

# On some philosophical aspects of Master Eckhart's Theology

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ALAIN DE LIBERA

## On Some Philosophical Aspects of Master Eckhart's Theology

The German Dominican Monk and Parisian Master of theology, Eckhart of Hohenheim, was condemned in 1329 by Pope John XXII, former Cardinal Duèze. Throughout history, this condemnation has been at the source of more than one regrettable misunderstanding, lending support to two seemingly opposing interpretations of Eckhart's basic position: 1) Eckhart is an unorthodox thinker, because he is a philosopher; 2) he is a philosopher because he is unorthodox. However contradictory these two interpretations may appear, they are, in fact, based on the same assumption, namely, that Philosophy is intrinsically opposed to Theology; or, at best, that Philosophy is a mere tool in the hands of Theologians: *Philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

Over the past 30 years, Master Eckhart the Philosopher – or, if one prefers, Master Eckhart's Philosophy –, has been acknowledged by historians of Philosophy, by certain of them even fully and unconditionally. This philosophical recognition has tended to place Mysticism at the center of the debate<sup>1</sup>. Reacting against the so-called «philosophical interpretation», some historians have argued that Mysticism, as opposed to Philosophy, should be considered as the core of Eckhart's teaching. This change in perspective – in fact, a return of some nineteenth-century interpretations – in no way annuls the dualistic approach that has always characterized the reception of Eckhart's writings, except that now, instead of seeing Eckhart as an unorthodox thinker because of his philosophical commitment and vice-versa, he is seen as an unorthodox

<sup>1</sup> See K. FLASCH, «Meister Eckhart – Versuch, ihn aus dem mystischen Strom zu retten», in: *Gnosis und Mystik in der Geschichte der Philosophie*, hrsg. von P. KOSLOWSKI, Zürich, München, 1988, p. 94–110, and «Meister Eckhart und die deutsche Mystik. Zur Kritik eines historiographisches Schemas», in: *Die Philosophie im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. von O. PLUTA (Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie, 10), Amsterdam, p. 439–463.

thinker because of his being a mystic, and vice-versa (as if Mysticism, like previously Philosophy, were only another possible name for theological incorrectness). I must confess that none of these alternatives appeal to me, and that as an historian, I think it is more appropriate to try and understand medieval thought on its own terms. In my opinion, on 27 March 1329, when Pope John XXII condemned Eckhart, he was condemning neither philosophy nor mysticism, as he simply had no idea as to what *speculative mysticism* or *philosophy of Filiation* or *Metaphysik–Mystik* mean to us. What the Pope was condemning in reality, were certain, specific expressions of Eckhart's Christian, medieval theology, some of which I intend to analyze in this paper, clearly situating them in their time and context. I have deliberately chosen, as such, to avoid any and all «modernistic» discussions with Schopenhauer, his disciples, or anyone who sees in Master Eckhart either a German Çakia Mouni or a Latin *Sufi*<sup>2</sup>. Instead, I will look at some controversial claims in Eckhart's Christian theology. When examining some of the basic expressions of Eckhart's thought that were the subjects of controversy in his time and day, I ever bear in mind that the very manner in which he elaborated his defense, both in Cologne and in Avignon, is ample proof of his inherently Christian understanding of all problems. In fact, Eckhart's entire defense was based on his firm and everlasting plea for a personal orthodoxy. This said, we still need to examine the philosophical component of his thought and pose the questions: to what extent were Eckhart's controversial expressions linked to philosophical topics or to the conceptual distinctions used by medieval philosophers? Did they reflect the philosophical debates of ancient and medieval philosophy, and, if so, which ones, and to what extent? Finally, what impact should they have on our views of the nature of philosophy and theology in the medieval period and of their mutual relationship? To answer these questions one must, however, first get a picture of Eckhart the theologian, which means try and describe Eckhart's main theological theses.

One of the most often quoted common places in Eckhartian scholarship is the distinction between the *Lebemeister* and the *Lesemeister*. This distinction was emphasized, in particular, by Martin Heidegger in *Der Feldweg*, when he praised «the old Master, who teaches us how to read and how to live, Eckhart» – *der alte Lese- und Lebemeister, Eckbehardt*. All

<sup>2</sup> See A. SCHOPENHAUER, «Parerga et paralipomena», in: *Nachlass*, Leipzig, 1864, p. 432.

this is well known, and goes back to the *Spruch* – the *Dictum* (*Saying*) no. 8 attributed to Eckhart himself<sup>3</sup>, and printed by F. Pfeiffer in 1857:

Master Eckhart says: better a Master who teaches us how to live than a thousand masters who teach us how to read. But, how to read and live in God, this so far remains unknown. If I were looking for someone mastering the art of lecturing on the Scriptures, I would certainly go to Paris, to the High Schools, to learn from this master's science. But, if I asked him the question – What is perfect life? he would have no answer. Therefore, whom shall I ask? Where shall I go? Nowhere, but to a Nature, which is both naked and free. Only from this Nature, can I obtain the answer<sup>4</sup>.

It is worth noting that this *Saying* has a parallel in a small, anonymous, German literary piece of religious prose, entitled *the Sayings of the Twelve Sublime Masters Teaching in Paris*. This work, which, it should also be noted, was widely diffused not only in Germany and in the Netherlands, but also in England and France, is composed of 12 pieces. Only two of the *Twelve Sublime Masters* are named: on the one hand, Hartmann von Kronenberg, an obscure person, and, on the other, the well-known Bishop of Regensburg, Albert the Great. Albert's saying shows a remarkable resemblance to Eckhart's *Spruch* no. 8:

If you want to meet the wisest clerks on the earth, go to Paris, to the Schools, but, if you want to know God's most intimate secret, then ask the poorest among human beings, ask for someone who by God freely and deliberately chose to be poor. He/She knows more of God's most intimate secret than any wise clerk ever knew.

Taken together, Albert's *Saying* and Eckhart's *Spruch* provide evidence for the first point that I would like to raise in this paper, namely, that there is no difference between Eckhart the *Lesemeister* and Eckhart the *Lebemeister*. Eckhart was both. That he was a *Lebemeister* – this is obvious to everybody. That he was a *Lesemeister* is amply testified to by the fact that he was the third German Dominican master lecturing in Paris (the first being Albert the Great, the second being Dietrich von Freiberg). In his *Dictum* Albert tells us how and where the ideal *Lesemeister* and the ideal *Lebemeister* ideally come together, thus telling us also who is the most effective theologian, the true Master, the only one able to disclose

<sup>3</sup> On the *Sayings* as a literary genre, cf. A. SPAMER, *Texte aus der deutschen Mystik des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, Jena, Diederichs, 1912. On the «twelve sublime Masters», cf. V. HONEMANN, «Sprüche der zwölf Meister zu Paris», in: W. STAMMLER/B. WACHINGER, eds, *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters, Verfasserlexikon*, IX, Berlin, New York, De Gruyter, 1993, p. 201–205.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ECKHART, *Sprüche*, no. 8, ed. PFEIFFER, p. 599.

God's most intimate secret: he is the poorest among human beings. This is precisely what Eckhart is talking about when he refers to «a Nature which is both naked and free». This Nature is the nature of man, assumed by God in Incarnation. *Naked* means for Eckhart the same as *poor* for Albert. Thus, *the poorest among human beings* and the *Nature which is naked* mean the same: Christ himself taken according to his human Nature. But Christ has two Natures. God's Nature in Christ being free, divine Freedom is linked with human nakedness because of the union of the two Natures in Christ – the Divine one and the human one. In the poorest among human beings there is therefore Freedom and Poverty, or Freedom in Poverty. But the poorest man of all, Christ, was not born once for all. Rather He continuously remains in a process of birth, being born and reborn, and still to be born both in His Father's heart and in every Christian. Given the union of the two Natures, every Christian is also in a continuous process of birth, being born and reborn, and thus partaking everlastingly in the process of Christ's birth – the Christian person being any man or woman who has freely chosen to be poor leaving everything that is not Christ, including his/her personal will. Freedom and Poverty thus become one in the «Poverty of the Will». In True Poverty, they become one Self.

The core of Eckhart's teaching thus revolves around the question of Poverty, or Grace. His teaching is therefore clearly theological: to be precise, it is Christian theology, to be even more precise, it is Christology, no matter how controversial this Christology was in Eckhart's time. In fact the patristic postulate according to which «God became man, so that man should become God» formulates in a nutshell the fundamental Christology which Eckhart the Teacher never ever tired preaching. At the very center of this postulate, we find the mysterious unity of the two Graces: Incarnation and Inhabitation, an entirely orthodox belief, which was held by such different thinkers as Irenaeus of Lyon, Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine and which amounts to saying – to put it succinctly – that the first and last goal of Incarnation is the Deification of man. As Irenaeus writes : «There is no other reason why the Verb should become flesh, no other reason why the Son of God should become the Son of Man, but this: becoming mixed with the Verb, thereby receiving Filiation and Adoption, Man becomes God's Son» (*Contra Her.*, III, 19, 1). For Eckhart, «Deification» or, if you prefer, «Justification» designates the *inhabitation* of the whole Trinity in the soul of the deified and/or justified man. For theologians, this inhabitation is Grace itself or, to be more precise, «uncreated Grace», for Eckhart, this

«uncreated Grace», which is the Holy Spirit itself, lives in man together with «created Grace», which is constituted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in the soul of the Christian, inasmuch as a Christian is and remains by Grace what Christ is by Nature – the only-begotten Son. As Eckhart puts it in his *Predigt* 29:

... our Lord said: «Everything that I have heard from my Father I have revealed to you» (Jn. 15,15). Certain clerks, who are very learned ... want to interpret [theses words] saying that he has revealed to us «on the way» [= *in via*] as much as is necessary for attaining eternal happiness. I do not agree that it is to be thus understood; it just is not the truth. Why did God become man? So that I might be born the same. God died so that I might die to the whole world and to all created things. This is how one should understand our Lord's words: «Everything that I have heard from my Father I have revealed to you». What does the Son hear from his Father? The Father can do nothing but give birth; the Son can do nothing but be born. All that the Father has and is, the abyss of the divine being and divine nature, all this he brings forth completely in his only-begotten Son. What the Son hears from the Father he has revealed to us: that we are this same Son. All that the Son has he has from his Father: being and nature, so that we might be this same only-begotten Son. No one has the Holy Spirit if he is not the only-begotten Son<sup>5</sup>.

Two brief remarks need to be made here. Firstly, Eckhart's thesis that the Holy Spirit or «uncreated Grace» is «sent» into the soul of the Just and that it is really present there, is not primarily a mystical thesis; it is fully theological one, since it incorporates three important theological concepts: the Trinitarian Inhabitation of God in the soul, the transforming union of the soul through knowledge and love, and the beatific vision of God. This thesis had appeared before Eckhart, in the works, for ex. of Thomas Aquinas, and prior to him, of Peter Lombard. But it was in no way common doctrine at the end of the XIIIth or at the beginnings of the fourteenth century . The second remark is that the Eckhartian idea of man becoming the only-begotten Son through Grace, was not only questioned by masters in theology, but firmly rejected by the Church itself. This becomes clear in further examining the *Predigt* 29, which was one of the sources for Eckhart's condemnation. In this *Predigt*, Eckhart tells why created Grace has to be implemented by uncreated Grace or, in other words, why the «essential» – (meaning uncreated Grace) should also be received by man «essentially» (meaning *not* in the

<sup>5</sup> ECKHART, *Predigt* 29, transl. F. TOBIN, in: Meister Eckhart Teacher and Preacher (The classics of Western Spirituality), New York, Mahwah, Toronto, Paulist Press, 1986, p. 289.

accidental powers of the soul, *but* in its innermost depths): you can receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit (meaning Grace that is created), but this does not mean that they remain in you; they are not *lasting* – because what is accidental, passes, whereas only the essential remains. I quote:

Thus it is with the man who is the only-begotten Son. The Holy Spirit remains in him [= this man] essentially. This is why it is written in the Book of Wisdom: «I have brought you forth today in the reflection of my eternal light, in the fullness and brightness of all the saints» (Ps. 2, 7; 109, 3). He gives birth to [this man] now and today. And so birth takes place in the divinity, [and] there they are «baptized in the Holy Spirit» according «the promise that the Father made to them». This is «after these days that are not many or few» (Ac 1, 5), the «fullness of the divinity» (Col. 2, 9)<sup>6</sup>.

«The man who is the only-begotten Son». In his *Constit. In Agro Dominico*, no. 20, Pope John the XXII condemned this statement: *Quod bonus homo est unigenitus filius Dei* («The good man is the only-begotten Son»). Apparently taken from *Predigt* 29, this sentence does not exactly respond to Eckhart's phrase. But there is anyway a problem with Eckhart's genuine formulation: who is Eckhart referring to when he speaks of the «man who is the only-begotten son»? Perhaps to Christ himself, for as Aquinas maintained: «Holy Spirit remains, or said even better, it *rests*, in the Son *quantum ad humanam naturam Christi*». But is this what Eckhart really meant? Probably not, as two other sentences condemned by the Pope in the *Constit. In Agro Dominico*, no. 21 and 22, which come from Eckhart's *Predigten* 14 and 6, indisputably refer to man, the good man, the just one, the true Christian – in other words, they do not refer to Christ, which is why, in my opinion, the *Votum Avenionense* declared: «Haereticum est dicere quod aliquis bonus homo sit unigenitus Dei filius». When summing up the content of *articuli* nos. 20, 21 and 22, the theologians of the Papal court in Avignon, John XXII's counselors, clearly rejected what appeared, in their view, to be the preposterous consequences of Eckhart's main thesis and they said: «... secundum dictos articulos quemcumque bonum hominem filium suum (sc. Dei) et eundem cum unitate esse, absque aliqua distinctione» («according to those articles, any good man whatsoever can be the Son of God, the very same Son in perfect unity, without any kind of distinction»)<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> ECKHART, *Predigt* 29, transl. F. TOBIN (modified), p. 290.

<sup>7</sup> On the articles 20–22, cf. T. SUAREZ-NANI, «Philosophie- und theologiehistorische Interpretationen der in der Bulle von Avignon zensurierten Sätze», in: Eckardus Theutonicus homo doctus et sanctus. Nachweise und Berichte zum Prozeß gegen Meister Eck-

Thus, a touch of heresy clearly appears to exist in Eckhart's doctrine of the good man, and it would seem that it disqualifies the whole of his doctrine of Grace and Justification. But what really went wrong here? Was Eckhart's doctrine too mystical? Was it too philosophical? I think that from the point of view of Eckhart's opponents, his doctrine was simply poor theology – neither unorthodox *qua* philosophical, nor unorthodox *qua* mystical, but unorthodox *qua* theologically incorrect.

Does this mean that we should not consider the philosophical aspects of Eckhart's doctrine, if, of course, they exist? Certainly not. But in order to deal with these aspects, we have to examine what Eckhart's understanding of philosophy was, and this brings us to the main subject of our lecture.

Eckhart never opposed theology and philosophy. On the contrary, in the *Prologue* to the *Commentary on John* he argues that all the articles of the Holy Christian Faith, as well as all that what is written in the Scripture, could be understood or explained by *rationales naturales philosophorum*, and, conversely, that all «the truth contained in the principles, conclusions and properties regarding natural things was revealed in the exact wording of the Scripture, which, in turn, is explained by those very natural things».

In cuius verbi expositione et aliorum quae sequuntur, intentio est auctoris, sicut et in omnibus suis editionibus, ea quae sacra asserit fides christiana et utiusque testamenti scriptura, exponere per rationes naturales philosophorum .... Rursus intentio operis est ostendere, quomodo veritates principiorum et conclusionum et proprietatum naturalium innuntur luculenter – qui habet aures audiendi (Jn 1, 6) – in ipsis verbis sacrae scripturae, quae per illa naturalia exponuntur<sup>8</sup>.

As far as I know, no one in the Middle Ages ever criticized Eckhart because of his use or misuse of Philosophy while interpreting the Scripture, or even questioned the exegetical doctrine exposed in the *Prologue*. Yet, it could have easily been done, since this doctrine clearly implies that, given his expertise in natural philosophy, the philosopher is the only one who is able to see why and how the *verba sacrae scripturae* illuminate the *veritates naturales*.

But no reproach of this type was ever made to Eckhart. He was not attacked because of some philosophical *bravado*. He was only criticized and condemned for his preaching *subtilitates* to «simple people». This re-

hart, hrsg. von Heinrich STIRNIMANN und Ruedi IMBACH (Dokimion, 11), Fribourg, Ed. Univ., 1992, p. 78–80.

<sup>8</sup> ECKHART, *Commentary on John*, § 2 and 3, Paris, Cerf, 1989, p. 26–28.



proach didn't implicate philosophy at all, it merely reminded the Preacher, in charge of the *cura monialium* (like many German Dominicans at the beginning of the fourteenth century), that he should not address the wrong audience or address the right audience in the wrong way. Speaking to nuns or illiterate people, one was meant to refrain from scholastic tricks; one was supposed to speak the plain, ordinary language of the so-called *vetula* – or the «*anus pia*» to put it in Francesco Petrarca's terms<sup>9</sup>. «Scientific theology» was not considered adapted to the *simplices*. What thus was required from a Dominican Friar in vernacular preaching, was just a decent, understandable, and not too complicated «weak theology»<sup>10</sup>. From this point of view, Eckhart was condemned because he simply was not doing his job. But this, of course, is far from the end of the story, since in addressing his audience as he actually did, Eckhart provoked a certain philosophical revival which had some important consequences not only on fourteenth-century German theology, but in fourteenth-century German society as well. I hope that considering those consequences will enable us to understand how far Eckhart's most controversial expressions actually reflected philosophical debates in ancient and medieval philosophy. This might contribute to modify our present understanding of the mutual relationship of philosophy and theology in the late medieval period.

As I have argued elsewhere, Eckhart played a prominent role in the late-medieval «deprofessionalization of Philosophy». This, in my opinion, is his most striking contribution to the history of medieval philosophy and theology. As it is well known, in late Antiquity, philosophy was not considered a mere «production of abstract concepts», it was also regarded as a «form of life». Any attempt to understand philosophical discourse in late Antiquity apart from *praxis*, without paying attention to its spiritual and religious component amounts to a methodological error, that has been rightly criticized by P. Hadot in his recent book, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* But, according to me, this reevaluation of the

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. DE LIBERA, «Pétrarque et la romanité», in: Chr. MENASSEYRE/A. TOSEL, eds, *Figures italiennes de la rationalité*, Paris, éd. Kimé, 1997, p. 7–35.

<sup>10</sup> On the *vetula* in fourteenth-century theology, see L. BIANCHI/E. RANDI, «Le théologien et la petite vieille», in: *Vérités dissonantes. Aristote à la fin du Moyen Age* (Vestigia, 11), Fribourg, Ed. Univ.; Paris, Cerf, 1993, p. 123–129. On «scientific theology» and «weak theology» in the Middle Ages, cf. M.-T. FUMAGALLI BEONIO-BROCCHIERI, «Note sul concetto di teologia in Durando di S. Porziano», in: L. BIANCHI, éd., *Filosofia e teologia nel Trecento. Studi in ricordo di Eugenio Randi* (Fédération internationale des Instituts d'études médiévales, Textes et études du Moyen Age, 1), Louvain-La-Neuve, 1994, p. 57–63.

*souci de soi*, rhetorically based on Michel Foucault's latest work, should not be confined to ancient philosophy. In other words, I think that P. Hadot is wrong to consider the medieval period as having promoted a clear-cut distinction between the philosophical *way of life* (absorbed in Christian spirituality) and the philosophical, theoretical, discourse of the Masters (reduced to the role of an *instrumentum* of theology as a science)<sup>11</sup>. University, in the Middle Ages, was not the Academy or the Stoa, it was of course a Christian institution, but it was also simultaneously a place for *living*, with its own ideals, its own norms, and rules, its own concept and practice of happiness – Dante Alighieri's *felicità mentale*<sup>12</sup>. University was not a place for merely producing and reproducing theoretical *savoirs*<sup>13</sup>. As Luca Bianchi rightly argues, in Paris University «mental felicity» was regarded as a «profession» (*status*)<sup>14</sup>. Thus, my first point is that the scholastic Aristotelian ideal of the «common life» and «friendship» has been taught by some Masters outside University and even outside religious *studia* to unprofessional audiences. My second point is that Eckhart was deeply involved in this teaching both in Strasbourg and Cologne (which is confirmed by the fact that spiritual groups in Germany or the Netherlands even after Eckhart's condemnation did use expressions like *Gottesfreunde*, that is the «God's Friends», or the «Brothers of the *Common Life*» to designate themselves). In view of this, I believe that a proper understanding of Eckhart's Christian theology is that he «baptized» Aristotelian ethics at the same time as he «Aristotelized» Christian life. I will thus argue that one of the distinctive features of the philosophical in Eckhart's Christian theology, is his (re)actualization of the former philosophical link between life and thinking, in a way that can equally be considered philosophical or Christian.

During the years 1260–1270, professional philosophers in Paris, the so-called «Masters of Arts», focused on the best way to reach perfect «autarky» (*sufficiencia*), by which they meant the philosophical achievement of the individual life. To attain this «autarky», man had to be him-

<sup>11</sup> See P. HADOT, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Folio Essais), Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> See M. CORTI, *La felicità mentale. Nuove prospettive per Cavalcanti e Dante*, Turin, 1983, p. 52–61.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. J. DOMANSKI, *La philosophie, théorie ou manière de vivre? Les controverses de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance* (Pensée antique et médiévale, Vestigia, 18), Fribourg, Ed. Univ.; Paris, Cerf, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> L. BIANCHI, «Virtù, Felicità e Filosofia», in: *Il Vescovo e i Filosofi. La condanna parigina del 1277 e l'evoluzione dell'aristotelismo scolastico* (Quodlibet, 6), Bergamo, Lubrina, 1990, p. 149–195.

self, he had to *live* with other men, «according to the best part and activity of man»: intellect and thought (*intellectus*)<sup>15</sup>. This was Albert the Great's doctrine. Having been trained in Paris, Master Eckhart knew of this philosophical aristocratism, and when he returned to Germany, he adapted it for his young friars as well as for the so-called *simplices*. In so doing, he came to celebrate the intellectual or theoretical life in Christian terms, inventing, what he himself termed, probably under Seneca's influence<sup>16</sup>, *vita beata*, many years before Fichte's *Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*<sup>17</sup> which is commonly held to be the first great synthesis between philosophical ethics, metaphysics and Christology ever produced by German philosophy.

This side of Eckhart's doctrine, his Christian celebration of Aristotle's *bios theoretikos* under the name of contemplative life, is often considered to be an evidence of his so-called Dominican «intellectualism», as opposed to Franciscan «voluntarism», which was based on love, devotion and charity. Up to a certain point, this is true, since Eckhart did carry on in theology what Albert the Great had started in philosophy: a reevaluation of the ethical and intellectual import of philosophical contemplation. But an «intellectual import» doesn't mean «intellectualism», and intellectualism doesn't characterize the new Christian notion of *vita beata* as it was conceived by Eckhart.

Eckhart's basic conviction, repeated throughout his work, is that *beatitudo* can be attained on Earth. He christianizes what the *artista* had called *felicitas* and *status adeptionis*<sup>18</sup>, maintaining that true *felicitas* is the

<sup>15</sup> See. A. DE LIBERA, *Albert le Grand et la philosophie*, Paris, Vrin, 1990, p. 242sqq.

<sup>16</sup> Seneca's influence on Eckhart could easily be documented. Some important points are 1) the expression *in thun und laszen* borrowed from SENECA's *Epist.* 16, 3; 2) the Christianization of the philosophical concept of equanimity described by Seneca in *Epist.* 16, 5; 3) Seneca's description of «God's friends» based on «intellectual dignity» [*ibid.*, commenting on ARISTOTLE, *Ethics*, X, 9]. Those topics were academic commonplaces: they often occur in the *principia* or in the discourses preceding the exams. Cf. O. WEIJERS, *Le maniement du savoir. Pratiques intellectuelles à l'époque des premières universités (XIIIe–XIVe siècles)*, (Studia Artistarium, Subsidia, 3), Brepols, Turnhout, 1996, p. 122–125, for an oxonian example.

<sup>17</sup> On Fichte's Christology, conceived as «unité d'une christologie d'en bas et d'une christologie d'en haut, qui, enracinant en l'homme la possibilité de l'Incarnation, constitue pour lui une incitation à *devenir* Dieu», cf. J.-Chr. GODDARD, *Christianisme et philosophie dans la première philosophie de Fichte*, in: *Archives de Philosophie* 55 (1992) 199–220.

<sup>18</sup> See E.P. MAHONEY, «John of Jandun and Agostino Nifo on Human Felicity (*status*)», in: *L'homme et son univers au moyen âge. Actes du septième congrès international de philosophie médiévale* (30 août–4 septembre 1982), éd. Chr. WÉNIN (Philo-

contemplative *beatitudo*, which can be obtained in this World, by the Christian, from God Himself. There is thus an Eckhartian theology of *beatitudo*, not only the one promised to the Just in beatific vision after death, but also the one that is already awaiting man in man, at every step in the existence of the *homo viator*. The core of Eckhart's theology is not the beatitude of the other world, it is the beatitude described in the Gospel as poverty of spirit, which is meant for this world. In *Vom edlen menschen*, Eckhart opposes the *vita beata*, which is a Christian *status adeptionis*, to the *visio beata*. Of course, he doesn't reject the idea of *beatific vision*, which remains for him the hope and goal of the Christian life for the *other world*. *Vita beata* is not an alternative to the vision. It is its anticipation. This has important consequences. As a matter of fact, if *vita beata* anticipates *visio beata*, they must have something in common. But if this is so, *beatific vision* has to be understood on the pattern of the *Christian adeptionis*. This is the most significant philosophical aspect of Eckhart's Christian theology. If we admit that *beatitudo in via*, which is actually accessible in this life, can be used as a criterion for theological discussion of *beatitudo in patria*, of which nothing can be said by direct acquaintance, some distinctive features of the *status adeptionis* should, at least, help us in stating what beatific vision cannot be. *Vom edlen menschen* clearly states what are those features when describing what is a Noble man: a Noble Man receives his being, life and beatitude in God, without a medium, which means that he doesn't not know that he knows God. Thus, in beatific vision, beatitude should not come from the act by which I know that I know God. This statement has nothing to do with mystics, it is a theological one. It is a criticism of a particular doctrine, which had been taught in Paris from about 1282–1284 onwards by John of Paris, the so-called *visio reflexa*<sup>19</sup>. For Eckhart, beatitude cannot be reflexive. If it is not

sophes médiévaux XXVI–1), Louvain-la-Neuve, éd. de l'Institut supérieur de philosophie, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> As one knows JOHN OF PARIS (Jean QUIDORT), In Sent. I, proemium, q. 8; éd. Muller, 28 sqq., draws a distinction between «simple vision» (*visio simplex* or *nuda*), which is the cause of beatitude, and «reflexive vision» (*visio reflexa*), which is the achievement of beatitude. Eckhart also polemizes against John (without naming him) in his Latin work. See Commentary on John, § 679 («Patet ex præmissis quod beatitudo non est in actu reflexo, quo scilicet homo beatus intelligit sive cognoscit se deum cognoscere») and § 108: «... adhuc autem et error dicentium beatitudinem consistere in actu quidem intellectus, sed reflexo, quo scilicet actu homo scit se scire deum. De quibus notavi plenius in Opere quæstionum». Among Eckhart's contemporaries, DURANDUS OF SAINT-POURÇAIN, In Sent. I, d. 1, q. 2 (n. 12); Lyon, 1556, f. 12vb stands for *visio reflexa*, whereas JOHN OF POUILLY, Quodlibetum, V, 6, Utrum beatitudo hominis consistat in actu recto aut reflexo, firmly rejects it. On this topic, see J.-P. MULLER, «La thèse de Jean Quidort

reflexive in this world, there is no reason why it should be in the other world. Of course, at first glance, it might seem reasonable to hold that there should be some kind of self awareness in beatitude. But, the question is not that simple. We cannot conceive this awareness on the pattern of natural knowledge. In natural knowledge or perception, there is a perceiving subject, a perceived object, an act of perception and the possibility for the perceiving subject to reflect on his own act of perceiving. If we apply this pattern to beatific vision accepting the *visio reflexa*-theory, we will have to hold that beatitude consists in reflecting on an act of knowledge, not in being one with God. But, according to Master Eckhart, beatitude cannot consist either in thinking or in thinking that I am thinking, whatever the object of thinking might be. In order to be happy, one has to be one, not one with, but, if I may speak so, one in God and One by God. God himself, not my knowledge of God, is beatitude. Thus, if being happy means being one with God, knowing God should only mean knowing him by *agnosia*. God is not an object of knowledge. But he is not an object of love either. Loving God doesn't mean loving myself, nor loving some other thing: it means loving God in the very same loving by which and in which God loves his creature. Thus rejecting the *visio-reflexa* theory is also rejecting the very question of the *medium* by which union should be achieved. In the debate between Dominican and Franciscan on the superiority of the Intellect over the Will, evidenced by the so-called *Third Parisian Question* – Is the Praise of God in Heaven more Excellent than the Love of Him on Earth? – Eckhart's ultimate doctrine remains *unclassifiable*. First because it doesn't oppose intellectual vision in the heaven and love on earth, second because it doesn't oppose love and praise either. Eckhart's theology is one of uncreated Grace. This implies man's love being replaced by the love of the Holy Spirit – the genitive being interpreted both subjective and objective, according to Peter Lombard's theory of the real presence<sup>20</sup>; this

sur la béatitude formelle», in: *Mélanges offerts à Auguste Pelzer* (Recueils de travaux d'histoire et de philologie, 3<sup>e</sup> série, fasc. 26), Louvain, 1947, 493–511.

<sup>20</sup> PETER LOMBARD's theses as expressed in the *Articuli in quibus Magister Sententiarum non tenetur communiter ab omnibus* (= *Sent.* I, d. 17, chap. 1, n. 2; Grottaferrata 1971, p. 142: «quod caritas qua diligimus Deum et proximum, est spiritus sanctus, vel quod caritas quae est amor Dei et proximi non est aliquid creatum», and *Sent.* II, d. 17, chap. 6, n. 5; Grottaferrata, 149: «quod caritas est spiritus sanctus, scilicet illa quae animae qualitates informat atque sanctificat») are unequivocally supported by ECKHART. Cf. *Predigt* 10; 27; 42; *Comm. Jn*, § 506; sermon XI/1 (§ 113) and VI/1 (§ 55), transl. B. MCGINN, p. 213: «... he [= God] loves us with the very same love by which he loves and cherishes himself,

further implies man's knowledge and intellectual praise being *replaced* by the Son's birth. Thus, one must not understand beatific vision on the pattern of created grace, but on that of Inhabitation.

Sometimes a light becomes perceptible in the soul, and a person thinks it is the Son; but it is only a light. Whenever the Son appears in the Soul, the love of the Holy Spirit also appears. Therefore, I say: The Father's being consists in giving birth to the Son; the Son's being consists in my being born in him and like him; the Holy Spirit's being lies in my catching fire in him and becoming totally melted and becoming simply love<sup>21</sup>.

This change, that occurs in *my* being, doesn't preclude love and seeing, it just means a change in the subject of knowledge and love. In beatific vision, as in *vita beata*, nobody gets reflexively aware of his own loving and knowing God, true reflection belongs to God's Knowledge and Love, not mine's. In beatific vision, as in *vita beata*, some One, let us say the *only One*, *daz einic ein*, is aware of One's Self being loving in its being loved and knowing in its being known, and conversely.

This is why, commenting on Ws 5,16: *Iustus in perpetuum vivet et apud dominum est merces eius*, Eckhart says:

Some masters claim that the mind takes its happiness from love; others claim that it takes it in seeing God. I say, however, it takes it neither from love nor from knowing nor from seeing<sup>22</sup>.

This is also why Eckhart's spiritual exercises all refer to «being». Spiritual exercises can be described in different ways, but all those descriptions – spiritual poverty, detachment, self-abandon, humility – lean towards the same goal: to live «essentially» (*weselich*) beyond any reflexivity.

This is what Eckhart writes in *Predigt 12*: «a person standing in God's knowing and in God's love becomes nothing other than what God is himself»<sup>23</sup>. This sentence has been incriminated by the Inquisitors in Cologne. In the second list of prosecution, which includes some of his *retractationes*, Eckhart himself seems to consider it as *false and erroneous*<sup>24</sup>. Actually, it strongly reminds of the heresy of the *Free spirit*. But taken in its true Eckhartian meaning, the sentence only holds that in the *poorest*

his coeternal Son and the Holy Spirit. ... he loves us with the same glory in mind by which he loves himself ... the love with which he loves us is the Holy Spirit himself».

<sup>21</sup> ECKHART, *Predigt 39*, transl. F. TOBIN, p. 298.

<sup>22</sup> ECKHART, *Predigt 39*, loc. cit. (modified).

<sup>23</sup> ECKHART, *Predigt 12*, transl. F. TOBIN, p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> Q 194, 7–8. Col. <sup>a4</sup>, a. 1<sup>c</sup> = *Col. I*, n. 52, S 215, 16–8; Col. <sup>b</sup>, a. 15<sup>c</sup>; S 230, 8–10: «Quod autem dicit articulus in fine, quod homo divinus fit nihil aliud quam quod deus est, falsum est et error».

*man of all* there is nothing left but God's own knowing and loving. Though Eckhart never abandoned this claim, his doctrine seems at first glance hardly intelligible. This is no reason for understanding it as a *mystical* one. To put it more clearly, I think that this doctrine is based on standard theological principles, but that its most distinctive feature can only be grasped with a philosophical *proviso*. I also think that one ought not to be puzzled by such a *proviso*, since, if Eckhart's *beatitudo in via* is really a Christianization of the philosophical ideal of «felicity», it has also to be firmly rooted in a philosophical conception of mind's nature and activity. For several reasons, I am inclined to consider that this conception can be traced back to Averroes' doctrine of the «intellect».

It would of course make no sense to *enroll* Eckhart among the chaotic and rather inconsistent group of masters that historiography has labeled *Latin averroists*<sup>25</sup>. There is nevertheless some striking link between Eckhart and Averroes, the most relevant aspect of which being that Eckhart's theory of *vita beata* strongly reminds Averroes' report of Alfarabi's doctrine of *fiducia in continuationis – continuatio*, «conjunction», being the «ultimate philosophical goal» of human life, that is the «other life» or the «afterlife» (*alia vita*) described in Alfarabi's *De intellectu et intellecto*:

This is the ultimate happiness and the afterlife, namely that there comes to man some other thing through which he becomes a substance. And there comes to him his final perfection, namely that there acts some other thing through which he becomes a substance with some other action through which he becomes a substance, and this is the meaning of the afterlife. But its action is not in some other thing *outside its essence*, and it acts in order that its essence may exist, and its essence, its act, and that it acts, are one and the same thing<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> On this label, see L. BIANCHI & E. RANDI, *Vérités dissonantes. Aristote à la fin du Moyen Age* (Vestigia, 11), Fribourg, Ed. Univ.; Paris, Cerf, 1993, p. 35: «En enrôlant Siger de Brabant, Boèce de Dacie, Jacques de Douai, Gilles d'Orléans, Henri de Bruxelles et Jean de Jandun parmi les «averroïstes», on les a présentés comme les fauteurs d'une position théorique identique et on en a aplani les différences, alors que, unis par une conception originale de la philosophie et de l'acte de philosopher, ils ont ... cultivé des intérêts différents et développé des logiques, des physiques ... et des métaphysiques ... qui n'étaient aucunement identiques». The same observation holds true for Eckhart.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. ALFARABI, *De intellectu et intellecto*, transl. HYMAN, in: A. HYMAN/J. WALSH, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages. The Christian, Islamic and Jewish Traditions*, Indianapolis, Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1973, p. 220; ed. GILSON, p. 123, 307–311. «[Et sic substantia anime hominis vel homo cum eo per quod substantiatur fit propinquius ad intelligentiam agentem] et hic est finis ultimus, et vita alia, scilicet quia ad ultimum acquiritur homini quiddam per quod substantiatur et acquiritur perfectio eius

Of course, this does not imply that Eckhart's doctrine of unity between God and the soul should be identified with the one Leibniz once called «Monopsychism»<sup>27</sup>. It only means that there is something in the doctrine of «conjunction» that Eckhart does accept: the idea that what is brought to *perfectio secunda* in the intellectual contemplation conceived, at the same time, as plain intelligibility and plain intellection, is not man's own intellectual faculty, but the only intellectual «subject» proper, which is «neither mine nor thine», the averroistic «possible intellect», with which man «becomes one» as soon as man «gets rid of particular and singular images or forms». This *reductio ad intellectus/intellectum* is what Eckhart calls *entbildung*. *Entbilden* is the first logical step in the process of man's «deification», that Eckhart describes in the *Predigt* 40 when he writes that «... in joining himself nakedly to God in loving, man becomes *unformed* (*entbildet*), *informed* (*îngebildet*), and *transformed* (*überbildet*) in the divine uniformity in which he is one with God»<sup>28</sup>. I realize that Eckhart's doctrine of *entbildung* can and must also be interpreted, in Dionysian terms, as some kind of spiritual *aphairesis*, and there is no doubt either that his doctrine of the «return» (*durchbruch*) in God by means of *entbilden* is based on a Christian Neoplatonic scheme. But *aphairesis* is also the source of Averroes doctrine of intellectual «abstraction» viewed as a kind of *exspo-*

ultima, quod est ut agat in alteram aliam actionem per quam substantietur, et haec est intentio de vita alia. Quamvis eius actio non fiat in alio quod sit extra suam essentiam, ipsam enim agere nichil aliud est quam invenire suam essentiam. Igitur sua essentia et sua actio et suum agere est unum et idem.» GILSON's French translation, loc. cit., p. 139, reads: «... ce qui est pour lui la fin dernière et une autre vie. Ainsi en effet l'homme acquiert enfin quelque chose qui fait de lui une substance; il acquiert sa perfection ultime, qui est d'accomplir dans une autre substance une autre action qui fasse de lui une substance, et c'est ce que veut dire: une autre vie. Alors en effet son action ne s'exerce pas dans quelque chose d'extérieur à son essence; pour l'âme, agir n'est alors rien d'autre que d'appréhender sa propre essence. Son essence, son action et son être sont alors une seule et même chose.»

<sup>27</sup> Cf. G.W. LEIBNIZ, Discours sur la conformité de la foi avec la raison, § 9, in: Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal, préface et notes de J. Jalabert (bibliothèque philosophique), Paris, Aubier. Ed. Mouton, 1962, p. 57: «L'âme du monde de Platon a été prise en ce sens par quelques-uns; mais il y a plus d'apparence que les stoïciens donnaient dans cette âme commune qui absorbe toutes les autres. Ceux qui sont de ce sentiment pourraient être appelés *monopsychites*, puisque selon eux il n'y a véritablement qu'une seule âme qui subsiste. M. Bernier remarque c'est une opinion presque universellement reçue chez les savants dans la Perse et les États du grand-Mogol; il paraît même qu'elle a trouvé entrée chez les cabalistes et chez les mystiques.»

<sup>28</sup> ECKHART, *Predigt* 40, transl. F. TOBIN, p. 302 (modified).



*liatio* or *denudatio* – both current terms in Eckhart's psychology and theory of intellectual knowledge.

Thus, my point is not just to underline a similarity in wording largely based on the equivocal meaning of *aphairesis*. My point is that, for Averroes, *exspoliatio rerum ymaginaturam* is a precondition for the «actuation» of the possible intellect interpreted as an impersonal and transcendental subject, just as, for Eckhart, *entbildung* is a precondition for another transcendental process: the «birth of the Son» in the innermost depths of the soul. This does not imply that Eckhart's notion of «the depths of the soul» refers to Averroes' concept of the «material» or «possible intellect». It only implies that for Eckhart nothing in the soul is «able to receive passively grace or any kind of perfection, especially a common one», as long as man has not «excluded and removed» himself «from every order or relation either to himself or to another created thing»<sup>29</sup>. In order to let God's grace operate in himself, man has to become and be one with what in the soul is able to passively receive grace. This is precisely what Eckhart often calls the «intellect». But this «intellect» is not the «form» or the «act» of the individual body, meant by Aristotle's *De anima*, it is the «pure subject» underlying the reception of Grace after every created image has been removed from the soul. Thus, Eckhart's *entbildung* is quite different from Averroes' *exspoliatio* or *denudatio ymaginum*: the former amounts to reject any created image whatsoever, the latter merely tends to disclose the intelligible form of every material thing. But both processes, the one natural, the other supernatural, require the same kind of subject: something that is *no thing*, since it «has nothing in common with nothing»<sup>30</sup>. This *no thing* and the *nothingness* which qualifies it as a *mere subject* are philosophically, that is conceptually, described in Averroes' *Great Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book III. I think that this is exactly what Eckhart borrows from averroism – no matter how he himself calls this pure, transcendental subject: «a clean heart», as in *Sermon VI/2*, § 57, or the «pure soul» (same sermon, same §) or «the intellectual world» (same sermon, § 58). Eckhart's theological problem requires a philosophical concept of the *place* where divine love might appear and actually «appeared», according to John's First Epistle 4, 9: «*In this has the grace of God, love, appeared in us*». Naturally, the various names used by Eckhart to designate this place do not evoke Averroes' terminology, but the very idea of a «pure subject» which is not man in man, but that which underlies

<sup>29</sup> ECKHART, *Sermon XXV/2*, § 266, transl. MCGINN, p. 220.

<sup>30</sup> As one knows, this is also a description of the *nous* attributed to Anaxagoras by Aristotle in *De anima*, III, 4, 429a18–20 and *Physics*, VIII, 5, 256b24–26.

the very process through which man acquires its own operation does evoke – at least to me – Averroes' account of *theoria*.

As a matter of fact, what is the purpose of *entbildung* in Eckhart's theology? I would say: to lead the soul to the «desert» where, «if God wants to operate, He will have to become the subject of His own operation», that is both the Giver (*geber*) and the Receiver (*nemer*), both the Gift and the Gifted. How shall we characterize this «desert»? According to Eckhart, the «desert» – that is also «the innermost depths of the soul», or the *supremum animae*, or the *abditum mentis*, or the *seelengrünt* –, referring at the same time to God and to that which, in the soul, is identical with God, is the subject of a single process called «deification». But what in man becomes God is already God in man: it is «neither Konrad nor Heinrich», «neither here nor there», «neither inside nor outside» the soul, because it is no *thing*. It is not even «me», because, as Augustine puts it, it is *interior intimo meo*. Thus, saying that Godhead or Divinity lies in «the depths of the human soul» does not mean that «God is the soul» or that «God is in the soul» as a distinct part of the soul, *aliquid animae* (no matter how this part might be called, e.g. «*spark of the soul*», or «the *highest*» or «the *noblest*» or «the *innermost part of the soul*»), since the expression «the depths of the soul» merely refers to the abyss of Grace. The question is to understand how what is in the soul can also appear in the soul, how God may «give birth to his only-begotten Son in the pure soul, and *in him and through him all things* (Rm 11, 36) and himself»<sup>31</sup>, how «the love that is in God was always in us, even before we existed, but now *has appeared in us in the interior person*»<sup>32</sup>.

Averroes' doctrine of the «pure subject» of thought, his conception of «conjunction» have very few in common with Eckhart's concept of the abyss of Grace and his doctrine of «deification». I would nevertheless like to maintain that Eckhart's theology could not be totally understandable, at least in its own mediaeval terms, without a reference to the philosophical pattern of a thinking subject being at the same time the intelligible and the act of intellection. Thus, though it would obviously be absurd to reduce Eckhart's doctrine of grace to Averroes' doctrine of «conjunction», it seems to me 1) that both doctrines face the same philosophical difficulty: explain how man gets its highest perfection by the mutual achievement of two related subjects, the one man is, the other he is not, and 2) that both doctrines basically share the same solution: hold

<sup>31</sup> ECKHART, Sermon VI/2, § 57, transl. MCGINN, p. 214.

<sup>32</sup> ECKHART, Sermon VI/2, § 59, *ibid.*

that when this mutual achievement takes place, one subject achieves its specific goal by letting the other act for him its own operation. When God inhabits (*habitat*) the soul, Eckhart says, when God «makes himself the *habitus*» of a human soul (*habituat se*), man knows, thinks, loves with God; man's acts are thus «divine», because man is not the one who acts what he is acting. In the same manner, says Averroes, man not only *thinks*, but «is similar to God in a certain sense»<sup>33</sup>, when he is joined to the agent intellect through the material intellect, and performs by it everything this intellect performs:

... cum [intellectus] efficietur forma nobis in actu (et hoc erit apud continuationem eius in actu), tunc intelligemus per illum omnia que intelligemus, et agemus per illum actionem sibi propriam<sup>34</sup>.

Eckhart's doctrine of justification and grace involves many other aspects, even philosophical, that have been left aside here for brevity's sake. However, if one holds that the core of his theology is the rejection of the usual pattern of God's being a mere *object* in the so-called *visio beata*, it seems to me that the philosophical approach of «conjunction» in Averroes' psychology plays an important role in Eckhart's new conception of beatitude. This is why the disputed question of Eckhart's «mysticism» cannot be but partly misleading.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. AVERROES, *De an.* III, comm. 36, ed. CRAWFORD, p. 501, 617–619.

<sup>34</sup> AVERROES, *De an.* III, comm. 36, ed. CRAWFORD, p. 501, 636–639.