

Suffering God: Meister Eckhart's Sermon 52

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## *Suffering God: Meister Eckhart's Sermon 52\**

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Meister Eckhart's Sermon 52 takes as its text Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." According to most Eckhart scholars, this famous sermon on spiritual poverty demands a radical break with ordinary life to make possible a union with God that generally lies beyond the limits of creatures.<sup>1</sup> In my view, on the contrary, Eckhart uses the idea of spiritual poverty to proclaim the eternal identity of God and the soul. Moreover, Eckhart vividly shows that the soul, involved in this identity, must paradoxically be both divine and created, both eternal and temporal. To appreciate the complexity of Eckhart's performance in this sermon, we must consider the sermon as a whole.

### 1

#### **Eckhart's introductory remarks**

Eckhart's opening sentences draw a distinction that raises perplexing questions about the sermon to come.

Blessedness opened its mouth to wisdom and spoke: "blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs."

All angels and all saints and everything that was ever born must be silent, when the wisdom of the father speaks; for all the wisdom of the angels and of all creatures, that is a pure folly before the groundless wisdom of God. This has spoken, that the poor are blessed. (DW 2, 486:2–7)<sup>2</sup>

Eckhart distinguishes two kinds of wisdom: God's and creatures'. He calls God's wisdom *gruntlos*, "groundless," unfathomable and ultimately incomprehensible to creatures. Creatures' wisdom is "folly" measured against God's wisdom, which in turn looks like folly to creatures. The two wisdoms are opposed and cannot speak with one voice: when God's wisdom speaks, creatures' wisdom must fall silent. The opposition between God's wisdom

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and creatures' wisdom most likely finds its source in a similarly absolute opposition between God and creatures.

Though all creatures keep silent when the wisdom of God speaks, Eckhart, a creature, does not keep silent. He preaches. What kind of wisdom does Eckhart's sermon communicate? If it is the word of a creature, steeped in the wisdom of creatures, then it is folly before God's wisdom. But Eckhart speaks of creatures' wisdom as folly. Either he speaks God's wisdom, then, or he knowingly preaches the folly of creatures' wisdom.

Who then is speaking? Is it the particular creature named Meister Eckhart or the eternal wisdom of God? Eckhart does not say. His omission suggests that even a creature like himself can speak in the voice of God's wisdom. In this way, even as Eckhart first draws an absolute distinction between creatures and God, reflected in the absolute distinction between their respective wisdoms, he also raises questions that begin to blur that distinction. Consequently, these initial sentences offer two warnings. First, when Eckhart says "I" in this sermon, the pronoun will need careful interpretation. Second, Eckhart's sermon may not obey the laws of created wisdom, and it may not contain what creatures consider knowledge.

Eckhart then distinguishes outward poverty from inward poverty. The two poverties parallel the wisdoms, since the wisdom of creatures understands outward poverty very well. Outward poverty is physical indigence or material want, which believers sometimes embrace in imitation of Christ. Even so, the blessed are not the materially poor but the inwardly poor.

This inward poverty, Eckhart says, is difficult to explain: "Now I ask you, that you be in such a way that you understand this speech; for I say to you in the eternal truth: if you are not like this truth, of which we now wish to speak, then you will not be able to understand me" (DW 2, 487:5–7).<sup>3</sup> This truth concerns "what poverty may be in itself and what a poor person may be" (DW 2, 488:1–2). Those like this truth will understand Eckhart's sermon. Those unlike it will not.

Why, then, does Eckhart give this sermon? Those like the truth have nothing to learn from it. Those unlike the truth and thus in dire need of it will not find it here, for they do not meet the condition for finding it. This dilemma repeats Eckhart's warning: his sermon will disappoint anyone seeking advice about self-improvement. The sermon has some value other than its ability to provide useful information.

After considering and rejecting Albert the Great's view that a poor person is one "who does not have satisfaction from all the things that God ever created" (DW 2, 488:3–5), Eckhart offers his own definition, which structures the rest of the sermon: "that is a poor person, who wants nothing and knows nothing and has nothing" (DW 2, 488:5–6).<sup>4</sup>

But before examining the definition's three parts, Eckhart again warns his listeners:

Of these three points we now want to speak, and I beg you by the love of God, that you understand this truth, if you can; and should you not understand it, then do not burden yourselves with it, because I want to speak of a truth that is such that few good people shall understand it. (DW 2, 488:6–489:1)

Eckhart here confirms our suspicions that he has taken on the voice of God's wisdom. Since he speaks God's wisdom, few people will understand him. Moreover, those who do must already resemble God's wisdom and therefore have nothing to gain from the sermon. Why then does Eckhart preach? For now, this is unclear. Whatever Eckhart's aims, his sermon is not an exchange of advice or information. His listeners, and we his readers, must set aside any such expectations in following him.

## 2

### **Wanting nothing**

Eckhart then turns to the first part of his definition. Some people, he says, take "wanting nothing" to mean "that a person should live so that he no longer fulfills his will in particular things, rather that he should strive in such a way that he fulfills the dearest will of God" (DW 2, 490:2–4). Eckhart praises such people for their good intention but otherwise castigates them. In their desire to appear pious and their attachment to external practices, they are really "donkeys," "for they do not understand the distinction of divine truth" (DW 2, 489:5–490:1). Armed only with the wisdom of creatures, they try to understand something that is really divine and inevitably fail.

In failing, they cling to the will. For Eckhart, to say that spiritual poverty consists in wanting nothing is not to name an object, "nothing," for the will. It is to say that one must stand in a particular relationship to the will.

For, should a person truly have poverty, so should he stand just as empty of his created will as he was when he was not. For I say to you in the eternal truth: as long as you have a will to fulfill the will of God, and a desire for eternity and God, so long are you not poor; for that is a poor person who wants nothing and desires nothing. (DW 2, 491:7–492:2)

Eckhart says that poverty requires being as empty of the will as one was when one was not. This reference to what one was when one was not recurs several times in the sermon. What does it mean?

The expression has three elements. First, it names a kind of being associated or identified with non-being. The poor person was when he or she was not. This kind of being differs from the one ordinarily ascribed to people and things. But does it belong to all persons or just to the spiritually poor? The second element is time. Eckhart casts his formulation in the past tense. This

reference to the past emphasizes the difference between the being mentioned there and the common everyday being ascribed to persons and things. But is Eckhart speaking literally of an actual moment in time long ago, or is he speaking metaphorically? The third element involved is God. Eckhart says that one must be as empty of one's will as one was when one was not. In describing this emptiness, Eckhart mentions a sure sign of its absence: any desire for God and eternity. This sign accounts for Eckhart's rejection of Albert's definition of poverty as wanting God instead of riches. Instead, Eckhart says, the spiritually poor desire neither God nor eternity. What, then, is their relation to them? What, in turn, does Eckhart mean by "emptiness"?

This reference to how the poor person "was when he was not" thus raises several questions. Eckhart immediately begins to suggest their answers.

When I stood in my first cause, there I had no God, and there I was the cause of myself; there I wanted nothing, and I desired nothing, for I was an empty being and a knower of myself in the joy of truth. There I wanted myself and wanted no other thing; what I wanted I was, and what I was I wanted, and here I stood empty of God and all things. (DW 2, 492:3–7)

When I stood in my first cause, Eckhart says, I was the cause of myself. Self-causing being is a traditional definition of God. In that moment, I was God and thus had no God, as Eckhart says. Having implies a distinction that here does not obtain.

Even though I wanted and desired nothing, I did not stand in a static void. After all, I "stood": Eckhart uses this verb several times in the sermon to describe this moment. Standing is not moving, but it is also not collapsing. It is an active stillness. Also, Eckhart says, I felt the joy of knowing myself in truth. I felt desire, too, but not in the manner of creatures who want what they do not have or want to be what they are not. Rather I was what I wanted and wanted what I was. This will or desire is always already fulfilled. It founds my being ["I was what I wanted"] at the same time that it desires my being ["I wanted what I was"]. Here, then, my being was an active, fulfilled willing.

This unlocks the puzzling references to emptiness. In that moment I was an "empty being," and I stood "empty of God and all things." But in that moment my being was my will, and my will had no other object than my being. In that sense I was empty of God and all things because they were not the object of my will: I myself was. Emptiness of will means wanting only what one is.<sup>6</sup> It is curious that Eckhart calls such an always already fulfilled will "empty," but it is clear that this will or desire does not function in the same way that created wills and desires do. Created desire implies a lack. This desire, however, is what it desires. Eckhart alludes to this desire in some of the most famous passages of this sermon.

Still, what does this “I” have to do with a God and with persons who use this word to name themselves? The sermon now turns to this question.

But when of my free will I went out and I received my created being, then I had a God; for before there were creatures, then God was not God; rather, he was what he was. But when creatures became and they received their created being, then God was not God in himself, rather he was God in the creatures. (DW 2, 492:7–493:2)<sup>7</sup>

God, Eckhart says, is a result of creation and exists only in relation to it. This is certainly true if the only conceptual use made of God is to trace the existence of creatures back to some creator. But creation as Eckhart describes it occurs not through the fiat of an external lawgiver but through “my” going out and simultaneously receiving created being. “I” perform both actions. Until the outgoing and receiving of creation occur, the distinction between God and creatures does not hold. In turn, the “I” is neither God nor creature, for it refers to a time before this distinction was valid.<sup>8</sup>

But we cannot ignore Eckhart’s decision to call this being and willing “I,” instead of “the good,” “the one,” or something else. Even if the “I” does not refer to the particular historical individual known as Meister Eckhart, it does suggest that this one creature and by extension all creatures have something to do with it, especially since Eckhart says that it “receives” created being.

It is still not clear, however, what this “I” is. Eckhart explains:

Now we say, that insofar as God is God, so he is not a perfect end for the creature; riches just as great are possessed by the smallest creature in God. And if it were the case that a fly had reason and could rationally search the eternal abyss of divine being, from which it came, so would we say, that God with everything that he is as God would not be able to fulfill or give satisfaction to the fly. (DW 2, 493:3–7)

This important passage unravels three difficulties.

First, it shows that creatures in and of themselves are related to the “I” that precedes the distinction between God and creation. A fly endowed with reason would realize that God, construed as the uncreated maker of creatures, exists only as a foil to creation. Seeking after God therefore means clinging to one’s status as a creature, and this is why God cannot fulfill the fly. The fly, even “the smallest creature in God,” already possesses a link with whatever it is that precedes God.

Second, this passage reveals the identity of the “I.” Eckhart’s fly searches “the eternal abyss of divine being, from which it came.” The abyss, or *abgrunt*, echoes the groundless, *gruntlos*, wisdom of God with which Eckhart began the sermon. But it is not the eternal abyss of God that the fly sounds but the eternal abyss of divine being. This divine being, in turn, is the mysterious “I.” God, the maker of creatures, is not itself divine being.

Third, this passage shows that Eckhart's placement of the "I" in the past is metaphorical only and not literal. Eckhart describes the abyss of divine being as eternal. In that case, "When I stood in my first cause" refers not to a past moment in time but to an eternal condition. Insofar as temporal creatures are involved with divine being, they are also involved with eternal being, and not solely in the past, but now as well. Still, Eckhart's placement of this "I" in the past emphasizes that divine being is quite different from the ordinary being of creatures.

These clarifications form the backdrop to Eckhart's famous prayer: "Therefore we beg God, that we may become empty of God and that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, where the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal there, where I stood and wanted what I was and was what I wanted" (DW 2, 493:7–494:1).<sup>9</sup> Since God cannot satisfy the fly, the fly must give God up. Clinging to God means clinging to one's status as a creature, while giving God up in favor of divine being means recognizing oneself as somehow divine. But Eckhart phrases the desire to be empty of God as a petition to God. This petition implies that God must still matter to creatures. Just because creatures are in some sense divine and eternal does not mean that they can do without God altogether: they are still creatures, and, to that extent, the distinction between God and creatures, nullified in divine being, still remains in force. The request therefore reflects the dual nature of creatures, who are divine, created, eternal, and temporal all at once.<sup>10</sup>

Eckhart says *bitten wir*, "we beg." He names an action we are already performing. How can this be? Becoming empty of God means becoming divine being. But in some mysterious way creatures already are divine being. They should not have to become it or ask to become it. Why then do we creatures beg for it? Does not this begging show, contrary to our reading, that creatures actually lack the divine being Eckhart says they ask for?

Divine being, as Eckhart has explained, is an always already fulfilled will for itself. Insofar as creatures already are divine being, they must want divine being. It is the necessary condition of their identity with divine being. The request to be empty of God and to become divine being does not connote a lack of divine being. On the contrary, it is the surest sign that creatures already are divine being.

Eckhart underlines this point by ending the sentence with his tag for divine being and its emptiness of will, "there I stood and wanted what I was and was what I wanted." The whole sentence thus enacts in two ways a dynamic union of irreconcilable opposites. In begging something of God, it implies the absolute distinction between God and creatures, while it requests the divine being that precedes the distinction. Moreover, though



the request appears to mark creatures' lack of divine being, it actually demonstrates their eternal possession of it.<sup>11</sup>

Eckhart concludes this section by returning to his definition of poverty of will. "Thus we say: if a person shall be poor in will, then he must want and desire as little, as he wanted and desired, when he was not. And in this way is a person poor, who wants nothing" (DW 2, 493:7–494:1). As we have seen, "wanting nothing" means "emptiness of will," which in turn is not a goal to be achieved in time but a description of dynamic, eternal, divine being. Creatures in some mysterious way already are divine being and to this extent already want nothing. Why then does Eckhart say, "if a person shall be poor in will, then he must want and desire as little" as when he was not? His formulation appears less as a definition than as a prescription, although his sermon has striven hard to remove any expectation of such advice. It raises the idea of "becoming poor," even though poverty seems to be eternal.

These reflections are superficial. Eckhart's eternity is not static but mobile, full of desire, knowledge, and joy. The kind of desire peculiar to divine being determines and establishes its being. Since creatures are in some sense this divine being also, they too partake of this eternal desire. When Eckhart says, "if a person shall be poor in will, then he must want and desire as little" as when he was not, he describes the operation of eternal desire, which arises not out of lack but out of eternal fulfillment. Creatures already participate in this desire. To some mysterious extent, they already want nothing.

### 3

#### **Knowing nothing**

In Eckhart's explanation of "knowing nothing," the distinction between God and divine being falls away, but Eckhart's strategy of describing a divine source remains the same. This time, though, it is within the soul itself.

A poor person is one who knows nothing. Eckhart takes back what he has said other times, that one should live "neither for oneself nor for the truth nor for God" (DW 2, 494:4–6). Now he says,

a person who shall have this poverty, he shall live in such a way that he does not know that he does not live in any way for himself, nor for truth, nor for God; rather, he should be so empty of all knowing, that he neither knows nor learns nor perceives that God lives in him; rather, he should be empty of all knowledge that is living in him. (DW 2, 494:6–495:1)

This definition of "knowing nothing" repeats certain features of "wanting nothing." Just as "wanting nothing" means being "empty" of the created



will, “knowing nothing” means being empty of all knowing. Though Eckhart describes the poor as knowing nothing, he also remarks that knowledge “lives” in them. Being empty of all knowledge does not mean being ignorant, just as emptiness of will did not mean apathy but an eternally fulfilled desire.

Still, Eckhart’s remarks about “knowing nothing” speak not of creatures in relation to a divine being superior to God, but of God’s work in and oneness with the soul. Eckhart further develops this new theme of oneness.

For, when the person stood in the eternal being of God, there lived in him no other; rather, what lived there was he himself. Thus we say, that the person should stand as empty of his own knowing, as he was when he was not, and let God do what he wants, and let the person stand empty. (DW 2, 495:1–5)

Again Eckhart mentions a primordial time of standing in eternal being. But whereas previously it was the “I” standing in its first cause, here it is a “person” standing in God’s being. Eckhart thus uses language redolent of the distinction between God and creation. But Eckhart also denies the distinction: “there lived in him no other; rather, what lived there was he himself.” What Eckhart previously called divine being has now become the soul’s oneness with God.

This oneness explains the soul’s emptiness of knowledge. Emptiness of will, as we saw, meant having no object other than oneself for the will. Emptiness of knowledge means knowing only oneself and recognizing no other within oneself. Since God and the soul are one, it is impossible to know that God works in the soul. Such knowledge would entail difference in a unity of indistinction.

This oneness is an essential aspect of the soul, as Eckhart now explains. Loving and knowing are the characteristically human activities, he says, but blessedness lies neither in one nor in both.<sup>12</sup> It lies in something else: “there is something in the soul, from which flow knowing and loving, which itself does not know or love in the way that the powers of the soul do. He who knows this knows where blessedness lies” (DW 2, 496:3–5).<sup>13</sup>

This source of knowing and loving, as Eckhart goes on to explain, closely resembles divine being, the source of all creation. Both are eternal. The source of knowing and loving “has neither before nor after, and it is not waiting for any approaching things, for it is able neither to gain nor to lose. “Therefore,” Eckhart continues, “it is emptied in such a way that it does not recognize God working in it” (DW 2, 496:5–7). Such emptiness, in Eckhart’s sense of the word, is possible only if the distinction between this source and God is absent, as it is in divine being.

In addition, this source is self-sufficient, and, like divine being, it feels joy: “it is itself the thing itself that rejoices in itself after the manner of God”

(DW 2, 496:7–497:1). The triple repetition in this sentence of *selbe*, “self,” echoes the “I” of divine being. However, Eckhart now says that the source of knowing and loving “rejoices,” in the present, whereas earlier he said that divine being “rejoiced,” in the past. This divine joy is always present in the soul.

Eckhart continues: “Thus we say, that the person should stand free and empty, that he may not know and perceive that God works in him; in this way can the person possess poverty” (DW 2, 497:1–3). Yet the source of knowing and loving does not perceive the work of God in the soul, because it is one with God. The soul therefore necessarily possesses in the source of loving and knowing the poverty Eckhart describes.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, just as he denies that the source of loving and knowing itself loves or knows, so he denies that God is “a being and a rational being and knows all things.” Instead, Eckhart says, “God is neither being nor rational and does not know this or that” (DW 2, 497:3–5). God is not a being but the source of being. The source of loving and knowing is not a faculty in the soul but the source of the soul’s faculties.

Eckhart now closes his comparison of God and the source of loving and knowing. “Therefore God is empty of all things, and therefore he is all things” (DW 2, 497:5–6). This sentence is not as paradoxical as it sounds, given our understanding of emptiness. Emptiness of will means wanting oneself alone, and emptiness of knowledge means knowing only oneself in the way in which one is God. Being empty, therefore, means being nothing but oneself. If God is empty of all things, then God is simply God. But God, in this section of the sermon, is divine being, the source of all creatures and beings that is also mysteriously one with them. In this sense, God is all things.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, knowing nothing, that is, knowing oneself in the way in which one is God, means knowing oneself as all things. Obviously, such knowing involves knowledge of a completely different order than ordinary knowing. This is only appropriate, since it resides in the source of knowing and loving, which does not itself know or love as the soul’s faculties do.

In this light, Eckhart’s conclusion to this section of the sermon is surprising:

Now he who shall be poor in spirit, he must be poor of all his own knowing, such that he not know anything, neither God nor creature nor his own self. Therefore it is necessary, that the person be desiring that he not be able to know or perceive the work of God. In this way, then, can the person be poor of his own knowing. (DW 2, 497:6–498:3)

Does Eckhart not contradict our reading? Knowing nothing, he says, means not knowing anything, “neither God nor creature nor [one’s] own self,” whereas it had seemed that knowing nothing meant knowing oneself as God,

which means knowing oneself as all things. This appearance of contradiction is deceptive. Eckhart says one must know neither God nor creatures nor oneself. He distinguishes them as discrete objects of knowledge. "Knowing nothing," on the other hand, does not treat them as separate objects but knows them all together as one.

Eckhart also asserts the necessity that a person desire not to know the work of God. This too is curious. The source of knowing and loving in the soul already possesses this poverty. This poverty is not something to be attained but an essential aspect of the soul. Why then is it "necessary" to desire it? Eckhart here refers back to divine being. By wanting what it is, divine being establishes itself. In turn, wanting to know nothing is simply wanting to be what one already is. Moreover, this wanting ensures that one is this way. Thus Eckhart says it is "necessary" that one desire this poverty, instead of saying "let us desire it" or "you should desire it." There is no choice in the matter. The soul, or at least something in the soul, already knows nothing.

#### 4

#### **Having nothing**

Eckhart now moves to the third part of his definition of spiritual poverty, "having nothing." Again he specifies that "having nothing" does not mean "having no material possessions." Though material want may be a perfection if practiced voluntarily, such poverty is not his concern.

He then pauses to review his sermon:

Here I have just said, that that is a poor person, who does not want to fulfill the will of God; rather, that the person should so live, that he be as empty both of his own will and of the will of God, as he was, when he was not. Of this poverty we say, that it is the highest poverty. Second we have said, that that is a poor person, who does not know the work of God in him. He stands as empty of knowing and perceiving, as God stands empty of all things, that is the clearest poverty. But the third, that is the nearest poverty, of which we now wish to speak: that is, that the person has nothing. (DW 2, 499:1-8)

Eckhart's summary is surprising. At the beginning of the sermon he says that he will explain spiritual poverty, which, it turns out, has three main traits. According to this summary, however, there are different kinds of spiritual poverty: the highest, the clearest, and the nearest. The superlatives especially suggest some distinction among the three. The summary therefore raises a question: does Eckhart's sermon describe one poverty or three?

This question asks about Eckhart's doctrine of poverty. Such a doctrine would make of poverty something we could argue about or practice. Yet expecting a doctrine is precisely what Eckhart warns against at the start of

the sermon. His offhand reference to three kinds of spiritual poverty makes the task of deriving a doctrine of poverty from the sermon much more difficult. Eckhart's summary reflects his rhetorical strategy. It hinders his audience from seizing upon his original definition of poverty as the unambiguous message of the sermon.

What then is the definition's role? Clearly it structures the sermon, since the sermon considers each of its three parts in turn. At the same time, the discussions of "wanting nothing" and "knowing nothing" have been closely similar. In the first Eckhart depicts an eternal divine being in which the distinction between God and creatures is absent and with which creatures are somehow involved. In the second Eckhart describes the eternal identity of the soul with God. In both the distinction between God and creatures does not hold, and the identity of creatures with divine being or God proves to be eternal. In the guise of developing different aspects of spiritual poverty, Eckhart formulates the same ideas in different ways. The definition offers him a clear structure for doing so. This function, more than its meaning or truth, makes the definition significant.<sup>16</sup>

In turn, Eckhart's discussion of "having nothing" builds on the previous sections. Again, Eckhart states one view before developing another.<sup>17</sup> He and others have often but wrongly said that one should be so empty of all things and works that one is a place in which God can work. But as long as one thinks of the poor in spirit as a place in which God can work, then one is making incorrect distinctions between the soul and God: "for that is the poverty of spirit, that he [the person] stand empty of God and of all his works in such a way, that, should God want to work in the soul, he himself is the place, in which he wants to work, and that he does willingly" (DW 2, 500:7–501:1).

God is willing to work in God's own self but apparently not in the soul. For the soul to convince God to work in it, it must become God: it must cut away everything that distinguishes it from God. This is possible only if the soul and God are similar or the same in some respect. Otherwise, no matter how drastically the soul attempted to put off its own nature and take on God's, it would never succeed. But Eckhart affirms the possibility of success. "For if God finds the person poor in this way, then God is working his own work, and the person is in this way suffering God, and God is a proper place for his work, in that God is a worker in himself" (DW 2, 501:1–4). In becoming a place for God to work, the soul transforms itself into God. When this happens, God works in the soul, and the soul "suffers" God.

This word "suffers" is important and rich. It means, first, that the soul allows God to work. It does not participate in that work. Eckhart probably has in mind the Aristotelian category of "undergoing," which the scholastics called *passio*. Second, the word "suffers" reveals difference between the soul

and God, since it implies that the soul is vulnerable to God. Even though the soul must become God for this work and suffering to begin, the soul remains distinct from God in some way. Third, that difference is expressed in suffering. The soul's identity with God manifests itself as a disruption in the soul precisely because the soul and God are also different. In these ways, the word "suffers" expresses the simultaneous identity and difference between God and the soul.

"Henceforth, in this poverty the person then achieves that eternal being [*wesen*], which he was and which he now is and which he will always remain" (DW 2, 501:4–5). The transformation signaled by this poverty and by God's consent to work in the soul delivers the person into his or her eternal being. Since the transformation involves the soul becoming a place for God to work, and since this means becoming God such that God is the very place of the work, then the eternal being which the person achieves is also God. God is what the person was and now is and always shall remain. Yet this "transformation" of the person into God does not occur in time. Eckhart is again referring to divine being, which wants what it is and is what it wants. Though its being is eternal, it continually establishes its being. Its being is activity. The soul is eternally achieving its eternal being.

Eckhart reiterates this point in terms of grace. He recalls 1 Corinthians 15:10, "By the grace of God I am what I am," where Paul mentions how grace turned him from fighting Christianity to spreading it. Eckhart's treatment of poverty apparently contains no room for such grace, because in poverty one does not change but instead eternally becomes what one eternally is. Eckhart admits that his speech "seems above grace" (DW 2, 501:7–8), but he also says that Paul's verse is true in that God's grace was in Paul necessarily: "for the grace of God worked in him, that the accidental was perfected into the essence. When grace finished and perfected its work, then Paul remained what he was" (DW 2, 502:2–3). The word here translated as "essence," *wesen*, is the same word used to name that eternal being grasped in having nothing. Transforming the accidental into the essential is the same as removing all distinction between God and the soul. Paradoxically, this change alters nothing. After it Paul remains what he was, because eternally he already is one with God. Grace in this sermon is another name for the eternal activity of divine being.

In this eternal activity, the soul cannot retain any trace of its own identity apart from God. "Thus we say, that the person should be so poor, that he neither is nor has any place in which God could work. Where the person retains a place, there he retains distinction" (DW 2, 502:4–6). Yet precisely where the person retains no place in which God can work, there the person suffers God and thereby remains distinct from God. The person is and is not God.

Eckhart then repeats the prayer that enacts this situation: “Therefore I beg God that he make me empty of God, for my essential being [*wesenlich wesen*] is above God, since we call God the beginning of creatures” (DW 2, 502:6–7). As divine being, I am “above” God, taken merely as the creator. Yet I am still a creature, and I must still ask God to make me empty of God. But I am God also, since I myself as divine being am the source of my created being.

Eckhart now draws a distinction within the soul itself: “for in the same being of God, there God is above being and above distinction, there I myself was, there I wanted myself and knew myself to make this person” (DW 2, 502:7–9). Eckhart’s saying “I myself” emphasizes the continuity between the person giving this sermon and the eternal being that gave rise to him. But saying that he knew himself “to make this person” implies a division between the maker and the person made, which Eckhart goes on to specify. “Therefore I am in this way cause of myself according to my being, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is temporal” (DW 2, 502:9–503:2). The division between my creative self and my created person is that between eternity and time, between being and becoming. Thus, in one sense I am eternal and unborn, in another I am born and mortal. Eckhart does not identify the self with either half alone. It is both, though how this is possible he does not say.<sup>18</sup>

Eckhart cannot resist the chance for verbal acrobatics offered by this division within the soul, as this next passage shows.

In my birth, then all things were born, and I was cause of my self and of all things; and had I wanted it, I would not be, and all things would not be; and if I were not, then God also would not be. That God is God, of that I am a cause; if I were not, then God would not be God. There is no need to understand this. (DW 2, 503:6–504:3)

The birth of which Eckhart speaks is not the birth of a particular human being, because this birth is not mine alone. In this birth I am cause of myself and all things. My eternal being, on which my particular temporal becoming depends, is also that upon which all temporal becoming depends. Birth is now a metaphor for all created becoming. To be a creature is to be constantly born.

The rest of this passage contains five instances of the word “God” and five instances of the word “I.” Scholarly attention usually fixes on how the term “God” shifts in meaning from one instance to the next, but the shifts in meaning undergone by the term “I” are more important. Even though the meaning of the word changes dramatically, these different meanings still name aspects of an inexplicably unitary self. “Had I wanted, I would not be.” The first “I” refers to my eternal being, the second to my temporal becoming.



ing. “If I were not, then God also would not be.” This “I” refers to my temporal becoming. If I as creature were not, then God also would not be, since God exists only in relation to creatures. “That God is God, of that I am a cause”; here the “I” refers to both at once. Since God is God only in relation to creatures, then if I as creature did not exist, no creatures would exist, and God would not exist either. But, since the created I depends on the eternal I, the eternal I is also the cause of God’s being God. “If I were not, then God would not be God.” Since the eternal I must exist, Eckhart must mean the created I, again because God is God only in relation to creatures.<sup>19</sup>

But Eckhart does not want his audience to pick through the sermon figuring out what “I” or “God” means here or there. His aim is to slip between the different meanings of the words to such an extent that we are no longer sure what they mean. “There is no need to understand this.” Understanding would entail making the proper distinctions and keeping the relevant meanings in mind while going through the sermon. But in this sermon, God and the self are the same and different, and the self is the same as itself while riven by an insurmountable divide between time and eternity, being and becoming, the uncreated and the created.<sup>20</sup> Eckhart’s wordplay dramatizes this situation.

As Eckhart nears the sermon’s end, he stays focused on these irreconcilable opposites within the soul.

A great master said, that his breakthrough was nobler than his flowing out, and that is true. When I flowed out from God, then all things spoke: God is; and this cannot make me blessed, for then I know myself as a creature. Rather, in the breakthrough, then I stand empty of my own will and of the will of God and of all his works and of God himself, then I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature; rather I am what I was and what I shall remain now and ever more. (DW 2, 504:4–505:1)<sup>21</sup>

Here Eckhart offers new images for the two halves of the soul. At first he describes the created, temporal aspect as a flowing out. When this outflow has occurred, then “all things spoke: God is,” that is, then the distinction between creatures and God came into play. The “flowing out” thus designates the createdness of creatures. The breakthrough, on the other hand, designates their divinity: “in the breakthrough . . . then I am above all creatures and am neither God nor creature; rather I am what I was and what I shall remain now and ever more.” This new metaphor perfectly accords with the dynamic images Eckhart has already used to represent divine, eternal being, yet it suggests in addition divine being’s transcendence of any determinate form. This breakthrough, along with the flowing out, both belong to the individual, not as actions which it makes but as actions which make it.<sup>22</sup>



Eckhart continues this relentless inscription and erasure of distinctions in his final comments on the “breaking through”:

There I receive an imprint, which shall bring me over every angel. In this imprint I receive such riches, that God cannot be enough for me with all that he is as God and with all his divine works; for in this breaking through I receive that I and God are one. There I am what I was, and there I neither diminish nor grow, for there I am an immovable cause that moves all things. Here God finds no place in the person, for the person gains with this poverty what he has eternally been and ever more shall remain. Here God is one with the spirit, and that is the nearest poverty that one can find. (DW 2, 505:1–9)

Eckhart piles up contradictions and paradoxes. In my breakthrough I receive an imprint, riches, and knowledge, but in fact I am immutable. In my breakthrough God cannot content me, but I learn that God and I are one. Though God may find no place in the person, in the “breaking through” the person is, like God, eternal being and the immovable cause of all motion. This final passage vividly sounds the sermon’s central theme of identity and distinction. Notably, it concludes by locating the “nearest” poverty of “having nothing” in an eternal condition.

Eckhart now closes the sermon:

Whoever does not understand this speech should not burden his heart with it. For as long as the person is not similar to this truth, so long shall he not understand this speech; for this is an unhidden truth, which has come here out of the heart of God without medium. That we may so live, that we experience it eternally, may God help us. Amen. (DW 2, 506:1–4)

Poverty is not a spiritual or moral ideal. It is instead, in Eckhart’s hands, a description of the eternal source of all creatures which is different from and identical with them. In saying that the truth has come from the heart of God, Eckhart implies his oneness with God, but this, we now know, is not a mystical privilege but the necessary condition of created being.<sup>23</sup> Whether his listeners and readers understand it or not, they are all already like the truth expressed in the sermon. This truth is therefore unhidden, though no easier to grasp for all that. In his prayer, Eckhart again joins the temporal and the eternal. Living happens in time, yet Eckhart hopes that we may grasp eternally the truth and poverty of which he has spoken.

## 5

### Suffering God

Eckhart’s sermon marks a progression. The first section draws a sharp distinction between God and creatures. The second and third sections depict negations of this distinction, whether in the form of divine being, which is

neither God nor creature, or in the form of God's oneness with the soul. The fourth section reiterates both these negations but then resurrects the distinction by inscribing it between the eternal and temporal parts of the self. The sermon ends without Eckhart providing any explanation of how the self is both eternal being and temporal becoming.

This conception of the self as a unity apparently riven by an insurmountable divide between different aspects of itself is the sermon's goal, echoed in the sermon's paradoxical phrases and images. We must become as we were when we were not. We beg God to make us empty of God. The soul becomes a place in which God can work and in fact becomes God, but in being one with God it differs from and suffers God. Thanks to the change worked by grace I become what I essentially am and therefore remain what I was. It is necessary that one be like the truth in order to understand it, but in the end there is no need to understand it. In fact the soul already is what the sermon describes: the same and not the same as itself.

This assertion and erasure of distinction explain why the word "God" shifts so dramatically in meaning. At times it means divine being, at others merely a foil to creation. This ambiguity accords with the sermon's central theme. God as creator is and is not distinct from divine being. Creatures are and are not distinct from God. A similar ambiguity marks the word "I." It refers sometimes to a temporal creature, sometimes to the eternal divine being, and sometimes to both at once. These slippages of meaning help Eckhart dramatize the identity and difference described in the sermon.

Eckhart's sermon, in fact, resembles the soul. Eckhart suggests at the beginning of the sermon that the wisdom of God speaks through him and says at the end that truth has come straight from the heart of God. He presents his sermon as a revelation of eternal truth. But the sermon is spoken in time, in a particular space, by a certain person to an audience. The sermon has all the trappings of an event in the order of created becoming, yet it possibly conveys a divine, eternal truth. In this way, the sermon combines time and eternity, just like the soul. How can we understand this combination?

In his discourse on "having nothing," Eckhart says that the soul must become God in order for God to work there, yet the soul retains something of its own identity. Eckhart describes the distinction between God and the soul that is present even in the midst of their identity as suffering: the soul "suffers" God. The suffering is the sign and manifestation in the soul of its eternal identity with the divine, but at the same time it indicates the soul's distinction from God.

This suffering does not mean actual pain. Eckhart says that the source of loving and knowing, where God and the soul are one, feels a joy comparable to God's. But the suffering does suggest a disruption in the order of creation.

Although the disruption reveals the divine to the created, it is a disordering within the created that shows something recognizably oneself but inexplicably different.

If the sermon, like the soul, joins within itself the eternal and the temporal, then we should expect to find within it signs of a similar disruption. These signs are, if anything, hard to miss. As Eckhart admits, the sermon does not conform to the usual rules of what he calls “creatures’ wisdom.” Its message is difficult, its central terms change in meaning, and it rejoices in paradox. Eckhart gives his listeners a sermon they will certainly never forget and probably never understand. In any case, they must pay attention and wonder what is going on.

Through it, Eckhart insists that the soul is already identical with God in some respect. But he abides by his promise that the sermon will not contain any clear explanation or direction. By striving to perplex his audience even as he enchants them with his imagery and wordplay, he offers them a compelling vision of their identity with God while simultaneously obscuring it. In doing so, Eckhart in effect renounces the privilege of the preacher. Instead of offering a univocal statement of doctrine, Eckhart acts indirectly. His hearers are already one with God in some sense, but it is up to them, not him, to discover how. Eckhart makes the sermon difficult and even shocking in order to provoke his listeners into discovering this identity for themselves. This task is not one of self-transformation but of recognizing what one already and eternally is.

The sermon does suggest a starting point for this task. When the soul “suffers” God, the disorder within the soul signifies God’s presence there. By making his sermon difficult and unpredictable, Eckhart is merely reproducing the disruptive effects of God in creation. These disruptions support Eckhart’s claim that he is speaking divine truth. In turn, the struggle to interpret the sermon offers a model for struggling with one’s own created existence and with one’s own soul. To detect the divine, look for disruption in the created world and within oneself. In the end, strangely enough, this task offers a role for creatures’ wisdom. Even if created wisdom cannot lay hold of the divine, it is only through the tenacious use of that wisdom that one can see where it ceases to help, and it is only there that one can begin to perceive the divine.

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## Notes

1. Frank Tobin (140–46) gives a solid version of this sermon's traditional interpretation. Kurt Ruh (157–65) agrees with this reading, as do Edmund Colledge and J. C. Marler. Dietmar Mieth (1972, 112–22) differs slightly in reading spiritual poverty as part of Eckhart's general exhortation to advance social injustice. For a fuller exposition of this view of Eckhart, see Mieth (1969). Michael Sells (180–92) takes a different tack, reading the sermon as an example of "apophatic discourse." This sermon has also drawn attention for its apparent debts to Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, a book Eckhart probably saw during his last sojourn in Paris, several years before the probable delivery of Sermon 52 during Eckhart's last year in Cologne. See Ruh (95–104), Colledge and Marler, and the essays on Eckhart and Porete by Maria Lichtmann, Amy Hollywood, and Michael Sells collected in McGinn. Such a connection is beyond the scope of my essay, and I will not address it here.
2. All translations are mine, from *Meister Eckhart*. References to this work adhere to the format standard in Eckhart studies, using the abbreviation "DW" and including volume, page, and line numbers. English translations are located in McGinn and Colledge (199–203), Schürmann (214–20), Walshe (269–77), and Davies (202–9).
3. Mieth rightly notes that here Eckhart recognizes the difficulty of his sermon. But Mieth takes "likeness to the truth" to mean a "uniformity" and "unity of function" between God and the soul. The "place" for this functional uniformity is "life experience" and social action (1971, 112–3). For Mieth, Eckhart uses "provocative and polemic irony" (1971, 114) to jar his listeners out of their complacency so that they redirect their action towards the "utopia" of the "essentially perfected person . . . who by means of grace fully corresponds to his being" (1971, 118), represented by spiritual poverty. Eckhart's language is provocative, and I agree that it is intended to shock. But in my view Eckhart locates the "functional unity" of the soul and God not in social action in time, as Mieth claims, but in an eternal identity, which will become clear later.
4. Mieth prefers the translation "that is a poor person who does not will and does not know and does not have," since Eckhart is not proposing a new object for desire, knowledge, and possession but demanding a transformation of desire, knowledge, and possession (1971, 121). Ruh and Tobin accept this suggestion, though Eckhart's English translators do not. I agree that Eckhart means something different from ordinary willing, knowing, and having, but, as I will argue later, the definition describes eternal conditions, not the transformation of human faculties.
5. Most commentators interpret such formulations as evidence for a view of what has been called principal existence, virtual existence, and pre-existence. Here is Tobin (145): "Put simply, Eckhart's view of poverty of spirit is that the union with God that one should strive for is the same oneness one had with God before one existed as a creature. Perfection consists in 'undoing' creation and returning to the *ideal* or *virtual* existence one enjoyed in the Word." Sells and Ruh agree, as does Bernard McGinn in his "Theological Summary" in McGinn and Colledge. But, as we shall see, this oneness is eternal. It is outside of time and cannot end. Hence, the creature, in time, is also eternally identical with God. (Tobin and McGinn do, to some extent, recognize the creature's *present* identity with God.) This is why I also disagree with Tobin's claim that poverty of spirit is something one should strive for. My claim is that poverty

of spirit really names an eternal condition in which creatures already stand. Mieth is one commentator who uses the language of “precreation” while pointing out that this “precreation” implies no priority in time, since time is itself an effect or component of creation (1971, 116).

6. This inference that emptiness of will consists in desire for oneself would appear to conflict with Eckhart’s pronouncement that such emptiness is incompatible with any desire for God and eternity. After all, this being is God and, as we shall see, eternal as well. But this conflict is only apparent. Eckhart is here introducing a concept of desire that differs from ordinary created desire. When he previously says that desire for God and eternity signifies the absence of this emptiness of will, he is referring to created desire, which is founded on lack.

7. The German editor Josef Quint distinguishes between *got* and “*got*” in this passage and elsewhere, believing that Eckhart uses a distinction between God in itself and God as it is for creatures. Colledge and Marler extend this punctuation to the rest of the sermon. But Eckhart could not have made such a distinction clear while he was preaching, unless he used different tones of voice or special hand gestures. Ultimately, it is for us to decide whether and how Eckhart uses such a distinction. Thus I agree with Sells (187–89) in dropping the quotation marks wherever they occur, both here and in the later sermon.

8. Tobin remarks that the outflowing of creation “must be viewed as an event with negative consequences, consequences that can only be made good through the redivinization of the creature” (142). There are two problems with this inference. The first is that Eckhart does not speak disparagingly of creation at all in this sermon. In fact, he goes on to speak of the riches possessed by “the smallest creature in God.” Second, this view relies on a strictly temporal reading of the creature’s identity with God. It assumes that the creature once was united with God, is so no longer, but should become one with God again. However, as we will see, this identity is eternal, and nothing can disturb it. Far from being an event with “negative consequences,” creation in this sermon is a result of the overflowing abundance of divine being, a trait expressed in Eckhart’s later description of divine being as a “breaking through.”

9. I have translated *ledic* in this sentence as “empty,” because that is how I have translated it elsewhere. Other translators render it as “free,” thus: we beg God that we may become free of God.

10. Tobin interprets this duality of nature in terms of a distinction advanced in Eckhart’s Latin works between a creature’s *esse virtual*, which inheres in God, and its *esse formale*, which is its created existence. This distinction accords with the doctrine of precreated existence. This kind of interpretation, which reads Eckhart’s German works through the lens of his Latin writings, is common to most Eckhart commentators. In my view it is too hasty, for it prefers to impose a distinction on the text instead of waiting to see how the text itself lets the distinction emerge. Though Eckhart does assert the simultaneous and paradoxical eternity and temporality of the creature, he also asserts its unity, and he does not provide any kind of metaphysical framework to explain or justify his statements. We must bear this in mind when considering the effect Eckhart, as a preacher, is trying to create, and we may overlook such effects when we use the Latin works to figure out what Eckhart’s German sermons must mean.

11. For Sells, Eckhart's prayer challenges the conception of God as a being to which one can address petitions (191–92). He rightly remarks that “to become free of will, it is necessary to become free of the will (expressed through petition) to become free of will.” The logical consequence is that one cannot try to attain freedom of will in time. We would need to ask what Eckhart is doing in setting such freedom up as a goal (if that is what he is doing), or we would need to read such freedom, as I do here, as an image of an eternal condition. A more traditional view of this prayer is Tobin's (143), which sees it as inscribing a distinction between God's true nature and humans' paltry conception of God. In order to appreciate what God truly is, in this view, we must give up our incorrect ideas of God. See also Ruh (163).

12. Eckhart here refers to disputes, in which he took part, over whether the faculty of will or the faculty of knowledge took precedence in God, and, consequently, whether beatitude consisted chiefly in the love of God or the contemplation of God. The Franciscans were the party of love and the will, the Dominicans that of contemplation and intellect. Aquinas and Scotus thought beatitude lay in both.

13. It is interesting that Eckhart returns to “blessedness,” since he began the sermon by describing blessedness opening its mouth to wisdom. Is Eckhart implying that his sermon, which appears to give voice to God's wisdom, originates within the soul as well?

14. One could object: does not Eckhart's formulation imply a distinction between the soul and the source of loving and knowing? Assume that it does. Then Eckhart is telling his listeners, “God is already one with you in a ‘part’ of your soul. God is already at work there. Strive so that God is one with the rest of your soul as well.” In this case, we have a complicated problem of interpretation: Eckhart predicates the poverty of knowing nothing on being unaware of God's work in oneself, yet in the sermon he informs his listeners of this work. It follows that Eckhart's description would make the goal of knowing nothing about God's work impossible to attain. Either, then, Eckhart is unintentionally preventing his listeners from attaining this goal, or he is engaging in subtle rhetorical maneuvers. Both possibilities would involve Eckhart in an analysis of the soul he shows no interest in pursuing in this sermon. For these reasons, I think it better to emphasize the identity of the soul with this source of knowing and loving.

15. Eckhart's willingness here to identify the source of all creation with creation itself gives support to my equating the source of loving and knowing in the soul with the soul itself.

16. None of Eckhart's commentators has remarked upon his contradictory statements about spiritual poverty, and they all agree in taking the definition somewhat literally as a point of doctrine.

17. Sells (190) points out that Eckhart's habit of taking back what he and others have said shows his practice of “apophatic discourse.” In this kind of discourse, one offers statements and then takes them back, thereby creating a tension that more adequately reflects the transcendence of God than simple assertions do. It is significant that Eckhart's discussion of “knowing nothing” does depict the soul as a place for God's work: precisely the image he disowns now.

18. Alois Haas puts Eckhart in the context of reflections on the Delphic maxim, “Know yourself.” The question raised in Neoplatonism, which stresses the identity



of the soul with the divine eternal One, is, “Am I myself as *God* or as *Human*? Or am I the state of suspense between essential God-Being and determined Finite-Being in the human, corporeal state which must be transcended in a movement toward God?”

(3). Haas does not mention Eckhart’s alternative in this sermon: the soul is essentially both God and human. It does not dwell in the tension between the two, but contains the tension within itself. Eckhart, as Haas goes on to say, integrates “the two divergent standpoints in his conception of *abegescheidenheit* [or ‘detachment’], insofar as the person simultaneously and paradoxically abandons himself and thereby wins it back again in its original condition” (3n, see also 52–75). Yet Sermon 52 suggests that no such integration of the two standpoints through ethical action or personal transformation is necessary, since both “standpoints” already constitute the soul and to that extent already are integrated, while simultaneously remaining contrary.

19. Curiously, Ruh describes Eckhart’s vertiginous manner here as “self-forgetful” and the result of “an act of intellectual ecstasy” (163). Such a view conveniently absolves commentators from taking the passage too seriously and working through its rapid changes, since it implies that Eckhart was not in control of his speaking.

20. Colledge and Marler agree. “[In] *Beati pauperes spiritu*, the components of being and becoming into which human existence is positively dissolved are treated as mutually exclusive” (23).

21. Eckhart regularly cites “great masters” without identifying them or providing scholars with any way to identify them, and he often does so as a way to mention what he himself has said elsewhere.

22. Commentators usually read this “breakthrough” in two different but complementary ways. McGinn sees it as part of a Neoplatonic cycle of emanation and return that structures the created world (McGinn and Colledge, 30). My reading does not dispute this, as long as we see the emanation, or “flowing out,” and the return, or “breaking through,” as expressing different aspects of the world, the “flowing out” expressing its temporal aspect, the “breakthrough” its eternal aspect. Commentators also read the breakthrough as, in Ruh’s words, “the (mystical) return into the un-created,” or “the release from every creature and every created world of representations, to which ‘God’ (our image of God) also belongs” (163). This is an event in time, an event in a personal history. Some even see it as the second step in a mystical itinerary, the first being the “birth of the son or Word in the soul.” See Ueda, for instance. Tobin, Sells, and McGinn agree with Ruh in reading the breakthrough in Sermon 52 in this second fashion. By contrast, Mieth, whose reading of this sermon begins with the breakthrough and works its way backwards, sees the breakthrough as symbolizing the radical refusal of religious life to conform to the usual materialism and selfishness of ordinary life. I disagree with these views, because they make the breakthrough an event in time, while Eckhart in this sermon clearly describes it as something eternal. Moreover, though for some the breakthrough completes the “birth of the son or Word in the soul,” this sermon does not mention this birth at all.

23. Colledge and Marler take Eckhart’s expression *âne mittel*, “without medium,” to “suggest that the reader of the sermon should not regard it as Eckhart’s composition . . . It is not Eckhart, but God alone who speaks” (25). Ruh takes it to mean that Eckhart is speaking of a “personally experienced truth” (189). As such, for him it reflects Eckhart’s “own mystical experience.”



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