

COMMENTARIAL NOTHINGNESS

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They live eternally with God, directly close to God, not beneath or above.

—Meister Eckhart¹

EQUAL TO NOTHING

Eckhart, when speaking of those who live directly close to God, poses a question regarding their identity: “Who are they who are thus equal?” He answers himself by commenting, “Those who are equal to nothing, they alone are equal to God.”² To be equal to God is to be equal to nothing. These sermonic remarks provide a commentary on the beginning of the Gospel of John,³ which itself

¹ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), Sermon 6, p. 187. I have refrained from repeating the inverted commas that are found, in the translation of this text, around “with God.” They are interpolations, and the reason I do not repeat them is my suspicion that the aim motivating them—namely that of “clarifying” the text’s meaning—serves to dissolve the force of Eckhart’s speech. It is erroneous, in my mind, to presume that Eckhart’s statement is in need of clarification, given that the sort of distinctions on which clarity depends are precisely what Eckhart repeatedly seeks to undermine, often quite explicitly and even more often by way of performance. As Michael Sells has remarked, “Such interpolations and the widespread acceptance they have received are indicative of a pervasive modern dis-ease with the kind of mystical language composed by Eckhart.” See *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

² Eckhart, Sermon 6, p. 187.

³ In order to add further complexity to this series, it should be observed that sermon from which these remarks are taken, and in which the text from John is referenced is a commentary on the Book of Wisdom, specifically its statement that “The just will live forever” (Ws. 5:16). *Ibid.*, p. 185.

is a commentary on the beginning of the Book of Genesis. The remarks thus emerge within a series of commentarial repetition that we might trace, moving backwards, from Eckhart to John to Genesis. On what is Genesis a commentary? We will answer this question, but not now. Our attention presently turns away from the “origins” of this commentarial series—hence holding in abeyance the problem of commenting on something prior to commentary—and toward the commentarial repetition taking place here in this commentary on Eckhart.

Our commentary on Eckhart’s commentary commences with his strange assertion of an equality to God that is simultaneously and necessarily an equality to nothing. How should we understand this assertion? One way would be to emphasize the distinction of God from all things—that is, the difference between God’s being and the being of all other beings. Foregrounding this distinction, we might read Eckhart’s comment as follows: “God is absolutely distinct from all other things, and so the one who is equal to God must likewise be absolutely distinct from all things; to become equal to God is to become equal to no thing, for no thing can be equal to God.” Such an interpretation—rather orthodox in its reliance on an account of God’s distinction—revolves around the supposed irreducibility of all beings to God’s being. The former beings participate in the being of the latter, but such participation does not alter the reality of distinction—in fact, participation is *required* by the unquestionability of this distinction.⁴ Participation does not threaten to undermine the reality of distinction, on the contrary it is the effect of distinction’s reality, which is to say that it is conceived in order to redeem, or to keep alive, the possibility that the actual difference (between God’s being and all other beings) does not utterly foreclose the affirmative relation between the differentiated. This is the dialectic of distinction and participation, and it will be found in any interpretation of Eckhart’s comment that relies on God’s distinction. It is because of this presence of the dialectic that any such interpretation must be rejected.

To interpret Eckhart’s comment by relying on a dialectic is to miss its meaning, and this is because there is no dialectic without

⁴ Of course, one may already wonder whether one can “participate” in equality? Does not participation require a kind of inequality between participant and participated?

duality, which Eckhart explicitly refuses. It is easy enough to see why dialectic requires duality, for its movement depends on an opposition of two terms. Even if the dialectic resolves its opposition through a unitary term, this unity must be composite—as the result of two—rather than simple.⁵ Thus dialectic cannot escape duality, but what still needs to be comprehended is the nature of Eckhart’s *antagonism* toward duality. For this we can turn to another of Eckhart’s sermons, wherein we find him commenting on the love of God. When we love God, what should we love God *as*, or in what *way* should we love God? It is not hard to imagine this question, posed “rhetorically” by Eckhart to himself, as a repetition of—a commentary on—Augustine’s own rhetorical question: “But what do I love when I love my God?”⁶ Augustine does eventually settle on an answer, but only after saying quite often what this beloved, or this God, is “not.” Eckhart’s commentarial repetition of Augustine’s question picks up on this tendency toward divine indistinguishability; it seems to draw out of Augustine’s text the failure of thought’s ability to answer. Such failure, of course, is not really a failure. We could say that it is *actually* a failure, or more precisely that it is a failure of *actuality*, yet in saying this we observe that actual failure preserves the possibility of not answering.⁷ And it is this possibility of not answering (the question of what is loved in and through the name of God) that Eckhart makes determinative: “You should love him as he is a non-God.”⁸

⁵ And if, perhaps, the dialectic does not want to compose its resolution, it will still find itself invoking something—perhaps a third term—that would function to resolve the duality, such that the resolution, while not necessarily composite, must be valorized against the background of duality.

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 213.

⁷ In speaking affirmatively of a possibility of not answering, of not giving way to the divisions bound up in actuality, I have in mind Giorgio Agamben’s (by now widespread) re-reading of the Aristotelian account of potentiality (or “possibility”) and actuality. “Contrary to the traditional idea of potentiality that is annulled in actuality,” he calls for a potentiality that “survives actuality and, in this way, *gives itself to itself*.” See his *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 184.

⁸ Eckhart, Sermon 83, p. 208.

The problem with naming the beloved as God is that it divides the lover from the beloved, it makes divine love into a duality, whereas divine love is simple. It is love according to the One. Thus, when Eckhart says that we ought to love non-God, he continues by saying that we ought to love the One: we love him “as he is a pure, unmixed, bright ‘One,’ separated from all duality.”⁹ This allows us to see that non-God is not the opposite of God. After all, such a determination would create yet another duality, a duality no longer of God and all other beings, but still of God and non-God. Therefore non-God is not the opposite of God, it is the intensification or excess of God according to the One. This One precludes duality, but it is not *opposed* to duality—for this too would introduce a duality, namely between the One and duality. It is “separated from all duality.” Non-God is thus the emergence of the One, from the One, which is indifferent to the difference of duality.

If Eckhart speaks of a One that is without duality and without mixture, then a dialectically mediated interpretation of his comment (on equality to God as equality to nothing) must be put out of play. Yet this returns us to the problem of grasping why it is that being equal to nothing is the condition of possibility for being equal to God. Clarity emerges when we look at the next line from Eckhart: “The divine being is equal to nothing.”¹⁰ This line significantly inflects the direction of our commentary. The interpretation we have already considered, and rejected, assumed an inverse relation between God and all other things, such that to become equal to God is to deny equality to all that which is not God. According to such an assumption, nothing becomes the intermediary between two poles of the given, namely God and anything that is different from God. Yet with this line Eckhart tells us that God, the “divine being,” is likewise “equal to nothing.” If God, like the soul, is equal to nothing, then nothing can no longer function within the conceptual division between God and all other things. Nothing is “separated from” all distinction, including God’s.

⁹ Ibid. In this sentence we are especially able to see the influence of Eckhart on various ideas found in the thought of François Laruelle, such as “vision-in-One,” “unilateral duality,” and the critique of mixture, as well as on Laruelle’s reliance on the prefix “non-.” As a way of developing this link, I have—in the previous sentence and elsewhere—used Laruelle’s phrase, “according to,” in order to articulate Eckhart’s account of the One.

¹⁰ Ibid., Sermon 6, p. 187.

The connection of “equality to nothing” with “equality to God” thus precludes the assumption that we must see all other beings as nothing *in relation to* the being of God. It is not a matter of opposition between God and the becoming nothing of all other beings, for God too is equal to nothing. Equality to nothing is the soul’s condition for equality to God because equality to nothing likewise conditions God; equality to nothing is not what brings the soul toward God, it is what the soul and God already have *in common*. The upshot of all this is that nothingness ceases to be that which must be “crossed” in order to reach God. Nothingness, as Eckhart articulates it, is not what separates us from God, it is what identifies us with God. Such a shift in sensibility with regard to nothingness is, we might conjecture, the point at which Eckhart’s thought departs from orthodoxy. In other words, what makes Eckhart heretical is not his mere discussion of or even emphasis on nothingness, it is more precisely the conceptual priority he grants it over the distinction between God and all other beings. We should not overlook the capacity of orthodox Christian theology to accommodate, and at times even to encourage, “mystical” discourses about nothingness. To name but one instance, Pseudo-Dionysius’s powerful account of “divine darkness” did not divorce him from orthodox affirmation.¹¹ Yet the capacity for convergence between his writings and the norms of orthodoxy was a result of the absence, within the former, of anything approaching the explicitness with which Eckhart insists on a “commonality” or univocity of nothingness. It remains possible to write a commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius that does not threaten orthodoxy insofar as the nothingness of divine darkness is able to be interpreted as something like the interval between God and all other beings. Eckhart is thus separated from Pseudo-Dionysius insofar as his articulation of nothingness resists the work performed by orthodoxy, which is to preserve distinction (and especially the distinction between creator and creature).

Those familiar with the record will observe that Eckhart’s thought, in spite of the heretical nature I am attributing to it, was not completely separated—in a historical sense—from Christian orthodoxy. Eckhart did not exactly affirm the status of his thought

¹¹ On “divine darkness,” see Pseudo-Dionysius (the Aeropagite), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 135-137.

as “separated” from orthodoxy’s dualities; he instead defended himself against heresy charges.¹² There is clearly something a bit opportunistic¹³ in this defense, and its relative success can certainly be taken as indication that, even amidst the radicality of his account of nothingness, a path for its incorporation into orthodoxy remained. But this just raises the stakes of commentary. In other words, the capacity to incorporate Eckhart’s thought, to chasten and disavow its separateness, depends on the availability of a commentary that would mute its heretical character; similarly, the capacity to express his thought’s heretical character depends on the availability of a commentary that would affirm this character (while muting its orthodoxy). Does this demand for commentarial determination imply that there is something peculiar to Eckhart’s thought, something that would not be found elsewhere?

There is in fact a sense in which Eckhart peculiarly demands commentary, it is just that this demand comes from language rather than from Eckhart. That is, the demand peculiarly present in Eckhart is the demand of language as such. If it is peculiarly present in Eckhart, then this is because Eckhart, unlike many others, does not block the demand that is already there. We block language’s demand for commentary by dividing language up in some manner or another, by subjecting language to a duality—perhaps between original and derivative meanings, or between the sensical and the nonsensical, or above all between the fixed and the commented on. To do this to language is to dampen the cry of its polysemic infinitude,¹⁴ which intrinsically demands commentary and makes commentary proper to all language, such that language is nothing but commentary upon commentary; to do this to language is to divert attention away from its essential potentiality and toward the regulation of the arbitrary division between the

¹² For a summation of the historical record, see Colledge, “Historical Data,” in Eckhart, pp. 5-23.

¹³ Far be it from me to blame him for this decision! Having said that, it is no doubt interesting to compare his response to charges of heresy with that of Marguerite Porete.

¹⁴ Though one might “equally” describe this polysemic infinitude in terms of its failure to have a meaning. The point is that the commentarial nature of language refuses the divisions between right and wrong meaning, and between meaning and its lack. It may do so polysemically, by meaning too much, but it may just as well do so annihilatively, by meaning nothing at all.

meaningful and the unmeaningful, or the right meaning and the wrong meaning. What is accidental is not commentary, it is the division between the originally given and the act of commentary. In this regard, it is incredibly apt that many of the claims by which Eckhart brought himself trouble were associated with his vernacular sermons, which generally proceeded according to the form of biblical commentary and sought, throughout this commentary, to express these authoritative texts such that they would “make sense” in popular terms. This meant, among other things, that the meaning of the sacred became inseparable from the risks of translation and rephrasing that vernacular expression—with its exteriority to the “proper” language of the sacred—demanded.¹⁵ It is as if Eckhart’s heretical character consisted not just in its denial of orthodoxy but also its free exercise of speech, its affirmation of language as such, wherever it takes place.¹⁶

Once one makes this affirmation one is already heretical, irreducibly so, for one understands language *in its separation from*

¹⁵ Colledge, in “Historical Data,” p. 12, notes that the condemnation written against Eckhart “does not, as it seems to do, distinguish, as critics today commonly do, between his learned treatises and his popular vernacular sermons.” My point, however, is not that the charges against Eckhart were neatly divided along this distinction, but rather that the *fact* of Eckhart’s vernacular freedom of speech was seen—not just in its content but also, or moreso, in its performativity—as threatening to orthodoxy. This point is bolstered by Colledge’s observation that the condemnation lists propositions that, though taken from Eckhart’s Latin treatises, are attributed to his German sermons. It is as if heretical propositions, even when they are known to have come from “proper” Latin, are imagined as *necessarily* vernacular. I have, in this commentary on Eckhart, limited myself to his sermons in order to play along with this sense of the vernacular’s force (though this is not to say such force is absent from his “learned treatises”).

¹⁶ As Nicola Masciandaro, discussing the taking place of language as such, or language as the taking place of the world as such, remarks: “the ground of language, its very possibility, is the *unity of life*. This unity is not something transcendent or outside the world, but rather constitutes the world as such, that is, it is of a piece with the plural fact of our being here in the first place, our *topos*. Language thus belongs to the originary goodness of world, to the goodness of its taking place . . . Language, like being, is not a thing, but a belonging, a participation in the innermost exteriority of the world’s taking place.” See “Falling Out of Language, Animally,” *Whiskey & Fox* 4 (2010): 22-27, at 23-24.

the duality of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. One then understands language as intrinsically commentarial, or as separated from the duality of original truth and derivative commentary on that truth. This, I am wagering in the commentary that I write, here and now, is the way to interpret the meaning of Eckhart's own sermonic, vernacular commentaries. That Eckhart sought to de-hereticize his thought is no matter, for the heretical force remains, and so it needs only a commentary that would attend to its force, without duality. To do this—that is, to comment upon Eckhart without duality—requires that we conceive commentary as taking place without being a commentary *on* something. As long as commentary is commentary on something else, then duality remains. What is therefore necessary is a commentary on nothing.

BLESSED IS THE REFUSAL OF WORK

In order to elaborate the way in which we can see Eckhart providing a commentary on nothing, let us return to his discussion of the connection between equality to God and equality to nothing. What must be made explicit is the way that nothing functions as the third term in virtue of which God and the soul are equal. A basic account of relation imagines that two related things involve a third thing, namely the relation. To speak of equality between the soul and God, then, is to raise the question of what that third thing is—that is, it raises the question of the nature of their equality. On an orthodox theological account, such equality belongs to God, so that the soul's equality to God is conditioned by God's equality to Godself. In this sense, equality is always asymmetrical, for the soul's equality to God is dependent on God's auto-equality, whereas God's equality to the soul does not depend on the soul's auto-equality. If one wished to avoid such asymmetry—and a genuinely equal relation *should* be free of asymmetry—then one might try to imagine the third term, the relation, as a medium between God and the soul. The difficulty with this strategy, however, is that it does not completely abolish asymmetry. For even if one imagines the equality of God and the soul in terms of something in between them—in terms of their middle, or medium—the initial assumption of inequality between God and the soul (as the greater and the lesser) remains. A relation based on a middle point between two unequal beings moderates inequality but does not remove it. The equality of God and the soul here amounts to the mediation of a prior inequality.

It is for this reason that Eckhart, when attempting to think rigorously the equality of God and the soul, refuses to admit a third term. As long as there is a third term, inequality remains, and so the thought of equality precludes any thing in virtue of which these two are related. Hence the soul that is equal to God is equal to nothing, *just as* God is equal to nothing. The soul is like God not because it shares something with God, but because it, like God, does not make itself equal to anything. The soul, equal *to* God in that it, equally like God, is equal to nothing, can be said to be equal *with* God, in nothing. A strange equality thus emerges, namely one that cannot be named, one that refuses any identification. Yet grammar remains, even amidst this attempt to wriggle out of it by dint of nothingness—which is to say that even as Eckhart pronounces an equality without any third term, he must express this equality in such a way that the problem of a third term appears. As soon as one says that X and Y are equal, one finds oneself thinking and asking about the shared quality (which can be neither X nor Y) that renders them equivalent. The habit of linguistic practice tends toward that which Eckhart's logic refuses, and it is in order to respond to this dilemma that Eckhart speaks of “nothing.” The nothing here invoked lacks the qualities that would allow it to be a thing, yet it is more real than any mediating thing—in fact, its reality stems precisely from this *inability* to be something. If one expresses nothing, then one has already contravened this nothing through the act of expression. It is enough to note—without getting fixated on—the obvious difficulty this involves. More worthy of attention is the way that Eckhart negotiates this difficulty. He does not refuse to address the tendency of linguistic practice when it presses toward a third term in virtue of which two terms are equal. As we have just noted, when he feels this pressure to speak of the commonality between God and the soul he does not stop speaking, rather he assumes the pressure in order to subvert its resolution by saying that equality is found in nothing. This indicates Eckhart's willingness to acknowledge the habit of linguistic practice even as he wants to reveal the limit of such practice when it comes to thinking radical equality. Such equality, by its very nature, cannot be divided, and so we cannot speak in a manner that would divide equality between equalized terms and the term that equalizes. The term that equalizes, and that would thus divide equality, is not there, it is nothing. What we can see is that nothing, for Eckhart, does not refer so much as *perform*: his

concern is not to speak of a nothing that, because it is nothing, cannot be expressed; it is, more exactly, to show the radical equality of things, to express this equality in such a way that the equality is not divided in the act of expression. Nothing, for Eckhart, is a way of expressing equality without division. Nothingness emerges in language as a way of undermining the habit of divisively practicing language; nothingness emerges as the commentary of language on itself.

Language, when subjected to the habit of division, tends to subject equality *to* something, and so Eckhart's expression of nothing serves to return language to itself, to free it from its habitual duality. This tendency toward divisiveness is present not only in habits of linguistic use, but also in habits of temporal narration. Just as there is a habit of dividing language between what is expressed and its expression,¹⁷ so there is a habit of dividing time into what has taken place and what has yet to take place. History, we might say, is merely the confused effect of this last division—though Eckhart frames the division of time in terms not of history but of “working.” It is the notion of performing a work, he says, that falsely turns time into a duality—that is, the duality of a state of affairs prior to the work and of a state of affairs that would be achieved as a result of the work’s completion. No “fruit” can genuinely be born in such a duality, for the temporality of the soul’s equality with God is subjected to the strictures of the work. To put oneself to work is to divide oneself from God, for works are “attachments,” i.e. conditions that obscure the unconditioned equality of the soul with God. As Eckhart comments: “Every attachment to every work deprives one of the freedom to wait upon God in the present and to follow him alone . . . free and renewed in every present moment, as if this were all that you had ever had or wanted or could do.”¹⁸ The desire to achieve something through labor is what must be refused, for the moment one assumes this frame of mind one must see one’s value

¹⁷ Here I have in mind Gilles Deleuze’s commentary on Spinozian immanence, such that it revolves around a notion of expression in which “what is expressed” and “that which expresses” are immanent to one another—neither is allowed to transcend the other. This, he says, is “the double immanence of expression in what expresses itself, and of what is expressed in its expression.” See *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

¹⁸ Eckhart, Sermon 2, p. 178.

as exterior to oneself. Even if one is confident that one can complete the work, or even if one does in fact complete the work, the problem still remains, for the value achieved is a value that depends on the division of time: the value achieved will never have meaning without contrast to its prior lack. Such is the logic of achievement, which puts one to work in the name of a future state of affairs that is promised to be superior to the prior state of affairs. What is lost in this attachment to work is time, or freedom, or oneself, or God—all are lost, and they are lost simultaneously for they are equal to one another. We have already commented on the equality of the self (or soul) with God, but we can now see that this equality appears temporally in the present moment, or more precisely in “every” present moment. It is in the moment that one is perfectly free, for the moment names time without the duality of past and future; the moment cannot be put to work, for work emerges only through the contrast between past and future. To refuse work and to remain in the present is to remain in equality with God, which is lost through the division of time just as much as it is lost through the distinction between God’s being and all other beings. Eckhart, when commenting elsewhere about “blessedness,” in which the soul is equal with God, remarks that it “has neither before nor after, and it is not waiting for anything that is to come, for it can neither gain nor lose.”¹⁹ When it comes to the equality of the soul with God, the “with” takes place in a moment, such that the division of this moment into before and after, into what has been and what is to come, effects a division between the soul and God—or, simply put, it effects the loss of blessedness.

The lesson of this commentary on the connection between temporality and radical equality is that the division of the former occludes the reality of the latter. Or, we could say that the reality of the latter makes the division of the former unnecessary, revealing it as a miscomprehension of what one already is. The same sort of lesson is expressed by Spinoza when he says, in the last proposition of the *Ethics*, that, “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself.” We are mistaken, he continues, when we think that “we enjoy [blessedness] because we restrain our lusts; on the contrary, because we enjoy it, we are able to restrain them.”²⁰ The

¹⁹ Ibid., Sermon 52, p. 201.

²⁰ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 180. It is wrong to presume—as we all too often do—that

point that here joins Spinoza to Eckhart is the priority of blessedness to any kind of labor. It has sometimes been imagined that Spinoza's concern is proto-Kantian, i.e. that one should pursue virtue for its own sake rather than for any reward. Yet the point is more radical. Obviously, the pursuit of virtue as a work that aims to yield some gain is precluded by Spinoza, but the problem with such a pursuit is not merely that it seeks gain *rather than* virtue itself—no, the problem with this pursuit is that it *is* a pursuit, that it seeks anything at all. The enjoyment of blessedness is prior to all work, and so the problem with work, at base, is that it denies the “already thereness” of blessedness, it exteriorizes it from oneself as something to be gained in the future, something to be achieved.²¹ For Spinoza, then, the loss of blessedness stems from the idea that one ought to gain something. This is once again an echo of Eckhart, who we have already seen connecting the logic of “neither before nor after” to the logic of “neither gain nor loss.” The division of time may be escaped through the escape from work, which may be escaped by realizing that there is neither gain nor loss: there is no need to attach oneself to work because the aim of work is to gain, or to prevent an imagined loss, and neither of these (nor even their duality) can emerge, given that one is equal with God. The question Eckhart thus poses, if only implicitly, is: Why do you work when you do not need to work? Why do you not refuse the supposition that work is necessary? And it is in the same sense that he poses another, more explicit question regarding prayer: Why do you look for prayer from the outside when you do not need anything? Noting that people often ask him for prayer, Eckhart tells us that he responds by thinking, “Why do you not stay in yourself and hold on to your own good? After all, you are carrying all truth in you in an essential manner.”²² Prayer, like work, puts the self in a situation of lack, it makes the self into

Spinoza belongs to modernity that has purportedly broken with what historically preceded. Such historical *narratives*—note that these are not the same as “historicizations” or critical genealogies—easily fall prey to the sort of divisiveness that Eckhart, and Spinoza, refuse. This same point may be kept in mind with regard to my commentary, later in this essay, on Kafka.

²¹ In this sense, it is unsurprising that a figure such as Antonio Negri, for whom the Autonomist strategy of “refusal of work” was central, eventually found himself drawn to the writings of Spinoza.

²² Eckhart, Sermon 5b, p. 184.

something that begins by being divided from what it wills, and thus prayer too is precluded by the self's equality with God.

This critique of prayer holds not just when one asks for it from another self, but also when one turns to God. It is because of one's equality with God—"God and I, we are one"²³—that one cannot address God as something exterior. And to pray to God for something is to imagine God as exterior, it is to deny equality. "If a man obtains or accepts something from outside himself, he is in this wrong. One should not accept or esteem God as being outside oneself, but as one's own and as what is within one; nor should one serve or labor for any recompense."²⁴ What is striking in this comment is not just the refusal of prayer, but more so the connection between this refusal and the refusal of work. Both amount to petitions for what one does not need, they divide the petitioner or laborer from that for which one petitions or labors. Furthermore, they subject equality to the duality of servant and master: "if I were accepting anything from God, I should be subject to him as a servant, and he in giving would be as a master."²⁵ Such a situation contravenes one's equality with God, and so prayer, like work, must be refused. Radical equality is posed against any dialectic of servant and master, or of worker and compensator—even when the master or compensator is God—and it is posed as what is already there, in the present moment, prior to any relation to exteriority.

COMMENTARY: CLOSE BESIDE AND UNDIVIDABLE FROM ITSELF

The implications of this insistence on radical equality, including antagonism toward Hegelian dialectics, certain forms of Marxism, and analogical or transcendent ontologies, is not hard to identify. What I want to attend to, however, are the implications that such radical equality has for Christianity, at least in its theologically orthodox form. The two features of Christian orthodoxy that here interest me are: its Christological claims, according to which humanity has a problematic (or at least incomplete) relation to God that demands a mediatic solution; and its sense of distinctiveness with regard to other religions, or to its

²³ Ibid., Sermon 6, p. 188.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

others that it names as religions. Both of these, I want to show, are undermined by Eckhart's thought.

Eckhart's writing makes clear that the first of these features is dissolved. We have already glimpsed this in his claim that one ought not imagine one's relation to God in terms of prayer's mediation. However, because he remains true to his insistence on the refusal of duality, he does not set up his thought as something that is divided from Christianity. On the contrary, he makes use of the material claimed by Christianity in order to show that it cannot support Christianity's theologically orthodox commitment to mediation. For example, the comment regarding the soul's equality to God, with which my own commentary began, is situated as a commentary on the Christian Bible's claim that, "The Word was with God" (Jn. 1:1). Eckhart, drawing on a spatial metaphor, contends that this proclamation about the "wholly equal" means that the Word "was close beside, not beneath there or above there, but just equal."²⁶ It is as a consequence of this equality between Word and God that he comments on the equality between the soul and God: "So should the just soul be equal with God and close beside God, equal beside him, not beneath or above."²⁷ Of course, orthodox theology refuses to draw this consequence—that is, it affirms equality between the Word and God, but it does not likewise affirm equality between the soul and God. The latter may in some sense be *achieved*, but only through the successful mediation of the soul by the Word, who took on human form in the person of Christ. Christian orthodoxy thus draws on a variety of assumptions that Eckhart, as a result of his account of radical equality, refuses to give place, most notably: the distinction between God and all other beings, which is not altered by the Word's incarnation, since the Word is equal with God by nature and all other beings are not; and the centrality of work, which is the means by which all other beings are able to achieve the equality that they lack by nature and that the Word, through its salvific mediation, enables them to gain.

Eckhart, regardless of his historical attempt to evade heresy charges, provides a heretical commentary, for he clearly expresses that Christ has nothing to do with mediating to all other beings something that they lack. Take, for instance, his commentary on a

²⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

²⁷ Ibid.

story that he tells in which a king gives his daughter to the son of a poor man. Obviously, Eckhart comments, the son benefits from this event. But does, say, the brother of that poor man likewise benefit? Eckhart feints in the affirmative—yes, he says, it would seem that, “All who were of that [poor] man’s family would be ennobled and honored” by this event. Having said this, however, Eckhart provides his ultimate response, by way of a cutting pair of questions: “How would it help me if I had a brother who was a rich man, if I still remained poor? How would it help me if I had a brother who was a wise man, if I still remained a fool?”²⁸ Of course, it would not be much help. Similarly, it would not be much help if Christ, or the incarnate Word, is equal to God while we lack this equality by nature. In other words, the point of his commentary on this story is that what is said of Christ, if it is of any help at all, must be said of us in the same sense that it is said of Christ. It does not suffice to imagine oneself as affiliated to Christ in an extrinsic manner, for that would correspond to the brother who is affiliated to the king by marriage, i.e. through an intermediary. What Christ brings is not something that can be applied to us from outside; Christ is not exterior to the self. In fact, Christ does not bring us anything at all, for to imagine such a scenario would be to imagine that Christ arrives for our gain, that Christ gives us something that we did not already have.

As long as we hold on to this image, we remain family by marriage, or in-laws of the divine, which is to say that we turn ourselves into beings who imagine themselves in terms of a before and an after (marriage’s mediation). So what, then, does Christ bring? Nothing. But if Christ does not bring us anything, then why should he be seen as having any significance? Eckhart has anticipated this question, which he phrases as follows: “Since in this nature I have everything that Christ according to his humanity can attain, how is it that we exalt and honor Christ as our Lord and our God?”²⁹ He answers by redefining—quite substantively—the meaning of Christ’s exaltation. Christ is not the mediator between an already distinguished God and humanity, he is instead a messenger who proclaims to humanity, and against humanity’s divisive denials, that humanity and God are One. The equality of the Word with God is not something attributed to humanity, for

²⁸ Ibid., Sermon 5b, p. 182.

²⁹ Ibid.

there is nothing to be attributed, and equality is to nothing, not even to the Mediator. Such, we may recall, was the meaning of blessedness, and so we find Eckhart commenting that Christ is exalted precisely because “he became a messenger from God to us and brought us our blessedness.”³⁰ But if he “brought us” our blessedness, then is this not something gained? The potential confusion, however, is removed when Eckhart continues by saying that this “brought” blessedness was not exterior in the first place, that it only seemed so as a result of our denial. “The blessedness that he brought us was ours.” Indeed, “Everything good that all the saints have possessed, and Mary the mother of God, and Christ in his humanity, all that is my own in this human nature.”³¹ Every supposed mediator is no mediator at all, what they are supposed to mediate is not in need of mediation, for it is one’s “own.”³² There can be no mediation, for the mediators are equal to one’s own nature—and it makes no difference whether the mediator is a saint (who is supposed to have moved from humanity toward God) or Christ (who is supposed to have moved from God toward humanity). So why, once again, is Christ exalted? It is not because of what he brought but because of what he refused to divide, namely the equality with God that we already possessed. What he brought us, then, was nothing.³³

We thus see how the first feature of orthodox Christianity mentioned above, i.e. the notion of Christ as mediatic resolution of humanity’s division from God, is undermined by Eckhart’s writing.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. In fact, we might imagine Eckhart’s general insistence on equality—for instance, his concern to emphasize God’s equal nearness to all that is created—as an indication of the transhuman.

³² For a fuller account of the nature of mediation in Eckhart, see Eugene Thacker, “The Wayless Abyss: Mysticism and Mediation,” in *Postmedieval* 3.1 (2012): 80-96.

³³ Eckhart at one point speaks of Christ’s performance as “messenger” in terms of a story about a wife who, having lost an eye, feared that her husband would no longer love her. The husband, in order to aid her belief in his love, also “gouged out” one of his eyes. What is of interest, Eckhart makes clear, is that the bond of love between husband and wife—i.e., between God and humanity—was not *achieved* by this gouging, for it was never lost in the first place. The love was always there; what was at risk was the wife’s belief in this love. The husband’s gouging—i.e., the incarnation of the Word—serves not to mediate the bond but rather to undermine the wife’s denial of the bond. See Eckhart, Sermon 22, p. 193.

But what about the second feature, that of Christianity's self-proclaimed distinctiveness from (and superiority to) other religions? This too has been rendered inviable: if Christ does not bring anything to humanity, then there is nothing on the basis of which a religion stemming from Christ could distinguish itself from others. In other words, Eckhart's heretical account of Christ does not just undermine the orthodox notion of mediation, it likewise undermines the notion that Christianity is distinct from its supposed rivals. Yet what still needs to be addressed is the precise nature of Eckhart's heresy with regard to Christianity.

We might assume that Eckhart's writing constitutes a heretical position. Yet this may be saying too much—not because the writing is not heretical, but because it remains questionable whether it should constitute a “position.” If Eckhart's heresy resides in his commentarial expression, then to imagine this expression as a commentary *on* or *about* a position is already to dilute the force of that expression. It is to make commentary into commentary on something—Christianity, or God, for instance—to divide commentary into expression and what expression expresses. We have seen, however, that it is possible to understand Eckhart's commentary as revolving around nothing. Even as it twists about, saying one thing, qualifying that saying, then saying another thing—and in this manner accumulating and expanding its expressivity—it remains undividable from itself, it never points to something but always calls for the erasure of anything that it may appear to have installed. Commentarial nothingness becomes contagious, it affects even the reader, undermining his ability to move from commentary's expression to what the commentary is supposed to be about.

All of this holds for the relation between Eckhart's heresy and Christianity. In other words, if Eckhart's commentary refuses to reduce expression to something that is expressed, if his commentary ultimately revolves around nothingness, then the fact that his commentary bears a relation to Christian material cannot be made determinative. This is not to deny the Christian character of his commentary, but it is to refuse to make Christianity prior to commentary. The commentary emerges in relation to Christianity, yet in doing so it refuses to be about Christianity, much less any thing at all.

Along these lines, the force of Eckhart's well noted invocation, to “pray to God that we may be free of God,” cannot

be to distinguish a true God from a false God.³⁴ Some will insist—no doubt in an attempt to inoculate themselves against commentarial nothingness—that this distinction does obtain, for God is addressed even amidst the invocation of freedom from God, and so God remains as that in virtue of which such freedom is able to arise. But why must this be the case? Why could not the aim be to render nonsensical—through commentarial performance—the very notion of prayer to God? Eckhart’s invocation is, in fact, nonsensical, at least as long as one thinks that the commentary revolves around something outside of it, as long as one divides the commentary between its expression and what it expresses. How, after all, can Eckhart pray to something while simultaneously calling for freedom from that something? Or how can one speak in terms of Christianity while simultaneously calling for freedom from Christian terms of determination? Such questions remain irresolvable—and Eckhart’s simultaneous use of and departure from Christian terms remains nonsensical—only insofar as one assumes that Eckhart’s invocation must be an expression of something.

It is, in fact, precisely in order to evade such irresolvability and nonsensicality that the inverted commas are deployed. Specifically, inverted commas are imposed on the God from which we seek freedom, but not on the God to which we pray for freedom. God, and Eckhart’s expression, are subjected to the duality of exteriority’s punctuation. If those marks are not imposed, if no distinction is introduced from outside of Eckhart’s expression, then the expression undermines itself, it seeks freedom from the same thing to which it prays. If such expressive tension is not resolved, then what is expressed will continue to be undermined by itself, which means that commentary will call for more commentary, and that every commentarial performance will lead to nothing, nothing but more commentary. *Commentarial nothingness*. This, precisely, is the heresy of Eckhart: not to take a heretical position on something called Christianity, but to comment on Christianity in such a manner that the commentary ceases to belong to Christianity, or that the commentary takes Christianity as occasion for departure. Eckhart’s heresy takes place

³⁴ Ibid., Sermon 52, p. 202. I have followed my earlier mentioned practice of refusing to include the interpolated inverted commas, which surround the second instance of “God.”

within Christianity, yet because it emerges by way of commentarial nothingness it does not need to remain in that place, nor does it need to remain opposed to commentarial nothingness occasioned outside of Christianity. Commentarial nothingness is able to go wherever.

WHEREVER

Commentarial nothingness, as it is expressed in Eckhart—though this is already an infelicitous expression, given that commentarial nothingness simply *is* Eckhart's expression—emerges simultaneously as coiling and uncoiling, annihilating and expanding, and this is because it plays on the tension of an equality so radical that it can be nothing other than One, and so undividable that it can only be expressed as nothing. His commentary expresses a “with” of all souls and God that does not admit division, and yet the act of expression constantly runs up against the impossibility of mirroring such a One, for expression is irrepressibly composite. Expression is necessarily composed, but its composition expresses the One. Accordingly, it must refuse the tendency toward composition, or toward composition that gestures *to* a One that would be dualistically opposed to the act of composition, and it does so by insisting that the commentary is about nothing. There is nothing other than the One, but since this One cannot be composed, and since expression is nothing if not composition, then nothingness recurs.³⁵ Commentary here denotes writing that is involved in the experience of the One/nothing: commentarially expressing the One, in its unlimitedness, requires spatiotemporal expansion, but the commentary that satisfies this requirement is simultaneously annihilated by the nothingness that emerges in its composition.

As a means of further exemplifying this logic of commentarial nothingness, we may return to my remark, at the outset of this

³⁵ This simultaneity of the One and nothing can also be pursued by way of the simultaneity of Eckhart's notions of possession and poverty. He will emphasize that we already possess all truth and thus are without need of an outside, but also that we should become poor, so that we do not imagine ourselves as things in relation exterior things. There is an evident commonality between these emphases—namely the refusal of division—but it should be noted that this refusal occurs, simultaneously, from both directions. It is according to the One that we possess everything, whereas it is according to nothingness that we are poor.

essay, that the commentary emerging in this essay, here and now, can be seen as yet another in a series of commentaries: this is a commentary on Eckhart's commentary on the book of John, which is a commentary on the book of Genesis, which is a commentary on the beginning of what we call creation. Our focus thus shifts "backward" by looking at the *Zohar*'s commentary on Genesis. Of course, there can be no origin of commentary, insofar as the term "origin" carries with it connotations of something that would be there, prior to commentary's commencement. The aim is thus to see how commentary, even when it addresses its supposed origin, still refuses division.

The very first verse of the Hebrew Bible, speaking of the origin of the universe, is rendered by the *Zohar* as, "With Beginning, _____ created *Elohim*" (Gen. 1:1).³⁶ Let us note that "*Elohim*," which here indicates God, is positioned so as to be the effect of the act of creation. In Hebrew, the verse reads, "Bereshit bara Elohim." What concerns us, specifically, is the order of the last two words. "Bara," uncontroversially translated by way of the verb, "to create," is prior to "Elohim." In this commentarial translation, then, the words are left in their exact order: God is said only after creation is said. To translate in this manner, however, is to frustrate grammar, as well as received connotations of God as creator, or as the origin of all creation. In fact, it is precisely so as to avoid such frustrations that we will often find translations switching the order, such that they are able to tell us that "God created." Yet this is an imposition on the text, and it is to the credit of the *Zohar*'s commentary on Genesis's commentary on creation that it allows the apparent nonsensicality of the text to remain, such that it can provoke more commentary. If it is through Genesis's commentarial expression that we know about God, then why should we insist on shifting this expression so that it conforms to a God that has no basis in the expression? The *Zohar*'s refusal to change the word order can therefore be seen as a refusal to divide commentary into expression and what is expressed. Yet the problem remains: if Genesis's text is read directly, then how should we respond to the phrase, "created God"? If God is not the cause but rather the effect of creation, then what is the cause? If God is not the creator, then what created God?

³⁶ *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, trans. Daniel Chanan Matt (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 50.

The *Zohar*'s response to this line of questioning is to introduce _____. In other words, it acknowledges the force of the problem that the reader encounters, or the problem of grammar's tendency to look for a creator whenever an act of creation is indicated. However, it refuses to deny the text, or to blunt the force of its expressive nonsensicality. That is, it refuses to turn God, which appears after the verb, into that which was there prior to the verb. But what, then, was there before the verb? The text does not say. Yet if the text were left as "created God," then the tendency of the reader may very well lead him to imaginatively reverse the word order and reduce the problematic "created God" to the more sensical "God created." In order to avoid this imaginative resolution, to prevent the dissolution of the text's intrinsic problematicity, the *Zohar* comments that "_____ created God." This is not a resolution of so much as an insistence on the problematic force of the text, for it makes impossible the division between the text's expression and the text's meaning. If the origin is expressed as _____, then there can be no origin. But what can commentary be about, if it is not about God? And from whence does expression emerge, if even God is an expression that emerges . . . from what? There is no answer—and what is more, the fact that there is no answer is expressed, as _____. The *Zohar* refuses to divide expression from God, and it furthermore refuses to divide expression from what might be imagined as prior to God, for even that which is supposed to be prior to God is neither outside of commentary (for it is commentarially expressed) nor a composite part within the commentary (for it, unlike God, does not appear as something, only as _____. We could say, in fact, that _____ is a commentary on commentary, within the commentary, which always demands more commentary.

This commentarial demand to always express _____, while simultaneously expressing that such expression is _____—a tension not unlike the coiling, uncoiling, and recoiling that emerges in Eckhart's tension between the One and nothing—is expressed elsewhere in the *Zohar*. For instance, we find it commenting, within the same passage, that God is "hidden, concealed, transcendent, beyond, beyond," but also that "God is known and grasped."³⁷ How can this be the case? The *Zohar* tells us that when God is known and grasped, it is "to the degree that

³⁷ Ibid., 65-66.

one opens the gates of imagination!”³⁸ In other words, God is known through imagination, which we can understand as commentarial expression. If one imagines God, then one’s imagination provides a commentary that opens something of the divine. Yet this something must then be erased as if it were nothing, for the divine is not something that *correlates to* expression—how could there be any correlation if there can be no division in the first place? Thus the *Zohar*, after posing the question of whether God is “known as He really is,” responds by commenting, “No one has ever been able to attain such knowledge of Him.” God is thus “known and unknown.”³⁹ The demand is to continually comment, but in doing so to comment that such commentary has not given way to the something about which the commentary may be imagined to speak. Commentary simultaneously speaks of something and marks that this something is never spoken *about* by commentary, for commentary is undividable from itself. Commentary never leaves itself, but its expression remains open; it opens precisely by never ceasing to comment, for by remaining commentary it remains within the expressive opening _____.

In terms of space, commentary expresses a divinity that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It is an exile that remains One with that from which it is supposed to be exiled; exile expresses that God is “unknown,” that it can never be identified with the something of a place, but also that every place is an opening of the divine, such that the places of exile are simultaneously gates through which God is “known.” As Kafka—who no doubt received and commentarily expressed, through novel means, the Kabbalistic tradition—put it: the human “is a free and secure citizen of the world, for he is fettered to a chain which is long enough to give him the freedom of all earthly space, and yet only so long that nothing can drag him past the frontiers of the world.”⁴⁰ We are bound to a space that expresses our freedom—that is, we find in every place a freedom that is bound to one place or another. We cannot get outside the space of these places, yet this space freely expresses the divine, for, as Kafka continues to say, the

³⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Franz Kafka, “Paradise,” in *Parables and Paradoxes*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 31.

human “simultaneously . . . is a free and secure citizen of Heaven as well.” The resulting dynamic is as follows: “if he heads, say, for the earth, his heavenly collar throttles him, and if he heads for Heaven, his earthly one does the same.”⁴¹

Kafka’s remarks can thus be understood as a commentary on the *Zohar*’s expression of simultaneous knowing and unknowing of the divine, which is exilically expressed at every place on earth, in the gate of every place, but which can never be found in a distinct place outside of earth. _____ is everywhere. Or, to put it otherwise, exile is everywhere, as long as one understands that everywhere returns us from exile. This a tensional thought, one demanding commentary, a commentary that robs us of the peace that comes from being able to distinguish one place from another or earth (as the totality of all places) from heaven. Their supposed separations are precisely what are refused by Kafka’s simultaneity of earthly and divine citizenship, by his commentary on the reality that there is no composite world, but only _____. Thus he remarks that “the whole visible world is perhaps nothing more than the rationalization of a man who wants to find peace for a moment.”⁴² Places do not belong to a world distinct from the divine—such a world, in fact, is nothing more than a “rationalization”—they belong to a divinity that undermines the distinction of any place at the same time that it refuses to be thought as its own distinct place.

Eckhart comments, along similar lines, that one “should be so poor that he should not be or have any place in which God should work.” Yet place is bound up not only with the logic of achievement, but also with that of division. Thus he continues by commenting that, “When man clings to place, he clings to distinction.”⁴³ To identify oneself by *being* or *having* a place is to divide oneself from the equality with God that is already there. Accordingly, to imagine that one has a place is to imagine that God has a place, a place that is exterior to one’s own. The problem with having a place is therefore inseparable from the problem of putting God in a place. At the same time, to *refuse* that one has a place is equally to refuse that God has a place, for it is to refuse the divisions between places. Those who are equal to no place, they

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 33.

⁴³ Eckhart, Sermon 52, p. 2.

alone are equal to God, for God is equal to no place. In fact, God's refusal of place can be worked through every imagined division. The *Zohar* observes that both "beings up above" and "creatures down below" mark, but initially fail to understand, God's refusal of place. "The ones below proclaim that He is above," while "the ones above proclaim that He is below."⁴⁴ Both thus grasp that God cannot be limited to the place where they find themselves, but at this point division remains, for God, though not imagined as being in one's own place, is still imagined as being in another place—if not below then above, and if not above then below. They fully grasp God's refusal of place only when they proclaim that, "He is unknowable," that there is no place where God can be located. Yet this refusal of any place is equal with an affirmation of all place, at least in the sense that God has nothing to do with the division of place. "Finally all of them, above and below, declare: 'Blessed be the presence of *YHVH* wherever He is.'"⁴⁵ There is no place for God, which means not only that God is not in one place or another, but also that God is not in a place beyond place—after all, this too would be a place. God has no place because God is nowhere, but nowhere is not another place, it is unplaceability, which is simultaneously the ability to be equal with any place whatever. God's nowhere is equal with God's wherever. Or as Deleuze and Guattari comment about utopia, it "refers not only to no-where but also to now-here."⁴⁶ And—to return to Eckhart in order to continue commenting, here and now, on his commentary on equality with God—let us say that he agrees with all of them, for wherever one is, one is equal with God, and so God is wherever.

In the beginning there is exile, or exile is what you get if you begin by locating yourself in relation to something that is there in the beginning. Yet what was there in the beginning is _____, and that is where you still are, here and now, namely the present moment, which does not admit a difference between a before and an after, much less a lost beginning and a culminating return. Thus the moment is exile, but it is the exile of _____. Exile is loss

⁴⁴ *Zohar*, p. 65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), p. 100. Specifically, they are speaking of utopia as it is inflected by Samuel Butler's "Erehwon."

only if one divides it from something to which it is supposed to return, and such division is refused in the moment of the soul's equality with God, the moment here and now, in which one is free from relating a place to God because one is free wherever God is, equal wherever the place. Exile is commentarial expression, wherever.⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ I would like to thank the editors of this volume, Nicola Masciandaro and Eugene Thacker, for their very helpful remarks on this essay.