

ECKHART AND THE QUESTION OF HUMAN NATURE

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The most interesting studies of Eckhart always focus on God as their ultimate object, so why have I decided to talk about Eckhart and the question of human nature? Why should we be interested in human nature? Was Eckhart concerned with our human nature? Does he not constantly call us to abandon our creaturely nature, along with all other creatures, and abide in union with God?

Well, I believe there are several very important reasons why we should explore this question. These may be grouped under three main categories. First, because we live in an age in which our general conceptions of human nature are very different to those of Meister Eckhart and the Middle Ages generally. Second, unless we reflect specifically on the question of human nature, we unconsciously project our modern conceptions into our reading of Eckhart. Third, because religion - all religion - is founded upon the possibility of a radical transformation of our human nature. Eckhart is certainly no exception to this. Many of his most difficult sayings are difficult because they belong to a mode of understanding which transcends our everyday objective mode of knowledge, and so they presuppose a kind of knowing which is founded on a different manner of being to the everyday kind of being and a different kind of relationship of all things to one another than our ordinary notions of things as separate and discrete entities.

Consider for a moment the first of these reasons. What is the modern conception of human nature? There is no consistent notion of man in our time but rather a collection of different and contradictory notions. We have those which come from psychology in which human nature is seen as split between our ordinary conscious lives and hidden or unconscious forces which struggle to rise to the surface. We have the many sociological conceptions of man which try to portray human nature as collective mechanisms. We have scientific notions of man which conceive human nature as essentially the product of instinct and of predetermined biological patterns. We have numerous

philosophical conceptions of man which either attempt to pin human nature down to will or to reason, or which declare that there is no essential human nature at all.

However, there are two features common to all these different notions. The first is that human nature stands outside man or our ordinary experience of ourselves and existence. This is an odd conception but a very important one for our present discussion. It arises from the attempt to make the human subject into an "object" seen as though from outside itself. This is the case even in psychology, where the human subject stands outside his own essence as the passive receptacle or victim of hidden powers and a history greater than himself. Thus we get the double conception of "ego" or "personal self" and our actual "true self" which forever remains unknown. But this "double-self" is also assumed in the sociological and scientific conceptions of man. Whether our essential human nature lies in the unconscious or in genetic mechanisms or in sociological history and conditioning, what we are and what we do is understood to be governed by forces and conditions over which we have no power. Thus the question of our human identity is fraught with a thousand problems. We are called to locate our self-hood outside ourselves and as the product of something other than ourselves. The second feature common to all these notions of human nature is the assumption that our essence is separate from God and from all created things. Thus "God" is held to be either something wholly discontinuous with our selfhood or else merely as a conception without meaning. Likewise, the world and the whole created order is taken to be that which we stand over against, again either as the passive and insignificant observer or as a being who attempts to "conquer" objective reality. And, more recently, this understanding of man as separate from the created order has found its way into ecological thought where the human species is often regarded as an impostor into the natural order. Or again, in the field of social struggle, vast numbers of people are called upon to identify themselves as "victims" of human history - of slavery, of racism or other types of difference and so on.

A simple observation follows from this: however we conceive our selfhood, so we see the world. It is a very simple principle. And however we conceive our selfhood, so we conceive God. Whatever we take ourselves to be determines what we take truth to be.

It is obvious, therefore, that if we do not reflect on these modern conceptions of

human nature and at least call them into question, that we will project them onto our readings of Meister Eckhart, just as we would on any other reading. Here I would suggest that many things that Eckhart says about either the created order or about God strike us as strange or difficult precisely because they break or clash with our modern presuppositions about human nature. And this is not confined only to our readings of Eckhart. We hear Christian leaders within the Church saying that they have problems with certain fundamental words in the Christian tradition, one of them being the word "God". I would suggest that their difficulty is not actually with the word "God", but with God as such because they hold a conception of human nature which clashes with the metaphysical and symbolic ways of speaking of God and relating to God. A limited view of human nature finds God incomprehensible in precisely those features that indicate God *as* God and God alone. So this is why I say we need to seriously reflect upon our conceptions of human nature in our studies of Eckhart.

This brings me to my third reason, which is really the most fundamental. I said that all religion is founded upon the possibility of a radical transformation of human nature. I have deliberately phrased this forcefully because in whatever way religion calls us it carries an implicit demand to transform our manner of being right at its foundations. We are called upon to exist differently, to leave behind completely our whole manner of existing in the ordinary sense. We are called upon to enter a completely different relationship with everything without any exception. We are called to transcend the world in all its everyday attachments, its joys and sorrows, to exist in a new way, and yet to *return* to our originary being. In this call we are not merely required to adopt a different explanation of things or to believe a different conception of reality, but rather to exist in a new mode and on a new ground which is wholly discontinuous with our present mode of existence and ground of thought and action. This new mode of being is expressed in religious language just as subtle and symbolic as the language about God. This is very evident in the New Testament, not only in such terms as "new man" or to be "born again", but also in the parables about the Kingdom of heaven where their sharpness lies in a complete break with or even reversal of the ordinary understanding of human action, human motive, morality, justice, goodness, grace and so on. They are always blatantly contrasted with "this world" and with "worldly wisdom", and it is in these discontinuities that their radical call lies.

So likewise in Meister Eckhart. His teaching about the breakthrough, about abandoning everything of creatures, about understanding, and even about the performance of ordinary actions, calls upon a new mode of being which leaves behind completely our ordinary mode of being and he speaks of this in language which runs counter to our normal grasping of existence. We are very often perplexed by his language about God - about the Nothing for example - and a lot of attention has rightly been given to this by scholars of Eckhart. Yet, if I may put it so, implicit in all these perplexing sayings about God is a whole anthropology about which less has been said. To put that more forcefully, Eckhart calls upon us to *be* in a different manner in order to grasp what he says about God - because talk of God is unlike talk of any other thing and because for man to speak of God meaningfully requires that man exists in a completely new manner. Thus all ordinary talk about God is not talk about God at all. It is talk about a second-hand concept, a mere notion ungrounded in God Himself. And in such speaking it is not really a self that speaks but only a conceiving mind. If I may put it strongly, the only right speaking of God is a speaking which arises within God and is God Himself speaking. There is no talk of God from *outside*. To rephrase Tillich, God is not an entity among other entities, a thing among things, an idea among ideas. And so the manner of knowing God is not similar to the manner of knowing any other thing. This is a given of every religion. What is unique to Christianity is that God has spoken Himself through His Son and His Son, His Word, is Himself. Thus for man to be born in Christ is for man to unite in God's own saying of Himself.

What stands in sharp relief in Eckhart is that for man to be born in Christ is also a breakthrough of man into himself, to his own true being. In Sermon 46 in the Walshe translation Eckhart says "whoever would enter God's ground, His inmost part, must first enter his own ground, his inmost part, for none can know God who does not first know himself".

This short passage is worth reflecting on. It bears the stamp of an ontology or an understanding of being quite different to that of our time, and therefore we must beware of translating it into what we might suppose is equivalent. The key is in the word "ground". To know oneself is to "enter one's own ground", which is "inmost". This inmost ground is not a psychological place. It is not in the mind. Rather it is the region of being and so lies beneath everything and is that out of which everything comes forth, including the world and the mind and all its psychological events. It is very helpful to try to grasp something of the

ontological tradition of which Eckhart is here an heir. In our time there is a confusion of "being" with "existence". We ask, for example, "Does God exist?" The answer, strictly speaking, is "No, because God pre-exists". That is to say, God is the origin and source of existence, and this is because for something to exist means that it stands forth from being is a specific form. Whatever exists has form. Existence therefore refers to what Eckhart calls the creatures, which are distinguished by measure: "whatever enters the soul is ruled by measure" (Walshe, Sermon 45). Existence is the realm of difference and distinction. Being, on the other hand, has no distinctions and is that out of which all distinctions stand forth. An analogy of the difference between being and existence would be space and objects in space. Without pure space no object would have a where to stand out. Yet space is not changed by any objects which stand forth within it. At the same time "pure space" is virtually inconceivable because the mind grasps only distinctions or measures. So likewise as "existences" or as distinct persons we cannot grasp being or what Eckhart calls our inmost ground. Our inmost ground is our whence or origin out of which all that makes us particular or distinct stands forth. However, whatever makes us particular or distinct is ontologically later than our ground and is subject to change. In short, in Eckhart's language it is "the creature".

Because of this confusion of existence with being in our time we have turned ontology upside down. We take that which stands forth in existence as *first* and try to consider essence or being as an effect or quality of existences. Thus "pre-existence" means for us simply "non-existence" and "non-being". Therefore we think of our selfhood as an attribute or quality which follows on from our existence. Or we think of things as "self-evident" which actually belong to the realm of changeable existence. In short, we try to get at being and essence by inference from existences. And in our own interior lives we try to get at our selfhood by inference from our characteristics and qualities, and so, for example, in psychology our selfhood is regarded as the product of our experiential history. But this is all upside-down when compared to Medieval ontology. Then - and this is very evident in Eckhart - pure or primary being was understood to be first and that alone which was self-evident. Being was understood as that which alone stood in unmediated presence to itself, for it was pure presence as such. And this is the reason why God is so often equated with pure being until the close of the Middle Ages. Being was not regarded as an object among objects, nor a subject among subjects, but that alone which stood forever in complete knowledge of itself as the very act of being itself. This is very evident in Eckhart's understanding of the Divine Trinity, and it is precisely because we do

not conceive the primacy of pure being as disclosed to itself as its very essence that we find Eckhart's discussion of the Divine Trinity so difficult. The unity or singularity of being is no longer part of our theological or philosophical vocabulary, and so we think of *everything* as qualified, plural and relative - including God.

And so likewise when we come to think of our selfhood or human nature. We commence from the opposite end of the chain of existence to that of Eckhart, turning it upside-down in the process. We suppose that we are *first* conditioned, *first* mortal, *first* bound by our history and so on. Consequently we regard the agencies of our minds as our selfhood and our experiences as the ground of our actions and manner of existing. And so it happens that it can be asked "Do we have souls?" The soul, or our being, is thought about as though it were an optional extra added on to what we take to be our "real existence". We suppose, quite wrongly, that this "real existence" is patently self-evident, and that supposition prevents us turning our gaze backward to what Eckhart calls our inmost ground. And it follows from this, that we cannot direct our gaze yet further back to that which underlies our own inmost ground, which is God. For modern man, God is somewhere "out there" or just before the history of the cosmos. And so, instead of God being that which is nearest to us - so near that Bonaventure declares that he will know himself better in God than in himself - God is now generally thought of as that which is furthest from us, as the most remote thing possible.

An interesting way in which we can see this reversal is also shown in the idea of God being in the unconscious, where the unconscious is understood to have replaced the metaphysical realm. The fall of the heavens and the symbolic meaning of the visible world into the unconscious represents very clearly the loss of the immediate presence of being or the likeness of God in the creation. According to Eckhart, however, God is neither within us nor outside us. He says that God's wisdom enters the soul, and this is God's work in the soul, but God does not enter the soul to unite with it. Rather the soul must go into God to unite with God, and this is because this work of God is performed within God Himself. Thus Eckhart says

"Here God is acting above the power of the soul, not as in the soul, but divinely as in God. Here the soul is plunged into God and baptised in the

divine nature, receiving the divine life therein and taking upon herself the divine order, so that she is ordered according to God." (Sermon 45, Walshe)

Since, in Eckhart's understanding, and that of the Middle Ages generally, the union of the soul with God is a *return of the soul to itself and to its ground*, it makes no sense to talk of that ground coming into the soul, for how could the origin and source come into that which arises from it and exists by virtue of going out from it? How could space enter into a form when space is the pre-existent ground of every form and that upon which the existence of all forms wholly depends? To put that another way, the *absence* of union with God consists exclusively of the soul's moving out of its ground, or forgetting its essence, in identifying itself with what is creaturely, in attachment to the things of sense perception, in attributing being to existence and so on. Eckhart tells us that the return of the soul to God consists in it stripping itself naked of every creaturely or existent thing, of everything that makes it "something", and of every kind of relationship. For in being "something" it stands over against God. Only when it becomes "nothing" by itself does it return to the ground of being, and when it returns to this state of nothing, of having no attribute, it then becomes similar to God and thus enters into God and becomes conformed to God. So how can attributeless being enter into the changeable and restless soul? To suppose that God can enter the soul is to suppose that God is an entity alongside other entities. It is to reduce God to an object, to a thing, to an agent. But also, and more to the point in our present enquiry, it is to identify the soul itself with its creaturely existence, which in Christian terms is to identify it with its fallen state, as though that were its true essence. And this is yet another consequence of turning ontology upside-down.

For Eckhart the key to God is also the key to human nature. As the ground, the meaning and the end of all things, God is what all things seek, for all things seek rest in the fullness of being. In Sermon 45 (Walshe) Eckhart says:

In the first place let us note and observe how the divine nature makes all the soul's desires mad and crazy for Him, so as to draw her to him. For the divine nature tastes so well to God and pleases him so much - that is: rest - that He has projected it out of Himself to stir up and draw into Himself the natural desires of all creatures. Not only does the Creator seek his own

rest by projecting it and informing all creatures with it, but He seeks to draw all creatures back with Him into their first beginning, which is rest. Also, God loves Himself in all creatures. Thus as He seeks His own love in all creatures, so He seeks His own rest.

Here Eckhart locates the source of all desires in God. It is therefore contrary to Eckhart's understanding of human desire to locate its source in something other than God, or as seeking some object other than God. In our everyday thinking we locate desire in our own minds or hearts or instincts and so we never review the universal ground of desire as such. But Eckhart understands all desire as seeking rest, and rest lies only in God who has never moved from rest in Himself, because that is His nature, and since God loves His own rest abundantly He desires that no creature be apart from that rest, and so all natural desires have rest in God as their true end. All desires, then, are informed by a knowledge of rest and are, so to speak, moved by rest. Thus the rest that all creatures seek is fullness of being. In so far as we have a difficulty with this understanding, that difficulty must lie somewhere in the notion that our being is separate from pure being and exclusive to ourselves. This notion stands in opposition to Eckhart saying here "God loves Himself in all creatures. Thus as He seeks His own love in all creatures, so He seeks His own rest."

The idea of God loving Himself, both in Himself and in all creatures, obviously runs counter to any worldly idea of self-love. But when we move into the realm of Eckhart's ontology it makes perfect sense for pure being to hold absolutely to itself. In the realm of absolutes every principle holds to itself because there is nothing other than itself to hold to. Thus truth holds absolutely to truth, goodness to goodness, justice to justice, rest to rest, and unity to unity. It is only separate being that would be false in holding to itself or loving itself in its separation from being as such. Or again, how could love not love itself? If love did not love itself it would depart from its nature, it would desire to become something else. It is inconceivable to imagine God desiring to become other than Himself, and if He did, then we could conceive of a higher God who had no deficiency of any kind and who therefore sought nothing other than Himself. So, in God, self-love is the principle of unity - unity already completely fulfilled.

But on the human side, so to speak, desire and love appear to seek something other. But Eckhart says that "a man could never feel love or desire for any creature, unless God's likeness were in it" (Sermon 45, Walshe). Thus the

attraction of love and desire has its origin in the likeness of God in creatures. This understanding of the nature of love and its true object can obviously be traced back to Plato's understanding of love seeking absolute Beauty in the *Symposium*. However, Eckhart places a slightly different emphasis in his understanding of God as the ground of being in which every creature has its existence. While Plato represents the ascent of love through a series of more universal forms of beauty, until it arrives at absolute beauty itself, Eckhart represents the movement towards God as a retreat backwards into the ground of our own inmost being. For Plato the ascent of the soul is represented in the form of more refined perceptions of beauty, through a series of higher and higher visions, while for Eckhart it is represented in the form of a stripping off of all *differences* from God, of everything that makes the soul discrete from God, so that, the less it is something, the nearer it comes to God, so that finally it has nothing to distinguish itself from God, and so it can only be conformed to God. The two ways of describing the journey of the soul are not incompatible, but in Eckhart the emphasis is ontological while in Plato it is visionary. In both, however, it is a journey to that which truly *is* away from that which only *partly is* and which is always in the flux of becoming but never in being. In Plato's *Symposium* beauty is selected as that which shines in all things and which draws us to them but which is actually beyond them and whose true nature is finally known through unmediated union, while in Eckhart the likeness of God is selected as that which is the true selfhood of every creature. For Eckhart, God is selfhood as such, or selfhood absolute. And so for Eckhart this journey is a journey back into the ground and origin of every creature into its true selfhood, which is God.

If we say that the true selfhood of every creature is God, does this not amount to a form of pantheism? And is this not the very thing which Eckhart was accused of by the Inquisition? Well, I think the word "pantheism" introduces a confusion into Eckhart's real ontology. To put that more boldly, pantheism is a muddled idea put forward by a form of thinking which does not grasp the real meaning of being as articulated in the Western tradition, or rather does not grasp the problem of the distinction between Being and beings, and beings and existence. There have always been Christian thinkers who cannot conceive the ontological relationship between God and His creation and who can only think of them as wholly separate from one another. This is not so surprising since the attempt to understand the ontological relations between God and creatures involves an abandonment of the everyday notions of relations between creatures. Eckhart, however, never confuses God with the creation. Quite the contrary. He insists

frequently that we leave behind all that is creaturely. Yet at the same time he insists that our inmost ground, should we be so bold as to return to it, involves ceasing to be a creature and thus, by becoming no distinct thing, approaching the likeness of God. And when every distinction is removed the word "I" becomes said out of God. Or, more boldly, there is no "God" over against "I".

Here we must tread very carefully. This is not pantheism, nor is it hubris or a conflation of man into God. It is the language of mystical union - which I said earlier employs of human nature a language as symbolic as the language about God. We are in the region of primal language itself and are really called upon to abandon all ordinary notions of language in which it is regarded as an artificial invention of man. But that is perhaps a topic for another discussion altogether. Leaving that on one side, I would like to present us with a question which comes at this problem of the separation of creatures from God in another way. The question is a rhetorical one and so I ask you to simply take it that way. If God is infinitely good, infinitely abundant and infinitely loving, when He created the world do we suppose He would give all creatures less than He might give to them? Did God hold back something just for Himself? Did God think to Himself "I will keep for myself just one thing which will keep me distinct from all I have made and thus show to all my creatures that I am better than all of them and also that I am the big boss of the universe?" Now if God thought like this, could we still regard Him as infinitely good? Or would we say there was a bit of meanness there? Consider further, what is the one thing He would most likely hold back for Himself if He thought such a thing? What is the one thing that he could deny to creatures which would make them less than they might be? One thing might be immortality, but I think there is something even more fundamental than that and that is absolute selfhood or pure being. Or, to put it another way, Himself. Suppose that God gave to creatures every possible thing but kept Himself back for Himself. Suppose that God gave to creatures a certain finite measure of being and autonomy but not all of it. What would a fragment of pure being or a fragment of autonomy amount to? I suggest it would amount to nothing at all. It would be a fraudulent being and a false autonomy, a mere illusion of either. There can be no such thing as a fragment of being any more than there can be a fragment of a Euclidean point. Now I can think of no reason at all for God to think and do this, apart from just being stingy.

Such is the rhetorical question. I realise it verges on blasphemy and mean no offence. But it makes us ponder because we know perfectly well that God

could not possibly have held back something to Himself which out of infinite love He would have given to the creation. It drives us to consider what it says of God to hold that the creation is less than God might have made it, for if we say the creation is imperfect or impoverished we imply an imperfect and impoverished creator. If we speak dismissively of the created order, then we speak dismissively of the works of God. So it is very provocative to assume just for a moment the ontological position of the Middle Ages where God is taken as the first and most self-evident reality, or pure being is taken as the starting-point of thought about the created order. We are driven to consider anew the question of the difference between God and creation.

Let us grant then that God held nothing back from His creation. This is Eckhart's position. Nevertheless the creation, as it stands forth as distinct in itself, is in no sense identical to God. And likewise with man. Insofar as he stands distinct as an existent being he is a creature just like all creatures. Yet God has withheld nothing of Himself from either man or creation, not even His selfhood. So how is this? The answer lies in the fact that, in creating all things, God has not become different in Himself or other than His original self. If God became created, then He would have suffered a modification of His selfhood. But also, if creation came forth after a time or condition in which it was not, then it must necessarily be distinct from God and be deficient in being and in autonomy. So where lies the resolution to this? According to Eckhart it is this. The true being of the creation and of man lies not in their created distinctions but as totally indistinct in God. Eckhart says:

Here note that when we say that all things are in God [that means that] just as he is indistinct in his nature and nevertheless most distinct from all things, so in him all things in a most distinct way are also at the same time indistinct. The first reason is because man in God is God. Therefore, just as God is indistinct and completely distinct from a lion, so too man in God is indistinct and completely distinct from a lion, and likewise with other things. Second, because everything that is in something else is in it according to the nature of that in which it is. Third, because just as God is totally indistinct in himself according to his nature in that he is truly and most properly one and completely distinct from other things, so too man in God is indistinct from everything which is in God ("All things are in him"), and at the same time completely distinct from everything else.

Fourth, according to what has been said note that all things are in God as spirit without position and without boundary. Further, just as God is ineffable and incomprehensible, so all things are in him in an ineffable way. Again, every effect is always in the cause in a causal way and not otherwise.

It may help if we put this in the ontological terms we discussed earlier. If we think of the "indistinctness" of God as pure or absolute being, then God is distinct from every existent thing - for to exist is to stand forth distinct as a particular nature and distinct from pure or absolute being. But since God in his pure being has never commenced any action so all things stand eternally within God and indistinct from pure being. Thus what we normally regard as the created order amounts to the coming forth into distinction all those things which are eternally indistinct within pure being or God. So we may infer a difference between the "created" existence of man and the "eternal being" of man within God. It is to this eternal being of man within God that Eckhart calls us when he speaks of him entering or returning to his inmost ground. His path back to God is through his own self-knowledge in the sense that his true self-knowledge is in his indistinct being in God. His knowledge of his creaturely nature is not, strictly speaking, self-knowledge but only creaturely knowledge or knowledge of his distinctness. This creaturely knowledge is not knowledge of selfhood. So the error of man, in considering his nature, lies in identifying his selfhood with his creatureliness, with his separateness from himself in God. And so man is not deprived of anything which God might have given to him, for he exists indistinct from God within God. According to Eckhart's understanding of man, God has already from eternity wholly given Himself to man.

Thus, if we assume when we begin an enquiry into Eckhart's understanding of human nature that our selfhood consists in a foundational separateness from God, or that it is finite or conditioned, or the product of material history, then we find that we are not really thinking of selfhood itself but of something else to which we would be erroneously attributing the word self. There is a kind of unspoken custom that supposes that religion reveals to us things of the spiritual realm and that the secular branches of knowledge inform us of the created realm, but we have seen in this brief enquiry into human nature that this custom is misguided, and that religious knowledge does not stand in a complimentary relation to natural knowledge but fundamentally challenges its presuppositions about the true ground of reality. One of the reasons for this, as I suggested

earlier, is that religion - at least in the hands of a great mystic such as Meister Eckhart - holds the ontological order of things the opposite way up to natural knowledge. Thus, for example, in natural philosophy the One or the principle of unity remains a merely speculative concept, whilst for mystical theology it is the point of departure for all thought and wisdom and that to which all natural processes ultimately tend. For the Medieval mystics the One, or pure being, was not regarded as something far off, but rather as that which is so close and so immediate that it was hidden from view only so long as the soul remained distracted by outward objects and concerns.

It is perhaps a curious thing that, living in an age in which so much is said and written about human nature, in which we have new disciplines such as social anthropology and psychology, we know so little of what is most fundamental about selfhood. But all these disciplines seek only knowledge of man as an object, as an entity to be defined and measured in various ways. The immediacy of selfhood, its simple presence in itself, is put aside and dismissed as "merely subjective", meaning by that phrase that it is arbitrary and ephemeral. The objective and the measurable alone is worthy of study. But *for whom* is all this objective knowledge of such value? Who is this being who seeks to know and understand everything that comes into sight? Such a question is not asked, or at least rarely asked. And so our minds never come to rest simply in that which we are and explore our own presence to ourselves, that which we each can know only for and within ourselves because no outside agency can disclose our own being to us. But Eckhart says "none can know God who does not first know himself", and this self knowledge is not a theoretical, inferential or conceptual knowledge but the action of "entering his own ground". According to Eckhart, entering this realm is the gate to the presence of God, and so the human capacity to reflect back upon ourselves is the key to man's spiritual potential, and where that capacity is pursued so also is the spiritual life. Therefore the question of human nature as we find it presented in the Christian mystics offers us a path towards a fuller understanding of many of the more difficult and subtle insights they have into God and the relation of the human essence to the pure being of God. By commencing here we have the advantage of beginning from that which is already closest to God.