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Author(s): Richard Kieckhefer

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MEISTER ECKHART'S CONCEPTION OF UNION WITH GOD

Richard Kieckhefer

Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60201

I

Although Meister Eckhart himself might have been puzzled by the term, he is traditionally known as a mystic.¹ The designation surely does apply, in the sense that Eckhart sought and recommended a kind of union between the soul and God. But as soon as one proceeds to analyze the precise nature of that union, difficulties abound. In recent literature it has become clear that the Christian mystical tradition has employed various distinct concepts of union with God, and scholars have inquired what sort of union one or another mystic sought. This effort has been made, for example, in studies of John Tauler and *The Cloud of Unknowing*.² In examining these and other mystics, particularly those of the Western medieval tradition, scholars have asked whether they viewed union with God as a momentary experience or as an ongoing way of life, and whether they saw this union as continuous and compatible with ordinary religious experience and knowledge or as discontinuous and incompatible. The present article will attempt to answer such questions in regard to Meister Eckhart, in hopes of clarifying an aspect of his thought which, though fundamental, is most commonly approached only tangentially in the literature.

While there is no uniform terminology in the mystical literature, there are certain distinctions that recur, whether vaguely and implicitly or clearly and explicitly. One of the most basic distinctions is between what may be designated as habitual and ecstatic forms of union—i.e., between a habitual consciousness of God's presence, which persists as one carries out one's ordinary activities, and a sudden and ecstatic

¹On this matter see H. Fischer, "Zur Frage nach der Mystik in den Werken Meister Eckharts," in *La Mystique rhénane* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) 109–32.

²Among the best and most interesting studies of this motif in Tauler are Steven E. Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson and Martin Luther (1509–16) in the Context of their Theological Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969) esp. 35–46, and Gösta Wrede, *Unio mystica: Probleme der Erfahrung bei Johannes Tauler* (Uppsala: Universitet; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell [distr.], 1974). On *The Cloud*, see William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Modern Interpretation* (2d ed.; St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey, 1975).

irruption upon one's life, which occurs briefly and intermittently.³ Habitual union is in principle accessible to all; essentially, it is the element of Christian life suggested in Paul's claims that "God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13) and "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:30). Ecstatic union, on the other hand, is generally viewed as a special favor, given to few; the Christian prototype is Paul's experience of being raised up to the third heaven, where he was oblivious to his body and heard "things that cannot be told" (2 Cor 12:1–6). Habitual union may be seen either as a preparation for ecstatic union or as an ultimate stage in spiritual development.⁴ A third form of union, sometimes known as the unitive life, ensues only in the highest stages of mystical development, when the mystic enters a permanent state of intense bliss and awareness of God's presence.⁵ This form of union combines the special intensity of ecstasy with the duration of habitual union. Typically, mystics who speak of the unitive life do so only after explicit reference to preceding ecstatic states; in the absence of such references, it is safest to assume that a mystic who speaks of constant or ongoing union has the simpler phenomenon of habitual union in mind.

Another distinction that can prove useful is between abstractive union, which precludes consciousness of the spatio-temporal world, and nonabstractive union, which is compatible with such ordinary consciousness.⁶ Ecstatic union is perhaps thought of most often as

³Scholastic theologians analyzing mystical experience sometimes distinguished between "habitual" and "actual" union; see Ioseph a Spiritu Sancto, *Cursus theologiae mystico-scholasticae*, ed. Anastasius a S. Paulo (5 vols.; Bruges/Rome: Beyaert, 1924–33), 4. 231–39, and Heinrich Seuse Denifle, *Die deutschen Mystiker des 14. Jahrhunderts: Beitrag zur Deutung ihrer Lehre*, ed. Otwin Spiess (Fribourg: Paulusverlag, 1951) 192. The terms here employed, though, are chosen in part to avoid the implications of the scholastic distinction between *actus* and *habitus*. The word "ecstasy" can, of course, be used in a broad sense for everyday experiences of intense joy, but it is used here (as are Eckhart's own corresponding terms: see below, sec. IV, and esp. n. 47) in a narrower sense, referring to extraordinary spiritual experiences.

⁴On the notion of habitual union as a kind of background experience that leads to ecstasy, see Wrede, *Unio mystica*, 203–71.

⁵While the notion was known in the fourteenth century, it received greater attention in following centuries. Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, for example, elaborated the concept of unitive life or "spiritual marriage"; see E. Allison Peers, *Studies of the Spanish Mystics* (3 vols.; 2d ed., London: S.P.C.K., 1951–60) 1. 149–52, 210–16.

⁶This distinction is more useful for analyzing Eckhart than that between "introvertive" and "extrovertive"; on the latter distinction see esp. W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960). Nonabstractive union need not be either exclusively introvertive nor exclusively extrovertive, but may entail awareness of God's presence (to use the formulation of Christian mystics, not that of Stace) both in the soul and in nature.

abstractive—as an encounter with God so intense that one briefly loses all sense of time and of one's surroundings, until one descends from the heights into mundane affairs—while habitual union is more readily conceived as nonabstractive. Yet these are not the only conceivable permutations. For example, one contemporary attested that Thomas Aquinas lived in a virtually constant but abstractive state of permanent trance, while ecstatic but nonabstractive experiences are common in Franciscan “nature mysticism.”⁷ Thus, numerous varieties of union or mystical experience were recognized well before Eckhart's time.

Whether these distinctions apply to any specific spiritual writer is a question that can be answered only through detailed scrutiny of his or her writings. It will be argued here that they can help in clarifying the main thrust of Eckhart's mystical works. Unfortunately, he was no more explicit on such matters than most mystics of his era. Given the opaqueness of his texts, it is understandable that scholars examining them have obtained fundamentally different impressions. Some have represented him as concerned exclusively with a state that amounts to habitual union. Reiner Schürmann, for example, contrasts the ecstatic experience of Plotinus with the very different consciousness that Eckhart advocates; while Plotinus seeks release from time in a privileged ecstatic union, Eckhart recommends that one accept time with equanimity and detachment.⁸ But Schürmann does not consider in this connection certain passages in which Eckhart seems *prima facie* to be discussing ecstatic union. Other scholars have spoken of Eckhart as an advocate of momentary or ecstatic union. Thus, Hermann Kunisch refers to the mystical experience of Eckhart as a specific act of union, and James Clark, considering a sermon in which Eckhart speaks of the soul as free from time and place, glosses the text with a comment that the soul “loses all sense of time in an ecstasy.”⁹ Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache

⁷*The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents*, trans. and ed. Kenelm Foster (London: Longmans; Baltimore: Helicon, 1959) 130 (cf. 57, 107); Edward A. Armstrong, *St. Francis, Nature Mystic: The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California, 1973).

⁸Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher: Translations with Commentary* (Bloomington / London: Indiana University, 1978) 15; cf. 23. See also C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven / London: Yale, 1977) 2–3 and 112, again with little evidence.

⁹Hermann Kunisch, “Offenbarung und Gehorsam: Versuch über Eckharts religiöse Persönlichkeit,” in Udo M. Nix and Raphael Öchsli, eds., *Meister Eckhart der Prediger: Festschrift zum Eckhart-Gedenkjahr* (Freiburg: Herder, 1960) 117–18 and 129; James M. Clark, *Meister Eckhart: An Introduction to the Study of his Works, with an Anthology of his Sermons* (London: Nelson, 1957) 175 and n. 2. Steven E. Ozment (*Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century* [New

raises the question whether Eckhart personally experienced ecstatic (or “nuptial”) phenomena, and concludes that he must have, despite his reticence on autobiographical matters, but that he speaks most often of habitual union (in her terms, “a tranquil and permanent possession of God”).¹⁰ Among the more elaborate expositions is that of Friedrich-Wilhelm Wentzlaff-Eggebert, who, in his survey of the German mystical tradition, distinguishes between “speculative” and “ecstatic” mysticism; the former is characterized by emphasis on the cognitive element, or consciousness of God, while the latter stresses the affective enjoyment of mystical union. Both forms of mysticism, though, are attempts to recapture and build upon an initial vision-experience (a *blic*, to use the term current in later medieval German texts). When speculative mysticism is combined with concern for the active life, the result is a “working union” (*Wirkeinheit*) with God, in which one performs external works through the strength God imparts. This working union, according to Wentzlaff-Eggebert, is what Eckhart understood by mystical union.¹¹ In other words, Eckhart’s mysticism may have been sparked by an initial experience of ecstatic union, but thereafter what he sought was a habitual sense of God’s efficacy within the soul. Like other scholars, however, Wentzlaff-Eggebert gives little effort to provide systematic textual evidence regarding Eckhart’s conception of union with God. The common tendency seems to be to read Eckhart in one way or another on the basis of largely unexamined assumptions. This tendency is understandable, in view of Eckhart’s own obscurity on the point in question, but one is left wondering whether it would not be worthwhile to address the issue systematically.

Of all recent literature dealing with Eckhart, perhaps the work that is most pertinent to the present inquiry is Dietmar Mieth’s study of the active and contemplative lives in Eckhart and Tauler.¹² Mieth marshals

Haven/London: Yale, 1973] 13) describes the religious experience mentioned in Eckhart as momentary. Gordon Leff (*The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook: An Essay on the Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century* [New York: Harper & Row, 1976] 125) states that for Eckhart “awareness of self of any kind was to be rejected; even the recoil of sadness following the moment of ecstasy.” And such examples could readily be multiplied.

¹⁰Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, *Master Eckhart and the Rhineland Mystics* (New York: Harper & Row; London: Longmans, 1956) 61–64.

¹¹Friedrich-Wilhelm Wentzlaff-Eggebert, *Deutsche Mystik zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Einheit und Wandlung ihrer Erscheinungsformen* (3d ed.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969) 12–19 and 88–102.

¹²Dietmar Mieth, *Die Einheit von vita activa und vita contemplativa in den deutschen Predigten und Traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler: Untersuchungen zur Struktur des christlichen Lebens* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1969) 119–233.

forth numerous texts showing that the goal and climax of Eckhart's spirituality is not contemplation, but rather the fruition to which contemplation leads—in other words, the living manifestation of God's efficacy in one's life, in a “working union” with God. It is in this sense that Eckhart speaks of the soul as receiving or conceiving God in its “virginity,” and bearing fruit in its “womanliness” (DW 1. 24–25).¹³ Having set forth the general outlines of Eckhart's spirituality, Mieth gives a detailed exegesis of a sermon on the text *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum* (DW 3. 481–92), in which Eckhart reinterprets the classical image of the contemplative Mary and the active Martha.¹⁴ In this sermon Eckhart distinguishes three “ways” that the soul has for entry into God (DW 3. 486–87). The first is by seeking him “in all creatures, with manifold activity and ardent love”—in short, the traditional active way. The second is “a way without way, free and yet bound, raised up, rapt up beyond oneself and all things, without will or image, although without any essential stability”—in other words, the contemplative way with its quest of ecstatic union. The third is in fact not really a way but the destination to which these ways lead, i.e., the beatific vision. The categories used here are not controversial. What is noteworthy is, as Mieth shows, that Eckhart sees the contemplative life as imperfect and immature until it has blossomed forth in activity.¹⁵ Martha and her friends are attentive (*mit der sorge*) but not anxious (*in der sorge*), and their active life joins them as closely to God as one can be joined short of the beatific vision (DW 3. 488). Thus, Christ is represented not as reproaching Martha for her short-sightedness, but as comforting her with the assurance that her younger sister will eventually outgrow her contemplative fascination: “Do not be upset, Martha, she [also] has chosen the best part. This [the contemplative stage] will pass

¹³The sources are Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke* (ed. Josef Quint et al.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958–), cited as “DW”; Meister Eckhart, *Die lateinischen Werke* (ed. Konrad Weiss et al.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1956–), cited as “LW”; and Franz Pfeiffer, ed., *Deutsche Mystiker des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts* (2d ed.; 2 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), cited as “P.” Translations are my own, though I have consulted those of Josef Quint (*Meister Eckhart: Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* [4th ed.; Munich: Carl Hanser, 1977]), James M. Clark (as above, n.6), and James M. Clark and John V. Skinner (*Meister Eckhart: Selected Treatises and Sermons* [London: Faber & Faber, 1958]).

¹⁴On the history of interpretations of Mary and Martha, see Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (London: Constable, 1922) 200–202, 214–15, 218–20.

¹⁵The text is obscure, and not surprisingly there has been confusion in its interpretation; see, e.g., Heiko A. Oberman, “Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Mysticism,” *CH* 30 (1961) 280, n. 21. As is clear from Mieth's exposition, the text here in question (“Maria was è Martha, è si Mária würde . . .”) means simply that Mary had to grow into the active life of Martha before she could fulfill her own religious calling.

away from her. The highest that can befall creatures will befall her; she will be blessed, like you" (DW 3. 489).¹⁶ Mieth demonstrates cogently that for Eckhart the active life—or more specifically the habitual union that is possible in this life—is a higher religious ideal than the contemplative life and ecstatic union. But the fundamental question still remains: one must still ask whether the contemplative phase is a necessary or even useful preliminary to full spiritual maturity, and whether in the course of an active life one will require intermittent rejuvenation in a return to ecstatic contemplation. In other words, one must inquire whether it is only in ecstatic union that the virgin can conceive what she bears later in her life of active service.

The present article will attempt to sort out a selection of pertinent texts. The motif of union with God pervades Eckhart's mystical writings, especially those in the vernacular, and any attempt to catalogue all the relevant passages would be both futile and needless. It will be sufficient to consider representative texts from those works now generally considered genuine, and to suggest ways of interpretation that can be applied to other passages.¹⁷ First to be considered will be texts dealing clearly with a form of union that is habitual and nonabstractive (section II); then further texts will be analyzed, which either seem to refer or patently do refer to other forms of union (sections III–IV). Throughout this examination, effort will be made to show the significance and implications of the passages in question for the general lines of Eckhart's thought.

II

The fundamental premise that underlies the notion of habitual union is that 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. There are numerous passages in which Eckhart refers to God, in a Pauline or Augustinian fashion, as present and working within the individual's soul.¹⁸ Thus, he says that one should not think of God as outside oneself, but "as my own and within me" (DW 1.

¹⁶The insertion of "also" follows DW 3. 597.

¹⁷Final judgment on the authenticity of many of the writings has not been passed, and in the interim it is safest to base one's conclusions on those works that are generally accepted (i.e., those in DW and in Quint's separate translation). In any event, the present article cannot consider more than a sampling of quotations even from the manifestly genuine works, but the interpretations here suggested can readily be applied to other passages, whether from accepted or from dubious writings.

¹⁸On the motif in Augustine, see Stanislaus J. Grabowski, *The All-Present God: A Study in St. Augustine* (St. Louis/London: Herder, 1954), and Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) 155.

113). God is present within all things, but especially in intellectual beings—"in the innermost of the soul and in the highest of the soul" (DW 2. 94–95).¹⁹

In some instances Eckhart gives an explicitly ontological interpretation of this divine indwelling. Thus, he suggests that human existence is radically dependent on the being of God: "God's being [*wesen*] is my life. If God's being is my life, then God's existence [*sîn*] must be my existence and His essence [*istichheit*] my essence, neither more nor less" (DW 1. 106). As in other passages from his corpus, Eckhart here views the relation between divine and human existence as one of analogy of attribution: while existence may be predicated of God in a full and literal sense, one may speak of a creature as existing only in the sense that it derives or "borrows" its existence from God. It does not have its own being, proportioned to its creaturely essence, as analogy of proper proportionality would ascribe to it.²⁰ Eckhart also applies this mode of analogy in his comment on the Augustinian text, "God is nearer to the soul than it is to itself"; his interpretation of this classic formulation is that "the soul receives its being [*wesen*] from God without mediation," in such a way that "there is in truth no distinction between the nearness of God and the soul" (DW 1. 162).²¹ In other words, it is God's being which is lent to the soul; God is near to the soul in the most radical of all possible ways, since the soul's very being turns out to be God's being. It is in this sense that Eckhart emphatically denies that any creatures have their own proper existence.²²

In other cases Eckhart represents God as present in a moral sense, through grace; that is, he is present within a soul that is spiritually alive or blessed, but this presence is not inevitable, and can be withdrawn:

When the soul separates from the body, it hurts; but when God separates from the soul, it hurts much more. As the soul gives life to the body, so God gives life to the soul. As the soul flows through all the [bodily] members, so God flows in all the powers of the soul, and irrigates them in such a way that they in turn pour forth this stream in kindness and love upon all that surrounds them, so that all perceive it. (DW 2. 214)

In other contexts Eckhart speaks of detachment as the moral prerequisite for God's presence by grace. God stands ready to enter into

¹⁹On the translation, see Clark and Skinner, *Meister Eckhart*, 58, n.3.

²⁰Much has been written on this topic; see esp. Vladimir Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957) 298–320.

²¹The text from Augustine is *Enarratio in ps. LXXIV*, n. 9.

²²G. Théry, ed., "Édition critique des pièces relatives au procès d'Eckhart contenues dans le manuscrit 33^b de la Bibliothèque de Soest," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 1 (1926–27) 205, 206–7, 208, 218, 236, 247–48.

a soul that has “annihilated” (*vernihitet*) itself, or purged itself of all its desires, passions, and worldly inclinations (DW 2. 415). Similarly, he says that “if God is to enter, the creature must exit” (P 2. 12). It is specifically in the “spark” or substance of the soul (*scintilla animae* or *vükefîn*) that God dwells by grace.²³ Thus, Eckhart speaks of a power in the soul wider than the whole world; “it must be wide, for God dwells within it” (DW 2. 524). More clearly alluding to God’s presence through grace, he says that “God is entirely in all good persons, and there is something in the soul in which God lives, and something in the soul where the soul lives in God” (DW 2. 301). In the last quotation he uses an opposite version of the standard image: the soul resides within God while at the same time God dwells within the soul. Yet the essential notion remains the same; like many spiritual writers, Eckhart is capable of using different and even contradictory images to express the same insight. Whatever the specific formulation, he is conveying the same fundamental point as was expressed in the scholastic notion of “uncreated grace”—that, in addition to created qualities, God bestows himself upon the soul that is disposed to receive him or be united with him. Eckhart’s own distinction is between “God” and “grace”; he says that the soul is not content with grace, since that is merely a creature, but insists on receiving God himself (e.g., DW 3. 399–400, 428–29). But the idea is essentially the same as that conveyed in the scholastic distinction between uncreated and created grace.²⁴

The bestowal of God is expressed in Eckhart’s notion of the birth of God’s Son within the soul.²⁵ Whereas God’s ontological presence is essential for the very being of all creatures, his moral presence, or the birth of the Son, is to be found only in the soul: “God is in all things, essentially, working, and powerful. But he gives birth only in the soul; for all creatures are footprints of God, but the soul is naturally formed according to God” (P 2. 11). And while the ontological presence of God

²³John D. Caputo, “Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism,” *The Thomist* 42 (1978) 205–9. Caputo gives a lucid exposition of Eckhart’s teaching and its Thomist background.

²⁴See also Th  ry, “  dition critique,” esp. 167–68, and Benedict M. Ashley, “Three Strands in the Thought of Eckhart the Scholastic Theologian,” *The Thomist* 42 (1978) 229–30. The notion of uncreated grace has been revived in recent theology. Karl Rahner (*Theological Investigations* I [Baltimore: Helicon; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961] 319–46) cites medieval texts and scholarship as a point of departure for his own theological developments. Gregory Baum (*Man Becoming: God in Secular Language* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1970] esp. 183–84) employs the same notion, though with less concern for medieval precedents.

²⁵Karl G. Kert  , “Meister Eckhart’s Teaching on the Birth of the Divine Word in the Soul,” *Traditio* 15 (1959) esp. 333–62; Kert   shows effectively that Eckhart’s teaching is orthodox in intention. See also Caputo, “Fundamental Themes,” 217–24.

is necessary for a person's very being, the birth of the Son is conditional: before it can take place, the soul must become detached from all worldly distractions (e.g., DW 1. 80, 177; 2. 293; P 2. 14, 24); it must exercise virtues and perform good works (DW 2. 252–53; P 2. 6–7); one's will must be united with God's will (DW 2. 11). The effect of this birth is expressed in three different ways, which if taken with absolute literalness would be incompatible: the Son enters the soul (e.g., DW 1. 109); the soul becomes the Son (DW 1. 72–73, 109, 169, 193–94, 376, 382–83); and the soul becomes the Father, cooperating in the begetting of the Son as in the generation of all else (DW 1. 109, 239; 2. 436–38, 502–3).²⁶ The first of these formulations is no more problematic than Eckhart's usual statements about the presence of God within the soul. The second and especially the third, however, could easily be taken to suggest that the person in whom the birth occurs loses his individual human identity. Yet the intention becomes clear in light of the deeply established patristic notion of "deification" by grace.²⁷ Thus, Eckhart is willing at times to use less radical language: "Never was anything so closely related to another through birth, or so similar, or so much one, as the soul is to God in this birth" (DW 2. 239).

As indicated above, this idea of God's ontological and moral indwelling within the soul is the premise that underlies Eckhart's notion of a habitual union. If one is to speak of Eckhart as in any meaningful sense a mystic, however, one must go beyond merely the notion that God is present in the soul ontologically and by grace; this much is common to Christian theology generally, and is in no way distinctively mystical. One must, at the very least, show furthermore that Eckhart stressed a habitual *consciousness* of God's presence. One of the texts in which Eckhart most clearly emphasizes this theme is from his sermon *Scitote, quia prope est regnum dei* (DW 3. 141–42). Just as the identity of a king requires his own awareness (as well as other people's) that he is king, so also, Eckhart says, the blessedness of an individual requires consciousness of God's presence. God is also present to a stone or a block of wood, but they lack the awareness required for beatitude; if they were as conscious of God's presence in them as the highest angel is, then the stone or wooden block would be as blessed as the angel. It is knowledge of God's presence, rather than this presence per se, that constitutes beatitude, and the degree of blessedness corresponds to the

²⁶For explication, see Th  ry, "  dition critique," 178, 199–200. For some of the implications, see Caputo, "Fundamental Themes," 222–23.

²⁷Denifle, *Die deutschen Mystiker*, 135–36. Denifle exonerates Eckhart on this point, though not on others. For the history of the notion, see M. Lot-Borodine, "La doctrine de la 'd  ification' dans l'Eglise grecque jusqu'au XIe si  cle," *RHR* 105 (1932) 5–43, 106 (1932) 525–74, 107 (1933) 8–55.

measure of one's consciousness. Likewise, it is characteristic of Eckhart to say that a person should always turn inward into the spark of the soul, for in abiding within it he abides in God (DW 2. 280–81). Yet this consciousness is more of a habitual orientation or disposition of the soul generally than it is an explicit, reflective act of cognition; it is an “inner, insightful [*vernünfftigen*] turning and striving toward God, and not a constant, regular thinking about him” (DW 5. 205).²⁸ The latter, he goes on to say, would be too hard for human nature to attain, and even if possible would not be the highest ideal. One should strive not for a God of one's cognition, who will vanish along with one's thoughts, but for a substantial God who stands above all thought and all creatures.²⁹

While Eckhart typically emphasizes consciousness of God's presence within the soul, there are passages in which he calls his hearer or reader to attend to God's indwelling throughout creation. Perhaps the best example of this subsidiary motif is a passage from the *Talks of Instruction*, in which he urges the reader to “become a person who seeks God in all things, and finds God at all times and in all places and among all persons, in all ways” (DW 5. 289–90).

There is no suggestion in any of these passages that Eckhart is speaking of ecstatic or abstractive experiences. The abstractive element is particularly excluded when he speaks of discovering God outside oneself, but even when the focus is on consciousness of God's inward presence there is no intimation that such awareness precludes ordinary consciousness of the world. Likewise, there is no sign here of any interest in momentary or ecstatic experiences. God's ontological relationship to human existence is necessarily constant, and his presence through grace is, or should be, an ongoing mode of life rather than an extraordinary experience. Eckhart says explicitly that in the spark of the soul God is present “eternally without ceasing” (e.g., DW 1. 419). Similarly, he says that the Father begets his Son within the soul “without intermission”

²⁸While “insightful” may not be quite satisfactory (other translators use “spiritual”), it does convey the notion that there is a mode of apprehension or awareness, even if it is not discursive or (in a technical sense) rational. Eckhart also says in this passage that genuine possession of God “liget an dem gemüete.” On the *gemüete*, see Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, 145–46, and Ozment, *Homo Spiritualis*, 15–21. Like the scholastic *mens*, it is a fundamental power of the soul, which works upon the other powers—which is why I suggest here that the consciousness in question is a property of the soul generally, since the *gemüete* serves to orient the entire soul.

²⁹C. F. Kelley's thesis (in *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*) must be understood in the light of these considerations: it is surely true that Eckhart wants his listener or reader to see all things from a viewpoint of perfect detachment (in his more radical formulation: only as they exist in God's mind), but the “knowledge” referred to here is an orientation of the entire soul rather than an activity of intellect alone. Kelley himself makes this point in various contexts.

(DW 1. 32, 109, 112, 419); the process occurs inevitably, whether the individual submits or resists, and whether he is awake or asleep (DW 1. 386–87). These passages suggest either that the birth of the Son is here being used as an image for God's ontological presence, which in principle cannot be resisted, or else that Eckhart is referring to the irresistibility of grace. To draw either conclusion, however, would probably be to overinterpret these ambiguous texts. It is more likely that Eckhart is merely saying here, as he does elsewhere (e.g., DW 2. 415; P 2. 27), that God's entry into the soul is automatic when the soul is properly prepared—or, in the terms of scholastic theology, that the bestowal of uncreated grace follows inevitably the infusion of created grace. More clearly in keeping with this interpretation is Eckhart's statement that one who "abides in God" (John 15:4) is always born in him, and God is always born within such a person (DW 2. 275); the moral prerequisites and the unfailing character of God's action are both here expressed.

This birth "takes place in the soul exactly as in eternity, no less and no more. For there is only one birth, which occurs in the being and ground of the soul" (P. 2. 10; cf. DW 1. 166–67). In other words, the birth of the Son in the soul is an extension of the generation of the second person within the Trinity.³⁰ And Eckhart's references to the "eternal birth" admit at least three further interpretations, all in keeping with his essential outlook: as an act of God, this phenomenon is eternal in the same sense that all God's acts are eternal; as a process that occurs within the spark of the soul, it is eternal in the sense that the spark is exempt from the conditions of space and time;³¹ and as a process which, for full impact on the life of the individual, requires moral development, it is "eternal" in an extended sense, that it calls for detachment from temporality or worldly objects.³² Thus, although Eckhart occasionally speaks of the soul as free from time and place, there is no reason to suppose that he is thinking of ecstatic removal from ordinary experience.³³ In all these passages, Eckhart is clearly referring to an ongoing condition of the soul. He would presumably acknowledge that the *awareness* of this state can, in special circumstances, take an exceptionally intense form during moments of ecstasy—but in the texts

³⁰See Caputo, "Fundamental Themes," esp. 222.

³¹On this Augustinian motif, see DW 1. 404–5, and n. 49 below.

³²For various statements regarding eternity (in the various senses of the term), see DW 1. 72, 171; 2. 219, 231, 232, 306, 309. The moral implications of withdrawal from space and time are especially clear in DW 5. 11.

³³Hence the conclusion given in Clark (*Meister Eckhart*) 175, n. 2, is unsubstantiated. The text—"Sô diu sêle der zît und der stat ledic ist. . ."—does not necessarily have the temporal significance that Clark gives it in his translation; the first clause can have conditional force.

now under consideration he says nothing of such experiences, and gives no clue as to how he might evaluate them. On the contrary, when he speaks of the consciousness of God's presence he represents that, too, as a habitual state rather than a specific experience.

It remains conceivable that in these texts he has the unitive life in mind, but since he makes no clear reference to ecstasy this is most unlikely. Presumably he might have applied to these passages what he says elsewhere about the joy that comes with a sense of God's presence: that any of those to whom he preached could attain such joy before they left church, or even before he stopped preaching (DW 3. 113–14; cf. 2. 682–83 and 3. 151). Thus, the notion of habitual and nonabstractive union with God is of fundamental importance to his spirituality, and is the subject of several key passages in his works. Whether he places complementary emphasis on ecstatic or abstractive union in other texts must now be ascertained.

III

Eckhart's penchant for radical, paradoxical, and even shocking language is well known. Not surprisingly, then, he frequently uses extravagant phrases that suggest ecstatic and abstractive union even in passages where he clearly is referring to ordinary and ongoing dimensions of experience. In his sermon *Et cum factus esset Jesus*, Eckhart states that when the birth of the Son occurs, the person affected immediately has his attention drawn to it, just as when lightning strikes all those in the vicinity turn toward it (P 2. 28). Yet the context makes it clear that he is not speaking of an ecstatic withdrawal from the world and a riveting of attention on God in himself. For at the beginning of this passage, an imaginary interlocutor is made to protest that he perceives nothing of the birth which, according to Eckhart, takes place within his soul. And immediately after citing the analogy of lightning, Eckhart says that the person in whom the Son is born will automatically perceive this birth in all *creatures*, however gross they may be—i.e., he becomes aware of God's presence throughout creation—and those objects which previously posed hindrances to the individual are now aids. Indeed, it is to the birth within creation, and not to the process within one's soul, that one's attention is drawn as if by lightning.³⁴ The individual is not rapt and oblivious to the world at all. Thus, abstractive union not only is not suggested in this passage, but is specifically excluded. Similarly, in his *Talks of Instruction* Eckhart uses the metaphor of a drop of water poured into wine, this being a classic image used traditionally to

³⁴This passage contradicts those in which Eckhart speaks of the soul as the only locus of the birth. Thus, his use of images has again shifted.

describe the experience of ecstatic union with God,³⁵ but he gives it a new twist:

There never was so close a union—for the soul is much more closely united with God than body and soul, which form one person. This union is much closer than that of a drop of water poured into a cask of wine: that would [still] be water and wine, but they [God and the soul] would be so transformed into one that no creature could discern the difference. (DW 5. 269)

The passage might easily be mistaken for a reference to ecstatic and abstractive union, but in its context it is clear that Eckhart is speaking of the union between God and the soul that ensues when the individual receives the eucharist, and Christ's divinity enters into the soul. That the experience is not ecstatic is abundantly clear from the sequel, in which Eckhart once again quotes an imaginary interlocutor as exclaiming, "How can that be? For I perceive nothing of the sort!" To which he responds that one must accept the fact of such union as a matter of faith. A further example of such misleadingly radical language can be found in the treatise *On Detachment*, in which Eckhart speaks of a soul as rapt into eternity (*gezücket in êwicheit*), so that no transitory object can move it, it perceives nothing that is corporeal, and it takes no pleasure in worldly things (DW 5. 411). But again the context divulges a less spectacular meaning: Eckhart is simply describing a soul which, as a matter of general moral disposition, has attained detachment from worldly objects. All three of these texts exemplify splendidly why one must be cautious about imputing to Eckhart the notion of ecstatic or abstractive union.³⁶ Still, there are numerous passages in which his intention is less clear, and at least some of these must be examined.

When he speaks *expressis verbis* of union with God, Eckhart routinely uses his strongest imagery. Thus, in one sermon he says that all sense of one's consciousness is lost when one attains union with God. Using here again the analogy of the water in wine, he says that the soul "is enchanted in wondrous manner and loses itself, like a drop of water poured into a tub of wine, so that it knows nothing of itself and thinks it is God" (DW 3. 430; cf. 2. 497–98 and 3. 149). A fortiori, the soul loses awareness of individual objects and persons about it, and becomes unaware of the individuality of any "Conrad or Henry" (DW 3. 90, 102). The soul must indeed forfeit its own being: "Whenever two become one, one must lose its being. Thus, when God and the soul become one, the

³⁵See Robert E. Lerner, "The Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought," *CH* 40 (1971) 397–411.

³⁶For a further example, see DW 3. 22–27, where Eckhart multiplies striking images to express one simple insight regarding the moral perfection that occurs in (and not after) union with God.

soul must lose its being and life" (DW 3. 101). Having attained this union, the soul has fallen "into its nothingness" (*nihtes niht*), and cannot return to its "created something" without divine help (DW 1. 14). Eckhart does moderate his formulation sufficiently to avoid the doctrine of mystical pantheism—i.e., the notion that the individual literally loses his separate identity.³⁷ Repeatedly he insists, despite his statements about annihilation of the self, that among spiritual beings it is possible for two individuals to be united in such a way that one is absorbed in the other, while both are preserved. When one pours water into a vessel, the water is inside the vessel only in the sense that the vessel defines the space to which the water is restricted; the water and the vessel do not occupy the same space. In the case of spiritual beings, however, it is possible for one to be within the other, so that union does not in fact require the miraculous destruction of a substance (DW 2. 631). Still, Eckhart does seem to imply that in union with God the soul, while retaining its individuality, loses consciousness of that individuality.

Even when Eckhart is referring expressly to union with God, though, he occasionally makes it apparent that this union is an ongoing state of soul, and that the loss of consciousness can at most be a kind of thoroughgoing detachment from created objects. Thus, in one sermon he says that a man who is united to God "is untrammelled and free in all his actions and performs them to the glory of God alone; he does not seek his own [purposes], and God works in him" (DW 1.9). In this excerpt he surely is not speaking of a moral state which ensues *after* the individual has enjoyed union with God;³⁸ rather, the union itself entails an assimilation to God, a bestowal of divine qualities, which are manifested in all the actions of the one thus united to God. It is not surprising that on occasion Eckhart not only requires detachment as a prerequisite for union, but represents union as a natural consequence of detachment.

To the extent that a person denies himself for God's sake and is united with God, he is more God than he is a creature. When a person is fully free [even] from himself for God's sake and belongs to no one but God, and lives for God only, then he is the

³⁷See Denifle, *Die deutschen Mystiker*, esp. 150–225, and Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California, 1972) esp. 182–86 (Lerner prefers "autotheism" to "pantheism"). For the history of the question whether Eckhart was heretical—a question that most scholars now answer in the negative—see Ingeborg Degenhardt, *Studien zum Wandel des Eckhartbildes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967).

³⁸The mystics frequently stressed a sense of moral duty that followed from mystical experience. See Ray C. Petry, "Social Responsibility and the Late Medieval Mystics," *CH* 21 (1952) 3–19, and my "Mysticism and Social Consciousness in the Fourteenth Century," *University of Ottawa Quarterly* 48 (1978) 179–86.

same by grace as God is by nature, and God for his part recognizes no difference between himself and such a person. (DW 3. 109)³⁹

In other words, union with God is not spoken of here as an experience which, if God deigns, may occur subsequent to detachment or purgation. It is the ongoing or habitual state of soul that comes into being precisely through the process of detachment.

Can the more radical formulations cited above be reinterpreted in a more moderate sense, to correspond to these texts just examined? In an obvious sense they *can* be reinterpreted. Eckhart's adaptation of the image of water in wine can be taken as meaning that the individual is overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence, and recognizes that all his own actions are manifestations of God's work within him. (Perhaps less plausibly, it could be construed as a reference to the beatific vision.)⁴⁰ The statement that the soul in union with God becomes oblivious to any "Conrad or Henry" can refer to the indifference toward individuals that one attains when one is sufficiently detached from the world to be united with God. The soul may be said to have "fallen into its nothingness" in the sense that it is no longer concerned about itself and relies entirely on divine aid in attending to its individual needs. And it may be described as "unconscious" in that it is detached from—or even oblivious to—personal needs, desires, and preferences. In other words, in each case his language may easily be read as hyperbolic rather than literal. Granted, it is not altogether clear that Eckhart *meant* for his statements to be reinterpreted in this fashion. But in view of his well established proclivity toward hyperbolic phrasing, none of these readings is at all implausible. While it remains possible to view these passages as referring to ecstatic and abstractive union, it would be hazardous to base such a conclusion solely on texts of this sort, with no corroborating evidence of a less ambiguous nature. It might be objected that, once one allows reinterpretation in preference to the more apparent meaning, it becomes impossible to specify what would count as unambiguous evidence for the notion of ecstatic union. It should become clear in the next section of this article, though, that there are places, mostly peripheral, in which

³⁹Ozment (*Homo Spiritualis*, 41–44) argues that whether the deification is by grace or by nature, the result is the same: i.e., qualitative identity of man with God. But it might be argued in response that the deification in question here occurs not only *by* grace but *with respect to* that which grace affects, i.e., the moral character of a person. On this point see Denifle, *Die deutschen Mystiker*, 151–80. Denifle's arguments are made in defense of Tauler and Suso, but they apply just as well to passages from Eckhart such as the one at hand. And while the polemical context of Denifle's book now seems antiquated, his conclusions must still be taken seriously.

⁴⁰See the exposition below of a pertinent passage from the sermon *Qui mihi ministrat* (DW 2. 614–17); see also n. 41 below.

Eckhart does make clear reference to ecstasy. After these texts have been examined it will be possible to ascertain their bearing on the ambiguous passages now under consideration, and to determine whether they can corroborate the suggestion that in the present texts Eckhart is speaking of ecstatic or abstractive union.

Further light may be shed on the topic by considering in some detail a few extended passages which Eckhart devotes to his theory of union. In his treatise on *The Nobleman*, he distinguishes between knowledge (or contemplation) of God on the one hand and knowledge that one knows God on the other (DW 5. 116–17). He takes issue with those who claim that reflective knowledge of one's contemplation is higher than the contemplation itself. On the contrary, he argues, such reflection is retrogressive: when the soul "knows and recognizes that it contemplates, knows, and loves God, according to the natural order that is a withdrawal and a reversion to the first [stage] . . ." It appears *prima facie* that Eckhart is distinguishing here between an ecstatic and unselfconscious apprehension of God and a later, lesser state of reflection upon that ecstasy. Yet it is clear that he does not mean to distinguish two temporally separable states; rather, he is making a logical distinction, or a ranking in order of logical priority and of superiority. In his words, "Although it is true that without this [reflective knowledge] the soul would not be blessed, yet blessedness does not depend on this [kind of knowledge]."⁴¹ Later he expresses the same notion in different language:

Thus I say that blessedness does not exist unless a person is aware and knows that he contemplates and knows God—and yet God forbid that my blessedness should depend on this! . . . The heat of the fire and the being of the fire are very dissimilar and marvelously far from each other in nature, although they are very near each other according to time and place.

The point is perhaps obscured by Eckhart's reference in this context to the nobleman of Luke 19:12, who "went out into a far country to obtain for himself a kingdom, and returned." For Eckhart, the going out represents contemplation, while the returning stands for conscious reflection upon contemplation. But when Eckhart gives his further commentary on this text, he speaks not of a temporal succession, but of a logical and preferential ordering: it is not the reflection but the contemplation that makes a person blessed, although the contemplation does not preclude simultaneous reflective awareness, and indeed cannot

⁴¹Note that it is specifically reflective knowledge that is not strictly a condition (but merely an inevitable concomitant) of beatitude. Thus, the present passage does not contradict DW 3. 141–42, where Eckhart makes knowledge of God's presence *the* condition for blessedness.

occur without inducing concomitant and presumably habitual reflective knowledge.

In another text Eckhart speaks of the darkness of negative theology, in which one stands in total receptivity to being or God. Here again he addresses the issue of distinct modes of knowledge: "You can never do better than when you place yourself wholly in darkness and unknowing. 'O sir, must everything be set aside, and can there be no return?' No indeed, there can be no real return" (P 2. 26). A state of "darkness" from which there can be no return is surely not a momentary ecstatic state, but an orientation of one's soul in which one is constantly indifferent toward all but God, however dimly he may be perceived. The reference here could be to the unitive life, but for lack of evidence pointing in this direction it seems more plausible to posit a simpler intention: once again, despite the radical wording, Eckhart seems to be referring to a habitual state of soul accessible to all.

In the sermon *Qui mihi ministrat*, Eckhart gives the following comments on the words, "where I am, there shall my servant be with me" (DW 2. 614–17): The dwelling place of the Lord is in union with the Father, and for those who serve the Lord it is a great reward to dwell with him in this union; one should yearn without measure to be united with God. Indeed, this union is analogous to that of the persons of the Trinity. When the soul is united with God, it possesses all things in him in their perfection—but at the same time it forgets itself as it exists in itself (i.e., as a creature), just as it forgets all other creatures, and it knows itself only as it exists in God (i.e., as an idea in God's mind), loving itself only as it finds itself within God. The Lord created human beings for this union, and after the Fall he set an angel and a flaming sword to guard the garden of paradise. This "twofold watch" symbolizes the two means by which a person can return to heaven: through the nature of an angel (i.e., the contemplative life), and through the flaming sword of good works done out of fiery love for God and fellow Christians (i.e., the active life).⁴² At this point it becomes clear that the preceding description applies not to union with God during this life, but to the beatific vision, toward which the two modes of life lead.⁴³ Eckhart seldom states explicitly that the "union" of which he speaks is reserved for the afterlife, but neither does he exclude this interpretation.⁴⁴ And

⁴²The notion of the "angelic life" had long been linked with the monastic or contemplative ideal; see the literature listed in Giles Constable, *Medieval Monasticism: A Select Bibliography* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1976) 153.

⁴³The images used here thus correspond to the "three ways" of the sermon *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum* (DW 3. 486–87).

⁴⁴There is similar ambiguity in Bernard of Clairvaux's use of the metaphor of water in wine; see *S. Bernardi Opera* 3 (ed. Jean Leclercq and H. M. Rochais; Rome: Editiones

his description of the beatific vision in this passage is not markedly different from those radical statements about union with God analyzed earlier. Thus, one can only point to the possibility that in such contexts Eckhart is speaking of a form of union not to be enjoyed until death. Regrettably, he does not make the distinction explicit, and he seldom comments on the relationship between union with God in this life and that in the next.

To be sure, he is not altogether silent on the matter. In one sermon on the text *Puella, surge*, he offers reflections on the subject (DW 3. 464–65): it is possible for a person who is about to be killed to die of fright before the actual blow is struck, and likewise it is possible to die of other emotions, such as extreme joy. So also, in joyous expectation of eternal beatitude, the soul “dies” in itself before it passes over to God. There are four steps that lead up to and anticipate this passage. First, the soul experiences within itself the growth of fear, hope, and desire—i.e., of natural human emotions. Secondly, these emotions are altogether extinguished from the soul. Thirdly, the soul becomes oblivious to all temporal things. And fourthly, it enters into God as he exists and rules eternally. In this fourth state it never thinks about itself or temporal things, being immersed in God as God is immersed in it; whatever it does, it does in God. And in his concluding prayer, Eckhart makes it clear that all four of these steps are anticipations of actual physical death: “May God help us, that we may all pass over and die here [on earth], so that we will enjoy our reward for it in eternity.” The passage from the first to the fourth state is a moral process; the second and third states are levels of detachment from worldly concerns, while the fourth state, which Eckhart represents as a permanent way of life (the soul *always* is conscious of God, and attributes *all* its actions to him), is the ideal condition of total detachment and absorption in God’s presence within oneself. The goal sought here is an ongoing one; there is no question of ecstatic union with God. One especially interesting feature of this passage is that Eckhart here represents ordinary or habitual union with God in the same way that certain other mystics portray ecstatic union: as a foretaste or anticipation of the afterlife.⁴⁵ The similarity between ordinary union and the afterlife is, clearly enough, the constant realization of God’s presence.

Cistercienses, 1963) 142–44, 153. The passage on p. 153 reserves the experience for the afterlife, but the text on pp. 142–44 exclaims how splendid it would be to enjoy it for only a moment during one’s life (a purely hypothetical situation?).

⁴⁵Eckhart himself did make similar use of the motif, in LW 5. 93–94. Matthew Fox (e.g., “Meister Eckhart and Karl Marx: The Mystic as Political Theologian,” *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 13 [1978] 235) speaks of Eckhart’s “realized eschatology,” though the parallel with the realized eschatology of the New Testament seems to be loose.

IV

Eckhart does make explicit reference to ecstatic union in certain of his works, though in comparison with the passages examined so far these explicit references are few and for the most part brief. Furthermore, they do not fit so clearly into the general setting of Eckhart's thought as do the texts already discussed. Yet they have evident significance for the present study.

Most of Eckhart's comments on ecstasy are based on 2 Cor 12:1–6, in which Paul recounts his experience of being raised up to the third heaven—"whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows"—whereupon he heard "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." Characteristically, Eckhart interprets this text with some measure of reserve. At one point he is elaborating traditional Neoplatonic negative theology, arguing that God is in principle unknowable and ineffable, or "without name," but he concedes that by grace it is possible to have an experience of God such as Paul's. Even in that case, however, one still cannot express one's perception of God in words, so God remains nameless and in that sense unknowable (DW 3. 381). The acknowledgement of ecstasy is in this context a merely incidental concession and a theoretical consideration, rather than a statement of a goal toward which Eckhart wishes to inspire his hearer or reader. In another passage he cites the Pauline text not so much as an example of ecstasy, but as an example of detachment: Paul was so much withdrawn from his body that he could ignore it entirely, and not even be certain whether he still inhabited it, and yet his body remained unharmed. "So also a person should be removed from all senses and turn all his powers inward, and attain forgetfulness of all things and of himself" (P 2. 7). The de-emphasis of Paul's ecstasy is shown in Eckhart's juxtaposition here of Paul with Moses, who was able to fast forty days without becoming weaker. The comparison with Moses, who was not in ecstasy as he accomplished his fast, shows that in Paul's case too it is not ecstasy but detachment that interests Eckhart. Even more clearly, Eckhart loses sight of the ecstasy when he uses the image of the three heavens as an allegory for Augustine's three modes of perception (corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual), none of which necessarily entails ecstasy (DW 3. 36–38).

There are two further passages in which, commenting on 2 Corinthians, Eckhart sheds particularly interesting light on his view of ecstasy. In the first of these he again gives an allegorical interpretation of the three heavens. The first heaven signifies severance from all corporeality; the second, alienation from all images; and the third, pure

and immediate knowledge of God (DW 1. 403–4).⁴⁶ Thus, in the third heaven one evidently does attain ecstasy or rapture.⁴⁷ But this ecstasy takes an attenuated form: if someone had touched Paul while he was in rapture he would have felt the stimulus.⁴⁸ For, as Augustine says, the soul stands on the border between time and eternity, with its lower powers directed toward temporal events, but its highest power absorbed in eternity.⁴⁹ In other words, even in ecstasy it is only the highest faculty, or what Eckhart elsewhere calls the spark of the soul, which loses contact with the corporeal world. But this is the element of the soul which by its very nature is constantly absorbed in spiritual reality. Eckhart does not give a clear account of how ecstatic experience differs from ordinary experience, but his interpretation of this passage from 2 Corinthians certainly presents a major qualification to any theory of distinct and abstractive states of consciousness. At most, in Eckhart's interpretation ecstasy can differ from ordinary experience in that the lower faculties cease functioning actively; i.e., they do not attend deliberately to the material world. They do not, however, suspend all receptivity to sensations from this world (cf. DW 5. 419–21).

The last of the relevant comments on this Pauline text is from the *Talks of Instruction* (DW 5. 219–21). Eckhart warns here that ecstasies may be merely delusions of the senses, and that even if they are from God they may be merely means toward some further end. Indeed, it may be necessary to give up one's rapture for the sake of charity.

... if a man were in a rapture [*inzucke*] such as Saint Paul was, and if he knew of a sick man who required a bowl of soup from him, I think it would be far better for you out of love to desist from this [rapture] and to serve the poor man with greater love.

This passage is addressed primarily to the classic problem of the active and contemplative lives, but has obvious bearing on Eckhart's assessment of the value of ecstatic union.

Apart from these comments on 2 Corinthians, Eckhart has other passages in which he speaks about ecstatic experience. In one, he insists

⁴⁶Note again the allusion (implicit this time) to the Augustinian triad of corporeal, spiritual (or imaginary), and intellectual perception.

⁴⁷Eckhart does not appear to have distinguished between ecstasy and rapture, and in one passage, following Thomas Aquinas, he explicitly equated the phenomena (LW 4. 203).

⁴⁸The experiment was apparently attempted on occasion, with results different from what Eckhart expected. At times the experimenters resorted to needle-pricks and other forms of abuse. See esp. Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1960) 366, n. 1. Eckhart might have dismissed such counter-examples (and the findings of modern psychology) as pertaining to something other than what he had in mind. But his statements on the topic are so undeveloped that it is difficult to conjecture how he would respond.

⁴⁹References to Augustine are given in DW 1. 404, n. 1.

forthrightly that such experience is not to be rendered absolute. No one should expect to get more in any specific devotion, even in “sweetness” of rapture or in special favors occasionally granted by God, than in sitting by a fireplace or in a stable. One who makes this mistake acts as if he could put a mantle over God’s head and stick him under a bench (DW 1. 91). Despite the harsh language, Eckhart does not dismiss ecstatic experience here as invalid, but merely argues against exaggerated claims in its favor. One might interpret this passage as similar to certain lines in *The Cloud of Unknowing* which are directed specifically against certain naive forms of ecstatic experience,⁵⁰ but Eckhart gives no suggestion of such differentiation, or of distinctions between ecstasy, rapture, and other phenomena. It is typical of him to group all such extraordinary experiences under the same heading,⁵¹ and to stress that they should not be overrated.

There are other passages in which Eckhart seems to be speaking of ecstasy, though their significance within the broader framework of his thought is negligible. For example, in one sermon he states that if Christ had revealed himself to Mary Magdalene all at once after the resurrection, when she was yearning for him, she would have died for joy; thus, he allowed her briefly to see him without recognizing him. Similarly, if the soul knew the moment when God entered into it, it would die for joy, and if it knew when he left it, it would die for sorrow. Thus, it knows neither when he comes nor when he leaves, though it can sense when he is present (DW 2. 589). The entire passage is reminiscent of one of Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermons on the Song of Songs, in which Bernard recounts his own mystical experience, which is transient and evidently ecstatic.⁵² Elsewhere Eckhart acknowledges that the soul can attain an ecstatic foretaste of the afterlife (LW 5. 93–94), or an ecstatic illumination such as Augustine and Monica had at Ostia (LW 4. 152). In one of his Latin sermons he sketches Thomas’s fourfold classification of ecstasies, but the schema plays no integral role in its context, and remains undeveloped (LW 4. 202).⁵³

In short, Eckhart recognizes the possibility of ecstasy, but does not appear greatly interested in discussing the phenomenon. In his vernacular works, which are generally regarded as more daring than his Latin compositions, he is more often than not interested in moderating

⁵⁰*The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 105–6, 114–17.

⁵¹See above, n. 44.

⁵²S. *Bernardi Opera* 2 (ed. Jean Leclercq et al.; Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1958) 242–43.

⁵³On these passages from LW, see Clark, *Meister Eckhart*, 92–93. The other texts cited (LW 3. 40, 214–16; 4. 81, 152) do not evidently refer to ecstatic experience.

the reader's or hearer's enthusiasm for ecstasy and exposing exaggerated claims for ecstatic experience. He neither disparaged nor denied the validity of ecstatic union, but neither did he cultivate or encourage it. Thus, these explicit references to ecstasy, far from corroborating a literal interpretation of the ambiguous texts adduced in the preceding section, make it all the more likely that Eckhart was referring there to habitual union with God, which seems to have been the primary concern of his spirituality.

V

The evidence considered in this study points to an inescapable conclusion: Eckhart did not view ecstatic or abstractive union with God as integral to the life of the soul, or even as a goal to be sought or particularly treasured. The state to which he invites his reader is that of habitual and nonabstractive union; he nowhere says that other forms are necessary or even helpful in the attainment of that goal. One might speculate that in some contexts he was referring to the unitive life, but there seems to be no basis for such conjecture. In his sermon on Mary and Martha he grants the possibility that someone following the contemplative "way" may grow into a more fruitful, active spirituality, but neither there nor elsewhere does he appear to require ecstatic union as a prerequisite for spiritual development. These conclusions may or may not seem especially novel, depending mainly on how one has been accustomed to reading Eckhart. The intention here has been first to document an interpretation of Eckhart's spirituality, and secondly to examine the implications of this interpretation.

It is not difficult to account for Eckhart's emphasis. In his most explicitly mystical works he was addressing audiences of urban laypeople and Dominican nuns, rather than a secluded and rigidly trained spiritual elite.⁵⁴ He was speaking to people who might very well gain a sense of God's presence in their lives. But they would rarely experience genuine ecstatic union; if they sought it, they would perhaps fall prey to an overly emotional spirituality of sweetness and visions. The rewards evidently did not justify the risks. In these circumstances, Eckhart made it his business to proclaim throughout his work that his hearers' habitual union with God was every bit as good and holy as the ecstatic union stressed in more traditional contemplative literature. Indeed, as he stressed in his sermon on Mary and Martha, in their active lives of habitual union his listeners were as closely joined to God as one

⁵⁴Regarding the audience, see Herbert Grundmann, "Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 27 (1953) 48–76.

could possibly be short of the beatific vision. At times he even used the language of ecstatic union but put it to new use in his accounts of ordinary religious experience. As a mendicant rather than an enclosed monk, Eckhart was dedicated to a life of active service in preaching, teaching, and administration. Instead of glorifying the spirituality of the strictly contemplative orders, he enjoined his reader to discover God in all times and places, in all persons and things (DW 5. 289–90). If an individual happened to receive ecstatic favors, they presumably came from God. But Eckhart was less concerned with the extraordinary moments in a person's life than with the substance of that life.