one with God:

*Swenne aber alle bilde der selen abegescheiden werden [...] vnd <si> allein schouwvet das einig ein, so vindet das bloze wesen der selen das bloze formlose wesen gotlicher einkeit, dc do ist ein vberwesende wesen, lidende ligende in ime selben.*<sup>189</sup>

Elsewhere, Eckhart says – echoing Eriugena, who maintains that the soul only knows that it is but not what it is since it, like God, is not a ›what‹ – that the soul does not know itself and can generate no image of itself given that it harbors the images of all other things:

*Und dar umbe sô enist der sêle kein dinc als unbekant als si ir selber. Alsô sprichet ein meister, daz diu sêle kein bilde von ir selber geschepfen enmac noch gewürken. Dar umbe enmac si sich selber mit nihte*

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<sup>184</sup> McGinn, Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher, p. 226. Cf. Sermo 29, LW IV, pp. 263–270.

<sup>185</sup> Sermo 29, LW IV, p. 270,7 sq.

<sup>186</sup> See Laurent, Autour du procès de Maître Eckhart.

<sup>187</sup> Acta Echardiana (Proc. contra mag. Echardum) n. 59, LW V, 586,16–19; Walshe, p. 28:

»For whoever sees duality or distinction does not see God, since God is One outside all number and above all number, and does not coincide with anything. It therefore follows that in God no distinction can exist or be discerned.«

<sup>188</sup> Pr. 5a, DW I p. 80,1–3; Walshe, p. 105: »In the love that a man gives there is no duality but one and unity, and in love I am God more than I am in myself.«

<sup>189</sup> Pr. 83, DW III, p. 437,13–438,1; Walshe, p. 462: »But when all images are detached from the soul and she sees nothing but the one alone, then the naked essence of the soul finds the naked, formless essence of divine unity, which is superessential being, passive, reposing in itself.«

*bekennen, wan bilde koment alles in durch die sinne. Des enmac si kein bilde von ir selber hebben. Und dā von weiz si alliu anderiu dinc und sich selber niht.*<sup>190</sup>

The soul has to be silent and still for the Word to speak in the soul:

*wan ze dirre geburt sō wil got und muoz haben ein ledige, unbekūmberte, vr̄e sēle in der niht enst dan er aleine, noch diu nihtes noch niemannes enwarte dan sîn aleine.*<sup>191</sup>

The human has to reach out beyond itself, transcend or overcome its created limitation, through an inner, spiritual emptying out. This leads to his thinking about ›letting be‹ (*gelâzenheit*). For Eckhart, in order to open itself to receive God fully, the soul must be entirely empty, ›void as a desert‹ (*verwüesteten ellendicheit*).<sup>192</sup> One must be in a state of ›pure nothingness‹ (*in einem lûtern nihte*).<sup>193</sup> He says: ›you must lay claim to nothing! Let go of yourself and let God act with you and in you as He will.‹ (*Dir ist nôt vor allen dingen, daz dû dich nihtes anenemest, sunder lâz dich alzemâle und lâz got mit dir wûrken und in dir, swaz er wil.*).<sup>194</sup> The natural light of the soul must become pure nothing so the Divine Light can shine. (*[S]ol got göt- liche in dir liuhten, dar envürdet dich dîn natiurlich lieht zemâle niht zuo, mēr: ez muoz ze einem lûtern nihte werden.*)<sup>195</sup> One must be as empty (*ledic*) as if one did not exist (*er niht enwas*).<sup>196</sup> The human soul must be virginal and ›free‹ (*vr̄e und ledic*),<sup>197</sup> just as Jesus is ›free and void and virginal‹ (*als Jêsus ledic und vr̄e ist und megetlich in im selber*).<sup>198</sup> This is the original state of humanity: ›void‹ or non-being. Eckhart also speaks of the soul as ›naked‹ just as the being of God is ›naked‹.<sup>199</sup> The Latin *erat* (he was) signifies the divine's naked essence.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Pr. 101 (›Dum medium silentium‹), DW IV,1, p. 348,65–69; Walshe, p. 31: »[...] there is nothing so unknown to the soul as herself. Accordingly, one master says that the soul can neither create nor obtain an image of herself. Therefore she has no way of knowing herself, for images all enter through the senses, and hence she can have no image of herself. And so she knows all other things, but not herself.«

<sup>191</sup> Pr. 102 (›Ubi est, qui natus est rex Iudaeorum‹), DW IV,1, p. 418,111–113; Walshe, p. 43:

›For at this birth God needs and must have a vacant free and unencumbered soul, containing nothing but Himself alone and which looks to nothing and nobody but Him.«

<sup>192</sup> Pr. 103, LW IV,1, p. 482,70; Walshe, p. 52.

<sup>193</sup> Pr. 103, LW IV,1, p. 483,81; Walshe, p. 57.

<sup>194</sup> Pr. 104, LW IV,1, p. 600,410–413; Walshe, p. 51.

<sup>195</sup> Pr. 103, LW IV,1, p. 476,27–477,1; Walshe, p. 56.

<sup>196</sup> Pr. 2, DW I, p. 25,2.

<sup>197</sup> Schürmann, Meister Eckhart, p. 3.

<sup>198</sup> Pr. 2, DW I, p. 26,6 sq.

<sup>199</sup> Pr. 76, DW III, p. 322,6; Walshe, p. 74.

<sup>200</sup> Walshe, p. 146.

## Conclusion

My aim here has been two-fold: to review the use of Eckhart in the phenomenological tradition and to suggest that Eckhart's reflections on nothingness could contribute to phenomenological meontics. I have argued that this meontics, although it has parallels with the phenomenological conception of the nothingness of consciousness, actually arises from the Dionysian tradition of negative theology. In regard to the appropriation of Eckhart by phenomenologists, besides Heidegger (and his student Oltmanns), whose use of Eckhart is somewhat selective and a-theological, there is more recently a revival of interest in negative theology by French phenomenologists and their successors Derrida and Marion, but there is scant evidence of central figures on the phenomenological tradition making extensive use of Eckhart. The neglect of Eckhart in figures such as Edith Stein is understandable given the unavailability of most of Eckhart's works (aside from the edition of Pfeiffer) and also the fact that the critical edition began in the shadow of the National Socialist celebration of Eckhart as one of the German philosophers.<sup>201</sup> Nevertheless, there seems to be strong intellectual affinities between the thought of Eckhart and the (me-)ontologies of being and nothingness found especially in Sartre and more recently in Marion. What is remarkable is that classical phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Scheler) never thought to address the Neoplatonic tradition of negative theology stemming from Proclus, but especially in the West, from the Christian Dionysius the Areopagite and his translators and successors (Eriugena, Albertus, Eckhart, Cusanus). Yes, Heidegger dabbles in Meister Eckhart, but even here Schürmann is the one who really develops a Heideggerian reading of Eckhart (and not Käte Oltmanns, whom Heidegger favored). Gadamer once told me, in a conversation which I regret I did not record, that he asked Heidegger about Nicholas of Cusa and even Gregory of Nyssa, but they were not on Heidegger's radar even though they represented a tradition opposed to the ontotheology that Heidegger thought was emblematic of the Western forgetfulness of being.<sup>202</sup>

More recently, Derrida felt forced into a dialogue with negative theology and offered a suitably ambiguous response. Marion, on the other hand, can be seen to be moving more directly

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<sup>201</sup> See Sturlese, *Die historisch-kritische Edition der Werke Meister Eckharts*.

<sup>202</sup> Heidegger should have known Nicholas of Cusa, as he had taken courses with Johannes Uebinger (1909–1910), who wrote two books on Cusanus, ›Die Philosophie des Nicolaus Cusanus‹ (1880) and ›Die Gotteslehre des Nikolaus Cusanus‹ (1888). Indeed, Uebinger helped Ernst Cassirer recognize the significance of Cusanus.

into the sphere of negative theology, especially with his recent serious studies of Johannes Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa, but he has yet to address Eckhart in any detail. John D. Caputo does have an extensive exploration of Eckhart in relation to Heidegger. Richard Kearney in his ›The God Who May Be‹, has explored how Meister Eckhart revisits certain metaphysical terms in his ›Commentary on Exodus‹ 3:14<sup>203</sup> – *Sum, ego, qui est* – reinterprets them in a way that opens them up to a postmetaphysical, eschatological interpretation.<sup>204</sup> For Kearney, as for Eckhart, *sum* refers to God beyond all predication. I am convinced that further exploration of the strong current of Dionysian negative theology in medieval Latin thought from Eriugena onward will uncover more fully Meister Eckhart's deep espousal of the transcendent nothingness of the divine unity and the empty nothingness of the human soul as the ground for the appearing of the divine overflowing.

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<sup>203</sup> In *Exod. nn. 14–16*, LW II, pp. 20–22.

<sup>204</sup> Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, pp. 35–37. Kearney, a student of Paul Ricœur, is strongly influenced by Stanislaus Breton, ›Je Suis (celui) qui Suis‹.



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