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A TRIAL OF INTERPRETATION
OF MEISTER ECKHART'S THOUGHT ON GOD AND MAN
THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF ITS PARADOXES

One of the main difficulties in the proper understanding of the nature of Eckhart's reflection is a sort of self-complacency of many historians of philosophy who, in order to interpret this thinker, use the usual methods of their profession but are not able to grasp the inner dynamism of his thought. All too often when they are reading Eckhart they are very quick in naming different aspects of his thought using the well-known categories of the history of ancient and medieval philosophy: Neoplatonic, Thomistic etc. After naming them in this way, they suppose the task of understanding him is accomplished. What is missing, however, is the genuine will to understand Eckhart philosophically as a living and reflecting person, with all his complexities, ambiguities and contradictions. From this perspective it can be noticed that, of course, he was influenced by Neoplatonic, Thomistic and other trends of Western Philosophy, but only discovering these trends does not get us very close to adequate understanding of his thought. Therefore, it is essential to interpret him not only in terms of history of philosophy but first of all in terms and perspective of philosophy, particularly that kind of philosophy that will be able to adequately interpret his inconsistencies and paradoxes.

There is another problem that prevents us from adequately interpreting Eckhart. It is a religiously motivated conviction that he was in fact a holy person and that in spite of being unjustly condemned by Pope John XXII, he was a very good Christian and Catholic. There are some voices that claim

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that he deserves to be declared a saint of the Catholic Church. The assumption lying behind all these ideas is a conviction that since he was a great mystic—and most commentators agree that he was—who else could he be than a holy person? A well known historian of mysticism Bernard McGinn included in the title of his book on Eckhart a religious glorification of the mystic as he called him “the man from whom God hid nothing.”¹ This “worshipping” method of analyzing Eckhart is surely not able to grasp the extent to which his thinking has been marked by his lively personality full of contradictions. For this is quite understandable that someone who is supposed to be a moral and religious pattern cannot be a source of a too big amount of contradictions, as, I suppose, Eckhart’s thought was, not to mention contradictory ideas on man and God.

Let us start our reflection with the presentation of Eckhart’s contradictory ideas on God. Then we will move on to the presentation of his inconsistent views on man. After sketching some theories that are trying to explain the inconsistencies in Eckhart and after showing their deficiencies, I will be trying to suggest a conception that, in my view, is the best suited for the right understanding of the mystic. This conception assumes that the main tendency of his axiological as well as intellectual endeavors was to find a salvific power. I believe that the *ascertaining of the fact* of the ambivalent nature of power, which will be analyzed in this article shortly, can bring us to a more adequate understanding of Eckhart’s inconsistencies.

1. ECKHART’S INCONSISTENT VIEWS ON GOD

There seem to be three independent concepts of God in the reflection of Eckhart:

¹ Bernard MCGINN, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad Publishing/Herder & Herder, 2003). Of course we must admit that if we assume that Eckhart was a person who knew all comprehensible truths of mystical life, we take a very risky approach since we deprive ourselves of the critical method of analyzing the thinker. This particular nickname attributed by McGinn to Eckhart is all the more doubtful as it assumes that McGinn himself knows mysteries of the mystical life as well as or even better than Eckhart did. Since he is able to evaluate the truth of Eckhart’s mystical thinking saying that God hid nothing from him, he lets us suppose that in fact his knowledge of mystical life and of what God can reveal to people is complete. It assumes not only that McGinn knew everything about the mystical life but more importantly that he experienced all that Eckhart has reportedly experienced, that he is a mystic himself. Can’t that be a too broad area of expertise?

- 1) personal—in this concept One is the Father giving birth to his Son;
- 2) impersonal—in this concept One is not the Father (either the Son, or the Holy Spirit);
- 3) “nihilistic”—in this concept God is nothingness and cannot be described at all.

The most dominant concept of God in Eckhart's thought is the personal concept. This is, biographically speaking, consistent with his being a Christian and an important person in the authorities of the Dominican Order of his day. In fact, the birth of God in the soul, the main idea of Eckhart's mystic, would be quite incomprehensible outside of the framework of this concept. It is by giving birth to his Son that the birth of God in the soul takes place. Thus, Eckhart fully confirms the Trinitarian concept of God. It is quite clear we have plenty of instances of this confirmation in his writing so there is no need to prove that approach by putting forward relevant quotations.

Here we must notice at once that from this perspective all apophatic approach in Eckhart must be deemed very limited. Far from any apophatism is not only the idea of the Son's being born by the Father but also frequently repeated statements about God as a good and a quite knowable being. Goodness is an essential part of the divine being in this Trinitarian conceptual framework of the German mystic as it is a part of any Trinitarian concept. Therefore Eckhart can say, for instance, that “all goodness flows forth from the superfluity of God's goodness”² or that “the soul cannot find peace with any but God, for in Him she finds all goodness collected together.”³

IMPERSONAL GOD

We would be, however, very far from the adequate understanding of Eckhart's thought in all its intricacies if we agreed that this is the only concept of God that is present in his writing. Apart from the personal concept of God in his texts, we can find a completely different concept of God that cannot be harmonized with the personal one. It is the concept of God perceived of as an impersonal being. In this impersonal concept of God, the Trinity seems to draw its existence from One (here the influence of Plotinus, Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysios is surely dominant) and One is not described in any personal terms. Another famous name for thus conceived Absolute is *gotheit* (Godhead).

² *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'Connell Walshe (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), *Sermon 51*, 270. All the quotations from Eckhart in this article are based on this edition of his writings.

³ *Ibid.*, *Sermon 84*, 414.

It must be underlined that Eckhart never talks directly about any kind of the Trinity being emanated from the One that is Godhead. We rather have to deduce the concept of that emanation from statements he makes on some other topics that seem to express this view in a more roundabout way. In those statements he describes the way in which THE SOUL OR THE PERSONAL GOD CAN ENTER INTO GODHEAD. As we will see, in the same vein it must be also noted that Eckhart does not state the impersonal character of God directly, but only indirectly. Let us have a closer look at the Eckhartian impersonal concept of God. In a sermon Eckhart says:

So one and simple is this citadel in the soul that “for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside, should He ever look in there. But only insofar as He is one and indivisible, without mode or properties, (can He do this): in that sense He is neither Father, Son, nor Holy Ghost, and yet is a Something which is neither this nor that.”⁴

As we can see, the idea of personal God is nullified in the face of the higher and, more importantly, more genuine impersonal God who forms unity with the highest element of the human soul.

The acceptance of impersonal God seems to take place also in his view that no name can be ascribed to God. And yet it is clear that the personal concept of God, as it is taught in the Christian doctrine, assumes that God should have names: at least the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as well as the name of loving and good person, to mention only the most important names of that fundamental Christian concept.⁵ Whereas in the personal concept the Absolute was definitely the Father, in the impersonal concept this idea is no longer valid. Impersonal Absolute is not the Father, the Son nor the Holy Ghost but “the silent desert”:

I declare in all truth, by the eternal and everlasting truth, that this light [of the soul] is not content with the simple changeless divine being which neither gives nor takes: rather it seeks to know whence this being comes, it wants to get into its simple ground, into the silent desert into which no distinction ever peeped, of Father, Son or Holy Ghost.⁶

⁴ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, Sermon 8*, 81.

⁵ A Polish Eckhart scholar Józef Piórczyński also rightly says that “nameless God cannot be a personal God.” Józef PIÓRCZYŃSKI, *Mistrz Eckhart. Mistyka jako filozofia* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997), 29.

⁶ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, Sermon 60*, 310–311.

It is not difficult to imagine that whereas in the personal concept God is given, as we have seen, an attribute of goodness, in the impersonal one all traditional divine attributes (goodness included) are external to Godhead:

If I say God is good, that adds something [...]. The soul receives the God-head as it is purified in itself, with nothing added, with nothing thought.⁷

It must be of no surprise to us when we hear that those who cared for the orthodoxy in the Catholic Church did not feel very comfortable with Eckhart's impersonal statements. In the bull *In agro Dominico*, Pope John XII found the denial of goodness of God unacceptable. The statement attributed to Eckhart "God is neither good nor better nor best. When I call God good I speak as falsely as if I were to call white black" was found erroneous or tainted with heresy.⁸ It may be noted that also in the contemporary teaching of the Catholic Church Eckhart's name is linked with the impersonal concept of God that is distinctively deemed unorthodox.⁹

"NIHILIST" CONCEPT OF THE ABSOLUTE

Finally, we can find a third theological trend in Eckhart's reflection that to a large degree differs from the impersonal concept of Absolute and clearly distinguishes itself from the personal one. The third concept may be called a "nihilist" one. This concept is formulated at the highest level of apophaticity. Eckhart says:

For God is nothing: not in the sense of having no being. He is neither this nor that that one can speak of: He is being above all being. He is beingless being.¹⁰

It is quite understandable that thus conceived, God cannot be described as good or loving as it was the case in the personal concept. But he also cannot

⁷ Ibid., *Sermon 97*, 467.

⁸ *In agro Dominico*, Ibid., 28.

⁹ In the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* the idea of "indeterminate abyss of the divinity" that is deprived of the attribute of love (or goodness) is mentioned. After saying that, Cardinal Ratzinger, who is the author of the letter, refers to Meister Eckhart. "They [some people] make use of a 'negative theology,' [...] they propose abandoning not only meditation on the salvific works accomplished in history by the God of the Old and New Covenant, but also the very idea of the One and Triune God, who is Love, in favor of an immersion 'in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity'." *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1989), 16. In the footnote we read: "Meister Eckhart speaks of an immersion 'in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity' which is a 'darkness in which the light of the Trinity never shines.' Cf. Sermo 'Ave Gratia Plena' in fine (J. Quint, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, Hanser 1955, 261)." Ibid.

¹⁰ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, Sermon 62*, 316–17

be described as One, which was acceptable on the ground of the impersonal concept. Eckhart says: “But if God is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing: he is neither this nor that.”¹¹ Or: “I cannot see what is one. He saw nothing, that is: God.”¹² It must be underlined that all these three concepts of Absolute certainly cannot be just different ways of speaking about one and the same God because in each of them other concepts of Absolute are openly contradicted. In the impersonal concept a name or goodness are declaratively not attributed to God, which was self-evident in his personal concept of God. The “nihilist” concept of God plainly rejected all attributes to God, even those, like the attribute of One, that was referred to God by Eckhart in his personal and impersonal statements.

2. ECKHART’S INCONSISTENT VIEWS ON MAN

Eckhart’s idea of man is also marked by remarkable inconsistencies. First he clearly expresses the hylomorphist conception of man. This is seen in this fragment of his sermon:

But although the spirit is rational and does the entire work that is wrought in the body, yet we should not say, my soul knows or does this or that, but rather we should say, I do or know this or that, on account of the close union between the two: for both together make up a man.¹³

This idea of perfect unity between body and soul can hardly be reconciled with his other statements in which we can notice clear Platonic tendencies. Platonic radical dualism is clear in his description of the body as the prison of the soul:

The word that denotes the soul means the soul as she is in the prison of the body [...] whatever the soul is in herself, that she can think of, refers to her as she is in her prison.¹⁴

Eckhart acknowledges clearly in a Platonic way that “vere carcer animae ... corpus.”¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., *Sermon 54*, 287.

¹² Ibid., *Sermon 19*, 140.

¹³ Ibid., *Sermon 23*, 157.

¹⁴ Ibid., *Sermon 21*, 149.

¹⁵ MEISTER ECKHART, *Sermones*, ed. Ernst Benz, Bruno Decker, and Joseph Koch. Die lateinischen Werke, Bd. 4 (Stuttgart: Kohl, 1956), 459.

These two traditional, Aristotelian and Platonic concepts of man are accompanied in Eckhart's thought by the trichotomous concept of man that is typical for his anthropological reflection and that seems to be rooted in Origen and Neoplatonic concepts. In his trichotomous concept man is divided not only into body and soul but into three elements: body, soul and the spark of the soul (or ground of the soul).

Having said that, we must bear in mind that also in the concept of the spark of the soul Meister Eckhart is ambiguous. An accurate analysis of his writing seems to show that there are at least two concepts of the spark of the soul. In one concept, it is conceived of as the participant of the Trinitarian life and as such it corresponds to his key doctrine of the birth of God in the soul. In the second concept, the spark of the soul is perceived of as the One higher than the personal God himself.

Eckhart conceives the spark of the soul as the participant of the Trinitarian life when he says:

All that God works in all the saints, that He works in the inmost part of the soul. The Father bears His son in the inmost part of the soul [...]¹⁶

But he also says elsewhere that the spark of the soul is a completely different entity, namely, it is One that is higher than personal, Trinitarian God. In this vein he says in a sermon:

It ["one power in soul"] is so pure, so high and so noble in itself that no creature can enter it—only God dwells in there. In very truth, God Himself cannot enter there as long as He has any mode: neither as being wise, nor as being good nor as being rich. God cannot enter there in any mode: He can only enter there in the nakedness of the divine nature.¹⁷

The same idea is expressed also in another sermon:

God Himself never looks in there [the spark of the soul, the highest element of the soul] for one instant, insofar as He exists in modes and in the properties of His persons.¹⁸

Whether a participant of Trinitarian life or a being located "over" the Trinity, the spark is regarded by Eckhart as uncreated:

¹⁶ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, Sermon 18*, 134.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *Sermon 80*, 400.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *Sermon 8*, 81.

There is a power in the soul, of which I have spoken before. If the whole soul were like it, she would be uncreated and uncreatable [...]¹⁹

There is something in the soul that is so near akin to God [...] Nothing created has anything in common with it. All created things are nothing. But this is remote and alien from all creation. If man were wholly thus he would be wholly uncreated and uncreatable.²⁰

It is clear that the concept of man containing an uncreated element differs quite remarkably from any dualistic concepts of man that can be traced back in the history of Christian anthropology.

3. INTERPRETATIONS OF ECKHARTIAN CONTRADICTIONS

Let us now try to approach the interpretation of Eckhart's reflection. As it is suggested by the title of this article, we are going to do it through the interpretation of his paradoxes, the sample of which I have just presented.

There are at least three main interpretations of Eckhart's inconsistencies. The most frequent seems to be an "apophatic" one according to which the mystical experience that Eckhart allegedly went through could be expressed only in contradictions. It is claimed that all mystical experience of any mystic can be expressed only in this way. Among many authors this view has been maintained by Bert Blans,²¹ Reiner Schürmann,²² Denys Turner,²³ Joseph Quint²⁴ or Peter Reiter.²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid., *Sermon 24*, 161.

²⁰ Ibid., *Sermon 57*, 296–97.

²¹ Bert BLANS, "Cloud of Unknowing. An Orientation in Negative Theology from Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart and John of the Cross to Modernity," in *Flight of the Gods. Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse Nina Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 58–77.

²² Reiner SCHÜRMAN, Introduction to *Wandering Joy. Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy*, trans. and commentary by Reiner Schürmann (Great Barrington, Mass.: Lindisfarne Books, 2001), xx.

²³ Denys TURNER, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 151.

²⁴ Joseph QUINT, "Mystik und Sprache. Ihr Verhältnis in der spekulativen Mystik Meister Eckharts," *Deutsche Vierteljahrszeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 27 (1953): 63.

²⁵ Peter REITER, *Der Seele Grund. Meister Eckhart und die Tradition der Seelenlehre* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1993), 47.

We must say that this kind of explanation does not seem to be quite convincing. The main criticism that can be directed at it is that its followers assume that they are what they apparently cannot be. It seems that in order to maintain this interpretation one should be a mystic oneself. If one says that contradictions are always a fruit of mystical experience, one must be regarded as the one who already had this experience, too. Otherwise, since contradictions can be noticed not only in mystical writing, but can be seen also in strictly philosophical or theological texts, how would one know that that is a key feature of mysticism only? If, on the other hand, one is a scholar, and does not pretend to present his or her interpretation as a mystic, how can one know what happens in the consciousness of a mystic experiencing all the things that mystics talk about? How can one prove that mystics are more prone to expound contradictions than any other religious people, theologians or philosophers? Apparently those who maintain these contradictory interpretations of mysticism are pretending to have more knowledge than they seem to be entitled to.

There is also another interpretation of Eckhart's contradictions that can be called "educational." According to this interpretation, inconsistencies that can be found in Eckhart's mystical thought were meant to shock his listeners (it is known that his mystical thought is expressed in sermons that he preached to nuns). So this contradictory way of speaking is said to be the Eckhart's way to attract the attention of his listeners to the message that in itself was not contradictory.²⁶ We can find that this interpretation is also difficult to accept because it seems to be itself inconsistent. For if Eckhart's purpose had been really to shock his listeners through pronouncing contradictions, his preaching would have been devoid of any message. If he had used contradictions as an educational tool, it would mean that also his message was contradictory and in fact he had nothing to teach. The fact is, however, that Eckhart was very eager to deliver a message to his listeners. Apparently he was convinced he was teaching them something and not only shocked them with inconsistencies.

There is also what can be called a "methodological" interpretation of Eckhart's inconsistencies. It says that Eckhart practiced a special method of philosophizing consisting in putting forward arguments for and against each set of theses. Frederick Copleston wrote that Eckhart "was accustomed to

²⁶ See Oliver DAVIES, Introduction to MEISTER ECKHART, *Selected writings*, selected and trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), xxxii; Benoît BEYER DE RYKE, *Maître Eckhart. Avec choix de textes* (Paris: Éditions Entrelacs, 2004), 84.

use antinomies, to state a thesis and give reasons for it, and then to state an antithesis and give reasons for it. Obviously both sets of statements must be taken into consideration if Eckhart's meaning and intention are to be understood."²⁷ In this way Copleston was trying to understand the inconsistencies between Eckhart's views from *Quaestiones Parisienses* and those from *Opus propositionum*.²⁸ In the former work the mystic is saying God is *intelligere* that is beyond *esse*²⁹ and in the latter one he is stating that "esse deus est."³⁰ The problem is, however, that Eckhart never mentions that he uses such a method of thinking or writing. The "methodological" interpretation can be valid for his Latin works, for we can assume that they have been read by the Scholastics, who understood his style of thought. But it is not in the Latin works that Eckhart is presenting his contradictory, mystical ideas. Therefore I think we have the full right to expect that in his sermons he should explain, if he used it at all, his method which would consist in thinking in antinomies. His mystical reflections were addressed to nuns, so to people who had no knowledge of sophisticated scholastic methods and had no understanding for the unconventional use of antinomies. We could suspect there would be no point in preaching contradictory statements without telling the nuns eventually which statement of an antinomy is binding. In his sermons Eckhart does not tell us that he uses this method, nor does he make us sure which of his contradictory statements is the right one. He seems to accept all statements as true. Therefore we can suspect that what we call a "methodological" interpretation does not bring us any closer to a more adequate understanding of Eckhart's contradictions.

4. ECKHART'S MYSTICAL SEARCH OF SALVIFIC POWER

In my opinion, Eckhart's contradictions on God and man should be understood as an expression of his continual mystical SEARCH FOR SALVIFIC POWER. In his search for the salvific power, Eckhart is "trying" different

²⁷ Cf. Frederick COPLESTON, *History of Philosophy. Late Medieval and Renaissance* (New York, London: Doubleday, 1993), 188.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 184–206.

²⁹ "[...] Deus est intellectus et intelligere et est ipsum intelligere fundamentum ipsius esse." MEISTER ECKHART, *Die lateinischen Werke*, Bd. 5 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936), 54.

³⁰ MEISTER ECKHART, *Die lateinischen Werke*, Bd. 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964), 166. The same expression *Esse est deus* can be found in *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*. *Ibid.*, 156.

views on God and man in order to find out whether they can bring him closer to the salvation from all sorts of things that turn out to be unsatisfactory. If a view seems to be satisfactory and potent, or if the view affirms reality that is religiously powerful, he accepts it and enthusiastically declares its truth with a high level of self-confidence. If after some time he finds no power in it, he overcomes it, expounding another, often an opposite view. This way of accepting and overcoming seems to create the most fundamental structural framework in which Eckhartian thought moved and which seems to account for inconsistencies in his writing.

I think that intermingling of power and cognition that is assumed in my interpretation of Eckhart is allowed as we find that his thinking, particularly in its mystical part, has always been, as we would say today, "existentialist." The existential perspective of Eckhart's thinking means that he is focused on the "participation in being," not on "contemplating being."³¹ Eckhart can rightly be called a "mystical existentialist"³² whose main purpose is not *scire propter ipsum scire* but the desire of salvation. This desire of salvation must be realized, of course, not only through emotions and deeds but also through philosophical and theological statements. It is so because the latter has the power to inform the former. And as the search for salvific power is an existential, sometimes unconscious process, we cannot expect that it will be always clear for the mystic himself.

Let us notice that in spite of appearances, by speaking about power, we do not put ourselves far away from religion. On the contrary, we seem to get very close to its genuine language. First it should be noted that power may be violence but not necessarily *ex definitione* violence. Power can also be used for good purposes; moreover, religious salvation cannot be understood without God being powerful. Only his strong hand can carry a believer through the all valleys of darkness. That is why a phrase from the Psalms "God [is] our refuge and strength" (Psalm 46:2) is by no means an expression of God's violence but is an expression of his power without which there would be no hope for salvation. Without a sense of power of God there would be also no religion whatsoever: religious people would not pray to him if it were clear to them that God is not powerful enough to do anything to help them. In the Christian idea of God, his goodness and love are emphasized but it is evident

³¹ C[arl] F[ranklin] KELLY, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1977), 58.

³² See John HALDANE, *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and Philosophical*, London: Routledge, 2004), 25.

for any Christian that religious life would become slowly dead if this loving God would turn out to be an impotent, deist God. In order to understand the desire of salvation we must refer to the language of power.

Even at first sight, we can observe that this language of power is not uncommon for many Eckhartian images and statements. For our purposes it is important to show that Eckhart used the language of power in his description of the mystical search for God: “The soul should never cease UNTIL SHE WORKS AS POWERFULLY AS GOD (*gewaltic als got*).”³³ This Eckhartian search of God and power is stated clearly in another statement in which he says that one of the three higher faculties of the human soul, namely *irascibilis*³⁴, a faculty whose connection with the will to power cannot be overlooked, cannot even accept the fact that God is higher than itself. The will to power as Eckhart conceives it, desires to OVERCOME GOD HIMSELF:

The second [human power] [*irascibilis*] is the upward striving power, whose special function it is to strive aloft. [...] She cannot tolerate that anything should be above her; I think she CANNOT EVEN TOLERATE GOD’S BEING ABOVE HER [...].³⁵

Of course we do not have much room here for a presentation of a more complex theory of power. I have presented a trial of such theory in my other publications.³⁶ In the reflection on the nature of power I draw significantly on the reflection of Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher of will to power and Gerardus van der Leeuw, a scientist of religion focused on the importance of power in the religious experience. Here I can only suggest some general remarks, conclusions rather than arguments.

Generally speaking, we can distinguish two sorts of power. One is what can be called the POWER OF WHAT IS, the other is THE POWER OF OVERCOMING OR SELF-OVERCOMING. Referring to the common intuition about it, we can say power is everything that can INFLUENCE any external or internal reality. Therefore at the most elementary level, power is, for instance, political dominance, the physical force, a healthy body, instincts, sex. All these things easily influence the outside world in one way or another. We can also say that at an even more elementary level, everything that exists, if it really

³³ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, Sermon 48*, 260 (emphasis is mine).

³⁴ “The highest powers of the soul are three: the first is knowledge, the second is *irascibilis*, which is an upward striving power, and the third is will.” *Ibid., Sermon 52*, 276.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 277 (emphasis is mine).

³⁶ See Zbigniew KAŻMIERCZAK, *Paradoks i zbawienie. Antropologia filozoficzna Mistra Eckharta i Jana od Krzyża* (Białystok: Trans humana, 2009), 546–98.

exists, is power. Existence itself is power. By saying that I do not mean any energetic concept of being according to which reality is a sum of energy. What I mean here are two things. First, that dynamical elements of being are able to influence other elements of being, sometimes in a very remarkable way (like a thunderstorm or the nuclear reaction). Second, existence can influence anything that is situated outside of it by creating an obstacle or giving resistance and thus forcing other beings to MODIFY their behavior. The more obstacles and resistance it produces, the more behavior modifications it involves and the more powerful it is. So, summarizing, we can say the power of what is consists in INFLUENCING OTHER BEINGS EITHER BY ITS OWN DYNAMISM, OR BY FORCING OTHER BEINGS TO MODIFY THEIR DYNAMISM. Modifying someone else's dynamism can be indeed a huge power as we can see, for instance, from the power attributed to big mountains. Big mountains in fact do not do anything and yet are perceived of by all the cultures as the vehicle of remarkable power. It is so because a mountain can efficiently modify people's behavior.

Now let us concentrate on the power of overcoming or self-overcoming. This form of power arises from overcoming the power of what is. The human person can achieve this power either by overcoming something outside of him (like other people, his tribe, his nation, his religion) or inside of him (like sexual drives). The power of (self)-overcoming is crucial in some or most religions. For instance, the asceticism, which is in many religions perceived of as a road to and a sign of the Supranatural, is so overwhelmingly impressive for some people because it is just THE POWER, namely, the power of self-overcoming. Some people even worship ascetics because in fact they worship the power of self-overcoming that is actualized in them.

The power of self-overcoming was almost worshipped in the Socratic and Platonic as well as in the Hellenistic and neo-Platonic philosophies. It is rudimentary in Hinduism and Buddhism. In Hinduism it is called *tapas*. Mircea Eliade writes:

This term ['tapas'] (lit. 'heat,' 'ardor') is used to designate ascetic effort in general. [...] Its powers are creative on both the cosmic and the spiritual planes; through tapas the ascetic becomes clairvoyant and even incarnates the gods. Prajapati creates the world by 'heating' himself to an extreme degree through asceticism [...]. For Brahmanic speculation, Prajapati was himself the product of tapas [...]³⁷

³⁷ Mircea ELIADE, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard. R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 106

The power of self-overcoming is a matter of course for the philosopher of the will to power, Friedrich Nietzsche. By the attraction that self-overcoming (*Selbstüberwindung*) exerts on people, Nietzsche explained—and he did it by no means in the anticlerical tone—the veneration that people have for Catholic priests. According to him, lay Catholics have been fascinated by the priests’ overcoming “the beast” in man and their contempt for life.³⁸ Also personally Nietzsche viewed some degree of self-overcoming that he was able to achieve in his life as his only achievement at all.³⁹

Eckhart was quite familiar with the importance of the power of self-overcoming. He says in one of his sermons: “It [moon] is never so powerful as when it is furthest from the earth: then it draws the sea out furthest. [...] The more the soul is raised above earthly things, the stronger she is.”⁴⁰ Only through this power of self-overcoming man is able to reach God’s power:

What are the Father’s attributes? Power is ascribed to Him more than to the other two Persons. And so, none assuredly can experience or approach this birth without a mighty effort. A man cannot attain to this birth except by withdrawing his senses from all things. And that requires a mighty effort to drive back the powers of the soul and inhibit their functioning. This must be done with force; without force it cannot be done. As Christ said, “The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matt. 11:12).⁴¹

Important for our interpretation of Eckhart’s inconsistencies is the fact that because of Eckhart’s being a mystical existentialist, the law of axiological self-overcoming can be also applied to his intellectual search. At the root of Eckhart’s inconsistencies there seems to be a dynamic search for salvific power that carries him high above all accepted ideas of God and man that from time to time seem to him impotent. He accepts the traditional, personal concept of God because he perceives power in it but eventually finds it impotent. The result is that he overcomes it, declaring that the Absolute is the impersonal Godhead. By overcoming the personal idea of God, he acquired the power that comes from the fact of overcoming of all those millions of people who believe in the personal God as well as of overcoming himself in

³⁸ Cf. Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, trans. Reginald J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1, 60 (p. 36–37).

³⁹ Cf. *Friedrich Nietzsches Briefwechsel mit Franz Overbeck*, ed. Richard Oehler and Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1916), 187.

⁴⁰ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart, Sermon 67*, 345.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, *Sermon 3*, 46. We can notice that the traditional idea of God’s grace plays no role in this reaching God.

his being a Christian and maintaining Christian theological doctrine. But after some time he also became weary of this intellectual situation and felt himself impelled to overcome it, declaring that God is just pure nothingness. But here the story of Eckhart's search for salvific power is not finished yet. Also this "nihilist" view seems impotent to him after some time, which makes him embrace a personal or an impersonal concept. And then again the process repeats itself.

The same story goes with the way he approaches his concept of man. Eckhart accepts the Thomistic concept of man, underlining power in God's created matter, confirming the value of energies that are contained in the body. But eventually he finds this view impotent, which makes him accept a more traditional Platonic concept. This shift is quite understandable if we consider his personal situation of being a celibate monk. In the same manner as one overcomes body for the sake of the soul and gains what one thinks is a spiritual power, Eckhart overcomes Thomism for the sake of Platonism. But finally even the Platonic concept of man turns out to be impotent for him so he overcomes it by saying there is a higher reality in human soul. This reality is called the spark of the soul or the ground of the soul and is made of more noble substance than the immortal soul in the typical dualism. It is uncreated. We can understand now why it was important for Eckhart to attribute such an unexpected character to the sparkle. It had to be more divine than a "regular" but still very divine immortal soul because otherwise his process of (self)overcoming could not be deemed successful. After some time, however, Eckhart seems to be weary of the power he noticed in the sparkle of the soul. Then his search for salvific power makes him return to the Thomistic or the Platonic concept of man. And then again the process repeats itself.

Because the search for salvific power is for Eckhart, as it is for any other philosopher, a search for a power that is ambivalent in nature and because of the fact that this search is in itself an existential process, we cannot expect that there will be some logic or consistency in his thought, some visible gradual progress, ascension in the process of creating of coherent doctrine. For power, let us repeat again, is ambivalent in nature: it can be achieved both by accepting what is and by overcoming of what is and what has been accepted.

Only a person who is aware of the intricacies of power in all its ambivalence might be able not to fall in the trap of the ambivalence of power. Because of his being an existentialist thinker, Eckhart apparently was not quite

aware of this ambivalence. But it does not mean he was not a great thinker. Also another great thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche, who was the philosopher who showed to the Western world the idea of the will to power as an important human drive, himself fell into the traps of this ambivalence.⁴² It is because of the mystical search of salvific power that Eckhart's writings are to some extent similar to those of Nietzsche. A historian of medieval philosophy Joseph Bernhart rightly noted those similarities:

Both Eckhart and Nietzsche fulfill at the turn of times a law that has been observed by Heraclitus: things can always change into their opposition. Both have not finished with one thing, when they desire something else. They are double-sided (*zwieschlächtig*), having two souls (*doppelseelig*), take turns to talk from two spheres in which they are quarrelling, contradicting themselves, canceling themselves."⁴³

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⁴² See my book on Nietzsche as a renovator of the primitive mentality: Zbigniew KAŻMIERCZAK, *Friedrich Nietzsche jako odnowiciel umysłowości pierwotnej. Analiza w kontekście fenomenologii Gerardusa van der Leeuwa* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000).

⁴³ Joseph BERNHART, *Die philosophische Mystik des Mittelalters von ihren antiken Ursprüngen bis zur Renaissance. Mit Schriften und Beiträgen zum Thema aus den Jahren 1912-1969*, ed. Manfred Weitlauff (Weissenhorn: Anton H. Konrad, 2000), 798.

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PRÓBA INTERPRETACJI MYŚLI ECKHARTA
O BOGU I CZŁOWIEKU POPRZEZ ANALIZĘ JEJ PARADOKSÓW

Streszczenie

Artykuł próbuje zinterpretować sprzeczności dotyczącego Boga i człowieka, zawarte w pismach Mistrza Eckharta, jako rezultat egzystencjalnego poszukiwania zbawczej mocy. Moc jako taka ma ambiwalentną naturę. Z jednej strony jest mocą tego, co jest, z drugiej mocą (samo)przewyciężenia (tego, co jest). Myśl Eckharta jest myślą egzystencjalną, obejmującą całego człowieka, łącznie z jego elementem nieświadomym. To wyjaśnia, dlaczego, szukając zbawczej mocy, mistyk nie do końca był świadomy ambiwalentnej natury mocy. Artykuł przedstawia, jak Eckhart, kierując się pragnieniem zbawczej mocy, akceptuje, a następnie przewycięża kolejne ujęcia Boga i człowieka. Ukazane są trzy główne, funkcjonujące w studiach nad Eckhartem interpretacje jego sprzeczności („apofatyczna”, „edukacyjna” i „metodologiczna”) oraz argumenty przeciw ich trafności.

A TRIAL OF INTERPRETATION
OF MEISTER ECKHART'S THOUGHT ON GOD AND MAN
THROUGH THE ANALYSIS OF ITS PARADOXES

S u m m a r y

This article interprets Eckhart's contradictions by presenting them as a result of an existential search for salvific power. It is shown that power is ambivalent in nature: it is the power of what is and the power of (self)overcoming (of what is). Just because power is in itself ambivalent and the process of searching for it existentialist (so not completely conscious), Eckhart's mystical texts are full of contradictions and the German mystic is apparently not aware of it. The sample of them is shown in this article with regard to his ideas on God and man. Three other interpretations of Eckhart's ("apophatic," "educational," "methodological") are presented and argued against.

Key words: contradictions; Eckhart; mysticism; interpretation of contradictions; God; man; power; will to power; salvation; Nietzsche.

Słowa kluczowe: sprzeczności; Eckhart; mistyka; interpretacja sprzeczności; Bóg; człowiek; moc; wola mocy; zbawienie; Nietzsche.

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