

THE DISTINCTION OF INDISTINCTION AND MEISTER ECKHART'S WAY OF
LIFE

by

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For my parents

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of practical activity in the union of the soul and God in Meister Eckhart. Since Eckhart's attitude toward temporal works is highly inconsistent, the thesis begins by examining the complex and intimate relationship between God and the temporal order in Eckhart's discussions of creation *in principio*. Next it considers the creation of man and how he, through the natural function of the intellect interacting with the created order, is transformed into the image of God. Finally it examines the relationship between the intellectual and practical acts and considers the possibility of a union between God and the soul which takes place in practical activity in Eckhart's thought. Throughout, the thesis makes reference to Eckhart's creative use of the term *indistinctum* (indistinct) and its Middle High German equivalents with respect to God, the soul, and the union between the two.

List of Abbreviations Used

Acten	<i>Acten zum Prozesse Meister Eckharts (Denifle)</i>
In Gen.I	<i>Expositio Libri Genesis</i>
In Gen.II	<i>Liber Parabolorum Genesis</i>
In Ioh.	<i>Expositio sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem</i>
In Sap.	<i>Expositio Libri Sapientiae</i>
Proc.Col.I	<i>Processus Coloniensis I</i>
Prolog.gen.	<i>Prologus generalis in Opus tripartitum</i>
Qu.Par.	<i>Quaestiones Parisienses</i>
Ser.Aug.	<i>Sermo die b. Augustini Parisius Habitus</i>
BgT	<i>Daz buoch der goetlichen troestunge</i>
Pr.	<i>Predigt with Arabic numeral</i>
RdU	<i>Die rede der underscheidung</i>
Vab	<i>Vom abegescheidenheit</i>
VeM	<i>Von dem edeln menschen</i>
DW	<i>Deutsche Werke</i>
LW	<i>Lateinischen Werke</i>
n. and nn.	Subsections from LW
Q	Questions of Qu.Par.
MHG	Middle High German

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The soul's union with God is the theme which dominates most of Meister Eckhart's writings. Due to the pastoral nature of Eckhart's offices, many of these writings are instructive in nature and take the form of personal address. Accordingly, there is a great deal of practical advice to be found in Eckhart, which collected might be expected to constitute a way of life or spiritual program for the man or woman who is seeking the union Eckhart describes. Constructing a comprehensive way of life from Eckhart's scattered nuggets of practical wisdom, however, proves to be exceedingly difficult.

Most often observed of Eckhart's way is its so-called interior nature. There are countless passages which express Eckhart's inwardness but one from the beginning of his career will suffice: "[A] man should have his inwardness well sealed off....[H]is mind [should] be on guard against the images that surround him without, that they remain without, not letting them, in an improper way, accompany him and walk with him, and that they find no dwelling place in him."¹ Not surprisingly, the Meister is usually equally critical of practical activity. Eckhart says that the external act is nothing in itself² and not properly commanded by God³, two statements which made it on the list of suspect articles of the Bull *in agro dominico*. This criticism even extends to acts of piety, whose practitioners Eckhart calls those "who want to make a business deal with God."⁴ It is not surprising, then, that the Dominican's criticism of the lower faculties of the soul is

¹ RdU, 21 (DW V, 276): "der mensche wol verslozen habe inwendic, ... sîn gemüete sî gewarnet vor den bilden, diu ûzwendic stânt, saz sie ûzwendic im blîben und in keener vremden wîse mit im wandeln und umbegân und keine stat in im vinden." All translations are my own. However, I am indebted to the translations of the German works by Walshe, Colledge (*Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981)) and Tobin (*Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986)).

² BgT, 2 (DW V, 41).

³ In Gen.II, n. 165.

⁴ Pr. 1 (DW I, 7): "wellent also koufen mit unserm herren."

matched by his praise of the intellect. Intellect serves double duty for Eckhart as both a *nomen dei* and the defining characteristic of the human, insofar as he is made *ad imaginem dei*.⁵ Clearly the union between the soul and God is one which takes place through the intellect.

There are elements of Eckhart's intellectualism, however, which do not seem to fit with the ordinary understanding of philosophic inquiry. That is to say, Eckhart often seems more interested in the intellect's formlessness, or potential for knowing, than with the intellect as thinking. This aspect of the intellect is described most radically by a host of MHG terms signifying the same uncreated something of the soul: *vüinkelîn* (little spark), *bürgelîn* (citadel), *daz edele* (the noble), etc. The negativity and absolute unity with which Eckhart describes this power of the soul clearly defies any relation of subject and object, which is implied in thinking. In a particularly spirited, though I do not think exaggerated, passage, Eckhart writes, "This little town is so truly one and simple, and this simple one is so exalted above every manner and every power, that no power no manner, not God himself may look at it."⁶ Eckhart later reveals that his meaning is that the divine Persons do not look at it, the point being that the "little town" unites only with the super-divine Godhead. We may safely say, then, that Eckhart does not simply wish to substitute external works for internal ones. In the short treatise the *Nobel Man* the Meister maintains, against Thomas Aquinas,⁷ that the soul's blessedness consists simply in knowing God and not the reflexive knowledge of knowing that it knows God. If the union between God and man happens so far above even the highest faculties of the soul, the

⁵ In Gen.II n. 138.

⁶ Pr. 2 (DW I, 42,3): "sô reht ein und einvaltic ist diz bürgelîn, und sô enboba alle wîse und alle kreft ist dizz einic ein, daz im niemer kraft noch wîse zuo geluogen mac noch got selber."

⁷ *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, c. 71.

reader has cause to wonder whether Eckhart is not simply advocating a shutting-down of the powers of the soul, whether the human has any role to play in this union save a passive one.

Ultimately Eckhart finds even this passive role unsatisfactory so long as it is done for some reason stemming from the self (i.e. to be united with God). In the famous sermon on the poor in spirit Eckhart writes, “[S]o long as you have a will to fulfill the will of God, and a longing for eternity and God, then you are not poor; for a poor man is one who wills nothing and longs for nothing.”⁸ That Eckhart’s criticism of the will includes even the will for transcendence begs the question of whether the Meister actually means to call his audience beyond ordinary human experience. Eckhart’s rhetoric of being free of God, and his theme of living without a why (*âne war umbe*) could be read in such a way as to suggest not. Thus, Eckhart ultimately seems as skeptical of the passive life (where the latter implies an intentional change from one ordinary way of life to another extraordinary one) as he does of the devotional and the philosophical. Accordingly, he does not generally describe the union of God and man as that between an active force and a passive receptacle. Thus, man’s union with God, in the final analysis, seems to involve some kind of activity—and ordinary activity at that. This theme can be seen most plainly in *Predigt* 86, in which the active figure of Martha, the sister of Lazarus, receives a surprising precedence over her passive sister Mary, though there is little to no evidence in the Biblical text that the elder is engaged in anything more noble than housework. And so, we have apparently come back to the external act with which we began.

⁸ Pr. 52 (DW II, 491): “als lange als ir willen hât, ze ervülle den willen gotes, und begerunge hât der êwicheit und gotes, als lange ensît ir niht arm; wan daz ist ein arm mensche, der niht enwil und niht enbegert.”

And yet Eckhart's severe criticism of the external act remains what it was. In many ways the Meister's favourable treatment of the active life is the most difficult feature of his thought to account for. Eckhart praises the external act far less frequently than he criticises it, while it is the latter attitude which seems to be more in agreement with the Dominican's most characteristic teachings such as the non-existence of the created order.

Of course it might be suggested that Eckhart is advocating a mixed life, in which action follows contemplation as the fruits of the latter.⁹ The extremity, however, with which he upholds each different way of life suggests not. Another option is to minimize the difference by ignoring or belittling parts of the Eckhartian corpus. Reiner Schürmann, for example, pays little attention to the intellectualism of the Latin works on account of the academic setting in which they were composed,¹⁰ and Günter Stachel denies the authenticity of Pr. 86 because of, among other reasons, the value the author places on works and virtue.¹¹ Considering the incomplete state of the critical edition of Eckhart's works, I do not say that such measures are never called for, but I do think they should be a last resort. Rather, I suggest that it is the difficult task of reconciling these opposites which emerges as the most appropriate way of proceeding. One might justly object that to achieve an identity, even philosophically, between both the inner way with the outer way and the positive way (including practical and theoretical activity) with the negative way would be quite a stretch. Nevertheless there is another reason, aside from what we have already said, for attempting to do so. Eckhart is part of a philosophical tradition in which

⁹ This reading has been suggested by John Caputo in "Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism" *The Thomist* 42 (1978): 205.

¹⁰ Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart Mystic and Philosopher*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), xii.

¹¹ Günter Stachel, "Stammt Predigt 86 'Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum' von Meister Eckhart?" *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 125. Bd., H. 4 (1996): 396.

the coincidence of opposites plays an important role. Furthermore, it is particularly in his teachings on the nature of God and His relation to creation that the coincidence of opposites is most apparent in Eckhart's thought. This is not at all insignificant considering that it is man's union with God with which we are concerned. If contraries are united in God, should they not be also in the soul who is united with Him?

We shall begin this study, then, with an inquiry into the nature of the God with whom this union is to take place. We shall see that God's nature is in fact inseparable from His act of creation. This necessary groundwork will allow us to see more clearly what an indistinct union with God would entail. We shall proceed to consider the nature of the human being, his place in the cosmos, and by what special means he is able to overcome his creaturely passivity to God and enter into an indistinct union with Him. We shall observe the precedence given to the intellect in Eckhart's anthropology and consider both the positive and negative moments in the intellect's knowing and the necessity of both in its assimilation to God. Finally we shall turn to the external act itself and its relation to the internal act, and we shall take up the figure of Martha as a potential example of a practical union between God and the soul.

Throughout this study, special attention will be paid to Eckhart's discussion of the indistinct (*indistinctum*). The *indistinctum* may be described as a verbal tool, which, in a single word, expresses two contrary ideas; its basic meaning is identity (it is not *distinct*), yet its form is negative and thus expresses difference (it is *not* distinct). Eckhart uses the *indistinctum* most extensively in his discussion of the creature-Creator relation, but the MHG equivalent *sunder underscheit* (without distinction, difference) is applied in two more important ways. Firstly, it is used of the spark of the soul to express its negativity and freedom from all things. Secondly, it is used to describe the union between the soul

and God. Consequently, the *indistinctum* is of special importance to this study. In what follows we will consider the possibility for Eckhart of a union between the soul and God which takes place in practical activity by observing and comparing his creative uses of *indistinctum* and its MHG equivalents.

CHAPTER 2: *Creatio in principio*: The Distinction of Indistinction

The ethical attitude most commonly attributed to Meister Eckhart is surely the inner or negative way marked by a withdrawal from particular beings. Eckhart's word *abegescheidenheit*, often translated as "detachment," literally means cutting away and implies, at least etymologically, that a physical separation from the created order is required to discover the uncreated ground where God and the soul are one. One of Eckhart's favourite verses for illustrating this point is John 16:16: "*modicum et iam non videbitis me.*"¹² The Dominican preacher explains that created reality is a little bit (*modicum*) which nevertheless prevents one entirely from seeing God. For Eckhart, detachment is an all-or-nothing affair and the separation from created being which the Meister demands is uncompromising.

There is, however, an aspect of the Dominican's thought which complicates this picture immensely and will be raised by anyone who knows something of Eckhart's reputation among his contemporaries. Among the list of condemned articles from the Bull *In agro dominico*, the first three, which deal with creation, seemed to Eckhart's inquisitors to have taught the newly condemned Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world. Further, articles ten to thirteen were condemned for apparently identifying the human soul with God. In other words, this Eckhart who instructs us to remove the created so as to uncover the uncreated, was even in his own life notorious for blurring the line which separates the one from the other.

As we will see, Eckhart's true position on the relationship between creature and Creator is not pantheistic; however, this is not to say that the Meister does not speak of an

¹² See especially Pr. 69 and Pr. 70.

indistinction between them. In fact, Eckhart is openly paradoxical on this point: “nothing is so distinct from number and the numbered or the numerable, namely the creature, as God, and yet nothing is so indistinct.”¹³ If, then, we wish to inquire into the role of created being in the soul’s return to God, it is clear that we must begin at the beginning, or rather *in principio*, and consider the relationship between God and His creation.

We have already hinted that Eckhart has different ways of thinking about created being. It should not surprise us then that he has different ways of speaking of the act of creation as well. Though the Meister employs a range of rhetorical and intellectual tools for this purpose, they generally fall under two broad categories which we might call the intellectual and ontological natures of the creation. These two themes are brought out most evidently in the Meister’s varying interpretations of the *principium* of Genesis 1:1, in which God creates. In his *Commentary on Genesis* we find that the principle is understood as ideal reason (*ratio idealis*),¹⁴ while in the *General Prologue* to his major *Opus tripartitum* he calls the principle “existence¹⁵ (*esse*).”¹⁶ One consistency, however, which the Dominican always maintains is that God neither creates nor does anything outside of himself, and, consequently, Eckhart always equates the principle with God Himself. Thus, as *esse* and *ratio* compete for Eckhart’s principle of creation, so do *esse* and *intellegere*¹⁷ for his highest name of God. In the first part of this chapter we shall consider the character of creation as it takes place in the principle-as-*esse* and in the principle-as-*ratio*. In the second part we shall consider how the creature relates to God-

¹³ In Sap. n. 154 (LW III, 489): “nihil tam distinctum a numero et numerato sive numerabili, creato scilicet, sicut deus, et nihil tam indistinctum.”

¹⁴ In Gen.I n. 3. (LW I, 186).

¹⁵ I will be translating the infinitive *esse* with the noun “existence” or else the participle “Being” with a capital “B.” The participle with a lower case “b” will always be translating or referring to *ens* or *esse hoc et hoc*, that is a particular instance of the act of existence, or a creature.

¹⁶ Prol.gen. n. 17 (LW I, 161).

¹⁷ Though Eckhart spells *intellegere*: *intelligere* (with an ‘i’), I use the standard spelling to avoid confusion.

as-esse and God-as-*intellegere*. Finally, in the third part we shall consider how God-as-esse relates to God-as-*intellegere* and draw our final conclusions about the relationship between the created and uncreated in the Eckhartian *cosmos*.

2.1 Principle as *esse* vs Principle as *ratio idealis*

In the *General Prologue* to the *Opus tripartitum* Eckhart famously states, “Existence is God.”¹⁸ While there is nothing terribly new about this definition save the unusual order of terms, we should note with Karl Albert and Oliver Davies that “Eckhart paramountly wants to say something about being [*esse*], and not about God.”¹⁹ In other words, Eckhart is not predicating existence of God but divinity to existence. The Meister’s emphasis on the absoluteness of *esse* is maintained in the *General Prologue*’s exposition of Genesis 1:1 and is echoed in Eckhart’s definition of the creation there. Like the former definition, the definition of *creatio* is subtly yet importantly unusual: “creation is the conferring of existence. It is not necessary to add ‘from nothing,’ since before existence there is nothing.”²⁰ Though Eckhart’s finding the *ex nihilo* logically redundant shows no real divergence from the usual conception of the creation, we can see where the Dominican’s emphasis is. “From nothing” does not qualify the act of creation, but is implied in it. By refusing to grant the *ex nihilo* any import, Eckhart does nothing here to differentiate the *esse* which is conferred from the *esse* which is God Himself. We should resist, then, thinking that the *nihil* is something like a material cause “in” which being is

¹⁸ Ibid. n. 11 (LW I, 156): “Esse est deus.”

¹⁹ I cite Davies citing Albert. Oliver Davies, *Meister Eckhart Mystical Theologian* (London: SPCK, 2011), 108.

²⁰ Prol.gen. n. 16 (LW I, 160): “creation est collation esse, nec oportet addere ‘ex nihilo,’ quia ante esse est nihil.”

received. “*Nihil enim nihil recipit*,” as Eckhart later says.²¹ If we do not grant this simple argument, Eckhart maintains, then we admit that God is not the sole cause of creation, but that creation has two causes: God and nothing. Since this is not the case, and there is for Eckhart only one cause of created *esse*, there is nothing to differentiate cause from effect, divine from created *esse*.

The result, or rather the other side of this argument, is that God does not create—nor does He do anything for that matter—outside of himself. “He created in the principle, that is, in himself.”²² For Eckhart creation *in principio* means creation *in deo*.²³ Thus, God’s creation is not like human technical production, the product of which exists outside of the producer, and in a very rhetorical passage Eckhart warns his readers against imagining that “God threw out creatures, or created them outside of himself in some infinite [space] or vacuum.”²⁴ The principle that runs throughout the *General Prologue*’s discussion of creation is “like causes like.” To think of a creature, namely something which has been endowed with being, outside of being is simply absurd. As nothing cannot cause anything, a thing’s being can only be caused by Being. Thus, in a somewhat unusual description of creation, the Meister writes, “He called [creatures] out of nothing, that is out of non-existence, into existence, so that they might come into it and receive it and have it in Him.”²⁵ The creation, then, ought not to be thought of as a flowing of being

²¹ Ibid. n. 17 (LW I, 161).

²² Ibid. n. 17 (LW I, 160): “creavit in principio, id est in se ipso.”

²³ Eckhart’s interpretation of *in principio* as *in deo* is comparable to Eriugena’s interpretation of *de nihilo* as *de deo* (*Periphyseon* 634A-B). It is interesting to note that Eckhart minimizes the *ex nihilo* and Eriugena takes it up much to the same affect, namely that God creates Himself. For a comparison of Eckhart and Eriugena on creation see McGinn’s “Do Christian Platonists Really Believe in Creation?” *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 197-223.

²⁴ Prol.gen. n. 17 (LW I, 161): “deus proiecerit creaturas seu creaverit extra se in quodam nihilo infinito seu vacuo.”

²⁵ Ibid. n. 17 (LW I, 162): “vocavit ex nihilo, ex non esse scilicet, ad esse, quod invenirent et acciperent et haberent in se.”

into nothing, but rather of nothing into being. God's flowing into creatures is not His flowing out of Himself but their²⁶ flowing into Him, not a projection (*proiacere*), but an in-coming (*invenire*).

So far Eckhart has apparently rendered "In the beginning God created" as "In *esse*, *esse* conferred *esse*." However, we must not think that the Meister's intention is to reduce the relationship between creatures and Creator to a static identity in a lifeless block of *esse*. Eckhart's use of *conferre* (*collatio*), *accipere*, *invenire*, etc. shows that he does not want to do away with the idea of motion in creation, and, if not motion, then neither time. Thus, the Dominican's next two points address the temporal aspect of the creation.

Eckhart's third point treats the *principium* in the more expected sense of beginning (*initium*): "every work of God is new."²⁷ We have seen that God does not act outside Himself or else He would not be God. Now Eckhart considers the nature of the act of creation itself. Since "God, as Being, acts in Being and for Being,"²⁸ and the end (the *ad*) is the same as the beginning (the *in*), the end does not follow the beginning sequentially so as to be outside of it (as in linear time). The more created a thing is, the more it is in *esse* which is the beginning and first cause. Thus, the more that God's acts are complete, the more they are being begun.

The fourth point is, of course, the other side of the third: though God's act is always beginning, it is no less always complete. "When the end and the beginning are the same, a thing necessarily is being made and has been made simultaneously; it is begun

²⁶ It is difficult at this point to clarify the status of creatures before their flowing in to *esse*. As we shall see below, Eckhart sometimes speaks of an intellectual status of creatures which precedes their created existence. This will become clearer as we move on.

²⁷ Ibid. n. 18 (LW I, 162): "omne opus dei novum est."

²⁸ Ibid. n. 18 (LW I, 162): "deus omne, utpote esse, agit in esse et ad esse."

and completed at once.”²⁹ It is only in *esse* that creatures can receive *esse*, but upon their arrival the work is done. God’s work is complete as soon as it is begun or, better, *because* it is begun, since the beginning (the *in quo*) is the end (the *ad quod*). Further, since God is always beginning to create, He is always finished creating. This ever-completed element in creation demands that God is always without motion, for, according to Aristotle, Eckhart quotes, “when conditions are present, motion ceases.”³⁰ Of course this motionlessness does not oppose the endless activity described above, but, on the contrary, the two reinforce one another. Because God is always active, He is ever at rest.

While Eckhart identifies the beginning of creation with the end of creation, he does not do this to the exclusion of all difference between the two. *Esse*-as-beginning does not differ from *esse*-as-end in content, but it does in form, as is illustrated by the language of motion and rest. Of course, a motion that never moves outside of itself might be expressed as rest, but the fact that Eckhart speaks about cause differently than he does effect implies a principle other than “like causes like,” *viz.* that cause is other than what is caused. But whence comes this difference?

We might call the *General Prologue*’s theme the divinity of *esse*. As such it does not treat beings insofar as they are distinct from God but only insofar as they are bestowed with the pure, undifferentiated *esse* which God is. However, this is not the only way Eckhart speaks of *esse*. The Dominican often makes the distinction between the *esse indistinctum* of God and the *esse hoc et hoc* of creatures. “Note that anything created, since it is this or that, something distinct, belongs to some genus, species, or singularity. God however is not something distinct, nor [does he] belong to some nature, but [is]

²⁹ Ibid. n. 19 (LW I, 163): “Ubi enim finis et initium idem, necessario simul fit et factum est, simul incipit et perfectum est.”

³⁰ Ibid. n. 19 (LW I, 163): “Propter quod praesentibus habitibus cessat motus.”

common to all.”³¹ In this typical passage from the *Commentary on John*, Eckhart maintains that it is the creature as possessing a certain determination or what-ness, which is different from and outside God. However, we must not imagine that, by adding *hoc et hoc* to the definition of the creature, Eckhart is positing a cause of creation that is other than God, as he evidently wants to avoid doing. If God is to be the sole cause of creation He must be the cause of the creature’s essence as well as its existence. For this reason Eckhart introduces a way of speaking of the principle other than *esse*.

In the *Commentary on Genesis*, we find Eckhart working under different assumptions than he did in the *General Prologue*. No longer is it “existence” which is “the principle and first of all things.”³² Now we find that “the universal principle and root of each and every thing is the *ratio* of that very thing.”³³ Thus, Eckhart tells us, “It should be known that the principle in which God created the heaven and earth is ideal reason.”³⁴ If, then, the *General Prologue* considers the creature’s existence, the *Expositio* considers the creature’s particular mode of existence which he calls *idea* or *quiditas*. We should note, however, that, although Eckhart’s terminology has changed, his reasoning is consistent. What makes formal causality appropriate for God’s mode of production is its interior mode. “The reason of things is such a principle that it does not have or look to an outside cause, but only looks inward to the essence of things.”³⁵ God does not look to

³¹ In Ion. n. 103 (LW III, 88-89): “Notandum quod creatum omne, cum sit hoc aut hoc, distinctum quid, proprium est alicui generi, specie vel singulari. Deus autem non est quid distinctum aut proprium alicui naturae, sed commune omnibus.”

³² Prol.gen. n. 17 (LW I, 160-161): “Esse autem principium est et primo omnium”

³³ In Gen.I. n. 3 (LW I, 187): “Uniuscuiusque enim rei universaliter principium et radix est ratio ipsius rei.”

³⁴ Ibid. n. 3 (LW I, 186): “sciendum quod principium, in quo *creavit deus caelum et terram*, est ratio idealis.”

³⁵ Ibid. n. 4 (LW I, 187): “rerum ratio sic est principium, ut causam extra non habeat nec respiciat, sed solam rerum essentiam intra respicit.”

what is outside when He creates, and so, here too, the principle is identified both with what is most fundamental to the creature and with God Himself.

One apparent difference between the *principium-as-esse* and the *principium-as-ratio idealis* is that while all creatures participate³⁶ in the same *esse*, they do not all participate in the same *ratio* but rather “a man according to one reason, a lion according to another and likewise for each thing.”³⁷ Thus, the question of the unity of God’s creative act arises. Eckhart notes that Scripture is not consistent in the ordering of the things God creates. He cites Hebrews 1:10: “In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands.”³⁸ His response is that compound things can be expressed by a single idea “such as the foundation, the wall and the roof of a house can be spoken simultaneously by one name.”³⁹ Since God creates formally and not efficiently like a human craftsman, He does not produce things in a sequential order, though there may be an order of dependence between things implied, just as one cannot have a roof before one has a foundation.

This is also the way Eckhart responds to the doctrine, which Eckhart attributes to Avicenna,⁴⁰ that from a simple One only one can proceed immediately. “Just as knowing many things does not oppose [God’s] simplicity, so neither does [his simplicity] oppose His producing many things immediately.”⁴¹ As God knows things, so does He create

³⁶ We will see just what Eckhart means by ‘participate’ later. For now we will have to take this term with a grain of salt.

³⁷ In Gen.I n. 5 (LW I, 189): “alia quidem ratione hominem, alia leonem, et sic de singulis.”

³⁸ Ibid. n. 8 (LW I, 191): “tu in principio, domine, terram fundasti, et opera manuum tuarum sunt caeli.”

³⁹ Ibid. n. 8 (LW I, 191): “fundamentum, paries et tectum, simul uno dicuntur nomine”

⁴⁰ For a history of this principle see W.J. Hankey’s “Ab uno simplici non est nisi unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas’ Doctrine of Creation,” *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev’d Dr Robert D. Crouse*, ed. Michael Treschow, Willemien Otten and Walter Hannam, Studies in Intellectual History (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 309-333.

⁴¹ Ibid. n. 11 (LW I, 195): “sicut suae simplicitati non repugnant intelligere plura, ita nec producere plura immediate.”

them. Therefore Eckhart argues that God “would not produce the universe nor would it be a universe, if any essential part of it were missing.”⁴² If God were to create one part of the universe before another, it would imply that God were thinking now of one *ratio* and now of another, and His knowledge would be divided. The simplicity of God’s understanding, and thus His creating, is inclusive rather than exclusive and in this sense it echoes the indistinction of God’s *esse*.

One might ask at this point what it is that causes creatures to fall into distinction and the *ratio idealis* to fall into multiplicity. In approaching this question we ought to remember that although Eckhart has been emphasizing its intellectual element here, the creation is still defined as the *collatio esse*.⁴³ Thus, the difference between the uncreated *ratio idealis* and the multi-partite universe is *esse*. This point is expressed more explicitly in the *Parisian Questions* (to which we will return): “Therefore, a being in the mind, as it is in the mind, does not have the nature of a being and as such hurries to the very opposite of existence.”⁴⁴ As that which differentiates creatures from God, *esse* is to *ratio idealis* as *ratio idealis* is to *esse*.

2.2 Extrinsic Analogy vs the Virtual-Real Distinction

Having considered the creation in the principle-as-*esse* and the principle-as-*ratio idealis* we can now turn to the question of the relation of creature to Creator. As we have just seen, there are different ways of approaching this question. The creature, by which we mean an *ens hoc et hoc*, is by definition a combination of essence and existence, either

⁴² Ibid. n. 13 (LW I, 197): “universum non produceret nec esset universum, si quid partium essentialium ipsi deesset.”

⁴³ Ibid. n. 14 (LW I, 197).

⁴⁴ Qu.Par. Q. 1, n. 7 (LW V, 43): “Ens ergo in anima, ut in anima, non habet rationem entis et ut sic vadit ad oppositum ipsius esse.”

an existence under the mode of a particular essence, or an essence distinguished from others by falling into being. As the sole cause of creatures, God can be given the names *esse* and *intellegere*. Thus, if we are to ask how creatures relate to their Creator, we must specify which nature of God we mean.⁴⁵ In other words, creatures relate to God as *esse* in one way and as *intellegere* another.

The most usual way to speak of the relation of creatures and Creator in Eckhart is ontologically. It is the most obvious way since Eckhart is famous for saying not only that God is *esse* but that all creatures are pure nothing.⁴⁶ The Dominican's notion of the non-existence of creatures becomes more intelligible in the light of his use of the analogy of *esse*. In the *Sermons and Lectures on Ecclesiasticus* Eckhart takes up the theory of analogy in his consideration of the verse "They that eat me, shall yet hunger" (Si. 24:29). Eckhart, like his fellow Dominican Thomas Aquinas, maintains that the term *esse* and other perfections like it, when predicated of God and predicated of the creature, ought to be understood neither univocally nor equivocally but analogously. Thus, the German Dominican cites the Angelic Doctor in defining these categories: "Now, equivocals are divided by the various things signified, while univocals [are divided] by various differences of the thing. Analogues, however, are not distinguished by things, but neither are they distinguished by the differences of things, but 'by modes' of the one and same simple thing."⁴⁷ However, Eckhart's unique understanding of how *esse* is modified distances his own use of analogy from that of Aquinas.

⁴⁵ Here too a grain of salt is in order. Ultimately Eckhart does not speak of God as so divided, but we have not yet seen how *esse* and *intellegere* relate in God.

⁴⁶ For example in Pr. 4. (DW I, 69-70).

⁴⁷ In Ecc. n. 52 (LW II, 280): "Nam aequivoca dividuntur per diversas res significatas, univoca vero per diversas rei differentias, 'analogia' vero non distinguuntur per res, sed nec per rerum differentias, sed 'per modos' unius eiusdemque rei simpliciter." Eckhart is citing Thomas' *Sentences*. I d. 22 q. un. a. 3 ad 2.

We have already said something about what modes of *esse* mean for Eckhart. Fundamentally for Eckhart *esse* is divine—*esse est deus*—and so he does not speak of imperfection or gradation of *esse*. Since *esse* is only conferred in *esse* we must say that insofar as⁴⁸ a creature is endowed with *esse* it has the latter “*positive et radicaliter*.”⁴⁹ However, since a creature is not pure *esse* but has other defining qualities i.e. a particular essence, it only has *esse* “*a deo et in deo*.”⁵⁰ Eckhart’s notion of the analogous is not somewhere between the univocal and the equivocal, whereby analogy would express a deficiency of the quality as it did for Aquinas, but rather the coincidence of univocal and equivocal. Creatures truly exist, but not by their own existence. Or, better, as Alain de Libera says of another perfection: “Il ne faut pas dire ‘la créature est bonne *mais* n’est pas sa propre bonté,’ il faut dire ‘la créature est bonne en *n’étant pas* sa *proper* bonté.’”⁵¹ He continues, “La singularité d’Eckhart est de pousser cette participation jusqu’à l’absolu.”⁵² This singularity is anticipated by another singularity which we have seen, *viz.* the word order in his statement “*esse est deus*.” While Eckhart’s analogy of extrinsic attribution seems at first to be a total devaluation of creatures, the priority the Meister gives to *esse* in the *General Prologue* should remind us that for Eckhart, as for Eriugena, creatures are in fact theophanies.

Nevertheless, as we have seen above, there is an aspect of the creature which does not participate in God’s *esse*. God is, of course, the cause of these qualities too, but, since they are of an intelligible nature, it is not God-as-*esse* that is their cause but God-as-

⁴⁸ Eckhart does not use the word “*inquantam*” here but the principle is implied if not employed in all his discussions of using the transcendentals of creatures.

⁴⁹ In Ecc. n. 53 (LW II, 282).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Alain de Libera, “A propos de quelques théories logiques de Maître Eckhart: existe-t-il une tradition médiévale de la logique néo-platonicienne?” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 113 (1981): 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*

intellegere. Eckhart usually speaks of the intellectual relationship between creature and Creator in terms of formal and virtual existence. Eckhart, like another German master, Dietrich von Freiberg, made extensive use of the Procline-Dionysian notion of the essential cause, *viz.* a cause which contains its effect in a prior and superior way. Eckhart says in the *Commentary on Wisdom* that “all things are in God as in the first cause intellectually and in the mind of a craftsman. Therefore they do not have any of their formal existence until drawn out causally and produced on the outside so as to be.”⁵³ We should note that here the difference between virtual and formal is the difference of intellect and existence and that what is outside of *intellegere* is *esse*. In other words, the inner life of the Divine Mind and the externality of Being are mutually exclusive. This raises the question of how the virtual and formal relate. In Pr. 57 Eckhart, without using the term, describes God as the essential cause: “Thus, God has in Himself all images eternally, not as soul, nor as creature, but as God.”⁵⁴ Here the Meister illustrates how the external image relates to the internal one by a mirror analogy. As the image of a face in a mirror depends on the original face, so does the creature existing formally depend on its corresponding idea in the mind of God. Though Eckhart’s intention in this sermon is not to demonstrate the nature of the dependence of the image on the original, it is clearly implied to be absolute. In Pr. 9 Eckhart makes the nature of a mirrored image explicit: “The image is in me, from me, to me. As long as the mirror is placed exactly opposite my face, my image is in it. If the mirror were to fall, the image would

⁵³ In Sap. n. 21 (LW II, 342): “Omnia autem sunt in deo tamquam in causa prima intellectualiter et in mente artificis. Igitur non habent esse suum aliquod formale, nisi causaliter educantur et producantur extra, ut sint.”

⁵⁴ Pr. 57. (DW II, 600): “Alsô hât got êwiclîch alliu bilde an im, niht als die sêle und ander créâtûre, sunder als got.”

disappear.”⁵⁵ The completeness of dependence implied by the “in,” “from,” and “to” is reminiscent of the *General Prologue*’s discussion of *esse*. Eckhart’s meaning is clear. Just as the being of the creature is radically dependent on, and extrinsically analogous to God’s Being, so is the creature’s image or form radically dependent on and extrinsically analogous to God’s ideal reason. Having seen this we cannot quite agree with Davies in suggesting that Eckhart uses the term *intellegere* of God in order to emphasize the transcendental aspect of God’s immanent/transcendent relation to creatures.⁵⁶ Davies’ suggestion is not incorrect, but only incomplete. We will grant that God-as-Intellect transcends the creature-as-being, but we have seen that insofar as the creature is form or image, God-as-Intellect is immediately present to it. It is the mirror not the image in it which the original transcends, for the image is properly in the original itself, while the mirror in itself is pure nothing.

In examining the relationship between Creator and creature first in the principle as *esse* and then in the principle as *ratio idealis* we have seen the same pattern emerge, *viz.* that nothing is at once so like and so unlike as creature and Creator. Insofar as it is a being, the creature is by and in God-as-*esse* and not in its particular self. But whence comes this particularity? From its idea, which is by and in God-as-*intellegere* and not its external independent existence. But whence comes the externality? From God-as-*esse*, and so on. God is the principle of both likeness and unlikeness in the creature as Being and Intellect respectively insofar as the creature is being, and as Intellect and Being respectively insofar as the creature is idea. From this we can see how Eckhart maintains both the transcendence and immanence of God without positing another cause of the

⁵⁵ Pr. 9. (DW I, 154): “Daz bilde ist in mir, von mir, zuo mir. Die wîle der spiegel glîch stât gegen mînem antlite, sô ist mîn bilde dar inne;”

⁵⁶ Davies, 110.

creature. But has he not divided the principle in doing so? Does Eckhart really wish to depict a God who gives with one hand and takes away with another? To answer these questions we must consider Eckhart *de nominibus Dei*.

3.3 God as *Esse* vs God as *Intellegere*

We have already argued that, since Eckhart wishes to maintain both that the creature is like and unlike the Creator and that God is the sole cause of creation, God must be *esse* and *intellegere* at once, and not one to the other's exclusion (though they do alternate the roles of principle of likeness and unlikeness of creatures). Thus, when we find Eckhart preferring one name over the other it is only due to the context of (a) how he is interpreting creatures and (b) which aspect of God he is trying to express. Insofar as creatures are existents, God must be immanent as Being and transcendent as Intellect, and insofar as they are ideas, the reverse. We must now ask how God-as-*Esse* relates to God-as-*Intellegere*.

The *Parisian Questions* is a helpful text for our purposes because there we see two apparently opposing tendencies in Eckhart present at once, *viz.* to elevate God's Intellect over God's Being on the one hand, while preserving His unity on the other hand. Thus, we find Eckhart at one point in the first question claiming that "intellect is superior to existence and belongs to a different order,"⁵⁷ and then, a few paragraphs later, saying "but if you want to call intellect existence I do not mind."⁵⁸ As for the first point, let it suffice to say that in the *Parisian Questions* part of Eckhart's agenda is to express God's

⁵⁷ Qu.Par. Q1. n. 5 (LW 5, 42): "intelligere est altius quam esse et est alterius condicionis."

⁵⁸ Ibid. n. 8 (LW 5, 45): "Et si tu intelligere velis covare esse, placet mihi."

transcendence over creatures insofar as they are existents, and, thus, he considers Intellect the more proper name of God. But what does the Meister mean by the latter statement?

To answer this question we should note one more subtle yet important difference between Eckhart's and the usual way of rendering standard doctrine. At the beginning of the *Questions* the Meister straight away gives us his position on the question of whether *esse* and *intellegere* are the same in God: "It should be said that they are the same in reality, *and perhaps both in reality and thought.*"⁵⁹ What follows the "and" is not found in Aquinas,⁶⁰ whom Eckhart immediately begins to quote. This slight addition should bring to our attention to the fact that according to Eckhart, we should (perhaps) understand God-as-*esse* and God-as-*intellegere* in the same way. This is indeed what we find in the *Questions*. What Eckhart finds appropriate to God in the term Intellect is what Aristotle, following Anaxagoras, says about it, *viz.* that it is "'unmixed,' 'having nothing in common with anything,' so that it might know everything, as is said in *De Anima* III."⁶¹ If we compare this notion of intellect with the mode of Being that Eckhart is willing to grant to God in the *Parisian Questions*, *viz.* "*puritas essendi*,"⁶² we can easily see the common notion: the indistinct. Thus, the issue of the *Parisian Questions* is not whether God has the nature of Being or Intellect, but rather whether God's indistinct nature is better described by the term Being or the term Intellect. Though the Meister prefers the latter here, he also seems to think that it makes little difference what word one uses provided that one has the meaning right.

⁵⁹ Ibid. n. 1 (LW 5, 37): "Dicendum quod sunt idem re, et forsam re et ratione." (my italics)

⁶⁰ See the *Summa Theologiae*, I, 26, ii.

⁶¹ Qu.Par. Q2. n. 2. (LW V, 50): "'immixtus,' 'nulli nihil habens commune,' ut omnia intelligat, ut dicitur in III De anima"

⁶² Ibid. Q1. n. 9 (LW V, 45).

But simply equating Being and Intellect does not solve our problem. Were Being and Intellect *simply* the same, they could not produce different effects and thus the creature would be identical to God. We have seen, however, that Being and Intellect can mean the same thing, but not apparently at the same time. If Being is the cause of likeness of creatures, Intellect, we have found, is the cause of the unlikeness of creatures, and *vice versa*. Thus, as usual, Eckhart seems to be demanding a paradox, *viz.* that God be both divided and one, and, as usual, Eckhart can provide a logic which not only allows it, but demands it.

In the *Commentary on Wisdom* Eckhart considers yet another name of God: *Unum*. By *unum* Eckhart does not mean numerical unity. Rather, he explains that “‘One’ is the same as the indistinct. All distinct things are two or more, all indistinct things are one.”⁶³ He continues in a now familiar manner by arguing that “nothing is so distinct from number and the numbered... as God. And nothing is so indistinct.”⁶⁴ However, in what follows we do find something new, and it is crucial:

Everything which is distinguished by indistinction is more distinct the more indistinct it is, since it is distinguished by its own indistinction. And conversely, it is more indistinct the more distinct it is, since it is distinguished by its own distinction from the indistinct. Therefore, it is more indistinct the more it is distinct and it is more distinct the more it is indistinct, as was said.⁶⁵

The importance of this passage is that, unlike the analogies of being and idea, there is no need of the *inquantam* principle here. We do not find that God is like His creatures

⁶³ In Wis. n. 144 (LW II, 482): “li unum idem est quod indistinctum. Omnia enim distincta sunt deo vel plura, indistincta vero omnia sunt unum.”

⁶⁴ Ibid. n. 154. (LW II, 489): “nihil tam distinctum a numero et numerato... sicut deus, et nihil tam indistinctum.”

⁶⁵ Ibid. n. 154. (LW II, 490): “omne quod indistinctione distinguitur, quanto est indistinctius, tanto est distinctius; distinguitur enim ipsa indistinctione. Et e converso, quanto distinctius, tanto indistinctius, quia distinctione sua distinguitur ab indistincto. Igitur quanto distinctius, tanto indistinctius; et quanto indistinctius tanto distinctius, ut prius.” On the One as indistinct see also Bernard McGinn, “Meister Eckhart on God as Absolute Unity,” in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic O’Meara (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982). 128-39.

insofar as they are considered in one way and unlike them insofar as they are considered in another, but, on the contrary, that God is unlike His creatures *because* He is like them! As the indistinct, God is the principle of likeness and unlikeness all the while remaining unified, not only in reality, but in our understanding as well. God acts as two because He is one and is one because He acts as two.

In a vernacular homily Eckhart says, “It has often been said by me that God’s going out is His going in.”⁶⁶ This is all I hope to have shown in our examination of Eckhart’s teaching on the creation. We have seen above that it is only in flowing out of Himself and into creatures that God flows out of creatures and into Himself. The *exitus* does not cause the *reditus*; it *is* the *reditus*. Thus, in the ultimate analysis, while there are many words that might correctly describe the relation of creature and Creator in Eckhart—dynamic, analogous, continuous—the most adequate is, no doubt, paradoxical. Nothing is more distinct and indistinct than God and His creation for He is distinct by being indistinct and indistinct by being distinct.

As the *indistinctum*, God cannot be understood apart from His act of creation. Were it not for the distinction of *esse hoc et hoc*, God would not be distinct in His indistinction, for His indistinction would have nothing to distinguish itself from. Thus, while God’s unity is, for Eckhart, totally inclusive, it does not eliminate exclusivity as such, in fact it demands it. God creates what is other than Himself and yet He does it in Himself where all things are one and are God.

⁶⁶ Pr. 53 (DW 2, 530): “Ich han ez ouch me gesprochen: gotes uzganc ist sin inganc.”

CHAPTER 3: The Intellect as Indistinct

As we have seen, Eckhart defines God in a very close relation to His creation. As the distinct by indistinction, God's transcendence entails both producing the otherness of creatures as well as overcoming that otherness. But what would it mean to be united to a God defined in this way? How would such a union be achieved? And what kind of creature could be capable of such a union? In this chapter we shall address these questions. In part one, I shall consider the implications of the creation of man as *ad imaginem dei*. In part two, I shall deal with the levels of the soul and how they related to one another in its proper activity. In part three, we shall see how the soul overcomes its created nature and is united to God and draw our conclusions about the nature of this union.

3.1 What Does *ad imaginem dei* Mean?

We have seen above that Eckhart uses the illustration of images in a mirror to illustrate the creature's dependence on its virtual existence in God. This is not, however, the Dominican's only use of the term *imago*. Eckhart's anthropology hinges upon the Biblical phrase *ad imaginem dei*. But neither of these uses show us Eckhart's primary meaning of the *imago* which, for him, is expressed most purely in the univocal relation of God the Father and His only begotten Son. We must begin here.

In the *Commentary on John*, Eckhart gives the defining characteristics of the image as it pertains to the emanation of the Son from the Father. The first three are stated as follows: "An image, in so far as it is an image, receives nothing of its own from the subject in which it is, but receives its whole being from the object of which it is an image.

Secondly, it receives its being from one single thing. Thirdly, it receives the entire being of [the object] according to all by which it is an exemplar.”⁶⁷ In these first three points the Meister describes the fundamental quality of the image, namely the perfect equality it shares with its exemplar. Were this basic equality with the exemplar not granted to the image, Eckhart argues, “it would no longer be the image of [that thing], but of something else.”⁶⁸ If the image received only part of an object, we could only rightfully call the part imaged the exemplar. Likewise, if an image possessed something more than this object, the source of this other quality would have to be included in what is meant by exemplar. This latter point pertains even to the image’s subjectivity. If we should imagine that an image in a mirror possesses something of the mirror itself, then we are not conceiving of the image in the strict sense that Eckhart is.

The Dominican’s next point seems to problematize what has just been said: “From which it stands, fourthly, that the image of anything is both one thing in itself and so is from one thing only.”⁶⁹ That Eckhart strictly denies that the image possesses anything from its own subject begs the question of what he means here by “*in se*.” As we have briefly seen in the previous chapter, Eckhart sometimes uses *imago* to illustrate that the creature is *nothing* in itself: as soon as the face is removed from in front of the mirror the image vanishes. But could one not say the same of the Eternal Image? The Son’s dependence on the Father is clear and yet He is one *in Himself*.

This statement ceases to be problematic if we keep in mind that the Son is not a distinct subject which receives the image of the Father. The Son’s being-in-Himself is

⁶⁷ In Ioh. n. 23 (LW III, 19): “Imago enim, in quantum imago est, nihil sui accipit a subiecto in quo est, sed totum suum esse accipit ab obiecto, cuius est imago. Iterum secundo accipit esse suum a solo illo. Adhuc tertio accipit totum esse illius secundum omne sui, quo exemplar est.”

⁶⁸ Ibid: “iam non esset imago illius, sed cuiusdam alterius.”

⁶⁹ Ibid: “Ex quo patet quarto quod imago alicuius et in se unica est et unius tantum est.”

received from the Father and is the same as the Father's being-in-Himself. The univocity of the Father and Son is clarified by a comparison with the analogy of God and the creature. De Libera has said that the creature is good *because* its goodness is not its own but God's; in other words, should the creature have some goodness of its own (i.e. not God's), it would not be an image (in the true sense of the word) of God's goodness but of something else. Thus, Aquinas' "intrinsic" analogy in which the received perfection takes root in the creature, though in an imperfect way, is unthinkable for the German Dominican. For Eckhart if the quality in the lower differs in any way from the quality in the higher, the relation must be called equivocal. Univocity also denies that the quality in one subject differs at all from the quality in the other, but it is distinguished from analogy in that both univocal terms possess the same quality equally. Thus, to pick up one of Eckhart's own illustrations, if a noble man loaning his coat to a poor man is an example of analogy, then an example of univocity would be making the poor man a co-owner. But why, then, do the qualities adhere to the uncreated Image but not to the created images? On this point Vladimir Lossky is helpful in pointing out that the Meister would consider this question to be problematic from the start. He explains that for Eckhart "les perfections spirituelles comme la sagesse, la justice etc., n'adhèrent pas aux sujets en les informant: ce sont plutôt les sujets qui 'accèdent' aux perfections pour être 'formés et informés.'" ⁷⁰ As Eckhart himself puts it, "The distinct does not properly receive the indistinct." ⁷¹ Should what is without limits become contained by the limited, it would then become limited and cease to be without limits. Ironically, then, when we say that whiteness is in the white thing, we in fact mean the reverse, that the white thing is in

⁷⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *Théologie Négative et Connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin, 1960), 346-47

⁷¹ In Ion. n. 99 (LW III, 85): "Distinctum autem proprie non recipit indistinctum."

whiteness. In this way Eckhart does away with the Thomistic distinction between theological and natural virtues applying the logic of the former to all the virtues of creatures.

In contrast, when we are dealing with the pure meaning of the *imago*, illustrated in the example of the Father and Son, we find that the image contains the exemplar just as much as the exemplar contains the image. “I am in the Father, and the Father is in me” (Jn. 14:11). Thus, we are not here attributing predicates to subjects or accidents to substances for we are dealing with the formal emanation of substance itself; the substance of the Son does not receive the divine perfections as attributes, but rather it is the very substance with all its attributes that is being received. However, we must not think by the word “received” that the Son is outside the Father already waiting to accept the latter’s substance, for in that case He would be a substance already and we would be dealing with the image as analogue, the creature. In that case, we would have an image contained in the exemplar but not an exemplar contained in an image. Rather, the Son receives the Father *in* the Father (the only place He could) and, more importantly, He receives the totality of the Father, on account of which we can say that the Father is in Him. Thus, if we were to represent equivocal, analogical, and univocal terms visually, we might represent the equivocal ones by two circles which never overlap, the analogical by a smaller circle contained within a larger, and the univocal by two concentric circles of equal diameter whose circumferences overlap.

It is clear how analogous creation differs from the univocal Son, but this does not explain the processes by which this difference exists. If we cannot ask why the image does not adhere to the creature since the creature is as an accident to God, we might ask how this accident comes to be.

To answer this question we must first remember that, while the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son, whereby they are one and coeval, nevertheless there is between them an order of dependence of begetter and begotten, that is a personal distinction. For Eckhart, as for Aquinas and others, the inner boiling (*bullitio*) of God in which the personal distinction is established is the exemplar for the external boiling-over (*ebullitio*) in which the real distinction between creatures is established. In the *Commentary on John* the Meister claims that this principle is demonstrated in any work of nature or art:

It stands that the form of a figure and its image which the artist depicts externally on the wall first exist in the artist in the mode of an inherent form....Secondly it is necessary for the image to be with [the artist] in the mode of an exemplar as that according to which he, who looks to it, works....Thirdly, the image depicted in the mind of the artist is the very art by which the artist is the principle of the depicted image.⁷²

Were the artist not united with the art by which he works (i.e. the exemplar), the image produced would not be a true work of his own art any more than the result of spilled can of paint is. However, if the unity of artist and art were of such a sort that there were no relation whatsoever between them, there could be no effect, that is an external product:

“Fourthly, it stands that Polycletus, in the words of the Philosopher, is not the principle of the statue before he receives the art of making the statue, nor is he able to be the principle if he should cease to have the art.”⁷³ This may sound like a strange point to make when comparing artist and art⁷⁴ with Father and Son, since it is impossible that the Father ever

⁷² In Ion. n. 36-37 (LW III, 31): “Constat enim primo quod in pictore sit forma figurae et imago eius, quod depingit foris in pariete, per modum formae inhaerentis... Adhuc autem oportet secundo quod apud ipsum sit imago per modum exemplaris, secundum quod et ad quod aspiciens operator... Rursus tertio imago depicta in mente pictoris est ars ipsa, qua pictor est principium imaginis depictae.”

⁷³ In Ion. n. 37 (LW III, 31): “Iterum etiam quarto constat quod Polycletus, ut verbo utar philosophi, non est principium statucae, antequam artem accipiat faciendi statuam, nec principiari potest, si desinat artem habere.”

⁷⁴ That is to say that by which the artist produces, not what is produced.

be without the Son, but Eckhart seems to be arguing that *in the act of creating* the Father looks to the Son as exemplar of His effect and in doing so possesses the Son as art accidentally. Further, since the image as accident is the very definition of creation, the Father's looking to the Son as the art of creation is the very act of creation. God becomes analogized being simply by relating to Himself as such. On this point Eckhart distinguishes himself from Aquinas, for whom the image of the trinity is expressed diversely in creation.⁷⁵ Thus, while Eckhart agrees with Thomas that the creature's being and essence are participations in Father and Son, the extrinsic aspect of his concept of participation does not allow the Meister to attribute the increasing distance between existence and essence in creatures to the receptivity of the creature itself, but to a relation which is still in a sense in God. (We might say that Eckhart telescopes the movements of *bullitio* and *ebullitio* into one another.) Nevertheless, this new relation would not even be possible were it not for the personal difference between Father and Son in their univocal relationship. For Eckhart, God creates by relating to Himself-as-self-related, and the creature is an image of an image-as-image.

Yet Eckhart has yet a third use for the term *imago* and it is by far the most difficult, and we must now look at the place of the human soul in all of this. The application of *imago* to the human is problematic, since it does not easily fit into either of the uses of *imago* that we have seen above. As we ordinarily experience ourselves, humans are surely creatures and thus have an analogical relationship to God, a fixed place in the hierarchy of beings, and are distinct from other creatures and thus from the indistinct God. However, Genesis says that man is made to the image of God (*ad*

⁷⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 45, vii.

imaginem dei). The Meister comments on Gen 1:27 in the First Genesis *Commentary* as follows:

[T]hose which are below [the intellectual creature] are produced according to the likeness of the thing which is in God and they have the ideas that are proper to them in God.... However, the intellectual nature as such has God Himself as a likeness rather than something that is in God as idea. The reason for this is that “the intellect is what it is by virtue of becoming all things,” not this or that determined to a species.⁷⁶

The “likeness to God Himself” here does not refer to everything in God as opposed to just one thing, but rather to the substance of the divine mind in which all things exist as idea. The human, by which Eckhart means the intellect,⁷⁷ is not all species but *can become* all species and is therefore none of them. To pick up our earlier discussion, the Father does not look to something in the Son in order to create the intellect, but to the Son’s nature. However, the Son’s nature is neither different nor other than the Father’s nature, and without this otherness, the Father cannot possess the intellect accidentally and therefore cannot produce it outside of Himself. By this reasoning the so-called “creation” of the intellect is not a creation, that is to say a process which produces an external product, at all, but is located in the inner boiling of the trinity at the point of the begetting of the Son.⁷⁸ And yet Eckhart’s use of similarity here requires that there be a real difference between the *ad imaginem dei* of Genesis 1:27 and the Image referred to in the prologue of John. Lossky puts the difficulty well: “Il y a donc, dans la création de l’homme, un moment qui le rend, pour ainsi dire, naturellement surnaturel.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ In Gen.I n. 115 (LW 1, 270): “ea quae citra sunt producta sunt ad similitudinem eius quod in deo est et habent ideas sibi proprias in deo... natura vero intellectualis ut sic potius habet ipsum deum similitudinem quam aliquid quod in deo sit ideale. Ratio huius est quod ‘intellectus ut sic est, quo est omnia fieri,’ non hoc aut hoc determinatum ad speciem.”

⁷⁷ In Gen.II n. 138 (LW, 604).

⁷⁸ Cf. Pr. 6 (DW I, 109): “He [the Father] gives birth to me His Son and the same Son” (*er gebirt mich sînen sun und den selben sun*).

⁷⁹ Lossky, 362.

Indeed Eckhart does, at times, fail to make the distinction between *ad imaginem* and *imago* when speaking of the human soul, and, though it is difficult to tell if he always intends to keep the distinct meanings of the terms, it is certain that the Meister makes much of the transformation into the same Image referred to at 2 Corinthians 3:18.⁸⁰ But how does this transformation happen? And what would it mean to achieve it? To answer these questions we must first look at Eckhart's view of the soul.

2.2 The Psychic Hierarchy

In the German sermons Eckhart never ceases speaking of the human soul—its uncreated ground (*grunt*) or spark (*vüncelin*), the birth of the Son there, its virtue of detachment from created images—but it is in the Latin *Book of Parables of Genesis* that we find the Dominican's scientific account of all the levels of the psychic hierarchy and how they function together.

In his exegesis of Genesis 3:1 Eckhart follows Augustine's parabolic interpretation of the man, woman, and serpent in the Garden of Eden as the superior reason, inferior reason, and sensitive faculty of the human soul respectively. Interpreted in this way, the interactions between Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the Biblical narrative can explain how the levels of the human soul ought to and ought not to relate to one another. For the sake of the conversation which follows, Eckhart begins his exegesis with two preliminary comments: the first gives an Aristotelian account of intellect and the process by which man knows, and the second gives a Neoplatonic account of the nature of hierarchy.

⁸⁰ Cf. Pr. 43 and Pr. 65.

Eckhart begins his first point by again drawing upon the Biblical notion that man is made *ad imaginem dei*, which he here identifies with Aristotelian potential intellect: “The Intellect, in us, is like a naked and blank tablet”⁸¹, an important hint to which we will return. Continuing in the Aristotelian epistemology Eckhart writes, “Likewise for us it is ‘not’ possible ‘to understand without the phantasm,’” and, since “‘Imagination is a movement made by sensation,’” “it is necessary that man, in his integrity, have a sensitive faculty.”⁸² What Eckhart is describing is the process of abstraction, the Aristotelian epistemological theory that, since the form is in the concrete individual, we come know the form by stripping it of its matter through the sensitive faculty. Thus, the sensitive faculty provides the inferior reason with a phantasm, a particular immaterial image, by which it comes to know universal principles.

While describing the dependence of the rational faculty on the sensitive faculty, Eckhart is careful to maintain an essential difference between the two. The sensitive faculty deals with particulars while the intellectual faculty deals with universals, and yet the latter serves the former as motion serves generation.⁸³ In *On Memory and Reminiscence* Aristotle gives the example of the geometrician who draws a particular triangle in order to make a universal conclusion.⁸⁴ In a mathematical proof the particular qualities are found to be determined by a universal principle, the substance is known through the accident.⁸⁵ Were it not for the accidental qualities of a substance, the substance, the thing in itself, would not be known to us. In this way the particular serves the object’s being known and the sensitive faculty serves intellect. This is not to say,

⁸¹ In Gen.II n. 138 (LW I, 604): “Intellectus autem in nobis se habet sicut tabula nuda et rasa.”

⁸² Ibid: “Item nobis etiam ‘non’ contingit ‘intelligere sine phantasmate’... ‘Phantasia autem est motus a sensu factus’... oportet quod ipse homo in sua integritate habeat sensitivum.”

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence* (450a)

⁸⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* (402b)

however, that the particular is truer than the universal, but only that it is more knowable to soul insofar as it is the form of the body; rather the universal truth remains fully actual in itself independent of, yet determining, its particular manifestations. Thus, just as the substance is unaffected by the accident, so the intelligible species is unaffected by the sensible species, and the sensitive faculty is outside the intellect.⁸⁶ Eckhart makes a comparison with a natural process:

We see an example in corporeal things, for alteration, which dwell in and is concerned with accidental qualities, serves generation, which is established in and stands upon essential things; it is the servant of generation, though it is outside of the species of generation in the species of alteration.⁸⁷

This prior self-relation of the truth in itself is essential to abstraction. As what determines the accidental qualities of the created image, the universal idea is that by which the latter becomes intelligible. However, to whatever extent the potential intellect is united to the phantasm (insofar as it has been made intelligible), the so-called active intellect informs it as well. This indistinct union of the active intellect and the potential intellect depends upon, firstly, the presence of the phantasm and, secondly, the presence of the intelligible in the phantasm which determines and yet excludes its accidental qualities. Thus, the “upward” movement toward the universal begins in our case with a “downward” movement toward the particular.

That the three faculties of the soul work together in the soul’s proper activity leads to Eckhart’s next point: “Order is that which makes the good.”⁸⁸ At first glance, however, the nature of this order seems to clash with what was said in the previous discussion.

⁸⁶ In Gen.II n. 138.

⁸⁷ Ibid (LW I, 605): “Sic enim exemplariter videmus in corporalibus quod alteratio, quae versatur et negotiatur circa qualitates accidentales, servit generationi, quae consistit et insistit essentialibus, et est serva generationis, extra speciem generationis et in specie alterationis.”

⁸⁸ In Gen.II n. 139 (LW I, 605): “Ordo enim ipse est qui facit bonum”

Eckhart states that, “A natural order, however, is one in which the highest point of the inferior touches the lowest point of its superior.”⁸⁹ What Eckhart is describing here is the Procline-Dionysian law of total mediation by which

hierarchical action is always mediated. The highest of one order never touches a lower order. There must be a diminution of spiritual virtue to a lower level within a hierarchical rank before a higher order of being can come into contact with a lower. Even then the higher touches only the top grade of the lower order.⁹⁰

Applying the *lex divinitatis*, as it came to be known in Eckhart’s time, to the faculties of the human soul, the Dominican describes, to borrow a phrase from Eric Perl, a “continuum of cognition”⁹¹ and not clearly defined powers of the soul stacked on top of one another. However, in the Aristotelian model we saw that the sensitive faculty belongs to a distinct species from the rational and that the higher and lower reasons are able to enter into an indistinct unity. To clarify this difficulty let us look at the nature of this “touch.”

At the highest level, which is between God and the superior reason, Eckhart describes a “mutual glance” which is “most natural, truest and most pleasant.”⁹² Unlike the potential intellect, the superior reason is not referred to by Eckhart as *ad imaginem* but as the straight *imago dei* which is “*cum deo et dei cum illo*.”⁹³ The notion of being with God is, of course, reminiscent of the prologue to John, and we have seen in Eckhart’s

⁸⁹ Ibid. (LW I, 605-606): “Ordo autem naturalis est, ut supremum inferioris attingat infimum sui superioris.”

⁹⁰ W.J. Hankey, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 64 (1997): 75.

⁹¹ Eric Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), 83-99.

⁹² In Gen.II n. 139 (LW I, 606-607): “respectus mutuus... naturalissimus est, verissimus est et dulcissimus est.”

⁹³ Ibid.

exegesis of that passage that the equality signified by this “with”⁹⁴ means a univocal relation.

The relation between the superior and inferior reasons is ambiguous. First Eckhart tells us that, as the superior reason adheres to God, “it is similar for the inferior reason, which is subordinated to its superior.”⁹⁵ However, he continues, “and by means of this [the subordination to the superior intellect] to God.”⁹⁶ It seems, then, that we cannot call this relation univocal since there cannot be a mediator in three univocal terms. Our only hint is that what the superior reason gives to the inferior is called light and power (*lumine et virtute*).⁹⁷

Being filled with this power, the inferior reason informs the sensitive faculty. Here Eckhart stresses a point which he made earlier, namely that the sensitive faculty remains outside the intellect; however, he does supply another way of understanding this relationship. He writes, “Indeed, God not only calls rational those things which are so essentially, but also those that are not essentially; for He also pours virtues into the sensitive appetite.”⁹⁸ The issue of calling things that are not as though they are (Rom. 4:17) will surely bring Eckhart’s extrinsic analogy to mind. If sensation were analogous to reason it would solve the problem of the discontinuity between defined levels and continuous emanation. Eckhart compares the transfer of power from one level to the next to the transfer of magnetic energy in a string of needles.⁹⁹ This illustration is helpful if we are careful not to misinterpret it. What is being transferred from superior to inferior is not

⁹⁴ Though the Eckhart uses different prepositions (*cum* and *apud*) the same point it being made.

⁹⁵ In Gen.II n. 140 (LW 1, 607): “similiter se habet de parte inferiori rationalis, subordinate suo superiori”

⁹⁶ Ibid (LW 1 607-8): “...et ipsa mediante deo”

⁹⁷ In Gen.II n. 141 (LW 1, 608).

⁹⁸ Ibid: “Deus enim non solum vocat ea, quae sunt rationalia per essentiam, sed etiam ea, quae non sunt rationalia per essentiam; nam et virtutes infundit appetitui sensitivo.”

⁹⁹ Ibid. n. 142 (LW 1, 611).

some thing, but rather the power to draw its inferior to itself. While, from the perspective of the bottom up, the second term mediates the third to the first, considered from the top down, we see that it is the power of the first term which mediates the third to the second. Here Eckhart is adhering to the Procline principle that the first, by virtue of causing the second, is more and not less active in the third than the second.¹⁰⁰ Thus, the first is the mediator between second and third.

We found in the theory of abstraction that the upward movement toward the indistinct universal implies a downward one toward the distinct particular. The Neoplatonic understanding of hierarchy teaches us the other side of this, that the downward movement implies an upward one. But we must now return to the question of the created status of the potential intellect as *ad imaginem dei*.

2.3 Intellectual Union

It is not yet clear exactly what the potential intellect gains by coming to know concrete and universal truths. In fact one could supply textual evidence that Eckhart condemns intellectual activity; for example Pr. 52 says that the poor man who is blessed according to the beatitudes is one who “wants nothing, knows nothing and has nothing”¹⁰¹, and in the very text we are considering he writes, “But note that anyone wishing to hear God speaking must become deaf and inattentive to others.”¹⁰² If, in knowing, the naturally empty potential intellect becomes filled, what value could it have? To answer this question we ought to remember that the dignity, we might even dare to say

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 56.

¹⁰¹ Pr. 52 (DW 2, 488): “niht enwil und niht enweiz und niht enhat.”

¹⁰² Para.Gen. n. 149 (LW 1, 618): “Sed notandum quod volens audire deum loquentem oportet obsurdescere aliis audiendis et intendendis.”

the divinity, of the intellect is that it is none of the things which it knows, and this is the case *because it can become all things*. It is an elementary point, but one worth remembering, that this does not imply that the intellect is dignified (i.e. is none of the things it knows) only when it is objectless, but rather it is dignified because it does not matter what its object is. In other words, taking an object does not annul the intellect's separateness, but, on the contrary, proves it (and the more objects it takes the better it is proved). Therefore this is not incompatible with the notion that the mind *becomes* what it knows according to the Aristotelian doctrine that like is known by unlike. “[A]ction and passion are two equally primary principles but are one motion.”¹⁰³ The fact that the active and passive are one *in act* does not change the fact that they are things in themselves.

Insofar as the intellect remains separable from the things it knows even though it actually becomes them, we might say that the intellect remains distinct despite its indistinction. However, we have seen in the previous chapter that, for Eckhart, God is distinct *because of His* indistinction, and it is therefore this kind of distinction which is most noble for the Dominican and of interest to us. If we consider this difference, the meaning of being made *ad imaginem dei* becomes more apparent. If the condition of the sub-intellectual creatures is simple distinction from one another and, thus, from God, and the condition of God is distinction by indistinction from the latter, then the intellectual creature—a phrase which borders on oxymoron—would fall somewhere in between the two. The potential intellect is neither limited by some intelligible species as an ordinary creature, nor is it, yet, indistinct from the intelligible species as the Son-Image is; rather, it is potentially indistinct. If *imaginem* can be translated as intellect, *ad* can be translated as potential.

¹⁰³ Proc.Col.I n. 85 (LW V, 279): “actio et passio duo quidem sunt principia aequae prima, sed motus unus.”

Thus, the transformation from *ad imago* into “the same Image” is for Eckhart intellectual in nature. As Kurt Flasch points out, Eckhart follows Avicenna in that this movement of the soul from potential knowledge to actual knowledge is not an addition to the soul, but rather a purification of the soul: “L’âme est donc le dépassement de soi-même dans l’universel, et pour Avicenne, cela correspond aussi à une assimilation du cosmos à travers l’étude de la nature. L’âme est le dépassement théorique et pratique des limites individuelles. Elle correspond au passage, par le savoir et la volonté, dans le monde intellectuel, *saeculum intelligibile*.”¹⁰⁴ We might say that, in knowing, the intellectual creature moves from created distinction to uncreated indistinction.

Indeed Eckhart comes very close to this formulation in some of his vernacular sermons. Consider the following passage from Pr. 46:

[N]othing (*niht*) makes distinction (*underscheit*). How? Note this! That you are not (*niht*) a certain man, that not (*niht*) makes the distinction between you and that man. And so: if you wish to be without distinction (*sunder underscheit*), then separate yourself from nothing (*niht*). There is a power in the soul which is separated from nothing, for it has nothing in common with any things.¹⁰⁵

The MHG phrases “without distinction (*sunder underscheit*)” and “separate from nothing (*gescheiden von nihte*),” here used of the intellect or spark of the soul, function in the same way as the Latin *indistinctum*, *viz.* to express a positive identity in a negative way.

This begs another question: since the possible intellect is only halfway down the psychic hierarchy, why should it be the centre of attention? If, in the peak of the soul, the intellectual creature is already the Image of God and possesses this uncreated

¹⁰⁴ Kurt Flasch, *D’Averroès à Maître Eckhart*, trans. Jacob Schmutz (Paris: Vrin, 2008), 158-59.

¹⁰⁵ Pr. 46 (DW II, 382): “niht machet underscheit. Wie? Daz merket! Daz dû niht enbist dér mensche, daz niht machet underscheit zwischen dir und dém menschen. Und alsô: wellet ir sîn sunder underscheit, sô scheidet iuch von nihte. Wan ein kraft ist in der sêle, diu ist gescheiden von nihte, wan si enhât niht gemeine mit deheinen dingen;”

indistinction, why concern ourselves with the lower levels? It is not altogether clear to what extent Eckhart wishes to identify man with the spark of the soul. In the German sermons the Meister often speaks of an uncreated and uncreatable something in the soul. However, when he was pressed about this by his accusers, the Dominican stressed that this uncreated something is not in the soul so as to be part of it: it is *aliquid in anima* but not *aliquid animae*.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, we must account for passages in which Eckhart apparently speaks directly out of the ground of the soul which is univocally related to God: “He [the Father] gives birth not only to me, His Son, but He gives birth to me as Himself and Himself as me and to me as His being and nature.”¹⁰⁷

According to Burkhard Mojsisch this difficulty illustrates the very heart of the Eckhartian psychology. As he puts it, “The ground of the soul and the essence of the soul mean the same for Eckhart.”¹⁰⁸ In this statement Mojsisch distinguishes Eckhart’s position from Theodoric of Freiberg, who also speaks of the ground (*grunt*) of the soul, but for whom the ground is something other than the soul. For Eckhart, it is the soul itself which is responsible for its condition as potential intellect. Mojsisch writes,

While Theodoric of Freiberg differentiates between the grounding origin or the essential origin of the soul... and the essence of the soul itself, Eckhart has the ground of the soul (the spark of the soul) distinguish itself from itself—itsself, insofar it is uncreated, from itself, insofar as it is created.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ See Acten II (Denifle, 632): “Nec etiam unquam dixi, quod sciam, nec sensi, quod aliquid sit in anima, quod sit aliquid animae, quod sit increatum et increabile, quia tunc anima esset peccata ex creato et increato, cuius oppositum scripsi et docui...” “I have never said that I think nor have I ever believed, that there is something in the soul such that it would be a part of the soul, that is uncreated and uncreatable, since in that case the soul would be pieced together out of the created and uncreated, of which I have written and taught the opposite”

¹⁰⁷ Pr. 6 (DW 1, 109): “er gebirt mich niht aleine sînen sun, mêr: er gebirt mich sich und sich mich und mich sîn wesen and sîn natûre.”

¹⁰⁸ Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity and Unity*, trans. Orrin F. Summerell (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2001), 153.

¹⁰⁹ Mojsisch, 157.

We should not then think of the transformation from *ad imaginem* to the same image as the fusion of two terms, since all levels of the soul are really the ground in different manifestations. We might say that the uncreated ground and the created soul are, to borrow a term Pierre Hadot uses of the Plotinian hierarchy, “levels of the self.”¹¹⁰ Although the agent intellect is not a part of the soul, so as to be added up with its other faculties, neither is it something foreign to the soul, any more than God as *esse indistinctum* is foreign to His creation; on the contrary He is more present to creatures than they are to themselves. We could say that the lower levels of the soul are its ground boiled over. Ultimately, there is no getting around the ambiguous nature of the potential intellect. It is misleading to think of it having a fixed position between the sensitive faculty and the agent intellect, for, as we have seen, the potential intellect, that is to say the human, is as created or uncreated as it chooses to be.

But still, man’s created nature is not destroyed by his choosing his uncreated nature anymore than creatures are destroyed by God’s being in Himself (on the contrary they depend on it for their existence!). Thus, we must ask now what the relation is between the human soul as *ad imaginem* and its ground which is the Image of God when the former is made over into the latter.

In an illustration of the transformation into the same image Eckhart writes:

Furthermore, however many mirrors are held up to the face or appearance of a man, they are all informed by the same one face; so too every single just person is made utterly and completely just by the same justice. They are formed, informed and transformed into the same [justice]. Otherwise they would not be univocally just, nor would any just person whatsoever be truly just if justice were one thing in itself and something else in the just person.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Pierre Hadot, *The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 27.

¹¹¹ In Ion. n119. (LW 3, 104): “Praeterea, quotquot specula opponantur vultui vel faciei hominis, formantur ab eadem facie numerali: sic etiam omnes iusti et singuli ab eadem iustitia prorsus et simpliciter iusti sunt,

Of this passage Lossky insists that “[I]’expression *univoce iusti* ne doit pas nous gêner, car elle ne concerne pas le rapport des justes à la justice : il s’agit de l’univocité des justes entre eux et avec le ‘premier Juste,’ le Christ, pour autant que le Fils de Dieu s’est rendu connaturel aux hommes ayant assumé leur nature.”¹¹² Lossky is no doubt right in that, insofar as the soul receives the Image from above, it relates to the latter analogically at best. Yet, his statement that in this relation the soul becomes univocal with other souls is suggestive; it reminds us that univocal union is not between unlike principles such as active and passive¹¹³ but between equals. Sometimes, however, Eckhart does speak of the union of the soul and the Son as between like principles: “As the authorities say that only between like and like can unity be produced, so must a man be a maid and a virgin who would receive the virginal Jesus.”¹¹⁴ This movement up the psychic hierarchy is not apparently all that is meant by the transformation into the same Image. Eckhart strictly warns those who expect to find God in inwardness but not in the stable: “you are acting no differently than if you took God and wrapped up His head in a cloak and pushed Him under a bench.”¹¹⁵ After all, as we have seen the previous chapter, God’s transcendence is not achieved by withdrawing Himself, but by creating Himself. God’s nature as distinct by indistinction depends upon both His descent into otherness and the overcoming of that otherness. Our transformation into the Image of God requires us to do the same. This does not imply solely an upward movement, but a movement which is simultaneously upward

formantur, informantur et transformantur in eandem. Alioquin enim non essent univoce iusti, sed nec iustus quilibet esset vere iustus, si alia esset iustitia in se ipsa et alia in iusto.”

¹¹² Lossky, 359.

¹¹³ Or if it is, it is only insofar as there is a personal difference.

¹¹⁴ Pr. 2 (DW I, 26): “Als die meister sprechent, daz glîch und glîch aleine ein sache ist der einunge, her umbe sô muoz der mensche maget sîn, juncvrouwe, diu den megetlîchen Jêsum enpfâhen sol.”

¹¹⁵ Pr. 5b (DW I, 91): “sô tuost dû niht anders dan ob dû got naemest und wündest im einem mantel umbe daz houbet und stiezest in under einen bank.”

and downward, or rather upward because downward and vice versa. We have seen that this movement is achieved in knowing whereby the intellect distinguishes itself from itself ultimately becoming analogized in sensation. Sensation in turn serves the intellect by supplying the distinct particular from which the universal form is indistinct and therefore distinct from it. Thus we become God's Image not simply by passively waiting for His impression from above (though this is part of the process) but by actively doing what God does. Eckhart makes an analogy: "You should know that my eye has far more unity with a sheep's eye which is across the sea and which I have never seen, than it has with my ear, with which, nevertheless, it shares its being."¹¹⁶

Until the soul as knower becomes indistinct from the particular of sensation, it remains a creature, passive before God's act of creation. It is true that God is always indistinct from the creature; however, as we concluded in the previous chapter, the creature remains distinct from God despite the indistinction of the latter. This is evident by the fact that God is made *distinct* by His indistinction. However, in the present chapter we have seen how the soul, by the power of the intellect, comes to image the distinct-indistinct relationship with creatures which God enjoys. In doing so the soul enters into a new relationship with God. No longer is God made distinct by His indistinction from the soul, since the soul itself is indistinct. To express the union of the indistinct soul and the indistinct God Eckhart's rhetoric is pushed to (or perhaps beyond) the limits of orthodoxy:

The angels are many without number. They make up no particular number, for they are without number; that is because of their great simplicity. The three persons in God are three without number, but they are a multiplicity.

¹¹⁶ Pr. 48 (DW II, 417): "Ir sult daz wizen, daz mîn ouge vil mê einicheit hât mit eines schâfes ougen, daz jensît mers ist und daz ich nie gesach, dan mîn ouge habe einicheit mit mînen ôren, mit den ez doch ein ist in dem wesene;"

But between man and God there is not only no distinction, but there is also no multiplicity.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Pr. 40 (DW II, 274): “Der engel ist vil âne zal, wan sie enmachent niht ‚sunder-zal,‘ wan sie sint âne sal’ saz is von ir grôzen einvalticheit. Die drîe persônen in gote der ist drîe âne zal, aber ir ist menige. Aber zwischen dem menschen und gote enist <niht> aleine niht underscheit, sunder dâ enist ouch kein menige;”

CHAPTER 4: Activity as Indistinct

As we have just seen, God's status as distinctly indistinct has important implications for Eckhart's understanding of the nature of union. Since God does not reside only at the top of the cosmic hierarchy but is perfectly immanent throughout it, the soul's union with God does not consist in a simple movement up the hierarchy but in a movement which is simultaneously up and down. For Eckhart, it is as intellect that the human is capable of this union. By virtue of its becoming all things, intellect distinguishes itself from that which it becomes. Thus, it is the intellect alone which images God's indistinct-distinct nature.

It is not surprising that Eckhart, the Dominican, generally gives intellect priority above love. More surprising, however, are the points in Eckhart's corpus where we find an almost anti-intellectual attitude. An example comes from Pr. 83:

And you should not want to understand anything of God, for God is above all understanding. . . . If you understand anything about Him, He has nothing to do with it, and by understanding anything of Him, you are brought into misunderstanding, and from misunderstanding you are brought into brutishness.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, such passages are not ultimately in conflict with the intellectual nature of Eckhart's union, for, as we have seen, it is not by its ordinary reflective activity that the intellect is the image of God, but by its infinite freedom, to which the power of reflection points. In the short treatise *On the Nobel Man*, Eckhart maintains that our blessedness is nothing other than to know God, and "not to know that we know God."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Pr. 83 (DW III, 442,443): "Dú solt och nit verstand von gotte, wand got ist uber allis verstan. . . . verstant dú nú iht von ime, des en ist er nit, vnde mit dem, so dú iht von ime verstant, so kumest <dú> in ein unverstandenheit, und von der unverstandenheit kúmeest dú in ein vihelicheit. . . ."

¹¹⁹ VeM (DW V, 117): "nicht: bekennen, daz man got bekennet."

More problematic for our reading are the passages in which the Dominican places special dignity on practical activity. The *Talks of Instruction*, for example, clearly states that the external work is preferred to a rapturous state, which renders the soul's faculties inactive, and that the co-existence of inner and outer works is preferable to only the former.¹²⁰ This same message is expanded and radicalized in the notorious Pr. 86 in which Eckhart exalts the active Martha over the passive Mary from the Gospel story of Luke 10. This unexpected turn to the practical is not without suspicion in Eckhartian scholarship. Despite the similarities between Pr. 86 and the *Talks*, Günter Stachel finds Eckhart's favourable treatment of external works in the sermon incompatible with the teachings of the established corpus and for this reason, among others, denies its authenticity.¹²¹ However, we need not restrict ourselves to the *Talks of Instruction* to shed light on Pr. 86. At various points in the Latin works Eckhart not only upholds the ethical as a philosophical discipline, but also goes so far as to identify ethics (and at times physics) with metaphysics, that is the study of being *qua* being.¹²² This collapse of metaphysics into the natural and practical realms has important implications for such Eckhartian motifs as detaching (*abegescheidenheit*, *gelâzenheit*, etc.) and life without a why (*âne/sunder war umbe*). These two themes, understood ethically, demonstrate the apparent contradiction between Eckhart's emphasis on the intellect as the image of God, on the one hand, and the precedence of the active life, on the other.

Thus, we shall proceed in this chapter first by considering the unity of metaphysics and ethics. In the second part we shall consider Martha and the role of

¹²⁰ RdU 23 (DW V, 290-309).

¹²¹ Stachel, 396.

¹²² In Ion. nn. 185, 361, 441, 486, 509; Ser. Aug. n. 2.

activity in time. And in the third part we shall consider the meaning of detachment and its compatibility with the active life in Eckhart's ethical philosophy.

4.1 Theology and Ethics

Eckhart's identity between metaphysics and ethics is anticipated by a prior identity between philosophy, that is what natural reason can uncover, and theology, or the revealed truth of scripture. Unlike Aquinas, for whom sacred scripture reveals truths otherwise inaccessible to human reason, such as the incarnation,¹²³ Eckhart's confidence in the ability of natural reason to penetrate the most obscure Christian doctrines seems never to waver. Eckhart also consciously distinguishes himself from the Augustinian position maintained in *Confessions* VII that the Platonists had no understanding of the incarnation. Against this Eckhart argues that "universally and naturally in every work of nature and art the word is made flesh and it dwells in those things which are made or in which word becomes flesh."¹²⁴ What the pagan philosophers could not have known for Aquinas, and should have known for Augustine, they did know for Eckhart, and they knew it by natural reason.¹²⁵ As he puts it elsewhere:

[T]he sacred scriptures can certainly be so expounded, such that they are in agreement in themselves with the things which the philosophers have written about the things of nature and about their properties, especially since everything that is true, proceeds from one fount of truth and one root of truth.¹²⁶

¹²³ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, i.

¹²⁴ In Ioh. n. 125 (LW III, 108): "universaliter et naturaliter in omni opera naturae et artis verbum caro fit et habitat in illis quae fiunt sive in quibus verbum caro fit."

¹²⁵ Though Eckhart does call Plato a priest (*pfaffe*) in Pr. 28 (DW II, 67).

¹²⁶ In Ion. n. 185 (LW III, 154-55): "convenienter valde scriptura sacra sic exponitur, ut in ipsa sint consona, quae philosophi de rerum naturis et ipsarum proprietatibus scripserunt, praesertim cum ex uno fonte et una radice procedat veritatis omne quod verum est"

This is not to say that there is not, for Eckhart, a variety of modes of knowing. Though “Moses, Christ and the Philosopher teach the same thing,” they do differ *quantum ad modum*, “that is to say as credible, as probable or having the appearance of truth, and as truth.”¹²⁷ This kind of reasoning is typical of the German Dominican. As we have seen above, Eckhart is very strict in his insistence that there is a single source of *esse* and therefore a single *esse*, but this does not mean that all creatures are the same, only that they are the same insofar as they are in *esse*. Likewise, Christ who is the Truth has a different mode of knowing/teaching than Aristotle; but, insofar as Aristotle’s philosophy is true, it is indistinct from the Truth itself. In other words, all lower forms of knowing relate to the highest form of knowing analogically in the extrinsic, Eckhartian sense. It is for this reason that Eckhart can achieve a philosophical exegesis of the prologue of John.

This has further ramifications. If there is but one *intelligere* for all modes of knowing, not only can natural reason be applied to the highest things, but also revealed wisdom can be applied to natural things. Though the self-professed purpose of Eckhart’s *Commentary on John* is “to explain what the holy Christian faith and both of the Testaments assert through the natural reason of the philosophers,”¹²⁸ we find him just as often explaining natural phenomena through Holy Scripture. Thus, the evidence of the doctrine of the incarnation, which Eckhart finds in the Platonists, is found in natural and ethical phenomena.¹²⁹ Scripture has no single meaning for the Meister but “contains and beckons to mysteries, teaches the natures of things, and instructs and composes moral

¹²⁷ Ibid. (LW III, 155): “Idem ergo est quod docet Moyses, Christus et philosophus, solum quantum ad modum differens, scilicet ut credibile, probabile sive verisimile et veritas.”

¹²⁸ Ibid. n. 2 (LW III, 4): “ea quae sacra asserit fides christiana et utriusque testamenti scriptura, exponere per rationes naturales philosophorum.”

¹²⁹ In Ion. n. 125.

matters.”¹³⁰ In other words, the unity of *intellegere* holds with respect to content as well as it does to form, to truth as well as to cognition.

In this way we can begin to understand the identity of theology, on the one hand, and ethics and physics, on the other. The theologian is at once a metaphysician and ethicist because what is true of being *qua* being is analogically true of being *hoc et hoc*.¹³¹ However, since the identity between the two sciences is analogous, it is only an identity from one point of view. Since being *qua* being is indistinct from being *hoc et hoc* but not vice versa, the same can be said of the sciences which apply to them.

There is another point of contention. Thus far we have only been speaking of an identity between philosophical disciplines and not practices. Nevertheless there are times when Eckhart, like Socrates, seems to remove the difference between virtue and knowledge. In the previous chapter, we saw that Eckhart illustrates the inter-trinitarian relationship of Father and Son with the example of an artisan and his art; but how literally are we to take this comparison? I suggest that we have reason to take it quite literally. As was demonstrated above, the human, having been made *ad imaginem dei*, has the potential to overcome finite being and knowing and enter into a new univocal relationship with God between like and like. Thus, we shall have to consider the possibility of an identity between theology and ethics, the science of God and the science of man,¹³² which exceeds an analogous relationship.

We said in the last chapter that for Eckhart the ground of the soul is the essence of the soul, that the soul is self-caused. The “psychic-hierarchy” described in the *Book of*

¹³⁰ In Ex. n. 211 (LW II): “tenet et innuit mysteria, docet etiam rerum naturas, mores instruit et componit.”

¹³¹ Here I am assuming the simple understanding of physics as the study of being in motion and ethics as study of practical activity. Since both sciences deal with changing phenomena, I say their subject is particular being (*esse hoc et hoc*).

¹³² That is, man in the practical realm. Of course, as we have seen, there are other ways of understanding man. Below we shall see how the practical and intellectual lives of man coincide.

Parables of Genesis does not consist of distinct cognitive entities, but a single, boundless cognition mediated to itself in different forms. Both the univocal relationship between God and intellect, and the analogous one between intellect and sensation, consist in a formal mode of causality. Even at the level of sensation, essence and ground are the same. Thus, the more perfectly sensation receives the power of intellect the more it becomes what it is. This is in fact the primary teaching of *In Gen.II* 135-165 and the exegetical meaning of Gen. 3:1: “Now the serpent was the most subtle of all the creatures.” Man’s sensitive faculties are more powerful than any other animal on account of their close union with the intellect. Eckhart gives a moral example explaining that “pleasure in food and drink and such things is not less in a sober and moderate man than in one who is a glutton and an immoderate man.”¹³³ The more intellectual, the more sensitive.

For Eckhart, there is no way to “shut down” the senses as it were. They have no existence apart from their operation: “to become or to be created or to be produced by God, are the very same as to hear Him commanding and to obey.”¹³⁴ Eckhart gives an example from the natural order:

when bringing some thing, such as fire, into being, God, by the very fact that He makes it fire, commands it to heat, speaks that it should heat, and teaches it to heat, to move upward, to rest there and all other things agreeable and appropriate to the form of fire, and He neither commands nor consults nor works anything else through it or it in at all. Indeed He prohibits and dissuades fire of nothing except that which is discordant and foreign to fire’s form; and it is the same with other things.¹³⁵

¹³³ In Gen.II n. 155 (LW I, 626): “delectatio in cibo, potu et huiusmodi non est minor in sobrio et continente quam in guloso et incontinente”

¹³⁴ In Gen.II n. 160 (LW I, 631): “feri sive creari aut produci a deo, item ipsum audire praecipientem et oboedire”

¹³⁵ In Gen.II n. 160 (LW I, 630-31): “deus producendo rem in esse, puta ignem, hoc ipso, quod ipsam facit ignem, praecipit ei calefacere et dicit ipsi quod calefaciat et docet ipsum calefacere, sursum moveri et sursum quiescere et omnia consona et convenientia ad formam ignis, et nihil aliud prorsus ipsi praecipit neque consulit neque operator per ipsum aut in ipso. Rursus etiam nihil prohibet, nihil dissuadet ipsi igni nisi dissona et aliena formae ignis, et sic de aliis.”

The identity of creation and command or being and nature suggests that God's command cannot but be obeyed. This obedience, however, does not seem to necessarily imply a translation into an external act, for a thing's inner nature can be suppressed from the outside. Eckhart gives the example of a stone, the nature of which is to fall to the ground. One can prevent this nature from being fulfilled by forcibly holding the stone up high. However, the stone's natural tendency to fall is never for a moment weakened.¹³⁶ Likewise, the senses can never truly be prevented from performing their natural functions: an eye which is shut *sees nothing* but it does not *not see*. The inner nature and the outer manifestation form a unity, but a unity in which the latter radically depends on the former but not vice versa; that is to say they are analogous.

Sensation, then, acts as a border between the internal and external realms; its power is internal but its object is external. However, it would be misleading to imagine that the external object is simply given for the sensitive faculties. Eckhart uses the Boethian principle,¹³⁷ that what is received is received according to the mode of the receiver, in two ways. On the one hand, Eckhart applies the principle to the creation insofar as the unity of Intellect is broken upon entering into existence. By this model we would seem to have particular beings standing by ready to be perceived. On the other hand, as was stressed in chapter one, Eckhart employs the same principle to show the inverse, namely that the divine and absolute Being is divided by Intellect into multiple and particular modes. According to this model, perception is not a passive event but a creative one. In the section we have been working with from the *Book of Parables of Genesis*, which deals with the various modes of cognition, it seems that it is the latter model of creation which is being

¹³⁶ In Gen.II n. 162 (LW I, 632).

¹³⁷ See the *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5p4, 75-77.

emphasised here. Eckhart's example of this principle, apparently adapted from Boethius'

Consolation,¹³⁸ confirms this:

For example, any sensible body communicates all that it is to each of the senses; but the eye perceives it only under the aspect of colour or what is coloured....Likewise, a visible body, though it speaks to the soul's other powers and their organs, is yet utterly silent to the ear, for it does not respond to the body according to colour, but hears and perceives it according to sound.¹³⁹

The sensitive faculty does not simply have an external object, but, by grasping as particular that which the intellect knows as universal, its effect is the external as such. Since the sensitive faculty is compelled to fulfill its proper operations by its very union with the intellect, there can be no tension between the inner life and the outer life. In fact, the more one emphasizes the internal life, the more the external is reinforced. Therefore, any event which manifests itself internally does so externally as well. This is what the French phenomenologist Michel Henry calls the duplicity of appearance.¹⁴⁰ According to the notion of the duplicity of appearance, Eckhart is able to seamlessly shift his conversation in the BPG from the relation of the levels of soul to the relation of the inner and outer acts, from psychology to ethics.

In his ethical inquiries, Eckhart's emphasis is not on the moral rightness of any particular action, but on the very possibility of external activity as such:

This is why evil never totally corrupts the good or extinguishes it or causes it to be silent. ... It in no way lessens the inclination, ability, relation, order and appetite toward the good, which is rooted in the subject's nature, through some subtraction or diminution that does not seek after and incline toward

¹³⁸ Ibid. 5p4, 78-82.

¹³⁹ In Gen.II n. 152 (LW I, 621-22): "Sic exempli causa corpus aliquod sensibile omne id quod est <loquitur> omnibus sensitivis; sed ipsum sub ratione colorati sive soloris percipit solum oculus et videndo respondet et colloquitur corpori visibili. ... Eodem autem modo corpus visibile quamvis loquatur et aliis potentiis animae et earum organis, auris tamen muta est prorsus et non respondet corpori in ratione qua coloratum est, audit vero et percipit ipsum sub ratione qua sonorum est..."

¹⁴⁰ Michel Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 194.

form. The reason is that the contrary and corrupting appetite has a common root and is one with the inclination itself.”¹⁴¹

Like any other nature, human nature cannot be destroyed. Eckhart accepts the full implications of this statement by making disobedience to nature a kind of obedience insofar as it comes from the same source, namely the interior act.

Although the inner life must manifest itself on the outside, we should not imagine a strict identity between the two. Eckhart is clear about this: “God does not properly command an exterior act, because it can be impeded.”¹⁴² However, the exterior act is the necessary result of the interior act. As he puts in the *Book of Divine Consolation*:

[the external work] has its divine goodness by means of the inner work fulfilled and poured into it in a descent from the Godhead which is clothed in distinction, in quantity, in part, all of these, and their like, and even likeness itself, are far from God and foreign to Him.¹⁴³

Here God’s act of creation is compared directly to practical activity.

In this way there seems to be the possibility of an identity between metaphysics and ethics, not simply as philosophical disciplines, but as actual practices as well, i.e. that doing metaphysics implies real practical activity and not just thinking about the latter. The fact that the soul as agent is untouched by externality allows us to consider the further possibility of a relationship between theoretical and practical activity even surpassing analogy. With this in mind let us turn to Eckhart’s most explicit praise of the active life, German sermon 86.

¹⁴¹ In Gen.II n. 163 (LW I, 633): “Hinc est quod malum nunquam corrumpit totaliter bonum neque exstinguit neque obmutescere facit. ... inclinationem vero sive habilitatem, respectum, ordinem et appetitum ad bonum, radicatam in natura subjecti, in nullo minuit per aliquam subtractionem aut diminutionem, quominus appetat et inclinet ad formam. Ratio est, quia ipsam radicem huius appetitus contrarium corrumpens habet commune et unam numero cum ipsa inclinatione;”

¹⁴² In Gen.II n. 165 (LW I, 634): “deus non praecipit proprie actum exteriorem, cum ille possit impediri.”

¹⁴³ BgT, 2 (DW V, 41): “...ez nimet sine götliche güete mittels des innigen werkes, ûzgetragen und ûzgezogen in einem nidervalle der gekleideten gotheit mit unterscheide, mit menge, mit teile, daz allez und em glîch und ouch glîchnisse selbe gote cerre und vremde sint.”

4.2 Martha and the Exterior Act

There are, to my mind, very clear connections between Eckhart's exegesis of Gen. 3:1 in *In Gen. II* and the often-thought dubious Pr. 86. In this section it will be argued that the way of life exemplified in the figure of Martha does not problematize the interpretation of Eckhart, but, on the contrary, is the fulfillment of his most fundamental themes such as the dynamic relation of Creator and creatures, the univocal union of God and the soul, and the non-duality of inner and outer act, all of which are laid out in his Latin works.

Part of the difficulty of interpreting Pr. 86 lies in the long history of interpretation of the Biblical text which it uses. The Gospel story of Mary and Martha from the tenth chapter of Luke has long been used as an allegory for the ordering of the contemplative and charitable aspects of the Christian life: Martha, who is busy about her housework, representing the latter, and Mary, who sits at the feet of Christ enthralled with his words, the former. As the story goes, Martha asks Jesus to order her seated sister to get up and help, to which he replies, "Martha, Martha, you are busy about many things, but Mary has chosen the better part which will never be taken from her." Christ's response would seem to confirm the Aristotelian ranking of *theoria* over *praxis*. Whether this ranking is to be seen as absolute, or whether activity is to be salvaged so long as humanity remains in its fallen state, is for the theologian to decide. But the notion that Mary and Martha represent distinct forms of the spiritual life which are opposed to one another is generally assumed. Obviously, Eckhart is aware of this traditional interpretation, but it would be an error to

assume that he shares it. As Dietmar Mieth argues,¹⁴⁴ though Eckhart does at times assume a dichotomy between act and contemplation, this dichotomy is one which is given to him and is not his own. Eckhart's own position—and the lesson of the sermon—is not only that there is no essential opposition between the internal and external lives, but rather that they are one.

Eckhart breaks from the standard interpretation of the two sisters from the very beginning of the sermon. He does *not*, like his predecessors, assign the contemplative life to Mary, whom he describes as “longing for she knew not what”¹⁴⁵ and basking in “sweet consolation and pleasure.”¹⁴⁶ Mary is not so much intellectual as she is emotional. Rather, it is Martha, to whom he attributes “a well exercised ground” (*wol geüebeter grunt*) and “wise understanding” (*wîsiu verstanntnisse*)¹⁴⁷, who seems the more intellectual of the two. But neither has the Meister simply reversed the sisters' traditional roles. Martha is indeed the active one as well. What is characteristic of Martha is the link between experience and ground, understanding and action. This coexistence of the inner and outer act is in keeping with what we have seen above. Mary, on the other hand, seems to possess neither of these virtues.

The opposition between Mary and Martha set up by Eckhart is not between contemplation and activity but between, what he calls a little later, mental satisfaction, which apparently implies activity, and the satisfaction of the senses. Once again the meaning of this opposition is not immediately transparent. Sensitive satisfaction is characterized by pleasure (*lust*). It is difficult to understand just what the Meister means

¹⁴⁴ Dietmar Mieth, *Die Einheit von Vita Activa und Vita Passiva in den deutschen Predigten und Traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1969), 198.

¹⁴⁵ Pr. 86 (DW III, 481): “si begerte, si enwiste wes.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid: “süezer trôst und lust.”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

by *lust* in this context, but it is clear that he does not restrict its meaning to corporeal pleasure. Later Eckhart pairs *lust* with light (*lieht*) and the rapturous union of St. Paul described in 2 Corinthians (12:2-6). Consistent in all cases of *lust*, however, is the subject's being affected. Eckhart's concern is the possibility that, in the pleasurable experience of being affected, the subject might forget the impassable something in the soul which allows for its being affected in the first place. Eckhart calls this to drown in pleasure (*ertrinke in dem luste*).¹⁴⁸

Opposed to this experience is mental satisfaction in which "the joys and sorrows of creatures are not able to pull the highest point of the soul down."¹⁴⁹ "Mental" (here *redeliche*), when used in such an elevated sense, does not, of course, refer to representational thinking but to that which in the intellect is none of the things which it thinks. Mental satisfaction lies in not being affected. This impassability, however, does not imply *stasis*. On the contrary, Eckhart associates it with Life.

Life knows better than pleasure or light what one can receive in this life under God, and in some ways life gives us a clearer knowledge than eternal light can give. Eternal light gives us knowledge of self and God, but not self apart from God; but life gives knowledge of self apart from God. Seeing oneself alone makes it easier to tell what is like or unlike.¹⁵⁰

The basic meaning of this passage is not difficult to understand. In experiencing pleasures we are less self-aware than when we set about to accomplish some external task, which can be impeded, for the latter always begins with an initial gap between the will and real circumstances. The difficulty of the passage lies in the question of why Eckhart is now upholding self-consciousness as something valuable, when in the *Noble Man* he argued

¹⁴⁸ Pr. 86 (DW III, 482).

¹⁴⁹ Ibid: "liep und leit der créature daz oberste wipfelîn niht geneigen enmac her abe."

¹⁵⁰ Pr. 86 (DW, 483,483): "Leben bekennet baz dan lust oder lieht allez, daz man in disem lîbe under gote enpfâhen mac, und etliche wîs bekennet leben lûterer, dan êwic lieht gegeben mûge. Êwic lieht gibet ze erkenne sich selber ûnd got, aber niht sich selber âne got; aber leben gibet ze erkenne sich selber âne got. Dâ ez sich selber aleine sihet, dâ market ez baz daz, waz glîch oder unglîch ist."

the opposite. This problem becomes clearer in the light of our discussion of union in the previous chapter.

In the *Book of Parables of Genesis*, Eckhart describes the analogical participation of lower in higher terms in a natural order as both light and pleasure.¹⁵¹ Since the inferior is by definition nothing in itself—and this is why the experience is so pleasurable—it has in this union no knowledge of itself apart from its superior. This is the soul in rapture, represented by Mary, which is united to God as passive to active, matter to form. The superior or agent, however, which we are here calling living, does not forget itself in this union, but rather it discovers itself as existing independently from its inferior: knowing the accident as accident uncovers the substance. In this way, Martha, as the formal principle of her external act, uncovers her separate existence from latter, just as God uncovers His separate existence from creatures in His very act of creation. Thus, the self, the knowledge of which Eckhart here esteems, is not the created empirical self, as Mieth thinks,¹⁵² but rather the uncreated ground of the soul. Eckhart said in his Defense that “everything which acts or begets, to the extent that it is acting or begetting, is engendered, neither made nor created.”¹⁵³ Eckhart is not, then, compromising what he said in the *Noble Man*; it is only that he calls the uncreated ground “God” there and “self” here, as he is prone to do on account of his theory of the *imago*.

In the *Noble Man* the internal produces the external, while in Pr. 86 the external points to the internal. Both moments are necessary since each reinforces the other. This is the basis for Eckhart’s discussion of the two kinds of means (*mittel*), and the double

¹⁵¹ In Gen.II n. 139, 141.

¹⁵² Mieth, 199.

¹⁵³ Proc.Col.I n. 84 (LW V, 278): “omne agens in quantum agens sive gignens est ingenitum, non factum nec creatum”

perfection of Martha signified by Christ's repetition of her name (Luke 10:41). "One [kind of means], without which I cannot come into God, is work and activity in time, and this does not diminish eternal happiness.... The other means is to be free of that."¹⁵⁴ That external activity mediates man to God does not imply that it is higher than soul on the cosmic hierarchy. Rather, like the senses in Eckhart's exegesis of Gen. 3:1, the external act mediates from below. Mediation from below is achieved in a negative fashion, by being unlike: "day implies night. If there were no night, there would not be day nor would one speak of it."¹⁵⁵ Thus, Eckhart is not pitting against each other two ways to God, the active and the contemplative; he is calling for a single way which makes use of two means: activity and contemplation.

The Meister cautions against ways which employ only one means. The first of these "is to seek God in all creatures with countless works and with flaming love."¹⁵⁶ Eckhart says nothing really about this way, but it is clear that to seek God in creatures is to forget that the latter are nothing in themselves, it is to use creatures "positively" as if they stood between the soul and God. On this way the soul is not free of creatures. The second is described as a "way without way, free yet bound, where one is without will or image, raised high and moved far above self and all things."¹⁵⁷ We might call this the negative way, which makes no use of creatures and ends in quiet rapture. Eckhart acknowledges such states apparently because they are recorded in the scriptures; however, his attitude toward them is skeptical: "Now our good people say that one should

¹⁵⁴ Pr. 86 (DW III, 485): "Einez ist, âne daz ich in got niht komen enmac: daz ist werk und gewerbe in der zît, und daz enminnert niht êwige saelde.... Da zander mittel daz ist: blôz sîn des selben."

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.: "tac bewiset naht. Enwaere kein naht, sô enwaere und hieze ez ouch niht tac, wan ez waere allez êin lieht"

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. (DW III, 486): "mit manicvaltigem gewerbe, mit brinnender minne in allen creature got suochen."

¹⁵⁷ Pr. 86 (DW III, 486): "wec âne wec, vrî und doch gebunden, erhaben und gezucket vil nâch über sich und alliu dinc âne willen und âne bilde"

become so perfect that no pleasure can move us and that one be untouched by pleasure or pain. They are wrong in this. I say that a saint can never become so great that he cannot be moved.”¹⁵⁸ One reason for this is that the negative way, “does not stand firmly on its own.”¹⁵⁹ This statement is reminiscent of Augustine’s experiences of union before his conversion to Christianity as described in the *Confessions*.¹⁶⁰ However, while fleetingness of union signifies inadequacy of mediation for Augustine, it signifies a problem with the final state for Eckhart. It is true that intellectual union with God should reinforce the operation of the senses, but so should the operation of the senses reinforce union. Eckhart’s philosophy does not allow for a spiritual life which involves a sequential rising and falling between two mutually exclusive mental states. To set as one’s goal a state which is opposed to ordinary experience would be, in Mieth’s words, to will a “solidification against the dynamic of the Christian life.”¹⁶¹ For Eckhart, vision of God seems always to be accompanied by an awareness of one’s own particular circumstances. Thus, as if as an alternative to the enraptured Paul, Eckhart offers the image of the suffering Christ who was deeply moved by suffering, not despite, but “due to the nobility of his nature and the holy union of his divine and human nature.”¹⁶²

Using only one means fails to grasp God in His “ownness” (*sînesheit*). Grasping God in His *sînesheit* is for Eckhart not so much a way or path as a being-at-home (*heime*). In identifying *wec* and *heime*, Eckhart overcomes the exclusivity inherent in the spatial metaphor (i.e. a path from something as well as to something). Though union with God

¹⁵⁸ Pr. 86 (DW III, 490): “Nû sprechent unser guoten liute, man sül alsô colkomen warden, daz un skein liep bewegen müge und daz man unberüerlich sî von liebe und von leide. Sie tuont im unrehte. Lich spriche, daz heilige sô grôz nie enwart, er enmöhete beweget warden.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid: “swie aleine ez doch weseliche niht enstâ.”

¹⁶⁰ *Confessions*. VII, 17.

¹⁶¹ Meith, 191: “*Verfestigungen gegen die Dynamik des christlichen Lebens*.”

¹⁶² Pr. 86 (DW III, 490): “von adel sîner natûre und von der heiligen vereinunge götlicher und menschlicher natûre.”

does not mean being oblivious to ordinary experience, neither does it entail finding God in creatures. Rather, creatures are “outside this way bordering it and mediating.”¹⁶³ To mediate from outside, as we just saw, is to do so negatively, that is to show where God is not. This is the path Martha takes, for she “stand[s] among things, but they do not reside in [her].”¹⁶⁴

The third path involves a proper use of both means, that is to say it uses creatures and is free of them. This way is the way of action since it is action, at the sensitive level, which is responsible for creatures as creatures. If Eckhart left his argument here, however, it seems we would be left with two problems: 1) If the creature is necessary only in a negative way, it would seem that Eckhart’s union never overcomes a dualism of two different, if complementary, terms; 2) Eckhart often speaks out against activity, on both divine and human levels, as opposed to a more blessed and hidden state, detachment. Thus, we will now consider detachment to see, first, if it poses any threat to the active life, and, second, if it will shed any light on the necessary difference between the internal and external.

4.3 Practical Union

Eckhart usually uses *abgescheidenheit* (cutting away), *gelazeneheit* (letting be), etc. in the ethical sense of poverty, with the qualification, however, that, while he does not discourage physical poverty, Eckhart is primarily concerned with poverty of the spirit. Though Eckhart does not use the word *abegescheidenheit* there, the best place to look for a discussion of spiritual poverty is Pr. 52, which preaches from Mathew 5:3, “blessed are

¹⁶³ Pr. 86 (DW III, 487-88): “Ûzerhalp disem wege umberingent und vermittelnt alle creature.”

¹⁶⁴ Pr. 86 (DW III, 485): “dû stâst bî den gingen, und diu dinc enstânt niht in dir;”

the poor in spirit.” Here Eckhart famously declares that to be truly poor in spirit is to “want nothing, know nothing and have nothing.”¹⁶⁵ The point of such poverty is not to clear a space in the soul in which God can work, but to take leave of the finite self as such. “Poverty of spirit is for one to be so free of God and of all His works that, if God wishes to work in the soul, He Himself must be the place where He works.”¹⁶⁶ Crucially, this overcoming of the self does not compromise the soul’s operation. De Libera has argued that Eckhart’s language of knowing nothing is not a criticism of theological knowledge as such, but is made “en réponse à l’insuffisante théologie de la vision bienheureuse proposée... par les tenants parisiens de la ‘vision réfléchie.’”¹⁶⁷ Eckhart maintains that our blessedness consists neither in knowing nor in loving, but in that something in the soul “from which *knowing and loving flow*.”¹⁶⁸ The proper activity of the soul is not our blessedness, but it is the result of our blessedness. Thus, despite the Meister’s rhetoric, there is for Eckhart no real tension between knowing nothing and knowing something. On the contrary, reflexive knowing is only possible against the background of the learned ignorance entailed in spiritual poverty.

Likewise, there are many passages in Eckhart which seem to speak directly against the value of external activity which the Dominican upholds in Pr. 86. Thus, Günter Stachel has argued that “the turning toward works and virtues in Pr. 86 stands against the teachings of Eckhart otherwise portrayed in the German Works.”¹⁶⁹ As evidence he cites Pr. 1 in which the Meister compares people who perform acts of piety to

¹⁶⁵ Pr. 52 (DW II, 488): “niht enwil und niht enweiz und niht enhât.”

¹⁶⁶ Pr. 52 (DW II, 500): “wan daz ist diu armuot des geistes, daz er alsô ledic stâ gotes und aller sîner werke, welle got wûrken in der sêle, daz er selbe sî diu stat, dar inne er wûrken wil”

¹⁶⁷ Alain de Libera, *Maître Eckhart et la Mystique Rhenane* (Paris: cerf, 2010), 26.

¹⁶⁸ Pr. 52 (DW II, 496): “von dem vliuzet bekennen und minnen.” My italics.

¹⁶⁹ Stachel, 396: “Die Einstellung von Pr. 86 zu Werken und Tugenden steht gegen die in DW sonst vertretene Lehre Eckharts.”

those merchants doing business in the temple in Matt. 21. “Look! All those people are businessmen who guard against grave sins and would like to be good people and do their good works in honor of God, such as fasting, vigils, praying, and whatever other good works are.”¹⁷⁰ However, it is clear that what Eckhart disapproves of in such people is not their work itself but the motive for their work, namely “so that our Lord might give them something in return.”¹⁷¹ The irony of this, as Eckhart is quick to point out, is that such people “are not giving what belongs to them, nor are their works their own.”¹⁷² The point being made in Pr. 1, then, is the same as in Pr. 52: Michael Sells puts it well: “The rejection of ‘human’ work is not a rejection of activity, but of the identification of the agent with the ego-self.”¹⁷³ Spiritual poverty does not necessarily mean that one’s external life become observably different, only that the true source of that life be uncovered.

Detachment is not merely a means or technique toward finding God. In the treatise of the same name¹⁷⁴ Eckhart describes *abgescheidenheit* not only as the highest human virtue but the very nature of God. As a human virtue detachment is ranked higher than love, for “the best thing about love is that it forces me to love God, but detachment forces God to love me.”¹⁷⁵ This is not to say, of course, that the soul possesses some power over God, but, in keeping with the teaching of Pr. 52, that in overcoming the finite self the infinite ground of the self is discovered. Eckhart makes clear that God’s detachment is

¹⁷⁰ Pr. 1 (DW I, 7): “Sehet, diz sint allez koufliute, die sich huetent vor groen sünden und waeren gerne guote liute und tuont ir guoten werk gote ze êren, als vasten, wachen, beten und swaz des ist, aller hande guotiu werk”

¹⁷¹ Ibid: “und tuont sie doch dar umbe, daz in unser here etwaz dar umbe gebe”

¹⁷² Pr. 1 (DW I, 8): “sie engebent von dem irn niht, sie enwürkent ouch von in selber niht”

¹⁷³ Michael Sells. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 193.

¹⁷⁴ Vab (DW V, 400-437).

¹⁷⁵ Vab (DW V, 402): “daz beste, daz an der mine ist, daz ist, daz si mich twinget, daz ich got mine, sô twinget abegescheidenheit got, daz er mich twinge ze gote.”

completely unmoved by any good work in time; but more importantly, God's detachment is also unaffected by His own activity:

Now you should know that God has stood in this unmoved detachment from eternity, and He still remains so; and you should also know that when God created heaven and earth and all creatures, that affected His unmoved detachment as little as if no creature had ever been made.¹⁷⁶

Though Eckhart unites the impassable and the active in the figure of Martha, we can see here that he nonetheless recognizes a tension between the two. God must act in such a way as not to suffer even Himself. Accordingly, Eckhart will at times sharply distinguish between the divine Persons, who act, and the Godhead, which does not: "God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth."¹⁷⁷ But if the Godhead does nothing, in what sense can it be called the principle of everything subsequent?

To best approach this question we must admit that Eckhart does not always speak of the difference between God and Godhead so absolutely. Perhaps the best description of the complex relationship between essence and persons in Eckhart's writings can be found in Pr. 10: "Distinction comes from the Unity, that is the distinction in the Trinity. The Unity is the distinction and distinction is the Unity. The more the distinction, the greater the Unity, for that is distinction without distinction."¹⁷⁸ In this passage Eckhart does not describe the opposed terms distinction and unity as conflicting but mutually reinforcing one another. Here we get the same problem of duality but in more absolute terms, and so we must examine it more closely.

¹⁷⁶ Vab (DW V, 413): "Nû solt dû wizen, daz got in dirre unbewegelichen abegescheidenheit ist êwelten gestanden und noch stât, und solt wizen: dô got himelrîche und ertrîche beschuof und alle crêatûre, daz gienc sîne unbeqegeliche abegescheidenheit als wênic ane, als ob nie crêatûre geschaffen waere."

¹⁷⁷ Pr. 109. Translation by Walshe, p. 293.

¹⁷⁸ Pr. 10 (DW I, 173): "der underscheit kumet von der einicheit, der underscheit in der drîvalticheit. Diu einicheit ist der underscheit, und der underscheit ist diu einicheit. Ie der underscheit mêr ist, ie diu einicheit mêr ist, wan daz ist underscheit âne underscheit."

Unity is the principle of distinction not by having any distinction within it, but by being the indistinct nothing against which a distinct something can appear. In other words, the Godhead does not actively cause the Persons but is the precondition for their causing themselves, simply by being other. Or better yet, since otherness is characteristic of the Persons, the otherness of the Godhead in fact lies in being the same. Thus, as McGinn points out, “the dialectical relation between oneness and threeness in God is isomorphically similar to the transcendent-immanent relation of God to creatures.”¹⁷⁹ The Godhead’s impassibility does not imply that it is isolated from the Persons, but rather that it is perfectly immanent in what has taken the first step in self-othering, i.e. a univocal relationship. Further, since, as we saw above, the difference between Father and Son is the exemplar for the *ebullitio* of creation, we can say that the inactive and impassible Godhead is the principle of all subsequent difference.

By “all subsequent difference” we must also include, of course, the difference implied in the intellectual and practical activity of man. This is why ethical detachment does not imply a new way of acting, but a new attitude toward our actions, namely one of non-possessiveness. The detached soul understands that the acting subject or ego is not the ultimate cause of its activity, but is in fact the result of a prior moment of absolute unity. This absolute unity, then, is the ground of the soul insofar as the soul acts, but it is also God’s ground insofar as God acts: “God’s ground is my ground and my ground is God’s ground.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, we must not think of ethical detachment as a means towards the end of metaphysical detachment as if the two were different. There is only one

¹⁷⁹ Bernard McGinn, introduction to *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981), 37.

¹⁸⁰ Pr. 5b (DW I, 90): “ist gotes grunt mîn grunt und mîn grunt gotes grunt.”

detachment, for there is only one Unity. Any overcoming of self-relation, whether by God or some intellectual creature, achieves the same blessed state.

We have considered in this chapter the unity of the metaphysical and the ethical under two broad themes, activity and detachment. Though these two modes of union with God would seem to be contradictory, it should be clear by now that they are not only compatible but interdependent. Under the rubric of detachment, Eckhart describes the indistinct unity which allows for the distinction involved in activity. Under the rubric of Life, Eckhart describes how activity in turn points to its indistinct ground by its own deficiency. Both Life and detachment are expressions of the *difference* between ground and relation: $A = A$ because $A \neq B$. However, Eckhart does not wish to leave this difference unresolved.

We have said that the difference between ground and relation is in fact the difference between sameness and difference as such. Thus, while relation does differ from ground, ground does not differ from relation, or it differs precisely by not differing: it is distinct by its indistinction. $A = A$ because $A = B$. Accordingly we must not consider the movement from detachment to Life or life to detachment sequentially, or even as complementary, but as unity. Since God's flowing out *is* His flowing in, and my ground is God's ground, so should the soul's flowing out be its flowing in. But how does Eckhart express this unity of *exitus* and *reditus* ethically?

Detachment and Activity are united in Eckhart's theme of living without a why. Living without a why (*âne/sunder war umbe*) stands in opposition to activity towards a specific goal. This includes even the loftiest goals such as union with God, insofar as God is understood as something external: Eckhart warns, "For whoever seeks God in ways

finds ways and loses God, who is hidden in ways.”¹⁸¹ According to Eckhart’s teaching of the common ground, Life seeks nothing outside of itself: “If anyone asked life for a thousand years: ‘Why do you live?’, if it could answer, life would say nothing but: ‘I live because I live.’”¹⁸² However, described thus, living without a why does not encapsulate perfect detachment. That life is at once means and end suggests self-relation. Eckhart seems to be aware of this problem in another sermon: “‘Why do you love God?’—‘I do not know, because of God.’—‘Why do you love the truth?’—‘Because of the truth.’—‘Why do you love justice?’—‘Because of justice.’—‘Why do you love goodness?’—‘Because of goodness.’—‘Why do you live?’—‘Indeed, I do not know! But I like to live.’”¹⁸³ Reiner Schürmann correctly points out that “the last of these questions actually remains unanswered.” He continues, “Instead of an answer, a response is given. An answer exhibits some knowledge, but a response involves the entire human being. To the question, ‘Why do you live?’ one can only correspond in living without a why.”¹⁸⁴ Life “without a why” does not mean that the subject of life and the object of life are the same; it means that there is no subject of life or object of life. It does not mean to cease activity, for that would be to solidify the immanent-transcendent dynamic of the ground, to seek God in nothing rather than something; it means a pure activity. Living without a why is to be perfectly active as perfectly detached and *vice versa*.

¹⁸¹ Pr. 5b (DW I, 91): “Wan swer got suochet in wîse, der nimet die wîse und lât got, der in der wîse verborgen ist.”

¹⁸² Ibid. (DW I, 91-92): “Swer daz leben vrâgete tûsent jâr: war ume lebest dû? Solte ez antwûrten, ez spraeche niht anders wan: ich lebe dar umbe daz ich lebe.”

¹⁸³ Pr. 26 (DW II, 27): “war umbe minnest dû got? ‘--, ich enweiz, umbe got’; ,war umbe minnest dû die wârheit? ‘--, umbe de wârheit’; ,war umbe minnest du die gerehticheit? ‘--, umbe die gerehticheit’; ,war umbe minnest dû die güete? ‘--, umbe die güete’; ,war umbe lebest dû? --, triuwen, ich enweiz! Ich lebe gerne.”

¹⁸⁴ Schürmann, 112.

In the figure of Martha we see Eckhart's notion of living without a why. Martha's activity is not only not opposed to her detachment; it is not only necessary for her detachment, as day is necessary for night; it is her detachment. Martha is like the man "who works in light [and] ascends to God free and stripped of all means," whose "light is his activity and his activity is his light."¹⁸⁵ Though action distinguishes itself from detachment, whereby detachment is its "transcendent ground," detachment distinguishes itself from action by indistinction, whereby it is its "immanent ground." Thus, while detachment is wholly impassable, there is a sense in which it is active which does not compromise its impassability, namely as being the activity of all acts. Activity which is, at its most immanent, detachment may be difficult to imagine, but I think it is best expressed in the word spontaneity;¹⁸⁶ and though I do not know if Eckhart used a word like it, he does give us a perfect picture of it in a sermon:

Here God is so pleased in this sameness [of all things in God] that He pours out His nature and His being in this sameness in Himself. It is as pleasant for Him as when one lets a horse run loose on a meadow that is completely level and smooth. The horse's nature is such that it pours itself out with all its strength in jumping about the meadow. It would find this pleasant for it is its nature.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Pr. 86 (DW III, 486): "swer dâ wûrket in dem liehte, der gât ûf in got, vrî und blôz alles mittels: sîn licht ist sîn gewerbe, und sîn gewerbe ist sîn licht."

¹⁸⁶ Though Eckhart does not usually speak of his First Principle (i.e. the Godhead) as spontaneously creative (though I hope to have shown now that there is a way in which He is), the Neoplatonists, whom Eckhart knew, did.

¹⁸⁷ Pr. 12 (DW I, 199): "Hie ist got als lustlich in dirre glîcheit, daz der sîne natûre und sîn wesen alzemâle durchgiuzet in der glîcheit in im selber. Dazz ist im lustlich; ze glîcher wîse, als der ein ros lât loufen ûf einer grünen heide, diu zemâle eben und glîch waere, des rosses nature waere, daze ze sich zemâle ûzgüzze mi taller sîner kraft mit springenne ûf der heide, daz waere im lustlich und waere sîn nature."

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Throughout this study it has been argued that Eckhart's application of the term *indistinctum* to the First Principle has important ramifications for the nature of the soul's union with God and the way of life by which this union is possible. The identity of *exitus* and *reditus* expressed in the formulation *distinguitur ab indistincto* allows Eckhart to conceive of a notion of hierarchy in which the superior achieves its separateness from its inferior nowhere but in the inferior itself. We have seen how this understanding of hierarchy can be applied to the relationship between creation, intellection and practical activity. There is a way in which the human intellect is caused by God's creative power and the outer act is caused by intellection. In this way, the terms God, intellect and act form a hierarchy in which the superior relates to the inferior according to the formulation: *the indistinct is distinct from the distinct*. However, since the distinct indistinction of the First is achieved at both the level of intellect and at the level of *praxis*, indistinction can be understood both intellectually (as the spark of the soul) and practically (as life without a why). In other words, the cosmic movement of the whole hierarchy happens, for Eckhart, on every level. For this reason intellection and activity have the power to overcome their createdness (i.e. their distinction) and image the distinctly indistinct nature of the First principle. In this way God, intellect and act relate according to the formula: *the indistinct is indistinct from the indistinct*.

According to the first formulation, Eckhart is able to overcome the to/from dichotomy with respect to the soul's relationship to particular. That is to say, as distinct by indistinction the soul, like God, achieves its freedom *from* creatures in

an inclusive movement *towards* creatures. Likewise, Eckhart also overcomes the contemplative/active dichotomy with respect the particular human being's way of life. As we have seen, since the separateness of the internal act is achieved in uniting the particulars of the external act, the internal and external acts are so intimately connected that one cannot perform one of them without simultaneously performing the other.

Through the second formula Eckhart understands the soul's union with God. As the *indistinctum*, God is always already in union with all of His creation. We have observed this union in our discussion of both the analogy of being and the virtual/formal distinction. However, the union between God and creature is only indistinct from God's point of view. That the distinction of the creature is preserved in this union is evident from the fact that God's indistinction makes Him distinct. The union between Creator and creature is the union between like and unlike, indistinct and distinct. In describing intellection and practical activity as processes by which the human distinguishes itself from the distinct by indistinction, Eckhart allows for a union of like and like, indistinct and indistinct, between God and the soul in the soul's proper activity.

While Eckhart's enterprise in his preaching and pastoral treatises is to restore the union between God and the soul, we have seen that this is achieved in restoring the union of the life of the soul. The life of the soul, namely the process of simultaneously causing and overcoming distinction, whereby the soul becomes distinctly indistinct, is for Eckhart indistinguishable from the life of God. Thus, the life to which Eckhart calls us is not a means toward union with God, but rather is that in which union consists. For this reason, the expression "way of life" is

inadequate to Eckhart's ethical vision. For Eckhart, the way is always to be distinguished from life. Nevertheless life is never without ways; it is hidden in them. Distinction is always on the way to indistinction since the latter is achieved in overcoming the former.

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