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Meister Eckhart's Understanding of God

Markus Enders (*Freiburg*)

The intention of the present essay is to sketch the basic features of Meister Eckhart's understanding of God. Essentially, we shall follow the development of his thinking from its beginning, in order to demonstrate the continuity at least of the core of Eckhart's understanding of God. We shall conclude by summarizing the essential definitions of God as Meister Eckhart understands these.

1.

The understanding of God in Eckhart's Discourses of Instruction

In the first chapter of his early *Discourses of Instruction*, Eckhart writes that the only reason why God bestows all his gifts is in order that he may bestow his own self.¹ Already in this

¹ See Meister Eckhart, "Reden der Unterscheidung," in: *Die deutschen Werke* (= DW), eds. Josef Quint and Georg Steer, 5, Stuttgart 1958ff., pp. 278,14-279,2: "Wan got engibet keine gâbe noch nie gegap, daz man die gâbe hæte und dar ane geruowete; sunder alle die gâbe, die er ie gegap im himel und ûf erden, die gap er alle dar umbe, daz er éine gâbe gen möhte: daz was er selber. Mit disen gâben allen wil er uns bereiten zu der gâbe, diu er selber ist" ["For God gives no gift, nor has he ever given any gift, in order that one may possess the gift and

passage, Eckhart maintains that there is a necessity on God's part to communicate himself to the human being who has become empty of his own will and is thus wholly receptive to God:

“Where the human being in obedience goes out from that which is his own and lays aside that which is his, God *must* necessarily enter again there; for when a person does not will anything for himself, God *must* will for that person in the same way as He does for His own self. If I have expropriated myself of my will and laid it in the hand of my religious superior, and I will nothing for myself, God *must* will for me; and if He fails to do something for me in this respect, He likewise fails to do it for Himself. This is how things are in every situation: where I will nothing for myself, God wills for me. Pay attention now! What does He will for me, when I will nothing for myself? Where I let go of myself, He *must* necessarily will for me everything that He wills for Himself, neither more nor less, and in the same way as He wills (it) for Himself. And if God were not to do this, then by the truth that God is, God would not be just – nor would He be God, (although) that is His natural being.”²

rest in its possession. Rather, he gave all the gifts that he has ever given in heaven and on earth only in order that he could give one gift: and that is he himself. With all these gifts, he [only] wanted to prepare us for the gift that he himself is”]; cf. also DW 5, pp. 180,10-181,1: “Daz ist diu sache, daz uns got niht gegeben enmac alle zît, als wir ez biten. Ez gebrichet an im niht, wan im ist tûsentstunt gæher ze gebenne wan uns ze nemenne” [“This is also the reason why God cannot always give to us in accordance with what we request. The problem does not lie with him, since he is a thousand times quicker to give than we are to receive”].

² Ibid., DW 5, pp. 187,1-188,3: “Swâ der mensche in gehôrsame des sînen ûzgât und sich des sînen erwiget, dâ an dem selben muoz got von nôt wider îngân; wan sô einez im selber niht enwil, dem muoz got wellen glîcher wîs als im selber. Swenne ich mînes willen bin ûzgegangen in die hant mînes prêlâten und mir selber niht enwil, dar umbe muoz mir got wellen, und versûmet er mich an dem teile, sô versûmet er sich selber. Alsô in allen dingen,

As later texts by Eckhart show, however, this necessity is based in God's essential goodness or love.³ Since God is truly good, and being good consists in communicating oneself, giving a share ungrudgingly in one's own fullness, and pouring oneself out (*bonum est diffusivum sui*),⁴ God as the perfect good must be "the most communicative of all," that is to say, the pure gift of self. In his *Book of the Divine Consolation*, Eckhart expounds this self-communicating love of God in terms of trinitarian theology: the perfect equality of the divine Son with the divine Father is the "ground" within the Godhead for the "birth" of the Holy Spirit as the divine being of pure love – which is the love of the divine Son for the divine

dâ ich mir niht enwil, dâ wil mir got. Nû merke! Waz wil er mir, dâ ich mir niht enwil? Dâ ich mich ane lâze, dâ muoz er mir von nôt wellen allez, daz er im selben wil, noch minner noch mêr, und mit der selben wîse, dâ er im mit wil. Und entæte got des niht, in der wârheit, diu got ist, sô enwære got niht gereht noch enwære got, daz sîn natiurlich wesen ist." [The capitalization in the English translation is made for the sake of greater clarity.]

³ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 5a*, DW 1, p. 81,1: "'God is love,' for with his love he must love all creatures, whether or not they know this"; *ibid.*, p. 81,3-9: "I will never ask God for his gift of 'grace,' nor will I thank him for his gift. For if I were worthy to receive his gift, he would be obliged to give it to me, whether or not he wished to do so. This is why I will not ask for him his gift, for he must give 'it'; but I shall ask him to make me worthy to receive his gift, and I shall thank him for being 'of such a nature' that he must give. This is why I say: 'God is love,' for he loves me with the love with which he loves himself; and anyone who would take this away from him would be taking away from him his whole divinity."

⁴ On the tradition-history of this philosophical adage, see Klaus Kremer, "Bonum est diffusivum sui. Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Neuplatonismus und Christentum," *ANRW* 36,2 (Berlin 1987), 994-1032.

Father. Selflessness, equality, and universality characterize this pure love of the perfect good, into which the human being who has become the son of God by grace is called to enter.⁵

2.

Eckhart's definition of God in terms of the theory of the intellect, as thinking that is free of Being and transcends Being (in his first Parisian Quaestio)

In his first *quaestio*, written during his first period as *magister* in Paris (1303-1305), Eckhart discusses the traditional question about the relationship in God between being and knowing. Against the authoritative position put forward above all by Thomas Aquinas, who sees the highest definition of God and the basis of all other divine predicates as pure and self-subsisting Being, Eckhart effects an exact reversal of this foundational relationship in God: knowing is the proper and highest definition of God, and is therefore the basis of his Being. For Eckhart “no longer holds that God knows because he is; rather, because he knows, he is, in such a way that God is intellect and knowing, and knowing itself is the basis of Being itself.”⁶ By basing God's Being on God's thinking, Eckhart in the *Quaestio Par.* elevates

⁵ On this, see my detailed study: Markus Enders, “Das göttliche Wesen der Liebe im Verständnis Meister Eckharts,” in id., *Gelassenheit und Abgeschiedenheit – Studien zur Deutschen Mystik*, Hamburg 2008, 77-97; on Meister Eckhart's trinitarian doctrine, see Rainer Hauke, *Trinität und Denken. Die Unterscheidung der Einheit von Gott und Mensch bei Meister Eckhart*, Frankfurt a.M. 1986, 94-112, 115-133.

⁶ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaestio Par.* I n. 4, in: Meister Eckhart, *Die lateinische Werke* (= LW), eds. Albert Zimmermann and Loris Sturlese, 5, Stuttgart 1936ff., p. 40,5-7): “Tertio ostendo quod non ita videtur mihi modo, ut quia sit, ideo intelligat, sed quia intelligit, ideo est, ita quod deus est intellectus et intelligere et est ipsum intelligere fundamentum ipsius

thinking “to the highest and most proper definition of the absolute, on which all the other definitions that apply to God, including precisely his Being, are based.”⁷ As the biblical justification of his reversal of the traditional foundational relationship between Being and the Spirit, Eckhart adduces the first verse of the Johannine prologue, according to which not Being, but the Word is at the beginning of everything – but the Word, as a speaking and as a spoken word, must be related to the intellect, just like the truth, which is identified with the *logos* at John 14:6.⁸ Eckhart also proposes philosophical reasons for this primacy of the intellect over Being: the knowledge of the intellect is uncreatable, while Being – as he infers from the *Liber de causis* – is the first creature. This is why God is intellect and knowing, not an existent or Being.⁹ Eckhart presents other reasons for this thesis of an identity between the

esse.” On this, see Ruedi Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE. Das Verhältnis von Sein und Denken in seiner Bedeutung für das Gottesverständnis bei Thomas von Aquin und in den Pariser Quaestionen Meister Eckharts* (Studia Friburgensia NF 53), Fribourg/Switzerland 1976, 18: “Thinking is the basis of Being because God’s thinking is the *causa* of reality.”

⁷ Jens Halfwassen, “Gibt es eine Philosophie der Subjektivität im Mittelalter? Zur Theorie des Intellekts bei Meister Eckhart und Dietrich von Freiberg,” *Theologie und Philosophie* 72 (1997): 338-360, at 343.

⁸ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaestio Par. I n. 4*, LW 5, pp. 40,7-12: “Quia dicitur Ioh. I: ‘in principio erat verbum, et verbum erat apud deum, et deus erat verbum.’ Non autem dixit evangelista: ‘in principio erat ens et deus erat ens.’ Verbum autem se toto est ad intellectum et est ibi dicens vel dictum et non esse vel ens commixtum. Item dicit salvator Ioh. 14: ‘ego sum veritas.’ Veritas autem ad intellectum pertinet importans vel includens relationem.”

⁹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaestio Par. I n. 4*, LW 5, p. 41,6-14: “Unde dicit *auctor De causis*: ‘prima rerum creaturarum est esse.’ Unde statim cum venimus ad esse, venimus ad creaturam. Esse ergo habet primo rationem creabilis, et ideo dicunt *aliqui* quod in creatura esse solum

absolute intellect and the pure knowing on the one hand and God on the other, and for a non-identity between God and (created) Being: since knowing is higher than Being, and has a different constitution,¹⁰ it follows that it must belong to God who is the embodiment of the unsurpassable. Eckhart employs a number of arguments to justify this thesis that knowing is

respicit deum sub ratione causae efficientis, essentia autem respicit ipsum sub ratione causae exemplaris. Sapientia autem, quae pertinet ad intellectum, non habet rationem creabilis. [...]

Et ideo deus, qui est creator et non creabilis, est intellectus et intelligere et non ens vel esse.”

Here, Eckhart understands Being “in agreement with the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition – as the equivalent of ‘being determined,’ that is, of limitation. Accordingly, everything that is determined and limited in its Being is not of itself, but presupposes a determinative principle to which it owes its Being. Further, the principle of all determinations – the One, which Christian Platonism identifies with God – cannot itself be something determined, if it is to be the foundation of all determinations. Accordingly, it can no longer be an existent”

(Halfwassen, “Gibt es eine Philosophie der Subjektivität im Mittelalter?” [n. 7 above], 344).

Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE* (n. 6 above), 167ff., has shown that in this context

Eckhart attributes a threefold meaning to “Being”: being caused or founded, and therefore being dependent on God; being limited or finite; and being a substance, whereby Eckhart understands substance as form or being, and views the accidentals (following Dietrich of Freiberg) as devoid of Being. – When Eckhart understands Being “precisely as an essential characteristic of that which is created, and thus as an indicator that something is founded”

(Halfwasser, *art. cit.*, 344), this goes beyond the *Liber de causis* (an Arabic reworking of the *Stoicheiôsis theologikê* of Proclus) back to Proclus himself, where Being is the first to have its principle in the One. Cf. Halfwassen, *ibid.*, 344 n. 29.

¹⁰ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 5, LW 5, p. 42,1f.: “... intelligere est altius quam esse et est alterius condicionis”; *ibid.*, n. 7, LW 5, p. 43,6f.

superior to, and different from, Being. First, every natural cause of movement is either itself capable of knowledge or else derivable from an intelligent moving cause; and that which is earlier in the causal context is more perfect than that which is later. This is why knowing is more perfect than Being, and this means that since God is the highest, it is to him that we must ascribe knowledge as the first and highest level of all the perfections.¹¹ Secondly, the act of knowing that is proper to the intellectual soul is of another constitution or nature than Being. Eckhart demonstrates this by means of the image that is known in the intellectual soul: this image as such is not the existent that it depicts, and thus is not an existent.¹² The third

¹¹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 5, LW 5, p. 42,3-7: “Dicimus enim omnes quod opus naturae est opus intelligentiae. Et ideo omne movens est intelligens aut reducit ad intelligentiam, a quo in suo motu dirigitur. Et ideo habentia intellectum sunt perfectiora non habentibus, sicut in ipso fieri imperfecta tenent primum gradum, ita quod in intellectu et intelligente stat resolutio sicut in summo et perfectissimo. Et ideo intelligere est altius quam esse.” Cf. also *ibid.*, n. 6, LW 5, p. 43,3-5: “Ego autem credo totum contrarium. ‘In principio’ enim ‘erat verbum,’ quod ad intellectum omnino pertinet, ut sic ipsum intelligere teneat primum gradum in perfectionibus, deinde ens vel esse.”

¹² Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 7, LW 5, pp. 43,6-44,6: “Secundo accipio ... Quae ergo ad intellectum pertinent, in quantum huiusmodi, sunt non-entia.” Besides this, our intellect could imagine something fictitious, something that cannot at all exist as such in reality, such as a fire without fire’s effective quality of warmth. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 44,7-9: “Intelligimus enim, quod deus non posset facere, ut intelligens ignem non intelligendo eius calorem; deus tamen non posset facere quod esset ignis et quod non calefaceret.” On the lack of Being on the part of the *species intelligibilis*, i.e., of the image that is known, and Eckhart’s theory of images that underlies this affirmation, see Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE* (n. 6 above), 179f.

reason that Eckhart adduces for the unsurpassability, and thus the divinity, of knowing as against the inferiority, and thus the creatureliness, of Being is the impossibility for us human beings of imagining the manner of the divine knowing, thanks to the fundamental difference in the degree of perfection between divine and human knowing: whereas human knowing is a product of the existent by which it is caused, the existent is itself a product of the knowledge of God, by which it is caused: “And this is why all that is in God is above Being itself, and is wholly knowing.”¹³

In the next step of his argument, Eckhart formulates reasons that prove that there is no existent and no Being in God. Nothing is of its nature present both in the true cause and in that which is caused. And since God is the only cause of all Being, Being is of its very nature

¹³ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 8, LW 5, p. 44,10-14: “Tertio accipio quod hic imaginatio deficit. Differt enim nostra scientia a scientia dei, quia scientia dei est causa rerum et scientia nostra est causata a rebus. Et ideo cum scientia nostra cadat sub ente, a quo causatur, et ipsum ens pari ratione cadit sub scientia dei; et ideo, quidquid est in deo, est super ipsum esse et est totum intelligere.”

not in God.¹⁴ Eckhart does however mention one significant qualification: he would not object if someone wanted to call knowing a Being, but Being is ascribed to God only via knowing.¹⁵

Since God is the principle either of Being itself or of that which exists, he cannot himself be Being or an existent, since the principle can never also be that which it brings forth, something that owes its existence to the principle.¹⁶ There is indeed a pre-existence of creatures in God – not however with their creaturely Being, but in their divine Being that is the exemplary cause. This is why the (creaturely) Being does not exist in God, but rather the

¹⁴ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 8, LW 5, p. 45,1-3: “Ex his ostendo quod in deo non est ens nec esse, quia nihil est formaliter in causa et causato, si causa sit vera causa. Deus autem est causa omnis esse. Ergo esse formaliter non est in deo.” Behind this lies Eckhart’s teaching about the true cause as the analogous cause: that which is caused is completely passive and needy, and is also pre-existent intellectually in the cause of its Being. See Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE* (n. 6 above), 185f.

¹⁵ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 8, LW 5, p. 45,3-5: “Et si tu intelligere velis vocare esse, placet mihi. Dico nihilominus quod, si in deo est aliquid, quod velis vocare esse, sibi competit per intelligere.”

¹⁶ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 9, LW 5, p. 45,6-8: “principium nunquam est principiatum, ut punctus nunquam est linea. Et ideo cum deus sit principium vel scilicet ipsius esse vel entis, deus non est ens vel esse creaturae.” Eckhart draws here on the fundamental proposition of the theory of principles, repeatedly formulated in the metaphysics of Plato, the Academy, Aristotle, and Neo-Platonism, that the principle is the zero sum of those things of which it is the principle. On this, see Halfwassen, “Gibt es eine Philosophie” (n. 7 above), 343 n. 38 (with the individual passages from the tradition); on the difference between the principle as pure thinking and that of which it is the principle as Being, see Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE* (n. 6 above), 187f.

“purity of Being” that was expressed in the divine name revealed at Ex 3:14, “I am who I am.”¹⁷ The mode of Being in the Godhead of every creaturely existent, in the manner of an exemplary cause, is the mode of the (divine) intellect and of the (divine) knowing itself, not the mode of the created existent.¹⁸

Eckhart also justifies his thesis that God is not an existent, but something higher than the existent, namely intellect and knowing, by appealing to the Aristotelian theorem of the indeterminateness of the intellect (which is passive in Aristotle), which is capable of receiving all forms and precisely for this reason must itself be essentially indeterminate, and therefore infinite.¹⁹ The reason for this indeterminateness of the passive intellect – or for its purity and

¹⁷ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 9, LW 5, p. 45,9-15: “Et ideo cum esse conveniat creaturis, non est in deo nisi sicut in causa, et ideo in deo non est esse, sed puritas essendi. Sicut quando quaeritur de nocte ab aliquo, qui vult latere et non nominare se: quis es tu? respondet: ‘ego sum qui sum,’ ita dominus volens ostendere puritatem essendi esse in se dixit: ‘ego sum qui sum.’ Non dixit simpliciter ‘ego sum,’ sed addidit: ‘qui sum.’ Deo ergo non competit esse, nisi talem puritatem voces esse.”

¹⁸ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 10, LW 5, p. 46,2-6: “Cum igitur deus sit universalis causa entis, nihil quod est in deo, habet rationem entis, sed habet rationem intellectus et ipsius intelligere, de cuius ratione non est, quod causam habeat, sicut est de ratione entis quod sit causatum; et in ipso intelligere omnia continentur in virtute sicut in causa suprema omnium.”

¹⁹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 12, LW 5, pp. 47,14-48,4: “Sic etiam dico quod deo non convenit esse nec est ens, sed est aliquid altius ente. Sicut enim dicit *Aristoteles* quod oportet visum esse abscolorem, ut omnem colorem videat, et intellectum non esse formarum naturalium, ut omnes intelligat, sic etiam ego <nego> ipsi deo ipsum esse et talia, ut sit causa omnis esse et omnia praehabeat, ut sicut non negatur deo quod suum est, sic negetur eidem <quod suum non est>. On this, see Halfwassen, “Gibt es eine Philosophie” (n. 7 above), 344:

passivity, or for its receptivity and ability to receive all forms – is its lack of Being, or its freedom from matter.²⁰

Eckhart sees the refusal to ascribe any creaturely forms of Being to the divine intellect as a genuine statement of negative theology that, like negative theology as a whole, is in

“For the intellect is capable of knowing every determinateness. But in order to be able to know every determinateness, it must be able to receive them all in the act of knowing. Accordingly, it cannot for its own part be something determinate, that is to say, something fixed in its determinateness. Rather, it must essentially be indeterminate, and that in turn means: infinite. As that which receives all determinate things in the act of knowing, the intellect must essentially be free of every objective determinateness, just as the sense of sight, which recognizes all the colors, is itself free of color according to Aristotle (*De anima* 418 b 27). This is why knowing as such – that is, not only the divine act of knowing, but our knowing too – is uncreated, and indeed essentially uncreatable: *Sapientia autem, quae pertinet ad intellectum, non habet rationem creabilis*. For creating means positing an existent, i.e., something determinate. This means that it is impossible to think of the act of knowing, which is the essentially indeterminate activity of the positing and receiving of determinateness, as itself creatable, for then it would be essentially determinate. This is the basis of Eckhart’s teaching about the uncreatedness of the reason [...]; at the same time, it already shows that Eckhart’s discovery that subjectivity is a principle which does not remain restricted to God, but concerns reason as such.” On the uncreatedness of the intellect, see also Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE* (n. 6 above), 173 n. 87, 197f., and 182f.: since the act of knowing is a participation in the eternal ideas of exemplary causes of the creatures in God, it cannot be created.

²⁰ On this, see the detailed remarks by Imbach, *DEUS EST INTELLIGERE* (n. 6 above), 173-177.

reality a superabundantly affirmative statement about God, since it does not deny to him anything that would be his by nature, but merely asserts “that he contains everything in himself antecedently in purity, fullness, and perfection, more amply and more broadly, since he is the root and cause of all things.”²¹ The mode of this eternal, pre-existent antecedent possession of all things by God is the mode of absolute thinking: this is what Eckhart indicates at the end of the first Parisian *quaestio* when he appeals to God’s self-revelation in Ex 3:14: “I am who I am.” For the revealed divine name “I am who I am” gives expression to the purity, fullness, and perfection of the divine Being as absolute Spirit and absolute knowing.²²

Eckhart interprets this self-affirmation by God even more strongly and radically in his commentary on the Book of Exodus.

3.

God’s name “Ego sum qui sum” (Ex 3:14) as the “negation of the negation” or as a reflexive self-affirmation by God

Eckhart justifies (against Moses Maimonides) the possibility of the trinitarian mode of Being of the essentially one God on the basis of a theory of relationships, and then develops in his commentary on Exodus his so-called “Exodus metaphysics,” that is, his interpretation

²¹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaes. Par.* I n. 12, LW 5, p. 48,4-8: “Quae negationes secundum *Damascenus* primo libro habent in deo superabundantiam affirmationis. Nihil igitur nego deo, ut sibi natum est convenire. Dico enim quod deus omnia praehabet in puritate, plenitudine, perfectione, amplius et latius, existens radix et causa omnium.”

²² Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Quaest. Par.* I n. 12, LW 5, p. 48,8: “Et hoc voluit dicere, cum dixit: ‘ego sum qui sum’.”

of the divine name “Ego sum qui sum” revealed in Ex 3:14 as the perfect fullness of the divine Being. He interprets this fullness of Being as reflexive self-communication or pure self-affirmation, since it is an act of trinitarian self-knowledge. Since the truth of an affirmative proposition consists in general in the identity of its *termini*,²³ the self-affirmation that is the fullness of pure Being itself is characteristic of God; it is this self-affirmation that utters itself in his name “I am who I am.”²⁴ This is why this tautological sentence is the truest of all sentences.²⁵ Eckhart also calls this intellectual self-positing and self-affirmation of God the “negation of the negation,” since it is a pure and utterly complete self-affirmation that abolishes all the limitations, and thus every negativity, of the creaturely existent: “I am who I am.”²⁶ For in this self-reflexive act, God returns in a perfect act of returning to his own self, as Eckhart states in agreement with the *Liber de causis*.²⁷

²³ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *In Exodum*, nr. 73, LW 2, p. 75,16-17: “... veritas affirmative propositionis universaliter consistit in identitate terminorum ...”

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 74, LW 2, pp. 76,13-77,4.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 74, LW 2, p. 77,5.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 74, LW 2, pp. 77,9-12: “Nulla ergo negatio, nihil negativum deo competit, nisi negatio negationis, quam significat unum negative dictum: ‘deus unus est,’ Deut. 6; Gal 3. Negatio vero negationis purissima et plenissima est affirmatio: ‘ego sum qui sum’.” On Eckhart’s understanding of the meaning of this self-affirmation by God, see Werner Beierwaltes, “Deus est esse – esse est Deus,” in *id.*, ed. *Platonismus und Idealismus* (Philosophische Abhandlungen 40), Frankfurt a.M. 1972, 47-58, esp. 58: “According to Eckhart’s interpretation, therefore, the proposition ‘I am who I am’ affirms that God is pure Being, pure substance, pure (self-)affirmation, self-reflection, self-utterance, and self-penetration. The fact that God is pure Being implies all the other designations, or else these are the self-unfolding of Being as identity (unity) in the Trinity.” On the precise meaning of

the “negation of the negation” as the essential act of the divine Spirit, see Halfwassen, “Gibt es eine Philosophie” (n. 7 above), 345ff.: “In himself, however, as the principle that posits all determinations – here in agreement with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – God is the negation of all determinations. For Eckhart, therefore, precisely as this negating activity, God is intellect. [...] Intellectuality is therefore the pure essence of the Absolute, which must be understood in the tradition of negative theology as the denial of determinations – that is, the denial of every existent – but in such a way that this negation is the specific activity of the Absolute itself, the activity that is proper to the Absolute in itself. This denial expresses, not a lack of Being, but the superabundance of the super-existent Absolute. This is why Eckhart [...] expounds it as the ‘superabundance of affirmation.’ [...] Eckhart now interprets this pure fullness of Being as the pure self-relationship and self-communication that is antecedent to every objective Being and constitutes it – as original intellectuality. [...] For every existent that is fixed in its determination is a limitation, and thus the negation of the unrestricted fullness of Being; and hence God, who is himself the pure fullness, is, as the negation of every finite existent, himself the negation of the negation. As pure and absolute affirmation, he is the abolition of all restrictions.” On the provenance of the “negatio negationis” in Eckhart from adumbrations in Thomas Aquinas and especially in Henry of Ghent, see Wouter Goris, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel. Versuch über die Einheitsmetaphysik des Opus tripartitum Meister Eckharts* (Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 59), Leiden, New York, and Cologne 1997, 197-206, esp. 200 (on Thomas Aquinas): “In this context, Thomas draws a distinction between the negation that is contained in the concept of multiplicity from the negation in the concept of unity. In the multiplicity, the things are distinguished by denial, which contains a real negation: it is not said of the one thing that it is the other thing. This distinction through negation denies the negation contained in the One, which is purely conceptual.” On Henry of Ghent as Eckhart’s source, see *ibid.*, 203: “In Henry, therefore, the

Since he is Being itself, God can neither deny himself nor refuse himself to another, since the First is rich through its own self. In other words, it brings forth everything else

negatio negationis serves to allow the unity as something posited in the divine. This entails the denial that God possesses something that it is in the truest sense his work to eliminate. The attribution of unity to God is thought of in terms of the model of something added to the existent. Here, the *negatio negationis* forms the explication of an *indivisio* that is predicated of the One as an additional *modus significandi*. Later, in the *Summa*, in response to the objection that “the One” is employed not as a positive but as a private designation in the Godhead, the position of the *negatio negationis* will once again be affirmed as the *verissima positio*.”

²⁷ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *In Exodum*, n. 74, LW 2, pp. 77,12-78,1: “Super se ipsum ‘redit reditione completa’ ...”; cf. *Liber de causis*, prop. 15 (§14; p. 79, ed. Adriaan Pattin), cf. prop. 7 (§6; p. 61f., ed. Adriaan Pattin). On this, see Halfwassen, “Gibt es eine Philosophie” (n. 7 above), 348: “Eckhart thus thinks of the Absolute as the absolute reflexive self-communication, which of itself, out of its own superabundant fullness, posits its own Being, and is hence pure or absolute spontaneity. This is why God is originally intellectuality, since it is only thinking that is characterized by reflexive self-communication [...]. This means that Eckhart has substantially anticipated the basic idea of speculative Idealism: the idea of the pure subjectivity that posits itself out of absolute spontaneity and communicates itself to itself.” This had already been affirmed by Walter Schulz, *Der Gott der neuzeitlichen Metaphysik*, Pfullingen 5th ed. 1974, 13, and by Beierwaltes, “Deus est esse” (n. 26 above), 47: “The conception of the concept of God that can be seen here, namely that God’s Being is his thinking and that his thinking is his Being, makes substantially possible the basic idea of an Idealistic speculative theology, namely, that the Absolute understands itself as its Being and its idea and thus is absolute reflexive self-communication.”

ungrudgingly and selflessly out of the superabundance of its self-communicating essence. Eckhart repeatedly quotes the fundamental proposition in the *Liber de causis* that the First is rich through its own self.²⁸ He justifies this by appealing to the perfect fullness of Being of the First, which cannot refuse itself to another and hence must communicate its own self.²⁹ For the only gift and work that are divine are those that are not given for the sake of a recompense nor sold, but are given purely and honestly, that is to say, free of charge – as Eckhart writes, long before the insights of modern phenomenology (and especially of Jean-Luc Marion) into the theory of gifts.³⁰ The only thing that God refuses or denies is “nothing,” since the

²⁸ On Eckhart’s frequent recourse to the *Liber de causis*, see the summary remarks by Werner Beierwaltes, “Primum est dives per se. Meister Eckhart und der *Liber de causis*,” in E. P. Bos and P. A. Meijer, eds. *On Proclus and his influence in medieval philosophy*, Leiden, New York, and Cologne 1992, 141-169, at 144: “Where Meister Eckhart draws on the *Liber de causis* for the explanation, clarification, and authoritative support of ideas, these ideas direct and determine his thinking: they concern his teaching about God’s Being and his unity in himself, and equally God’s creative working *ad extra*, the Being and activity of the divine ground and origin *in* Being, or his teaching about the soul as a movement that grasps itself reflexively. Most frequently, Meister Eckhart quotes *propositio* 20 of the *Liber de causis*: ‘*Primum est dives per seipsum*’ in the form: ‘*Primum est dives per se*’.”

²⁹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *In Exodum*, n. 74, LW 2, p. 78,3-8; on this creative self-outpouring of the First, see Beierwaltes, “Primum est dives per se” (n. 28 above), 145f.

³⁰ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *In Exodum*, n. 75, LW 2, p. 78,9-11: “Iuxta quod notandum quod illa datio sive donum proprie divinum est et universaliter operatio et opus, quod gratis fit. Quod enim non gratis fit, sed pro mercede, non datur nec donatur, sed venditur, simonia est ...” On the Platonic and Neo-Platonic sources of the ideas of the goodness of the First Principle that pours itself out ungrudgingly, and on the definition (borrowed from Aristotle’s *Politics*) of the

affirmation belongs to Being and thus is proper to God as such.³¹ The affirmation possesses Being and includes Being, as can be seen clearly from the use of the copulative “is” in all affirmative propositions.³² However, Eckhart resolutely underlines that the affirmation of God’s own self and the pure giving of himself to something else without any ulterior motive does not contradict the rejection of affirmative divine predicates by representatives of negative theology such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Augustine: for in fact, the perfections of Being such as goodness, truth, life, knowing, etc. belong to God, though not (as Eckhart emphasizes, following Thomas Aquinas) with regard to the creaturely way in which these are defined.³³

rich person in terms of giving rather than of receiving, see Beierwaltes, “Primum est dives per se” (n. 28 above), 146f.; on this whole topic, see *ibid.*, 148: “This free giving of Being as existence, the establishing and forming of individual existents and the preserving of each existing form is linked directly and strongly by Meister Eckhart, in a convergence of propositions from the *Liber de causis* that derive from the *dives*-proposition, with the definition of this giving that is characteristic of the Christian faith: since the First, or God, is rich through his own self, ‘he gives all things to every one free of charge’ (*gratis dat omnibus omnia*). When God generously gives life, allows it to exist, is its ground, and preserves it, this is an act of his *grace*, and hence an expression of God’s free and active turning towards that which is created, an act free of all obligation ...”

³¹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *In Exodum*, n. 77, LW 2, p. 80,9-10: “Patet igitur quod affirmatio, utpote ad esse pertinens, propria est deo et divinorum, in quantum divina sunt.”

³² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 80,11-81,1: “Ratio est breviter quae supra, quia affirmatio esse habet et includit. Li est enim medium est omnium affirmatarum, vel in ipsum resolvuntur.”

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 81,3-82,5.

Let me sum up: Eckhart interprets the divine name “Ego sum qui sum” that is revealed in Ex 3:14 as the self-relationship and self-communication of the absolute Spirit, antecedent to every objective existent, as perfect Being. This has the character of a negation of the negation of every finite existent and thus of the abolition of all limitations, or the character of a pure and absolute self-affirmation.

This means that Meister Eckhart’s so-called Exodus metaphysics presupposes *a priori* the identification of God or of the absolute Spirit with perfect Being. This may appear to contradict what he says in the first Parisian *Quaestio* about the Being-lessness of the divine intellect; but the next section on Meister Eckhart’s so-called “metaphysics of the transcendentals” will show that this contradiction is only apparent.

4.

God is Being (Deus est esse) – Eckhart’s metaphysics of the transcendentals

In the *Prologus generalis* to the *Opus tripartitum*, most probably composed as early as 1305,³⁴ Eckhart sketches the basic outlines of a metaphysics of the transcendentals. The starting point is the principal thesis of the “Tripartite work” as a whole, namely: “*esse est Deus*,” This is the opening of the “work on the theses” and runs like a leitmotiv through Eckhart’s scriptural commentaries. He attempts to demonstrate this principal thesis by means of numerous arguments, such as the impossibility of thinking the opposite,³⁵ or on the basis of the understanding of creation as the gift or communication of Being *ex nihilo*. Since only Being itself can communicate Being – that is to say, create – it follows that if God were not

³⁴ See Loris Sturlese, “Meister Eckhart in der Bibliotheca Amploniana. Neues zur Datierung des ‘Opus tripartitum’,” *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 23 (1995): 434-446.

³⁵ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Prologus generalis in Opus tripartitum*, n. 12, LW 1, p. 156.

identical with Being itself, he could not be the creator either, and then nothing would exist.³⁶ As Being itself, God creates always, or unceasingly; and he creates everything “in the beginning,” that is to say, in his own self.³⁷ In this context, Being, which is unrestricted in its perfection, is indeed called the essence of God, from which the real existence of God follows as an eternal truth.³⁸ Being is the reality or the act and the perfecting of all things, including the forms.³⁹

Eckhart’s teaching about the transcendentals occupies a unique position in mediaeval thinking.⁴⁰ It is characterized by the duplication of the *termini generales* into *abstracta* (*unitas, veritas, and bonitas*) and *concreta* (*unum, verum, and bonum*)⁴¹ and by the equation of these terms with God. Besides this, the reciprocally convertible universal concepts are also identified by Eckhart with the “universal perfections” such as wisdom and justice.⁴² Eckhart

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 12, LW 1, p. 157,7-10: “ante esse est nihil. Propter quod conferens esse creat et creator est. Creare quippe est dare esse ex nihilo. Constat autem quod omnia habent esse ab ipso esse, sicut omnia sunt alba ab albedine. Igitur si esse est aliud a deo, creator erit aliud quam deus.”

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 17f., LW 1, p. 160.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 8, LW 1, p. 159,4-5: “Sed esse est essentia dei sive deus. Igitur deum esse verum aeternum est. Igitur deus est.” Cf. also *ibid.*, n. 20, LW 1, p. 164,6: “esse est deus per essentiam.”

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 8, LW 1, p. 153,7-8: “Ipsium enim esse comparatur ad omnia sicut actus et perfectio et est ipsa actualitas omnium, etiam formarum.”

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 4, LW 1, p. 150. See Ch. 5 above on Eckhart the doctrine of Transcendentals.

⁴² On Eckhart’s metaphysics of the transcendentals, see the detailed remarks by Jan A. Aertsen, “Der ‘Systematiker’ Eckhart,” *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 32 (2005): 189-230; on Eckhart’s identification of God with justice, cf. e.g., DW 2, pp. 252,1-253,2.

draws a fundamental distinction between the divine, absolute Being and the created, particular Being of “this and that” (*hoc et hoc*).⁴³ In Eckhart’s metaphysics of the transcendentals, the perspective of his teaching about God has indeed shifted somewhat in comparison to the first Parisian *Quaestio* that we have looked at above, but this does not result in a self-contradiction, since the “Being” that Eckhart refused to ascribe to God in the first Parisian *Quaestio* was only creaturely Being, the Being of “this and that,” and the “purity of Being” ascribed to God in this *Quaestio* is identical with the Being that Eckhart has in mind here in the *Opus tripartitum*. The difference – not an antithesis – between the two concepts of God lies in the grounding of the Being of God in his knowing, a position taken in the *Quaestio* but not in the *Opus tripartitum*.

5.

The justification of the unity of God in terms of the theory of the intellect in Eckhart’s Latin Sermon 29, “Deus unus est,” and its source in Moses Maimonides

5.1

The omnipresence and the omni-unity of God – unity as the proper, essential name of God, as the specificum of the divine nature

⁴³ On *hoc et hoc* as the designation of spatial-temporal or creaturely individual existence in Eckhart, see Beierwaltes, “Deus est esse” (n. 26 above), 58, esp. n. 23 (with numerous textual references).

The 29th Latin sermon, *Deus unus est*,⁴⁴ begins with a number of traditional passages that refer to the so-called ontological concept of God – he quotes Anselm, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Seneca – according to which God is the absolutely unsurpassable.⁴⁵ Eckhart quite correctly infers infinite simplicity from this rational concept of God. From infinite simplicity, he next infers the total omnipresence or the universal immanence of God in everything else:⁴⁶ God alone descends into the essence of all things. He alone is in the innermost sphere of every creature, and in his unity he is without differentiation from all things.⁴⁷ Because of its unrestrictedness, the unity of God is at the same time “omni-unity,” a perfect fullness of Being that includes everything. As such, it lacks nothing and is impassible.⁴⁸ This One is the fundamental goal or the ultimate *raison d’être* of the love of every creature, and especially of the rational creature. This means that human beings love the perfect Being, the power, the wisdom, and the perfect goodness of God only for the sake of his unity and in order to be united to this unity.⁴⁹ For the One is “higher, earlier, and simpler than the good and is closer to Being and to God. Or rather, in accordance with its name, it is

⁴⁴ On the construction of the argumentation in this sermon, see Goris, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel* (n. 26 above), 82-88.

⁴⁵ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Sermo 29*, LW 4, p. 263,5-12.

⁴⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 296, LW 4, p. 263,13f.: “Deus simplicitate est infinitus et infinitate sua est simplex. Ideo et ubique est et ubique totus est. Ubiq̄e infinitate, sed totus ubiq̄e simplicitate.”

⁴⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 297, LW 4, p. 264,1-3: “Deus solus illabatur omnibus entibus, ipsorum essentiis. Nihil autem aliorum illabatur alteri. Deus est in intimis cuiuslibet et solum in intimis, et ipse solus *unus est*.”

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 297, LW 4, p. 264,8.11.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 297, LW 4, p. 264,4-7.12f.

one Being with Being itself.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, the unity of God is not higher than God’s perfect Being. This makes it clear that Eckhart is not undertaking a henological reduction of Being to the unity in the Absolute. Rather, what he does is to present the character of unity of the divine Being and its simplicity. In Eckhart’s metaphysics of the transcendentals, therefore, unlike in philosophical Neo-Platonism, the unity of God is not a unity higher than Being, but the unity of God’s Being.⁵¹

According to this sermon, however, the One is also the ground that brings forth all multiplicity while remaining immutable in itself and leading everything back to itself, in accordance with the triadic law of movement of the absolute Spirit, which is conceived in Neo-Platonic terms – remaining in itself, going forth, and returning.⁵²

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 299, LW 4, p. 266,4-6: “unum altius est, prius est et simplicius est ipso bono et immediatius ipsi esse et deo aut potius iuxta nomen suum unum esse ipsi esse sive cum ipso esse.”

⁵¹ On the convertibility of unity and Being in God, see Werner Beierwaltes, “‘Und daz Einmachtet uns saelic.’ Meister Eckharts Begriff der Einheit und der Einung,” in *id.*, ed. *Platonismus im Christentum* (Philosophische Abhandlungen 73), Frankfurt a.M. 1998, 100-129, at 117: “The unity of God is his pure Being; the pure Being of God is his (true) unity [...]” On this, see also Goris, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel* (n. 26 above), 86: “This immediacy of the relationship between the One and Being signifies the characteristic of the transcendent One, which is interchangeable with the divine Existent, but expounds this divine Existent as purity and fullness, thus showing that it is Thinking.” On the classification of this position of Eckhart, see *ibid.*, 88: “Eckhart’s intention in *Sermo 29* should not be judged henological, but rather as critical of the henological tradition, since unity, Being, and thinking are placed on one and the same level.”

⁵² Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Sermo 29*, n. 299, LW 4, p. 266,7-10.

5.2

Eckhart's justification of the unity of God in terms of the theory of the intellect, with recourse to Moses Maimonides: unity as the specificum of the (absolute) intellect

The systematic center of gravity of the elements of the metaphysics of unity that are unfolded in this sermon lies in their location in the theory of the intellect, which Eckhard underlines in a particularly pronounced manner. He regards unity or the One as the *specificum* and the specific property of the intellect alone.⁵³ Eckhart justifies this equation of radical simplicity with pure intellect by means of a henological reduction:⁵⁴ the material entities are composed

⁵³ Ibid., n. 300, LW 4, p. 266,11-12: “unitas sive unum videtur proprium et proprietas intellectus solius.”

⁵⁴ Unlike Goris, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel* (n. 26 above), 83, I would call this first line of argument for unity as a specific property of the absolute intellect, not an ontological, but a henological reduction since it has the character of a *reductio* of forms of unity that *per se* are composite into a unity that is no longer composite, namely the unity of Being and essence, or of Being and thinking. The second *reductio*, which Goris calls “henological” (*op. cit.*, 84), seems to me rather to have the character of a noological reduction, since it excludes everything that possesses no thinking and everything that possesses a Being outside its thinking. With this proviso, I agree with Goris’s description of the structure and the outcome of both *reductiones* (*Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, 84): “These two *reductiones* resemble one another, since both are based on a threefold hierarchical structure: the ontological *reductio* is based on the hierarchy of material, composite immaterial, and divine, while the henological *reductio* is based on a hierarchy of intellect-less, composite intellectual, and God. The ontological *reductio* shows that God possesses no thinking alongside his Being, while the

of form and matter, and are thus not a pure unity, but only a multiplicity that is united to form a *compositum*. It is only the immaterial, intellectual essences that are perfectly simple, since they are composed of Being and essence, or of Being and thinking. God is wholly intellect, not composite, a perfectly simple intellect, since in him thinking and Being are absolutely identical.⁵⁵ As Eckhart states in a later passage, identity is unity.⁵⁶ This means that, unlike the philosophical Neo-Platonism of a Plotinus or a Proclus, Eckhart understands the unity of God not as a transcendence that lies beyond Being, thinking, and identity, but as the identity of pure Being and pure thinking.

Eckhart's second line of argumentation for unity as the specific property of the divine intellect has the character of a noological *reductio*. Here, Eckhart shows that God possesses no Being outside his thinking. Rather, he possesses unity as the identity of thinking and Being. He is thus pure and uncreatable intellect.⁵⁷

Since God is nothing other than pure intellect, it was only through the intellect that he gave all the creatures existence. The unity proper to God is therefore "nowhere and never

henological *reductio* shows that he possesses no Being alongside his thinking. But both *reductiones* lead to the same outcome: God is one whose Being is his thinking."

⁵⁵ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Sermo 29*, n. 300, LW 4, pp. 266,12-267,5, esp. p. 267,3-5: "Unde signanter dictum est: *deus tuus deus unus est*, deus Israel, deus videns, deus videntium, qui scilicet intelligit et solo intellectu capitur, qui est intellectus se toto."

⁵⁶ Ibid., n. 303, LW 4, p. 269,12-13: "Identitas est enim unitas."

⁵⁷ Cf. ibid., n. 301, LW 4, pp. 267,6-268,6 esp. p. 268,4-6: "Patet ergo manifeste quod deus est proprie solus et quod ipse est intellectus sive intelligere et quod solum intelligere praeter esse aliud simpliciter."

anywhere else than in the intellect, and here too it is not, but is thought.”⁵⁸ Accordingly, God’s unity is realized in his being spirit, which is identical with God. In another passage in the same sermon, Eckhart expresses, with a clarity that could scarcely be stronger, this conviction that God’s simple essence is spirit and nothing else than spirit: “The one God is intellect and the intellect is the one God. This is why God is never and nowhere God other than in the intellect.”⁵⁹ We can grasp the particular radicality and the significance of Eckhart’s substantial and conceptual identification of the perfect simplicity, or of God’s own simple essence, with the absolute spirit when we look at the Platonic and Neo-Platonic history of the Western Metaphysics of Spirit. Here, the conviction reigns that a distinction (at least in terms of relationship) or a bipolarity of the thinker and that which is thought, and thus a structure of difference, is constitutive of being spirit, and that the simplest (because most unified) epiphenomenon of this structure of difference is realized in the act whereby the absolute spirit knows itself. This means that the self-reflection of the absolute spirit does not constitute a simplicity devoid of relationship and difference: the absolute spirit is not substantially and conceptually identical with the One as the ground that brings it forth. Rather, the absolute spirit is the first going forth of this ground from itself, and at the same time the return or home-coming to itself, the primal act whereby this ground sees itself, as Plotinus explains. Almost the entire tradition of Christian Theology prior to Eckhart – especially Marius Victorinus, Augustine, Boethius, and John Scotus Eriugena, as well as thinkers in the Greek tradition such as Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – had attempted to link in a speculative manner the unity (as the essential definition of the first

⁵⁸ Ibid., n. 303, LW 4, p. 269,3-5: “quod nusquam est et nunquam nisi in intellectu, nec est, sed intelligitur.”

⁵⁹ Ibid., n. 304, LW 4, p. 270,1-3: “Deus enim unus est intellectus, et intellectus est deus unus. Unde deus nunquam et nusquam est ut deus nisi in intellectu.”

principle) with the trinitarian, three-Personal life of this first principle, drawing a distinction here between the simple essence of God that is common to the three divine Persons and the hypostases or Personal relationships that are relationally distinct from each other. There can be no doubt that Eckhart's definition of the relationship between God's being spirit and the unity of God lies within this Christian tradition that is inspired by Platonism and Neo-Platonism; but his radicality goes beyond this tradition, since he identifies the perfect simplicity of God with the act of self-knowledge that is most particularly God's own act. Indeed, he describes this unity as based not in the divine Being but in the divine act of knowing, in an act of self-knowledge that is necessarily devoid of differences and objects and thus exists only in God's self-reflexive essential act in which God himself knows his own simple essence. Eckhart thus gives a justification of the unity of the divine nature or of the divine essence in terms of the metaphysics of spirit or the theory of the intellect, thereby precisely reversing the relationship of justification between the definition of the first principle in the metaphysics of unity and its definition in the metaphysics of spirit that had been traditional in Platonism and Neo-Platonism and in Christian thinkers prior to Eckhart. In this tradition, the One that transcends spirit is the ground that brings forth, and at the same time the basic goal of the absolute spirit's act of knowing. In Eckhart, however, the absolute spirit grounds (so to speak) the unity of the divine essence through the act of its self-knowledge, and the absolute spirit is this unity. I believe that this reversal in the theoretical justification is the truly revolutionary element in Eckhart's metaphysics of unity. As far as I know, it is not to be found anywhere in the Western History of the metaphysics of unity before him.

There is at least one source of inspiration for Eckhart's justification of the unity of God in terms of the theory of the intellect, namely (as is also the case with regard to negative theology) in the Jewish philosopher of religion Moses Maimonides, since Eckhart receives and transforms not only Maimonides' strict concept of the absolute unity of God, but also the foundations of this concept in Maimonides' theory of the intellect. However, this affirmation

relies on a much more restricted textual basis than Eckhart's reception of the metaphysics of unity and the negative theology of Moses Maimonides,⁶⁰ since he does not refer explicitly to Maimonides as his source when he justifies the simplicity of God in terms of the theory of the intellect. Nevertheless, there is a certain amount of indirect evidence for this affirmation, as some remarks by Kurt Flasch suggest.⁶¹ In a passage in chap. 20 of his *Expositio libri Exodi*, Eckhart quotes Maimonides' statement that the highest group of human beings makes its goal that which ought to be the goal of the human person, namely to know what is intellectual and to choose that which is nobler, that is, the knowledge of the divine creator, of the angels, and of the other works of the creator. Such persons see God's face and are even like the angels. Accordingly (and here Eckhart quotes Maimonides), the true human being must limit himself to the satisfaction of those bodily needs that are necessary for life, in order to lead as intellectual a life as possible.⁶² This is because (as Eckhart states in another passage) the intellect is proper to the essence of the human person. According to Maimonides, the intellect

⁶⁰ On this, see Markus Enders, "*Deus est unus omnibus modis. Zur Metaphysik der Einheit bei Meister Eckhart und bei Moses Maimonides als ihrer bedeutendsten Quelle,*" in J. Brachtendorf, ed. *Einheit und Vielheit als metaphysisches Problem*, forthcoming.

⁶¹ See Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart. Die Geburt der "Deutschen Mystik" aus dem Geist der arabischen Philosophie*, Munich 2nd ed. 2008, 144 (speaking of Maimonides): "But he [*sc.* God] is spirit. Strictly speaking, this could lead to a contradiction of the pure unity. Maimonides took this already traditional contamination, which Plotinus had avoided, from the tradition and drew the consequence that it is not external ceremonies that lead us to God, but rather the intellect. In its striving towards unity, it links us to the divine One. It is the intellect of the Aristotelian-Arabic theory of the intellect that brings God and the human person closer to each other, in a strict (Jewish-Neo-Platonic) consciousness of transcendence."

⁶² Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Expos. l. Ex.*, n. 200, LW 2, pp. 168,16-169,13.

is precisely the human capacity that unites the human person to God, in that he grasps God with the light of the intellect.⁶³ The intellect unites the human person to God because Maimonides sees in the intellect the perfectly simple essence of the creator God, since the triad of the ability to know, act of knowing, and that which is known are perfectly one in God. In chap. 68 of the First Book of his *chef d'œuvre* in the philosophy of religion, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides demonstrates in great detail, with his starting point in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7, the identity or perfect unity of the subject of knowledge, the object of knowledge, and the act of knowledge by God as the essentially active intellect. For Maimonides, the perfect unity of God and his being intellect are substantially identical; or

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 277, LW 2, p. 223,7-11, with a quotation from Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, Book 3, chap. 52: “This king that protects us and is united to us is the reason that emanates towards us and is the link between us and God. And just as we know God through the light that he allows to stream towards us, in accordance with the words: ‘In your light we see light’ (Ps 36:10), so too he continuously sees through us by means of this light ...” (Maimonides, *Dux seu director dubitantium aut perplexorum*, Paris 1520 [reprint Frankfurt a.M. 1964], lib. 3, cap. 52, fol. 112r: “Quoniam rex iste qui est obligatus et coniunctus cum eo, iste est intellectus qui effusus est super nos: qui coniungit nos cum creatore, secundum quod nos apprehendimus ipsum cum lumine intellectus quem effundit super nos, sicut David dixit. In lumine tuo videbimus lumen. Et similiter ipse cum hoc eodem lumine respicit super nos: et per ipsum est semper nobiscum videns et considerans ...”). On this, see Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart* (n. 60 above), 144: “It is the intellect of the Aristotelian-Arabic theory of the intellect that brings God and the human person closer to each other, in a strict (Jewish-Neo-Platonic) consciousness of transcendence.”

more precisely, God is one or single and simple in essence because he is absolute intellect – absolute, because he is essentially active intellect.⁶⁴

Let us briefly sum up the results of our exposition of Sermon 29 up to this point. According to Eckhart, the simplicity that is proper to God is the essence or the nature of the absolute intellect, so that God is realized only in the intellect. In the act of its self-knowledge, the divine intellect grounds the absolute unity of its essence. This means that Eckhart is the first thinker in the history of Western Metaphysics to propose a justification of absolute unity in terms of the metaphysics of spirit, and thus a metaphysics of absolute subjectivity.

⁶⁴ On this, see also Flasch, *Meister Eckhart* (n. 60 above), 144: “One who has not read the philosophical books about the intellect can never understand God correctly. Maimonides speaks in the plural of “books” about the theory of the intellect, and we should take this as a reference to Aristotle’s *De anima* and to al-Farabi, as well as to Avicenna. Maimonides drew on a broad current of speculation on the intellect, in the hope that this stream alone would allow him to acquire some knowledge of the unknown God, despite all that he says about the unknowability of God.” Flasch refers here to Maimonides, *Dux* (n. 62 above), lib. 1, chap. 67, fol. 27r: “Iam scis verbum manifestum quod philosophi dixerunt de Creatore, quod ipse est intellectus, intelligens et intellectum, et quod ista tria sunt unum in Creatore. [...] Non est dubium quod quicumque non considerat in libris de intellectu compositis nec apprehendit quiditatem intellectus vel substantiam eius [...]” (“For you know how widely known is the affirmation that the philosophers have made about God, namely that he is at one and the same time the ability to think, the one who thinks, and that which is thought, and that these three in God are only one. [...] It cannot be doubted that one who has not read the books about the intellect and has not grasped the essence of the intellect or its substance [...] will find it very hard to grasp this idea”).

5.3

The distinction between the “Godhead” and “God” and the mystagogical consequence of grounding the unity of God in the theory of the intellect

This substantial identification of the unity with the intellect of God does not contradict the well-known distinction that Eckhart frequently draws between the “Godhead” as the simple essence of God and “God” as the trinitarian life of the Godhead.⁶⁵ For the Godhead is the essential unity of the divine intellect, and “God” (distinct from this unity not in essence, but only relationally and personally) designates the trinitarian mode of self-knowledge and of Being of this absolute intellect. According to Eckhart, therefore, there must be two modes of knowledge of the divine intellect: his perfectly simple knowledge of his own essence, without relationships and differentiations, and a relationally differentiated self-knowledge, in which his trinitarian mode of Being consists. In the divine intellect, however, these two modes of knowledge are always realized simultaneously in one and the same act.

In *Sermo* 29, Eckhart draws the following mystagogical consequence from his grounding of the unity of God in the theory of the intellect: to the extent that something possesses intellect or the capacity for knowledge, it participates in God or in the One, and to that extent it is one with God. The ascent to the spirit or the subordination under the spirit thus means being united with God through God. At the end of this sermon, Eckhart undertakes yet another justification of the total character of the unity of God in terms of the theory of the intellect: in the divine intellect are “doubtless all beings in all, since there they are intellect

⁶⁵ On this distinction, see the detailed study by Gunther Stephenson, *Gottheit und Gott in der spekulativen Mystik Meister Eckharts. Eine Untersuchung zur Phänomenologie und Typologie der Mystik. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde vorgelegt der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Bonn*, Bonn 1954.

and nothing else.”⁶⁶ All-embracing unity or omni-unity is the unity of God thanks to its character as intellect, since in the absolute intellect all its specific contents are linked to one another without separation and without commixture, and thus interpenetrate one another.

6.

The unity of God, undifferentiatedness, reflexive self-affirmation, and its function as a principle for the numerically determined multiplicity in Eckhart's Expositio libri Sapientiae

6.1

The unlimitedness, undifferentiatedness, unity, fullness, and unicity of God

In the course of his commentary on the Book of Wisdom, Eckhart expounds the scriptural passage “Deus est unus” (“God is one,” following Gal 3:20) with an emphasis on the metaphysics of knowledge. Here, he begins by deducing God’s unity and unicity from his unlimitedness: that outside of which there is nothing, is unlimited. The consequence is that there cannot be two unlimited beings. God is unlimited, because nothing sets any limit to him; accordingly, he is one and unique.⁶⁷

Secondly, Eckhart derives God’s unicity from his undifferentiatedness, and points out that undifferentiatedness and unity are one and the same, as he has already stated in his

⁶⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Sermo* 29, n. 305, LW 4, p. 270,14-15: “ubi procul dubio in quantum huiusmodi nec aliter sunt omnia in omnibus.”

⁶⁷ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 146, LW 2, p. 484,2-5: “impossibile est duo esse infinita. Hoc est per se notum intelligenti terminos. Infinitum enim est extra quod nihil est. Deus autem, utpote nullo genere finitus et limitatus aut finibus comprehensus, infinitus est, ut iam supra dictum est. Igitur ipse est unus et unicus.”

Commentary on the book of Wisdom. It is impossible for two or more undifferentiated things to exist, since these would have to be distinct from each other, and consequently no longer undifferentiated. Accordingly, the lack of differentiation implies both unicity and unity.⁶⁸

Thirdly, the unicity of God is also a consequence of his identity with Being itself – the identity taught by Ex 3:14. This proposition too is proved by a *reductio ad absurdum* of the contradictory antithetical supposition: for if God were not Being itself, then there would be two gods. These could not be Being itself, but each of them could only be an existent. In that case, however, every existent brought forth by these gods would be two existents, and that is impossible. God’s unicity therefore follows from the identification of God with Being.⁶⁹

Eckhart also affirms that although the concept of the One may indeed sound negative – the One as the “not many” – it is in substance affirmative. As the negation of the negation, it is in fact the purest affirmation, and the fullness of the concept that is affirmed.⁷⁰ According to Aristotle, it is to the One alone that plenitude and superabundance belong.⁷¹ Eckhart’s great concern, therefore, is that the unity of God should not be misunderstood as an abstract, negative intellectual concept in the sense of that which is merely not many; rather, it should be understood as the unlimited, all-embracing plenitude of the intellectual essential act of

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 146, LW 2, p. 484,6-8: “impossibile est duo esse infinita, duo vel plura indistincta. Indistinctum enim est unum idem, ut etiam supra dictum est; sed deus indistinctus est et indistinctum. Igitur impossibile est esse plures deos.”

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 146, LW 2, pp. 484,9-485,2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 147, LW 2, p. 485,5-7: “Sciendum igitur ad praesens quod li unum primo est voce quidem negativum, sed re ipsa affirmativum. Item est negatio negationis, quae est purissima affirmatio et plenitudo termini affirmati.”

⁷¹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 147, LW 2, p. 485,8-9: “Plenitudo autem et superabundantia et ‘quod per superabundantiam dicitur uni soli convenit,’ ut ait philosophus.”

God, which possesses the supremely affirmative character of a pure self-affirmation. Hence, the unity of God is to be understood as his self-reflection, which recognizes as his own the plenitude of all the perfections of Being that are united to one another, and therein at the same time perfectly affirms his own self. This divine One, which is unlimited and continuously knows itself and infinitely affirms itself, generates from itself all that is multiple, and hence every number. Thanks to its own unity, it bestows on all that is multiple its numerically determined form of Being, which represents a degree or a manner of united multiplicity.⁷² Furthermore, the One has both substantial and conceptual priority over against duality and multiplicity, as Eckhart emphasizes in agreement with Thomas and the entire tradition of the Western Metaphysics of unity.

6.2

The precedence of the unity over the truth and the goodness of God

Eckhart likewise resolutely maintains the precedence of unity, as a definition of God, before truth and goodness. He justifies this as follows.⁷³

Unlike the true and the good, the One does not add anything positive to Being, either substantially or conceptually; all it adds is a negation, since “the One” designates Being itself, as it is in itself, by excluding and negating the “zero.” The One negates the “zero” by negating every negation of Being that designates a particular lack of Being. This is why the One

⁷² Cf. *ibid.*, n. 148, LW 2, p. 485,9-11: “Adhuc autem unum se toto descendit in omnia, quae citra sunt, quae multa sunt, quae numerata sunt. In quibus singulis ipsum unum non dividitur, sed manens unum incorruptum profundit omnem numerum et sua unitate informat.”

⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 149, LW 2, p. 486,12-13: “unitas sive unum propriissime deo convenit, magis etiam quam li verum et li bonum.”

designates a negation of the negation of Being. In this way, it negates the “zero”, or, to put it positively, it expresses the purity, the core, or the summit of Being itself – something that is not yet expressed in the term “Being” as such. The One has thus a very immediate relationship to Being. It indicates that the Being thus designated embraces everything that belongs to it and excludes everything that belongs to its opposite, namely the “zero.”⁷⁴ Here too, Eckhart’s metaphysics of the transcendentals is in the background, but for the reason we have stated, he gives unity a position of precedence among the transcendentals, since it designates nothing other than the pure substance that is the purity and perfection of Being itself.

Since the One designates the perfect purity of Being itself and does not add anything positive to this, it is – even more than the true and the good – the definition of his essence that is the most proper to God.⁷⁵ And this is why the scriptural text “God is one” (Gal 3:20) attributes this unity to God. Eckhart takes over from Macrobius’ *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* the proposition that this unity of God, which is itself not enumerable, is the source and origin of all numbers and of innumerable genera and species, and thus the beginning and the boundary of all, without itself possessing a beginning or a boundary. As we have seen,

⁷⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 148, LW 2, pp. 485f.; on the relationship between Being and unity in God, see Goris, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel* (n. 26 above), 71: “The negative element in thinking of the One as *indivisio* is posited absolutely and is linked exclusively to God, since it designates the total inclusiveness of Being. A productive relationship is thus established between the attribution of the ‘existent’ and the attribution of the ‘One’ to God. The fact that God is one means that he includes all Being in himself. The fact that God exists means that he is one.”

⁷⁵ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 149, LW 2, p. 486,12-13: “... unitas sive unum propriissime deo convenit, magis etiam quam li verum et li bonum.”

Eckhart holds that this unity of God's essence also entails the unicity of God, or of his wisdom – the wisdom that He Himself is.⁷⁶

6.3

The undifferentiatedness of the unity as the basis of its difference from all that is multiple

Eckhart loves the paradoxical, contradictory definition of God, since this shows that God is exalted above the thinking of human reason. It also shows the limitation on the validity of the principle that contradictions must be avoided, since God is above all contradictions. This is why he affirms the validity of the apparently contradictory proposition that nothing is so different as God from number and that which is counted or can be counted, i.e. from that which is multiple or created – and at the same time, that nothing is so un-different as God from all this.⁷⁷ In what follows, Eckhart demonstrates separately the two parts of this

⁷⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 149, LW 2, pp. 486f.; on unity as the principle of number, see Goris, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel* (n. 26 above), 114-123 and 133-155.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 154, LW 2, p. 489,7-8: “Iuxta quod notandum quod nihil tam distinctum a numero et numerato sive numerabili, creato scilicet, ut deus, et nihil tam indistinctum.” On the context of this sentence, see Werner Beierwaltes, “Unterschied durch Un-unterschiedenheit,” in *id.*, ed. *Identität und Differenz* (Philosophische Abhandlungen 49), Frankfurt a.M. 1980, 97-104, at 98: “The sentence quoted from the commentary on Wisdom is the goal of the exposition of the verse: *et cum sit una, omnia potest*, ‘and since she (Wisdom) is the One, she can do everything.’ This makes it clear that the discussion of the reference of ‘indistinctio’ and ‘distinctio’ takes place against the background of the question of *unity and multiplicity ...*” On this, see also Beierwaltes, “‘Und daz Ein machet uns saelic’” (n. 50 above), 111f.

contradictory affirmation. He employs the following arguments to show that nothing is so different as God from all created things in their multiplicity.

First, the undifferentiated is more different from the differentiated than any one differentiated thing is from another differentiated thing. Undifferentiatedness belongs to the nature of God, while differentiatedness belongs to the nature and to the concept of that which is created. This is why God is supremely different from that which is created.⁷⁸

Secondly, the antithesis of something is that which is furthest removed from it. God and the creature are antithetical, for the One and the innumerable are the antithesis of number and the numerable. Consequently, nothing is so different from every created thing as God.

Thirdly, whatever is different, thanks to its undifferentiatedness, from everything that bears a differentiation in itself is all the more different, the more it is undifferentiated. Eckhart argues that this proposition can be reversed: The more something is differentiated, the more is it undifferentiated, since its differentiatedness differentiates it from that which is undifferentiated or non-differentiated. Accordingly, the more it is differentiated, the more is it undifferentiated. How far is this paradoxical description valid? Something that is in itself multiple, and therefore different from something else, becomes more undifferentiated from God precisely through an increase in its differentiatedness, i.e. in its definition, because it becomes ever more identical to the infinite simplicity of God, or ever more one. This means that the paradoxical relationship is valid: the more it is differentiated, the more is it undifferentiated. It is one with the Undifferentiated. But the reverse paradoxical relationship

⁷⁸ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 154, LW 2, p. 489,9-13: “Ratio prima: quia plus distinguitur indistinctum a distincto quam quaelibet duo distincta ab invicem. [...] Sed de natura dei est indistinctio, de natura et ratione creati distinctio, ut dictum est supra. Igitur deus est distinctissimus ab omni et quolibet creato.”

is also valid: The more something is undifferentiated or simple, the more is it different from that which is different from itself. Eckhart now states, with a reference to Thomas Aquinas (cf. *S.Th.* I, *quaest.* 7, art. 1), that God is something undifferentiated that differs from everything else by reason of his undifferentiatedness, since (according to John Damascene) he is a sea of unlimited and accordingly undifferentiated substance. This is why God is supremely different from his creatures.⁷⁹

Eckhart adduces the following three reasons in support of the apparently contradictory second part of the affirmation, namely that nothing is so one and undifferentiated as God and the creature:

⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 154, LW 2, p. 490,4-10. On the meaning of this first part of the contradictory affirmation – that nothing is so different as God from all that is multiple and created – see also Werner Beierwaltes, “Unterschied durch Un-unterschiedenheit” (n. 76 above), 99: “It is thus through this undifferentiatedness per se that the pure unity or identity differs ... from that which is differentiated in itself and from other things ... The created existent is thus determined, limited, and in its essence mutually exclusive (despite a specific relatedness). Each one is, by itself, something different and at the same time something separated by number, this thing identical with its own self (*hoc et hoc*).” Beierwaltes expounds Eckhart’s thesis, that a higher degree of differentiatedness in an existent leads to a higher degree of its undifferentiatedness from God, with regard to the foundational relationship between the creator and that which is created; cf. *ibid.*, 103: “A higher degree of differentiatedness in an existent points all the more strongly to something that is not differentiated from it, as its ground; the One is the foundational ground, and the closer the existent comes to undifferentiatedness as a quality of Being, the greater is its difference from all that is different.”

First, nothing is so undifferentiated as Being and the existent, as an act and its potency, and as form and matter. And this is precisely how God relates to all that is created.

Secondly, nothing is so undifferentiated as the composite and its components. Since however number or multiplicity, that is, that which is counted and that which can be counted, are composed of unities, nothing is so reciprocally undifferentiated as God the One, or the unity of God, and the created things which are numerically determined.

Thirdly, nothing is more undifferentiated from another thing than from that from which it does not differentiate itself by its differentiatedness. As the third argument for the first part of the affirmation has shown, all created things that are determined by number do not differentiate themselves from God by means of their differentiatedness. Consequently, nothing is so undifferentiated and so “one” as God and the creature – for undifferentiatedness and unity are the same. This is why God and every creature are undifferentiated entities. And this proves the unity of the divine intellect or of the wisdom of God.⁸⁰

6.4

The omnipotence of the divine intellect as the implication of its unity

In the second line of argumentation with regard to the one, simple Spirit of God, Eckhart gives reasons why omnipotence is implied by the unity of the divine intellect.

Here, he takes up the Neo-Platonic principle that the more something is simple and united in itself, the greater is its generative, creative, and sustaining ability – its effects *ad extra* in the sphere of real multiplicity. However, he attempts to offer his own demonstration

⁸⁰ On these three reasons in support of the second part of the affirmation, cf. Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 155, LW 2, p. 491; on this, see also Beierwaltes, “Unterschied durch Un-unterschiedenheit” (n. 76 above), 98f.

of this principle. That which is composite receives its power from something else, namely, from its components. Unlike this, however, that which is not composite or simple possesses its own power and its ability. And this is why its effects are greater.⁸¹ This means that the greater the number of the simple, non-composite components of a thing is, the greater will be the power that it has as a totality, and likewise its effects *ad extra*. Accordingly, the simpler something is, the more powerful and the stronger it is.⁸²

If however something is the more effective, the more united it is, then that which is absolutely simple – and it alone – must be able to do all things. It must be omnipotent. For an increase in power in the cause leads to an increase in power in the effect. The wisdom or Spirit of God is in itself perfectly simple; it follows that it is also omnipotent.⁸³

The second proof that the omnipotence of the Spirit of God is implied by his unity is based on a proposition from the *Liber de causis*, that every united power is less restricted, and is capable of having a greater effect on a greater number of things. God's wisdom is the simplest of all, since it is the first cause of everything. Accordingly, it is absolutely unrestricted and omnipotent.⁸⁴

Finally, let us also mention Eckhart's third argument. Each thing has an effect because it is real and one. It follows that the more something is "one" or simple, the more is it real. The divine wisdom is absolutely and supremely simple. It therefore possesses the greatest

⁸¹ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 156, LW 2, p. 492,2-3: "Sciendum ergo quod quanto quid est simplicius et unitius, tanto est potentius et virtuosius, plura potens." This principle is the subject of *Propositio 17* of the *Liber de causis* (§16, p. 83f., ed. Adriaan Pattin).

⁸² Cf. *ibid.*, n. 156, LW 2, p. 492,4-7.

⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 157, LW 2, p. 493,1-5.

⁸⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 157, LW 2, p. 493, 6-8.

power and effect. Thanks to its simplicity, it possesses absolute effect. Thanks to its primordial unity as the first cause, it possesses an omnipotent effect that is proper to the divine wisdom alone.⁸⁵

Let us sum up. In his commentary on the Old Testament Book of Wisdom, Eckhart infers from the scriptural passage “Deus est unus” (according to Gal 3:20) and from the Book of Wisdom that wisdom is one. He infers the infinite unity and the undifferentiatedness of God from all that is created, his reflexive self-affirmation, his superiority to all multiplicity and every number, his function as creative and constitutive principle of all multiplicity and every number, his identity with the purity of Being, and his omnipotence, that is, his unrestricted power to bring forth everything that is possible.

7.

*A note on Sermo 37, “Unus deus et pater omnium,” on Eph 4:1-6*⁸⁶

Reasons of space do not permit me to analyze all the details of this Latin sermon, which is important for Eckhart’s definition of the concept of God in terms of the metaphysics of unity. Let me at least summarize the findings of a study presented elsewhere.⁸⁷ According to this sermon, God’s unity is the reason why he can be known only negatively. His unity is the reason for his undifferentiatedness and his character of totality or his omni-unity, which gives perfect joy to all intellectual beings.⁸⁸ Besides this, God’s unity is the reason why he is the

⁸⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 157, LW 2, pp. 493,9-494,5.

⁸⁶ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Sermo 37* [Dominica septima decima post trinitatem de epistula (Eph. 4,1-6)], LW 4, pp. 320-324.

⁸⁷ See Markus Enders, “*Deus est unus omnibus modis*” (n. 59 above), chap. V.

⁸⁸ Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Sermo 37*, n. 375, LW 4, pp. 320,5-321,2.

principle of all that is different from him and of all that is multiple. It is only the one God who brings forth the existence of the multiple and determines what it shall be, that is to say, its particular degree of unity.⁸⁹

8.

Meister Eckhart's understanding of God – a summary of our findings

Let us now bring together the findings of our investigation of Meister Eckhart's understanding of God.⁹⁰ By far the most important traditional source for Eckhart's theory of the absolute unity of the first principle is the metaphysics of unity and the radical negative theology of the Jewish philosopher of religion, Moses Maimonides. Eckhart takes over Maimonides' strict concept of the absolute unity of the divine essence, which excludes every form of multiplicity, whether real or merely conceptual. Secondly, Eckhart follows Maimonides in the rejection of an affirmative theology, to the extent that this predicates accidental properties of God. He does not however follow Maimonides in his view that all the divine predicates developed by the affirmative theology possess an accidental character. Rather, Eckhart presupposes that perfections of Being that are employed as divine predicates, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness, designate the perfection of the absolutely simple essence of God himself and thus correspond to something real, even if this "something real" is not mutually distinct properties. Thirdly, Eckhart basically follows Maimonides in his negative theology, as the most appropriate epistemological path with regard to the simple and

⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 377, LW IV, pp. 322,11-323,8.

⁹⁰ This summary also takes into account the findings in my essay "*Deus est unus omnibus modis*" (n. 59 above) on the metaphysics of unity in Meister Eckhart, which complements the present essay.

unrestricted essence of God. But he does not follow him in his strict exclusion of every relationality from the essence of God. Rather, Eckhart transforms Maimonides' metaphysics of unity by giving a specific justification of the applicability of the category of "relationship" to God in order to safeguard God's trinitarian mode of Being. In his commentary on the Book of Exodus, Eckhart links this transformation of Maimonides' metaphysics of unity to his exposition of the revealed divine name "Ego sum qui sum" in the sense of a reflexive self-affirmation by God that possesses the formal character of the abolition of all restrictions, or of a "negation of the negation." In his commentary on the Book of Wisdom, which was probably written at an earlier period than his commentary on Exodus, Eckhart develops a concept of absolute unity by demonstrating the unicity, the omni-unity, that is, the all-embracing total character of this unity, the unlimitedness, the omnipotent function as principle of the numerically determined multiplicity, and above all, the utter lack of differentiation as implicit designations of the absolute One, or more precisely of the unity of the divine intellect. As we have seen in his Latin *Sermo 29*, Eckhart is the first in the history of Western Metaphysics (though most probably following Moses Maimonides) to justify the unity of God in terms of the theory of the intellect or of the metaphysics of the spirit, thereby exactly reversing the causal relationship – that belonged to the Platonic-Neo-Platonic tradition and had been received by Christian thinkers before Eckhart – between the designations of the first principle in terms of the metaphysics of unity and of the spirit. According to Eckhart, the absolute Spirit realizes the unity of his divine being through the act of his self-knowledge. It is only because Eckhart sees unity as a proper designation of the divine intellect that he can also understand and conceive of this unity as a trinitarian unity in his commentary on the Book of Exodus.

This finding accords very well with Eckhart's early exposition of the Being of God in terms of the theory of the intellect, in his first Parisian *Quaestio*. Here, the absolute act of knowing is identified as the ground of God's Being; according to the Latin *Sermo 29*, the unity of the divine nature is a property belonging only to the divine intellect. This makes

Eckhart the first proponent of a metaphysics of absolute subjectivity *avant la lettre*. The teaching in the first Parisian *Quaestio* about the transcendence of the Being of the divine intellect does not in the least contradict Eckhart's metaphysics of the transcendentals in his *Opus tripartitum*, which identifies God with perfect Being itself, since the "Being" that is not applied to God in the first Parisian *Quaestio* is the grounded, determined, finite Being of the creatures, which is fundamentally different from the perfect, simple Being of the divine intellect.

The Latin *Sermo* 37 makes it particularly clear that Eckhart understands the unity of the divine Spirit as the ground that brings forth the existence and the degree of unity of all the determinate forms of united multiplicity, and is therefore the ground of all that exists. Eckhart understands this absolute unity of the divine intellect as the nature or the essence of God. At the same time, however, it is the irresistible basic goal of all the striving of the human soul, which was created by this unity and in view of this unity. This is why the human soul is

capable of receiving the unity of the divine Spirit.⁹¹ And this, as Eckhart programmatically asserts in his *Book of the divine consolation*,⁹² is why “only the One makes us happy.”⁹³

⁹¹ This interpretation can be verified with particular clarity in Eckhart’s German *Sermon 21* (“Unus deus et pater omnium”). Whereas the transcendentals of goodness and truth, which are interpreted by Eckhart’s metaphysics of the transcendentals as perfections of the divine Being, contain conceptual additions to the unity of the divine essence, since the goodness of God signifies his admirable perfection and the truth of God signifies his self-reflexive omniscience, unity adds nothing conceptually to God and is therefore the exact expression of his Being. In the unity, God’s divinity is realized; that is to say, the divinity of God, the nature proper to God or the essence of God, is the (absolute) unity. Cf. Meister Eckhart, *Predigt 21*, DW 1, p. 361,9-12, pp. 368,5-369,5; on the receptivity of the created intellectual soul for the unity of God, cf. *ibid.*, DW 1, pp. 369,6-370,6.

⁹² Meister Eckhart, *Das Buch der göttlichen Tröstung*, DW 5, p. 41,21.

⁹³ [English translation: Brian McNeil.]