“*Meister Eckhart undertakes the risk of speculative mysticism, explaining under philosophical guise the overwhelming closeness of the Origen beyond God. That this clothing is full of holes suggests to us the fire that consumed him.”*

Reiner Schurmann, Meister Eckhart Mystic & Philosopher

The quote above underscores the originality of Meister Eckhart, and also his courage, given Meister Eckhart’s personal history. Paradoxically though, both Meister Eckhart and Reiner Schurmann in his study of Eckhart’s philosophy, are consciously and profoundly historically rooted. With regard to Meister Eckhart, this history runs through Saint Thomas Aquinas, who was perhaps a dialectical point of departure for Meister Eckhart, and the mystical tradition of the Church. For Reiner Schurmann, the exposition of Meister Eckhart’s philosophy requires a deep grasp of the limitations and achievements of philosophy from Plato, through the early phases of the hermeneutical tradition, and culminates in Proclus and the other neoplatonists. At the same time, it would be a mistake to see in Meister Eckhart’s philosophy a late instance of applied neoplatonism, just as it would be a mistake to see in Schurmann’s study an instance of the history of philosophy. Instead, the combination of philosophical history, and the history of the mystical tradition, essentially a third exposition, provided Schurmann with a language particularly well suited to presenting Meister Eckhart’s philosophy.

**The Problem of Syncretism in Approaches to Meister Eckhart**

Reiner Schurmann’s account of the philosophy of Meister Eckhart takes pains to emphasize the nuances that are necessary for a complete account of Eckhart’s philosophy. The reason for this caution is the problem of syncretism: the tendency to equate ideas without sufficient attention to subtle, but essential distinctions. For Schurmann, the problem of syncretism has bled through many of the analyses of Eckhart’s philosophy. In fact, the book begins with a cautionary word against syncretism from one direction - that which places too great an emphasis on Meister Eckhart’s proximity to the mystical tradition, and ends with an equally compelling case against syncretism from another direction - that of too close a comparison of Meister Eckhart with Zen Buddhism. It is between these two trends that Schurmann locates the strong points of distinction between the teachings of Meister Eckhart, and that of Martin Heidegger, itself one of the major tendencies in Eckhartian scholarship. In sum, Meister Eckhart Mystic & Philosopher is an attempt to clear a path from which to view the originality of Eckhart’s philosophy, and most especially what Schurmann considers Eckhart’s penultimate philosophical teaching - the *play of the three as perigrinal ontology.*

Schurmann’s cautions against syncretism were addressed by a number of authors during the years since *Meister Eckhart Mystic and Philosopher* was published. Caputo’s works on Meister Eckhart, Martin Heidegger and Saint Thomas Aquinas, addressed the issue in some detail. It remains the case though that the philosophical element in Meister Eckhart’s work elicits the tendency to locate his ideas in other philosophies, or moments of philosophy. All too often, the growth of interest in medieval life has often meant the reproduction of these syncretic approaches to Eckhart, as opposed to the one authored by Schurmann. The latter, however, makes a strong claim to being the authentic voice of Eckhart.

So, the difficulty of syncretism is one of long standing and we need look no further than the influential work by Johan Huizinga, republished as part of an ongoing interest in the medieval world. In Huizinga’s work, The Autumn of the Middle Ages, in the section where he is discussing Eckhart, for example, we find this commentary:

“Most mystic statements show all the phases synchronically, mixed and blended with one another. They already existed in India, were fully developed in Pseudo-Dionysius, who is the source of all Christian mysticism, and are revived in the German mysticism of the fourteenth century.” Johan Huizinga, 1995, p.258)

Reiner Schurmann contrasting view of Meister Eckhart is one which argues that Eckhart is most properly understood as a philosopher who developed a unique ontology, which Schurmann terms *perigrinal*. This ontology is used by Eckhart to usher in a new formulation of the self, one which has come to be known as *wandering identity.* As noted, Schurmann’s delineation of Eckhart’s philosophy takes place against the backdrop of syncretism and, and by far the most difficult form of it concerns Heidegger’s philosophy, especially the philosophy of the late Heidegger. One instance of this that is noted by Schurmann concerns Caputo’s early analysis: “But I must confess that I am ill at ease with parallels between two thinkers so far apart from each other when these parallels become as specific as the following: Heidegger’s “recollection into being” and mysticism at large; Heidegger’s analogy between being and thinking, and Eckhart’s analogy between God and the thinking within faith; Heidegger’s “Dasein,” and Eckhart’s “ground of the soul”; Heidegger’s “Event of appropriation and Eckhart’s “birth”(Schurmann, 1978, p.255n). In fact, it is within the context of discussing Caputo’s article (on which his book was based), that he uses the term syncretism. (Schurmann, 1978, p.263).

A second instance is that of the comparison of certain ideas about Zen in connection with Eckhart, but these too are not unrelated to the comparisons with Heidegger. The source of these two instances, and the tendencies they represent is the glossing of differences between Heidegger and Eckhart, a problem compounded by the fact that Heidegger himself did not discourage very strongly, and in fact, in some venues even encouraged some comparisons on the topic.[[1]](#footnote-1) The “break” with Martin Heidegger himself on an aspect of his work underscores what was for Schurmann, a defining aspect of his own phenomenological approach—the distinction between the philosophical work of a thinker and their own philosophical reflections on it. It is worth noting that this distinction was also viewed as a pivotal one by Edmund Husserl, and was a core element of his philosophy of history.

One figure who is at the heart of the controversy of syncretism between a Heideggerianized Eckhart and Zen Buddhism is, of course, is D. T. Suzuki. Of his work: Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist. Schurmann maintains that, “Suzuki understands Eckhart correctly when he interprets the ground or “little point” in the mind as the demarcation between the immutable zone in man and everything created. Still these formulations must not remain confined to their gnoseological context: they indicate less a faculty of knowledge than man’s ontological identity” (Schurmann, 1978, p.226). Perigrinal ontology, as I hope to show in this paper, is the essence of Schurmann’s analysis, and it is also the point of distinction of the comparison between Eckhart and Zen. For, as Schurmann puts it: “The disturbing power of Eckhart’s theory of releasement consists precisely in the transformation of a psychological or moral concept into an ontological one. Man’s way of being turns into God’s way of being” (Schurmann, 1978, p.223). Detachment for Eckhart consists not only in riddance of representation, but entails a qualitative or positive change. It is not merely, Schurmann reminds us, a matter of attitude (Schurmann, 1978, p. 223).

**Towards a Perigrinal Ontology**

Schurmann’s concern with syncretism becomes clearer when one realizes exactly what it is that he is attempting to undertake in Meister Eckhart: the delineation of an unique ontology and a radical concept of the self. Seeing this through the lens of the mystical tradition, Heidegggerian philosophy, or an overly close comparison with Zen, is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Instead, Schurmann wishes to undertake a philosophical approach to Eckhart in order to distinguish these unique features - features which I will argue may be assessed on their own merit, quite apart from the safety of “mysticism.”

This ontology is accomplished by Eckhart through the movement of the three: God, world and mind. Throughout his work, Schurmann refers to the movement as a dialectic (Schurmann, 1978, xiv), which lies at the heart of Eckhart’s concept of wandering identity. It is also worth noting on this topic, that one of the ways in which Schurmann’s approach is to be distinguished from other approaches is his methodology. We can see this even in comparison to Caputo’s impressive and encyclopedic study. Schurmann’s approach is itself dialectic, whereas in the case of Caputo, the approach is one of categorizing the distinct elements within Eckhart. For example, in his analysis of Eckhart, Caputo delineates two different strands within Eckhart, one Neoplatonic and “pagan,” and another which is Christian. In this categorical approach it is difficult to ignore the implicit good and evil connotations that each category carries with it.

Schurmann, of course, does discuss the different strands within Eckhart, especially in his opening chapters where he is building his case for the totality within of Eckhart’s ontology, but he does so dialectically, where the work itself emerges as perigrinal, and as a relationship not to one tradition over and against another, but as a synthesis of theory reflecting upon itself in practice through history.

Finally, on the issue of methodology, it should not go unmentioned that the structure of the work is also dialectical; since each chapter is introduced by a new translation of an Eckhartian sermon, followed by an analysis of the argument, and culminates in a philosophical analysis of the issues raised. Thus, each step in the methodology is intended to cull and refine the philosophical import of each of the teachings.

The outcome of this undertaking is a recasting of Eckhart as a figure who calls into question a certain view of philosophy in which each epoch of thought has its own distinct time and place that is isolated from other epochs by the uniqueness of its political and social world. The picture of Eckhart that Schurmann draws is one in which a philosophy of freedom is grounded [[2]](#footnote-2) in a relational ontology, and where ontology escapes from both of the structures - language and metaphysics - that are the hallmarks of the mediaeval epoch. Moreover, by advancing a radically non-essentialist conception of the self, it is, on this score at least, very much at home among contemporary debates on the nature of the self. Eckhart has left behind, not only entitative ontology, as Schurmann reminds us, but the very symbols and language of scholasticism.[[3]](#footnote-3) The perigrinal ontology developed by Eckhart is itself constituted by him in a perigrinal way, and as I noted earlier, this is addressed by Schurmann by his methodology, which, as I noted, is dialectical. Schurmann himself draws our attention to this when he sums up the principles that inform Eckhart’s theory:

“The tradition in which Meister Eckhart stands... begins with the writings of Clement of Alexandria, who still used a vocabulary very close to that of the Bible. It underwent a philosophical development with Hippolytus and especially Origen, and it blossomed out into a systematized theology of union with God in Methodius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Maximus” (Schurmann, 1978, p.26).

It is clear from this and other more detailed remarks that, for Schurmann, Origen plays a central role not only in Eckhart’s ontology, but also in his approach to language. It is also worth recalling in this context the influence that Origen exerted both directly on Heidegger and on Heidegger, secondarily, through Eckhart.

Henry Crouzel notes in his work on Origen that words, as symbols, were for him a dynamic entity. The same symbol does not have a universal meaning, especially with regard to scripture. Meanings are not fixed but emerge from a relationship between the text, which in Origen’s case was usually that of Scripture, and the mind of the reader. The ultimate determinant for Origen was the purpose of the deity in the textual dialogue.

Eckhart picks up this approach and, in the process, develops the theory of the wandering self. The connection is an interesting one and here is how it unfolded. If, in the first instance, the text of scripture, as Origen taught, did not contain univocal meanings, but instead was an invitation to dialogue and disclosure (one in which events which seemed to call for a literal interpretation were more properly understood as allegorical: and where seemingly allegorical events were meant to be taken literally), then the entire text, as well as the readers relationship to it, was already perigrinal in the first instance.[[4]](#footnote-4) On this point, Eckhart simply draws out the consequences of Origen’s hermeneutics.

One can approach this question from the point of view of the philosophy of religion as well. If, for example, one advocates a dynamic relationship to Scripture, as Origen did, and further, if one then accepts the view that Scripture is the actual word of God, then the unfolding of meanings is thoroughly dynamic, and further, one’s relationship to the Divine Logos places one well “on the way” towards the idea of wandering identity, at least in so far as that identity is constituted by a relationship to God. This concept is perhaps best represented by the idea that the Christian is a pilgrim or wayfarer.

There is more however, to Eckhart’s teaching than Origen’s hermeneutics and this constitutes additional and original contributions by Meister Eckhart, albeit, as Schurmann notes, with the assistance of Aristotle.

One of these is the issue of temporality. When Eckhart discusses time, he frequently does so in terms of releasement. In fact, his way of detachment, a complex word which has little to do with the other-worldly image it evokes, is a route to a relationship which existed prior to physical existence. It entails all three tenses in that is radically open to the future of that relationship, it discerns it in the present, but it is also mindful of its own source. Schurmann notes the echoes of an idea in Plato at this juncture, especially the Meno, and states that: “Without a great risk of error we can state that the true source behind the paradoxical expression “as free as he was when he was not” is the Platonic doctrine of the preexistence of the soul, which Eckhart knew perhaps, though somewhat altered, through Origen.” (Schurmann, p. 12)

The process of releasement (detachment) is one which involves the reording of time. This implies, as Schurmann notes, a new commerce with the world. For one to be in the primal now, or to have an explicit relationship of liberation, is, at the same time, to have a different comportment to the world. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Viewed from the point of view of temporality, the route of detachment marked out by Meister Eckhart is a releasement towards the being of things in the eternal now, on the basis of a different manifestation of time than the day to day ordering and experience of temporality. The “social time,” that is socially constructed, and that can often be correlated with the pace of consciousness itself, occludes eternal time. In fact, Schurmann describes it thusly: “temporality in Eckhart is a moving among things as they are in their essence.” (Schurmann, p. 33) Precisely because the apparent being of things is nothing, such a releasement towards things represents an approach to the problem of change and time first broached in ancient Greek philosophy. Here, of course the major figures are Parmenides and Heraclitus, but also Plato’s own work, the Parmenides where this precise issue is studied by Plato in considerable detail.

Viewed in this light, detachment is a two-fold process where the expression of *telos* expresses a relational ontology. By this I mean that first, there is an intellectual detachment (Schurmann, p.13), and secondly, there is an objective detachment. However, because the end is relational (as ontology) there is a qualitative shift in the self. Eckhart departs rather dramatically from Neoplatonism on this point; for, detachment is meant not to bring one away from the world with all that implies (higher and lower, rest and labor, sacred and profane), but exists instead in order to bring one more truly into the world. “Detachment,” Schurmann reminds us, “carries a mark of worldliness,” since it designates a being among things, without restraint.”

**Schurmann’s Depiction of Perigrinal Ontology in Eckhart.**

Perigrinal ontology is the idea that human identity is not fixed, static, or essential but is emergent. As noted above, this idea has come down to us in a religious concept—the idea of the wayfarer or pilgrim. It is not merely a matter of religious doctrine though, for one can be thoroughly at home with the ideas of essentialism and still subscribe to the label of wayfarer. The more essential component, the one at the heart of Eckhart’s idea of perigrinal ontology, is that of radical freedom. The Augustinian idea that God in creating all things, at the same time creates himself in all things, means that for Eckhart one is in continuous or perpetual relationship to God in the world as well as God in the soul. The distinction itself evinces the two-fold directionality of ontology, mind to world and world to mind. [[6]](#footnote-6)

One way of considering this issue is by way of Eckhart’s version of the ontological argument. For Eckhart, being is God, and if being were not God, then God would exist in virtue of something other than himself. Additionally, other beings would exist in virtue of something other than God. Finally, if this were the case then God would not be God.[[7]](#footnote-7) One aspect of this approach to the ontological argument is that the idea of Being as such becomes the basis for grasping and accepting wandering identity. Eckhart’s combination of wandering identity, and his exposition of the ontological argument address the selfsame idea as that expressed by Saint Paul: For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts, 17:28). Wandering identity and the unique delineation of gestalt that it evinces and is grounded in seems replaces the usual dichotomies of: subject-object; man-God; and immanence and transcendence with a new ontology of “there is God with us.”

Moreover, Meister Eckhart’s ontology, in Schurmann’s analysis, is relational in a stronger sense than in Heidegger, and in Heidegger there is a pronounced distinction regarding the nature of “ereignis.” For Eckhart, the event is the eternal now, and hence it may be thought of spaciously as stretched out. Heidegger, on the other hand often uses the imagery of lightning, which certainly suggests a different, far more dramatic upsurge of Being.

Also, in Heidegger’s work the word “destiny” frequently recurs in discussions of “ereignis,”and there is an important distinction here as well. For Eckhart and Heidegger the nature of the sending, the destiny, is different. The difference consists not only in the divinity of author in the case of Eckhart, as Caputo notes, but also in the parameters of destiny in these two ontologies. For Heidegger, in both the middle and late period, Being is the author of the destiny. One is open to the sending or destiny, but beyond openness there is little more to be said. For Eckhart, on the contrary, working within the context of wandering, or operative identity, destiny is more properly thought of as a relational praxis. Schurmann uses the example of music: “Properly speaking, perfect listening implies that the distinction between the soloist, on one side, and the listener, on the other, is no longer true. Through the unique event of the song that enraptures us, one identical being accomplishes itself. Thus the fundamental determination of existence is “operative identity” or, in homage to Aristotle, “energenetic identity.”(Schurmann, p. 105)

Another analogy which might serve to underscore this point can be derived from Aquinas’ negative theology. The way of detachment in Eckhart is akin to the progressive de-determination of the attributes of God. One can say that the way of detachment brings about a relational praxis which was first set forth in the scholastic theory of negation. Schurmann delineates this by asking: “In his program of exclusion of differences and of the multiple, how does Eckhart determine the identity which supports and demands this putting to death of the scattered self? The difficulty lies... in avoiding the error of representing it as the ontic identity of a universal mega substance with itself” (Schurmann, p.108). Here, Schurmann’s reservations against syncretism of Eckhart and Heidegger seem especially relevant. For Heidegger, of course, Being is anything but a universal megasubstance, and while this caution seems to apply more to a Hegelian reading of Eckhart, the spirit of it also includes Heidegger.

The relational praxis that comprises the ontology of Meister Eckhart, a praxis that becomes aware of itself in detachment, involves what Schurmann refers to as “the play of the three.” The different moments of this way are referred to by Eckhart, and described by the tradition as: dissimilarity, similarity, identity, and dehiscence.

The last moment is the play of the three, and what characterizes it above all else is the removal of will which, during the previous moments was very much at work. Even so, to speak of the will during earlier moments of this process is to acknowledge its overall de-emphasis in favor of a relational praxis. There is a relational praxis involved in Schurmann’s core concept - the play of the three, and it may be useful to say a word about this. I will do this historically in order to illustrate the tradition within which Eckhart was working. Doing so, I think, places Eckhart’s teaching in a more philosophical setting, and also serves to highlight certain aspects of Schurmann’s characterization of it.

**Relational Praxis and the Play of the Three**

Locating the elements of a philosophy of praxis in the Middle Ages seems unusual from the point of view of late 20 Century Philosophy. Most contemporary discussions of praxis seem to take their cue from Gramsci who, in his prison notebooks, repeatedly refers to Marx as the founder of the philosophy of praxis. Even if one accepts that such a philosophy traces to Hegel, or even to Rousseau, [[8]](#footnote-8) to discuss this philosophy in terms of the middle ages seems awkward. There is however, some scholarship to suggest that the period from Aristotle, who is generally considered to be the initiator of this philosophy, to Rousseau, was not devoid of a philosophy of praxis. On this score, it is also worth noting that the key school that scholars have looked at is also the one which exerted such an important influence on Eckhart in the area of hermeneutics - *the Alexandrian School.*

Sheldon-Williams notes, as other scholars do as well, Boethius’ depiction of praxis in the opening pages of The Consolation of Philosophy, as the ladder to heaven, or the way between practical and theoretical philosophy. We know that Eckhart was strongly influenced by Boethius, not only by virtue of the fact that he wrote a work with a competing title (although, as some scholars have noted such “consolations” were far from rare in the middle ages), but by the fact that scholars seem to be in agreement that Boethius’ work served as something of a textbook for students. He was, of course, revered in the middle ages for his personal qualities. In addition, as Caputo notes in his work, Eckhart succeeded Aquinas at Paris. So it is quite likely that Eckhart was familiar with the reference cited above, and others which are sprinkled throughout Boethius’ writings. [[9]](#footnote-9)

It was not only Boethius who deployed praxis as a way of accounting for reality, but the Cappadocian theologians, whom Schurmann cites as well. Gregory Nazianzen, for example, like Boethius, also referred to praxis as a ladder to theory (Armstrong, p. 443). In his notes, Sheldon-Williams maintains that “Boethius probably studied at Alexandria, and both he and Gregory may be using a common Alexandrian source” (Sheldon-Williams, 1967, p.443).

There is another aspect of this expression of praxis that is relevant to Eckhart’s ontology, and that has to do with the world per se, in the play of the three. The “new commerce with things” which Schurmann refers to as following from the detached individual’s existence, takes place against the background of the Cappadocian doctrine of immanent praxis.[[10]](#footnote-10) Here, the gestalt which binds the panoply of created objects together is their participation in the act of creation, expressed not only in Thomas, but in the Augustinian notion, most succinctly expressed by Johannes Scottus Eriugena, that “God, in creating all things, creates himself in all things”(I.P. Sheldon-Williams, 1967, p.431).

Viewed from the point of view of medieval praxis then, perigrinal ontology is a depiction of individual existence as a bordered arena of relational praxis. It is in this sense that Schurmann can maintain that: “to claim the ultimacy of the “there is,” (what I have referred to as a bordered arena of relational praxis) understood as an event, obviously runs counter to all efforts to read Eckhart in a theistic perspective” (Schurmann, 1978, p, 258).

The upshot of viewing perigrinal ontology within the framework of relational praxis

is that perhaps the “selfsame” in Meister Eckhart and Heidegger is to be sought not in comparisons of Eckhartian theology and Heideggerian destiny, but in the “there is,” of Eckhart and the “being there” of the early Heidegger, or in a word, the world.

It is in the moment of dehiscence that many of these ideas coalesce. Here we see the more radical nature of his ontological approach, and it is also here that an alternative grounding of the self begins to appear. This later event comes about through the breakdown of the distinction between transcendence and immanence in the play of the three. Once the “world” enters the picture in Eckhart’s formulation, an entirely new meaning of ontology begins to unfold. Here, one thinks of Hegel’s ontology of becoming, or the earlier mentioned ereignis of Heidegger. What is different however, and what distinguishes it from either Hegel or Heidegger, is a notion of the world as an arena of poetry, understood as a discourse between God and human beings. Some aspects of this idea trace to Augustinian and Cappodician theology. What is unique in Eckhart however, is the radical non-stasis it takes on in his philosophy. One outcome of the play of the three is a transformation in the character of existence. The kind of presence that Eckhart describes as following from the play of the three is presented by him this way: “God, man and world are united in the play of the three,” in a reformatted temporality that is also suggestive of yet another teaching of Heidegger - his idea of ekstatic temporality from Being and Time.

Meister Eckhart’s “wandering identity” proceeds along the road of detachment - a dialectic of “voluntary disappropriation,” and the “development of a state: the original liberty which man never lost at the basis of his being. “In so doing, past, present and future is replaced by an “indwelling,” in the eternal now. It is at this point in Eckhart’s philosophy that Schurmann’s remark, to the effect that Meister Eckhart has left entatative ontology (in place of perigrinal) altogether, most directly underscores the relationship between relational praxis (the play of the three) and human identity. It represents nothing less than a transformation of Dasein as a “here I am,”[[11]](#footnote-11) into “being-there-with.”

A similar parallel may be found in Karl Jaspers philosophy of existenz, whereby moments or events of existenz occur which exhibit an enrichment of temporality and which subsequently inform existence, leaving traces of meaning or “ciphers.” Having said that however, it is also important to note that, for Jaspers, the individual self is a rather fixed entity in comparison to Eckhart’s. Moments of existenz are fleeting for Jaspers by virtue of their exceptional quality and something quite different is at work in Eckhart’s wandering identity.

It might be useful to consider Heidegger’s critique of Eckhart at this point since it is profound and since it sheds light on the play of the three. While discussing Eckhart, Heidegger maintains that the relationship between Eckhart’s thought as theology and Heidegger’s own philosophy is not as close as the relationship that exists between Heideggerian thought and poetry. It is important to approach this comment however, from the point of view of Schurmann’s position that Eckhart presents an ontology which is a fusion of transcendence and immanence. For, wandering identity is just such a fusion not only of one of the poles that structure existence, namely time, but the additional structure of space as well.

This overcoming of the duality of immanence and transcendence in Eckhart can be thought of as dialectic very close to Hegel’s concept of experience.[[12]](#footnote-12)As a synthesis of transcendence and immanence, Eckhart’s ontology is, Heidegger’s critique notwithstanding, capable of accounting for the fact of poetry - a fact that, as Heidegger rightly notes, implies what he refers to as indwelling, but which we might instead prefer to term *immanent presence*.

It can be argued that the Heideggerian critique of Eckhart on the issue of poetry is inaccurate because the central position of poetry in the historical tradition out of which Eckhart speaks. That tradition, which as I noted includes Origen as well as Maximus, placed a great deal of emphasis on the Old Testament book referred to variously as The Song of Solomon, or The Canticle of Canticles. In fact, it is arguably the single most important scriptural source for that tradition. As poetry, even erotic poetry (Greeley, 1994) it includes many of the themes that are raised by Eckhart in his sermons. The Heideggerian position then, that Eckhartian thought is not close enough to poetry, or does not account for it, seems to be ahistorical in its analysis.

Eckhartian ontology, Schurmann, maintains, is one of personal spiritual relationships, and is rightly spoken of as a functional ontology (Schurmann, p. 170-171). It is interesting to consider Schurmann’s use of the word “functional” in this context. This suggests that while one may, at any given moment, take a conceptual snap-shot of this perigrinal ontology, it in no way captures the totality of one’s existence. What will result from this picture will be a freeze frame which will delineate the functional distinctness of the human being and the divine being. However, it would be a mistake, from the point of view of Eckhartian ontology, to abstract from this snap-shot and constitute the three-fold relationship of God, Soul and World as per se distinct and separate. The more correct version, for Eckhart, is that which, to keep with the visual analogy, is present in the moving picture or the perigrinal view - the operational unity of God, Soul and World. The individual human being, as a separate and distinct entity frozen in the moment, is an abstraction from a more actual context of life where there is nothing so much as a play of the three.

Again, for Heidegger, although it is not possible to discuss Being apart from human beings, let alone the disclosures of Being, the very fact of disclosure seems to argue against the kind of unity that Meister Eckhart has in mind. The radical freedom (understood as releasement) that pervades Eckhart’s language is, in my analysis, rather far removed from Heidegger’s much more declarative and univocal statements on the relationship between Being and Dasein. The focus of Schurmann’s account of the relationship between Heidegger and Eckhart is guided by the central position he affords in his analysis to perigrinal ontology, and what follows from it: “a surprising and bold conception of man” (Schurmann, p. 33). For, it is the delineation of this concept of the self that Schurmann considers to be the doctrine of the thinker, Meister Eckhart.

History and Releasement

Many of the questions that arise from Eckhart’s ontology are united in that they all revolve around the issue of history. In fact, as Schurmann notes, it is precisely this question in Eckhart that inspired the young Hegel: “It was this concept of a totality at the beginning and at the end of releasement, unfolding itself without a why, that was to enchant Frederic Hegel five centuries later” (Schurmann, p.113). Schurmann further relates, this time in his notes, a fascinating exchange culled from Franz von Baader’s recollections of Hegel’s reaction to Eckhart. It is worth quoting: “Very often, at Berlin, I was in the company of Hegel. One day I read him some texts of Meister Eckhart, an author of whom he knew only the name. He was so delighted that he gave before me an entire course devoted to Meister Eckhart. At the end he also confided to me: “Here we have found at last what we were seeking.” Among the many things that Hegel might have been seeking, one of them might have been an historical instantiation of the unity of content between revealed religion and philosophy. Here, I would cite, as Schurmann does, the name of Ernst Bloch, as one thinker who supports viewing Hegel and Eckhart in this way. While the relationship between *arche* and *telos* as absolute was an inspiration for Hegel, there is another direction in which one may take Eckhart’s version of the absolute as relational ontology, in contrast to the one posed by Hegel. Here the question would be: Does the play of the three have a demonstrable history, not as a phenomenology of history, where the individual gives way to the social, but where the *telos* remains with the individual? Can we discern anywhere in the history of the individual in society, examples which made use of, or which verified, the concept of the three that Schurmann delineates?

The influence of Eckhart’s philosophy has had some interesting detours. In some ways this influence is even more surprising given the relative lack of interest in Eckhart by mainstream philosophy noted by Schurmann. For example, it is fascinating to note that Karl Jung used almost identical language to that of Hegel in describing his initiation into Eckhart’s philosophy. Matthew Fox notes, in his work on Eckhart, that Jung was enthralled by Eckhart’s philosophy of releasement, and saw in the idea of “letting go” a palliative for the psyche, in the therapeutic attempt to overcome consciousness.[[13]](#footnote-13) One of the most interesting, although to my mind unnoticed, outcomes in the history of philosophy has been the introduction into mainstream schools of social work and psychology, the very Eckhartian notions of “letting go” and releasement, placed there by Jung’s study of Eckhart’s philosophy.[[14]](#footnote-14) This would seem to argue for a very this-worldly application of Eckhart’s philosophy in history.

An additional historical question that develops out of Schurmann’s analysis concerns dialectics. Given the synthesis that Eckhart accomplished between Origen’s hermeneutics and Aristotle’s energetic identity, does Eckhart represent the apex of a pre-Hegelian, pre-Marxian philosophy of praxis, a philosophy whose modus operandi is thoroughly dialectical? Here, we may wish to pose an historical question such as this: Since some philosophers have, with compelling reasons, written of the end of the philosophy of praxis, does this also hold of this other tradition that I argue we find in Eckhart, and which traces to Boethius, Augustine and Aristotle?

Additionally we may wish to consider the historical implications of Schurmann’s account of Eckhart’s philosophy of the self. This question is an especially interesting one when viewed through the lens of the Plotinian idea that the highest human expression of rationality is itself not an act of reason. In Eckhart, the meaning changes and we can redirect it thusly: *the highest expression of psychology is ontology*. Is this the ultimate meaning that is to be derived from Jung’s application of Eckhartian principles, and if so, what does this tell us about the relationship between psychology and philosophy? Finally, Schurmann’s work has something to say about the historical role of philosophy itself among the academic disciplines. The level of scholarship that Schurmann advances to make his case for a competing approach to Eckhart can obscure an important aspect of his work. For, it is not as if the unity that other approaches to Eckhart attempted was something per se that Schurmann was opposed to, but rather his argument seems to be that in order for a true unity of thought to come about, it must do so by way of what Hegel referred to as the engagement with the moment of negation. The syncretism to which Schurmann objects is an attempt to bypass that moment in order to accomplish a lesser unity, ultimately, of theory and practice.

It is in this sense, where the work is an illustration of the practice of philosophy, that we see writ large a reminder of one of the traditional roles of philosophy. Here, insistence on points of distinction, the recollection of the history of ideas, and the expression of them among the wider community, has ever been the meaning of praxis as *theoria*.

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1. See, for example, Heidegger’s remarks on the subject in Caputo’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Freedom is used here in a very restricted sense - referring not to the freedom of the will, but to the state of releasement, or not descriptively but normatively. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eckhart is credited with having contributed to the German language itself, of course, but was also responsible for providing Heidegger with many of the key terms for addressing the central quest of his own thought - Being. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The relationship itself is doubly grounded. For, it is both the record of the relationship, on the one hand, and the actual word of God, on the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here one might be inclined to contrast this view with Nietzsche, for whom the will is overwhelmed by the impact of time. The will’s inability to will towards the past, which, for Nietzsche is its bane, is for Eckhart the basis of its liberation, if not its cause. For Eckhart, one might say that his analysis would agree with Nietzsche on the limits of the will, but would insist, even against the tradition of which he was a part, that the solution of the “brokenness of the will” lies in its replacement by absolute will. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William Barrett captures this idea well when, in discussing fundamental ontology, he refers to Heidegger’s “field theory of being,” but a more useful depiction is accomplished by way of “intentionality,” and here one thinks of Hubert Dryfus’ article on Heidegger’s theory of intentionality, which he describes in terms of gestalt. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By way of contrast, for Thomas Aquinas, beings are independent and existential in their own right. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As early as the Second Discourse, Rousseau’s depiction of the movement from a state of nature to social existence employs many of the key elements, the totality of which, we have come to term transformational praxis. In doing so, one can clearly see, I think, the forerunner of Marx’s account of transformational praxis in Capital, when he uses it to describe the labor process. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. He may have also shared the pre-occupation that consumed Boethius, and many other early medieval thinkers - the resolution of the tension between Aristotle and Plato. Boethius seems to have had something else in mind other than the predilection of many medieval thinkers to accomplish such a resolution by means other than the usual one - assigning the theological to Plato, and leaving the philosophy of nature in the hands of Aristotle’s physics. This point is made by Stewart in his introduction to Porporhy in The Isogoge. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This aspect of praxis (thurgy) traces at least to Porphyry who, according to philosopher A.C. Lloyd, accepted it as an “allegorical version of a philosophical truth, “and further stipulated that, against an Epicurean empirical criticism, the more ancient axiom “nature loves to hide,” applies “to myth as well as nature” per se, and thus the criticism appeared to be without ground. (A.C. Lloyd, 1967, p.285.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Which was the translation Schurmann preferred to give to the word “Dasein” in his lectures on Being and Time. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is an idea that Heidegger placed a great deal of emphasis on in his own work, and his comments and analysis on it are striking. They are found in the published lectures Heidegger gave on The Phenomenology. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Matthew Fox, Breakthrough (New York: Doubleday, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is also interesting that, as Kelley notes in his work on Hegel and Jung, that both were involved in an attempt to reconcile speculative philosophy and empirical science. Schurmann notes something of the same in Eckhart’s attempt to reconcile certain human experiences with the philosophical tradition. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)