



## The Knowability of Divine Being according to Meister Eckhart's Principal Thesis: «The Act to Be Is God»

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Meister Eckhart loves to hide his thought under the appearance of extreme positions<sup>1</sup>. The church condemned some of his teachings *prout sonant verba*, as the words sound or seem to speak, in 1329<sup>2</sup>. But Meister Eckhart warns his readers not to interpret his text according to its exterior appearance. He knows that his writings appear to be false or monstrous at first sight, though not when the reader treats them with diligence. The diligent reader may find, that Eckhart's words are in accord with the truth of scripture, with the words of saints, or famous teachers<sup>3</sup>. Thus, Eckhart intentionally uses a provocative style in order

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. F. BRUNNER, «Eckhart ou le goût des positions extrêmes», in E. ZUM BRUNN (ED.), *Voici Maître Eckhart*, Millon, Grenoble 1998, pp. 209-230.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the apostolic constitution *In agro dominico*, in: LW V, pp. 597-600, here: line 114. Eckhart's works are quoted from MEISTER ECKHART, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*. Herausgegeben von J. KOCH, J. QUINT et al., Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1936 sqq. (DW = German works, LW = Latin works). I refer also to the English translation in B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, Paulist Press, New York 1986, E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (eds.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, Paulist Press, New York 1981. Other translations of Eckhart's writings are my own.

<sup>3</sup> «Advertendum est autem quod nonnulla ex sequentibus propositionibus, quaestionibus, expositionibus primo aspectu monstruosa, dubia aut falsa apparebunt, secus autem si sollerter et studiosius pertractentur. Luculenter enim invenietur dictis attestari veritas et auctoritas ipsius sacri canonis seu alicuius sanctorum aut doctorum famosorum» (LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 7).

to incite his readers to a more diligent thinking. Even the principal thesis of his tripartite work (*Opus tripartitum*) contains such a provocation.

At first, this article tries, therefore, to clarify the meaning of the thesis ‘The act to be is God.’ Then it asks the questions how we come to know the act to be, and how God is known as the act to be.

## I. The principal thesis: The act to be is God

The first part of the *Opus tripartitum*, i. e., the work of propositions (*opus propositionum*), lists about a thousand propositions or principles and their demonstrations. The second part (*opus quaestionum*) consists of questions ordered according to the structure of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*. The third part contains Eckhart’s commentaries on scripture<sup>4</sup>. Part two and three are useless without part one because the propositions or principles are the basis for the interpretation of the two other parts. Eckhart answers the questions and interprets scripture in accord with his principal propositions<sup>5</sup>. These propositions focus especially on the transcendentals, i. e., on the act to be and being, on unity and the one, on truth and the true, on goodness and the good, and their opposites, though Eckhart mentions also other principles<sup>6</sup>. The first and most principal thesis mentioned in the prologues identifies the act to be with God. The *Prologus in opus propositionum* clarifies, that all the other transcendentals are also the divine essence<sup>7</sup>. But we lack a deeper consideration of these assertions because the treatises on the propositions and questions were either lost or remained unachieved.

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<sup>4</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, nn. 5-6, cf. W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel. Versuch über die Einheitsmetaphysik des Opus tripartitum Meister Eckharts*, Brill, Leiden 1997, pp. 9-51 regarding Eckhart’s *Opus tripartitum*.

<sup>5</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 11.

<sup>6</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 4, cf. J. A. AERTSEN, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought. From Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1225) to Francisco Suárez*, Brill, Leiden 2012, pp. 330-359, K. ALBERT, *Meister Eckharts These vom Sein. Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik des Opus tripartitum*, Aloys Henn Verlag, Kastellaun 1976, pp. 109-172.

<sup>7</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, nn. 4-8.

The work of Eckhart underlines the need for basic principles without which the interpretation of questions and texts is useless<sup>8</sup>. Inasmuch as he proves these principles, they are not known through themselves as we might suppose at first sight. Eckhart maintains, that the first proposition, which identifies the act to be and God, is able to answer nearly all the questions concerning God as long as someone knows how to deduce the answer from this proposition<sup>9</sup>. It is the door through which he invites us to enter into his work. On the other hand, Eckhart's opponents smelled the odor of heresy in this thesis. It appears among the incriminated teachings of Eckhart in the process of Cologne in 1326<sup>10</sup>. Obviously, the opponents identified the act to be with the existence of all things, thus interpreting the proposition as a sign of pantheism. But the apostolic constitution *In agro dominico* of 1329 does not condemn the principal thesis.

## 1. The demonstration of the principal thesis<sup>11</sup>

Prior to proving his principal thesis, Eckhart mentions an important presupposition. He writes:

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<sup>8</sup> J. A. AERTSEN, «Der Systematiker Eckhart», in A. SPEER, L. WEGENER et al. (ED.), *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt*, [Miscellanea Mediaevalia, 32], Walter de Gruyter, Berlin – New York 2005, pp. 189-230, here: pp. 193-195, and W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 22-25, refer to the Neoplatonic *Liber de Causis* and Boethius' *De ebdomadibus* as models for Eckhart's procedure. Goris underlines, that Thomas Aquinas had interpreted Boethius' text as referring to all the transcendentals. Boethius, on the other hand, mentions only being (that which is) and the act to be, the good and goodness (cf. *Expositio libri Boetii De ebdomadibus*, lect. 2). Thus, Eckhart's propositions regarding the transcendentals are in accord with Aquinas' interpretation of *De ebdomadibus*.

<sup>9</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 22.

<sup>10</sup> LW V, *Proc. Col. I*, n. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. K. ALBERT, *Meister Eckharts These vom Sein*, pp. 30-108, J. A. AERTSEN, «Der Systematiker Eckhart», pp. 195-201, R. MANSTETTEN, *Esse est Deus. Meister Eckharts christologische Versöhnung von Philosophie und Religion und ihre Ursprünge in der Tradition des Abendlandes*, Karl Alber, Freiburg 1993, pp. 49-60, A. WILKE, *Ein Sein – ein Erkennen: Meister Eckharts Christologie und Samkaras Lehre vom Atman. Zur (Un-)Vergleichbarkeit zweier Einheitslehren*, Lang, Bern 1995, pp. 82-90, T. TSOPURASHVILI, *Sprache und Metaphysik. Meister Eckharts Prädikationstheorie und ihre Auswirkung auf sein Denken*, [Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie 52], Grüner, Amsterdam 2011, pp. 113-130.

[W]e must not imagine or judge the general terms, such as act to be, unity, truth, wisdom, goodness and the like in accord with the mode and nature of accidents, which receive the act to be in a subject and through a subject and by its transmutation and are posterior to it and receive the act to be by inhering [in it]. ... The aforementioned general [terms] are wholly different. For the act to be itself, and those which are convertibly identical with it, do not supervene upon things as posterior [to them], but are prior to everything in things. For the act to be itself does not receive existence in something nor from something nor through something, nor does it come to or supervene upon something, but it forestalls and is prior to everything. Therefore, the act to be of everything is immediately from the first cause and from the universal cause of everything. Therefore, 'everything is' from the act to be itself 'and through itself and in itself,' [the act to be] itself [is] not from another. For what is distinct from the act to be is not or is nothing. For the act to be itself compares to everything as act and perfection and is the actuality itself of everything, even of forms<sup>12</sup>.

At first, Eckhart speaks of the transcendental perfections including spiritual perfections, such as wisdom and justice. They are not called divine yet. Nevertheless, the master warns us not to confuse these perfections with accidents regarding their mode of existence. An accident is in a subject and partakes in the act to be of its subject by inhering in it. The transcendental perfections, especially the act to be, do not receive their existence from or in a subject. On the contrary, the act to be actualizes a thing and everything, which belongs to it. Therefore, the act to be is prior to the thing, which is through the act to be<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 8, cf. LW IV, n. 13, n. 23, n. 220, n. 416. Eckhart mentions a second presupposition, namely that the prior and higher (cause) receives nothing from things posterior to it. On the contrary, the lower and posterior things receive from the higher cause and are conformed to it. Hence, the first cause being rich through itself flows into the posterior things affecting them with its own properties, among which we find the property of unity. Thus, the first cause remains undivided in the multitude of things caused by it (ibid., n. 10, cf. W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 53-63).

<sup>13</sup> Eckhart identifies the created act to be as «that through which [something] is» (*quo est*) and calls the essence «that which is» or the «what is» (*quod est*), cf. LW I, *Liber paraboliarum*

Having said so, the master concludes that ‘the act to be of everything’ stems immediately from the first and universal cause. On the other hand, he identifies this universal cause with the ‘act to be itself,’ which is not from another though everything is through it and in it. Thus, he distinguishes between the act to be, which is from another, and the act to be, which is not from another. Nevertheless, ‘the act to be of everything’ and the ‘act to be itself’ resemble each other insofar as they are prior to everything in things and do not receive their existence from or in something<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the negation of inherence regarding the act to be Eckhart confirms, that being and the other transcendentals are the first *in* things and common to everything. They are present (*adsunt*) and are in all things prior to the action of any cause besides the first and universal cause of everything. This primacy of the first cause regarding the act

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*Genesis*, n. 34. Another text of Eckhart describes the *quo est* in a threefold way, namely as efficient, formal, and final cause (LW IV, n. 252). This variety of interpretations of the *quo est*, especially as formal and efficient cause, explains the ambiguity in many texts of Eckhart.

<sup>14</sup> Eckhart maintains, that nothing is a cause of itself (LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 119). Hence, the creator cannot be the cause of his own act to be in creatures. Inasmuch as Eckhart claims, that God creates both the *quo est* or act to be of things and their *quod est* or essence from nothing the act to be of everything cannot be God (LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 34). Nevertheless, K. ALBERT, *Meister Eckharts These vom Sein*, p. 75, p. 185, p. 245, cf. V. LOSSKY, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, Vrin, Paris 1973, pp. 44-56, pp. 77-84, pp. 137-157, p. 195, pp. 298-312, and A. QUERO SÁNCHEZ, «Sein als Absolutheit (*esse als abegescheidenheit*)», *Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch* 2 (2008), pp. 189-218, here: pp. 202-213, regarding the same interpretation). Fabro accuses Eckhart of pantheism and, therefore, interprets Eckhart’s understanding of the cause of the act to be as Platonic identity of formal and efficient cause, which creates necessarily and not voluntarily (C. FABRO, *Participation et causalité selon s. Thomas d’Aquin*, Publications universitaires de Louvain, Louvain 1961, pp. 551-567). But Eckhart calls God a voluntary cause working through intellect and will (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 6, n. 10, n. 169). He distinguishes the extrinsic efficient and final cause from the intrinsic formal and material cause (LW III, nn. 336-338, n. 443). Though these texts also call God the formal cause of everything divine as such Eckhart does not identify these aspects of causality. God is not the formal act to be of things. Accordingly, the innerdivine generation differs from creation because the latter implies efficient and final causality, not formal causality: «in divinis personis emanatio est formalis quaedam ebullitio, et propter hoc tres personae sunt simpliciter unum et absolute. Creaturarum vero productio est per modum non formalis, sed efficientis et finis creatio» (LW III, n. 342). In this sense, God is an extrinsic formal cause as Aquinas writes: «esse creatum non est per aliquid aliud, si ly ‘per’ dicat causam formalem intrinsecam; immo ipso formaliter est creatura; si autem dicat causam formalem extrinsecam, vel causam effectivam, sic est per divinum esse et non per se» (THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 2 ad 2).

to be as effect does not exclude secondary causes from their influence on things. For instance, the form of fire does not give the act to be to fire but this act to be, i. e., it limits the act to be of everything. The form's capacity to give the act to be to fire – as *this* act to be – stems from the determination of the first cause<sup>15</sup>. Obviously, this text identifies the transcendentals as something caused by God, which *is in things*. However, this 'being in things' must not be confused with the inherence of accidents.

When Eckhart defends this teaching during the process in Cologne he affirms, that the act to be itself does not receive existence in something nor from something. Then he adds, that, «nevertheless, we have to distinguish [the truth of the phrase] regarding the formally inhering act to be and regarding the absolute act to be, which is God»<sup>16</sup>. Following Eckhart, both the act to be of everything and the divine act to be or first cause neither receive existence in something nor from something. Eckhart uses the term 'formally inhering act to be' only in his defense. Though he clarifies, that the act to be 'is' not in things similar to accidents inhering in their subject, the formally inhering act to be still belongs to a subject and is distinct from the divine or absolute act to be. We will have to see whether Eckhart confirms this teaching in his writings prior to the process of Cologne.

Last but not least, the German master calls the act to be 'the actuality of everything and even of forms.' We arrive at this description of the act to be by comparing it to everything else. Hence, the act to be relates to everything else by actualizing or perfecting it. The defense maintains, that this phrase is true and stems from Saint Thomas<sup>17</sup>. Other texts refer the phrase both to God<sup>18</sup> and to the act to be of

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<sup>15</sup> «Praeterea, ens, unum, verum, bonum sunt prima in rebus et omnibus communia, propter quod assunt et insunt omnibus ante adventum cuiuslibet causae non primae et universalis omnium. Et rursus insunt a sola causa prima et universali omnium. Nec tamen per hoc excluduntur causae secundariae a suis influentiis. Forma enim ignis non dat igni esse, sed hoc esse ... Sed hoc ipsum, puta quod forma ignis dat esse ignem, unum, verum, bonum, habet per fixationem causae primae» (LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 11).

<sup>16</sup> LW V, *Proc. Col. I*, n. 116.

<sup>17</sup> LW V, *Proc. Col. I*, n. 115.

<sup>18</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 189, LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis I*, n. 3. Several texts call the act to be «the perfection of everything» (LW IV, n. 279, LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 19, n. 80, n. 182).

everything, calling it the «formal actuality of every form and essence universally»<sup>19</sup>. Accordingly, the term ‘formal actuality’ or ‘formal act to be’ distinguishes the act to be of creatures from the divine act to be in most of Eckhart’s texts<sup>20</sup>. The formal act to be compares to everything in things as act to potency because it is actuality as intrinsic and formal principle. God, on the other hand, is the source of the act to be of everything. The five demonstrations of the principal thesis proceed from these presuppositions. We may expound them as follows:

a. If the act to be were distinct from God, God would neither exist nor would he be God<sup>21</sup>. On the one hand, nothing can be, which is distinct from the act to be. This phrase does not deny, that things and their act to be are distinct. However, neither a being and its act to be nor a thing and its form can be counted as two things<sup>22</sup>. Matter and form constitute one thing in the unity of its act to be<sup>23</sup>. In the same sense, a being and its act to be are metaphysically one and undivided. Thus, if God were distinct from the act to be as from another thing, he would not be at all.

On the other hand, if God were by the act to be as every other being is, he would have his act to be from another<sup>24</sup>. If the act to be is distinct from a being, this being is by another. This phrase remains ambiguous. A thing is both by the formal and the divine act to be though in different ways. But Eckhart’s general teaching distinguishes between essence and act to be as two created principles of all things. Thus, the act to be does not belong to the created essence and is from another, i. e., the created beings are beings by participation<sup>25</sup>. Another text maintains, that if the essence or ‘what-is’ of anything, for instance of man, were its act to be it would be necessary and eternal existence. But God alone is his act to be<sup>26</sup>. Thus, if God were by the act to be and yet were not the act to be, he would have the act to be from another, which would be prior

<sup>19</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. for instance LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 77, n. 83.

<sup>21</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 12.

<sup>22</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 60.

<sup>23</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 33.

<sup>24</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 12.

<sup>25</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 34.

<sup>26</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 21, cf. n. 15, nn. 18-20, n. 85, LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 34.

to God and the cause of his act to be. Obviously, Eckhart presupposes, that God is the first ‘being’ and the cause of everything that is. The consequence is, that the act to be is God.

b. Everything, which is, has from and through the act to be, that it is. Hence, if the act to be is not God, things have the act to be from something, which is not God<sup>27</sup>. Once more Eckhart presupposes, that God is the principle from which everything has its act to be. However, this principle cannot give the act to be to everything unless it is the act to be itself. The proof speaks the ambiguous language known from the presupposition. The phrase ‘from and through the act to be’ may both signify the formal act to be of things and the divine act to be. In either case the phrase is true and reduces the fact, that something is, to the act to be, which signifies, that something is<sup>28</sup>.

In general, the phrase ‘things have the act to be’ refers to participation. The term ‘being’ (*ens*) connotes something participating in the act to be (*esse*). Thus, ‘being’ names the act to be in a concrete way (*in concreto*) whereas ‘act to be’ signifies it in an abstract way (*in abstracto*). Eckhart writes: being signifies the act to be though it co-signifies or connotes also that, which is. In listening to these words we must not forget, that ‘being,’ though signifying in a concrete way, does not connote this or that being, this or that act to be. Whereas every other being is outside of this being, only nothing is outside of being, which is the likeness of all beings<sup>29</sup>.

Further, participation rules the relation of all concretely signified perfections to the same abstract perfections. The good or the good one partakes in goodness, the just one in justice. Hence, the act to be and truth are in all things as participated, i. e., the things grasp or take a part of these perfections<sup>30</sup>. This grasping of a part entails, that the participant – through its own essence or through itself – lacks the participated perfection and, therefore, receives it from another. The participant is

<sup>27</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 12.

<sup>28</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 15.

<sup>29</sup> LW III, n. 63, LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 115, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 50, n. 84, nn. 101-106.

<sup>30</sup> LW III, n. 14, n. 26, n. 207, n. 512, cf. the same description of participation in THOMAS AQUINAS’ *Expositio libri Boetii De ebdomadibus*, lect. 2.

naked through himself though clothed by a perfection belonging to another<sup>31</sup>.

Eckhart illustrates participation by the example of light. The medium of light is not actually transparent without the actually illuminating sun. In the same sense, there is no participated perfection in the participant unless the source of the perfection actually shares its own goodness with the participant. Hence, the positive root of the participated perfection remains in its source and is never in the participant, which always thirsts or longs for the perfection<sup>32</sup>. Usually, Eckhart refers participation to God as extrinsic source<sup>33</sup>. Then, God is the act to be through his essence<sup>34</sup> whereas beings are beings by participation<sup>35</sup>.

c. Prior to the act to be is nothing. Accordingly, to create means to give the act to be from nothing. Obviously everything has the act to be from the act to be itself as everything white is white from whiteness. Hence, if the act to be were not God he would not be the creator<sup>36</sup>. If we suppose, as Eckhart does, that the formal act to be of things and the divine act to be are distinct, this proof does not seem to offer any difficulty. However, the ambiguous language of this proof sets up a parallel between the accidental form ‘whiteness,’ from which all white things are white, and the act to be, which is from the act to be itself.

<sup>31</sup> LW III, n. 63.

<sup>32</sup> LW III, n. 70, LW IV, n. 188, LW II, Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici, nn. 52-53. Whereas a univocal effect does not partake in the nature of its cause but receives it in the same sense, the analogous effect shares in the nature of its cause (LW III, n. 5).

<sup>33</sup> «[S]anctus ut sic non potest esse nec fieri sanctus nisi sola sanctitate, sicut non album non potest esse nec fieri album nisi sola albedine formaliter. ... sanctus participat sanctitatem et ab ipsa sortitur nomen: denominatur enim ab ipso quod <quis> participat, puta albus ab albedine nominatur» (LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 69). This text seems to indicate, that a subject also partakes in its formal cause, not only in the transcendent divine cause.

<sup>34</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Thus, the proof of the principal thesis repeats Aquinas’ demonstration of the non-distinction of essence and act to be in God: «Tertio, quia sicut illud quod habet ignem et non est ignis, est ignitum per participationem, ita illud quod habet esse et non est esse, est ens per participationem. Deus autem est sua essentia, ut ostensum est. Si igitur non sit suum esse, erit ens per participationem, et non per essentiam. Non ergo erit primum ens, quod absurdum est dicere. Est igitur Deus suum esse, et non solum sua essentia» (THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 3, a. 4 c).

<sup>36</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 12, cf. LW IV, n. 288.

The ambiguity lies in the term ‘whiteness.’ Metaphysically speaking there is no whiteness by which all white things are white. Whiteness is the accidental form of this white thing. It is specifically the same in all things though numerically distinct. We may consider it universally. But there is no unique and subsisting whiteness by which all white things are white. The parallel between whiteness as such and in things, on the one hand, and the act to be itself and the act to be of things, on the other, seems to be a mere hypothesis.

If whiteness were considered as formal cause the parallel would imply, that the divine act to be is the formal cause of the created act to be. But Eckhart maintains, that God is neither efficient, nor formal, nor final cause, though he is the account (*ratio*) or idea of all these causes inasmuch as he causes through his understanding. Hence, the divine intellect has the *account* of formal causality and is the exemplar of created perfections<sup>37</sup>.

Accordingly, Eckhart sometimes attributes formal causality to God regarding his creatures. But this formal cause is extrinsic, not intrinsic, i. e., it is the exemplar of created things in God. God’s form is his essence and act to be by which he gives the act to be. Thus, God is – *in his own way* – the form of everything divine insofar as it is divine, as whiteness is the form of every white thing. Wisdom or the divine understanding is the act to be or the actuality and form of all acts and forms<sup>38</sup>. The term ‘everything divine insofar as it is divine’ may refer to being qua being because it is immovable and ingenerate despite being caused by God. God as cause of being qua being causes every creature qua being, not qua this or that being<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> LW IV, n. 14, n. 21, n. 252, LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, n. 4, LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Eckhart writes regarding the form of God: «Forma enim sola essentiam respicit: ipsa dat esse, ipsa est esse, ipsa est quare, finis, principium et quies omnis operis divini. Nihil extra respicit, ‘adhaeret uxori suo’, deo scilicet qui est omnis divini, in quantum divinum, forma suo modo, sicut albedo est forma omnis albi» (LW III, n. 336). Every form as such stems from God as *primus actus formalis* (LW II, *Sermones et lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 48). Therefore, God is the *actualitas et forma actuum omnium et formarum* (LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 189). But inasmuch as God is understanding this means, that we find in him the accounts of things and not their forms (LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 121-126).

<sup>39</sup> «Est quidem deus in quolibet, ut illud ens est, in nullo autem, ut illud est hoc ens» (LW III, n. 206, cf. n. 361, n. 444, LW II, *Sermones et lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 48, regarding God as cause of being qua being and being qua being as divine or immutable).

Further, the parallel between whiteness and the divine act to be stands in the context of Eckhart's presupposition, which distinguishes between the inherence of accidents and the formally inhering act to be. Contrary to whiteness the act to be does not receive 'existence' in and from a subject inasmuch as it is prior to the existing thing. This phrase is true regarding both the formal and the divine act to be. Thus, the example of whiteness does not seem to illustrate what Eckhart intends to say. But other texts clarify, that he is speaking of the white thing inasmuch as it is white. This means: whiteness is prior to the white thing insofar as it is white, even though the subject exists prior to becoming white and whiteness inheres in it. In this sense, the priority of whiteness regarding the white thing is the priority of the formal cause. Last but not least whiteness transcends the white thing as end or term of the motion of whitening<sup>40</sup>.

Especially this latter understanding of whiteness as final cause of everything white reflects its meaning in the proofs of the principal thesis. Eckhart continues in the *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*: if the act to be is not, there is no being. If whiteness is not, there is nothing white<sup>41</sup>. The *Prologus in opus propositionum* maintains: this or that being has its whole act to be from the act to be and through the act to be and in the act to be. In the same sense, a white buckler, inasmuch as it is white, receives its whole to-be-white through whiteness. The buckler as buckler has no whiteness in itself<sup>42</sup>.

This means in the light of Eckhart's presuppositions: whiteness abstracts from all white things. Though there is no abstracted or subsisting whiteness as such we may consider it as unique and transcendent final cause of all whitening, which relates to all white things. This whiteness is not the intrinsic formal cause of this or that white thing but the extrinsic final cause. Then there is nothing white without whiteness as final cause. As long as the accident 'whiteness'

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<sup>40</sup> In LW III, n. 172, Eckhart considers the white thing insofar as it is white. LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 84, distinguishes between whiteness as formal, efficient and final cause: «Subiectum vero semper se habet respectu formae sicut passivum ad activum et effectus ad causam. Constat enim quod album habet albedine et per albedinem, quod sit album. Et sic albedo est ante album ut causa et auctor albi, et est ultra sive post album ut finis et terminus dealbationis, qua res est alba.»

<sup>41</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 13, cf. LW IV, n. 23.

<sup>42</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 23.

does not flow from a thing's essence or is not a proper accident – as in the case of snow –, this quality has no root in its subject and comes from an extrinsic cause. The to-be-white of all white things is due to whiteness as final cause. Thus, Eckhart's sophisticated understanding of the relation between whiteness and the white thing reflects aspects of the relation between the divine and the created act to be.

d. Everything, which has the act to be, is, as that, which has whiteness, is white. Hence, if the act to be were not God, things could be without God. Thus, God would neither be the first cause nor the cause of the existence of things<sup>43</sup>. This proof repeats the ambiguity of the previous demonstrations. The term 'act to be' signifies both the divine and the formal act to be, the term 'whiteness' both the transcendent final cause and the formal cause of this white thing. Both interpretations are true and imply each other according to the principle of participation: everything has its own act to be by participating in the act to be itself. If the latter were not God, God would not give the act to be to everything.

e. Outside of the act to be and prior to the act to be there is only nothing. Therefore, if the act to be were distinct from God he would be either nothing or from another who is prior to him. Then this principle prior to God would be the true God<sup>44</sup>. Obviously Eckhart repeats the first demonstration but bases it on the distinction between the act to be and nothing. He concludes, that the aforesaid alludes to Exodus 3: 'I am who I am.'

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<sup>43</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 12.

<sup>44</sup> LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 12. The brevity of the demonstrations of the principal thesis and their ambiguous language are partly due to Eckhart's style. However, the last sentence of the *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 25, says: «His ergo ad evidentiam dicendorum praemissis incipiamus et dicamus: *Esse est deus* etc.» Hence, Eckhart treats of the principal thesis at length in the *Opus propositionum*. The demonstrations in the *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum* are only a prelude to the later explanation of the thesis, which is lost.

## 2. The meaning of the principal thesis

The conclusion of the last proof relates the thesis ‘The act to be is God’ to revelation. Eckhart’s exposition of the divine name ‘I am who I am’ may clarify this parallel to the principal thesis. Though Eckhart quotes sometimes the Latin phrase ‘Ego sum qui sum’ he also uses the abbreviation ‘sum qui sum’ because the verb ‘sum’ contains the ‘ego.’ In any case ‘sum’ is a substantive verb (*verbum substantivum*)<sup>45</sup>. Such a verb or word signifies both as substantive connoting the ‘I’ that is, and as verb, which refers to the act to be<sup>46</sup>.

Eckhart quotes Rabbi Moses saying: the first ‘I am’ signifies the divine essence and is the denominated subject. The second ‘I am’ signifies the act to be and is the predicate, which denominates, or is the denomination. The German master presupposes, that propositions signify a composition of subject and predicate. The composition indicates, that the subject has a certain predicate or partakes in it. Therefore, subjects are the material, predicates the formal aspect of propositions. For instance, when we call someone just or wise, the subject appears to be imperfect because it is not wise or just through its essence or through itself but through an additional perfection in which it partakes and which ‘forms’ the subject.

The name ‘I am who I am’ avoids this difficulty of our language because the subject and the predicate are the same, i. e., the predicate neither determines the subject nor expresses an additional perfection not contained in the subject. In other words, the essence or denominated subject and the act to be or denominating predicate are identical. Eckhart concludes, that the divine essence has no need for an act to be, which would be extrinsic to the essence. The act to be is not an additional perfection in which the essence partakes. God is all perfections through

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<sup>45</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 14-16.

<sup>46</sup> LW III, n. 8, LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 110. In the latter text, Eckhart maintains, that the word ‘one’ may be understood both formally and in a substantive way. This remark refers to ‘one’ as convertible with ‘being,’ so that ‘one’ signifies formally ‘to be one’ and is a predicate, which ‘forms’ the ‘material’ subject (LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 3). Elsewhere Eckhart explains, that ‘sunt’ (they are) and ‘esse’ (act to be) signify the same ‘thing,’ namely the act to be, though they co-signify different things (LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 19).

his own essence and wholly self-sufficient<sup>47</sup>. The revealed divine name indicates God's unique mode of existing inasmuch as it does not relate a formal predicate to a material subject.

The principal thesis 'The act to be is God' reflects this understanding of the divine name 'I am who I am.' As Boethius says, a simple form cannot be the subject in a phrase inasmuch as the simple form lacks the composition indicated by the division of subject and predicate<sup>48</sup>. According to Eckhart, the abstract term 'act to be' signifies in the manner of a form and cannot substitute for a subject, which underlies a form. If we posit the act to be as a formal perfection in a proposition, we have to say: God is the act to be, and not: the act to be is God<sup>49</sup>.

When Eckhart writes: 'the act to be is God,' he intentionally reverses the order of subject and predicate. This reversal appears to be false inasmuch as a simple form cannot be a subject. But Eckhart tries to express his negative philosophy in this way. If the act to be is the subject, the predicate loses to a certain extent its formal character. The formal subject is not imperfect or material regarding the predicate<sup>50</sup>. On the contrary, the act to be is the actuality of every form or essence and contains all perfections in itself. Is divinity one of these perfections?

Contrary to concretely signifying terms, such as 'being' or 'God,' the abstract term 'act to be' does not connote composition or participation. The abstract names 'prove' God's purest simplicity, which lacks any composition<sup>51</sup>. In our way of thinking, the term 'God' connotes someone having divinity, the term 'being' something partaking in the act to be. These terms imply, therefore, the composition of a participating subject and a participated perfection. Propositions unfold the participation and composition signified by the concrete names. But

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<sup>47</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 19-20.

<sup>48</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 19, cf. n. 49, which interprets Boethius' thesis without relating it to the logic of propositions: «omnis dispositio est accidens ... Sed hoc repugnat divinae simplicitati et formalitati. Ei enim, quod est, aliquid accidere potest; ipsi autem esse sive quo est nihil accidit, ut ait Boethius. Propter quod secundum ipsum 'forma simplex subiectum esse non potest'.» Aquinas also understands Boethius' thesis in a logical and an ontological way (cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>o</sup>, q. 3, a. 6 s. c.; q. 13, a. 12 ag. 2, c, and ad 2; q. 29, a. 2 ad 5; q. 54, a. 3 ad 2).

<sup>49</sup> DW IV, 2, *Sermon* 117, ll. 27-29.

<sup>50</sup> LW IV, n. 251.

<sup>51</sup> LW III, n. 63, LW IV, n. 52.

this way of thinking cannot mirror the simplicity of God who does not partake in anything because he is everything through his essence. The simple form cannot be the subject of a proposition unless our thinking negates any composition and imperfection regarding the simple form<sup>52</sup>. Eckhart's exchange of subject and predicate leads to such a negation.

Nevertheless, the thesis 'The act to be is God' implies more than the negation of imperfection in a subject. Eckhart avoids calling God 'subsisting act to be' though he maintains, that the divine act of understanding subsists<sup>53</sup>. Even in the language of Thomas Aquinas, the name 'subsisting act to be' is not only a positive expression of subsistence. On the contrary, it denies, that God's act to be is received in a subject, which limits the act to be. Hence, the divine act to be is infinite. Further, the identity or indivision of essence and act to be in God implies, that he is subsisting act to be<sup>54</sup>. Eckhart is well aware of these questions in Aquinas' theology when he denies, that the divine act to be is received in anything or would receive anything, or when he maintains, that God is infinite because he is not received in anything<sup>55</sup>. But Eckhart's answer to the question concerning God's infinity allows him to leave aside the term 'subsisting' regarding God's act to be. He develops this understanding in a dialogue with Aquinas.

Aquinas himself replies to the following objection. If something is this thing and excludes being another thing, then it is not infinite regarding substance. But God is this God and not a horse or a man. Hence, God's substance is not infinite<sup>56</sup>. The defense of God's substantial

<sup>52</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 171, nn. 46-51.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. the *Rationes Equardi* in LW V, *Quaestio magistri Consalvi*, n. 10: «intelligere in quantum huiusmodi est subsistens.» This statement stands in the context of Eckhart's teaching, that God appears to be higher under the account of intellect than under the account of act to be. The reason is, that every real being limits the act to be. Intellectual existence or being as apprehended and the consequent understanding, on the other hand, are not limited (LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 214, LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* II, n. 1, cf. R. J. MAYER, «Meister Eckharts erste *Quaestio Parisiensis* oder: Wie kann Gottes Vernehmen das *fundamentum* seines Seins sein?», *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 54 (2007), pp. 430-463, especially pp. 439-442, pp. 450-458).

<sup>54</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 7, a. 1 c and ad 3; a. 2 c and ad 1; *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 2. *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 1, refers to subsistence as positive divine perfection inasmuch as God has the perfection of substance.

<sup>55</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 177, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 131.

<sup>56</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 7, a. 1 ag. 3.

infinity has, therefore, to show, that God is ‘this thing’ though he includes the act to be of everything else. This answer lies hidden in Aquinas’ response: God’s act to be is distinct from every other act to be because it subsists through itself<sup>57</sup>. We may conclude, that God’s act to be is not distinct from any other act to be if we consider it only as act to be. But if we consider the divine act to be as subsisting or not received in another, it is distinct from every other act to be. The reason is, that God’s infinity contains every other act to be and is not distinct from it inasmuch as it contains it. Though Aquinas refers the name ‘actuality of all acts’ to the created *esse universale*<sup>58</sup>, the latter is contained in God as source of the universe.

When Eckhart quotes this text of Aquinas, he writes: God distinguishes himself from all other things by being not distinct from them (*sua indistinctione distinguitur*)<sup>59</sup>. God is not distinct from other things inasmuch as he contains their act to be. But he is the only one who contains everything else, thus being distinct from everything by containing everything in his infinite act to be. Other essences, i. e., the essences of creatures, exclude each other and limit or determine the act to be received by them. Hence, they are finite<sup>60</sup>. Thus, Eckhart’s interpretation gives a more explicit answer to *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 7, a. 1 objection 3 than Aquinas.

The consequence of this interpretation is, that Eckhart sees no need in calling God ‘subsisting act to be.’ If God’s act to be is distinct from every other being and act to be by not not being distinct from them, i. e., by including every other act to be, this infinity distinguishes him from everything else. In this view, subsistence is a consequence of God’s unity. The act to be belongs to God or *God ‘is’ his own act to be*, is the pure act to be and the act to be of everything *because God is one*<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 7, a. 1 ad 3.

<sup>58</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2 ad 9.

<sup>59</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 154, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 117.

<sup>60</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 106, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 144.

<sup>61</sup> LW IV, n. 301. The above argument presupposes, that the term ‘one’ signifies something not distinct in itself though distinct from everything else, so that the distinction from everything else denotes also subsistence in itself (LW III, n. 562). Nevertheless, Eckhart may also maintain, that the ‘one’ is not distinct from all things. But then he refers to ‘being’ and ‘one’ as common to everything. Similar to God they are distinct from everything by not being distinct (LW IV, n. 298, LW III, n. 208). Further, Eckhart translates the principle, that ‘God is distinct

This unity implies, that God is not distinct in himself *though being distinct from everything else by not being distinct*, i. e., by containing everything else.

Inasmuch as Eckhart explains, that the ‘one’ adds a negation to the act to be, the ‘one’ signifies the purity and the apex of the act to be, namely the act to be together with the negation or exclusion of nothingness. Accordingly, every negation negates some kind or mode of being. The negation of the negation signified by the ‘one’ denotes, that everything belonging to a signified concept is contained in it, whereas everything found in the opposed concept is excluded from it<sup>62</sup>. In this sense, negation is a positive principle, which determines and limits the act to be from within. This is not possible without the identity of the act to be with the act of understanding. Then, nothingness is within the act to be insofar as it is known, i. e., nothingness has cognitive existence. The distinction between natural or real being outside of the soul and cognitive being in the soul divides the created act to be. Hence, nothingness is within the act to be, which is ‘common’ to natural and cognitive existence. Unity alone excludes nothingness from the act to be<sup>63</sup>.

The ‘one’ as negation of the negation explains Eckhart’s prior remarks. Every ‘being’ is like God inasmuch as created beings imitate the divine act to be. This unity of imitation, which is the negation of a negation, includes a negation, which distinguishes the creature from God. Thus, the whole of creation does not only proceed from God as ‘act to be’ or under the account of being, i. e., the account of that which can be created, but also from God as ‘one’ because creation presupposes the distinction of God from the nothingness contained in creatures, i. e., from the limitation of the created act to be<sup>64</sup>.

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from everything else by not being distinct,’ into the theological formula of analogy: the more something is unlike God, the more it is like God. Inasmuch as the ideas of things are in God and not the things or their forms themselves, this implies, that nothing is as like and as unlike as a thing’s idea and the thing itself (LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 117-120).

<sup>62</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 148; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d. 24, q. 1, a. 3 ad 1 and *Quodlibet* X, q. 1, a. 1 ad 3, regarding unity as *negatio negationis*.

<sup>63</sup> LW III, n. 514, n. 540; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1 ad 7; *Sum. theol. I<sup>a</sup>*, q. 16, a. 3 ad 2, regarding nothingness as *ens apprehensum*, which has intelligible existence.

<sup>64</sup> LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, n. 4, LW III, n. 514. Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 3 ad 16: «esse simpliciter et absolute dictum, de solo divino esse intelligitur, sicut et

It is important to note, that Eckhart attributes this kind of distinction not only to the divine act to be or unity, but also to the account of being in our mind. The account of being is something not distinct and we distinguish it by its not being distinct. The account of the ‘one,’ on the other hand, signifies distinction, i. e., the one is not distinct in itself though distinct from everything else<sup>65</sup>. Nevertheless, we may consider the account of the ‘one’ in two ways. The infinity of the act to be is both distinct and not distinct from everything. In this sense, God is both one with everything or not distinct from all beings inasmuch as they are. But he is also distinct from every being inasmuch as he alone contains the act to be of everything in himself.

Beyond this argument for God’s subsistence we find also more traditional remarks concerning divine subsistence. For instance, in the first being the act to be and substance are identical, so that in God the supposit is both the nature, and the act to be<sup>66</sup>. Further, the necessary act to be of God is due to the identity of essence and act to be in him. It is God’s essence to exist<sup>67</sup>. In other words: his act to be ‘is’ or subsists because ‘to be’ is his essence. Accordingly, the ‘I am’ in God’s name signifies the pure and naked act to be in a subject and of a subject and

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bonum; ratione cuius dicitur Matth. cap. XIX, vers. 17: *nemo bonus nisi solus Deus*. Unde quantum creatura accedit ad Deum, tantum habet de esse; quantum vero ab eo recedit, tantum habet de non esse. Et quia non accedit ad Deum nisi secundum quod esse finitum participat, distat autem in infinitum; ideo dicitur quod plus habet de non esse quam de esse.» And: «omne ens in quantum habet esse, sit ei [sc. deo] simile» (*Contra Gentiles*, Lib. II, c. 22).

<sup>65</sup> LW III, n. 562; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 29, a. 1 ad 1: «ens, in quantum ens, non habet rationem repugnantis, sed magis convenientis: quia omnia conveniunt in ente. Sed ens in quantum est hoc ens determinatum, habet rationem repugnantis ad aliquod ens determinatum.»

<sup>66</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 165, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 10. Eckhart attributes the act to be of creatures to the supposit (LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 33).

<sup>67</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 21. Eckhart knows a further argument for divine subsistence. He formulates it in regard to truth though he could have chosen other transcendentals as well: «But God is truth [sc. *veritas*] itself. Other things are true things [sc. *vera*], but they are not the truth; but in any way they are true by the truth. From this it is evident first that everything on this side may deceive, may fall away from the truth, but truth itself cannot fall away from itself or desert itself. E. g.: a white thing may turn black, but whiteness may never become blackness. ... Therefore, everything else is confirmed and established as true by something else, namely by the truth; but truth itself is confirmed, fixed and established as true by itself» (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 271).

the act to be itself as subject, i. e., the essence of the subject<sup>68</sup>. When Eckhart writes, that God alone is ‘being’ – and not ‘act to be’ – in the proper sense, he implies the subject of the act to be and that God alone ‘is’ through his own essence<sup>69</sup>.

These remarks clarify, that Eckhart intentionally posits the act to be as subject of the phrase ‘The act to be is God.’ The effect is, that the act to be appears like a subject, which subsists. Nevertheless, the act to be is understood as that through which God, the act to be, is everything what he is. And God ‘is’ or contains every other being inasmuch as he is infinite. The predicate ‘God,’ i. e., a name connoting a substance and not only a form, underlines the subsistence of the act to be. Despite the simple form of the act to be as subject, the term ‘God’ *as predicate* implies a formal sense as if we said: the act to be is divine. Thus, the predicate ‘God’ elevates the signification of the term ‘act to be.’ The act to be itself, which is the cause of every being, is God and infinitely transcends every being.

Eckhart seems to give a twofold answer regarding the divinity of the act to be. If we speak about the act to be by essence or the first being, then ‘God’ is the corresponding predicate. The predicate ‘God’ clarifies, that the act to be is that, which calls all beings into existence from nothingness and is the first among all beings.

On the other hand, Eckhart may write, that being as being is divine. In this sense, the immutable substance alone ‘is’ or all beings are divine inasmuch as they are ‘being.’<sup>70</sup> This is true insofar as God is the cause of ‘this being qua being’ and not the cause of ‘this being

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<sup>68</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 15. When Eckhart avoids the technical term ‘esse subsistens,’ he does not deny, that God subsists. But his negative theology seeks other ways of signifying subsistence. He seems to be afraid, that the term ‘esse subsistens’ could identify the act to be with a subsisting subject. According to Eckhart, the act to be is the subject and subsistence is not an additional perfection of the act to be. The divine act to be ‘is’ or subsists through itself

<sup>69</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 4, n. 25. LW III, n. 534, speaks of God as fountain and root of the subsistence of creatures. We have to remember, that ‘being’ signifies the act to be and connotes that which is (LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 84).

<sup>70</sup> «These eight points and similar ones seem to be contained in the preceding words: *whom God sends, speaks the words of God; for God does not give the spirit by measure.* And they seem to be consonant with natural reason and are found in every being of art as well as of nature, insofar as they are being and divine» (LW III, n. 361, cf. n. 444 regarding the act to be as immutable substance).

insofar as it is this being.’ The ‘act to be of everything’ stems from God. Everything exists by it and contracts it. This means, that the ‘act to be of everything’ comprehends everything and is, therefore, immutable. Nevertheless, the creatures, which determine and particularize the act to be of everything, change in their particularized existence. Thus, the act to be of everything and every being ‘qua being’ reflect the divine immutability and may be called divine. Nevertheless, this ‘divinity’ is caused and distinct from the act to be itself who is God and not only divine. The caused act to be *as participated* by creatures signifies the divine essence inasmuch as no creature has the act to be by essence. The act to be is the property of the divine essence and, therefore, divine. In this sense, ‘God’ is the true predicate unfolding the hidden essence of the act to be.

Last but not least all the demonstrations of the thesis: ‘the act to be is God,’ are negative. They do not presuppose an understanding of the divine essence from which any knowledge of God might be deduced. On the contrary, they prove that the non-identity of the act to be and God would force us to think, that God is not God, i. e., that he is something partaking in the act to be, not the first being, and not the cause of created existence. Thus, Eckhart presupposes, that God is the first being and being by essence. Though his demonstrations use the principle of (efficient) causality regarding the creator, his metaphysics considers primarily the interior and formal cause, which is the act to be<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> Eckhart departs from the principle, that the divine as such knows neither a principle from which nor an end towards which or for the sake of which. Thus, if mathematics demonstrates through the formal cause, metaphysics employs this principle to an even higher degree regarding the formal cause, which is the act to be. Nevertheless, this consideration does not exclude, that God is the end of everything else though he has no end outside of himself (LW III, nn. 336-338, n. 443, LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 20, LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 54, n. 121).

### 3. Summary: divine and created act to be

Having considered Eckhart's philosophy of the act to be in the immediate context of his thesis 'The act to be is God,' we may try to clarify and summarize this philosophy by looking at some further texts.

#### *a. The act to be in comparison to real beings*

As we saw, Eckhart describes God as the cause of being as such<sup>72</sup> or of being in its own nature. God does not cause this or that limited act to be of this or that thing, but the fullness of the act to be. Other causes, especially the forms of things, limit the act to be<sup>73</sup>. Hence, the influence of secondary causality is not in vain as they cause this act to be, though not the act to be as such. To cause this or that act to be means to determine or limit the fullness of the act to be. Following this point of view, we must not understand the act to be as an accident inhering in things and having its sustaining root in things. The act to be *is not in* things in the proper sense of accidents that *are in* things, though the act to be is in things insofar as things are kept in the act to be<sup>74</sup>. Accordingly, the act to be has no positive root in things and comes from the first cause alone, i. e., the act to be of things roots in God<sup>75</sup>. Therefore, even the created act to be is prior to things, which are not without the act to be and limit or contract it.

In the same sense, all the spiritual perfections such as wisdom and justice do not receive the act to be from their subjects but have an external efficient cause and exemplar. Hence, they formally give the act to be to their subjects, e. g., the just one – *inasmuch as he is just* – receives his whole existence from divine justice and is analogously just<sup>76</sup>. Properly speaking, these perfections are neither accidents – that are by inhering in their subjects – nor do they accrue to their subjects. On the contrary,

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<sup>72</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 48.

<sup>73</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 144.

<sup>74</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, nn. 41-42.

<sup>75</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 53, cf. Aquinas' *STh* I, q. 104, a. 1.

<sup>76</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 44.

the subjects are formed by accruing to these perfections<sup>77</sup>. Therefore, Eckhart does not deny the existence of virtues in the virtuous. But these habits are a conforming to justice and to God himself from whom they are and to whom they conform us<sup>78</sup>.

Inasmuch as Eckhart quotes 2 *Corinthians* 3:18, that we are transformed into the same image of the Lord, he speaks of infused habits of grace, not of acquired perfections. Regarding the act to be, grace, and all the common perfections, which are not determined to this or that thing, the creature relates immediately to God as air or the medium of light refers to the sun. Hence, there is no light of grace, common perfection, or the act to be in us unless the divine sun shines in us<sup>79</sup>. Eckhart includes the spiritual perfections of God, such as life, understanding, wisdom, and justice among the general terms – and not only the transcendentals – because these perfections, in which we share analogously, descend immediately from God as universal cause. This way of thinking indicates, that Eckhart writes primarily as theologian though he clarifies, that we know about the transcendentals naturally, and tries to interpret scripture also from the point of view of philosophy<sup>80</sup>.

The fullness of the act to be, the fullness of grace and perfection, i. e., the sunshine caused by God, does not change as such, even though the things partaking in this fullness change and participate in it in different degrees, i. e., the just ones are analogously just in regard to

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<sup>77</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 74.

<sup>78</sup> «Nec tamen hoc dicendo, quod supra praemisimus, negamus habitus virtutum esse in virtuosis, sed hoc dicimus quod sunt quaedam conformationes et configurationes ad iustitiam et ad ipsum deum, a quo sunt et cui configurant et conformant, secundum illud Cor. 3: 'in eandem imaginem transformamur' 'tamquam a domino spiritu'; et Hebr. 1 de primo iusto, filio dei, dicitur quod est splendor gloriae et figura substantiae eius'. 'Splendor', inquit, 'gloriae'. Et hoc est quod volumus dicere. Virtutes enim, iustitia et huiusmodi, sunt potius quaedam actu configurationes quam quid figuratum immanens et habens fixationem et radicem in virtuoso et sunt in continuo fieri, sicut splendor in medio et imago in speculo. ... Ad praemissa facit quod ... in divinis filius semper nascitur» (LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 45).

<sup>79</sup> LW IV, n. 264.

<sup>80</sup> J. A. AERTSEN, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, pp. 337-338, criticizes Eckhart's understanding of 'common perfection' because justice and life are not as common as the transcendentals, which belong to all the categories. But we have to note, that Eckhart compares the common perfections to the transcendentals inasmuch as both stem immediately from God and have no positive root in creatures. When Eckhart speaks of the common attributes, which are convertible and participated by all, he mentions only being, one, true, and good (LW III, n. 512, LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 11).

divine justice and have their own formal justice<sup>81</sup>. Eckhart describes the created act to be in relation to God as follows:

[J]ust as the whole universe and the one act to be of the universe itself is first intended by the first cause, but every part and its act to be secondarily, so they [the parts] receive the act to be from the cause of the universe by mediation of the one act to be itself of the universe, in itself, through itself, and for the sake of itself, and equally necessarily, because in the one there is no inequality. ... For the singular beings, though they are unequal among themselves, and more or less perfect, receive, draw, and collect their act to be under the account of the one act to be, which falls first and through itself under the causality and the glance of the first cause of every act to be. ... Thus, because they [the singular beings] proceed and are and stand in the act to be and consequently under the first cause, which cause is the act to be, on account of something one and in something one, it follows that they are also under the care of the same first cause<sup>82</sup>.

Once more the term ‘act to be’ may signify both God and the act to be caused by him<sup>83</sup>. The creator intends to bring about the whole universe in its act to be that is one and undivided. The name of this act to be is ‘act to be itself of the universe,’ also called ‘formal actuality of

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<sup>81</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 43-44, cf. LW V, *Proc. Col.* I, n. 82. Eckhart gives the example of the sinner who loses justice. Nevertheless, justice as such remains and the sinner may rise and conform to it again (LW III, n. 172). The different grades of perfection show themselves also regarding goodness. For instance, living beings partake in the divine goodness to a higher degree than non-living beings. Accordingly, the order of the universe is its unity including higher and lower grades of being and the good (cf. LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 112, n. 121).

<sup>82</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 72. Cf. LW IV, n. 287 and n. 279, where Eckhart mentions the act to be of the universe whose simplicity is the cause of the distinction of things because all the differences of being are contained in being: no mode or difference of the act to be may be missing in the act to be (LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 15). This understanding of the act to be allows Eckhart to uphold the Neoplatonic principle, that from one simple thing only one simple thing proceeds, *namely the whole universe*. Thus, Eckhart affirms the Neoplatonic principle and refutes the conclusion from it, which maintains, that the multitude of the universe stems from the duality of the One and the intellect first proceeding from it.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 23.

every form and essence universally.’<sup>84</sup> The term ‘formal’ excludes an attribution of this actuality to God unless Eckhart says ‘formal act to be of God.’ God is the virtual act to be of things, not the formal act to be of things in their own nature. Forms are formally in things, but as ideas and virtually, i. e., by his power (*virtute*) or as in a cause they are in God<sup>85</sup>. Hence, God causes the act to be of the whole universe, which has the power to actualize everything, including every form. In this sense, Eckhart also says: the providence of God – in every operation concerning creatures and in the creation of the universe itself – regards primarily and through itself the common act to be and good and the act to be and good of all (*respicit esse et bonum omnium et commune*)<sup>86</sup>. Accordingly, we may call the formal actuality of all things or the act to be of everything the common act to be.

Despite receiving the same common act to be, things are more or less perfect, i. e., they have more or less formal existence due to their different forms<sup>87</sup>. Therefore, we have to distinguish between the act to be absolutely and the act to be of this and that<sup>88</sup>. The act to be of everything or actuality of everything differs from the actuality of this thing. Only the latter is found in things, though God causes the former. For the act to be is contracted by a thing’s essence, i. e., the forms give this or that act to be to a thing, even though God causes the whole act to be in them<sup>89</sup>. Nevertheless, the individuality of things, their being this or that, does not add any existence to the act to be as such because the act to be includes all the differences between things in itself<sup>90</sup>. God could not give this act to be to a thing without communicating the whole

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<sup>84</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 14.

<sup>85</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 77, n. 83, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 121, LW III, nn. 44-45, n. 337; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 4, a. 2; q. 18, a. 4 ad 2 and ad 3; q. 19, a. 7 ad 2, q. 79, a. 2, *Compendium theologiae*, Lib. I, c. 133 (who speaks of a *praeexistere virtute* or *virtualiter* and *originaliter in causa*). Eckhart sometimes calls the formal act to be of things a ‘made act to be’ (*esse factum*, cf. LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 55).

<sup>86</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 235.

<sup>87</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, nn. 21-22, n. 32, n. 37, LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 77.

<sup>88</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 3.

<sup>89</sup> LW I, *Tabula prologorum in opus tripartitum*, n. 1, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 21, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 214.

<sup>90</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 15, LW IV, n. 279, n. 287.

act to be because individual existence within the universe determines itself by the distinction from other individual beings.

We may call the act to be God's first effect 'to the outside' though innermost in all things. Therefore, God is innermost in all things by giving to them their innermost<sup>91</sup>. Being itself, the effect of God, neither is in a genus nor proper to a single genus but common to all genera. Therefore, God is also common, i. e., as cause of being itself he is not distinct from or proper to a single nature and exists outside of and above every genus. Hence, God is not a universal concept or a universal nature in things, but the universal cause of the common act to be in all things containing all their perfections. Inasmuch as he is substantially infinite, his act to be includes any other act to be and is not distinct from it, i. e., analogously common to everything<sup>92</sup>.

Further, Eckhart interprets the fourth proposition of the *Liber de Causis*, that 'The act to be is the first of created things,' as saying that the act to be is the account of that which can be created (*ratio creabilis*)<sup>93</sup>. As this account, it is a divine idea and uncreated, identical with God himself. Though this idea mediates between God and creature, God causes the creature immediately through his own essence, which is the act to be<sup>94</sup>. God, who is wisdom, may therefore also be called 'actuality and form of all acts and forms.'<sup>95</sup> But he is the virtual act to be of things, not their formal act to be.

#### *b. The act to be in comparison to understanding*

Inasmuch as the act to be is the actuality of all acts and compares to everything as act and perfection, Eckhart unveils the fullness of the account of the act to be by relating it to understanding. On the one hand, the actuality of all acts, i. e., the act to be, contains the actuality of understanding<sup>96</sup>. However, this identity does not concern

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<sup>91</sup> LW III, n. 34.

<sup>92</sup> LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, n. 10, LW III, n. 103, cf. LW IV, n. 53, n. 289.

<sup>93</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 24, LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, n. 4.

<sup>94</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 72, LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 20, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 15.

<sup>95</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 189.

<sup>96</sup> LW III, n. 63.

the quintessence of the relation between understanding and the act to be. Eckhart maintains, that the whole plenitude of being divides into 'real being outside of the soul' (*ens extra animam*) and 'being in or from the soul' (*ens in et ab anima*). Real being belongs to the creation or making of things whereas being in the soul refers to doctrine and cognition, especially to God as creator. God alone, the act to be itself as first cause and principle of everything is the origin of both real and cognitive being. The division between real and cognitive being must not deceive us. There is only one plenitude of being caused by God. Real and cognitive being are modes of the one plenitude of being. God is Lord as the creator of things in real existence. But he is teacher regarding cognitive being<sup>97</sup>. This means: God as cause of the whole act to be is also the cause of truth and true doctrine<sup>98</sup>.

Other texts call the cognitive act to be an intellectual or spiritual act to be attributed to the intentional species or intention in the senses or the mind. The species is a 'being in the soul.' The difference between a natural form and the corresponding species in the soul concerns the act to be and the act of cognition, e. g., the form is for the sake of being red, whereas the species in the eye is for the sake of seeing red. Hence, the eye seeing red *is* not colored though it *sees* a color through the intentional species, which is the principle of seeing. Therefore, the species *as species* does not exist in the mode of real beings, which are present in themselves. The species does not represent itself but the real being whose image it is, i. e., the species is not seen though the visible thing is present to the eye through the species<sup>99</sup>.

This act of representing is the quintessence of the relation between being and cognition. Eckhart maintains, that the actually visible thing and the actually seeing sight are one and the same act through the species, which actualizes both sight and the visible thing in its visibility. In this unity the actually visible object presents itself to sight<sup>100</sup>. Thus, the presence of the object to sight through the species and the

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<sup>97</sup> LW III, n. 540, cf. n. 514.

<sup>98</sup> LW III, n. 619.

<sup>99</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 21, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 124-125, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 25, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 152, n. 202, n. 206, LW III, n. 194, LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis I*, n. 7, *Quaestio Parisiensis II*, nn. 4-6.

<sup>100</sup> LW III, n. 505, cf. n. 401, W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 345-360.

corresponding act of seeing through the same species are two sides of one and the same actuality.

The distinction between intellectual or spiritual and real existence illustrates also how things preexist in God. Whereas the act to be of things in their ‘original’ cause, for instance the existence of colors in light or the intellectual existence of all things in the divine Word, is spiritual, the formal act to be of things in themselves is natural or real. Eckhart claims in this context, that the act to be of things inasmuch as it relates to the intellect is the act to be under the account of the true (*esse rerum sub ratione veri, quo modo respicit intellectum*)<sup>101</sup>. Hence, the intellectual or cognitive act to be is identical with the act to be under the account of the true. This intellectual act to be, namely the truth of being belonging to the plenitude of being, relates to the mind (*respicit intellectum*), i. e., it presents the whole act to be to the mind. As Eckhart says: the species does not present itself but the thing. In the same sense, intellectual existence presents the whole plenitude of being and not only itself. The *Expositio libri Exodi* summarizes this understanding of being as follows:

Further, ‘that which first falls in the mind,’ according to Avicenna, and universally in apprehension, ‘is being.’ Therefore, also, the first philosopher treating of the first beings and the first principles of things presupposes being. And hence it [being] itself is and is called his subject because it is subjected and presupposed to everything, even to the first cognition and apprehension<sup>102</sup>.

‘Being’ signifies the plenitude of created being. This plenitude is presupposed to everything. On the one hand, the term ‘everything’ connotes all really existing things. Being is presupposed to them inasmuch as all things receive and contract the plenitude of the act to be. But the one plenitude of being contains also that mode of being, which presents being to the mind. In this sense, being is not only the presupposition for all real beings, but also the presupposition for any

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<sup>101</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 35, *Expositio libri Genesis*, nn. 77-78, cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 29.

<sup>102</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 169.

cognition. Being falls *universally* in the mind and the first or natural cognition always relates to being. Secondary cognition may refer to the modes of being.

Eckhart's way of thinking compares the act to be to everything as act and perfection. The comparison of the act to be to understanding reveals, that the actuality of all acts contains the act of understanding. But first and foremost being is the principal object of understanding and that, which first falls in apprehension. This falling in apprehension implies, that being presents or manifests itself to the mind. It is possible because the plenitude of the act to be comprehends the mode of intellectual existence in itself, which is being in the act of manifesting itself to the mind.

Whereas the color of the wall presents itself to sight through an intentional species in the eye, the plenitude of being presents itself to the mind inasmuch as it is in the mind as intellectual existence. The species received in the eye entails, that actual sight and the actually visible are one and the same, so that the visible object presents itself to sight. In the same sense, the mode of intellectual existence contained in the plenitude of being leads to the identity of understanding in act and the actually intelligible, which is being. There is no need for a species, which mediates between being and the intellect because being is actually intelligible or knowable<sup>103</sup> through itself inasmuch as it contains the mode of intellectual existence, which refers the act to be to the mind in the act of cognition. Eckhart is well aware of this immediate identity of the mind with the plenitude of being though the identity with this or that being needs to be mediated by the species in the senses and in the intellect:

A buckler having color does not cognize it, does not enjoy it, lacks every other color, which is numerically or specifically distinct [from its own color]. But the sense of man, especially sight, not having and repudiating color by nature cognizes color, enjoys color, and is receptive of all numerically and specifically distinct colors.

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<sup>103</sup> Regarding being true as knowable or comprehensible (*scibile, comprehensibile*) cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 29, regarding the unity of intellect and intelligible in general cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 266.

... We see the same regarding the capacities of the soul. The more a capacity is separate [sc. from matter], the more [objects] it may receive ... to the extent, that the intellect having nothing has the whole of being as object, having the same act to be with the object that is being<sup>104</sup>.

Accordingly, the intellect is open to everything because it has no act to be of itself or has nothing of all its objects. If we say, the intellect has no act to be of itself prior to understanding anything, we identify the act of understanding with the intellect's act to be, i. e., to be is to understand. This consideration distinguishes between the *intellect as capacity inhering in the soul* and the *intellect as intellect*, which signifies the intellect's order or relation to its object<sup>105</sup>. Though the intellect *is* and *is something*, i. e., belongs to the order of real existence, inasmuch as it is a capacity of the soul, it *is not* in relation to its object, the knowable, prior to receiving the species of it. In this sense the intellect – in the order of intellectual existence – *is nothing* regarding its objects. The species of the object gives the act to be to the intellect in relation to something knowable, i. e., the intellect receives its whole act to be [in relation to the object] from the object.

Inasmuch as the proper object of the intellect is the whole of being, the intellect has 'the same act to be with the object that is [the whole of] being.' This identity in the act to be regarding the intellect as intellect and being as the intellect's object is due to the mode of intellectual

<sup>104</sup> LW III, n. 247, cf. n. 554 regarding the separation from matter.

<sup>105</sup> «Item: intellectus nec est hic nec nunc nec hoc, in quantum intellectus. Sed omne ens vel esse est determinatum ad genus et speciem. Ergo intellectus, in quantum huiusmodi, non est aliquod ens nec habet aliquod esse. ... Cum dices: si intellectus est <nec> hic nec nunc nec hoc, ergo penitus nihil est, dico quod intellectus est potentia naturalis animae. Sic est aliquid, quia anima est verum ens» (LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* II, n. 7, cf. LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 10). «Item: operatio et potentia, ut potentia, habet suum esse ab obiecto ... Ergo et obiectum dabit esse ei cuius est obiectum, scilicet potentiae et operationi. ... Ergo intelligere quod est ab obiecto, et similiter potentia, in quantum huiusmodi, non sunt aliquod esse nec habent aliquod esse» (LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* II, n. 3). Regarding the intellect as relation to the object cf. the following text on knowledge: «'idem est intellectus et quod intelligitur', 'sed et sensus et sensibile actu unum sunt et idem', ut ait philosophus De anima. Et in 'V Metaphysicae dicit, quod scientia, ut relatio, non est scientis, sed scibilis'» (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 199, cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 94, LW III, n. 100, n. 107, n. 141, and THOMAS AQUINAS, *In Metaph.*, Lib. V, lect. 17, [Marietti, nn. 1028-1029]).

existence contained in the plenitude of being. Accordingly, the intellect as intellect is the likeness of the whole of being containing in itself the universe of beings though not this or that being determinately. Hence, its object is absolute being, not only this or that being<sup>106</sup>.

In a German sermon, Eckhart considers the intellectual act to be as likeness of God and describes it in a metaphor: The soul takes all things in God, not in that purity where things are in their natural purity, but in the pure uniformity as they are in God. God has made this world as in a coal. That image, which is in gold, is more solid than that which is in a coal. Therefore, all things are in the soul in a purer and nobler way than in the natural world. The matter from which God made all things is poorer than a coal in comparison with gold. Who wants to build a harbor, takes a little bit of earth. That is his matter upon which he acts. He gives a form to it, which is in him and is nobler than matter. Here all things are innumerable nobler in the intellectual world, which is the soul, than they are in this natural world. The images of all things that exist in the soul in a uniform way resemble therefore the image hewn in gold<sup>107</sup>.

According to this metaphor, the natural act to be of material things is neither permanent nor intelligible. It is represented by the darkness of a coal. The intellectual world in the soul and its intelligibility is described as gold that endures and shines. But the image of gold falls short of intelligibility insofar as gold can only receive one image. Intelligible existence, on the other hand, is the one act to be of all the images in the mind, i. e., the actual appearing of things to the mind. Therefore, Eckhart claims that the images exist in the mind in a uniform way, or elsewhere: In this life all things are one, all things together, all and all united in all and all<sup>108</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 115. Thus, Eckhart speaks of an identity in act of understanding and being as object. Inasmuch as being refers to the plenitude of being in the actuality of all acts both the relations of being to understanding and of understanding to being are contained in being. Therefore, being does not relate to something outside of itself. The intelligibility of being excludes dependence on the intellect because the intellect is within being.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. DW I, *Sermon 17*, pp. 289, 7 - 291, 1.

<sup>108</sup> DW III, *Sermon 76*, p. 317, 1-2. To say it with Aquinas: All the intelligible species have one and the same account of existence though they represent things with different degrees of existence (*ScG I*, c. 55).

We must not be astounded when we hear, that the soul takes all things in God. Eckhart understands all things in the uniformity of being as first intelligible. Even Aquinas repeats Augustine's words in this case: The soul judges according to divine truth, when it judges or knows according to the first principles impressed by God<sup>109</sup>. But God remains unseen. We know his likeness, not himself. As Eckhart says: Everything divine as such, is unknown, latent, and concealed, especially God, the highest, and the first essential cause of all. He is concealed for all that are other in nature from the highest itself<sup>110</sup>. The divine truth or God is in the ground of the soul, but it is hidden for reason<sup>111</sup>. These remarks force us to ask: How do we know the act to be of creatures and the act to be of God?

## II. The spark of reason and the understanding of being<sup>112</sup>

As we will see, the understanding of being relates to the mysterious experience of a spark within reason. Several times Eckhart calls the spark

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<sup>109</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Quolibet* VIII, q. 2, a. 2; *De veritate* q. 1, a. 4 ad 5; q. 10 a. 8; *Sum theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 16, a. 6 ad 1.

<sup>110</sup> LW III, n. 195. Eckhart writes in this context: As long as we are not fully born as sons of God and our participation in the divine nature is not manifest, we cannot see the hidden God. Christ is the way through faith in the present, but as future reward he will be truth and life for us. For faith is a motion towards becoming a son (cf. LW III, n. 545, n. 158).

<sup>111</sup> DW IV, 1, *Sermon* 104, ll. 328-330.

<sup>112</sup> The Middle High German 'vünkelin' translates the Latin term 'scintilla' not known in Eckhart's writings. The exact English translation would be 'little spark.' Inasmuch as Eckhart speaks also of 'vunke' we may omit the term 'little.' Regarding the history of the term, cf. A. M. HAAS, "Seelenfunken (*scintilla animae*)", *Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch* 9 (2015), pp. 293-326. The author identifies the spark of reason with the ground of the soul (*ibid.*, pp. 320-324). In a previous article he opines, that Eckhart learned about the spark from Augustine's *De civitate Dei* XXII, 24, 2, which calls superior reason 'spark' (A. M. HAAS, «Aktualität und Normativität Meister Eckharts», in R. IMBACH and H. STIRNIMANN (ED.), *Eckardus Theutonicus, homo doctus et sanctus. Nachweise und Berichte zum Prozeß gegen Meister Eckhart*, Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, Freiburg 1992, pp. 205-268, here: p. 258). This discussion overlooks, that the spark is a natural habit of reason called synderesis whereas the soul's ground is the soul's essence or nature (DW I, *Sermon* 17, pp. 281-283). Hence, Eckhart seems to derive his understanding of the spark from Aquinas' text (synderesis as natural habit of reason and as *scintilla rationis* in THOMAS AQUINAS, *In II Sent.*, d. 39, q. 3, a. 1; *scintilla conscientiae* in *De veritate* q. 17, a. 1 ad 1, a. 2 ad 3). Cf. R. MAYER, «The Terms 'Ground of the Soul' and 'Sparkle of Reason' in Eckhart and Aquinas», *Medieval Mystical Theology* 22 (2013), pp. 120-138.

a light or natural light that is impressed from above, i. e., from God. The German sermons call this light ‘synderesis’<sup>113</sup>. The Latin works speak of a participation in the divine light both in speculative and practical reason, though in speculative reason it is the habit of understanding the principles, not the synderesis. These principles are the seeds of sciences and virtues impressed by God and contain any knowledge virtually and radically. They are naturally known in the spark. Speculative reason judges truth and falsity in accord with these principles. Practical reason distinguishes between good and evil through the synderesis, which inclines human beings always to the good<sup>114</sup>. Eckhart locates the spark in that region of the soul or of reason where it touches upon the angelic nature, i. e., the understanding of principles is similar to angelic knowledge<sup>115</sup>.

Strictly speaking, reason is a capacity, which moves from one thing to another, reducing the unknown to that which it already knows. But the principles are known without such an investigation. We do not know them through a reasoning process. They are understood through themselves<sup>116</sup>. Reason touches upon this angelic way of knowing through the habit of understanding, though it cannot do so without receiving something through the senses. Accordingly, the habit of understanding exalts reason above itself. In this sense, Eckhart denies that the spark is a capacity. It is the habit of understanding belonging to the capacity of reason<sup>117</sup>.

Eckhart says regarding the spark: «‘God is understanding [*sc. vernünftigkeit*], living in the knowledge of himself alone.’ ... Now let us take this as it is in the soul, which has a little drop of understanding [*sc.*

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<sup>113</sup> Cf. DW I, *Sermon 20 a*, pp. 332, 3 - 334, 4; *Sermon 20 b*, p. 348, 1-12; DW II, *Sermon 48*, pp. 418, 1 - 420, 10.

<sup>114</sup> LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 200, cf. n. 190, nn. 197-199, n. 217, DW V, *Buch der göttlichen Tröstung: Vom edlen Menschen*, p. 110, 8-10; p. 111, 10-21. Regarding the participation in the divine light through the created agent intellect cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 93.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. DW I, *Sermon 20 b*, p. 348, 1-2, cf. Aquinas’ *QD De veritate* q. 16, a. 1.

<sup>116</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 280, LW III, n. 267; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, *II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>*, q. 1, a. 5; *De veritate* q. 11, a. 3. In this latter text Aquinas speaks of knowledge of the first principles, which is impressed by God.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. DW I, *Sermon 20 a*, p. 333, 1-2; *Sermon 20 b*, p. 348, 11; LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 200.

*vernünffticheit*], a spark, a sprout»<sup>118</sup>. It is noteworthy that the German term *vernünffticheit* relates here to reason as strengthened by the habit of principles. Inasmuch as the spark is a participation in the divine light, the corresponding understanding is reduced to God himself, not to angels. Then the terms ‘little drop’ or ‘spark’ signify that our participation in the divine understanding is most limited. Eckhart also characterizes the spark as that which is highest, smallest or finest, and purest in our soul<sup>119</sup>.

### 1. Apprehension of being and other first principles

Eckhart claims, that the first principles are understood naturally. But what is natural cognition and what does it apprehend? Eckhart says of the spark:

The soul has something in itself, a spark of understanding [*sc. redelicheit*], which is never extinguished, and in this spark, as the highest part of the mind [*sc. gemüetes*], one places the image of the soul. There also exists in our souls a knowing that turns to external things, i.e., a knowing through the senses and reason, which happens through likenesses and concepts that conceal this [spark]. ... The inward cognition is that which is founded intellectually in our soul’s act to be. However, it is not the soul’s act to be. Rather, it is rooted in it, and is something of the soul’s life, when we say that understanding is something of the soul’s life, which is intellectual life ... This cognition is without time and place, without here and now. In this life all things are one, all things together, all and all united in all and all<sup>120</sup>.

Eckhart identifies natural cognition with inward cognition. As impressed by God it belongs to the soul’s life and the act to be. The act to be is the act or actuality of the soul’s essence, i. e., of the soul’s

<sup>118</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 9, pp. 150, 5 - 151, 2.

<sup>119</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 20 b, p. 344, 10.

<sup>120</sup> DW III, *Sermon* 76, pp. 315, 6 - 317, 2, cf. B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, pp. 327-328.

ground<sup>121</sup>. All the capacities of the soul share in this one and same act to be in the ground. Hence, the natural light of the soul or the spark is not nobler than the lowest capacity in the act to be, though understanding is much higher than the other capacities in its operation<sup>122</sup>. Obviously, Eckhart distinguishes between spark and ground of the soul.

The spark is an understanding not received through the senses. It is rooted in the soul's act to be and, as natural habit of the intellect, flows from the soul's ground together with the intellect. The concepts and phantasms, which stem from experience, hide the natural understanding or that which is naturally understood in our souls. This light of God's countenance, impressed on our soul, manifesting what is good and to be done, is always in us, but does not appear. It is concealed, overshadowed [*sc. obumbratur*], and darkened by the images of created things put on top of it. But this light may be unveiled, if we expel the images<sup>123</sup>.

Not only images but also earthly desires may prevent us from realizing the spark. A further possibility of throwing earth on the spark is human reasoning. Reasoning in the strict sense relates to the capacity of reason as searching. It is a discourse between many things and a negotiation drawing us to the outside, whereas the interior understanding of the spark may be called a reason that is not searching<sup>124</sup>. Accordingly, the reasoning process prevents us from perceiving the presence of God in the concealed part of the mind [*sc. in abdito mentis*] where we have an interior understanding<sup>125</sup>.

Then, Eckhart calls the inward understanding an inward eye as opposed to an outward eye: «The inward eye of the soul is the one that sees into the act to be and takes its existence from God without anything else mediating. ... The outward eye of the soul is the one that

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<sup>121</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionem*, n. 14.

<sup>122</sup> DW II, *Sermon* 48, p. 418, 5-11.

<sup>123</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 301. Aquinas also writes that the first principles offer themselves immediately and without any searching to the intellect. But reason is an overshadowed intellect [*sc. intellectus obumbratus*] because its discourse darkens the intellectual light by time and the continuous, i. e., space, insofar as cognition is received through the senses and images (cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 3, q. 4, a. 1 ad 4; *In II Sent.*, d. 3, q. 1, a. 2; d. 16, q. 1, a. 3; d. 24, q. 3, a. 3 ad 2, *De veritate* q. 8, a. 3 ad 3; *Super Boetium De Trinitate* q. 1, a. 1 ad 4).

<sup>124</sup> LW III, n. 267, DW III, *Sermon* 71, p. 217, 1-3.

<sup>125</sup> LW III, n. 267.

is turned to all creatures, taking note of them by means of images»<sup>126</sup>. On the one hand, the German master *appears to* identify the inward eye with superior reason. He calls the spark the highest part of the mind [*sc. supremum animae*] and, according to Augustine, the corresponding understanding the ‘man in the soul,’ i. e., superior reason<sup>127</sup>. The mind’s highest part is superior reason.

But this highest part of the soul has a specific ‘history.’ Superior reason has always been ordered to God before the fall of mankind. After the fall it needs grace in order to turn to God<sup>128</sup>. Hence, superior reason or the ‘man in the soul’ is dead in fallen mankind, i. e., the inward eye of the soul does not turn toward God though the fall does not destroy the understanding of being or the good. The *synderesis* remains intact even in hell. Nevertheless, the soul does not cognize this light in God as long as she is not at home and turning toward him. If the spark of reason is cognized without any veil in God, then the man in the soul, i. e., understanding, lives<sup>129</sup>.

Accordingly, the interior eye looks always at being or the good, and if this understanding of being is seen in God through grace, i. e., is seen as his image, the inward eye turns toward God and our understanding is raised from the dead. Thus, the Holy Spirit leads the spark into God, the first origin<sup>130</sup>. Knowledge of the spark as such, i. e., without understanding it as God’s image or language, is not knowledge of God.

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<sup>126</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 10, p. 165, 4-8, B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, p. 263, cf. R. MANSTETTEN, *Esse est Deus*, pp. 357-406. R. SCHÖNBERGER, «Predigt 10: ‘In diebus suis placuit deo’», in: G. STEER and L. STURLESE (eds.), *Lectura Eckhardi II. Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2003, pp. 53-88, here: p. 78, relates Eckhart’s understanding of the soul’s two eyes to Avicenna’s *De anima* I 5 (cf. LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 138, where Eckhart identifies the two faces known from Avicenna with Augustine’s superior and inferior reason). Obviously, Eckhart knew about these sources. However, these sources do not speak about an eye turned towards ‘being.’ They mention the distinction between higher and lower things, between creatures and God. Thus, Eckhart reinterprets these sources in a new way, i. e., man has to ascend to God through the act to be caused by him (LW IV, n. 247, n. 212).

<sup>127</sup> Cf. DW II, *Sermon* 37, p. 211, 1-3, DW IV, 2, *Sermon* 106 D, ll. 67-72. The latter text calls the spark a capacity because of the identification with superior reason.

<sup>128</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, nn. 140-145, cf. R. MANSTETTEN, *Esse est Deus*, pp. 415-422.

<sup>129</sup> DW II, *Sermon* 37, pp. 218, 2 - 219, 4.

<sup>130</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 20 b, pp. 344, 9 - 345, 10. R. SCHÖNBERGER, «Predigt 10: ‘In diebus suis placuit deo’», p. 78, and K. ALBERT, »Meister Eckharts Mystik der Seinskenntnis«, in: K.

Accordingly, the understanding of being is an interior eye given with human nature and, therefore, impressed by God. Nevertheless, the question of abstracting the transcendentals or first principles of apprehension is not alien to Eckhart's thought. Quoting Augustine he says that we have to remove this or that good in order to come to an understanding of the good itself. The latter is hidden by this and that good because these particular goods contain a negation of all the goodness excluded by them<sup>131</sup>. These negations determine the different modes of goodness and all these differences are contained in goodness itself<sup>132</sup>. Hence, a removal of this or that good might lead to an empty understanding of goodness lacking all the differences between particular goods.

Thus, Eckhart can and cannot think of a removal of all beings when he writes, that we ascend to the act to be through abstraction<sup>133</sup>. Being, too, contains all the differences of beings<sup>134</sup>. Hence, abstraction must not remove all the different modes of being from being itself because they belong to it. Abstraction as removal of differences cannot arrive at an understanding of being. Eckhart says: the act to be compares to everything as act and perfection. Thus, we arrive at a deeper understanding of the act to be by a comparison, which relates the act to be to all beings. Then the act to be shows itself as that actuality, which comprehends every actuality or actualizes everything. We call it the actuality of all

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RUH (ED.), *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter. Symposium Kloster Engelberg 1984*, Metzler, Stuttgart 1986, pp. 7-16, here: p. 11, ID., «Eckharts intellektuelle Mystik», in: A. SPEER, L. WEGENER et al. (ED.), *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt*, pp. 231-238, here: pp. 235-237, identify the interior understanding of the act to be with an immediate understanding of God because they follow Eckhart's principle: The act to be is God. However, Eckhart writes: «According to Damascene prayer is 'the intellect's ascent to God.' Hence, the intellect in itself does not touch upon God, unless it ascends. But ascent is to something higher. Hence, it has to transcend not only imaginable things, but also intelligible things. Further, as the intellect resolves into the act to be, it also has to transcend this. For the act to be is not the cause of the act to be, as fire is not the cause of fire, but something far higher to which it has to ascend» (LW IV, n. 247). Accordingly, the 'immediate' apprehension of being relates to the act to be of creatures, not to God. Nevertheless, this creatural act to be is the *formal* actuality of all acts.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. LW III, n. 611, DW V, *Buch der göttlichen Tröstung*, p. 25, 1-7, LW IV, n. 546, LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 8.

<sup>132</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 173.

<sup>133</sup> «[P]otentiae immateriales abstractione ascendunt. Stat autem abstractio in esse, supra quod deus est, utpote causa esse» (LW IV, n. 212).

<sup>134</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 15.

forms and essences. This kind of abstraction is not possible without the interior eye impressed by God because the comparison between the act to be and this or that being presupposes already the understanding of being. We cannot compare this being to that being under the aspect of being unless this aspect guides our apprehension of this and that being. The abstraction or comparison determines what we understand by the term ‘act to be.’ But the comparison cannot produce that understanding, which is presupposed in any thought and comparison. Thus, the human understanding of being has a twofold origin. It is impressed by God, known naturally and through itself, but also experienced in and through creatures by abstraction.

Eckhart emphasizes, that the act to be known through abstraction is not God who is the cause of the act to be. In other words: the highest knowledge reached through abstraction is the understanding of ‘being’ or the act to be. God still transcends this understanding<sup>135</sup>. Nevertheless, ‘being’ and the other transcendentals are seen or known through themselves and their knowledge strikes like the flash of a lightning<sup>136</sup>. Regarding the knowledge of being Eckhart writes in a German sermon, that the Latin word ‘erat,’ it was, signifies the bare act to be or being. All things add something (sc. to being), but it, i. e., being, does not add anything except in thought, though not in a thought that adds, but in a thought that removes. Goodness and truth add something, at least in thought. But bare or naked being, to which nothing is added, is meant by the word ‘erat’<sup>137</sup>.

The *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Iohannem* gives a fuller account of the transcendentals. Accordingly, being, which first falls in the mind and signifies only the act to be<sup>138</sup>, comes first and implies something not distinct, which is distinct from everything else because it is the only thing not distinct. This is Eckhart’s way of describing being as common to everything. Something common is not distinct from the things comprehended in it. As was said, being contains all the modes and differences of being in itself. These modes may be particular beings

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<sup>135</sup> LW IV, n. 212, n. 247.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. LW III, n. 688, LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 7.

<sup>137</sup> DW II, *Sermon 44*, pp. 347, 9 - 348, 4.

<sup>138</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 2, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 169.

but also general divisions of being such as real and cognitive being<sup>139</sup>. The other transcendentals are as universal as being in their account. The ‘one’ adds only the negation of the negation to being, i. e., in the ‘one’ being shows itself as distinct from everything else and as not distinct from itself or in itself. The term ‘true’ adds the conformity of thing or being and intellect to being<sup>140</sup>.

Roughly speaking, these lines follow the development of the transcendentals described by Thomas Aquinas in his *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*. According to Aquinas, the term ‘ens’ or ‘being’ signifies the act to be and is most common containing all the differences of being. Any other name is either the description of a universal mode of being, such as one and true, or relates to a limited mode of being, such as substance and accident (being per se or in another), human being and plantlike being, etc. Thus, understanding focuses either on being itself or on being in its different modes. All these modes add to being. They cannot add a mode of being that would not be contained in being. Hence they express a mode of being not expressed by the term ‘being.’ The term ‘human being,’ for instance, adds a determinate mode of being founded upon the human essence that contracts the universality of the act to be to the act to be of humanity. Good and true neither limit being nor add to being in this sense, i. e., they do not add something real that contracts being. As these names do not signify nothing, they add at least in thought, namely a relation of reason. The good unveils the relation of being to the appetite, whereas the true signifies the relation of being to the mind, especially the conformity of mind and being<sup>141</sup>.

Up to this point, Eckhart and Aquinas describe a similar development of concepts as additions to the account of being. Both maintain that being is that which first falls in the mind. But Eckhart claims that being adds a thought that removes. We cannot come to the apprehension of being without removing something from that which first falls in the mind. As he said about goodness, that we have to remove this or that good in order to perceive goodness in its width, hovering in itself<sup>142</sup>, so he thinks about being, that we have to remove this or that being in order

<sup>139</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 15, LW III, n. 540.

<sup>140</sup> LW III, n. 562.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1; q. 21, a. 1.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. DW V, *Buch der göttlichen Tröstung*, p. 25, 1-7.

to apprehend being itself. Otherwise, the commonness of being itself would not appear to be distinct from this or that being.

On the one hand, this kind of abstraction leaves behind all the images and modes of being that conceal being itself. It removes the modes of being received through the senses without forgetting that all these modes belong to being itself. Thus, the apprehension of being must and must not turn to things. We cannot try to think being through the outward eye of reason. But the inward eye cannot understand being without the aid of the senses because there is no understanding without phantasms received through the senses<sup>143</sup>. If we represented being through abstraction from substance and accidents, the concept would be a representation here and now, empty and void of all the differences of being. We would know substance and accidents first and ascend to being through them. Eckhart experiences being in a different way. The interior eye apprehends the plenitude of being first. Substance and accidents, known through the exterior eye appear in being as the mind's first principle. Only the inward eye catches sight of being as first principle, perceiving or seeing it naturally and not representing it at command. Being is not a representation here and now but the remaining plenitude of being present in the mind through itself at all times. As Eckhart says: being is presupposed to every real being and to the first cognition or apprehension<sup>144</sup>. Nevertheless, the first principles are also a kind of knowledge or light belonging to our nature:

Reason receives from bodily things. Regarding this part, i. e., insofar as reason receives from bodily things, the will is nobler. But it is only in a part of reason that looks and falls down, that understanding receives from bodily things. But in the highest part reason acts without receiving from bodily things. A great master says: Everything carried in through the senses does not come to the soul or into the soul's highest capacity. Saint Augustine and the pagan master Plato say that the soul has in itself every kind of art in a natural way. Therefore, it does not need to draw the art from outside into itself, but the exercise of an outward art reveals that art,

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<sup>143</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 113, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 229, n. 232.

<sup>144</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 169.

which is naturally concealed in the soul. ... Everything carried in through the senses, the images and forms, does not give anything to the light of the soul (or: does not give any light to the soul). But it prepares and purifies the soul, that it may take bare the angel's light and with it the divine light in its highest part<sup>145</sup>.

Though Eckhart quotes Plato and Augustine, his own opinion differs from their doctrine. Plato maintains, that we know all the different ideas of things by recalling them. Eckhart, on the other hand, refers only to the spark as naturally known. He writes: In the power of the first principles naturally impressed in the soul by God there is virtually and radically, i. e., in the form of a root or seed, any kind of knowledge. Therefore, Plato posited, that all the sciences are co-created with the soul, and only recalled by studies and the exercise of the senses<sup>146</sup>. Thus, Eckhart claims, that the principles contain everything virtually or implicitly, not explicitly, as Plato would say. Coming to know something through the senses strengthens and purifies the soul, so that she is prepared to take bare the angelic light of the spark. Though this light does not enter the soul through the senses, the senses prepare us for the abstraction of being, which considers being in its purity. Knowing this purity, we may ascend through it to the divine light<sup>147</sup>.

As something known through itself, being and the other principles are not cognized through creatures, i. e., not through something else. Eckhart underlines, therefore, that we understand the transcendentals in a tautological phrase when we ask what they are. Then the answer is, for instance, truth is truth. Being is being. Regarding created things such a tautology is a ridiculous stupidity that conveys no meaning. The phrase

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<sup>145</sup> DW II, *Sermon* 36 b, pp. 201, 17 - 203, 5. Because of this passage, Vladimir Lossky explains, that – according to Eckhart – the habit of principles does not only contain the transcendentals and the principle of non-contradiction, but all the species and genera of things. The only reason why man has to turn to things in order to gain knowledge is the defect of nature due to original sin (cf. V. LOSSKY, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, pp. 232-242). But Eckhart does not maintain such a multiplicity of principles in the spark or habit of principles. The spark is the image of God that contains the images of all creatures in its unity and therefore not by way of an image (cf. DW III, *Sermon* 76, p. 317, 1-2).

<sup>146</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 217.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. DW II, *Sermon* 32, pp. 134, 4 - 135, 5. Eckhart underlines many times, that man cannot understand without phantasms received through the senses (cf. LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 113, n. 138).

‘angels are angels’ is an empty repetition of the same word. But the case of the per se known transcendentals is different. They are manifest and seen through themselves in such a phrase, whereas other things are manifest through these principles and not through themselves<sup>148</sup>.

Accordingly, the intellect understands all things from within, namely through their principles by which things are light. Without the light of the principles things are dark and obscure<sup>149</sup>. Hence, that which falls away from being falls away from the light of truth and cognoscibility<sup>150</sup>. Being falls first in the mind and is cognoscibility. The very first capacity originating from the pure ground of the soul is bare cognoscibility. When cognoscibility comes bare to the market, she gets dressed and covered. Only when she is inside, she falls on pure being, but soon she takes a cover around herself, which is truth. She knows a true being<sup>151</sup>.

Due to the universality of the act to be the mind understands all things as one in the pure intelligibility of being. There is no past and no future in being that could withhold the manifestness or cognoscibility of something<sup>152</sup>. On the contrary, any time and any thing are present in this light of the soul or the day of the soul:

There is the day of the soul and the day of God. The days that are six or seven days past and the days that occurred six thousand years ago are as near to today as yesterday is. Why? Because time here is in a present ‘now.’ ... There in a moment the day of the soul takes place. In its natural light, in which all things are, a whole day takes place. There day and night are one. God’s day is where the soul exists in the day of eternity in an essential now<sup>153</sup>.

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<sup>148</sup> LW III, n. 688. Eckhart uses the term ‘prima principia per se nota’ in LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 280.

<sup>149</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 80, n. 83, LW III, n. 20.

<sup>150</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 23.

<sup>151</sup> DW IV, 1, *Sermon* 94, lines 66-69, cf. Aquinas’ *STh* I, q. 16, a. 2, a. 3 ad3, a. 4 ad2. Eckhart views the pure understanding of being as an apprehension that takes being neither as truth nor as cognoscibility, cf. DW I, *Sermon* 3, p. 56, 1-4.

<sup>152</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 23; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 75, a. 6: «Sensus autem non cognoscit esse nisi sub hic et nunc, sed intellectus apprehendit esse absolute, et secundum omne tempus».

<sup>153</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 10, p. 166, 2-9, cf. B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, p. 263, and DW II, *Sermon* 38, pp. 231, 7 - 232, 1, LW IV, nn. 370-371.

Eckhart relates the timeless apprehension of being to the time of creation as described by revelation. At his time the world was six thousand years old according to scripture and all of these six thousand years are present in the apprehension of being, though not as past or future or as singular events. Thus, our understanding of being relates at first to every created being because the spark is born in the divine mind as image of all creatures:

[God] created the soul according to the highest perfection, and poured into it all his brightness in the first purity, and yet he has remained unmixed. - ... When God created all creatures, and if God had not before begotten anything that was uncreated, that carried within itself the images of all creatures, that is the spark ... and this spark is so closely akin to God that it is a uniform one, indistinct, and bears within itself the image of all creatures, images without images and images beyond images<sup>154</sup>.

We might understand the spark as the Word of God, begotten, not made, through whom all things came into being. Such a thought is not alien to Eckhart's theology. The Son is the image and ideal account of everything<sup>155</sup>. But the above quoted Sermon 22 says: «When the Father begot all creatures, then he begot me, and I flowed out with all creatures, and yet I remained within, in the Father. ... In the Father are the images of all creatures»<sup>156</sup>. Accordingly, the idea of a human being is said *to be begotten*. It remains in the Father, i. e., in God, not only in the divine Word, even though the Word remains in the Father too. Therefore, the spark is an idea begotten by the Father. It is *closely akin to God* but is not God or the divine Word. This idea contains the ideas of all creatures in itself, though not as distinct.

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<sup>154</sup> DW I, *Sermon 22*, pp. 380, 2 - 381, 2, cf. E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (ED.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 194.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 5, LW III, nn. 31-35.

<sup>156</sup> DW I, *Sermon 22*, pp. 376, 7 - 377, 1, cf. E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (ED.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 193.

## 2. ‘Existential’ judgment

An important corollary of this understanding of being lies in Eckhart’s logic of propositions. He considers simple, positive judgments with two or three terms: ‘S is’ and ‘S is P.’ The two-term-judgment predicates a thing’s existence, so that the transcendentals being, one, true, and good are the predicate of the proposition. Being is that, which is predicated. The three-term-judgment, on the other hand, does not predicate being but the inherence of the terms S and P, i. e., the inherence of P in S. For example, the proposition: ‘Man is an animal,’ or: ‘Man is a rational, mortal animal,’ is true even if no human being exists. In this case, being is not the predicate of the proposition but the copula joining subject and predicate. Nevertheless, being belongs to the predicate P in the latter case<sup>157</sup>.

The example of a three-term-judgment, which is necessarily true though no really existing thing corresponds to it, is noteworthy. On the one hand, Eckhart defines truth as conformity of mind and thing<sup>158</sup>. But how is such conformity possible without an existing thing? Eckhart’s examples, i. e., the definition of man or the predication of a genus, are necessary and universal truths where the subject term contains the predicate term or is identical with the predicate term. Therefore, he may speak of a necessary inherence of the predicate regardless of the existence of the thing signified.

This necessary inherence and truth of essential predications without the relation of conformity to real things, and the necessity to predicate existence in a two-term-judgment reveal two consequences. If we can predicate the essence without experiencing a corresponding reality, existence does not belong to the essence of any created thing. Otherwise the essential judgment would manifest the existence of the thing signified<sup>159</sup>. Further, the proposition: Socrates is, is true as long

<sup>157</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 20, LW III, n. 377, LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 3, n. 25, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 13, LW V, *Proc. Col.* I, n. 123; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermenias*, Lib. II, lect. 2 (regarding predication of existence in two-term-judgments) and *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 2, a. 1 (regarding propositions known through themselves because the subject contains the predicate).

<sup>158</sup> LW III, n. 562, n. 619.

<sup>159</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS maintains also, that we represent any created essence without representing it as existing. Hence, essence and act to be are distinct in creatures: «Quicquid enim

as Socrates is. If he loses existence, the proposition is no longer true. The temporal existence is an accidental predicate. Though the act to be is the act of the essence, it is not contained in the essence. Otherwise Socrates would exist always and necessarily<sup>160</sup>. Hence, the act to be is in Socrates by participation in an extrinsic principle of existence and not by the essence of Socrates. The latter has his essence through himself whereas the act to be points to a cause of being qua being<sup>161</sup>. Inasmuch as being or the 'is' of a two-term-judgment is the predicate understood 'formally and as substantive,'<sup>162</sup> Eckhart speaks of the formal act to be of things. This formal act to be reveals the participation in the extrinsic cause of the act to be because the act to be is not essential in creatures. On the other hand, this entails, that the source of the act to be 'is' the act to be by essence or the only one who is being in the proper sense<sup>163</sup>.

### III. The knowledge of God

#### 1. Faith and reason

Eckhart interprets scripture in the *Opus tripartitum* by expounding or showing through the philosophers' natural reasons that, which holy faith asserts<sup>164</sup>. This faith is higher than natural understanding as Eckhart prefers scripture to his own reasoning<sup>165</sup>. Nevertheless, the question is whether 'to expound or to manifest by the philosophers'

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non est de intellectu essentie uel quiditatis, hoc est adueniens extra et faciens compositionem cum essentia, quia nulla essentia sine hiis que sunt partes essentie intelligi potest. Omnis autem essentia uel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo: possum enim intelligere quid est homo uel fenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura; ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia uel quiditate» (*De ente et essentia*, c. 4).

<sup>160</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 21.

<sup>161</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 20, LW I, *Prologus generalis in opus tripartitum*, n. 13, LW V, *Proc. Col. I*, n. 123

<sup>162</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 3, n. 25.

<sup>163</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 4, n. 25.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. LW III, nn. 2-3, n. 160, n. 486.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. DW IV 1, *Sermon 101*, ll. 33-35.

natural reasons' implies to demonstrate the faith, as some would interpret it<sup>166</sup>.

Eckhart clarifies this question in a sermon held in Paris on the feast of Saint Augustine, probably dating back to his first period as master of theology. The introduction to this sermon copies the commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate* by Clarenbaldus of Arras, dividing philosophy into speculative, logical and practical science<sup>167</sup>. But the German master adds to the text of Clarenbaldus, when he subdivides the speculative science. Clarenbaldus describes physics, mathematics and theology as parts of speculative science. Eckhart writes 'ethics or theology' instead of 'theology' alone<sup>168</sup>. Several questions arise. Why would Eckhart identify theology with 'ethics' even though it belongs to the speculative sciences that are distinct from ethics or the practical sciences? Does Eckhart exclude the theology of faith when he subsumes theology under philosophy? Does he subordinate faith to reason?

At first the German master seems to follow Clarenbaldus when he writes: the theologian considers the ideas in the divine mind and sometimes the divine substance without matter<sup>169</sup>. Does Eckhart claim, that the natural mind has access to the divine essence and truth, similar to Augustine's theory of illumination<sup>170</sup>? The German master answers,

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<sup>166</sup> Cf. K. FLASCH, *Meister Eckhart. Philosoph des Christentums*, C. H. Beck, München, 2010, pp. 203-211, R. MANSTETTEN, *Esse est deus*, pp. 63-70. J. KOCH, «Sinn und Struktur der Schriftauslegungen», in: U. M. NIX et al. (eds.), *Meister Eckhart der Prediger*, Herder, Freiburg 1960, pp. 73-103, here: pp. 76-87, gives more weight to faith and theology in Eckhart's works.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 2, and footnote 2 on p. 89, W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>168</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 2, and footnote 1 on p. 90.

<sup>169</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, nn. 2-3.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. W. GORIS, «Heinrich von Gent und Meister Eckhart: Die Lehre von Gott als Ersterkanntem», *Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch* 5 (2011), pp. 115-129, here: pp. 115-118, pp. 124-125, gives an Augustinian background to his earlier interpretation (W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 178-183), which suggests an ascent from the creatural perfection to the analogous divine perfection. When Eckhart writes, that the just one is born from divine justice and knows divine justice before everything else (cf. LW III, nn. 187-189), Goris explains, that this way of knowing relates to divine illumination and God as first known. Accordingly, Eckhart would join Franciscan theologians, e. g., Bonaventure, who maintain, that the act to be, which first falls in the mind, is God himself. However, the context of Eckhart's description of the just one relates his knowledge to connatural understanding: «Adhuc autem sciendum quod iustus per hoc scit et cognoscit iustitiam quod ipse est iustus, sicut habens habitum virtutis scit ea quae virtutis sunt et quae secundum virtutem agenda per hoc quod est virtuosus. Unde ipsi idem est esse virtuosum et scire virtutem. Unde Hierotheus didicit divina patiando, non discendo ab extra,

that the theologian as wayfarer has a twofold cognition of God, namely ‘through a mirror and in enigma’ and ‘through a mirror and in light.’<sup>171</sup> Both ways of knowing the divinity relate to God through a mirror and not to God without any mediation or in himself.

The cognition ‘through a mirror and in enigma’ is philosophical and follows the Dionysian schema of knowing God through negation, eminence and causality. This cognition is possible without the illumination of faith<sup>172</sup>. It is noteworthy that Eckhart writes: «the demonstration of a cognoscible thing is based on the senses or the intellect. But regarding God there is neither demonstration based on the senses because he is incorporeal, nor [sc. demonstration] based on the intellect because we lack [his] form as cognized»<sup>173</sup>. Eckhart does not want to deny that we can know something about God through creatures perceived by the senses. On the contrary, any kind of cognition of God is based on creatures known through the senses, unless we consider God’s intelligible effects in our mind<sup>174</sup>. Hence, the German master denies that God could be cognized through a concept of his essence. We have no understanding of God in his own form and know him only through creatures, even when we are given a special illumination through faith.

This remark sheds some light on Eckhart’s *Opus tripartitum* that starts with propositions about God, such as ‘The act to be is God.’ These propositions are neither known through themselves<sup>175</sup> nor due to an

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ut ait Dionysius. ... Secus de aliis non habentibus habitum et esse virtutis, qui per studium ab extra accipiunt cognitionem virtutis audiendo» (LW III, n. 191). This connatural understanding is not due to something first known in the intellect. On the contrary, this kind of understanding is rooted in a habit or virtue that gives a specific existence to man. E. g., the habit of justice gives just existence to the just one. He understands what is just through just existence inasmuch as he is inclined to just works and has a corresponding taste for that which is just (cf. LW IV, nn. 535-539, regarding wisdom, R. SCHÖNBERGER, «Wer sind ‘grobe liute’? Eckharts Reflexion des Verstehens», in: K. JACOBI (ed.), *Meister Eckhart: Lebensstationen – Redesituationen*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1997, pp. 239-259, here: pp. 253-258). THOMAS AQUINAS describes this way of knowing in *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 1, a. 6 ad 3; II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 1, a. 4 ad 3; q. 2, a. 3 ad 2; q. 45, a. 2.

<sup>171</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 4, cf. W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 186-188.

<sup>172</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, nn. 4-5.

<sup>173</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 4.

<sup>174</sup> «[N]on contingit nos de deo aliquid scire nisi per effectus» (LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 11).

<sup>175</sup> LW I, *Tabula prologorum in opus tripartitum*, n. 1.

understanding of the divine essence. The definition of God's essence would be the middle term in any deductive knowledge regarding the divinity. Without the divine form as cognized we lack God's definition and have no deductive knowledge of him. Therefore, Eckhart's principal propositions are conclusions from our understanding of creatures and cannot be deduced from the divine essence or a concept of the divine essence. Even the transcendentals, though known naturally in the spark and impressed by God, are known from creatures, i. e., our mode of knowing and signifying being, goodness and truth corresponds to creatures. This mode of signifying has to be negated when we understand the transcendentals as God's proper perfections<sup>176</sup>.

The cognition 'through a mirror and in light' is possible when the divine light illustrates the knowing capacities and their medium of knowledge through a special effect, thus elevating the intellect itself to that, which lies beyond its natural capacity<sup>177</sup>. Accordingly, the mind's eye cannot be fixed on such an excellent light, i. e., on the divine light, without being purified by the justice of faith<sup>178</sup>. This cognition allows us to achieve meritorious works and to have a foretaste of divine sweetness. The foretaste is possible through the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the corresponding operations called fruits of the Spirit<sup>179</sup>. Eckhart speaks about the foretaste insofar as it is located in the practical intellect. It is knowledge or wisdom, namely a tasting knowledge that causes a strong affection in man<sup>180</sup>. This taste relates especially to the affection, i. e., even the cognition 'through a mirror and in light' does not lead to an immediate knowledge of God. We know him through a special effect of his light in our mind<sup>181</sup>. The *Opus tripartitum* contains similar remarks concerning faith:

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<sup>176</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 78, cf. LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 270, LW III, n. 86, and THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 13, a. 3; *In I Sent.*, d. 22, q. 1, a. 2.

<sup>177</sup> «Secundo cognoscitur in via per speculum et in lumine, quando scilicet lux divina per effectum suum aliquem specialem irradiat super potentias cognoscentes et super medium in cognitione, elevans intellectum ipsum ad id quod naturaliter non potest» (LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 5, cf. LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 154).

<sup>178</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 5, cf. LW III, n. 743, n. 745.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 68 – q. 70.

<sup>180</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 6.

<sup>181</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 11.

It can also be said that Moses as he drew near or approached God ‘hid his face.’ Anyone who wishes to see the deep hidden things of God in the light of grace, i. e., in the spirit, must hold captive his own face, that is, natural intellect or reason. That is why these things are called supernatural, ‘bringing every intellect into captivity in service to Christ’ (2 Corinthians 10). ‘Darkness was above the face of the abyss’ (Genesis 1) - ‘darkness’ meaning the hidden things of God; ‘above the face of the abyss’ meaning above all created reason<sup>182</sup>.

Hence, natural reason needs to be elevated by grace. It is not sufficient of itself, when the deep mysteries of God above all created reason are sought by the intellect<sup>183</sup>. This description of the theology of faith explains too why Eckhart had equated theology and ethics. On the one hand, the cognition ‘through a mirror and in light’ is impossible without justification by faith. In this sense, theology has a practical presupposition. On the other hand, the highest cognition of God, namely the tasting knowledge of wisdom, may be spoken of as situated in the practical intellect because it is cognition with affection. Here, Eckhart’s theology is similar to the ‘affective science’ of Albert’s early *Commentary on the Sentences*<sup>184</sup>. It is mainly a speculative science. But it has a taste for God due to the affection springing from knowledge. Beyond this Albertinian understanding of wisdom Eckhart quotes also Aquinas, saying that wisdom belongs to the intellect, not to the practical intellect, and, secondarily, has a taste belonging to the affection<sup>185</sup>.

Thus, Eckhart maintains, that the intellect cannot demonstrate that, which is of faith regarding those things that exceed natural reason and are hidden. On the one hand, the German master subsumes theology under philosophy similar to Clarenbaldus. But this means that there is only one science of God distinct in its mode of cognizing him either

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<sup>182</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 13, cf. B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>183</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 13.

<sup>184</sup> W. SENNER, *Alberts des Großen Verständnis von Theologie und Philosophie. Lectio Albertina Bd. 9*, Aschendorff, Münster 2009, pp. 8-12.

<sup>185</sup> LW IV, nn. 535-536; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 45, a. 2.

by way of natural reason or by way of faith, which transcends natural reason.

In general, the German master expounds scripture in such a way that the truths of philosophy about the natures of things and their properties are consonant with scripture. For anything true, both in being and in knowing, in nature and in scripture, proceeds from one origin and root of truth, which is God. Thus, anything true taught by Aristotle, Moses, and Christ, is the same in root, but known in different ways, namely as probable [*sc. probabile sive verisimile*], as credible, or as truth<sup>186</sup>. Accordingly, Eckhart tries to describe a consonance between scripture and philosophy, between faith and reason. But Aristotle knows the truth of the root only in a probable way, Moses believes it, and Christ knows the truth with certitude.

On the one hand, this implies, that any believer is like Moses because he does not see God yet<sup>187</sup>. On the other hand, even the human intellect can demonstratively comprehend certain truths about God, for instance that he is creator and one or undivided. There is no need to expect these truths from a prophet<sup>188</sup>. Hence, the teaching of the just or good, who is born from divine justice or goodness insofar as he is just or good, is written in the holy gospel and known with certitude in the natural light of the reasonable soul<sup>189</sup>. For God is one single source or vein of all goodness and truth according to natural truth<sup>190</sup>. This natural truth is known in the spark that provides us with knowledge of being, the one, the true and the good. Thus, we may prove that God is the source of all existence, truth and goodness.

On the other hand, there is a spiritual light in the soul, which derives from faith and cannot be reached by the soul's nature. Faith is, that three persons are in one act to be [or essence] and one act to be [or essence] 'is' in three persons, that one person became man. Our natural light and understanding is too small to attain this knowledge of faith because the

<sup>186</sup> LW III, n. 185.

<sup>187</sup> Christ is the way now through faith, but he is truth and life regarding the future reward, cf. LW III, n. 545.

<sup>188</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 97.

<sup>189</sup> DW V, *Buch der göttlichen Tröstung*, p. 11, 14-21, cf. E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (eds.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 211.

<sup>190</sup> DW V, *Buch der göttlichen Tröstung*, p. 14, 3-5, cf. E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (eds.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 212.

whole natural light cannot provide a likeness for this purpose. The three persons do not act as three persons but as one God. All the effects of God proceed from the unity of the persons<sup>191</sup>. Thus, there is no perfect likeness of the three persons in one essence because all the creatures are effects and likenesses of the divine unity and not of the three persons.

Nevertheless, Eckhart tries *to show* or *expound* the faith through natural reasons. In the light of the abovementioned texts, these natural reasons cannot be a proof of the truth, which exceeds human reason. As was said, some of the truths regarding God are known with certitude in philosophy, i. e., they are proved. Eckhart maintains, that certain demonstration is distinct from the probability [*sc. probabilitas rei et verisimile*] reached in Aristotle's *Topica*<sup>192</sup>. Probable knowledge about divine truth was ascribed to Aristotle or philosophy in the general description of Eckhart's procedure even though he admits, that the human intellect may demonstrate certain truths about God. In his commentary on John 3:34, introduced by the words: «the holy ones and doctors, teaching the faith, write about God»<sup>193</sup>, Eckhart describes the theology of the trinity in eight points. The conclusion says:

These eight points and similar ones seem to be contained in the preceding words: *whom God sends, speaks the words of God; for God does not give the spirit by measure*. And they seem to be consonant with natural reason and are found in every being of art as well as of nature, insofar as they are being and divine. For how would his nature not shine in being? And how would the nature of God not shine in everything divine, insofar as it is divine? For thus light shines in that which is illuminated, the fire in the coal and also the form of fire and its power in the heat acting in its power. 'For the invisible things of God' 'are considered to be understood through those things which are made: also his eternal power and Godhead,' Romans 1. In the question on the trinity of persons in one essence Boethius says thus: 'see more diligently' 'and join faith and reason if you can.' For as, if you do not want to believe unless

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<sup>191</sup> DW IV, 2, *Sermon* 115, Versions A, B, C, D, ll. 75-95; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 32, a. 1.

<sup>192</sup> LW III, nn. 443-444.

<sup>193</sup> LW III, n. 358.

you have understood, this is of presumption and recklessness, so it is of laziness and indolence not to investigate by natural reasons and likenesses that which we believe by faith, especially because every creature is at least a trace of its creator and universally the effect of its cause<sup>194</sup>.

Eckhart's intention is to investigate the Christian faith through created likenesses. This procedure *presupposes* revelation and faith. Therefore, the German master warns us of the presumption of those who do not want to believe unless they understand. As faith transcends reason we may try to understand revelation insofar as this is possible once we have given the assent of faith. But it would be presumption if we withheld our assent as long as we did not understand. Such a position seeks insight beyond the measure granted to human beings.

Creatures are natural reason's way to God, as the effect leads to its cause or the burning coal to the fire. The effects are mostly an imperfect likeness of God, only the intellectual creature is his image<sup>195</sup>. Eckhart does not say here whether this likeness allows us to understand God perfectly or leads only to probable knowledge and a likeness of the truth. But he explains that the divinity is manifest in creatures insofar as these creatures are divine and being, i. e., insofar as the creature is a likeness of God or a likeness of being as such. This likeness allows Aristotle to reach the truth about God as probable [*sc. probabile sive verisimile*], not as necessary.

Faith, on the other hand, believes in revelation for the sake of first truth. Divine things are true through themselves. It is insane to ask for a proof or a cause or a reason of them, as they are the truth and the cause and the reason of everything else. In these things, we have to believe and to give credence to them for their own sake<sup>196</sup>. However, faith must not become lazy and has to try to come to a deeper understanding of

<sup>194</sup> LW III, n. 361, cf. n. 743, n. 745, and THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Boetium De Trinitate* q. 2, a. 1, a. 3.

<sup>195</sup> LW IV, n. 506.

<sup>196</sup> «Tertio notandum quod, quia ipsa divina seipsis sunt vera, fixa et stabilia, quaerere istorum causam et probationem sive rationem - cum sit ipsa veritas et ratio omnium, Ioh. 1: 'in principio erat verbum' sive ratio - dementiae est et ignorantis veritatem dei. Oportet ergo credere in talibus et ipsis propter seipsa fidem adhibere» (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 275; cf. Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the object of faith in *Sum. theol.*, II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 1, a. 1,

the revealed truth through natural reasons<sup>197</sup>. These natural reasons lead to a probable insight into the mystery. Hence, the try to expound or to show the assertions of faith does not achieve necessary demonstration.

Eckhart underlines in a German sermon, that God himself is a supernatural truth never touched by reason in this life. In this regard, reason lives always in a state of waiting. Therefore, her knowledge of God is more ignorance than knowledge. Every revelation of God is nothing compared to what he is. Though his truth is in the soul's ground it is covered and hidden for reason. The latter naturally seeks an immutable object and finds no rest without having it. Thus, reason does not rest, waits, and prepares herself for something, which shall become manifest though it is still concealed. Hence, man cannot know what God is though we understand well what he is not. Reasonable man separates all of this, i. e., of what God is not, from God. But this procedure does not arrive at a concept or inner word of what God is<sup>198</sup>.

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*Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 2, and A. M. HAAS, «Aktualität und Normativität Meister Eckharts», pp. 245-259, who claims, that Eckhart inherits Augustine's understanding of faith).

<sup>197</sup> Though Eckhart denies any possibility to demonstrate the divinity, he writes: «[I]t remains to show from natural things, through natural things and in natural things that in divine things and especially in God it is necessary to say and to confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that 'these three are one [thing],' not a single [person]» (LW III, n. 160). Thus, the necessary, revealed truth is shown to a certain extent through natural reasons. In Eckhart's words: Aristotle reaches a probable insight into the revealed mystery.

<sup>198</sup> «Dar umbe gerüeret diu vernunft niemer in disem lebene den grunt der übernatürliehen wârheit, diu got ist. Und dar umbe sô stât si alles in einem beitenne und in einem arbeitenne. Und daz muoz mê heizen ein unwizzen dan ein wizzen alles, daz si hie haben mac von gote. Got offenbâret sich niemer sô sêre in disem lebene, ez ensî nochdenne ein niht gegen dem, daz er ist. Wie daz diu wârheit sî in dem grunde, si ist aber bedeket und verborgen der vernunft. Und alle die wîle sô daz ist, sô enwirt diu vernunft niht enthalten, daz si niht ruowe enhabe als in einem unwandellichen vûrwurfe. Si enruowet noch niht, mêr: si beitet und bereitet sich noch ze einem, daz noch bekannt sol werden und noch verborgen ist. Alsô enmac der mensche zemâle niht wizzen, waz got ist, mêr: etwaz weiz er wol, waz got niht enist. Und daz selbe scheidet der vernünftic mensche allez abe. Die wîle enwirt diu vernunft niht enthalten in keinem wesentlichen vûrwurfe» (DW IV, 1, *Sermon* 104 A, ll. 319-341; cf. Thomas Aquinas' *Contra Gentiles*, Lib.I, c. 14; *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 6, a. 3). Though Eckhart writes many times, that God and man look at each other even in the natural light of reason, he denies, that this might be a vision of the divine essence (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 185, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 139, nn. 218-219, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 276). The vision of God is, therefore, a future reward and impossible without the light of glory. No created intellect has the vision of God through its purely natural disposition though it is possible through a supernatural disposition (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 296, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 52, n. 275, n. 281, DW IV, 2, *Sermon* 115, Versions A, B, C, D, ll. 96-167, cf. W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 360-372).

## 2. The transcendentals as divine names<sup>199</sup>

The difficulty to distinguish between the divine and the caused act to be belongs to the question of being. Eckhart writes: the act to be *in the proper sense* is an effect of God<sup>200</sup>. Though God causes the act to be as such, this fullness of the act to be is not found in any particular created thing because they limit and determine the act to be. The intellect alone receives absolute being as its object, not as real but as cognitive or intellectual being. Eckhart prefers, therefore, to call being the formal object or idea of creation and not only the first of created things. The divine mind produces the whole universe in accord with this idea, which implies also the unity of all the parts of the universe<sup>201</sup>.

Though Eckhart calls both God and the act to be of everything ‘actuality of all acts,’ he seems to indicate, that God transcends the formal actuality of all acts or act to be of the universe. God is above his creation inasmuch as he is wholly within and wholly without it<sup>202</sup>. Thus, the transcendentals *as such* and in their fullness are found in God alone because creatures limit them. But we may consider the divine essence under two aspects: in itself and as source of creation, i. e., relative to all things. God is the act to be as actuality of all acts in relation to creation. God in himself transcends the actuality of all acts. If God were only the actuality of all forms and essences, he would be wholly within his creation without transcending the actuality of his creatures.

The distinction between God in himself and as source of the universe is elucidated by our way of knowing God through the transcendentals. The human understanding of the transcendentals is taken from creatures,

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<sup>199</sup> Cf. W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 178-183, R. MANSTETTEN, *Esse est Deus*, pp. 164-195.

<sup>200</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 16.

<sup>201</sup> According to Eckhart, the divine Word is the ideal account of all things though the account of man is distinct from the account of a lion. Thus, the term idea or account seems to imply more than the simple, nude, divine essence, which is not distinct in itself. Hence, God is simple in his act to be, life, understanding, and acting, though multiple according to the account of things because it is not repugnant for his understanding to be one and simple in knowing many things (LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, nn. 5-6, nn. 11-12, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 59, LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 36; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS’ *De potentia* q. 3, a. 16 ad 1; *De veritate* q. 3, a. 2; *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 15, a. 2, q. 45, a. 4 ad 1).

<sup>202</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 54; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS’ *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 8, a. 1 ad 1.

i. e., we know and signify the transcendentals according to the mode of creatures. Therefore, our mode of knowing the transcendentals relates to something caused and imperfect and must be negated regarding God, even though the mind understands the transcendentals as likeness of the whole creation, i. e., we cognize absolute being and not only this or that being. Thus, Eckhart maintains, that the transcendentals signify God's own nature and belong to him properly, but our mode of signifying them falls short of the divine perfection<sup>203</sup>.

We must not be astounded, that we find two nearly contradicting phrases in Eckhart's works when he writes, that the act to be in the

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<sup>203</sup> «Quod autem Dionysius dicit 2. c. Caelestis hierarchiae, quod 'negationes de deo sunt verae, affirmationes vero incompactae,' non obstat. Hoc enim verum est quantum ad modum significandi in talibus. Intellectus enim noster perfectiones quae ad esse pertinent, apprehendit ex creaturis, ubi huiusmodi perfectiones imperfectae sunt et divisae sparsim, et secundum illum modum significat. In his enim propositionibus est duo considerare, scilicet ipsas perfectiones significatas, puta bonitatem, veritatem, vitam, intelligere et huiusmodi; et sic sunt compactae et verae. Est etiam considerare in talibus modum significandi; et sic incompactae sunt» (LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 78, cf. n. 58, LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 270, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 4, n. 25). «Sciendum ergo quod revera [sc. perfectiones generales] quantum ad ipsas perfectiones absolute, quas nomina apud nos signant, proprie deo conveniunt et vere, quin immo proprius et per prius deo quam alicui creaturae, licet quantum ad modum significandi vel quantum ad aliqua, quae concernunt vel consignant ista nomina, secus se habeat» (LW III, n. 86; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS' *Sum. theol.*, I, q. 13, a. 3; *In I Sent.*, d. 22, q. 1, a. 2; *Contra Gentiles*, Lib. I, c. 30; *De potentia* q. 7, a. 5; G. P. ROCCA, «The Distinction between *Res Significata* and *Modus Significandi* in Aquinas's Theological Epistemology», *The Thomist* 55 (1991), pp. 173-197). Eckhart nearly copies Aquinas' texts about the transcendentals that belong to God in the proper sense, though we have to negate our mode of signifying them when we use them as divine names. Thus, it is questionable when an interpreter of Eckhart writes, that Aquinas considers the transcendentals exclusively as caused by God, the cause of being qua being, whereas Eckhart understands the transcendentals as God's essence (T. KOBUSCH, «Transzendenz und Transzendentalien», *Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch* 5 (2011), pp. 41-54, here: pp. 46-49). For both Aquinas and Eckhart claim that God alone is good, true or being by his essence and that he is the cause of being qua being, i. e., the creator who gives the act to be as such and not this or that act to be. Another interpreter remarks, that Aquinas tries to solve the question how the transcendentals found in creatures may be used as divine names, whereas Eckhart asks how the transcendentals that belong to God alone may be said of creatures (J. A. AERTSEN, «Die Bedeutung der Transzendentalbegriffe für das Denken Meister Eckharts», *Meister-Eckhart-Jahrbuch* 5 (2011), pp. 27-39, here: pp. 38-39). This remark is not wholly correct. The transcendentals are known through creatures. Therefore, Eckhart thinks about their use as divine names. Nevertheless, he also tries to understand how that, which is proper to God, namely the act to be, may be found in creatures. He gives Aquinas' answer: the transcendentals have no root in creatures so that God has to keep them in the act to be as long as they are. Further, even Aquinas maintains, that we may understand creatures through extrinsic denomination, e. g., we may call a thing good because of God's goodness and not only because

proper sense is the act to be caused by God though God alone is the act to be in the proper sense<sup>204</sup>. Usually, he calls the creatures' own act to be their formal act to be<sup>205</sup>. But he also may speak of God's formal act to be<sup>206</sup>. The terms 'proper' and 'formal' signify relative to the subject in question. They refer to a thing's form from which the name is taken. The forms of things give to things their species and names and are in things formally, in God virtually and causally. These accounts of things in God do not denominate things at all<sup>207</sup>. In this sense, all the perfections are formally in things, though they are never formally in God because they do not give a form to him. For instance, there is no circle in God but the account of a circle<sup>208</sup>. Even the transcendental perfections are formally in things inasmuch as the predicate of the phrase 'S is' or 'S is good' signifies formally and as a substantive<sup>209</sup>. Hence, a thing receives its name from that in which it partakes, e. g., formal whiteness denominates the white thing, holiness the holy one<sup>210</sup>. Accordingly, the formal and proper sense of the term 'act to be' is taken from creatures and the act to be in the proper sense is an effect of God.

Nevertheless, the transcendentals are proper to God because he is all the transcendental perfections through himself, i. e., they belong to him through his essence whereas creatures partake in that, which is his. Creatures do not have these perfections through themselves nor as inhering in themselves like an accident. They continually receive these perfections<sup>211</sup>. Thus, if God alone 'is' in the proper sense, this means: the act to be is his essential property and belongs to him alone. Creatures partake in the act to be and have the act to be in a derivative sense, not in the proper sense.

Eckhart's understanding of analogy reflects this twofold use of the term 'proper.' The perfection of one analogate is formally not in the

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of the thing's intrinsic or own goodness (LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 53; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS' *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 104, a. 1; q. 6, a. 4).

<sup>204</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 4, LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, n. 16.

<sup>205</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 77, n. 83.

<sup>206</sup> LW III, n. 337.

<sup>207</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 121, cf. LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 118.

<sup>208</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 175.

<sup>209</sup> LW I, *Prologus in opus propositionum*, n. 3, n. 25.

<sup>210</sup> LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 69.

<sup>211</sup> LW III, n. 97, LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 25.

other. For instance, health belongs formally and in the proper sense only to animals. Nevertheless, we attribute ‘to be healthy’ also to urine and diet because, e. g., urine *has a quality by which it signifies the health of the animal*. In this case, the denomination happens because of and relative to the form of health in the animal because there is as much proper health in urine and diet as there is in a stone. Hence, if we call caused things ‘beings’ formally and in the proper sense, then this formal sense of being does not refer to God. He is a non-being in this sense. Otherwise God would be caused<sup>212</sup>.

Of course, we may consider the same kind of analogy by finding the act to be formally and in the proper sense in God. Then the act to be ‘is’ by essence and not by participation. This proper sense of being does not refer to creatures because they ‘are’ by participation and there is no act to be by essence in them. Though Eckhart refuses to denominate things by their account in God he maintains, that creatures ‘are’ only by relating to their extrinsic source of existence. In this sense, God alone ‘is’ in the proper sense and creatures are inasmuch as they are caused by him<sup>213</sup>. Therefore, the created being signifies the divine act to be.

This way of analogical thinking functions only if we respect, that the perfection of one analogate is formally not in the other. Accordingly, the names of human language are taken from created forms, i. e., they signify formally a created perfection, which, as created, is not in God. Nevertheless, our naming *ascends* to God analogously and attributes to him, that he is. This affirmation of the act to be in God is true regarding the signified perfection and false regarding the mode of signifying. Therefore, we may call God ‘act to be’ if and only if we negate the mode of signifying attached to our way of speaking, which originates from the experience of creatures and their perfections<sup>214</sup>.

On the other hand, the act to be *descends* from God to creatures when he calls them from non-existence to existence. Then the act to be

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<sup>212</sup> LW V, *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, n. 11, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 54, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 52, LW III, n. 472; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 16, a. 6, and R. IMBACH, *Deus est intelligere. Das Verhältnis von Sein und Denken in seiner Bedeutung für das Gottesverständnis bei Thomas von Aquin und in den Pariser Quaestionen Meister Eckharts*, Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, Freiburg 1976, pp. 184-189.

<sup>213</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 52, cf. Aquinas’ *QD De veritate* q. 21, a. 4 ad2.

<sup>214</sup> LW III, n. 97, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 78.

is God in the proper sense because any other act to be derives from him. Creatures are non-beings in comparison to God because they have no act to be through themselves. Eckhart writes:

The [secondary] analogates have nothing positively rooted of the form according to which they exist in an analogous way. But every created being is analogous to God in the act to be, truth, and goodness. Therefore, every created being has from God and in God, not in itself as created being, the acts to be, to live, to know positively and as in a root<sup>215</sup>.

Obviously, Eckhart does not deny the creature's own formal perfection when he says, that *the analogous form* has no positive root in the creature. As long as the sun shines there is light in the air even though this light has no positive root in the air. The air is lit up by the sun and relative to the sun, which has light in itself. Therefore, the positive root of the air's light is in the sun, not in the air<sup>216</sup>.

As was said above, philosophical – and theological – understanding approaches God through negation, eminence, and causality. Thus, causality reduces all mobile things to one immobile thing, the whole multitude of things to the first unity. The way of eminence attributes the perfections to God in a higher way, so that he is more beautiful than any created beauty, better than any created goodness. Negation separates limited perfections from God or denies, that a limited perfection might

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<sup>215</sup> LW II, *Sermones et Lectiones super Ecclesiastici*, n. 53, cf. Aquinas' *STh* I, q. 104, a. 1.

<sup>216</sup> LW III, nn. 70-72, LW IV, n. 264, LW I, *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, n. 122. J. A. AERTSEN, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, pp. 364-365, writes: «In contrast to Aquinas, who teaches that 'being' and the other transcendentals formally 'inhere' in creatures, the Meister denies any ontological autonomy to them.» On the one hand, this remark overlooks, that Eckhart uses the term 'formally inhering act to be' in his defense (LW V, *Proc. Col.* I, n. 116). Further, Aertsen seems to imply, that – according to Eckhart – there is no created formal act to be in the creature. He writes, that at least in the divinized just one the *formal cause is divine justice* from which he receives his whole act to be insofar as he is just (*ibid.*, p. 344). But Eckhart wants to say, that the formal act to be of creatures is due to the creator and does not inhere in things like an accident. He never says, that God might be a formal cause of the creature, not even in the intellectual creature's divinization (cf. LW II, *Expositio libri Sapientiae*, nn. 43-45).

be God, e. g., no body is God, no created intelligible is God<sup>217</sup>. The first sentence excludes the whole material world from being divine, the second phrase denies, that any created spiritual perfection is divine.

Eckhart follows the tradition when he says, that there are three classes of divine names, namely affirmative, e. g., ‘God is goodness and life,’ negative, e. g., ‘God is immobile and eternal,’ and relative names, e. g., ‘God is the first being and the highest good.’ The *philosophical tradition* of the pagans and the Jewish wisdom, i. e., Rabbi Moses, praise only negation, which removes imperfection from God, and relative names, which touch upon God’s relation to creatures or on the relation of creatures to him. Affirmations, on the other hand, seem to attribute the creatural perfections, which we know, to the divine substance. But compared to God these perfections appear to be imperfections. Therefore, nothing can be affirmed of God in this way. Thus, the phrase: God is substance, signifies only, that he is not in a subject, i. e., he is no accident<sup>218</sup>.

After reporting these opinions of the philosophers and the reasons for it, Eckhart mentions also the opinions of the catholic teachers and finally presents his own thesis: «affirmation, inasmuch as it belongs to the act to be, is proper to God and the divine things inasmuch as they are divine. Negation is not proper but alien to God. The reason is ... because affirmation has and includes the act to be»<sup>219</sup>. However, the affirmation is only true regarding the signified perfection, which is imperfect in creatures. Inasmuch as we apprehend these perfections through creatures, we have to negate the imperfect mode of signification attached to our understanding of them<sup>220</sup>.

Thus, Eckhart’s conclusion is wholly distinct from that philosophical tradition, which denominates God from creatures though not in an affirmative way. In Eckhart’s and Aquinas’ theology, the negation of the mode of signifying roots in the affirmation of the act to be in God. God’s essence is the act to be and truth. Thus, our theological predication: ‘God is good,’ does not only affirm, that God is the cause of our goodness,

<sup>217</sup> LW V, *Sermo die beati Augustini Parisius habitus*, n. 4.

<sup>218</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 34-45, cf. Aquinas’ *STh* I, q. 13, a. 2.

<sup>219</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 77.

<sup>220</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 78; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>, q. 13, a. 3,

or that he is not evil. On the contrary, the divinity is goodness though infinitely transcending our mode of goodness. Regarding the thesis «The act to be is God», this means, that the term ‘the act to be’ is taken from creatures and referred to God through causality. We have to negate its mode of signification and to understand, that God’s way of existing infinitely exceeds the modes of being found in creatures.

This solution allowed Eckhart to preach the phrase: «God is not good, nor better, nor best. If someone said, that God were good, he would do him the same injustice as if he called the sun black»<sup>221</sup>. The accusation at the process of Cologne and in the apostolic constitution *In agro dominico* changed the conclusion of the phrase into: «... as if I called something white ‘black’»<sup>222</sup>. According to the apostolic constitution the phrase is heretical. The theologians at Avignon argued, that – if the phrase were conceded – no predication of God would be true. The names ‘being’ and ‘good’ belong to God in a more proper sense than to creatures and must not be negated regarding him as we negate, that something white is black<sup>223</sup>. Eckhart’s defense does not protest against the false report of the phrase and mentions only, that God is above every name and further removed from every name than white is removed from black<sup>224</sup>.

Thus, Eckhart should have defended his thesis more explicitly. He could have said, that he did not deny goodness to God though he denied the mode of signification belonging to the human understanding of this perfection. Then nobody could have condemned the phrase as heretical. The theologians in Avignon also should have studied Eckhart’s theology instead of condemning some phrases taken out of their context. Then they would not have done a grave injustice to a master of theology by condemning him and his writings *prout verba sonant*.

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<sup>221</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 9, p. 148, 5-7.

<sup>222</sup> LW V, *Proc. Col.* II, nn. 127-128, cf. the apostolic constitution *In agro dominico*, in LW V, pp. 597-600, here: lines 93-94.

<sup>223</sup> LW V, *Votum theologorum Avenionensium*, n. 29.

<sup>224</sup> LW V, *Proc. Col.* II, n. 128.

### 3. The bare spark leads to the bare God

According to the above, superior reason or the man in the soul rises from the dead when it cognizes the spark of reason in God through faith. The German sermon 48 describes this way of knowing God as follows:

That is why I say that if a man will turn away from himself and from all created things, by so much will you be made one and blessed in the spark of the soul, which has never touched either time or place. This spark contradicts all creatures, and wants nothing but its bare God, as he is in himself. It is not content with the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit, or with the three Persons so far as each of them persists in his properties. I say truly that this light is not content with the uniformity of the divine nature's fruit-bearing property. ... I speak in good truth, and in eternal truth and in everlasting truth, that this same light is not content with the uniform divine being in its standstill, as it neither gives nor receives; but it wants to know where this being comes from, it wants to go into the uniform ground, into the quiet desert, into which distinction never gazed, not the Father, nor the Son, nor the Holy Spirit. In that which is innermost, where no one is at home, there is contentment for this light, and there it is more inward than it can be to itself, for this ground is a uniform silence, in itself immovable, and by this immovability all things are moved, and all those living intellectually in themselves will receive life [from it]<sup>225</sup>.

Many interpreters believe that Eckhart describes a divine unity or essence as source beyond and above the persons<sup>226</sup>. His Latin writings do not suggest such an interpretation. The persons are identical with the

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<sup>225</sup> DW II, *Sermon 48*, pp. 419, 1 - 421, 3, cf. E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (eds.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 198.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. B. DIETSCH, «Der Seelengrund nach den deutschen und lateinischen Predigten», in: U. M. NIX et al. (ED.), *Meister Eckhart der Prediger*, pp. 200-258, here: pp. 202-209, pp. 237-243, B. MOJSISCH, «Predigt 48: 'alliu glīchiu dinc minnent sich'», in: G. STEER and L. STURLESE (ED.), *Lectura Eckhardi I. Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1998, pp. 151-162, here: pp. 159-161.

essence<sup>227</sup>. Eckhart does not subordinate the persons to the essence, but depicts how the spark leads us to an experience of God.

In general, the spark ‘resists all creatures’<sup>228</sup> because it inclines us to the universal and absolute good and does not allow us to rest in the creatures’ participated goodness. The spark relates to an inward seeing that is concealed by all the images and concepts of outward reason. The only way to the spark is to remove all of these images in order to look at the bare spark as image or likeness of God and in order to take the spark in God, i. e., as coming from him and as his image without any distinction.

As Eckhart writes in the same sermon: my eye has much more unity with the eye of a sheep beyond the sea, than it has with my ears with which it shares the same act to be. In the same sense the spark – as likeness of God – has more unity with God than with any capacity of the soul, despite the spark’s unity in the act to be with all the capacities of the soul<sup>229</sup>. The spark, i. e., the bare understanding of being, takes God therefore without a medium, bare, and without a cover. It is one with God, not because it is the divine substance or because there is a fusion of God and the spark, but because our intellectuality is a weak participation in and an image of divine intellectuality, so that the apprehension of the bare act to be belongs to God and us, though God infinitely transcends our mode of this apprehension. Inasmuch as this apprehension belongs to our nature, it is not a willed representation. We need not express a name in order to call being into presence. Being presents itself naturally to man whose mind lives within ‘being.’ When we do not express the name ‘being,’ the bare spark is not covered by any name. Meister Eckhart wants to lead us into this nameless presence called ‘being.’

The names ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’ are received from experience and belong to those concepts and images that must be removed in order to see or apprehend the bare spark. Even the divine

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<sup>227</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 56, cf. R. Öchslin, «Der Eine und Dreieinige in den deutschen Predigten», in: U. M. NIX et al. (ED.), *Meister Eckhart der Prediger*, pp. 149-166, here: pp. 161-165.

<sup>228</sup> DW I, *Sermon 20 a*, p. 333, 1-2; *Sermon 20 b*, p. 348, 12; DW II, *Sermon 48*, p. 420, 1.

<sup>229</sup> DW II, *Sermon 48*, pp. 417, 1 - 418, 11, cf. E. COLLEDGE, B. MCGINN (ED.), *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, p. 198.

nature's fecundity in the Father belongs to the concepts that would hide the naked act to be understood in the spark. This naked act to be as divine name and image of the Most High manifests God as the infinity of being within which every existing thing has its own act to be. However, as long as our intellect ascends to being, it knows only the act to be of creatures, i. e., it knows being as perfection found in creatures. The cause of the act to be is far above it even though 'being' in the spark is God's image. Therefore, Eckhart denies that the spark could be content with the uniform divine act to be in its standstill. It seeks God beyond the understanding of being and wants to know where *this act to be* comes from. It seeks the hidden source of the act to be. Eckhart explains the motion of the spark in a Latin sermon:

According to Damascene prayer is 'the intellect's ascent to God.' Hence, the intellect in itself does not touch upon God, unless it ascends. But ascent is to something higher. Hence, it has to transcend not only imaginable things, but also intelligible things. Further, as the intellect resolves into the act to be, it also has to transcend this. For the act to be is not the cause of the act to be, as fire is not the cause of fire, but something far higher to which it has to ascend. - Besides [sc. secondly], the intellect receives God under the clothing of truth, and therefore it needs to ascend. Therefore, he [Damascene] says: 'to God.' For the soul has to transcend God himself under this name, even under every name. - Further, thirdly: as the intellect, according to its name, proceeds from the outside to the inside, ... and according to its nature abstracts from everything added from outside, its ascent is an entering into the first root of the purity of everything that is in a word [or: the Word]<sup>230</sup>.

Thus, God has to be understood in a nameless way, when the intellect ascends to the Most High. Even the names 'God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,' i. e., the limited representations of God through these names, must not stand between us and God. Anything imaginable and intelligible has to be transcended, even the act to be as understood in

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<sup>230</sup> LW IV, nn. 247-248. Regarding the negation of the act to be cf. DW I, *Sermon* 9, pp. 145, 4 - 148, 7.

the spark. Inasmuch as knowledge of the modes of being is resolved into the understanding of being, we first leave behind the different modes of being. Though we truly understand God as the act to be when we experience the spark as his image, the creatural mode of signification still prevents us from cognizing God as he is. Therefore, the knowing ignorance of God has to transcend the understanding of the act to be, which is the first root of the purity of everything that is in a word<sup>231</sup>.

According to Eckhart, names signify primarily concept(ion)s or words and relate only secondarily, or through the conceptions, to things<sup>232</sup>. The act to be signified by the name ‘being’ is common to all beings and all names, as every name signifies a mode of being. Thus, the act to be is above every name, excludes no name and universally includes all names in an equally indistinct way. Hence, we might say, that ‘the act to be’ is God’s proper name. Other perfections and their names, such as ‘power’ and ‘wisdom,’ partake in the act to be, which is – in the sense of containing every mode of being – above every name<sup>233</sup>. Man partakes in the understanding of being as common to all names and beings because the spark is impressed by God and is an image of the divine nature. ‘Being,’ that which first falls in the intellect and universally in apprehension, underlies and is presupposed to everything, even to the first cognition and apprehension<sup>234</sup>. It is the first root from which every word derives, i. e., the primordial word or word of all words.

Insofar as Eckhart speaks about real beings and names, the latter phrase has two implications. On the one hand, universal being is presupposed to everything, which is. God gives the universal act to be to all things, though they contract it by their essence and have a limited or formal act to be. On the other hand, universal being is the first known and presupposed to every cognition. It does not only fall first in the mind, but it falls universally in the mind and underlies every

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<sup>231</sup> We could translate ‘in verbo’ as ‘in the [divine] Word.’ Then the first root of everything is the idea of the act to be in the divine Word and the spark is nothing else but this idea as participated in our intellect.

<sup>232</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 55, n. 167, cf. LW III, n. 9, regarding the identity of word and concept (though ‘word’ may also signify the spoken word).

<sup>233</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, nn. 166-167, cf. B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, p. 96.

<sup>234</sup> LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 169 and n. 29, cf. B. MCGINN (ed.), *Meister Eckhart. Teacher and Preacher*, p. 97 and p. 51.

apprehension. Hence, that which is naturally apprehended constitutes the nature of our understanding prior to any kind of experience.

Accordingly, every understanding is an understanding of universal being. But universal being is not necessarily considered as such. It may be understood analogously in the contracted mode of the act to be found in this or that being. We might call this or that being into the presence of our understanding, for instance by pronouncing the name 'winter evening' or 'snowfall' in summer. In this sense reason is similar to God calling that into (intelligible) presence, which does not exist<sup>235</sup>. Then 'being' is understood implicitly in these names or in that, which they signify, but it is not mentioned explicitly.

Nevertheless, 'being' is the intelligible presence into which 'winter evening' and 'snowfall' are called. Every cognition responds to this presence and does not create it<sup>236</sup>. Therefore, every name somehow signifies the act to be and is contained in it without being its proper name. When Eckhart writes, that the intellect «according to its nature abstracts from everything added from outside», and that «its ascent [through abstraction] is an entering into the first root of the purity of everything that is in a word», he describes a thinking, which finds every other name in the first root of all words and names<sup>237</sup>. The first root of the purity of everything that is in a word is 'being.' The intellect ascends by entering into the first root and origin of all our thoughts.

Though 'act to be' is the proper name of God, Eckhart experiences, that God flees from being named through the understanding of the act to be and much more so from being denominated by any other name. Therefore, any creatural mode of signification has to be negated. The spark itself indicates this need for negation because it does not seek the

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<sup>235</sup> DW I, Sermon 9, p. 151, 8-12.

<sup>236</sup> Thus an interpreter claims that Eckhart's term for being, i. e., «*Wesen* is the word for the totality of what shows itself insofar as it shows itself» (R. SCHÜRMAN, «Meister Eckhart's 'Verbal' Understanding of Being as a Ground for Destruction of Practical Teleology», in: W. KLUXEN et al. (ED.), *Sprache und Erkenntnis im Mittelalter*, [Miscellanea Mediaevalia 13/2], Walter de Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1981, pp. 803-809, here: p. 803). But Eckhart uses this term mostly to signify the absolute act to be of things in themselves or their essence. He signifies the act to be relative to the intellect by the term *esse verum* or *esse sub ratione veri*, also as *esse intellectuale* or *esse cognitivum* (cf. LW I, *Liber paraboliarum Genesis*, n. 35, LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 29).

<sup>237</sup> LW IV, n. 248.

act to be of creatures, but the unknown reality of absolute goodness, which we find neither in this nor in that thing. Understanding seeks the cause of the participated act to be, seeks where the act to be comes from. On the one hand, the spark is the intelligibility of everything into which the intellect resolves its cognition. But everything, even the intelligibility of everything, has to be transcended, if we follow the spark on its way to God. Why would our mind pursue such a way that leads into complete darkness or into the quiet desert of God's uniform ground? Eckhart responds by asking:

What is divine order? Wisdom breaks out from divine power, and love, which is the blaze, breaks out from both. For wisdom and truth and power and love, the blaze, are in the vicinity of being, which is being hovering above [everything], pure without nature. This is his nature, that he is without nature. Who wants to think about goodness or wisdom or power, covers being and darkens it in this thought. A single addition in thought covers being. This, then, is divine order. Where God finds conformity to this order in the soul, there the Father gives birth to his Son. The soul must break through into its own light with all its power. A blaze, a love, originates from power and from light. So the soul must break through to divine order with all its power<sup>238</sup>.

God is not without nature, but it is his nature to be without nature that could cover his pure act to be or it is his nature 'to be' every nature. Thus, even wisdom, power, love or blaze, goodness, and truth are among those names or things that cover being<sup>239</sup>. Accordingly, the soul tries to break through to the purity of being. It does so driven by the blaze that seeks being without any clothing. This is the true order within the soul where all the transcendentals are modes of being following upon it and pointing to the infinite God. Natural love tends by itself to the infinite good who is God and leads the soul back to him. But it would not seek God beyond being, unless it were guided by the Holy Spirit:

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<sup>238</sup> DW II, *Sermon 31*, pp. 119, 6 - 121, 2.

<sup>239</sup> Eckhart adds a special reason why the names 'goodness' and 'truth' do not denominate God in the proper sense. These names add to 'being' and, therefore, lack the simplicity of 'being' (LW IV, n. 30).

When the soul tastes the meal at the Lord's Supper and the spark of the soul touches the divine light, then there is no need for a meal any longer and it does not seek something outside and holds itself wholly in the divine light. ... [T]he power of the Holy Spirit takes that which is purest and smallest and highest, the spark of the soul, and carries it up in the blaze, in love, as I say it now of a tree. The sun's power takes the purest and smallest in the tree's root and draws it into the branch. There it is a flower. Thus, the spark is carried up in every way in the soul in this light and in the Holy Spirit, and thus carried up into the first origin and, in this way, becomes wholly one with God and searches wholly within the one and it is more properly one with God than the meal is with my body<sup>240</sup>.

Thus, nobody could enter the quiet desert beyond being, unless the Holy Spirit led him into it by the blaze of love and the light of faith<sup>241</sup>, manifesting that the unintelligible darkness is the first origin itself and that love alone leads us into God. Commenting on Psalm 99, 1 (or 80, 2): 'God sits above the cherubim,' Eckhart writes:

'Cherubim' signify wisdom, which is knowledge. That carries God into the soul and leads the soul to God. But it cannot bring her into God. Therefore, God does not act according to his divine work in knowledge, as it stands under a measure in the soul. For as God he works in a divine way. Thus, the highest capacity, that is love, comes to the fore and breaks through into God and leads the soul together with knowledge and all its capacities into God and unites them with God. There, God acts above the soul's capacity, not as in the soul, but as in God in a divine way<sup>242</sup>.

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<sup>240</sup> DW I, *Sermon* 20 b, pp. 343, 5 - 345, 4, cf. *Sermon* 23, p. 396, 2-6. The Middle High German 'kleinste' does not only signify 'smallest,' but also 'finest, sharpest, most shining,' i. e., it has all the connotations of the English 'finest.'

<sup>241</sup> Eckhart describes the union of God and the soul in the spark as the union of two lights, the light of the soul and the divine light. When the divine light pours itself into the soul, the soul is united with God. The divine light, as received and participated in the soul, is called the light of faith and is a divine virtue (cf. DW II, *Sermon* 32, p. 142, 1-5).

<sup>242</sup> DW III, *Sermon* 60, pp. 22, 2 - 23, 1.

In this sense, love has even the priority when the soul breaks through into God because the Holy Spirit leads her into the quiet desert. We might compare this step of Eckhart to Aquinas' way of contemplating God. He maintains also, that love seeks God immediately and other things for the sake of God. Knowledge, however, comes to know God through other things. This limited knowledge suffices to enkindle the fire of love. For where knowledge ends, namely in God known through other things, there love begins and unites us with God in himself<sup>243</sup>. Aquinas, when commenting on the divine name 'He who is,' describes the ascent to God in the words of Eckhart:

Every other [divine] name expresses a determinate and particularized act to be; as 'wise' expresses 'to be something' [namely to be wise]. But this name 'He who is' expresses the absolute act to be, not yet determined by something added to it. Therefore, Damascene says that it does not signify what God is, but it signifies a certain infinite sea of substance, [i. e., infinite] as not determined. Hence, when we proceed into God by way of remotion, we first negate bodily things of him; and secondly also intellectual things, insofar as they are found in creatures, as goodness and wisdom. Then, there remains in our intellect only that he is, and nothing more. Therefore, he is like in a certain confusion. But finally, we also remove from him the act to be itself, insofar as it is in creatures. Then he remains in a certain darkness of ignorance, and according to this ignorance we are best joined to God, regarding the state of the wayfarer, as Dionysius says. And this is a certain cloud in which God is said to dwell<sup>244</sup>.

Obviously, this text presupposes the understanding that every name adds to being by expressing a mode of being not expressed by the name 'being,' though already included in it. Most names determine and particularize being, whereas the transcendentals do not contract

<sup>243</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, II<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 27, a. 4 c, ad 1, ad 3.

<sup>244</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, a. 1 ad 4 (own translation); cf. R. J. MAYER, *De veritate: Quid est? Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. Ein Gespräch mit Thomas von Aquin*, Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, Freiburg 2002, pp. 507-516.

the universality of being<sup>245</sup>. Nevertheless, they cover and conceal being. Regarding God we even deny wisdom and goodness as found in creatures. The only thing, which remains, is being as an infinite sea of substance. Thus, Aquinas is aware of the ‘infinite’ width of being<sup>246</sup>. But the mind has to transcend being as fountain and origin of all words, i. e., as that from which derives any kind of intelligibility<sup>247</sup>. We know being only as it belongs to creatures and yet seek being and truth by essence and not by participation<sup>248</sup>. Even Thomas Aquinas underlines, that the quest for God leads us into a cloud, which is the darkness of ignorance. This kind of not-knowing knowledge is the best or deepest union with God in this world. The mind may desert itself in this way, if it trusts in God’s power and not in its own capacity. In the union with God, it is more important to receive his gifts and to apprehend God in darkness than to proceed in accord with natural reason<sup>249</sup>.

Thus, Eckhart’s experience is, that God is unknowable in this world because he transcends the intelligibility conceded to the human mind, which has to reduce all its thoughts to being. Asking the question: Why is it difficult to cognize something?, he answers: either the act to be of a thing – because of its eminence – exceeds the proportion of our intellect or it falls short of the act to be or of being, which is the intellect’s object. In this sense, both God and matter are not cognoscible because of too much or too little intelligibility measured by the intellect’s object, which is being<sup>250</sup>.

This means, that God’s «nature is the hidden act to be (*esse absconditum*)»<sup>251</sup>. In other words: everything divine inasmuch as it is

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<sup>245</sup> Cf. the similar development of the transcendentals in THOMAS AQUINAS, *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1, and DW I, *Sermon* 23, pp. 399, 10 - 401, 8.

<sup>246</sup> Eckhart calls it wide without width in order to remove any kind of spatial or bodily extension, as being is above space and time (DW II, *Sermon* 38, p. 233, 1).

<sup>247</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Expositio Libri Peryermenias*, Lib.I, lect. 5 (Editio Leonina, ll. 314-316); *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1; *Quodlibet* VIII, q. 2, a. 2), cf. R. J. MAYER, «Von der Kraft des Wortes. Thomas von Aquin und Meister Eckhart zur Frage: Wie und von woher empfängt die menschliche Vernunft ihr Wort?», in: W. HOYER (ed.), *Gott loben, segnen, verkündigen. 75 Jahre Dominikanerprovinz des hl. Albert in Süddeutschland und Österreich*, Herder, Freiburg 2014, pp. 67-119.

<sup>248</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sum. theol.*, I<sup>a</sup>-II<sup>ae</sup>, q. 3, a. 7; a. 8.

<sup>249</sup> *In De divinis nominibus*, c. 7, lect. 1 (Marietti, nn. 705-706).

<sup>250</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 41.

<sup>251</sup> LW I, *Expositio libri Genesis*, n. 300.

divine is unknown, concealed, and hidden<sup>252</sup>. We may prove by way of negation, that the act to be is God<sup>253</sup>. But the result of this negative demonstration is: The hidden act to be is God. Hence, the demonstration exalts the name ‘act to be’ above everything similar to the name with four letters, the tetragrammaton. «Maybe, it could appear to someone, that ‘act to be’ is the name of four letters. Literally, the name ‘act to be’ [*esse*] has four letters, and many concealed properties and perfections. It is neither taken from an operation nor said by participation»<sup>254</sup>. Thus, the silence before the one whose name cannot be pronounced is the peak of Eckhart’s theology of the act to be. But only the wise may enter into this silence of knowing ignorance, which leaves behind its own knowledge in order to open itself to divine knowledge and to receive it. If we moved from ignorance to ignorance – and not from knowledge into ignorance – we would be a monkey or a fool<sup>255</sup>.

## Conclusion

Eckhart’s theology is not as negative as its reputation. On the contrary, his negative theology presupposes the affirmation of divine perfections. Only their mode of signification is negated. Other theologians, for instance Bonaventure and Hans Urs von Balthasar, nearly deny the need for negative theology. Why would the human mind affirm or deny this need?

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<sup>252</sup> LW III, n. 195.

<sup>253</sup> In LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 178, Eckhart asks the question why or how the wise men like Moses, Solomon, Paul, and John differ from the ignorant if even the wise never knew anything of that, which is in God unless by pure negations? He answers: «sicut negatio in iure non probatur directe, probatur tamen indirecte – puta: ‘Martinus non commisit adulterium apud Thebas’ probatur, si illa die et hora fuit visus apud Athenas – sic in proposito probatur per effectus manifestos quod deus non habet materiam, concluditur aperte quod ipse liber est ab omni imperfectione consequente proprietatem materiae, puta ignorantia, passibilitate vel similibus. Et quia privatio necessario consequitur habitum et negatio fundatur in affirmatione, convincitur consequenter aliquid esse in deo, quodcumque sit illud, excludens ignorantiam, passibilitatem et huiusmodi, sicut lux tenebras et bonum malum» (ibid., n. 181, cf. nn. 182-184).

<sup>254</sup> In LW II, *Expositio libri Exodi*, n. 164, cf. W. GORIS, *Einheit als Prinzip und Ziel*, pp. 169-178.

<sup>255</sup> DW IV, 1, *Sermon 102*, ll. 126-133.

According to Eckhart, 'being' is the measure of our understanding. If something transcends 'being' or falls short from 'being' it cannot be known. Hence, Eckhart experiences the transcendence of God in the spark of reason. The spark does not allow us to understand God or to include God in a concept of his essence. The spark is the origin of all human words and this origin lacks the power to give birth to a concept regarding God. This experience tells Eckhart, that all human knowledge cannot express the divine essence. Therefore, he negates the mode of signification of all divine perfections because they are known through creatures.

What is Bonaventure's experience regarding the act to be? He underlines, that the act to be first falls in the mind. But this act to be is God, the first known of human understanding. In this sense, God is similar to the natural light, which shines in all visible colors and renders them visible. God shines in all beings and renders them cognoscible. Created beings are known through the uncreated act to be. But we are used to consider beings and phantasms, so that the light of the highest act to be appears to be nothing when we see it. Therefore, we have to learn, that this cloud or darkness is the highest illumination of our mind<sup>256</sup>.

Though Bonaventure experiences God as darkness, this darkness is the light without which nothing may be known. The experience of darkness does not invite Bonaventure to seek God beyond that, which is intelligible for man, because God himself is identified with the intelligibility of everything: we understand everything through God. The human and the divine mind dwell in the same light or intelligibility. Hence, it is impossible to transcend intelligibility. Negative theology is senseless because the human mind is always confronted with divine intelligibility.

Though, unlike Bonaventure, Duns Scotus does not believe in divine illumination, he thinks of an intellect, which has the capacity to understand God without the light of glory. The only reason why we do not see God in this life lies in God's free decision not to join his

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<sup>256</sup> *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* V 3-4.

essence to our intellect<sup>257</sup>. Once more, God is univocally included in everything, which our mind understands, i. e., in ‘essential being’ as the most determinable and empty concept<sup>258</sup>. Thus, there is no possibility to experience the transcendent God as unknowable though we cannot know his individuality. But we cannot understand the individuality of creatures either. The consequence is, that Scotus finds no sense in negative theology<sup>259</sup>.

Hans Urs von Balthasar experiences the act to be as believability and identifies it with the act to be of the human subject or self-consciousness, which reflects on its own believability. The subject encounters his or her act to be in reflection as the last subject of all possible predicates<sup>260</sup>. If the act to be is believability the corresponding cognition is faith. Even natural knowledge – if we could separate nature from grace – is, therefore, faith. Faith is the principal act of human subjectivity<sup>261</sup>. Even the divine persons believe in each other and we will remain believers in heaven, i. e., the faith of heaven does not destroy our ‘natural’ faith but perfects it<sup>262</sup>. Thus, the human mind lives always on the level of divine, interpersonal faith. There is no need to transcend this faith because even the divine persons may only believe in each other. Negative theology is unnecessary because the divinity does not wholly transcend the believability of the act to be.

This short consideration tells us: whenever the human being experiences his own mind as proportioned to divine intelligibility, negative theology ceases to be. However, Eckhart knows also the case

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<sup>257</sup> IOANNES DUNS SCOTUS, *Ordinatio*, prol. p. 1 q. unica, nn. 57-60; *Ordinatio* IV, d. 10, q. 8, n. 9, cf. L. HONNEFELDER, *Ens inquantum ens. Der Begriff des Seienden als solchen als Gegenstand der Metaphysik nach der Lehre des Johannes Duns Scotus*, [Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, Neue Folge 16], Aschendorff, Münster 1989<sup>2</sup>, pp. 29-30.

<sup>258</sup> Cf. L. HONNEFELDER, *Ens inquantum ens*, pp. 151-160, pp. 305-313, pp. 351-362.

<sup>259</sup> Cf. R. SCHÖNBERGER, «Negationes non summe amamus. Duns Scotus’ Auseinandersetzung mit der negativen Theologie», in: L. HONNEFELDER et al. (ED.), *John Duns Scotus. Metaphysics and Ethics*, Brill, Leiden 1996, pp. 475-496.

<sup>260</sup> H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theologik. I. Wahrheit der Welt*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1985, pp. 25-49.

<sup>261</sup> H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1976, pp. 278-335, especially p. 323.

<sup>262</sup> H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *Theodramatik. IV. Das Endspiel*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1985, pp. 85-86.

of pagan and Jewish philosophy, which developed a strong negative philosophy. This philosophy avoids any affirmation regarding God who is known either as relating to us or by way of negation, for instance as source of all goodness or as not being evil. Accordingly, we cannot say, that God is good in his essence because he transcends everything that we can know. Obviously, these philosophers experience our mind as proportioned to creatures and not to God. The spark of reason does not tell them, that we seek to understand the transcendent source of all being. Thus, if the mind lacks any proportion to God in its experience, it has no hope to come to know the transcendent Lord of all. Human knowledge relates to God as if our language represented him equivocally.

The experience of the spark of reason proves to be the measure of human thinking. This spark as cognition of 'being' may be known through abstraction and an unfolding of the modes of being. Then the act to be shows itself as actuality of all acts and intelligibility of everything, which wholly determines the mind. This understanding of being leads to a different kind of negative theology. It affirms the transcendental perfections in God but negates their mode of signification. Thus, both the transcendence of God and the truth of human knowledge are taken seriously. Eckhart writes in a sermon on grace:

Omne quod quid est id quod est laudat et praedicat suum quo est. ... Ipsum vero quo est nunquam est materiale, nunquam est subiectum, semper est praedicatum. ... Patet ergo quod ipsum quo est de ordine praedicatorum est. Et hoc est quod ipse 'praedicator veritatis et doctor' ait gratiam dei laudans et praedicans: *gratia dei sum id quod sum*<sup>263</sup>.

Though the *quo est* refers in this text to efficient, formal, and final cause<sup>264</sup>, Eckhart distinguishes it especially from the *quod quid est* or essence. Thus, the *quo est* signifies primarily the act to be. Eckhart writes explicitly, that the act to be belongs to the order of predicates and cannot be the subject, which relates to the predicate as matter relates to

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<sup>263</sup> LW IV, n. 251.

<sup>264</sup> LW IV, n. 252.

form<sup>265</sup>. But the term ‘ordo praedicatorum’ has also another meaning. The German master alludes to it by calling St. Paul the preacher of truth (*praedicator veritatis*). Hence, our text says: the act to be is of the order of preachers. To know the act to be as actuality of all acts, even as intelligibility in relation to the mind, is of the order of preachers. Maybe, even the negative theology, which flows from this understanding of being, is a property of this order. But this order, having the grace to stand in the service of the act to be and the hidden act to be, shares its property by preaching: it is the nature of every act – and especially of the actuality of all acts – to communicate itself insofar as this is possible<sup>266</sup>.

**Summary:** Eckhart discusses the knowability of God by presupposing two principles: 1. The act to be is God. 2. The divine nature is the hidden act to be. This essay tries to enquire into the meaning of these two principles. The first part of the essay considers the context and the demonstration of the principal thesis, ‘the act to be is God.’ Eckhart distinguishes the divine act to be from the created act to be, which he calls formal actuality of all forms or common act to be. This created plenitude is received and limited by creatures, which have their own act to be. The intellect receives common being by understanding it. The second part of the essay unfolds the human understanding of being. The human mind recognizes common being and the other transcendentals by a natural habit impressed by God. Any other knowledge is received through sensual experience. Eckhart calls the natural habit of understanding the ‘spark of reason’. This kind of cognition refers to apprehension, i. e., the human mind apprehends being in everything or apprehends everything qua being. Nevertheless, when we want to know whether this or that thing is, we have to express this existence in a judgment of the form: ‘S is.’ In this case, ‘being’ is not the copula but the predicate of the proposition, which manifests, that all things we know exist by participation. The third part shows how Eckhart applies this understanding of being to God. On the one hand, he distinguishes faith and reason inasmuch as faith in revelation transcends the natural understanding of being. For instance, the Trinity is a mystery to which human understanding has no access though we have to try to understand it in a deeper way once it is revealed. On the other hand, Eckhart maintains, that the transcendentals are the divine essence. However, we understand the transcendentals as

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<sup>265</sup> This understanding of the act to be counterbalances Scotus’ description of ‘(essential) being’ as most determinable subject underlying any predication. The confrontation with Scotus’ theology marks Eckhart’s way of thinking (cf. R. J. MAYER, «Meister Eckharts erste *Quaestio Parisiensis*», pp. 435-437, p. 462).

<sup>266</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De potentia* q. 2, a. 1: «natura cuiuslibet actus est, quod seipsum communicet quantum possibile est. ... Agere vero nihil aliud est quam communicare illud per quod agens est actu, secundum quod est possibile.»

they are found in creatures. Though the transcendentals signify perfections belonging to God by essence, their mode of signification belongs to creatures. Thus, Eckhart's philosophy and theology of the divine names lie between two extremes. He affirms that the transcendentals are God, and denies that they are God: «God is not good, nor better, nor best. If someone said, that God were good, he would do him the same injustice as if he called the sun black». But this negation refers to the mode of signification of the transcendentals and is rooted in the affirmation of the act to be. Nevertheless, the negation emphasizes that human understanding has no access to God's mode of existing. God is the hidden act to be. Eckhart experiences this darkness of human understanding regarding the divine act to be because the spark of the soul is the measure of any understanding. Inasmuch as the spark cannot reveal God as he is in himself, our understanding falls short of apprehending the divine essence in this life.

**Key words:** Meister Eckhart, metaphysics, understanding of being, creation, negative theology, analogy, faith and reason, spark of reason.

**Sommario:** Eckhart tratta il tema della conoscibilità di Dio presupponendo due principi: 1. L'atto di essere è Dio. 2. La natura divina è l'atto nascosto di essere. Il presente saggio cerca di investigare il significato di questi due principi. Nella prima parte, consideriamo il contesto e la dimostrazione della tesi principale, "l'atto di essere è Dio". Eckhart distingue l'atto di essere divino da quello creato, che egli chiama l'attualità formale di tutte le forme ossia l'atto comune di essere. Questa pienezza creata è ricevuta e limitata dalle creature, che hanno quindi il proprio atto di essere. L'intelletto riceve l'essere comune comprendendolo. Nella seconda parte del saggio, sviluppiamo la comprensione umana dell'essere. La mente umana conosce l'essere comune e gli altri trascendentali grazie all'abito naturale in essa impresso da Dio. Ogni altra conoscenza viene ricevuta attraverso l'esperienza sensibile. Eckhart chiama l'abito naturale dell'intelletto la "scintilla della ragione". Questo tipo di conoscenza si riferisce all'apprensione: la mente umana apprende l'ente in ogni cosa o apprende come ogni cosa come ente. Nondimeno, quando desideriamo conoscere se questa o quella cosa esiste, dobbiamo esprimere questa esistenza in un giudizio la cui forma è "S è". In questo caso, "ente" non è la copula ma il predicato della proposizione, il che manifesta che tutte le cose che conosciamo esistono per partecipazione. Nella terza parte, mostriamo come Eckhart applica questa comprensione dell'ente a Dio. Da una parte, egli distingue fede e ragione di tal modo che la fede nella Rivelazione trascende la comprensione naturale dell'ente. Ad esempio, la Trinità è un mistero al quale l'intendimento umano non ha accesso, anche se dobbiamo provare a capirlo in un modo più profondo, una volta che è stato rivelato. D'altra parte, Eckhart mantiene che i trascendentali sono l'essenza divina. Però, noi comprendiamo i trascendentali nella misura in cui vengono trovati nelle creature. Benché i trascendentali significhino perfezioni che appartengono a Dio per essenza, il modo in cui vengono significati appartiene alle creature. Quindi la filosofia e la teologia dei nomi divini, in Eckhart, sta fra due estremi. Egli afferma che i trascendentali sono Dio, e nega poi che sono Dio: "Dio non è buono, né migliore, né ottimo. Se qualcuno dicesse che Dio fosse buono, gli farebbe la stessa ingiustizia che se chiamasse nero il sole". Ma questa negazione si riferisce al modo di significazione dei trascendentali, e si radica nell'affermazione dell'atto di essere. Al contempo, la negazione sottolinea che l'intendimento umano non ha accesso al modo di esistere proprio di Dio. Dio è l'atto nascosto di essere. Eckhart sperimenta questa oscurità dell'intendimento umano riguardo all'atto di essere divino, perché la scintilla dell'anima è la misura di ogni comprensione. Dato che la scintilla

non può rivelare Dio come egli è in sé stesso, il nostro intelletto viene impedito di apprendere l'essenza divina in questa vita.

**Parole chiave:** Meister Eckhart, metafisica, comprensione dell'ente, creazione, teologia negativa, analogia, fede e ragione, scintilla della ragione.