

MEISTER ECKHART ON TEMPORALITY
AND THE "NOW"

A Phenomenological-Hermeneutical Interpretation

The paradoxical nature of mystical theories, makes them difficult to explain. Meister Eckhart's thinking is no exception. Various attempts have been made to employ phenomenological-hermeneutical tools to make sense of it.¹ Reliance on the direct data of consciousness, pre-understanding, empathy, or metaphor helps explain the mystical phenomenon in ways in which non-hermeneutical-phenomenological accounts cannot. My aim in this essay is twofold. First, to suggest a variant of the phenomenological-hermeneutical method which can render Meister Eckhart's (and others') mystical teachings more understandable. Second, to explain Meister Eckhart's teachings on the "now" – a theme which in many phenomenological-hermeneutical interpretations of his theory has hitherto been neglected. In Part 1 I present the characteristics of this method. In Part 2 I exemplify its use by applying it to Meister Eckhart's teachings on the "now".

I

Like other phenomenological and hermeneutical interpretations of Meister Eckhart, the one suggested here is marked by understanding through empathy rather than through reducing the phenomenon to another set of terms (e.g., physiological, psychological) supposed to be more basic or understandable. The mystical experience is taken to make sense in itself, and its interpretation is intended to help readers understand by bringing them closer to the mystic's state of mind. The interpretation is meant, then, to enable readers to grasp the mystical experience by arousing feelings analogous, in some ways, to those of the mystic.

Likewise, as with other hermeneutical interpretations, this interpretation supposes some pre-understood intuition of the mystical experience and sympathy towards it on the part of the reader. The interpretation elaborates some kind of pre-understanding of the mystical experience, even if it be a very vague one, rather than providing new information. Because the interpretation relies on this pre-understanding, it is somewhat circular.

Similarly, like other hermeneutical interpretations, it is not aimed at everyone. The methodology is not intersubjective in the sense that it is impossible for any rational being not to understand it. People with a total disregard for the mystical experience cannot understand it. Those who are left completely "cold" by mystical culture, then, will not find the following discussion of any help.

The interpretation suggested here is, however, different from some other phenomenological-hermeneutical interpretations in its emphasis on the interrelations among the different characteristics of the interpreted phenomenon. The issue under question is explained by showing how its different characteristics cohere. Since each characteristic is both *explicans* and *explicandum*, there is no one correct starting point for the explanation; we can start off with any of the characteristics and show, from that viewpoint, how it is related to the others. Then we can pick another characteristic and discuss its relations to all the others, including to the first. A complete explanation is one in which the interrelations between all the characteristics are discussed. Graphically, such an explanation would look like a collection of dots where all the dots are connected by lines to all the others, so that there is no dot which is not interrelated with all the other dots, both directly and indirectly.

To be sure, others also discuss to some extent this characteristic of hermeneutical explanations. Dilthey, for example, observes the circularity present in the fact that, on the one hand, in order to understand the whole the parts must first be understood and, on the other, the parts cannot be understood if the whole is not first understood.² This whole/parts circularity exists (even if not as emphatically) in the method of interpretation suggested here; Dilthey, however, does not put as much emphasis on the circularity among the parts of the interpreted phenomenon as is suggested here.

Another point of difference between some other phenomenological-hermeneutical methods and the one suggested here is that whereas they (e.g., Heidegger's) do not provide a place for atemporal and non-linguistic phenomena such as the mystical experience, the present approach does. (Indeed, the very term used by Heidegger to refer to the three dimensions of temporality, "ecstases", would in Meister Eckhart's teachings denote an atemporal state.)³ Moreover, no elaborate terminology is needed to employ the phenomenological-hermeneutical interpretation suggested here.

In what follows I shall give an example of how this hermeneutical

interpretation can be employed to clarify some of Meister Eckhart's mystical teachings. I shall not be able, however, to present a complete account of Eckhart's mystical theory. Instead, I shall limit myself to discussing it only from the viewpoint of one of its characteristics – the non-temporality in "nowness".⁴ Thus, I shall not attempt here to show how all the characteristics are interrelated, but only how nowness is related to some of the most important of them.

II

Meister Eckhart says baffling things about the mystical experience. He says that when we are in the sublime state we are in a perfect now and time does not exist for us,⁵ that this now is an unceasing now,⁶ and that although nothing changes during the sublime state, every second of it is new for us.⁷ He typifies the mystical experience as being complete, homogeneous, real and certain.⁸ He tells us that if we want to achieve the mystical experience we should not try to achieve it⁹ and that the mystical experience is achieved at once and immediately.¹⁰ Moreover, he says, in effect, that the real self is no self,¹¹ and he sees rationality and language as obstacles to the mystical experience.¹²

These statements seem puzzling, if not completely nonsensical or straightforwardly wrong. We feel that it is impossible, for example, that time should cease to exist. Similarly, it seems to be a contradiction that although nothing changes in the sublime state, every second will still be new. Moreover, why in order to achieve the mystical experience should we *not* try to achieve it? How can these and other expressions be explained?

Let us start with what Meister Eckhart says about being in the now. To understand his expressions about time we should remember that he does not refer to objective time but to our phenomenological temporality, i.e., our being in time. How are we phenomenologically in time? We can be in our past, for example, when we regret that we did things the way we did and wish we had done them otherwise. Or, we can be in the past by having memories and being happy or sad because present things are not the way they were. Similarly, we can be in the future when we worry about what will happen. We are in the future when we have ambitions, plan how to achieve them and speculate about different possibilities.

Although I have brought up our being in the past and our being in

the future separately, they are, as Heidegger and others have shown so elaborately, intermingled with each other. When we plan for the future, for example, we rely on past experience, and what we remember is usually relevant for our future activity. Moreover, past and future are also intermingled with what is usually called our being in the present; we are now doing things which are relevant for future possibilities and are influenced by what has happened to us in the past.¹³

We are always in the present in another way as well. When we are in the past or the future we are aware that we are thinking about them in the present. When we are conscious that the future will come and is ahead of us, and that the past has gone and is behind us, we are necessarily also conscious of the fact that we are conscious of them *now*. If we did not know that we were conscious of them now, we could not know that they are past and future. Our consciousness of the future or of the past, then, is always relative to our consciousness of the now.

But when Meister Eckhart calls on us to be only and completely in the now in the sublime state, he is not referring to the now or the present in the regular sense. The present in the regular sense (the sense used by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) is nothing more than that which has just been in the very near past or is just starting to happen in the very near future. Even if we try to narrow down what we usually call the present, we shall find ourselves busy with what is actually the very near past and future, and not the present. Further, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty show us that when we are in this so-called "present", we are never *only* in it; this "present" (or close past plus close future) is always connected and experienced in view of the further future and past.

Thus, if by "being in the now" we mean being on the very "razor's edge" second of what we are doing now, and not what we have just done or are about to do, we are very rarely in the now. We are usually *also* in the now, because we are always conscious that what we are doing we are doing now; but we are not, in all these cases, *only* in the now.

This complete nowness, moreover, does not change from one second to another; every now is identical to the others before and after it, and thus there are no changes when the I is in this state. Hence we have the feeling of the "unceasing now", "unchanging now", or "eternal now" of which Meister Eckhart speaks.

Notwithstanding the fact that the complete now is unchanging, it is always new. In each and every second we are conscious only of the

thinking that happens in that very second, and of nothing else, including the thinking occurring in the previous or coming seconds. Thus, the nowness in every second cannot be compared to that in the previous one. If there were comparability and continuity between these now-points, we would not be thinking only about the thinking which is now thinking, but also about previous thinking, and thus we would stop being in the now and be in the future or in the past. Thus, every second in the complete now is disconnected from all other seconds and nows, which explains Meister Eckhart's saying that although there is no difference between the nows, being in the now is always new.

The sublime state is also complete. Our regular future or past temporalities are incomplete; when we are in the future, typified by our ambitions and plans, we feel we lack something we hope to achieve. Similarly, when we are in the past, typified by memories, we feel that something is past and gone. These two temporalities of our everyday life are characterised by feelings of striving and loss.

However, since in the nowness the only thing we are thinking about – viz., the thinking itself – is fully present, we do not feel we lack anything. To put it differently, when the subject and object of thinking are not the same, the object can either exist or not exist, and when it does not exist it can be missed. When the subject and object of thinking are the same, the object is necessarily there, and thus cannot be missed. Hence, the state of being-now is a state of non-striving.

For similar reasons, the experience of nowness is also an experience of reality and certainty. Part of our consciousness of what will come – our future – is awareness that in the present it is unreal and uncertain. Similarly, part of our consciousness of what is gone and does not exist any more – our past – is awareness that now, in the present, it is unreal. We are also not completely free from doubt as to whether the past was indeed exactly as we remember it. In the nowness, in contrast, it is impossible for the object of thinking not to exist, since it is also the subject of thinking. When we are in the future and in the past, when the subject and object of thinking are different, there is the possibility that the object will not be or has not been as we think it. But when the subject and object are identical in nowness, the consciousness which happens now is completely present to itself. Thus, in nowness we experience reality and certainty.

One of Meister Eckhart's most paradoxical sayings is that we should not strive for the sublime state if we want to achieve it.¹⁴ However, in

the light of what consideration of the characteristics of nowness previously considered tells us, this exhortation sounds less odd. The more we strive, the more we have before us an object and thus the further we are from the state in which the subject is its own object. To describe the same thing in another way, the more we strive, the more we enter the future and, thus, the less are we in the now; the more we try to achieve something, the more we are in a state of incompleteness and thus the further we are from the possibility of feeling the completeness of the mystical experience.

Thus, if we want to achieve the state of complete nowness, we should just let ourselves be and not strive for it; we should just let it happen. We should not be or do for the sake of anything, but simply be or do for the sake of being or doing. Hence, we cannot decide by any technical means when a mystical experience will happen to us and how long it will last. All we can do is to avoid what we know would hinder it, such as intending strongly to reach it or concentrating on its particulars. Reaching the mystical state and staying in it are accomplished with complete effortlessness and acceptance, without intending to reach it and without clinging to anything.

This also explains why entering the mystical experience can only be done instantaneously, and not gradually and bit by bit. Since our experience in the state of nowness is one of completeness, experiencing partiality will not bring us nearer to nowness but take us farther away.

In the sublime state we also experience homogeneity. Our awareness in itself is taken by Eckhart to be simple. Thus, if there were any particulars before the mind, it would not be about itself, and hence also not in the nowness. Once the most basic distinction there is, that of subject and object, disappears, there is no more place for any distinctions to remain in the mind.

Meister Eckhart also calls on those who want to attain mystical experience to let go of their ego, get rid of their phenomenal self and thus reach their true self. In the nowness we can be seen as thinking about ourselves. But this "self" is very different from the future-and-past self which we experience in our daily life. While our everyday self is made up of regrets and memories, plans and aspirations, the real self is completely homogeneous. None of the things that make up our normal personal self and life exist in our real self. Thus it can be said that in complete nowness, in the mystical experience, we have no self. Since we experience reality in the nowness, we feel that there is more reality

in this "no-self" than in the regular future-and-past self. For this reason Meister Eckhart thinks that our everyday self is one of lies and appearances, and summons us to get rid of it. For the same reasons he recommends the virtue of humility.¹⁵

It should be noted that we do not know the self (or any other thing in the complete nowness) in the third person, but only in the first. As shown above, objects are connected with past and future consciousness, not with now-consciousness. When we think about anything, including the self, in the past or the future we "objectify" it, we think of it in the third person. But in the now the self is known in the first person. In nowness we are not aware of the self as an object, but rather live it as a subject; we do not know the self, we are not even aware of it, but it is our very awareness.

Like many other mystics, Meister Eckhart takes language and rational thinking to be obstacles to the mystical experience and therefore recommends that we try to free ourselves from what he sees as our obsessive habit of using them. The communication of the mystical experience, to Meister Eckhart, can only distort it. There are several reasons for this aversion to language and rational thinking, all of which have to do with the difference between the nature of the mystical experience and the nature of language. Rational thinking and language advance step by step; they are discursive. But in this they are alien to the mystical experience, which is achieved immediately and all at once. Further, the discursiveness of language and rationality is connected with their temporal character. Expression and thinking take time and are done in time. Every sentence and every reasoning process (even $2 + 2 = 4$) occurs in time, and what has been and what will be are combined in it. Thus, language and rationality can only be obstacles to achieving mystical experience. Besides, as shown above, there are no distinctions in the complete nowness; it is completely homogeneous. Language and rational thinking, on the other hand, are built on distinctions, comparisons and categories.

In all these ways language and rationality are inappropriate for achieving, being in, conceiving of, and communicating the mystical experience. The mystical experience is irrational in its essence and if we want to achieve it we must let go of our rational prejudice. For this reason Meister Eckhart and other mystics use paradoxes, plain contradictions and even nonsense when they discuss the mystical experience.¹⁶ These are meant to convey the nature of the experience and to help the audience achieve it.¹⁷

Partiality, dubitability, change and diversity – the characteristics of our being in the future and the past – are associated with false or inferior being in the philosophical and Christian tradition in which Meister Eckhart lived and thought. Completeness, reality, and homogeneity, on the other hand, are associated in this tradition with God and true being.¹⁸ Hence, Meister Eckhart sees our being in the future and the past, which seems – to the uninitiated – to be real being, as inferior being or non-being. In complete nowness, in contrast, we have the characteristics of true being or Being, which are also the characteristics of God. Thus, through nowness, we find ourselves in God, and *unio mystica* with Him is achieved.

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NOTES

¹ Niklaus Largier, *Zeit, Zeitlichkeit, Ewigkeit: Ein Aufriss des Zeitproblems bei Dietrich von Freiberg und Meister Eckhart* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1989); Donald F. Duclow, "Hermeneutics and Meister Eckhart", *Philosophy Today* 28 (1984): 36–43; John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1978); Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Emil Winkler, *Exegetische Methoden bei Meister Eckhart* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965); and J. Koch, "Sinn und Struktur der Schriftauslegungen", in *Meister Eckhart der Prediger*, ed. Udo Maria Nix and R. Ochslin (Freiburg: Herder, 1960).

² Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Bernard Groethuysen, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 7 (Stuttgart and Göttingen: B. G. Teubner and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), p. 131.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1951), p. 329; *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 377.

⁴ I shall explain what I mean by "nowness" below.

⁵ Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatise and Defence*, trans. E. Colledge and B. McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), pp. 177–179; hereafter cited as *Essential Sermons*; *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, trans. R. B. Blakney (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), pp. 136–137, 167; hereafter cited as *Modern Translation*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Essential Sermons*, pp. 177, 179; *Modern Translation*, pp. 212–214.

⁸ *Essential Sermons*, pp. 179, 183, 188, 191, 282, 288; *Modern Translation*, pp. 119–120, 122–123, 140–141, 188.

⁹ *Essential Sermons*, pp. 168–169, 172–173, 178, 183–184, 264–265; *Modern Translation*, pp. 136–137.

¹⁰ *Modern Translation*, p. 121.

¹¹ *Essential Sermons*, pp. 184, 190, 248, 260; *Modern Translation*, pp. 107, 131, 189, 191.

¹² *Essential Sermons*, pp. 177, 182–184, 204, 206; *Modern Translation*, pp. 107, 118–119, 165, 197–200, 215.

¹³ What has been presented here is, of course, an incomplete and rather simplified account of Hiedegger's and Merleau-Ponty's views on this subject.

¹⁴ Eckhart's recommendation not to try is also connected with his discussions of detachment, in e.g., *Essential Sermons*, pp. 177–178, 285–287.

¹⁵ E.g., in *Essential Sermons*, pp. 156, 190, 280–281, 294.

¹⁶ And in some cases (such as Zen Buddhism), they use humour, which also consists of breaking and confusing categories.

¹⁷ Note, however, that some of the seeming paradoxes and contradictions can, in fact, be made sense of, as has been done in this chapter concerning the necessity of trying not to try, the unceasing now, the true self which is no self, or the now which is always new.

¹⁸ *Essential Sermons*, pp. 178, 183, 188, 190, 197, 288; *Modern Translation*, pp. 120, 213.