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Source: *New Blackfriars*, October 1996, Vol. 77, No. 908 (October 1996), pp. 458-472

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43249917>

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# Meister Eckhart and the Via Negativa: Epistemology and Mystical Language

John J. Murphy

The mystical language of the 14th century Dominican, Meister Eckhart, can certainly be characterised as daring in its creativity. Indeed, Eckhart uses language like few others in his talk of the divine, employing bold paradoxes and unusual metaphors. But as Bernard McGinn has written, “while Eckhart’s creative handling of language is one of the major attractions of his style, it often does not make the task of understanding him any easier.”<sup>1</sup> Part of the problem in failing to understand Eckhart’s words involves a failure to understand the context of his theological vision and his efforts to bring his listeners to a new appreciation of the divine. This has been especially true in the contemporary philosophy of religion. Philosophical analyses have failed to attend to the conditions in which the mystic’s words have their meaning and instead have generally been attempts to “penetrate” the phenomena. What is required instead is what the 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein has advised, namely, a grammatical investigation. When Eckhart writes, “The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me; my eye and God’s eye are one eye and one sight and one knowing and one loving”, it must be recognized that the meaning of such a statement can only be understood in seeing how Eckhart’s words are being used, for it is only in this context that these words have their significance. Rather than impose a philosophical explanation, therefore, it is important to note the grammar of Eckhart’s discourse and thus a description is offered. What this will reveal is that Eckhart’s use of paradox and metaphor in his talk of the divine, rather than being a description of God, is instead part of a deliberate linguistic strategy. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to employ a Wittgensteinian approach to the study of Eckhart’s mysticism by attending closely to Eckhart’s mystical discourse. In so doing, attention is paid to the place such mystical language has in Eckhart’s religious life. This, I argue, in contrast to the predominant philosophical analyses of mysticism and mystical language, should be the epistemological basis on which the study of mysticism is constructed. In paying attention to the way Eckhart uses mystical language, one can come to appreciate that understanding the words of the mystic does not involve the attempt to provide a metaphysical classification.

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# I

For Eckhart, "God is nameless because none can say or understand anything about Him." (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, sermon 96, p. 332.).<sup>2</sup> If one were to understand God, God would be something less than ourselves. He therefore warns his readers to be "silent and do not chatter about God" for "If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God." (*Sermons and Treatises*, Vol. II, sermon 96, p.333). It is perhaps with Eckhart's language in mind that a standard description of mystical discourse was one in which its ineffable and paradoxical character was asserted. His famous prayer to God to rid him of God is another example. But the sense of mystical language can only be determined by seeing how such language has an application in the mystic's life. Philosophers of religion, however, have generally disregarded such a tack and have instead come to understand the mystic's use of the word "God" as a name. But with this philosophical presupposition, mystical language is analyzed with an inappropriate criterion. Such an approach divorces the mystic's discourse from the context in which talk of God is meaningful. An example of this approach can be found in the work of the philosopher A. J. Ayer. Ayer has written that because a mystic's claim to an apprehension of the divine cannot be empirically verified it must be considered insignificant. Any claim about the transcendent, including the mystic's assertion of an ineffable and paradoxical nature of the experience, must be rejected. Thus, according to Ayer, there is no epistemological value to a mystical experience. In his book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer writes:

It is no use his (the mystic) saying that he has apprehended facts but is unable to express them. For we know that if he really had acquired any information, he would be able to express it.... So that in describing his vision the mystic does not give us any information about the external world: he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind.<sup>3</sup>

Another example comes from Walter T. Stace. Stace has argued that mystical language is epistemologically significant because, according to Stace, it is an accurate description of the mystical experience. Like Ayer, Stace imposes an empiricist's presupposition and understands the mystical experience to be comparable to ordinary intentional experience. The difference for Stace, however, is that the mystic does experience something in his or her encounter. But the empirical approach is the same. The concepts used by the mystic in his or her description ultimately depend upon this experience for their significance. Thus, the language employed by the mystic is understood to be wholly referential and the meaning of the

mystic's language is determined by the experience of the phenomenon to which the language refers. With such a presupposition Stace is led to the dubious conclusion that, since mystical language is paradoxical and contradictory, the mystic is then "embarrassed" by such talk.

The epistemological significance of mystical language for Ayer and Stace is evaluated with a philosophical presupposition. Mystical language is understood to be either epistemologically insignificant, or else it is understood to be an ostensive definition of the transcendent. Such an application, however, is an idle wheel. As noted, Eckhart does indeed employ an apophaticism in his mystical language. But the *via negativa* is not a negative language. According to the mystical tradition to which he belonged, God is not present as some other object in the world. Rather, God, by definition, is a hidden God.<sup>4</sup> The epistemological significance of Eckhart's mystical discourse, therefore, and his use of the *via negativa*, is that it mediates this sense of a *Deus absconditus*. An example of this mediation can be found in his paradoxical discussion of the being of God.<sup>5</sup> Eckhart discusses God's being as a means of illustrating the separateness between God and creatures. But at the same time, the being of God also illustrates how creatures and God are one, for, according to Eckhart, God not only transcends the world of creatures, God also "has the being of all creatures in himself. He is a being that has all beings in itself." (*Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon XXIX, p. 323). Therefore for Eckhart, God is one and yet resides as the inner reality of everything else.

God is infinite in his simplicity and simple by reason of his infinity. Therefore, he is everywhere and everywhere entire. He is everywhere by his infinity, but entire everywhere by reason of his simplicity. God alone flows into all created beings, into their essences; nothing of other beings flows into anything else. God is in the inner reality of each thing, and only in the inner reality. He alone "is one." (*Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon XXIX (pp.223–4))

According to Eckhart, God is infinitely dissimilar to creatures because God is all and everything while creatures in and of themselves are nothing. And yet, nothing is more similar since the creature's true being is God. With the use of a metaphor suggesting creatures are like mirrors reflecting the light of God, Eckhart teaches that creatures are and have everything they have from God. This serves as the ground for the similarity between God and creatures. But again, in dialectical fashion, this metaphor also works to illustrate the dissimilarity between God and the world. The individual creature can be said to possess two natures then. The *esse formale* of the individual is received from the *esse virtuale* or the idea that exists in the mind of God. Thus according to Eckhart, not only do creatures possess a being in and of themselves, but they also possess

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being through the *idea* of this being which exists in God. The *idea* is of a higher nature. It is unchanging and eternal. The *idea* that exists in God is nobler since it is not of a transitory nature. Because the *idea* or *esse virtuale* is in God and thus in the realm of intellect, it is something that is uncreated. This is in contrast to the being of creatures in and of themselves; *esse formale*. The *esse formale* requires an efficient cause. In and of herself, the creature is nothing—infininitely distinct from God. However, the individual's nobility if you will, her true being, is derived from God as a mirror reflects the light of the sun. Eckhart writes:

I take a bowl of water and put a mirror in it and set it under the disc of the sun. Then the sun sends forth its light-rays both from the disc and from the sun's depth, and yet suffers no diminution. The reflection of the mirror in the sun is a sun, and yet it is what it is. So it is with God. God is in the soul with His nature, with His being and with His Godhead, and yet He is not the soul. The reflection of the soul in God is God, and yet she is what she is. God *becomes* when all creatures say "God"—then God comes to be. (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 56, p. 81).

With the metaphor of the mirror, a symbol of mystical union, Eckhart teaches that creatures are and have everything they have from God. Therefore, this not only serves as the ground for the similarity between God and creatures but also this similarity works as the basis of how dissimilar God and creatures are. What is more, with this conception of the dual nature of the individual, the transcendence of God is preserved for Eckhart with the *esse virtuale* being completely outside anything existing *esse formale*. The *esse formale* requires an efficient cause. Because of this, and because God is complete unity, there is a separation of God from creatures. Yet because the soul, in its core, is uncreated, the Son of the Father is eternally immanent. The soul possesses the eternal presence of God—present before the creation of the world. Thus, while at the same time stressing God's transcendence, the dialectic employed by Eckhart conveys God's immanence. God is so totally transcendent of all creaturely things that no positive designation or ostensive definition will do. And yet the inner reality of all creatures is God. Rather than attempt to harmonize such contradictions, Eckhart holds these contradictions in tension so that in the absence of the divine, the presence of the divine is manifested. Eckhart writes:

You should know that nothing is as dissimilar as the Creator and any creature. In the second place, nothing is as similar as the Creator and any creature. And in the third place, nothing is as equally dissimilar and similar to anything else as God and the creature are dissimilar and similar in the same degree. (*Teacher and Preacher*, 'Commentary on Exodus. No. 112', p. 81).

As noted, according to Ayer and Stace, when the mystic employs a contradiction or paradox in his or her mystical language, it is understood that this is an attempt to describe the mystical experience. Only for Stace is this description successful. For Stace, the mystical experience, itself, is inherently paradoxical. These descriptions of mystical experiences are not to be dismissed as emotive or considered merely as metaphorical. According to Stace, the descriptions must be understood to be literal descriptions. Due to the fact that the mystical experience is contradictory or paradoxical in nature, the mystic, out of necessity, ends up using paradoxical language in his or her description. The mystic's report of "it is x" and then the compulsion to report "it is not x" immediately afterwards, leads the mystic to believe he or she has made a mistake. With such a contradiction, therefore, the mystic frequently concludes that the language employed is inadequate to describe such an experience. Stace points out however that this conclusion is mistaken. According to Stace, when the mystic returns from the "paradoxical world of the One" he or she wishes to communicate the experience to others. But as Stace writes, the "words come from his mouth, but he is astonished and perplexed to find himself talking in contradictions."<sup>6</sup> It is Stace's argument that the mystic cannot conceptualize the mystical experience while it is being experienced. It is only after the experience, when one has left the mystical state of consciousness, that the mystic tries to reason about it. The cause of this is the significant difference between a mystical and the ordinary, or what Stace terms "sensory-intellectual", state of consciousness. In the mystical consciousness one has no thoughts or concepts, nor any sensations whatsoever. It is Stace's contention that all one has in the mystical consciousness is a simple apprehension of the transcendent. It is only in one's "sensory intellectual" consciousness that one can describe or analyze this experience. This, he argues, is why the mystics make the claim that mystical experiences are "ineffable" since, as Stace writes, "every word in language, except proper names, stands for a concept, it follows that where no concepts are possible no words are possible" (Stace, p. 285). Yet, as Stace notes, mystics still try to describe their experiences. But because the mystical experience is inherently paradoxical, the laws of logic do not apply (Stace, p. 304).

The language which he finds himself compelled to use is, when at its best, the literal truth about his experience, but it is contradictory. *This is the root of his feeling of embarrassment with language.* And he is embarrassed because he is, like other people, a logically minded man in his non-mystical moments. He is not a being who lives solely in the paradoxical world of the One. He lives mostly in the space-time world, which is the territory of the laws of logic. (Emphasis original). (Stace, p. 305).

On the one hand, then, according to Stace, the mystic's language is not inadequate at all. It is not the case that the mystical experience contains a content that cannot be described by language. Rather, the language correctly and accurately describes the experience. Because, as Stace notes, "concepts depend on multiplicity and can therefore find no foothold in an experience which is wholly unitary" (Stace, p. 286), paradoxical language is found in mystical writing. Thus, the mystic's claim of the ineffable character of a mystical experience, Stace argues, is derived from the mistaken notion that the mystic is unable to describe the experience accurately. The mystic falsely concludes then that the language he or she uses is inadequate and therefore the experience must be considered ineffable. But according to Stace, the mystic is frequently "a poor logician, a poor philosopher, and a poor analyst" (Stace, p. 306). Stace considered Eckhart to be "the greatest and most original and audacious *intellect* among the Christian mystics" (Stace, p. 233). Yet, Eckhart still finds the mystical consciousness ineffable (Stace, p. 282). Again, in actuality, according to Stace, the contradiction of "it is *x*" and "it is not *x*" offered by the mystic, is an accurate description by the mystic. For Stace, mystical language is contradictory and paradoxical for it describes an inherently contradictory and paradoxical experience. Thus, while for A. J. Ayer the language of the mystic ultimately does not refer to anything, for Stace the mystic successfully refers to an inherently paradoxical experience. On the other hand, however, there is an inadequacy to the mystic's language. According to Stace, language belongs to the "sensory-intellectual" world and yet the transcendent mystical experience involves no conceptualisation. In this sense, while the mystic's language is a description of the paradoxical world of the One, it does not fully reveal the content experienced in mystical states. Again, however, such an analysis fails to see that Eckhart is not using language as if he could designate the content of his mystical experience and then offer a description to others. God, by definition for the mystic, cannot be ostensively defined as some physical object. This does not mean that talk of God is insignificant or lacking in meaning, however. In fact, it is God's absence that is central to Eckhart's religious understanding. The whole point of his paradoxical language is to share his mystical insight that God's presence is not the same as the presence of an additional existent (*The Essential Sermons, Parables of Genesis*, 143, p. 112). Only then can one enter into a more intimate relationship with the divine. This, it might be said, is the grammatical point.

Eckhart certainly employs contradiction and paradox, but he is far from being embarrassed. In a deliberate linguistic strategy, as in his discussion of the being of God, Eckhart offers a distinction between God



and the Godhead. The original assertion of God's transcendence in the Godhead is critically turned back upon itself with the reference made to the immanent God. The more God's transcendence is asserted, the more God's immanence is reasserted. This turning back upon the original assertion is a never ending series of affirmations and denials. Any one of the propositions, either of God being wholly other or of God being non-other, is resisted in the attempt to avoid any reification. Thus, the significance of his dialectic of transcendence and immanence is located in the tension in which these two opposing propositions are held. To assert that God is transcendent is to say that that which is beyond is within. In his theme of the birth of the Son in the soul, in which God the Father begets His only begotten Son in the soul of the believer, at that moment, Eckhart says, "I bear him back into the Father" (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 53, p. 64). So that the more God is immanent in the world, the more God is in things, "the more he is out of things: the more in, the more out, and the more out, the more in" (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 18, p. 147). Importantly therefore, one must recognize how Eckhart understands the word "God" in order to see why he employs such paradoxical language. For Eckhart, God's absence is not a failed presence. The ineffable and paradoxical characteristics of mystical language are therefore not descriptions of an inherently paradoxical experience which are then subject to verification. Rather, God's hiddenness is an essential element of what the word "God" means for the mystic.

Eckhart's concept of *Abegescheidenheit* is closely related to his understanding of a *Deus absconditus*. Eckhart is combating conceptions of the divine will in which explanations are sought in order to justify whatever circumstances have occurred. Thus, for Eckhart, God is not to be conceived as an agent. Such an understanding obstructs what Eckhart would consider an intimate communion with the divine and miss how God is mediated in and through the world. Instead, it is precisely because there is no point to things that God's will can be seen. Eckhart's *via negativa* is an effort to mediate this sense of the divine will. God's grace is something that is realized with a shift in perspective; in a dying to the desire for such explanations and realising that they too, like God, must be hidden. This is Eckhart's concept of *Abegescheidenheit*. It is a "giving up" or a "letting go" (*Gelâzenheit*) of the things that impede a greater knowledge and union with the divine. The detachment or "letting go" spoken of by Eckhart is also an abandonment of all attempts to offer explanations or justifications for whatever circumstances have occurred in the world. In this regard, time is replaced for the eternal and the eternal is mediated within time. The sufferings of the world are not explained away by referring to something "higher" or something beyond. These questions



are unanswerable in the end, and it is only when they are abandoned that the need for answers is as well. For the mystic, God is involved in the sufferings. *Abegescheidenheit* is a renunciation of the will in order for the divine to enter into the life of the believer. With this renunciation the individual self ceases to be the centre of the world and then whatever occurs in the world is seen as the will of God. Then the Father is known, not as an agent or additional existent, but through Himself. Eckhart writes:

There are many masters who claim that this image is born of will and intellect, but this is not so. I say rather that this image is an expression of itself without will and without intellect. I will give you a simile. Hold up a mirror before me, and whether I want to or not, without will and without intellectual knowledge of myself I am imaged in the mirror. This image is not of the mirror, and it is not of itself, but this image is most of all in him from whom it takes its being and its nature. When the mirror is taken away from me, then I am no longer imaged in the mirror, for I am myself the image (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 14, p. 121).

When the soul gives up all images and forms, its will and intellect, then it can receive the image of the divine. But only when the individual will is completely abandoned does the divine enter into the soul. Whether one wants to or not, when a mirror is held up in front of one, one's image is reflected in the mirror. Similarly, according to Eckhart, when the soul gives up its will and its intellect, it too becomes a mirror in which the image of the divine appears. Eckhart uses this metaphor since the mirror cannot reflect the image of itself. It is the function of the mirror to take on the being of another. In the same way, the soul has no being in and of itself. When it is free of its will and intellect, when like the mirror it is polished, it takes on the being of the divine. As Eckhart says of this image of the soul, "what comes out is what stays within, and what stays within is what comes out. This image is the son of the Father, and I myself am this image ...." (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 14, p. 121). Because the creature, one who remains in the state of *esse formale*, fails to participate in the fuller being that truly is, Eckhart can discuss the way in which that desired union between creature and God can be achieved. According to Eckhart, when the soul is detached God is compelled to give of God's self. As Eckhart writes, "I praise detachment above all love. First, because the best thing about love is that it compels me to love God, yet detachment compels God to love me" (*The Essential Sermons, Treatise 'On Detachment'*, p. 286).

Just see what a righteous man can do with God! It is a certain and necessary truth that he who resigns his will wholly to God will catch God and bind God, so that God can do nothing but what that man

wills. He who makes his will over wholly to God, to him God gives His will in return, so wholly and so genuinely that God's will becomes that man's own, and He has sworn by Himself to do nothing but what that man wills, for God will never be anyone's own who has not first become His own: St. Augustine says, "Lord, thou wilt be no man's own till he has become thine own" (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 10, p. 92).

Mystical union is only realized in the changed life of the individual. Eckhart's language reflects this, particularly with his metaphor of the mirror. The union is not an experience between subject and object in which God is taken by storm, but rather an event in which the individual's ego is renounced and the self withdraws so that God can enter. Just as the mirror loses itself in the process of reflection, it is no longer considered in itself. When it takes on the being of the other, it fulfils its function and the image reflected is what is realized. The God who is hidden is then revealed. Eckhart writes:

As truly as the Father in his simple nature gives his Son birth naturally, so truly does he give him birth in the most inward part of the spirit, and that is the inner world. Here God's ground is my ground, and my ground is God's ground. Here I live from what is my own, as God lives from what is his own. Whoever has looked for an instant into this ground, to such a man a thousand marks of red, minted gold are no more than a counterfeit penny. It is out of this inner ground that you should perform all your works without asking, "Why?" I say truly: So long as you perform your works for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, or for God's sake, or for the sake of your eternal blessedness, and you work them from without, you are going completely astray. You may well be tolerated, but it is not the best. Because truly, when people think that they are acquiring more of God in inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness and in various approaches than they do by the fireside or in the stable, you are acting just as if you took God and muffled his head up in a cloak and pushed him under a bench. Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden (*The Essential Sermons*, Sermon 5b, *In hoc apparuit charitas dei in nobis*, p. 183).

The inner ground Eckhart speaks of is, what he terms, a 'spark' (*vunkelin*) of the soul, in which a part of the human intellect partakes or is a portion of the divine. Eckhart says "this spark is so akin to God that it is a single impartible one, and it contains in itself the images of all creatures, imageless images and images above images" (*The Essential Sermons*, vol. II, Sermon 53, p. 63). It is uncreated. Because it is eternal, the creature can "return" to the place it was before creation of the *esse formale*. In order to "return" to that One, however, creatures must abandon their own

createdness, they must abandon their *esse formale* and return to their *esse virtuale*. This process is the ascent or “breakthrough” of the soul into the Godhead. According to Eckhart, before the Fall, human beings were in the “correct condition” when “the sensitive faculty obeys, looks to and is ordered to the inferior reason, and the inferior reason cleaves and adheres to the superior reason as it in turn does to God” (*The Essential Sermons*, Parables of Genesis, 143, p. 112). Since the Fall, however, “all the powers of the soul, inferior reason and the sensitive faculty as well, were separated from contact with the rule of the superior reason” (*The Essential Sermons*, Parables of Genesis, 143, p. 112). The soul, instead of being oriented towards the One, is now focused on the objects of the world, according to Eckhart. Eckhart thus teaches that in order to become “sons of God” again we must “distinguish between the outward and the inward understanding” (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 7, p. 64). Eckhart writes that the soul should strive for the “purity” found in God, “for in God all things are pure and noble.” He writes:

As soon as they flow out of God into the nearest creature, unlikeness arises as between something and nothing: for in God there is light and being, and in creatures there is darkness and nothingness, since what in God is light and being, in creatures is darkness and nothingness (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 84, p. 258).

In contrast to the soul’s ascent into the transcendent Godhead, Eckhart entertains perhaps the central theme of his corpus, namely, the birth of the Son in the soul.<sup>7</sup> This process is a descent of God into the human soul.<sup>8</sup> But the two themes of the birth of the Son in the soul and the “break-through” are interrelated. Both are concerned with the changed life of the individual. The soul must be pure of all images and concepts if the birth of the Son is to take place in the soul. “For,” as Eckhart writes, “at this birth God needs and must have a vacant free and unencumbered soul containing nothing but Himself alone, and which looks to nothing and nobody but Him” (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 2, p. 20). It is for this reason, Eckhart says, that the human will must be totally extinguished. What this entails is an abandonment of the *esse formale* of the creaturely world and all creaturely approaches to the divine in order to embrace the God who is above all forms and images. This is a sacrificial form of love in which the other world of the divine is brought to this world. In a sense, God dies to God’s self and thus only by embracing the divine nature ourselves are we brought into unity with the divine. When the soul is free of all images, when it is pure and in union with the Godhead then it has returned back again to the primordial source of all things. The paradoxical language employed by Eckhart is most evident

here. The soul returns to its source and that source is the soul itself. The flowing out ends in creation and distinction whereas the breakthrough back to the Godhead is a completion of the circle of being and a regaining of the primordial indistinction where there is only the undivided One (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 87, p. 271). To return to that place where one has no God and is one's own cause is the spiritual goal for Eckhart. An apophatic use of the theme of emanation is employed by Eckhart, in which the metaphor is undermined.<sup>9</sup> An external system which offers explanations only obscures the God who is hidden. Thus in paradoxical and apophatic fashion, and similar to Dionysius's undermining of the emanation metaphor, God's outgoing is God's ingoing (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 22, p. 177).

Rather than the scholastic distinction between God-as-God-is-in-creatures and God-as-God-is-in-God's-self, Eckhart's distinction between God and the Godhead is an apophatic exercise in which the attempt to refer to the divine by way of this scholastic distinction of two names is resisted. The paradox of God as immanent, or as God-as-God-is-in-creatures, and God as transcendent, or as God-as-God-is-in-God's-self, rather than ascribing two different kinds of names, for Eckhart, this paradox is held in tension. This is done, in a typical apophatic manner, in order to resist the static reification of the divine. Eckhart writes: "God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth. I say further: the inner and the outer man are as different as heaven and earth. But God is loftier by many thousands of miles. God becomes and *unbecomes*" (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 56, p. 80). Eckhart correlates the concept of God and Godhead with the soul's existence prior to, and after, its creation into the world. That part of the soul, the "spark" (*vunkelin*), the part that precedes creation, resides in the ineffable Godhead beyond God. Once the creature has received his or her being (*esse formale*) then it is in relation to God who is active in the world. The spiritual process for the soul is to move beyond God and "break-through" to the transcendent Godhead where it once resided. This break-through is more noble than the outflowing, for Eckhart says: "When I enter the ground, the bottom, the river and fount of the Godhead, none will ask me whence I came or where I have been. No one missed me, for there God *unbecomes*" (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 56, p. 82). The "breakthrough" for Eckhart involves a movement away from the traditional stress of God's transcendence and to recognise God as immanently present.<sup>10</sup> It is to see all of life as a gift of grace. God is thus immanently present in all things but nowhere more so, according to Eckhart, than in the ground of the soul where no image resides. It is here where God can be received, where the soul can give birth. Eckhart says that to be poor in spirit, one "must be

poor of all his own knowledge: not knowing any *thing* not God, nor creature nor himself" (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. II, Sermon 87, p. 273). The "ground" or "summit" of the soul, which is the "inmost" and "highest part of the soul," is that place where all activities and images are silenced (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 18, p. 147). It is a place withdrawn from the senses and the world of objects or images. It is free of all forms and thus there is nothing one can say of it. In this way, in its purity and unnameability, the ground of the soul is similar to the ground of the deity. Because it is so detached from all creatures the soul is identical to God. This is the reason the Son is born in the soul. Eckhart writes of this ground:

In created things—as I have said before—there is no truth. There is something that transcends the created being of the soul, not in contact with created things, which are nothing; not even an angel has it, though he has a clear being that is pure and extensive: even that does not touch it. It is akin to the nature of deity, it is one in itself, and has naught in common with anything. It is a stumbling-block to many a learned cleric. It is a strange and desert place, and is rather nameless than possessed of a name, and is more unknown than it is known. If you could naught yourself for an instant, indeed I say less than an instant, you would possess all that this is in itself. But as long as you mind yourself or any thing at all, you know no more of God than my mouth knows of colour or my eye of taste: so little do you know or discern what God is (*Sermons and Treatises*, vol. I, Sermon 17, p. 144).

Eckhart writes that whoever surrenders his or her will to God will "bind" God so that God's will becomes the individual's. Here is the manifestation of the truth of the mystical life. Eckhart asks those who would follow him to consider the possibility of coming to know God in a different, more intimate, manner. The mystical experience then is not to be equated with an intentional experience. Eckhart is teaching that only through a sacrificial form of love can one come to truly know God. *Abegescheidenheit* is such a love, one which allows the other world of the divine to be mediated in this world. The epistemological value of Eckhart's mystical language is connected to a mystical way of life, therefore. It is discovered with the emptying of false conceptions of the divine. With the emptying of the will, which is a dying to the self, God enters the life of the believer. Here is the union of the ground of the soul with the ground of the divine, for in being pure and free of all concepts and images, being a "virgin," the soul is able to give birth. According to Eckhart, with this birth "God is creating the whole world" through a self-emptying love. Eckhart's mystical teaching is that in order to come to

know and enter into a communion with the God who is hidden, one must take on this particular aspect of the divine. One must die to the self, in order to make room for the *Deus absconditus*.

## II

The difficulty in interpreting Eckhart's language, and indeed mystical language in general, is complicated by modern philosophical analyses with the imposition of speculative systems. What Ayer and Stace seem to share in common is the belief that understanding a language involves understanding how words represent objects. This understanding is born out of a failure to attend to the function of mystical language. In particular, Stace's view of the epistemological value of mystical language has been most influential in the contemporary philosophy of religion. Despite the fact that Stace's claim of the ineffable and paradoxical nature of mystical language has been called into question, empiricist interpretations of mysticism are still prevalent. Steven T. Katz, for example, in his very important essay, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", rejects Stace's interpretation of how mystical language accurately describes the mystical experience and instead argues for a type of agnosticism concerning the epistemological value of mystical language. For Katz, the notion of ineffability and paradoxicality is meaningless. He writes that "if mystical experience(s) are being accurately described when they are said to be paradoxical and ineffable, then these experiences are actually being removed from all possibility of definition, description, pointing to, and thus also, of comparability" <sup>11</sup> Thus for Katz, the ineffable and paradoxical character of mystical language must be understood as part of a contextualised interpretation. Because of Katz's Kantian epistemology, and understanding of the contextuality of all experience, mystical language cannot be understood to reveal or say anything about the so-called "objective" content of a mystical experience. Instead, one must remain cautiously agnostic. Therefore, the mystic cannot be certain whether he or she successfully refers to God or not. The mystic's language must be understood as an interpretation of an unknown noumenal ground, and thus, the truth of a mystical experience can never really be determined. Katz writes that "it is not being argued either that mystical experiences do not happen, or that what they claim may not be true, only that there can be no grounds for deciding this question, i.e. of showing that they are true *even* if they are, in fact, true" (Katz, p. 22). For Katz, the truth of a mystical experience is unknowable.

Katz's critique is important. Yet his philosophical analysis, too, fails to recognize the religious character and context of a mystical experience and, in so doing, misrepresents the epistemological value of mystical language. Eckhart does not exhibit a cautious agnosticism in his talk of



the divine. Indeed, Katz's understanding is the opposite of what Eckhart asserts. Eckhart's mystical insights belong to the religious community in which he was deeply involved. And his mystical language is a manifestation of his training and practice within this community. But the truth of his mystical experiences is something that is determined within this community as well. Where Katz is misguided, is with his suggestion that the truth of a mystical experience is something that cannot be established. For Eckhart, it is. His language is demonstrative of a deliberate linguistic strategy which, in turn, demonstrates the certainty of his faith. Eckhart is neither embarrassed nor skeptical of this discourse. The question of whether his paradoxical language is actually a reference to God or just an interpretation is, therefore, simply misguided. There is no universal application of mystical language. The failure to recognize this is precisely where the confusion begins.

The words of the mystic are not descriptions of an inner state. Nor is the mystic in the position to designate the contents of that inner life or to ostensibly define some "object." If that were the case, then the mystic, him or herself, would be the sole arbiter as to whether the words he or she uses are correct in his or her description of the mystical experience. But for Eckhart, the words for the mystical life are determined to be correct based on a spiritual practice. The life of the mystic, specifically in the act of *Abegescheidenheit*, is thus not a secondary way of determining the veridicality of the mystical life. Again and again Eckhart teaches that the manifestations of the mystical life are to be found in the changed life of the mystical soul, in his or her abandonment of the will. His understanding of "living without a why" (*sunder warumbe*) is to see the world without explanation and justification, for God is not a causal agent. Such an understanding is necessary, or a precondition, according to Eckhart, in order for one to see, not the God of explanations, but the God who is hidden. The mystic's language, therefore, is what reveals God to the world. Any attempt to go beyond this language is thus misguided. The reality of God and the truth of Eckhart's mystical vision are certainties he invites others to share. The ineffable and paradoxical character of his words are not a description of an inherently paradoxical experience, nor is his language an interpretation of a noumenal reality. Rather Eckhart's words are an invitation to come to know God in a more intimate way. God may not be something that can be ostensibly defined, but this does not mean that God is not present.

According to A. J. Ayer, mystical language offers no epistemological value. And for Walter Stace, the mystic is "embarrassed" by his or her paradoxical language. For Steven Katz, the mystic's language is an interpretation and thus the mystic must ultimately abandon all claims of



veridicality. Such philosophical interpretations as Ayer's and Stace's fail to appreciate the religious contexts of the mystic's words. And for Katz, because the noumenal reality of what the mystic refers to when he or she uses the word "God" can never be known in itself, the claim of mystical union can never be verified. But for Eckhart, the divine hiddenness is an essential part of who God is. The sense of his mystical language then, is only discovered in the application these words have in his life. What I hope to have argued, therefore, is that paying attention to how a mystic's words are used should be the epistemological framework on which the study of mysticism is based.

- 1 Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn, (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 24.
- 2 Eckhart's works cited are from the following texts: Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Sermons and Treatises*, M. O'C. Walshe, ed. and trans., Vols. I & II, (Rockport, MA: Element Books, Ltd., 1989), Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, ed., Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn, (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).
- 3 A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936), p. 119.
- 4 For discussions on the concept of the "hiddenness" of God, see especially Gareth Moore, O.P., *Believing in God: A Philosophical Essay* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) and D. Z. Phillips, *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God. Meaning and Mediation in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986).
- 5 I am indebted to Bernard McGinn's discussion of this complicated theme in Eckhart's work. See Bernard McGinn, 'The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart' *Journal of Religion*: 61, (1981), pp.1-19.
- 6 Walter Terence Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1960), p. 305.
- 7 See Karl G. Kertz, "Meister Eckhart's Teaching on the Birth of the Divine Word in the Soul" in *Traditio* 15 (1959), pp. 327-63.
- 8 Some commentators have suggested that Eckhart is heretical with this theme but this interpretation is due to non-apophatic analyses. As Bernard McGinn writes: "Eckhart was at least equally daring in insisting that the Father not only eternally begets the Son in the soul, but also that the soul itself, after it has become a virgin by stripping itself of all things through detachment, must go further and become a wife, that is, must in turn beget the Son with the Father and beget itself as the selfsame Son in the Father. While Eckhart's language here may seem pantheistic, we must note that the birth of the Son or Word in the soul has deep roots in Christian thought and that a number of interpreters have stressed the conformity of Eckhart's views with Christian teaching on the divinizing power of grace." Bernard McGinn, "The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart", p. 9.
- 9 John D. Caputo writes: "God's flowing forth is intended to become a flowing back, for only then is the meaning of creation fulfilled." John D. Caputo, "Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism", *The Thomist* 42, no. 2 (April, 1979), p. 216.
- 10 Richard Kieckhefer has written concerning this: "God is present within the human soul and within creation generally, and that the moral task incumbent upon human beings is to heighten their awareness of God's indwelling so that they may better manifest it in their lives." Richard Kieckhefer, "Meister Eckhart's Conception of Union with God" in *Harvard Theological Review* 71 (1978), p. 208.
- 11 Steven T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism' in, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed., Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 55.