

Beyond the Ultimate: the impossible proposition at the core of Meister Eckhart's unique teaching, and why he remains so consistently misunderstood

Peter Eastman
London, 2015

Abstract: Eckhart proposed that the ultimate of ultimates was not a perceptible God reachable through mystical experience, but an inconceivable and unfathomable 'something' beyond all human possibility. His proposition rests on an important distinction between the mutually exclusive paths of mysticism and spiritual knowledge. Eckhart's teaching is analysed as if it were an independent metaphysical proposition, detached from its historical and scholarly context. The overall explanatory perspective is that of a dedicated interest in metaphysical gnosis, as part of a quest for the resolution of the human condition. Eckhart provides some valuable assistance in this regard, identifying the 'Intellect' – the principal force behind ordinary intellection – as a crucial spiritual capacity. Eckhart is likely to remain misunderstood and misinterpreted because those who are attracted to his teachings have no authentic metaphysical grounding of their own, and are therefore unable to recognise and appreciate – let alone elucidate – the key features of a spirituality that extends beyond mystical experientialism.

Introduction

Eckhart von Hochheim (c.1260 – c.1328) better known as Meister Eckhart, was a German Dominican monk who lived and taught in various scholarly institutions in Germany and France. He wrote extensively on advanced metaphysical subjects, and left behind a large body of writings in Latin and German, some of which has yet to be translated into English. His ideas were expressed in the religious idiom of the day, and illustrated with simple parables. Towards the end of his life, Eckhart was charged with heresy – and with good reason, if you understand his actual message – but he died before a final inquisitorial decision could be reached, and he himself – as an ever loyal foot soldier – always denied the charge. Rome has recently decided, after some persistent lobbying by his supporters, that Eckhart's teachings might not be as unorthodox as they originally thought, but the whole heresy debate is by the bye, and of no real consequence.

And after his death, Eckhart's name all but disappeared. Then towards the end of the 19th century some of his teachings were picked up again, and began to be promoted by various New Age luminaries, from Rudolf Otto to Aldous Huxley to D. T. Suzuki, who were keen to portray Eckhart as offering an authentically western version of the type of mystical thinking much favoured in the East. And as a direct result of his endorsement by the New Agers, he is now being favourably reassessed by the Catholic Church, as well as Christianity at large. None of this has any bearing on the topic at hand, but it is always worth reminding ourselves of the revolutionary impact New Age religion has had on all aspects of modern spirituality, especially in the creation of an extensive 'religious marketplace', where previously impossibly hard-to-find

esoteric doctrines are now freely available to all. This has to be one of the truly great advantages of the modern era.

This short study is intended to identify and delineate the most interesting and provocative idea at the core of Meister Eckhart's teaching, and then to discuss some of its major implications. This will be done from the perspective of a serious interest in achieving genuine metaphysical gnosis, and not with the desire to add another turgid conceptual analysis to the ever growing body of turgid and misleading Eckhart Studies¹. Eckhart attracts both mystics and scholars of mysticism, and the discernments they bring to the table tend to be either invitations to mood music², or complicated conceptual analyses³, undertaken in the vain hope that by engaging with philosophical intricacies we will somehow edge towards a clearer picture of what Eckhart was actually trying to say⁴.

Methodological perspective

We are going to approach Eckhart's key teaching as if it were a standalone testament, completely detached from any historical, scholarly and theoretical context. This is to avoid getting sidelined into worthless discussions about textual accuracy, or philosophical contextualisation, and all manner of other irrelevancies. We will treat Eckhart as if he were a contemporary figure whose ideas are perfectly easily understandable if we are prepared to make the effort to work through them purposefully and systematically, concentrating on their actual meaning, and not digressing into examining their contextual interrelationships with other philosophical and theological doctrines. We have no interest in the finer points of medieval scholastic theology, or in the disparate philosophical systems that it is composed of.

And interestingly, the approach we will take here can even deal successfully with the potential criticism that, as 'inadequately qualified outsiders', we haven't got anywhere near the 'real' Meister Eckhart, and are seriously misguided in our belief as to what we think he said, or what we think he meant. This is because we are not interested in the 'Eckhart' of accurate, forensic and meticulous scholarship, we are interested only in one or two of the key ideas which emerge from some of his writings, whether or not they have been accurately translated, and whether or not he actually wrote them, or whether or not he meant something else when he did, or whether or not we have the least idea of the finer points of the complex philosophical systems Eckhart was relying on to organise his ideas. It is quite possible that Eckhart's theories are no more than a mishmash of ideas from the Neoplatonists, Aquinas and Maimonides, and that their coherence is entirely accidental. It doesn't even matter to us if Eckhart had no idea what he was talking about, or was the secret mouthpiece for someone else, or was simply addicted to wild and suicidal theological ramblings, the kind that could get you murdered by the church. It may even turn out that a tranche of new writings of his are discovered which completely contradict – in terms of testimony – everything that we intend to argue here. None of this is critical: we are only interested in a certain key teaching which can be seen –rightly or wrongly –to be present in his writings, and which, once defined on its own terms, becomes completely independent of anything that may happen to Eckhart scholarship, now or in the future.

And as regards our overall perspective, we should point out that the most interesting possible question we can ask of Eckhart's teaching - at every stage in the analysis, and irrespective of how successful or unsuccessful our presentation turns out to be – is not whether or not his propositions are philosophically coherent, or doctrinally valid, or theologically attractive, but simply whether or not they are 'true'. In other words, is what Meister Eckhart is proposing an accurate portrayal of the metaphysical state of affairs that we actually face, or is he

just another waffling religious fantasist ? Is the reality of 'God and the Godhead' exactly like he says it is, or is spiritual metaphysics just an opportunity to talk impressive-sounding nonsense ? This gets right to it. Unfortunately in a study as short as this, we can only frame these questions, and not do them any justice⁵.

Eckhart's unique and crucial metaphysical proposition

So what exactly is this crucial proposition ? Basically, that 'God' – as the Ultimate of ultimates – covering any and all designated 'ultimates', whether in the guise of the Buddha-Mind, or Non-dual awareness, is not the last word in any genuine quest for the last word. 'God' – in any conceivable shape or form, including shapelessness and formlessness, suchness or nothingness - is not the end of the road of any quest for metaphysical gnosis, nor is it anywhere approaching it. Because there is a 'something else' – which Eckhart termed 'the Godhead', or 'the Principle' – which is beyond God, and beyond any union with God, and beyond any Nirvana, and beyond any conceivable perfect experience, and beyond any conceivable fathomability. And this 'something else' – the Godhead - is not some kind of conceptual necessity, merely holding a fanciful doctrine together, it is the most crucial element in all existence, without which nothing of any conceivable shape or form – including God, or the Buddha-Mind and every other conceivable conception – could possibly have any perceptibility in the first place.

The implications of Eckhart's elemental metaphysical proposition are immense but, as we shall see, most Eckhart devotees – of whatever stripe – simply do not have the metaphysical insight to be able to explain, and clarify, and help us get closer to the reality of his ideas, and so are obliged instead to portray Eckhart as really just another fully-paid up mystic of the old school, peddling the usual 'God is Love' stuff. Any statements in his writings which appear to contradict this can be attributed to an idiosyncratic style, or to medieval conceptual schemes, and then given a new gloss.

What did Eckhart actually say about 'God' and the 'Godhead'⁶ ?

The following are a few representative quotations, chosen for their cogency from very many similar possible examples:

When I stood in the Principle, the ground of Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing: there was no one to ask me. . . . When I go back into the Principle, the ground of Godhead, no one will ask me whence I came or whither I went. There no one misses me, there God-as-other passes away. [Walshe, Sermon 56; emendations by Kelley (1977).]

Yet again I will say what I never said before: God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth. ...Everything that is in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said. God works, the Godhead does no work: there is nothing for it to do, there is no activity in it. [Walshe, Sermon 56]

Indeed I will say more, and this may sound surprising: I say by eternal truth that it is not enough for this Light to disclose the impartable, immutable divine Being, which neither gives nor takes; it will rather disclose that from which this Being comes; it will penetrate directly into its unconditioned Principle [the Godhead], into the silent desert, in which no distinction ever

enters, neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Spirit. Only there in the Innermost, where no individualized one (or other) abides, is the Light fulfilled, and it is more within [the Principle] than it is in itself. For the Principle is purely unmanifested and wholly immutable and unaffected in itself; but from this immutable Principle are all things manifested. [DW II 416-420, as quoted in Kelley (1977) p.136]

The Godhead in itself, identically the All-inclusive, is comprehensible by nothing other than itself. Neither speech nor thought can ever attain it, and this explains why no man can fathom or describe it. [Q 360, as quoted in Kelley (1977) p.109]

Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God [ie of all possible conceptions and experiences of God] that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there [in the Godhead] where the highest angel, the fly, and the soul are equal. [Walshe, Sermon 87; emendations mine]

God is something that necessarily transcends being. Whatever has being, time, or place, cannot reach God: He is above it. God is in all creatures, insofar as they have being, and yet He is above them. [Walshe, Sermon 67]

God is nameless because none can say or understand anything about Him...He is a transcendent being, and a superessential nothingness...Nor should you (seek to) understand anything about God, for God is above all understanding. One master says, 'If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God'... So, if you understand anything of Him, that is not He, and by understanding anything of Him you fall into misunderstanding, and from this misunderstanding you fall into brutishness, for whatever in creatures is uncomprehending is brutish. So, if you don't want to become brutish, understand nothing of God the unutterable...as He is: a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image; rather, as He is a sheer pure limpid One, detached from all duality...And in that One may we eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness. [Walshe, Sermon 96]

Now the crucial point of interest here is the distinct idea of their being an 'unfathomable, unmanifest Principle' beyond anything that could be conceived of, as 'God'. And as can also be understood from this, when Eckhart refers to 'God' he is obviously not referring to some kind of personalised conception, he is talking about an experiential Ultimate Unity, the attainment of which would constitute the goal of all mysticism, whether conceived of personally – as in theistic religions – or impersonally – as in non-theistic religions. This ultimate mystical union - as satori⁷, or Unio Mystica, or Nirvana, or Moksha – wherein the experiential self is experienced in its capacity as the ultimate ground of experiencing, and which is spoken of as a 'Union with the Divine' in Christianity, or as union with the Ultimate Self in Advaita, or as a Non-Dual awareness in New Age religion, or as Nirvana in Buddhism, would not, in Eckhart's teaching, be – in metaphysical terms - anything more than a supremely powerful, and supremely compelling, modification of ordinary consciousness; in other words, no more than an 'altered state', no matter how cosmic, all-encompassing and significant the experience might appear to be.

In other words, whatever can be conceived of as an 'ultimate' can never actually be the actual 'ultimate'. It might look to be the last word, and you may think it is, but it is not. This is the essence of Eckhart's most astonishing testimony. Eckhart is saying that when you 'think' you have 'perceived' as far as you think you can go, you can be sure you are deluding yourself. If you think 'this perception or perceived non-perception is definitely Heaven, or Nirvana, or Moksha, or God or Nothingness or Suchness, and I have no further realisations to realise', then you are most certainly mistaken.

Now how can we possibly make sense of paradoxical statements of this sort? We are certainly knocking at the door of the furthest limits of intelligibility. Isn't all of this just grandiose nonsense masquerading as spirituality? Possibly. And given the capacity of human beings wilfully to delude themselves, more than likely. So we have to take all of the key metaphysical propositions and break them down into their constituent parts, and then attempt to justify each crucial element.

The quest for metaphysical insight

We can start by outlining a very basic and elemental idea of a 'metaphysical quest', and then work forward from there. A 'metaphysical quest' begins when an ordinary human being sets about trying to answer the big questions of life and existence, in the belief that, in answering those questions, the profound and persistent dissatisfaction that mysteriously poisons their existence will somehow be resolved, and ended, hopefully in a decisive way.

And anyone embarking on this metaphysical quest will soon find themselves heading in the direction of religion. This is not because religion is necessarily the best direction to be heading in, but because it is what we are led to believe, thanks to education, is where the answers lie. 'Religion' – as a generic concept covering the generic features of all the major religions – has evolved over thousands of years, and contains within it many apparently convincing solutions to the difficulties thrown up by existential questioning. It offers reassuring beliefs, absorbing practices, and 'systems' – like yoga, and meditation, and contemplative prayer - whereby you get a sense of your spiritual self, and then, in time, a sense of how you might deepen your spirituality.

Mysticism

At the shallowest end, religion offers something you can involve yourself in right away, and this can, by taking your mind of your existential worries, seem to solve the problem, albeit in a very superficial fashion. And at the deep end, religion offers you the possibility of direct contact with the supposed creator and ruler of the universe – God, the Buddha-mind, or whatever you want to label it – and this process of direct contact is called 'mysticism'. Mysticism comes in many forms, from very tangible modes of cosmic consciousness, to very ethereal and subtle cerebral intuitions; though the common denominator to all mystical experiences, rapturous or subtle, is that they are directly apprehendable, and tangible, and graspable, even when they appear to be so refined and delicate and incomprehensible as to defy description. So all mystical experiences are, in a very straightforward sense, 'apprehended experiences'; that is to say, experiences which can be identified and labelled, and referred to. If they were not apprehendable experiences, with a measure of objectivity, and with noticeable characteristics, mystics would not be able to characterise them, and refer to them, and mysticism - as an experiential possibility - would not, could not, exist.

The other prominent feature of mystical experiences is that they invariably come accompanied by an overwhelming sense of certainty. They have an authority and self-validation

quite unlike anything you could normally encounter in everyday life. They leave the mystic in no doubt that what they have experienced is the answer to all their questions, and a final revelation, now and for all time.

Most mystical experiences resulting from meditation, prayer, and contemplation are positive, and rapturous, and delightful, but this is not always the case. Sometimes things go horribly wrong, and the hapless aspirant is plunged into a living nightmare. Negative mysticism – the ‘bad trip’ – is a well-known occupational hazard of those who seek spiritual illumination through narcotics – like ayahuasca, or LSD, or mescaline - and of course terrifying experiencing is also well-known to schizophrenics, although schizophrenia itself is seldom considered a form of spiritual illumination – not in western society, at least - and most sufferers will go to any lengths to avoid having to endure schizophrenic episodes. This says nothing about the comparative validity of such experiencing, but an awful lot about human beings, and what they like and dislike.

But the really great difficulty arises when we start to subject mysticism to any kind of objective analysis. Mystics who have been granted special and sacred experiences as the result of meditation and prayer and spiritual practice would doubtless resist the indignity of being bundled into the same category as drug users and schizophrenics, mainly because they believe their experiencing has granted them privileged access to some kind of sacred knowledge, and not just to profound feelings of well-being embedded hallucinatory religious imagery. And this sacred knowledge – so they believe – is intimately secret, and divinely sanctioned, and is cosmically special, and is not just handed out to all and sundry. And it is most certainly not merely accidental, or in any way obtainable by mere technique, or the by-product of a blood disorder, or a brain malfunction, or anything in any way grossly mundane. Above all, religiously dedicated mystics like to think of their experiencing as equivalent to a hard-won reward for their intense – but divinised and sublimated - spiritual effort, or perhaps for their massive goodness of heart – or their massively immaculate purity of mind - or for God knows what else, but definitely a massive something of something. Spiritual experiences are never interpreted by their recipients as either merely mechanical, or randomly accidental.

And it is this element of the ‘self-validatory’ and ‘self-affirmatory’ significance which is the real problem with mystical experience. As has been said, mystical experiences come with their own sense of authority and certainty, and if they happen to someone with a strong religious faith, they seem to be proof positive of the ultimate validity of that faith, and there would seem to be absolutely no reason to subject them to sceptical questioning of any kind. In fact, sceptical questioning always feels like a kind of blasphemy to any highly sensitised mystic, who naturally feels very protective towards the sacred experiencing that has been afforded them. All of which means that, from the point of view of the believing mystic, their experiences have taken them as far as they, or anyone, ever need go with regard to answering the ultimate questions of life. Intense mystical experiences are therefore – for the mystic - the end of the spiritual road, with nowhere else to go, even if ordinary and everyday life itself still has to be lived – perhaps endured – for the time being.

And this is where someone like Meister Eckhart comes in. What he said, in effect – and by implication, as he did not address the subject in precisely these terms - was that mystical experiencing, no matter how profound and revelatory and divine and sacred, could not be the end of any authentic metaphysical quest, because there was still a more important ‘something’ way beyond all of that, and that this ‘something way beyond all of that’ had nothing to do with mysticism, or experience, or God, or life, or Love, or anything remotely humanly comprehensible

in any conceivable way. So different is it from anything we know, or can think of, that even to think that we have managed to label it as a 'something' is a big mistake.

Eckhart's pronouncement obviously makes for catastrophic reading for every mystic, and every religious believer, and everyone with any vested interest in a religion of any kind. This is essentially why the church planned on shutting him up. All religions end with an apprehendable ultimate state of some sort, whether it be union with a transcendent God, as in the theistic religions; or an absorption in a non-dual Nothingness, or Suchness, as in a non-theistic religion like Buddhism or Jainism. No religions posit any 'possibilities' beyond the experiential, as this would effectively destroy their – already doubtful - claim to control access to spirituality. Because if the 'key to everything' lies beyond the experiential, and is essentially inconceivable, how can us poor aspirants be sure that the church – or any religious authority of any kind – actually knows what it is talking about ?

But if not mysticism, then what ?

It is something of an indication of the ongoing poverty of spiritual discourse that this question still needs to be asked. To date there are apparently only two avenues open to human beings who want to try to resolve the mystery of life and existence: belief, or mysticism. You either adopt a series of beliefs, quietly modifying them over time from very primitive fantasies into something more sophisticated and credible; or you involve yourself in various religious practices, from yoga and meditation, to guided prayer and contemplation, in the hope that some mysterious transformation will take place behind the scenes, making you ever more receptive to, and ever more worthy of, some kind of direct connection to spiritual reality. This is how mysticism works.

But if you are in any way exacting, and intellectually demanding, and possessed of a genuinely inquiring mind, you will surely find the idea of salvation through 'mere belief' deeply unsatisfying. Which means your only alternative is mysticism, in one form or another. 'Mysticism' here refers to any attempt to engage with a method, or a technique, whereby you can practice your way into spiritual progress, increasing your spiritual receptivity, and capacity, either by force of will, or as the result of deliberate and prolonged exposure to the supposedly spiritual elements in your experiential realm. Mysticism, as a practice, is any deliberate and purposeful attempt to increase your spiritual experiencing.

And there can no doubt whatsoever that mystical practices – yoga, prayer, meditation, mindfulness, narcosis and any number of other options – can lead, on occasion, to some unbelievably dramatic alterations in consciousness. You can unite with God, or you can expand to fill the entire cosmos, or you can become the One Mind source of everything, as a state of permanent non-dual awareness. Or you can enter the rapture of Nirvana, floating in an unlimited cosmos of Nothingness and Emptiness. Or you can become the source of limitless Universal Love, radiating compassion and goodness to infinite realms in infinite universes. All very wonderful and fantastic. And if you can find a way to integrate these experiences with your ordinary life, you will be considered a holy person; otherwise you run the risk of being thought of as brain-fried, and perhaps destined for incarceration. But the point is that no matter how spectacular your mystical experiencing, and no matter how extensive and convincing it appears to be, it nevertheless remains 'mere experiencing', and vulnerable to all the uncertainties and ambiguities that all experiencing is essentially subject to. Experience cannot offer the final answer to anything because it is not capable of doing so; it is only ever capable of appearing to do so.

And the only way to deal with the false promise of experience – as part of a quest for metaphysical insight - is to change the terms of engagement at the very start. You have to realise, as soon as is meaningfully possible, that experiential ‘feelings’ and ‘yearnings’ and ‘sentiments’ and ‘sensations’, no matter how compelling, are always ‘apprehended’, and that anything apprehended is always one step removed from something else, and anything ‘one step removed from something else’ cannot answer the question ‘how can I resolve the enigma of experience?’ Insofar as you depend on experiential and apprehendable perceptions to supply you with the answer, you are always doomed to uncertainty, and therefore to failure.

The Intellect

But how do we know all this? How can we be sure? Because the one and only capacity we possess to help us adjudicate in this matter tells us so. And that one and only capacity is the intellect. The intellect is your perfectly simple and straightforward, ‘front-of-the-house’ ability to think, and to assess, and to judge. And there comes a point – unfortunately always some considerable distance down the road of any metaphysical quest – when you realise that whatever you present the intellect with, it can always find a ‘flaw’ – an inadequacy - in that which it apprehends. If you present your ordinary, simple, front-of-the-house intellect with God, or with the Buddha-Mind, or with the Ultimate of Ultimates, it will say, sooner or later, yes, wonderful, but ‘so what?’ So what, God, the Buddha-Mind, and all the rest of it? And the answer to ‘so what?’ is, of course, ‘so nothing’. The intellect reduces everything to dust. As Samuel Beckett put it in *Molloy*: ‘Might not the beatific vision become a source of boredom, in the long run?’ Yet this ability of the intellect to find an inadequacy in ‘all it surveys’ is not the great spiritual curse it might appear to be – it is our very road to salvation.

Meister Eckhart knew as much. This is some of what he had to say on the intellect, and the way it works, and its relation to a higher metaphysical capacity:

Now note the explanation of this. Intellect's object and lodgement is essence, not accident but pure unmixed being in itself. When the intellect discerns true being it descends on it, comes to rest on it, pronouncing its intellectual word about the object it has seized on. But, so long as the intellect does not find true being and does not penetrate to the ground, so as to be able to say, 'this is this; it is such and not otherwise,' so long does it remain in a condition of questing and expectation; it does not settle down or rest, but labours on, seeking, expecting, and rejecting. And though it may perhaps spend a year or more investigating a natural truth, to see what it is, it still has to work long again to strip off what it is not. All this time it has nothing to go by and makes no pronouncement at all, as long as it has not penetrated to the ground of truth with full realization. Therefore, the intellect never rests in this life. However much God may reveal Himself in this life, yet it is still as nothing to what He really is. Though truth is there, in the ground, it is yet veiled and concealed from the intellect. All this while, the intellect has no support to rest on in the way of a changeless object. It still does not rest, but goes on expecting and preparing for something yet to become known, but so far hidden. Thus there is no way man can know what God is. But one thing he does know: what God is not. [Walshe, Sermon 3]

There is a principle in the intellective soul, untouched by time and corporeality, flowing from pure Intellect, remaining in pure

Intellect, itself wholly intellectual. In this principle is God, ever verdant, ever flowering in all the fullness and glory of his actual Self. . . . It is free of all names and void of all structures. It is one and unconditioned, as God is one and unconditioned, and no man can in any way behold it mentally. [DW 1, 35-40, as quoted in Kelley (1977), p.26]

When we receive God in being, we receive Him in His forecourt, for being is the forecourt of His dwelling. Where is He then in His temple, where He shines in holiness? Intellect is the temple of God. God dwells nowhere more truly than in His temple, in intellect, just as the second master said, that 'God is an intellect that lives solely by understanding itself' -remaining alone in Himself where nothing ever touched Him, for He is there alone in His stillness. God in His own knowing knows Himself in Himself. [Walshe, Sermon 67]

The intellect is the head of the soul. Those who put the matter roughly say that love has precedence, but those who speak most precisely say expressly - and it is true - that the kernel of eternal life lies in understanding more than in love. You should know why. Our finest masters - and there are not many of them - say that understanding and intellect go straight up to God. [Walshe, Sermon 30]

Insofar as these quotations are representative of Eckhart's thinking on our intellectual capacity, they tell a remarkable story, quite unlike anything else in spiritual metaphysics. There is nothing here about mystical rapture, or absorption in divine love, or the piercings of the aching and prayerful heart; it is all about intellective functioning – thought and thinking - showing us the need to exercise our ability to discriminate, and get to the intellective point, as part of a quest for ever greater insight into the intellect itself.

We need to be clear however, that it is helpful to distinguish between our ordinary, everyday, front of the house intellect – given to obsessive thoughts, trivial insights and mistaken judgements – and our more metaphysical 'Intellect'; that is to say, that same everyday intellect when put into the service of metaphysical insight. They are both built of the same stuff, and both subject to the same massive errors of judgement, but when the intellect is encouraged to investigate its metaphysical capacities, it begins to transform itself into something more elemental, and insightful, and starts to become what Eckhart terms the 'Intellect'.

But where does all this get us ? Merely having recognised the intellect as the key to metaphysical insight will not, of itself, guarantee delivery of such insight: one has to engage with the whole process of questing towards metaphysical wisdom, and engage with it over time, indefinitely, whatever it takes, until it has resolved every possible metaphysical mystery. And experience teaches us that insight – as an ordinary, everyday, mundane capacity – operates in a strangely roundabout way, moving in something like an outward spiral, with realisations deepening over time, often taking decades to work themselves out, even when the initial insight appears conclusive. It is the same with metaphysical insight, in that a certain obvious fact – like the importance of patience and persistence in achieving clarity of mind - seems to return to you again and again, hardly ever seeming to add anything to your existing stock of knowledge, and it is only on its umpteenth return that you discover that you never really grasped its crucial validity in the first place, even though you were convinced you did.

Trying to reach the end of the road

So when we 'think' we have reached the end of the road then, according to our reading of Eckhart, we can be sure we haven't. We can be sure of this because our thinking will be based on a mental reference to memories of certain key experiences we have had and, as we have seen, this cannot deliver the kind of absolute certainty we crave. Because is based on the type of self-validating circularity which our intellect will eventually dismiss. How can you know - independently of your own experiencing - that your belief in your own spiritual breakthrough is in fact the breakthrough you believe - and want - it to be ? We validate the conclusions we come to by a process which involves calling up various mental images, and then checking those images against various ideas we have decided are appropriate to use in coming to judgements, and, under normal, everyday circumstances, this works perfectly well. But if we are serious about genuine metaphysical knowledge, and serious about overcoming the very real problem of the inherent uncertainty in drawing conclusions about our experiencing, and serious about all manner of other metaphysical issues, we are obviously in a proper fix.

Because as we have seen, the final piece of the real metaphysical puzzle - the Godhead, or whatever you want to call it - is beyond reach. It is inconceivable, impossible, non-experiential, unfathomable. Eckhart offers this advice:

Now you might say, 'Well sir, what use is my intellect then, if it is supposed to be empty and functionless? Is that the best thing for me to do - to raise my mind to an unknowing knowledge that can't really exist? For if I knew anything at all it would not be ignorance, and I should not be empty and bare. Am I supposed to be in total darkness ?'

Certainly. You cannot do better than to place yourself in darkness and in unknowing.

'Oh sir, must everything go then, and is there no turning back ?'

No indeed, by rights there is no returning.

'But what is this darkness? What do you call it? What is its name? '

The only name it has is 'potential receptivity,' which certainly does not lack being nor is it deficient, but it is the potential of receptivity in which you will be perfected. That is why there is no turning back from it. But if you do turn back, that is not on account of any truth, but because of something else - the senses, the world, or the devil. And if you give way to the impulse to turn back, you are bound to lapse into sin, and you may backslide so far as to fall eternally. Therefore there is no turning back, but only a pressing forward, so as to attain and achieve this possibility. It never rests until it is filled with all being. Just as matter never rests till it is filled with every possible form, so too intellect never rests till it is filled to its capacity. [Walshe, Sermon 4]

In other words, you keep going, no matter what. You keep trying to push your intellectual insight to its furthest limits, always on the lookout for some clues which might take you further still. And the most important feature of this relentless striving into the darkness of unending metaphysical ignorance - and it cannot be overstated - is the 'receptivity' it generates: so don't let yourself down by grabbing on to beliefs and experiences when you know you still have further to go. Be receptive to the impossible by reminding yourself that the

impossible is probably only possible when you have exhausted all possibilities. Let your intellect destroy everything that comes its way. One day it might encounter something it cannot dismiss, but this will not be an experience, or a belief, or a thought, or a satori, or mindfulness, or a Unio Mystica, or divine rapture, or anything you presently can have the faintest idea of. And it will have to come and get you, you will not be able to reach it by the force of your own will, or by the goodness of your heart.

Meister Eckhart terms the 'event' whereby the unfathomable and inconceivable reaches across and bridges the unbridgeable divide between us and it, 'mercy', meaning 'grace', meaning an act in our favour the nature of which is essentially beyond our comprehension. As humans, we like to think we deserve the good things that come our way, but 'grace' has nothing to do with rewards. But now we are already straying into the realms of sentimental and mystical thinking, and this can only serve to cloud our judgement, so it is enough to confront the paradoxical truth – part disheartening, part energising and inspiring - that we will never reach spiritual enlightenment by our own efforts, though we know we have to keep trying.

Why is Meister Eckhart so consistently misinterpreted ?

The real problem with Eckhart is that, on the page, his metaphysical teaching is not quite as clear as it could be. He embedded his ideas in a tangle of scholastic concepts, Christian terminology, and biblical illustrations, making it relatively straightforward for those who want to interpret him as just another conventional mystic - albeit one with a very original and distinctive voice - to make their case. As it is, most people come to Eckhart indirectly, usually through the medium of a limited selection of quotes – as in this essay - making his thoughts seem surprisingly contemporary and straightforward, and not at all musty and gothic, but this is not the Eckhart you will find if you try ploughing through his collected works. There you will see that he was more than capable of rambling, and freewheeling, and wandering way off the point, and arguing badly, and talking about one thing when meaning quite another, and, yes, also talking complete rubbish⁸. Standard occupational hazards of any spiritual instructor, you might say in his defence, but the problem remains that Eckhart's unique and distinctive metaphysical teaching is often hidden under more than one bushel. And at times it can look like a whole medieval cartload of them.

All of which means – again - that there is much in Eckhart which will allow anyone, if they are so minded, to characterise him as a mystic. Mysticism means believing that spiritual salvation is to be achieved by means of special experiences, which can range from a rapturous union with God, to a sedate non-dual awareness, with a whole range of psychedelic possibilities in between. Spiritual experiences are often so powerful that mystics believe them to be self-validating and self-explanatory, but there are also many esoteric doctrines to consult if you feel you need a second opinion as to exactly what you think may have befallen you. And Eckhart does talk a lot about 'loving God' and 'goodness' and 'God is love' and all the rest of it, and this is unquestionably mystical talk, and hard to interpret in almost any other way, were it not for the fact that elsewhere Eckhart talks in metaphysical terms, making a very different case, and clearly arguing for principial insight of a quite different order from anything even distantly imagined by mystics. And Eckhart's metaphysical teaching, though often sitting side by side with what appears to be a very conventional Christian mysticism – and all about the love of God - is clearly designed to supersede that mysticism, and transcend it, and put a decisive end to it, and to mark out an entirely different path to spiritual liberation altogether, with a quite different goal, and held together by a quite different perspective.

More confusingly still - and this too cannot possibly be over emphasised – spiritual metaphysics, though grounded in exactly the same basic human desire to resolve the mystery of our perplexing and distressing human condition, has no overlap with mysticism whatsoever,

and cannot be thought of as heading even vaguely in the same direction, and therefore merely an alternative path leading to the same goal. Which means that even if you took all the mystical experiences in the history of the world, and concentrated them in a single hapless individual, they would not, of themselves, lead to a single metaphysical insight, and certainly not to the critical basic insight that spiritual enlightenment cannot be attained through mystical experiences, no matter how profound those experiences might appear to be. To attain spiritual insight, you have to head in an altogether different direction, and say goodbye to mysticism for once and for all.

Now the truth is that most of those who, for whatever reason, find themselves provoked and inspired by Eckhart will have no grounding in spiritual metaphysics at any level, and will only be able think in mystical terms. They will not have been alerted to the possibility – as a proposition with direct relevance to them - that mysticism is a dead end, a false trail, a siren call to nowhere. So none of them will be asking simple, penetrating and usefully clarifying metaphysical questions like ‘what’s this all about ? What’s all this mysticism for ? What’s the point of it ? What’s the point of God ?’

There are those scholars who flirt with mysticism in their imaginations, vaguely believing that, by engaging with Eckhart through his writings, and absorbing him off the page, and by turning over some of his ideas in their minds, while on long meditative walks in the countryside, or in sparkling conversation with clever postgraduates in a cafe, that they will bring about some sort of benign transformation of themselves - in their innermost ‘soul’ - and then, as the phrase has it, ‘grow in spirituality’. This is mysticism by association; essentially vicarious, and osmotic. ‘University mysticism’ you could call it, with the ‘transformative spirituality’ – pleasant feelings and ‘profound’ thoughts - taking place in book-lined offices, and seminar rooms, and comfortable lodgings, and resulting, in time, in more of the books we get to read on Eckhart.

Then there are those mystics, predominantly from New Age groups - though some will be in monastic orders - who use Eckhart to interpret and give shape to some of mystical experiences triggered by their own formal meditations, and contemplative prayers. But even in this second and more experientially involved group, no one will be receptive to metaphysical insight, or anything like it, because they are primarily concerned only to deepen and extend their mystical sensitivities, in the quest for ever stronger and more intense mystical experiencing, believing that this alone will lead them to the Promised Land.

By now it should be clear that, under these most difficult of intellectual circumstances - combining conceptual confusion with misdirection and human error - Eckhart is more or less doomed to be repeatedly misinterpreted, and have his key propositions not only disregarded, but likely never actually seen in the first place. This is not because of any malicious intent, but simply because those who are trying to interpret Eckhart are basically not aware that you can approach the quest for spiritual liberation in anything other than in experiential terms. As they see it, there has to be something minimally tangible, and apprehendable, and noticeable – even at an extremely subtle and cerebral level - for spirituality to exist at all, otherwise what else is there ? How else do we know what’s going on ? So surely, for example, that magnificent sense of subtle ‘sweetness and light’ that pervades everything after your early morning meditation is proof positive of your ever increasing spirituality ?

Unfortunately no, it is not. It is proof only of your ever deepening self-absorption, and your ability to indulge in fantasy. Spirituality is of another order altogether, and nothing to do with sweetness and light. It’s about a certain type of knowledge, a certain type of insight. So there has to be another way to proceed, though it might look to be something of a counterintuitive undertaking to begin with, and full of unexpected demands. You have to learn to ask searching questions, and to keep asking them, until you think you might be heading

towards an answer. And then you have to keep asking ever more searching and penetrating questions - like 'how do I really know what this is all about ?' and 'How could I possibly find a way to tell ?' - to try to find a way to make sure you are not deluding yourself, and to try to find a way to 'ground' yourself without resorting to religious belief. And so on. It can feel like a thankless uphill climb, especially if you have thoroughly indoctrinated yourself with comforting religious ideas. But in time – and who knows how long it will take ? - you might begin – slowly –to understand what you're all about. And begin to see how your mind works, and what you are made of, and what you amount to. And after that, you won't be going back to 'mysticism', or the triviality of religion. You will be able to stand on your own two feet, and think for yourself. And then, for the first time, you will be able to appreciate the utterly outstanding and provocative teaching that Meister Eckhart has left us with.

Endnotes:

¹ See the heavyweight *Companion to Eckhart Studies* (2012); full of meticulous scholarship for scholarship's sake, but, as ever, offering nothing to those who would like to know how to go about realising Eckhart's realisations for themselves.

² See Appelbaum's prototypically New Age web article, or Demkovich (2006).

³ See Enders *Meister Eckhart's Understanding of God*, in Hackett (2012), or McGinn *The God Beyond God* (1981), or Kieckhefer *Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God* (1978).

⁴ So far the only book to have successfully identified Eckhart's true teaching, and to have argued the case with some strength, is Kelley's *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (1977). Well worth the necessary effort, because it is a dense and difficult book, even for experienced professionals. Yet even Kelley was unable or unwilling to disentangle himself from Catholic theology and explain Eckhart from the standpoint of an independent and objective spiritual metaphysics; a fact which, given Kelley's indisputable insight into the whole Eckhartian project, amounts to a most bewildering shortcoming. Spiritual metaphysics is not, and never will be, a subdivision of theology, let alone the Catholic version. Incidentally, Kelly's book is not mentioned even once in 781 pages of the *Companion to Eckhart Studies* !

⁵ Once again, the book by Kelley (1977) is a useful next step.

⁶ It is very important to remember, when reading Eckhart, that he very often did not make it clear when he referred to 'God' whether he meant 'the Godhead', or God as normally conceived, or something else altogether. A bizarre and self-defeating feature of his writings, given how important the various distinctions are.

⁷ For Eckhart and Zen, see Suzuki (1957), but experiencing satori is not reaching 'the Godhead'.

⁸ Many sections of the *Parisian Questions and Prologues* (1974), for example, make for dismal reading.

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