

The Epistemology of Illumination in Meister Eckhart

Abstract

How is experience possible if the one who experiences is ‘forgotten’ and transcended? In his book *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* Reiner Schürmann explores two lines of thought in Eckhart’s philosophy of mind – Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic. The first of these, he observes, leads to the idea that being is revealed in the “birth of the Son” – that is, in God acting in place of the active intellect. The second leads to the idea that being is revealed in an unrepresentable Unity. These two lines of thought are, on their face, inconsistent. While the idea of the “birth of the Son” permits a division between ‘illuminator’ (universal) and ‘illuminated’ (particular), and so preserves the possibility of experience, the idea of an unrepresentable Unity does not. The resulting aporia, Schürmann argues, is resolved through Eckhart’s concept of detachment. But if, as Eckhart suggests, detachment is fundamentally atemporal, then it is not clear how, when one ‘lives in detachment,’ the process of becoming, through which an object appears to a subject, can be sustained. Hence, Schürmann’s resolution is problematic. In his *Defense* to charges of heresy, however, Eckhart takes positive steps towards explaining how something can simultaneously be a Unity and a multiplicity. In so doing, he offers us a window into both the nature of detachment and the nature of mind.

1. In his accounts of how the mind and world relate Meister Eckhart often employs a conception of ideal being that he borrows from Aristotle. Aristotle suggests that although the mind, as the intellectual part of the soul, is a place of ‘forms’ they only reside there potentially and not actually. Aristotle does not object to talk of the ideas of all things residing in man’s intellect so far as these ideas are understood only potentially to inhere there. Eckhart subscribes to this basic position. However, as Reiner Schürmann has observed, Eckhart does not find it completely satisfactory (Schürmann, 1978, 189). In the final analysis Eckhart argues that there is no *being*, either determinate or indeterminate, in the mind. The mind, in its capacity to encounter the world, is fundamentally groundless. This groundless mind, Eckhart maintains, is both the source of all things and the source of my experience of those things – an identification that permits Eckhart to transcend the limitations of the philosophies upon which he draws, but at the expense of threatening to collapse the very division on which experience rests – the division between subject and object. Eckhart’s response to this threat is surprising and worthy of re-examination as it points to what may be a fundamental truth about the nature of mind.

In the first instance, Eckhart’s account of how mind and world relate relies on a division of the mind into active and passive aspects. The world, he suggests, manifests by means of a movement of ‘images’ from the active to the passive intellect. Eckhart illustrates this model as follows:

The active intellect abstracts images from outward things, stripping them of matter and of accidents, and introduces them to the passive intellect, begetting their mental image therein. And the passive intellect, made pregnant by the active in this way, cherishes and knows these things with the aid of the active intellect. Even then, the passive intellect cannot keep on knowing these things unless the active intellect illumines them afresh (Walshe, 1979, 29-30).

On this line of thought ‘images’ are first abstracted and then ‘illuminated’ by means of passing them from the active to the passive intellect as described above. This description of how we come to know things is not far removed from Aristotle’s characterization of the role of intelligence (*nous*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in so far as both accounts are concerned with attaining knowledge by means of abstracting universals from experience of particulars. Unfortunately, as an explanation of how the mind works, this type of abstractionism is quite limited, since it presupposes that which needs to be explained.

Briefly, abstracting a universal requires one to identify a ‘likeness’ in the world. But identifying a ‘likeness’, e.g., purple, requires applying, within the abstracting ‘process’, a matching universal. Since, in practice, this matching principle turns out to be the very same ‘likeness’ one is attempting to identify, there seems to be no way for the mind to abstract universals without presupposing their *a priori* existence. Hence, as Eckhart observes, the problem with relying on abstraction is simply that ‘the active intellect cannot give what it has not [already] got’ (Walshe, 1979, 30). And since the active intellect has no power of its own to create *ex nihilo* that which intelligence grasps (in receptivity), an account of how the mind relates to the world that relies on abstracting images from outward things, if it is to have a chance of being sound, must assume that the movement through which likenesses are identified is powered by ultimate Forms, all of which must, in some sense, lie waiting within the abstraction process. Thus, Eckhart is led to rely on the Aristotelian idea that the Forms exist in the mind (*sêle*) in a state of potentiality.

But even this idea is not completely adequate to Eckhart’s understanding of the process in question. This is revealed, for example, when in speaking of God’s perfections (e.g., goodness, truth, justice, love, wisdom, etc.) he writes that,

among perfections in themselves intelligence comes first, and then determinate or indeterminate being.... On the basis of this I show that in God there is no being, determinate or indeterminate.... [In fact] if there is anything in God that you want to call being, it belongs to him through his intelligence (Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974, 46-48).¹

Such insights as this lead Eckhart to a Neo-Platonically influenced account how mind and world relate that relies heavily on the notion of Unity. It is ‘the One’, Eckhart argues, that ultimately possesses the capacity to ‘illuminate’. ‘Likeness in all things,’ he writes ‘... is the birth of the One and the likeness of the One...’ (College and McGinn, 1981, 221). ‘God has hidden [the essence of] all things in himself. They are not this and that, individually distinct, but rather, they are one with unity’ (College and McGinn, 1981, 148). On this line of thought, the illumination of the world involves a reflexivity in which ‘the One’ contacts itself. Hence, Eckhart concludes: ‘It is asked where an image is, in the mirror [i.e., mind] or in the object? The image is in me, of me, and to me. ... Thus, the being of angels [i.e., universals] depends on the presence of the divine mind in which they behold themselves...’ (Blakney, pp. 221-222).²

Such an explanation as this is not easily rendered consistent with Eckhart’s Aristotelian-based explanation – and there are other problems. First, an account of the possibility of experience that relies on a reflexively illuminating ‘One’ runs a high risk of identifying the knower with the known, and hence of being inherently contradictory. Second, since we are only ever able to encounter ‘that which has already been illuminated’ and ‘that which illuminates’ can be none of

¹ In Schürmann, 1978, 189.

² Brackets mine.

these things, the One will admit of no predicates. Hence, neither the Aristotelian nor the Neo-Platonic influenced lines of thought seem satisfactory to Eckhart's understanding of the relationship in question.

2. Now, as a Meister of the Catholic Church, Eckhart's primary concern is not to provide a philosophically coherent account of the possibility of experience. It is rather to educate people of what he takes to be the true nature of the relationship between God and the human soul (*sêle*). As a result, his employment of philosophy is strategic and modified where necessary in service of articulating his fundamental experience of the ground of Being and its relationship to the Christian faith. Eckhart is attempting to express the Truth that reveals itself to a truly detached mind, – a mind that has been co-opted by, or more accurately, *is* God. Eckhart's account of the 'life of the intellect,' in its capacity to render the world intelligible, results in large part from his desire to place the things of the world appropriately as distractions from man's proper aim and destiny. Hence, when Eckhart continues his discussion of the active and passive intellects he writes:

Now observe: what the active intellect does for the natural man, that and far more God does for one with detachment: He *takes away* the active intellect from him, and installing Himself in its stead, He himself undertakes all that the active intellect ought to be doing (Walshe, 1979, 29-30).³

Once again, what the active intellect purportedly does for us is to permit mental content in the passive intellect by introducing 'mental images' therein. What the active intellect ought, according to Eckhart, to be doing is ceasing its 'incessant activity of expecting and rejecting', in order to permit God to reveal himself where he is one and simple (Blakney, 1941, 225). In other words, instead of co-opting God's power, through attachment, to do one's own will in thought, perception, and the like, one ought to remain completely receptive, in order to do God's will and to permit all things to be present in their essence.⁴

By Eckhart's account, when a person is completely detached from self and world a void is created which the One, by necessity of its nature as illuminator, then fills. In this case simple Being is held to manifest and Truth is revealed. This process is clarified by Eckhart in his explication of the following passage from Luke 10:38. He writes:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ went into a little castle and was received by a virgin who was his wife".

Now then, pay close attention to this word: it was necessary that it be a virgin by whom Jesus was received. "Virgin" designates a human being who is devoid of all foreign images and who is as void as he was when he was not yet (Schürmann, 1978, 3).

The first thing to observe about his passage is that the word '*empfangen*', which Eckhart uses for 'receive' in this text, can equally mean 'conceive' (Schürmann, 1979, 11). Since, as Schürmann suggests, Eckhart's sermons are carefully planned, this bivalent use of term seems to imply that the two emergent aspects of the unity he calls the little castle, i.e., the forming (active) and being formed (passive) 'aspects' of the intellect, are in fact one 'movement.' To speak metaphorically with Eckhart, God's knowledge can only be received by a virgin and conceived by a wife, both of

³ The word, which is here being translated as 'detachment,' and elsewhere as 'disinterest,' is *Abgescheidenheit*. For an analysis see Schürmann, 1978, 84-5.

⁴ Eckhart writes: 'Intellect's object and lodgement is essence, not accident (*zuoval*), but pure unmixed being itself' (Walshe, 1979, 31).

which are the same woman. The second thing to observe is that, as Schürmann points out, this is a loose translation; so loose in fact that Eckhart has undoubtedly accommodated it to his own ends (Schürmann, 1979, 10). The reception of Jesus by a 'virgin' is held to signify the fact that for God's knowledge to manifest, the intellect must be completely 'void'. As long as the active intellect is dominant and occupied with abstraction, thought, imagination, and perception, the mind will remain incapable of receiving the Truth. As Eckhart writes: 'No idea represents or signifies itself. It always points to something else, of which it is a symbol. And since man has no ideas, except those abstracted from external things through the sense, he cannot be blessed by an idea' (Blakney, 1941, 98). This argument is analogous to: No interpretation interprets itself. All interpretations (e.g., rules, abstracted principles, symbols, etc.) point to something else. And since all abstracted forms are interpretations. Abstracted forms cannot render content determinant. Hence, as long as one is focused on thought, perception and the like, one cannot begin to approach the 'source' of all these manifestations. If, however, the active intellect can be made 'void' then that Truth manifests that is not an experience in the usual sense. Eckhart suggests that to know this one must:

Look and see: this little castle in the mind (*sêle*) of which I am speaking and which is my intention, is so simple... that if God is ever to catch a glimpse of it, it will cost him all his divine names... You see, insofar as he is one and simple, he penetrates into this unity that I call the little castle in the mind, but otherwise he will not enter into it in any way... With this part of itself the mind is equal to God and not otherwise. What I have told you is the truth; I give you truth itself as witness and my soul as pledge (Schürmann, 1978, 45).

'The little castle in the mind,' is the seat of intention and of the intellect's power of illumination. This power can be directed toward the world through attachment, or it can be returned to itself through detachment. Directed toward the world the little castle is the *means* by which the world is known. Returned to itself it is the revelation of divinity.

But there are problems with Eckhart's account of how the Absolute is able to reveal itself – problems that closely parallel those we encountered in his accounts of the possibility of experience. As Schürmann observes, Eckhart's thoughts on these matters lead to an aporia. On the one hand Eckhart suggests that the Absolute manifests just in case we become 'void', or 'break through beyond everything that has a name,' and on the other hand he suggests that it manifests in letting the 'Son of God be born in you,' – that is, in letting God act in place of the active intellect (Schürmann, 1978, 159). Since there is no clear way, however, for Void to manifest in experience, these lines of thought are inconsistent.⁵

This inconsistency, Schürmann argues, is ultimately resolved by Eckhart through his doctrine of detachment, wherein the bifurcation of that which illuminates and that which is illuminated is transcended.⁶ As Eckhart writes:

Listen closely to the instruction that I am going to give you. I could have so vast an intelligence that all the images that all human beings have ever received and those that are in God himself were comprehended in my intellect; however, if I were in no way attached to

⁵ This is not exactly Schürmann's way of articulating the problem. Schürmann's concern is that, in the first instance, 'being cannot be represented as the union of the mind's being and Son's being' (159). I have identified Eckhart's discussion of 'God acting in place of the active intellect' as another description this union and am following through the implications of this identification for an understanding of Eckhart's account of how experience is possible.

⁶ Cf., for example, Schürmann, 1978, 137-140, and 165.

them, to the point that in everything I do or neglect to do, I did not cling to any of them with attachment – with its before and its after – but if in this present now I kept myself unceasingly free and void for the beloved will of God and its fulfillment, then I should indeed be a virgin, without the views of all the images, as truly as I was when I was not yet (Schürmann, 1978, 3).

In this passage Eckhart suggests that there is a tight connection between attachment, or clinging, and normal temporal awareness. He suggests also that, regardless of what is before one's mind, if one remains completely unattached to it then that void will manifest through which God replaces the active intellect. Eckhart implies, therefore, that in detachment, although the flow of images continues unabated, the One is nevertheless present to itself. Hence, Schürmann's resolution consists simply in the fact that Eckhart maintains that the Void will manifest within the context of what he calls the 'Birth of the Son' – that is, within the context of having God take over from the active intellect.

Unfortunately, there remains a significant problem with Eckhart's proposal. As we saw earlier, Eckhart's account of the possibility of experience, at least in the first instance, relies on the active intellect to abstract images and introduce them to the passive intellect. When God takes over the functions of the active intellect he takes over the responsibility of sustaining the movement of the mind. But if, as Eckhart tells us elsewhere, God's 'movements' do not take time, then there is no clear sense in which God can sustain these movements. According to Eckhart, 'I am cause of myself according to my being which is eternal, but not according to my becoming which is temporal' (in Schürmann, 1978, 219). 'As long as one clings to time, space, number, and quantity, he is on the wrong track and God is strange and far away' (Blakney, 1941, 213). 'God does not see through time, nor does anything new happen in his sight' (86).⁷ In other words, when God takes over the function of the active intellect, Eckhart is left with an atemporal permanent in its stead that, because it is essentially atemporal, cannot provide for that movement of the intellect through which the world is contacted. If Eckhart's aporia is to be resolved, it would seem that there must be a consistent way for God to sustain movement in the mind.

3. Although Schürmann (1978) suggests that Eckhart's *Defense* to charges of heresy is 'uncompromising as to the aporia mentioned above' (160). A partial solution to this problem can be gleaned from it. In Eckhart's *Defense* he sets out three main points from which, he suggests, 'I can clearly demonstrate the truth of everything brought up against me from my books and remarks. I can also show the ignorance and irreverence of my opponents...' (College and McGinn, 1981, 71). The first of his points, is that,

... the absolute acts of the Godhead proceed from God according to the property of his attributes, as a theological maxim says. Hence, in the fifth book of *On Consideration* Bernard says that 'God loves as charity, knows as truth, sits in judgment as justice, rules as majesty,... operates as strength, reveals as light, etc.'

The second is that the good man and goodness are one. The good man insofar as he is good signifies goodness alone, just as something white signifies whiteness. These two things,

⁷ Such being, it would seem, is bereft of all wonder and gets nothing new from things to come or from any chance not because it can tell the future but because it is always already complete. Imagine, for example, an infinite number of parallel complete universes as in Julian Barbour's work on the non-existence of time (for a primer see *Discover*, 2000, Vol. 21, 12, 54-61).

being good and goodness, are univocally one in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (College and McGinn, 1981, 73).⁸

Here Eckhart first suggests that the absolute acts of Godhead proceed from God in the form of his attributes, e.g., goodness. Second, these attributes of God are, insofar as a person is good, identified with that person. Hence, it follows that, insofar as a person is good, the absolute acts of Godhead proceed from God in the form of a person. As Eckhart writes: 'Exert yourself so that the child [i.e., the Son] be not only in the process of being born, but that it be already born, just as in God the Son is always born and in the process of being born. May God help us that this be our destiny. Amen.' (Schürmann, 1978, 170)⁹ In this case the being of the Father, i.e., Unity, is actualized as a function of the intellect through the holy trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – God replaces the active intellect.

How God happens to perform this function of engendering his being is the essentially the subject of Eckhart's third point. He begins by suggesting:

The third is that everything that begets, indeed everything that acts, at that moment possesses two characteristics. The first characteristic is that by nature it does not rest or stop until it introduces its form in what it acts upon and begets. When the form as such has been introduced, bestowed and communicated, it confers existence, as well as everything that belongs to it, namely operation and any type of property. That is why according to Aristotle [*Physics* III, 2 and VII, 1] what has not been moved is not moved, and what does not touch does not act. The second characteristic is that every agent insofar as it is an agent, or everything that begets insofar as it begets, is unbegotten, neither made nor created, because it is not derived from another. For example, the form of a work of art (think of a house in the architect's mind) is a kind of begotten or made offspring. If I may speak in this way, it is created from something outside, namely from a real house or the architect's teacher. It does not beget as such; it is not a father or a principle that produces (College and McGinn, 1981, 73).

Here Eckhart is referring to what he considers to be the essential characteristic of the 'movement' of the intellect – that is, at any given moment, it's 'acting' possesses two characteristics. First, it does not stop until its potential being is rendered actual. Second, 'potential' being is Unconditioned being – i.e., Unity or Void. Hence, Unconditioned being – the Father – is ultimately responsible determining all things – through the Son. Thus, Eckhart continues:

"The Son can do nothing of himself" (Jn. 5:19). From this it clearly follows that the begetter [potential being] and the begotten [actual being] are one in reality, but of opposed and distinct relation, either by a real relation in the Godhead where the relation and the real being are the same thing, or by relation and reason [i.e., judgment] in created things. This is because acting and being acted upon are two equally primary principles but one motion. To move and to be moved according to the nature of their relations begin and end at the same time (College and McGinn, 1981, 73).

From this passage we are able to conclude that whether in the Unconditioned ground of the mind or in the 'movement' of the mind the Universal and the particular are One. This can be seen, he

⁸ God is the active form of Godhead.

⁹ And elsewhere: 'God desires urgently that you, the creature, get out of his way - as if his own blessedness depends on it' (Blakney, 1941, 127).

suggests, both in the ground of the mind, accepting for the moment the idea that all forms exist there potentially, in terms of relation (e.g., goodness) and real being (e.g., the good), and in our experience of the world by means of relation and reason (e.g., the perception of a white object involves the application of a universal, etc.). These relations, however, since they begin and end at the same time, are, as absurd as this may sound, fundamentally atemporal.

If one accepts these premises it follows that God is able to replace the active intellect in detachment because at any given moment the active and passive intellects are two aspects of a single reality – a reality that is bifurcated through our worldly attachment. Consistent with his Christian mission, this fact effectively renders self, world, and the philosophical problems that experience gives birth to, as mere creaturely truths, or perhaps as illusions, to be transcended in detachment. Only in detachment is the veil lifted to reveal the Unity of all things. But this Unity is not something that can be experienced, since ‘a consciousness of it’ would require the very two aspects that detachment necessarily transcends, i.e., the knower and the known.

It is somewhat misleading, therefore, for Schürmann to suggest that Eckhart resolves the aporia to which his thoughts lead. What he does is to attempt to teach us how, in detachment, it may be dissolved. Detachment, since it transcends the knower and the known, also transcends the dilemmas imposed on the knower by the known. In being/becoming, which is One, the categories of being and non-being, movement and rest, illuminator and illuminated, form part of the already fragmented world of attachment and so are not wholly adequate to the ‘phenomenon’ under investigation. For Eckhart, thinking, imagining, judging, and perceiving lead only to an inferior sort of knowledge (Blakney, 1941, 79). In the end, he suggests that God manifests *in fluxu et fieri* (Schürmann, 1978, 88).¹⁰ In ‘becoming’, analogically speaking, Universal Being flows and gels into particular being. But since these ‘movements’ begin and end at the same time, they are in fact not movements at all. Instead, as he tells us elsewhere, time, space, and all things in it, come from these ‘movements’.¹¹

¹⁰ *Fieri* is the passive form of the Medieval Latin *facere* a polyvalent term that primarily designates the formation of something. Cf. also where Schürmann (1978) writes: ‘The difficulty in reading Eckhart consists in thinking of this kind of identity *in fluxu et fieri*.’ (162)

¹¹ He writes: ‘The course of heaven is outside time - and yet time comes from its movements. Nothing hinders the soul’s knowledge of God as much as time and space, for time and space are fragments, whereas God is one! And, therefore, if the soul is to know God, it must know him above time and outside of space; for God is neither this nor that, as are these manifold things. God is One!’ (Blakney, 1941, 131)

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