

The Thinker and the Master

Heidegger on Eckhart

It has long been known that Heidegger was, and indeed saw himself as, a successor to Meister Eckhart. Hannah Arendt, for example, believed Heidegger's later thought to be "entirely influenced by him," whereas Hans-Georg Gadamer took Eckhart to be a crucial source for the early development of Heidegger's questions about being. Otto Pöggeler, in contrast, has contended that it was in between these two periods, when Heidegger was trying to liberate himself from the hegemony of Western metaphysics, that he depended on Eckhart. Judging from a remark Heidegger made at age fifty-nine, however, all three commentators seem to be right. For, as he said then, "Since 1910, the master of letters and life, Eckehardt, has accompanied me" (MH/KJ, 181–82/172; trans. mod.). Thus, we would not be overstating matters if we were to claim, with Jacques Derrida and Werner Beierwaltes, that Heidegger is hardly legible without an appreciation of his Eckhartian heritage.¹

Not surprisingly, therefore, many parallels have been drawn between Eckhart's thought and Heidegger's: from the sameness of their vocabulary (*abgrunt/Abgrund*, *gelâzenheit/Gelassenheit*, *abegescheidenheit/Abgeschiedenheit*, *wesüng/Wesung*), to the similarity of their core relata (the spark of the soul and *Dasein*, the Godhead and *Sein*); from their linguistic creativity to their philosophical concerns (the verbal character of being, life without why, truth as deeper than correspondence); from their critiques to their contributions. While some of these connections surely have merit, and indeed will receive corroboration over the course of this study, in this chapter I am less interested in speculating about possible lines of influence than in examining when and where Heidegger himself cites or refers to Eckhart. This preliminary philological work on the Heidegger/Eckhart connection is especially necessary today, since only recently have many of Heidegger's references to Eckhart become available to researchers. There is also crucial archival material that must be discussed if we are to have a more complete

picture of Heidegger's relation to Eckhart. Given the fact that Heidegger cites or makes reference to Eckhart nearly one hundred times throughout his career, however, I cannot hope to discuss all of the relevant passages here. Instead, this chapter will examine the most significant places in which Heidegger mentions Eckhart, as well as material that has only recently come to light. Proceeding more or less chronologically, I will also mention various figures in Heidegger's life whose own knowledge of Eckhart will help us to better understand Heidegger's. This should help us to appreciate how Heidegger could see in Eckhart not just a great theologian, philosopher, and mystic, but a great thinker as well. This will, in turn, provide a degree of orientation for the chapters to follow, when I focus on the distinctive way in which being and thinking are connected in the work of both men.

1. Heidegger's Early Eckhartianism

The earliest indication available for Heidegger's engagement with Eckhart comes from a lecture course Heidegger took with the archaeologist, theologian, and art and church historian Joseph Sauer at the University of Freiburg in Winter Semester 1910–11. The course was called "Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Mystik" (History of Medieval Mysticism) and took place two hours per week (HAD, 14). Although it is possible that Eckhart was neither read nor discussed during Sauer's course, it is extremely unlikely that the towering figure of medieval German mysticism would have been omitted, especially in light of Sauer's 1911 bibliography of the history of mysticism in the Middle Ages, which contains many entries on Eckhart.² What is more, in a letter to Karl Jaspers from 1949 that was cited above, Heidegger writes that it was since 1910, the very year Heidegger began Sauer's course on medieval mysticism, that Eckhart had accompanied him. Sauer's course might well have influenced Heidegger's eventual critique of Scholasticism as well as his efforts toward a phenomenology of religious life. For, as will be the case for Heidegger several years later, Sauer saw in mysticism "a certain compensation for the loss of religious immediacy that resulted from the historical relativization of the beginnings of Christianity."³

Heidegger and Sauer would remain in contact over the years, although a serious intellectual exchange between the two men after Heidegger's student days seems doubtful. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, around the time when Heidegger was compiling notes for a work on the phenomenology of religious life and planning a lecture course on the foundations of medieval

mysticism (1916–19), Sauer, along with his colleague (and Heidegger’s close friend) Engelbert Krebs, was also working on mysticism. In Winter Semester 1917–18, for example, Krebs delivered a popular lecture course on mysticism, and in Summer Semester 1919, Sauer offered a course on mysticism and art.⁴

Although Heidegger most likely began reading Eckhart in Sauer’s course, there are no references to Eckhart in Heidegger’s corpus until 1915. Nonetheless, we know that Heidegger continued to work on Eckhart in the interim, as he later recollects: “My previous study of Aristotle over the years facilitated my first attempt in 1913–15 at thinking alongside Meister Eckhart, who belongs in the slim kinship [*geringe Verwandtschaft*] of the first thinkers” (GA 97: 436). Indeed, as he later clarifies, it was particularly with the help of Franz Brentano’s *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle* and Hermann Lotze’s *Metaphysik* that “I learned for myself to read Eckhart” (GA 97: 470).⁵ These recollections—which, mind you, were not, like many of his other references to Eckhart, intended for immediate publication or reception, and would thus attenuate any attempt to see Heidegger’s later tributes to Eckhart as a mere self-rebranding—reveal Heidegger as a careful reader of Eckhart, indeed at a time when many philosophers hardly took Eckhart seriously.⁶ They also indicate that, in Heidegger’s own view, Eckhart was one of the few great thinkers of the premodern Occident. Later he will even call Eckhart a “master of thinking” (GA 79: 15/14–15).

As mentioned, it was in 1915 that Heidegger began to refer to Eckhart explicitly in his writings. In a local newspaper article, he notes the appearance of new editions of Eckhart and of the latter’s disciples John Tauler and Henry Suso (KT, 22/51).⁷ In the main portion of his *Habilitationsschrift*, Heidegger mentions the epigraph that his director Heinrich Rickert took from Eckhart for his essay “Das Eine, die Einheit und die Eins” (One, Oneness, and the Number One).⁸ For his qualifying lecture “The Concept of Time in the Science of History,” which was required in order to be able to teach as a *Privatdozent* (unsalaried lecturer) at the university, Heidegger himself selected an Eckhart-quote for the epigraph (GA 1: 415/49). And in a footnote to the 1916 conclusion of his *Habilitationsschrift*, Heidegger projects future work on his German predecessor: “I hope to be able to show on another occasion how *Eckhartian mysticism* is given its proper philosophical interpretation and assessment only from this point of view and in connection with the metaphysics of the problem of truth” (GA 1: 402, n. 2/187, n. 4).⁹ Thus, already at the very beginning of his professional career, Heidegger is thinking about Eckhart with regard to topics as wide ranging as number theory, time, and truth.

He is also thinking about the central role of detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) in Eckhart's corpus. This may be seen indirectly in a note that has survived from Heidegger's Winter Semester 1915–16 lecture course "Grundlinien der antiken und scholastischen Philosophie" (Basic Trends of Ancient and Scholastic Philosophy), and directly in his 1916–19 notes for a work on the phenomenology of religious life. Although there is no explicit mention of Eckhart in the extant portions of the 1915–1916 course, there is one passage in which Heidegger no doubt had Eckhart in mind.¹⁰ The note deals with one of the fundamental themes of Eckhart's preaching: detachment (DW 2: 528,5–6/ES 203 Pr. 53 ["Misit dominus manum suam"]). Heidegger speaks of the detached man's ignorance of (or perhaps indifference to) his city and its customs. He speaks, with Nicholas of Cusa, of opposites coinciding.¹¹ And he speaks of detachment from both self and world. He then alludes to Matthew 18:3 and Genesis 1:2. When detachment has been realized, and philosophy has reached its summit, we return back to our origins: we "become like little children," and "the spirit of God" again comes to "hover over the waters."

Without more context, it is difficult to determine how exactly detachment should be understood here. Heidegger seems to intend not only a prerequisite detachment from the world and from our selves—insofar as they are plagued by the distinction of *hoc et hoc*, this and that—but also how our relationship to the world will change as a result of this. In true detachment, we are able to see and be in the world as but an unfolding of the contraries that are one in God. Things no longer appear as distinct and opposed, but as unified, indeed *as* God. "All things," preaches Eckhart in a sermon that Heidegger will later cite, "become pure God to you" (DW 4: 488,136/Davies 228 Pr. 103 ["Cum factus esset Iesus annorum duodecim"]).¹²

For our part, teleology is suspended, our knowing transforms into an unknowing, and, like children, our relation to God becomes a relation of *play*. As Heidegger writes in a note for a phenomenology of religious life from 1916, quoting (Pseudo-)Eckhart: "The Father thus conveys His word to the soul and the soul, again in the word, conveys itself to the Father. Let us nurture this eternal play in God, so help us God? (Pfeiffer 1857, 479, 25f.)."¹³ The note is titled "Original Sense of Spirituality in its Central Vitality," and contains several other quotations from Pfeiffer's edition of Eckhart that are now thought to be spurious. One of Heidegger's main concerns in this note, as well as in others that would come to be published in GA 60, is to find out where and how the divine reveals itself. With respect to the "where," Eckhart entertains several options in another passage cited by Heidegger, including (1) reason, (2) the will, (3) the spark of the soul,¹⁴

(4) the concealment of the heart (*verborgenheit des gemüetes*), and (5) “the most intimate essence of the soul—where all the powers of the soul are first born *in a divine taste*, [which manifests] each power in its essence.” Eckhart opts for the fifth, but brings it together with the fourth when he writes of the “*concealment of the heart* as a concentration of all divine gifts in the innermost essence of the soul, like a bottomless spring of all divine goods.”¹⁵ It is here that the Son is born in the soul and we are one with God, where there is no ultimate reason but only that childlike, “eternal play.”

How this transpires is addressed in other notes from Heidegger’s work on a phenomenology of religious life, where the term *detachment* again takes center stage, this time with direct reference to Eckhart. Generally speaking, what we need is a detachment that is not just “negative,” but has a “positive” side, one that is at work even as we direct ourselves to the world. This positive unification through detachment would primarily not be of a theoretical nature, but rather of a lived, “emotional,” “religious” experience. There is thus something “irrational” about this “[c]entral concept: ‘detachment’” (GA 60: 308/234, 314/239; trans. mod.). Heidegger develops what this means for Eckhart in a three-and-one-half-page note from 1917 titled “Irrationality in Meister Eckhart.”

Though interpreted in the potentially misleading language of subjectivity and objectivity, Heidegger rightly notes that detachment for Eckhart involves a suspension of “multiplicity,” “opposition,” and “difference,” including “space and time” as “forms of the multiple and oppositional,” as well as a suspension of “the understanding, as judging, pulling apart into the duality of subject and predicate.” Doing so enables access to the “eternal ‘now [*Nu*]’” (GA 60: 318/241; trans. mod.),¹⁶ and lets the subject behold the pure “objectness” of the object, that is, “the primordial object *kat’exochên*, the absolute.” It also lets the subject overcome its own imbrication in opposition. “Only in this way,” Heidegger writes, “does the mystical-theoretical meaning of the central concept of *detachment* first become clear” (GA 60: 317–18/241; trans. mod.).

The term *mystical-theoretical* should not be misunderstood here. Although Eckhart does employ speculative terminology borrowed from the Schools, there is still something “irrational” about Eckhart’s mysticism (GA 60: 315/239). Yet the term *irrational*, for its part, does not mean what lies prior to all determination, awaiting rationalization (GA 60: 311/236), nor what is beyond all apprehension and analysis, at least insofar as these fall under what Heidegger calls “phenomenological understanding” in contrast to “scientific study.”¹⁷ Nor, however, can the term *irrational* be conflated with the holy, as in Rudolf Otto’s *das ganz Andere* (the wholly Other).¹⁸ Rather, the irrational is “that which is essentially without determination in general,”

“the ever-expanding exclusion of particularizations from the form, out of the magnified emptiness of the same.” It is, in other words, the absolute attained through detachment. And since the ground of the soul and the ground of God are one for Eckhart, there is an “[a]bsoluteness of object and subject in the sense of radical unity and as such unity of *both: I am it, and it is I*. From this the namelessness of God and ground of the soul” (GA 60: 316/240).

Such namelessness is, importantly, not to be reached through the faculties. “In this sphere,” Heidegger writes, there is “no opposition—and therefore the problem of the precedence of *intellectus* or *voluntas* no longer belongs to this sphere.” Harkening back to his note from 1916 on the proper place of the soul for the manifestation of the divine, Heidegger writes that “Eckhart is not in favor of theoretical reason as juxtaposed to the will, but rather of the primacy of the soul’s ground, which is, mystical-theoretically, ranked above both” (GA 60: 316/240, 318/241; trans. mod.). When we take Eckhart’s whole corpus into consideration, we cannot readily place it on one side of the medieval debate about the primacy of will or intellect (even if in texts such as the early Parisian Questions Eckhart will argue along with the Dominicans in favor of the intellect against the Franciscan emphasis on the will). Such a line should certainly lead one to question just how serious Heidegger is when he later has an interlocutor in the first “Country Path Conversation” relegate Eckhart’s thought to the domain of the will. I will return to this issue later. In any event, Heidegger does notice an ambiguity in Eckhart, for, despite his move beyond the faculties, Eckhart nevertheless “sees precisely in free will, by virtue of its freedom and devotion to value [*Werthingegebenheit*], the axiologically superior ‘faculty’ [*das wertüberlegene ‘Vermögen’*]” (GA 60: 316, 318/240–41; trans. mod.).¹⁹ Heidegger is thus clearly aware of the difficulties surrounding Eckhart’s doctrine of the soul, where, at the most fundamental level, even the term *faculty* is out of place.

Heidegger also takes note of what might be called the epistemological dimensions of such a doctrine. If it is true that like is known only by like, then, taken radically, I can only know God if in some sense I am God. Knowledge, at the level of the ground of the soul and of God, is such that subject and object, knower and known, must be the same. Here it is not a question of the relative feebleness of the human intellect in comparison to God, nor thus of the intellect’s dependency on phantasms or its discursiveness. Knowledge, here, is not a result, but a primordial state, prior to the more familiar subject/object distinction:

An opinion that grasps the subject-correlate of the absolute as summation, as the totality of specific achievements and faculties,

and correspondingly views the value of the holy as some kind of result of the true, good, and beautiful, is entirely misguided. . . .

Eckhart's "fundamental conception"—"you can only know what you are"—becomes conceivable only from out of the specific concept of cognition. Here cognition determines subject and object. (GA 60: 316–17/240)²⁰

Although Eckhart's "progression to the subject" or, better, to the originary ground of the soul, is not a theoretical enterprise, and although Heidegger suggests that it advances beyond the medieval problem of universals, Heidegger nevertheless seems to complain that "Eckhart seeks to grasp it rationally and thus places it into theoretical contexts" (GA 60: 317/240). One might argue that Eckhart accordingly falls prey to the Scholastic tendencies of his epoch,²¹ and that it was Heidegger's reservations about the theoretical superstructure in Eckhart's work that led him to abandon further work on Eckhartian mysticism around this period. Rather than deconstructing the Eckhartian edifice, Heidegger would have simply moved on to other, less fortified structures.

The problem with such a reading, however, is that Heidegger speaks, not of a mystical superstructure that is also theoretical (as if the latter were facultative), but of a mystical-theoretical superstructure that "*stems from* living religiosity."²² Heidegger's wording here suggests that this superstructure is not an external imposition, but rather an outgrowth of primordial religious life. Thus, a few years later Heidegger is still able to exempt Eckhart and Tauler from the Scholastic obfuscation of primal Christianity, suggesting that they remain viable candidates for work on the phenomenology of religious life (GA 58: 61–62/47–48; GA 61, 7/7).

2. God and Godhead in the 1920s and Beyond

And yet, after 1920 there will not be a single reference to Eckhart in Heidegger's corpus until the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Summer Semester 1927). Although this may be due to a certain incompatibility between Eckhart's speculative-mystical thought and Heidegger's attempt to give phenomenology a scientific footing, a report by Gadamer assures us that Heidegger never stopped reading the Dominican master:

Meister Eckhart played a particularly great role for Heidegger. At that time (1924), the *Opus tripartitum*, Meister Eckhart's Latin

magnum opus, had just been reedited. Heidegger was completely fascinated by it, evidently because the dissolution of the concept of substance in regards to God pointed in the direction of a temporal and verbal sense of being, when it was said that: “Esse est Deus.” At that time, Heidegger may have suspected an ally in the Christian mystic.²³

Only later will Heidegger explicitly acknowledge his debt to Eckhart’s understanding of being.²⁴ His interpretation of Eckhart in the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, which draws closely (and tacitly) on Adolf Lasson’s 1868 book on Eckhart,²⁵ nonetheless confirms Gadamer’s report about his interest in this topic. After claiming that “[t]he mystical theology of the Middle Ages, for example, that of Meister Eckhart, is not even remotely accessible without comprehension of the doctrine of *essentia* and *existentia*,” Heidegger notes a distinctive feature of medieval mysticism, namely, “that it tries to lay hold of the being [*Seiende*] that is rated ontologically as the properly essential being [*das eigentliche Wesen*], God, in its very essentiality [*Wesenheit*].” What is strange about this, Heidegger explains, is that it treats essence, which is *of* a being, as though it were *itself* a being, and considers a being’s possibility, not its actuality, to be what really *is*. (Here too, we might add, does possibility stand higher than actuality.) This “ontologization” of essentiality and possibility is necessary for what Heidegger refers to as “mystical speculation.” Yet it is not, for all that, ontotheological. Strictly speaking, it is neither theological nor ontological, as Heidegger goes on to show with reference to Eckhart:

Meister Eckhart speaks mostly of the “superessential essence [*überwesentlichen Wesen*]”; that is to say, what interests him is not, strictly speaking, God—God is still a provisional object for him—but Godhead. When Meister Eckhart says “God” he means Godhead, not *deus* but *deitas*, not *ens* but *essentia*, not nature but what is above nature, the essence—the essence to which, as it were, every existential determination must still be refused, from which every *additio existentiae* must be kept at a distance. Hence he also says: “Spräche man von Gott er ist, das wäre hinzugelegt.” “If it were said of God that he is, that would be added on.” Meister Eckhart’s expression “das wäre hinzugelegt” is the German translation, using Thomas’ phrase, of: it would be an *additio entis*. “So ist Gott im selben Sinne nicht und ist

nicht dem Begriffe aller Kreaturen." Thus God is for himself his "not"; that is to say, he is the most universal being, the purest indeterminate possibility of everything possible, the pure nothing [*das reine Nichts*]. He is the nothing over against the concept of every creature, over against every determinate possible and actualized being.

Heidegger then notes the similarity between Eckhart and Hegel on the identification of being with the nothing, before concluding this remarkable passage with the comment that medieval mysticism ought not to be understood in terms of the way in which mysticism is typically understood, but rather "in a preeminent sense" (GA 24: 127–28/90–91; trans. mod.).

This passage shows Heidegger's awareness of the crucial distinction between the Godhead (*gottheit, deitas*) and God (*got, deus*) in Eckhart's thought.²⁶ Eckhart is so committed to God's unique, radical otherness that he is willing to distinguish the Godhead as a single oneness (*ein einic ein*) from God the Father, from God the Creator, and from God as Person of the Trinity. Indeed he is so committed to such otherness that, at times, even the term *being* falls short. For the danger looms that God's essence would still be understood in terms of creation. Instead, sheer nothingness would be a better description, as would terms such as *abyss* and *desert*.

Heidegger's passage on Eckhart, and especially the distinction between Godhead and God, can also help us to make better sense of later references to Eckhart in Heidegger's corpus. Allow me to mention three. First, in a letter to the historian Rudolf Stadelmann from November 1945, Heidegger comments that certain theological circles in Freiburg are beginning to recognize that what seems to be nihilistic about Heidegger's thought is actually something more akin to the nothingness of Eckhart's Godhead (GA 16: 406).²⁷

Second, in his 1949 text "The Pathway," Heidegger writes of his beloved trail in Meßkirch:

The expanse of all growing things, which while along the pathway, bestows world. In the unspoken of their language is—as Eckehardt, the old master of letters and life, says—God first God.

Die Weite aller gewachsenen Dinge, die um den Feldweg verweilen, spendet Welt. Im Ungesprochenen ihrer Sprache ist, wie der alte Lese- und Lebemeister Eckehardt sagt, Gott erst Gott. (GA 13: 89/35; trans. mod.)²⁸

Here Heidegger seems to have in mind Eckhart's 109th German sermon ("Nolite timere eos").²⁹ In this sermon Eckhart explains that "when all creatures speak God forth: there 'God' is born [*Dô alle créatûren gotes sprechent, dô wird got*]" (DW 4: 771,56/Davies 234). Although not contained in the manuscripts, the inverted commas supplied by the translator here point to the difference between God and the Godhead, which "are as far apart from each other as heaven and earth" (DW 4: 767,34–768,35/Davies 233). God is representable, relatable to creatures, whereas the Godhead is beyond all representation and relation.³⁰ The Godhead only becomes "God" in creation: "When I was still in the ground, in the depths, in the river and source of the Godhead, no one asked me where I wished to go or what I was doing. But as I flowed forth, all creatures uttered: 'God' [*Dô ich úzvlôz, dô sprâchen alle créatûren got*]" (DW 4: 771,56–772,59/Davies 234; trans. mod.).³¹ Of God creatures may speak, yet the Godhead remains unspoken.

This process may be reversed, however, when "God 'unbecomes' [*entwirt got*]" (DW 4: 773,68/Davies 234). For it is not just to God that we may return from his bubbling-out (*ebullitio*) into creation. In what Eckhart calls the "breakthrough [*durchbrechen*]" (DW 4: 773,64/Davies 234), we may return to the Godhead from the latter's inner-bubbling (*bullitio*) into God. If we listen closely, if we release ourselves to the Godhead and "follow God" not in richness, but "in poverty and in exile," then truly may we let God be God (DW 4: 774,74/Davies 235). Then is God first truly God, the Godhead.

Lastly, the passage from the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* bears on the final session of Heidegger's 1968 seminar in Le Thor, where Heidegger shows how this emergence of God from out of the Godhead can be understood in terms of being (which is used transitively). Heidegger is reported to have concluded his reflections with a discussion of God in Eckhart and Hegel as a way to elucidate the nature of a speculative statement. He begins his elucidation with Aquinas's proposition, *Deus est ipsum esse*, God is being itself. This, Heidegger contends, is merely a metaphysical statement. It only becomes speculative when the terms are switched, as one finds in Eckhart's *Opus tripartitum*: *esse est deus*, being is God. What emerges from this inversion is not simply a reversal, however. It does not simply mean that everything that *is* is now also God. Rather, this reversal is more of a "counter-blow" in which the function of the copula is also transformed. "Now," Heidegger continues,

what does "is" mean when overturned in this manner? Meister Eckhart said: *Istic-heit*. Being is God, now understood specula-

tively, means: Being “*istet*” God, that is, Being lets God be God. “Is” speaks here in the transitive and the active. The unfolded Being itself [*Das entfaltetete Sein selbst*] (as it is unfolded in Hegel’s *Logic*) first makes possible (in a speculative recoil) being-God [*Gott-sein*]. (GA 15: 325/34)³²

While *wesen* (Middle High German for “being”) does appear in Eckhart’s corpus in the transitive passive voice,³³ it seems less obvious that *istichheit* (“isness” or, more properly, the “thatness” of self-identity) has a transitive sense.³⁴ One passage Heidegger might have had in mind, however, is from Eckhart’s 12th German sermon (“Qui audit me”), where the language of letting is quite prominent. Eckhart speaks of St. Paul letting go of God for God’s own sake, such that God was able to remain for him “as in an isness that God is in himself [*denne in einer istichheit, daz got in im selber ist*]” (DW 1: 197,4–5/TP 268; trans. mod.).³⁵ Although it seems natural to place God on the left side of the copula, as I have done here, we would come much closer to Heidegger’s sense if we were to place God on the right: “as in an isness that is God in himself,” that is, as in an isness that “ises” God, that “lets” God “be” in himself, that brings him into his own. Whatever the case may be, the idea that the Godhead, as *wesen, istichheit*, or “*weseliche istichheit*” (DW 1: 19,1/Walshe 70 Pr. 1 [“Intravit Iesus in templum”]), lets God the Father and the other Persons of the Trinity be (in the sense of bringing them forth) is quite compatible with Eckhart’s thought. It is also remarkable that Heidegger traces the notion of transitive being back to Eckhart, for it plays an important role in Heidegger’s own thought as well, so much so that his student Käte Oltmanns was willing to divert from the manuscript when she was editing GA 63, changing “intransitive” to “transitive”: “Being—transitive: to be factual life!” (8/5).³⁶

3. Käte Oltmanns

To turn back to the late 1920s, the strongest piece of evidence for Heidegger’s interest in Eckhart during this period does not come from what he wrote, but from Oltmanns herself. Starting in Winter Semester 1926–27, Oltmanns (who would later marry another student of Heidegger’s, Walter Bröcker) began studying with Heidegger. She would remain in his inner circle of exemplary students, and attend nearly all of his seminars up through 1934, the year she completed her dissertation under his directorship on

“Die Philosophie des Meister Eckehart.”³⁷ (The topic of the dissertation, incidentally, was suggested by Heidegger himself, after she had rejected his initial proposal that she write on Francisco Suárez.)³⁸ Much could be said of Oltmann’s dissertation, more than I can treat here.³⁹ It should be noted, however, that she received the highest grade possible, and that Heidegger had nothing but positive things to say about her work in his evaluation (which I have reproduced and translated in §7 of Appendix One, below). Instead of analyzing Oltmann’s dissertation, I would like to discuss an assignment Heidegger gave her for a session of his Winter Semester 1927–28 Schelling seminar, namely, to prepare and deliver a presentation on Eckhart.⁴⁰

In this presentation, which she titled “Wesenheit, Dasein und Grund bei Meister Eckehart” (Essentiality, Existence, and Ground in Meister Eckehart), and which I have translated in full in Appendix Two, Oltmann begins by noting the linguistic creativity of Eckhart’s German and Latin writings. She then proceeds to show how the problem of ground appears in connection with the problem of the being of God. Similarly to Heidegger’s comments in the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, she explains that Eckhart’s notion of the Godhead precedes all distinction, be it between essence and existence, between *actus* and *potentia*, or even between Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. She then demonstrates that, when, in texts such as the *Opus tripartitum*, Eckhart operates under the conception that only God really *is* and that creatures are nothing in themselves,

Eckehart decisively moves beyond the approach of antiquity and Christianity according to which being = being-present-at-hand = being-created or being-produced, where an *analogia attributionis* can be posited between the being of God and the being of creatures as between the being of the uncreated creator and the being of the created that is derived from it. (192)

In other words, Oltmann shows how Eckhart’s understanding of being in terms of ground is not metaphysical, that is, is not conceived as the mere being of beings. She then discusses the vexed problem of analogy, and attempts to reconcile the *Opus tripartitum* with Eckhart’s early Parisian Questions, where God’s intellect seems to take priority over his being. Nevertheless, Oltmann maintains that Eckhart is still thinking of God’s “way of being [*Seinsart*]” when he thinks of God as *intelligere* (193). In other words, we could say that Eckhart is still motivated by the question of being, even when he does not use the language of being, just as Heidegger is still motivated

by the question of being, even when he does not use such language, but attempts rather to think of being as *Walten*, as *Anwesen*, as *Ereignis*, etc.

Before concluding with a comparison of Eckhart and Schelling, Oltmanns discusses Eckhart's psychology (in the ancient sense): how the Son comes to be born in the soul and how we appropriate our oneness with the Godhead. Despite the fact that Eckhart's psychology at times resembles that of Scholasticism, with its division into the powers of memory, reason, and will, there is another dimension of the soul that is uncreated, not just *like* God, but sharing with God *one and the same ground*: "The soul and the Godhead are thus, in their ground, one and unseparated, and therefore the ground of the soul is uncreatable and untouched by any creature" (194). This ground exceeds the faculties of "understanding and will," and even lies beyond anything the Persons are capable of arriving at (194). For the human being, however, unity with this ground is only *in potentia* until "the human being turns away from external things and directs himself solely to his own essence" (193). Here we see Oltmanns's understanding of the supra-volitional character of the spark of the soul and of the Godhead, as well as her understanding of the role of detachment in making our implicit oneness with the Godhead explicit. While much more could be said of Oltmanns's work, it is manifest that, along with Heidegger's independent interest in Eckhart during these years, he had in Oltmanns a student and conversation partner with a vast understanding of Eckhart's corpus, both the Latin and German works, and even of the contemporaneous state of Eckhart scholarship and philology.

4. Nishitani Keiji

Although Oltmanns would remain in contact with Heidegger for the remainder of Heidegger's life, she did not remain active in academia or in publishing after defending her dissertation in 1934. However, just three years later, Heidegger would find another interlocutor nearly as steeped in Eckhart as his former student. This was the Japanese philosopher and scholar of religion Nishitani Keiji, who had received a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Education to conduct research in Freiburg for two years (1937–39). Nishitani began attending Heidegger's seminars (and presumably his lecture courses as well), and the two would eventually grow close. For Heidegger's birthday in 1938, Nishitani gave him a copy of the first volume of D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927), which, incidentally, contains

numerous references to Eckhart.⁴¹ Shortly thereafter, Nishitani learned from Heidegger that he had already read Suzuki's book and was looking forward to discussing it. This in turn led to a standing invitation to visit Heidegger's home on Saturday afternoons to talk about Zen Buddhism. According to Nishitani, Heidegger took much from these conversations, and would even draw from them in his lectures (although Heidegger would remain silent about their source in Zen).⁴²

It is safe to assume that their conversations extended beyond just Zen. Nishitani's deep interests in Jakob Böhme, Eckhart, Schelling, and Nietzsche would have appealed to Heidegger, and Nishitani had already written on topics such as the history of Western mysticism and the role of freedom in the later Schelling (whom he had also translated into Japanese).⁴³ Moreover, this was the period of Heidegger's intense engagement with Nietzsche, and Nishitani himself gave a presentation on Eckhart and Zarathustra in one of Heidegger's classes during Nishitani's sojourn in Freiburg. Not only was this presentation pivotal for the development of Nishitani's own thought.⁴⁴ It also received praise from Heidegger as a sensible point of comparison.⁴⁵ The reader will find the published version of Nishitani's text translated in Appendix Three, below, but I would like to say a few words about it here before proceeding with my analysis of Heidegger's relation to Eckhart.

A chasm seems to separate Eckhart's medieval theism from Nietzsche's modern atheism. However, if we are able to take a broader perspective, we will come to see that the deepest stratum of their respective philosophies is one and the same. Both philosophies, Nishitani argues, are grounded in a "radicalization of the dialectical movement of living" (212). By this he means that both are committed to an extreme affirmation of life only by way of its extreme negation. We cannot just deny the world of human affairs and live like saints in the woods on Zarathustra's mountain. We cannot, in Eckhart's language, merely become "united" (*vereinet*) with God. Rather, we must realize that "God is dead" (Nietzsche), that the God of our fathers—that any God which stands over against us—is no living God. We must negate this God and "break through" God to the ground of God which is our ground, where there is a single oneness (*ein einic ein*) that is always already at work, where I am God and God is I. Or in the words of Zarathustra: "Peak and abyss—they are now merged as one!" (212, 213). Only as a result of this utter negation can we truly affirm the childlike, "overflowing life" that surges through ourselves and through all things (212). It is at this point that Nishitani can declaim their companionship: Nietzsche and Eckhart "stand together in the blazing present moment of living's bottomless depths" (212).⁴⁶

Many of these themes will reappear in Part Two of this book, including the relation between negation and affirmation and the contrast between oneness and unity. Suffice it to say here that Eckhart was a crucial philosopher for Nishitani, perhaps even the greatest Western counterpart to Nishitani's own philosophy of absolute emptiness. We will soon see that Eckhart played a similarly important role in Heidegger's thought.

5. Eckhart, Thinker of (the Analogy of) Being

Indeed, in the 1930s, as Heidegger becomes more overt about Eckhart's significance, Eckhart comes to stand out as an even more exceptional philosopher in Heidegger's corpus. Heidegger identifies Eckhart (along with Hegel) as a representative of the "deep and creative philosophical character" of German, the only language, according to Heidegger, on a par with Ancient Greek (GA 31: 51, n. 3/36, n. 2; see also MH/HA, 247/208). He calls Eckhart the first *German*, and not *modern*, philosopher, where German philosophy is distinguished by its proximity to the Greeks, especially Heraclitus and Parmenides, and by its "understanding of *Seyn*" (GA 39: 123/111, 133–34/118; GA 41: 98/98; EDP, 40/339).⁴⁷ And he notes that Eckhart is unique among the medievals in his approach to the *analogia entis*.

This last point is particularly worthy of development. In his Summer Semester 1931 lecture course on Aristotle, Heidegger returns to a problem addressed by Oltmanns, explaining that the *Seinsfrage* cannot be answered by way of the analogy of being, for the latter is but a "title for the most stringent aporia, the impasse in which ancient philosophy, and along with it all subsequent philosophy right up to today, is enmeshed." When the analogy of being was taken up in the Middle Ages, at issue was not, according to Heidegger, the question of being, but rather how to understand one's beliefs philosophically. How, if humans are finite and God is infinite, can we say of both that they *are*? *Are* they in exactly the same way (univocally), utterly differently (equivocally), or only in some sense or to some degree (analogically)? It was the last approach that allowed the medievals to "rescue . . . themselves from this dilemma," although what they provided was not "a solution but a formula." Everyone except Meister Eckhart, that is:

Meister Eckhart—the only one who sought a solution—says
"God 'is' not at all, because 'being' is a finite predicate and

absolutely cannot be said of God.” (This was admittedly only a beginning which disappeared in Eckhart’s later development, although it remained alive in his thinking in another respect.) (GA 33: 46–47/38)

Heidegger is here referring to two seemingly opposed positions in Eckhart’s Latin writings. I will devote considerable attention to this topic in chapter 2. For now, let us note that the first position, developed most prominently in the early Parisian Questions, maintains, ostensibly, that God is best understood, not as being (*esse*), but as understanding (*intelligere*). It was this position that would later lead Heidegger to declare, in a letter to Bernhard Welte, that Eckhart’s thought should be exempted from the charge that the history of metaphysics is but a history of the oblivion of being.⁴⁸

The second position (which led to the apparent “disappearance” of the first) comes from Eckhart’s *Opus tripartitum*, which, as we already learned from Gadamer and Oltmanns, develops the idea that being is God (*esse est deus*). Heidegger, apparently following Martin Grabmann’s edition of the Parisian Questions (Grabmann, 86), thought that the second position marks a later period in Eckhart’s development, although this chronology has recently been called into question.⁴⁹ What is important, however, is something that Heidegger recognizes in this quote too, namely, that there is a certain continuity between the two positions (the beginning which “remained alive in Eckhart’s thinking in another respect”). The continuity may be seen in Eckhart’s anti-Thomistic doctrine of analogy, according to which whatever is in one analogate cannot belong essentially in the other. Health, for instance, would belong essentially only in the animal, not in urine or diet. What we call a healthy urine or diet shares nothing, other than the name, with the health of the animal. When we apply this to God and creation, the mode of thinking remains the same across Eckhart’s two positions (even if the content differs). If we wish to call God understanding, then he must have nothing in common with the creatures that one attempts to relate to him analogically. Thus, he has no being. If we call God being, in contrast, then creatures, insofar as they are taken as anything other than being, are nothing. There is no hierarchy of being, no more and less being. There is being, or there is not. It comes as little surprise, then, that Heidegger would turn to Eckhart when he was developing a critique of the metaphysical basis of analogy, as Gadamer again relates in another reflection on Heidegger’s philosophical trajectory.⁵⁰

6. *Gelassenheit* and the Will

In the 1940s, as Heidegger endeavored to extricate himself from the willfulness of the metaphysical tradition (in which his own thought appears for a time to have been ensconced), he invoked Eckhart several times throughout his writings. In an elliptical note from around 1940, he brings Eckhart together with Nietzsche, as Nishitani had done just two years prior. The note concerns justice: “*Nietzsche’s* thought of ‘justice’ and ‘Christian’ metaphysics. Cf. *justice and the just man in Meister Eckhart;—iustitia and certitudo.*” While Heidegger may seem to intend a comparison here, the following line speaks in favor of a contrast: “‘Justice’—its concealed essence: the totality of the truth of beings as such, insofar as being is the will to power as unconditioned subjectivity” (GA 50: 83/63; trans. mod.). For, however ambiguous the status of the will in Eckhart may be, his understanding of justice, according to which those who are just become justice itself, can hardly be labeled a subjective voluntarism. In his sixth German sermon (“Iusti vivent in aeternum”), for example, Eckhart declares bluntly: “The just have no will at all” (DW 1: 102,12–13/Walsh 329).⁵¹ Such willlessness involves, among other things, becoming released (*gelâzen*) from *self*-love and directing one’s love toward God (or more properly, the Godhead), who one thereby comes to be—or better: whose oneness with the soul is thereby *appropriated*.⁵² At this point one may live as God, *without a why*.

Heidegger develops this last-mentioned theme, on life without why, in a recently published collection of what look like poems but what he prefers to call *Winke* or hints. In a *Wink* titled *Thinking* (and comprised entirely of trochees in the original German), which Heidegger sent to his brother Fritz in December 1945 (DLA HS.2014.0069.00012), we read:

Thinking is dwelling-near,
is quiet thanks.

Thinking is noble protecting,
is the bold bend.

In a path of obscure signs,
Turns between nothingness and being.

Thinking is never shrinking
from evil, in the face of agony.

Thinking is without seizing and grasping,
is a frank questioning.

Thinking is letting-be-said,
is the cool drink

On the course, where gently are cleared
lights without number,

Roses without why, that poetize,
greeting river and valley.

Thinking remains this freeing of all,
a modeless call,

that they be mortal, that they be:
for the sake of healing.⁵³

Not only are there many Eckhartian dimensions at play in this composition, such as nobility, letting something be said rather than saying it of one's own volition,⁵⁴ a wayless or modeless call, and, of course, groundlessness. There is also, immediately following the composition, a quote from Eckhart's Sermon 5b "In hoc apparuit" (along with one from his baroque poetic successor Angelus Silesius). Heidegger writes, as though to himself:

for an elucidation of "*Thinking*" / cf. Angelus Silesius, *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* I, 289: / "Without Why. / The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms; it does not heed itself, asks not if one does see it." // cf. on this Meister Eckhart (Pfeiffer, Predigt 13, S. 66.5f.) / "Out of this inmost ground, all your works should be wrought without why. I say truly, as long as you do works for the sake of heaven or God or eternal bliss, from without, you are at fault." (GA 81: 187; Eckhart translation from Walshe, 110; cf. DW 1: 90,11–91,2 Pr. 5b)

This passage confirms Heidegger's awareness of the importance of living without why for Eckhart. To be sure, Heidegger would have been acquainted with this theme already in the late 1910s, when he read the two-volume war book *Deutscher Weltberuf* (1918) by Paul Natorp. In a chapter on

“German Faith” devoted to Meister Eckhart, Natorp quotes from the very same Eckhart sermon: “*life lives from out of its own ground and wells up from out of its own* [aus seinem Eigenen]; thus it lives without why, insofar as it lives *itself*.” This becomes, in Heidegger’s first lecture course as Husserl’s assistant (1919): “Lived experiences [*Erlebnisse*] are events of appropriation [*Er-eignisse*] insofar as they live from out of one’s own [aus dem Eigenen] and life lives only in this way.”⁵⁵

It would nevertheless take Heidegger many years to aver the profound significance of this doctrine. Only in his 1955–56 lecture course *The Principle of Reason* will he set out the stakes. There he again takes up Silesius’s distich on the rose without why, this time pointing to its ethical relevance, that is, its relevance for how to live and how to *be*: “What is unsaid in [Silesius’s] saying—and everything depends on this—. . . says that humans, in the concealed grounds of their essential being, first truly are when in their own way they are like the rose—without why” (GA 10: 57–58/37; trans. mod.). Although Heidegger does not pursue this matter, his comment does reveal that it did not altogether elude him when he read texts such as Eckhart’s *Die rede der unterscheidung* (Counsels on Discernment) and Suso’s *Little Book of Truth*, which was written in defense of Eckhart.⁵⁶ Heidegger also ascribes great relevance to Eckhartian *mysticism*: “The entire saying [of Silesius] is so astoundingly clear and neatly constructed that one is inclined to get the idea that the most extreme sharpness and depth of thought belong to genuine and great mysticism. This is also true. Meister Eckhart proves it” (GA 10: 56/36–37; trans. mod.). Indeed, earlier in the lecture, Heidegger appears to grant mysticism a place alongside poetizing and thinking as ways out of metaphysics (GA 10: 54/35).⁵⁷

Such would not seem to be the case in the first “Country Path Conversation,” however, where Heidegger’s thinking of *Gelassenheit* (releasement) as an indispensable alternative to the willfulness of Western metaphysics receives its most substantial treatment. In this dialogue, which Heidegger composed in the mid-1940s, the Scholar—one of the three interlocutors, alongside the Researcher and the Sage—asserts that Eckhart’s conception of *Gelassenheit* is “thought of still within the domain of the will,” as “the casting-off of sinful selfishness and the letting-go [*Fahrenlassen*] of self-will in favor of the divine will” (GA 77: 109/70). Now this should seem puzzling, not least because of Heidegger’s praise of Eckhart elsewhere. Any close—indeed any casual—reader of Eckhart ought to know that the will is precisely a faculty that Eckhart strives not just to deemphasize in the human, but even occasionally to deny altogether in the Godhead. To take just two

examples, one from a famous sermon that Heidegger doubtless read early on and from which he would later quote, namely “*Beati pauperes spiritu*,” and another from “*In hoc apparuit*,” which speaks of the *emergence* of the will in the Godhead:

These people say that a poor man is one who wants nothing and they explain it this way: A man should so live that he never does his own will in anything, but should strive to do the dearest will of God. . . . They are much admired by those who know no better, but I say that they are asses with no understanding of God’s truth . . . for a poor man is one who wills nothing and desires nothing. . . . [T]he poor man is not he who wants to fulfil the will of God but he who lives in such a way as to be free of his own will and of God’s will, as he was when he was not. (DW 2: 490,1–4, 490,7–8, 492,2, 499,1–3/Walshe 421, 423 Pr. 52)

Go right out of yourself for God’s sake, and God will go right out of *Himself* for your sake! When these two have gone out, what is left is one and simple. In this One the Father bears His Son in the inmost source. Out of that the Holy Ghost blossoms forth, and *then* there arises in God a will which belongs to the soul. (DW 1: 93,6–94,2/Walshe 110 Pr. 5b)⁵⁸

While the Scholar’s comment is not false if considered in light of select passages from *Die rede der unterscheidung* which Heidegger marked up in his personal copies of this text (some of which he copied out), or in light of passages relating to *Gelassenheit* in the likes of Tauler, Luther, and Böhme,⁵⁹ it hardly epitomizes Eckhart’s thought as a whole. One could, of course, stress that Heidegger’s viewpoint in the first “Country Path Conversation” is confined to this text. However, there are several problems with such an approach. First, while Heidegger was composing the dialogue in the Upper Danube Valley as the end of the war was approaching, in addition to Bernhart’s translation of *Die rede der unterscheidung* he also had available the copy of Pfeiffer’s edition, which his wife Elfride—who herself had an abiding interest in Eckhart—had given to him as a birthday present in 1917.⁶⁰ Indeed, he even cites from this edition in his notes for the conversation (GA 77: 158/103). Second, he also would have had access to dozens of texts by and about Eckhart in the library of the nearby Benedictine