The Significance of Meister Eckhart's View of the Self for Psychoanalytic Theories of Subjectivity: A Radical Hermeneutic Study

Mark Kroll-Fratoni

Follow this and additional works at: https://dsc.duq.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Immediate Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillipsg@duq.edu.
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEISTER ECKHART’S VIEW OF THE SELF FOR
PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVITY:
A RADICAL HERMENEUTIC STUDY

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Mark Kroll-Fratoni

August 2013
Copyright by

Mark Kroll-Fratoni

2013
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEISTER ECKHART’S VIEW OF THE SELF FOR
PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVITY:
A RADICAL HERMENEUTIC STUDY

By

Mark Kroll-Fratoni

Approved June 14, 2013

Will Adams, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Chair)

Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

Marie Baird, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Theology
(Committee Member)

James Swindal, Ph.D.
Dean and Professor
McAnulty College and Graduate
School of Liberal Arts

Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.
Chair, Psychology Department
Associate Professor Psychology
ABSTRACT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEISTER ECKHART’S VIEW OF THE SELF FOR

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVITY:

A RADICAL HERMENEUTIC STUDY

By

Mark Kroll-Fratoni

August 2013

Dissertation supervised by Will Adams, Ph.D.

This interdisciplinary, theoretical dissertation puts Meister Eckhart and psychoanalysis (in particular, the work of Jacques Lacan) in dialogue in order to examine the question of the self. It extends the success of recent Buddhist-psychoanalytic dialogues on the self into the neglected area of Christian mysticism. The author reviews the extant literature on psychoanalysis and mysticism, summarizes Freud and Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, and examines the existing literature on Meister Eckhart and the self. Then, the author undertakes a commentary of an especially significant passage in one of Eckhart’s sermons using an interpretive method which brings together “radical hermeneutics,” a form of hermeneutics developed by the American philosopher of religion John Caputo (1987, 2000) with Lectio Divina and centering prayer, two Christian contemplative practices.
Based on the commentary, the author presents a fresh understanding of Eckhart’s view of the self which emphasizes the unity between the soul and God in the *process* of God’s birth in the soul (*Gottesgeburt*). Then, some of the key themes of Eckhart’s sermons are put in dialogue with key Lacanian concepts – e.g., properties (*eigenschaften*) with symptoms, detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) with castration, and living without why (*ohne Warum*) with jouissance – in order to explore the significance of Eckhart’s view of the self for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. Additionally, the discussion includes clinical vignettes in order to suggest implications for the practice of psychotherapy. The dissertation concludes that psychoanalysis and mysticism are guided by a similar logic and structure, as they are both oriented around processes of change.
DEDICATION

To Dr. David Kangas, without whose passion and inspiration this project never would have been conceived.

And to Katharina Kroll-Fratoni, without whose love and support this project never would have been brought to fruition.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my director, Dr. Will Adams, who has been an incredible guide through this process. He has read my work closely, provided helpful feedback, and offered moral support on countless occasions. I am truly lucky to have had a director who allowed me such great latitude in developing ideas and, at the same time, provided direction which contributed so much to the final product. In addition to all his work on the project itself, I would also like to thank Will for his enthusiasm about and promotion of my work. Finally, I would like to thank Will for being willing to take the time to do a readings course with me on psychoanalysis and mysticism in spring 2009, which laid the foundation for my dissertation proposal.

My two other committee members also deserve special thanks. I have learned so much from Dr. Leswin Laubscher over the course of my time at Duquesne. In particular, his course on Derrida in my first semester of graduate school – probably the first course on Derrida ever offered in a psychology department – has exercised a profound influence on my intellectual development and offered an opportunity to wrestle with Derrida’s ideas in a paper that became my first publication. The influence of Dr. Laubscher’s Derrida course is evident most prominently in this dissertation’s method section but is in the background throughout. Dr. Laubscher’s feedback on this project has been especially helpful in calling into question moments when it seemed as if I’d succumbed to the mystical temptation of believing I’d glimpsed the secret, and he brought me back to the radical doubt – and, therefore, faith – which is at the heart of mysticism on the other side of deconstruction.
I am honored that my other committee member, Dr. Marie Baird, has lent her expertise in Christian mysticism and Continental philosophy of religion to this project. Her course on Levinas in Duquesne’s Theology department provided me with a valuable opportunity to explore how my background in Continental philosophy of religion could be brought into dialogue with my current studies in psychology – a dialogue which has culminated in this dissertation. Her feedback at the proposal meeting in particular pushed me to improve the project and contributed to my decision to focus on Eckhart, which lent the project a rigor it otherwise would not have had.

I would like to thank the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts for their selection of my dissertation for a dissertation fellowship which provided financial support for this project from fall 2011 to spring 2012. The freedom the fellowship gave me to focus on the dissertation and to make the most of the research opportunities that were available to me during my time in Germany greatly contributed to the quality of the final product.

Duquesne University’s Office of International Programs deserves special thanks for their organization of my study abroad experience through their partnership with the University of Cologne, which was originally a Dominican school founded by Albert the Great, where Meister Eckhart himself studied. This exchange allowed me to take very intensive German classes for free at the University of Cologne during 2010-2011, without which I never would have been able to achieve fluency as quickly as I did. I would like to say “Danke schön” to all of my German instructors, from Dr. Zsuzsa Horváth in Pittsburgh to all of my instructors at the University of Cologne, who contributed so much to my German skills.
Dr. Andreas Speer was kind enough to allow me to audit his course “Meister Eckhart: Lesemeister und Lebemeister” at the University of Cologne during winter semester 2010-2011. As director of the Thomas Institute for Medieval Studies at the University Cologne, he also allowed me to conduct research and write at the Thomas Institute (located on Meister-Ekkehart-Straße) during my time in Cologne, which also houses the Meister Eckhart Archive. Access to these original Middle High German sources greatly enhanced my project. I would like to thank Dr. Maxime Mauriège for allowing me to sit in on his discussion section of Dr. Speer’s course and for our conversations in the Thomas Institute, which forced me to consider some very fundamental issues to my project at an early stage of the writing.

I would also like to thank the Austrian psychoanalyst Dr. Georg Gröller for contacting me to send me his chapter on Meister Eckhart and Lacan, the only work of which I am aware which specifically put Eckhart and Lacan in dialogue prior to this dissertation. I have really enjoyed our email exchange and hope to meet someday in person. As he said once in an email, it doesn’t happen very often that two people independently arrive at such a unique (some might say esoteric) research topic, and I have especially appreciated his feedback on my ideas given his immersion in the same literature.

Dr. Michael Meyer zum Wischen, the founder and director of the Cologne Academy for Lacanian Psychoanalysis, deserves special thanks for many reasons. The enthusiastic welcome I received from him to the Lacanian scene in Cologne gave me an intellectual community which afforded me opportunities to receive feedback for the ideas I was working on in my dissertation, including an invitation to present some of my
preliminary findings at a conference in November 2011. In addition to this intellectual support, however, I would like to thank Michael and his family for their friendship and support.

There are many others whom I would like to thank for making me feel at home in Cologne, where the bulk of the writing occurred. First and foremost, I would like to thank my in-laws, Joachim, Heide, and Lisa Kroll (and Lisa’s boyfriend, Rainer Dupré) for welcoming me into their family. I would like to thank my boss at the Max Planck Institute for Social Research, Dr. Jürgen Feick, for his friendship, support, and countless pots of tea. I would also like to thank all of the friends I made as an exchange student from around the world, who made my exchange student experience so special. Alice Dananai deserves special mention for writing a detailed summary of a French article I needed for my dissertation.

Additionally, I would like to thank my two research assistants, Gloria McGillen and Ashley Gill, for their instrumental assistance to this project. Gloria helped me prepare materials before I left for Germany and was unsure of the availability of English-language sources there. Ashley helped me by sending me scanned documents while I was on my internship in Wyoming, an hour and a half from the nearest university library. I don’t know what I would have done without the two of them.

I would like to thank Dr. Bruce Fink for his courses at Duquesne, including his willingness to do an independent study in which we met to discuss Lacan’s Seminar VII, which gave me a unique opportunity to grapple with a primary text by Lacan with Bruce as a guide. His courses, clinical supervision, and books have contributed immeasurably to my understanding of Lacan and laid a solid foundation for my further study of Lacan for
this project. Although he was not directly involved in this dissertation, the numerous references to his work are a testament to his influence on it. That said, to paraphrase what Bruce writes when acknowledging his mentors in *The Lacanian Subject*, this dissertation’s presentation of Lacanian concepts is in no sense a summary of his views; indeed, he would no doubt take issue with various interpretations proffered here. Bruce’s presence in the psychology department will truly be missed.

Speaking of the psychology department, I would like to thank Duquesne’s psychology department as a whole for giving me the opportunity to write a theoretical dissertation on Meister Eckhart and Lacan – something I doubt I could have undertaken at any other psychology department in the world. My time as a graduate student in Pittsburgh will always be special to me, as will the psychology department. I am so grateful for the courses, clinical training, and personal relationships I had while at Duquesne. I wish you all the best and hope to remain in touch.

Dr. Kevin Smith, a Duquesne alumnus and my external supervisor during my final year of clinical training in Pittsburgh, deserves special thanks for his close reading of and feedback on this project. Although Kevin’s name is not officially on this project, he has really been an honorary reader, and his background in psychoanalysis, Continental philosophy of religion, and contemplative practice made him an ideal interlocutor. I learned so much about clinical work from my time in supervision with him and about contemplative practice from attending a centering prayer group with him.

I also want to thank my parents, Anita and Keith Davis and Mark and Kelley Fratoni. Their love and encouragement during this project has been a much-needed source of support. I am grateful to my mom and stepdad, Anita and Keith Davis, for
providing me with a dissertation retreat at their home in the mountains of Western North Carolina during a crucial phase of writing in summer 2012. They also deserve special thanks for their patience and understanding when my phone calls became more sporadic while working full-time on internship and finishing my dissertation on the weekends.

The love and support of my wife, Katharina Kroll-Fratoni, has been invaluable. She has been there through many “dark nights of the soul,” and I doubt that I ever would have completed this project (and my degree) without her. Especially during my internship year, when I was writing all weekend nearly every weekend, her patience was much appreciated. I am really looking forward to spending more time with her post-internship and dissertation! Katharina also deserves special thanks for being a human German-English dictionary – her language skills are truly staggering. She has helped with and checked most of my translations of German quotes that I have included in this dissertation (although responsibility for any errors lies solely with me). I also have Katharina to thank for luring me to her native Cologne, a city which has been so good to me both personally and professionally (much better to me than it was to Eckhart!). Kölle Alaaf!

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. David Kangas for his mentorship during my time studying Continental philosophy of religion at Florida State University. The courses I took with him included a seminar in spring 2006 on “Neoplatonism, Meister Eckhart, and Spiritual Theology,” which first exposed me to Eckhart’s work and planted the seeds for this dissertation. Beyond opening up the world of Continental philosophy to me, I am eternally indebted to David for exposing me to his singular way of thinking and reading, which has so decisively shaped my intellectual development and so profoundly changed
the way I think about and live my life. I learned so much about Eckhart, among other thinkers, from David not only from hearing David’s lectures, but from witnessing the fun and joy with which he approached thinking – *ohne Warum*
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| Abstract | iv |
| Dedication | vi |
| Acknowledgements | vii |
| Chapter 1 – Introduction | 1 |
| The Importance of Psychoanalytic Theories of the Subject | 1 |
| Psychoanalysis and Mysticism | 3 |
| Objectives and Design of the Study | 14 |
| Chapter 2 – Literature Review I: Psychoanalysis and Mysticism | 17 |
| Introduction | 17 |
| Lacan and Zen Buddhism | 23 |
| Lacan’s Engagement with Christian Mysticism | 32 |
| Jacques Lacan and Meister Eckhart | 35 |
| Chapter 3 – Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject | 47 |
| Introduction | 47 |
| The Lacanian Subject: A Brief Introduction | 49 |
| The Subject’s Cause | 64 |
| Extimacy and *das Ding* | 72 |
| Chapter 4 – Literature Review III: Meister Eckhart on the Self | 81 |
| Chapter 5 – Method | 96 |
| Methodology – Introduction | 96 |
| Methodology – Meister Eckhart and Hermeneutics | 104 |
Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Importance of Psychoanalytic Theories of the Subject

The topic of the subject occupies a place of central importance in psychoanalysis. Indeed, this is evident in Freud’s own understanding of the revolutionary implications of his discovery of the unconscious. Freud compared psychoanalysis to the Copernican revolution, which displaced humans’ sense of themselves as occupying the center of the universe. Similarly, psychoanalysis, by introducing the notion of the unconscious, called into question the notion that the conscious ego could be “master in its own house” (Freud, 1917/1966, p. 285). Thus, at stake in the psychoanalytic project is the introduction of an other – the unconscious – at the heart of the self which displaces the centrality of the conscious ego. Just as Copernicus’s heliocentric model called into question humans’ understanding of their own centrality in the universe, Freud delivered a blow against the illusion of the ego’s mastery within the domain of the subject itself.

However, at other times Freud seemed to recoil from the revolutionary implications of his discovery. To follow these implications to their logical conclusion would problematize notions of individual autonomy, agency, and consciousness which would shatter the foundation of modernity. Freud, however radical his discovery, was a man of the Enlightenment who was in some sense troubled by his own discovery. The psychoanalytic goal of making the unconscious conscious (Freud, 1917/1966) represented, in some sense, an attempt to restore the position of the conscious ego. Freud discovered not only the unconscious, but a set of practices and techniques by which it can be brought under conscious control and appropriated by the ego. In this sense, the unconscious as a threat to the ego’s mastery can be understood as merely a negative
moment in Freudian psychoanalysis, which is ultimately transcended. This is, at any rate, the reading of Freud which proliferated in the decades following Freud’s death, promulgated by Anna Freud and the school of ego psychology, which understood the aim of psychoanalysis as strengthening the conscious ego.

At stake in Lacan’s “return to Freud” was a retrieval of the radical dimension of the otherness of the unconscious. The unconscious cannot be colonized or tamed. The self is fundamentally not-whole, irreducibly heterogeneous. Sherry Turkle (1992) sums this up in the following passage:

For generations, people have argued about what was revolutionary in Freud’s theory and the debate has usually centered on Freud’s ideas about sexuality . . . . But Lacan’s work underscores that part of Freud’s message that is revolutionary for our time. The individual is “decentered.” (p. xxxii)

For Lacan, the unconscious represents not simply a negative moment; rather, it is absolutely unassimilable, precluding any attempt by the ego to constitute itself as a unity.

Furthermore, Lacan viewed ego psychology’s attempt to strengthen the ego as not only erroneous; rather, Lacan understood the ego as pathological: “[T]he ego is structured exactly like a symptom. At the heart of the subject, it is only a privileged symptom, the human symptom par excellence, the mental illness of man” (Lacan, 1975/1988, p. 16). Rather than strengthening the conscious ego, Lacanian psychoanalysis aims instead at acceptance of the unconscious. According to Turkle (1992):

Lacan’s critique of ego psychology relates directly to a struggle that touches each individual. To what extent is each of us willing to accept the presence within ourselves of an other, an alien . . . . To what extent are we willing to accept a
subversion of our everyday sense of ourselves as autonomous actors, the makers of our own lives? (p. xxxii)

Thus, Lacan’s critique of ego psychology illustrates the significant consequences for psychoanalytic practice which flow from theoretical differences concerning the self. On the one hand, ego psychologists’ view of the unconscious as an other which is basically assimilable leads them to put forth the strengthening of the ego as the goal of psychoanalysis. In contrast, Lacan’s understanding of the ego as founded on illusion and sharing the structure of a symptom leads him to conclude that the goal of psychoanalysis is the stripping away of the ego and acceptance of the absolute otherness of the unconscious. Consequently, debates surrounding the structure of the subject carry significant implications for psychoanalytic theory and practice and bear directly on what Freud saw as most significant about his discovery of the unconscious.

Psychoanalysis and Mysticism

Lacan’s emphasis on the subject as not-whole and the inability of the ego to constitute itself as a unity raises the question of the position of psychoanalysis within the field of psychology and the sciences in general. So, according to Lacan (1966/2006) in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire”:

[W]e encounter what has already been constituted, with a scientific label, by the name of psychology.

Which I challenge – precisely because, as I will show, the function of the subject, as inaugurated by Freudian experience, disqualifies from the outset what,

---

1 For an examination of the scientific status of psychoanalytic discourse and the relationship between psychoanalysis and science, see Fink (1995), pp. 129-146.
going by the name “psychology,” merely perpetuates an academic framework, no matter how one dresses up its premises.

*Its criterion is the unity of the subject*, which is one of the presuppositions of this sort of psychology; it should even be taken as symptomatic that this theme is ever more emphatically isolated, as if a return of a certain subject of consciousness [*connaissance*] were at stake . . . (pp. 672-673, emphasis added)

Thus, the unconscious *qua* absolute other, which calls into question the unity of the subject for Lacan, also distinguishes psychoanalysis from the scientific discipline of psychology, which presupposes the subject’s unity. The entire edifice of mainstream, natural science psychology stands or falls with the belief in the individual as a discrete unit whose thoughts and behavior are ordered according to an intelligible, in principle predictable, structure.

An understanding of the unconscious as radically other and a concomitant view of the subject as not-whole leads to a fundamental break with mainstream approaches to psychology; however, it also provides an opening for interdisciplinary dialogue with mysticism. Mystics have developed a view of the self which places God as an absolute other at its center, a position structurally analogous to the unconscious in the subject. This connection between contemporary psychoanalytic understandings of the subject and medieval notions of the soul and God may seem arbitrary or anachronistic at first glance; however, the linkages between psychoanalysis and mysticism are substantial. Freud

---

2 The risk of projecting contemporary notions of the subject onto the substantially different worldview represented by Eckhart’s work will be addressed in the Method section. See pp. 100-101.
wrote more about religion than any topic other than sex\(^3\) and, at the end of his life, wrote a note on mysticism, calling it “the obscure self-perception of the realm beyond the ego” (Freud, 1941/1955, p. 300).\(^4\) Lacan (1975/1998) goes so far as to locate his own writing in the mystical tradition.\(^5\) Mysticism offers an extensive literature which has explored, at the level of experience and language, how to approach an other at the heart of the self and, furthermore, what that other means for an understanding of the self and for how to live one’s life.

The value of mysticism for psychoanalysis, in particular with regard to theorizing on the self, has garnered increased attention in recent decades. For example, a substantial body of literature on Buddhism and psychoanalysis has emerged (e.g., Epstein, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008, Rubin, 1996; Molino, 1998a; Safran, 2003; Magid, 2005). However, the particular value of Christian mysticism for psychoanalysis has largely been left unexplored – despite, or perhaps because, Christianity is typically the religion most well-represented in the parts of the world where psychoanalysis is also most prevalent. Due to

\(^3\) This assertion was first made by Ernest Jones (1953, Vol. 3, p. 349) in his biography of Freud, and is also cited by Parsons (1999, p. 3) and Eigen (1998, p. 13).

\(^4\) This quote is included in “Findings, Ideas, Problems,” which is comprised by a series of fragments and notes written in 1938 only a month before Freud’s death and published posthumously in 1941. As such, it is Freud’s last statement on religion. Morgan (2013) provides the citation for the original German source (p. 263, note 5): “Ergebnisse, Ideen, Probleme (London, Juni 1938),” in Gesammelte Werke, chronologisch Geordnet: Siebzehnter Band: Schriften aus dem Nachlaß (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1969), 188.


> These mystical jaculations are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage; they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find – at the bottom of the page, drop a footnote, “Add to that list Jacques Lacan’s Écrits,” because it’s of the same order. (p. 76)
the prominence of the Christian tradition in the West, many tend to associate Christianity exclusively with the established set of doctrines and rituals embodied in the various Christian denominations. The desire for forms of spirituality which are less mediated and lead more directly to an experience of divine presence has led many to Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism. However, the presence of a mystical tradition within Christianity, which has often found itself at odds with the established Church, is unknown to many in the West. For those who were raised in a Christian context – or even those for whom Christianity is the most familiar religious point of reference due to its cultural, historical, and aesthetic resonances in the Western world – mysticism expressed in a Christian vocabulary can carry a unique power. This dissertation aims to extend the fruitfulness of dialogues between psychoanalysis and Buddhism into the neglected area of Christian mysticism – in many ways, the most intuitive and accessible form of mysticism for a Western audience, and yet, the most neglected.

The need for further research on the topic of psychoanalysis and mysticism has been demonstrated by the limitations of the extant literature. According to Meissner (2005), “The vantage from which both psychoanalysis and the psychology of religion have approached mystical experience has generally and appropriately been from the perspective of exclusively psychological meanings and processes” (p. 508). Following Freud, psychoanalysts have traditionally adopted a reductionistic stance vis-à-vis mysticism, rejecting the theological and spiritual framework within which mystical writing positions itself and instead reducing it to psychoanalytic categories.

Specifically, Freud’s interpretation of the “oceanic feeling” in the opening chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents* has exercised a significant influence on the traditional
psychoanalytic characterization of mystical experience as basically regressive. The term “oceanic feeling” was suggested by Freud’s friend and correspondent, the French poet Romain Rolland, who offered it as an alternative to the explanation of the origin of religious consciousness put forth by Freud in *Future of an Illusion*. The oceanic feeling refers to “a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded – as it were, ‘oceanic’” (Freud, 1930/1961, p. 11). Freud compares this state to disturbances in consciousness which are symptomatic of various forms of mental illness: “Pathology has made us acquainted with a great number of states in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly” (p. 13). Ultimately, Freud contends that the sources of the oceanic feeling can be found developmentally in the “infant at the breast” who “does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him” and dismisses it as seeking “the restoration of a limitless narcissism” (p. 13, 20).

William B. Parsons (1999), whose book *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* contains an excellent review of the literature on psychoanalysis and mysticism, sees the “hegemony of the reductive models promoted by Freud” continuing to exercise an influence in ... reductive psychoanalytic studies ranging from Franz Alexander’s early attempt to classify Buddhism as inducing pathological states to the more recent
portrayals of Indian mysticism by J. M. Masson and Narasingha Sil in terms of regression, manic denial, depersonalization, and derealization. (p. 10)

In addition to these classical, reductive psychoanalytic approaches to mysticism, Parsons identifies two additional approaches: an “adaptive school,” which includes studies that “utilize advances in ego psychology and object-relations theory and emphasize the healing, adaptive dimension of mystical experiences,” and a “transformational” school that “utilizes yet goes beyond ‘classic’ and ‘adaptive’ approaches” and includes studies that “display cross-cultural sensitivity and, in calling upon theorists like Bion and Lacan, display a marked sympathy with the transcendent, religious claims of mystics” (p. 11). Whereas the classic school has tended to reduce mysticism to psychoanalytic categories such as regression and narcissism, the adaptive and transformational schools have adopted a more sympathetic view of mysticism.

Indeed, many exponents of these schools tend to look to mysticism as offering something to psychoanalysis which would supplement its deficiencies. Rather than offering a psychoanalytic reading of mysticism, they want to bring psychoanalysis closer to mysticism. This perspective can be traced back to Romain Rolland’s desire to “enlist [Freud] in the creation of a social space for a distinctly religious psychology, a ‘mystical psychoanalysis’” (Parsons, 1999, p. 167). Along these lines, Parsons asserts that as a result of psychoanalytic-mystical dialogues not only will the “self-understanding of mystical traditions” change, but “psychoanalytic models will similarly be subject to

---

6 See Alexander (1931), Masson (1980), and Sil (1991). Also, see Hood (1976) for a critique of regressive explanations of mysticism.

7 Parsons (1999) provides several citations for the “adaptive school” (pp. 183-184, note 32) and for the “transformational school” (p. 184, note 33).
modification” (pp. 168-169). Meissner (2005) echoes this sentiment with his assertion that “the theories and reflections of the mystical theologian remain partial and incomplete without integration with psychoanalytic or other psychological perspectives; conversely, the psychoanalytic grasp of the subjectivity and psychology of mystical experience calls for further integration with theological insights” (p. 511).

While sharing much in common with the “transformational approach” outlined by Parsons, this study differs from the existing literature in several key ways. This dissertation neither offers a psychoanalytic reading of mysticism, nor seeks to revise psychoanalytic theory or technique according to the specifications of mysticism. Rather, by delving deeply into the work of one mystic – Meister Eckhart – and the work of one psychoanalyst – Jacques Lacan – this dissertation seeks to find that which is already mystical in psychoanalysis. Our cue here is taken from John Caputo’s comments on the meaning of the title of his book *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, which is an attempt to explore the connections between Meister Eckhart and Martin Heidegger’s work. In his introduction, Caputo (1986) stresses the importance of the word “element”; in other words, there is an affinity between Heidegger and the mystics without there being a unity or equivalence. He argues that despite the “abyss” that separates Heidegger and mysticism, there is “a certain structural analogy” (p. xvii).

This dissertation takes up the dialogue between psychoanalysis and mysticism in a similar way: It examines the mystical “element” in psychoanalysis. Despite the vast differences in Meister Eckhart and Lacan’s respective worldviews, this dissertation highlights certain structural analogies in how they understand the self. In doing so, it aims to affirm the value of dialogues between psychoanalysis and mysticism not on the ground
that psychoanalysis is deficient in some way and must be supplemented with insights from other traditions; rather, it affirms the value of these dialogues by highlighting the common structures and aims which psychoanalysis and mysticism share. Indeed, this common ground is precisely what makes it possible for psychoanalysis to learn something from mysticism in the first place.

This common ground has been obscured by the tendency of traditional psychoanalytic explorations of mysticism to fixate on mysticism’s supposedly regressive and escapist dimension, as evidenced by various mystical states of consciousness, in contrast to the psychoanalytic emphasis on the reality principle and the centrality of language in the “talking cure.” Thus, psychoanalysis sets itself up in opposition to pre-linguistic, irrational mystical experience. The selection of Meister Eckhart, generally considered one of the greatest exponents of the Christian mystical tradition, as our mystical interlocutor offers several unique advantages and allows us to circumvent this dichotomy.

First, unlike some mystics who describe in great detail their own mystical experiences, Eckhart’s writing does not emphasize mystical experience, which has often been the focus of psychological explorations of mysticism. Rather, Eckhart – who was, in addition to being a mystic, one of the greatest preachers and theologians of his day – presents his mysticism in a form which emphasizes the power of preaching and language to effect change in his audience. While Eckhart certainly had personal experiences of the

---

8 See, for example, the preeminent American scholar of Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn (2001), who asserts that “perhaps no mystic in the history of Christianity has been more influential and more controversial than the Dominican Meister Eckhart” (p. 1).

9 For example, cf. Teresa of Ávila’s (1562/2007) *The Book of My Life.*
direct presence of God, his writing and preaching generally do not describe these experiences. Rather, his writing and preaching attempt to lead the reader/listener to this experience of God in and through language. Eckhart utilizes language in a highly innovative way – indeed, he was one of the founders of the modern German language – in order to produce divine presence as an effect of his discursive strategies. Thus, Eckhart is ideally suited as a mystical interlocutor to circumvent the traditional psychoanalytic characterization of mysticism as a retreat to regressed, pre-linguistic consciousness.

Additionally, Eckhart’s prioritization of birth through his notion of the birth of God in the soul (the Gottesgeburth) over a metaphysic of being or presence means that Eckhart’s mysticism centers on change, which provides a clear point of access to psychoanalysis, whose focus is also processes of change. For Eckhart, becoming one with God does not mean dissolving into a higher being, but becoming one with the act of creating.

---

10 See the following passage from O’Walshe’s introduction to his translation of Eckhart’s (2009) sermons and treatises for a description of the only known passage in Eckhart’s work which may allude to his own mystical experience:

Eckhart was emphatically not the type of mystic who was given to visions: he certainly never speaks of any. But in one sermon (Sermon 19) he does tell us of an experience which seems to be autobiographical. He says, 'It seemed to a man as in a dream – it was a waking dream – that he became pregnant with Nothing, like a woman with child. And in the Nothing God was born: He was the fruit of Nothing.' This little story seems to have a peculiar significance. The impersonal mode of narration is probably due to modesty and also perhaps to the influence of St. Paul, but in view of Eckhart's frequent references to the birth of the Son in the soul, we may well assume he is here telling us of a personal experience. If this is so, it is especially precious to us precisely because of his general reticence about how he came to experience his mystical insights. (p. 16, emphasis added)
Although this study will focus on Eckhart’s work, it will be helpful at this point to provide a brief biographical sketch of Eckhart’s life. Although Meister Eckhart is not as widely known today as his immediate predecessor and fellow Dominican Thomas Aquinas, during his lifetime (which spanned from c. 1260 to c. 1328), he was one of the most highly regarded theologians and preachers in Europe. Indeed, he earned the title “Meister” by which we know him today by holding the prestigious chair of theology at the University of Paris after Aquinas. Although Eckhart was probably born in Thuringia near Erfurt, the city of Cologne played an especially important role in his life. He came to Cologne c. 1280 to study at the Dominican school once led by Albert the Great (the precursor to the University of Cologne), where Eckhart may have come into contact with Albert himself, or at the very least with people who had known Albert personally and were inspired by his teaching. After serving in positions in Erfurt, Strasbourg, and again in Paris, he was sent back to Cologne c. 1323, which one commentator has described as “the scene of his downfall” (Colledge, 1981, p. 10). The Archbishop of Cologne, Henry of Virneburg, initiated an inquisitorial process against Eckhart, and in 1327, his writings were condemned. Eckhart’s stature was such that he was able to appeal to the pope, and

---

11 For a more comprehensive biographical description, see Colledge (1981), from which much of the information presented here has been taken.

12 Much of this dissertation was written in Cologne, which remains a hub for international research on Eckhart, and the Thomas Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Cologne houses The Meister Eckhart Archive, which I used for my research. There is even a “Meister-Ekkehart-Straße” in Cologne, which is the street where the Thomas Institute is located – really the least they can do for Eckhart, after what happened to him in Cologne.
he was tried again in Avignon (at that time the seat of the papacy). By the time his teachings were condemned again in 1329, Eckhart had already died.

While Aquinas became St. Thomas, the rulings against Eckhart condemned his works to obscurity for centuries, and his reputation within the Catholic Church has only in recent decades begun to be rehabilitated – a prominent example of this rehabilitation being Pope John Paul II’s mention of Eckhart’s work as “a model for Christian meditation” (Drazenovich, 2003). Despite the condemnation of his works, Eckhart exerted a powerful influence on other Rhineland mystics, like Johannes Tauler and Henry Suso, and his ideas served as an inspiration to later German philosophers, such as Hegel and Heidegger. Furthermore, his vernacular sermons, preached in Middle High German, were so linguistically innovative that they contributed to the development of the modern German language.

On the psychoanalytic side, by focusing on Lacan’s theory of the subject, we have also chosen a psychoanalytic interlocutor who is not only sympathetic to mysticism, but who locates his own work in the mystical tradition. Furthermore, several key Lacanian concepts resonate with mysticism, which will be discussed in detail in Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject. These include “extimacy,” Lacan’s (1986/1992) neologism designating “an intimate exteriority” which is meant to denote a form of otherness which, paradoxically, lies at the heart of the subject (p. 139). Another Lacanian concept which will help us build a bridge to mysticism is the “other jouissance,” a form of enjoyment beyond the limits imposed by the Oedipus complex, which Lacan explicitly links to mystical experience (Lacan, 1975/1998). Another opening for dialogue with mysticism in Lacan’s work is offered by his critique of the ego as a structure founded on
an illusory identification with the wholeness of the child’s image in the mirror (Lacan, 1966/2006, pp. 75-81).

However, beyond any particular concepts or themes in Lacan’s work, we have turned to Lacan because, like Eckhart, he attempts to perform in his writing and seminars the form of (psychoanalytic) awareness which is also the goal of his teaching. As in the work of Eckhart and other mystics, Lacan’s writing – and, dare we say, preaching – circles around an absence. For the mystics, this absence is the God who cannot be reduced to human concepts (what Eckhart calls the Godhead, Gottheit); in the case of Lacan, this absence goes by the name of the Real, that which is beyond the Symbolic.13 Lacan takes up the same challenge as the mystics: How can we say the unsayable? And, even further, how can we express this absent, unsayable other in and through language? Thus, both the content and form of Lacan’s thought make him an ideal interlocutor for a dialogue between mysticism and psychoanalysis.

Objectives and Design of the Study

This dissertation has two main objectives. First, it aims to formulate an understanding of Eckhart’s view of the self. This is undertaken via a commentary on a single paragraph of one of Eckhart’s Middle High German (MHG)14 sermons, which is then connected to other passages from throughout Eckhart’s work. Since Eckhart does not develop a systematic theory of the self, and the topic of the self has been relatively

14 Throughout this dissertation, the abbreviation “MHG” will be used to denote “Middle High German,” and the abbreviation “MG” will be used to denote “Modern German.”
neglected in Eckhart scholarship, this represents an original contribution to the Eckhart literature. Furthermore, the use of commentary on particular passages or sermons by Eckhart as a point of departure for exploring major themes of Eckhart’s work is a venerable tradition within Eckhart scholarship, and the legitimacy of this tradition is further supported by the fact that Eckhart himself wrote commentaries on Biblical texts. Additionally, I have incorporated contemplative practice (specifically, Lectio Divina and centering prayer) into my method of commenting on Eckhart’s texts in order to approximate Eckhart’s own approach to reading and interpretation to the greatest extent possible and to read and reflect on Eckhart’s work with the kind of contemplative awareness which his writing aims to evoke.

The second main aim of this dissertation is to interrogate the significance of Eckhart’s view of the self for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. This is carried out by putting Eckhart’s view of the self in dialogue with Lacan’s theory of the subject. As we have already noted, this dialogue is undertaken not to supplement psychoanalysis, but to highlight common structures, themes, and objectives in order to clarify ways in which psychoanalysis already operates according to a certain mystical logic. Since this task involves textual analysis and interpretation, a hermeneutic method has been selected.

---

15 The extant literature on Meister Eckhart and the self will be discussed in detail in Literature Review III: Meister Eckhart on the Self.

16 See, for example, Schürmann (2001), Fox (2000), Largier (1993), and Houedard (2000).

17 See Eckhart (1986) for the full commentary on Exodus and selections from his commentaries on the Book of Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, and John. See Eckhart (1981) for selections from the commentaries on Genesis and John.

18 Eckhart was himself a significant figure in the history of hermeneutics. See Method section, pp. 105-112.
However, radical hermeneutics, a modified form of hermeneutics developed by the American philosopher of religion John Caputo (1987, 2000), has been chosen for several reasons. First, Lacan critiques hermeneutics and sets up psychoanalytic interpretation in opposition to hermeneutic interpretation. Second, Eckhart’s employment of the stance of detachment (MHG: *abegescheidenheit*) and releasement (MHG: *gelâzenheit*) in the interpretation of divine texts involves a passivity and a self-emptying which precludes the reciprocal and dialogical notion of interpretation put forth by “traditional” hermeneutics, as articulated by figures such as Gadamer (1960/1989) and Ricoeur (1965/1970, 1981). Caputo’s radical hermeneutics allows us to employ a hermeneutic method which incorporates the various challenges which Eckhart and Lacan pose to more conventional approaches to hermeneutics.

By putting Eckhart’s view of the self in dialogue with Lacan’s theory of the subject, we will arrive at a perspective on the self that emphasizes its fluidity and openness. The self will be shown to lack any solid substance, foundation, or nature. At stake in this view of the self is a critique of essentialist approaches which regard the self as possessing a fixed essence. Psychoanalysis and mysticism will be understood as united (despite their divergent worldviews) in their focus on processes of change. For both, the task of the self is to open itself to the process of becoming, instead of clinging to established self-representations. Thus, an exploration of the dialogue between Eckhart and Lacan on the topic of the subject will allow us to trace the ways in which the logic of Eckhartian releasement (*gelâzenheit*) suffuses Lacanian psychoanalysis.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review I: Psychoanalysis and Mysticism

Introduction

On the surface, a dialogue between psychoanalysis and mysticism may seem an unlikely project. Freud’s (1930/1961) attitude toward mysticism was dismissive, as is evident in his reductive interpretation of the “oceanic feeling” in Civilization and Its Discontents as a regression to the infantile experience of fusion with the breast. Freud – the rationalist, the champion of Enlightenment, the author of Future of Illusion’s scathing critique of religion and defense of the scientific worldview – seems to represent a Weltanschauung as distant from mysticism as one could imagine. Indeed, even at the level of psychoanalytic technique, Freud seemed to adopt a skeptical stance toward what might be described as “mystical states of consciousness” among his patients:

As much as many may believe that Freudian “depth psychology” concerns itself with just such “depth experiences,” a minimal familiarity with Freud suffices to show that this notion does not in fact feature anywhere in his oeuvre. Psychoanalysis is no mysticism. It is not in search of any “insights” that might emerge from such experiences. For example, when his first hysterical patients enter a state of reduced consciousness and are overcome by hallucinatory experiences, what interests Freud are not these experiences or states themselves, but what the patient says about them. The experiences of the patient have to be articulated, so that the hidden “logos” of which they are the expression can be brought to light. (Haute, 2000/2002, pp. xxxi-xxxii)

The psychoanalytic distrust of mystical states of consciousness expressed in the above quote is founded on a skepticism of any state that purports to be beyond language.
Freud was, after all, the inventor of the “talking cure,” and, as Haute asserts, he was interested in the verbal *articulation* of his patients’ experiences. Furthermore, a dialogue between mysticism and Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst known for his emphasis on language in analysis and his marriage of psychoanalysis with structural linguistics, may perhaps seem most unlikely of all. Indeed, the passage by Haute cited above is based on the following passage from Lacan, which he includes in his footnotes:

> For I assume that you are sufficiently informed about Freudian practice to realize that such states play no part in it; but what is not fully appreciated is the fact that this supposed “depth psychology” does not dream of using these states to obtain illumination, for example, or even assign any value to them along the path it sketches out.

> For that is why – though it is not stressed – Freud steers clear of hypnoid states, even when it comes to explaining the phenomena of hysteria. That is the amazing thing: Freud prefers the hysteric’s discourse to hypnoid states. (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 673)

Thus, Lacan draws the lesson from Freud’s approach to treating hysterics that the focus should be squarely on the patient’s language, rather than the patient’s experience of hypnoid or trance states which present themselves as inaccessible to language.

However, this psychoanalytic antipathy toward mysticism only holds if we accept its presupposition that mysticism is founded on experiences of unity which transcend language. The role of transcendent or ecstatic experience in mysticism is a matter of controversy, however. The renowned scholar of Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn, addresses this point in the context of answering those Meister Eckhart scholars – such as
Heribert Fischer, Kurt Flasch, C.F. Kelley, and Bernard Mojsisch – who question whether Eckhart is a mystic at all and prefer to think of him as a philosopher or theologian because he generally does not speak about personal, transcendent experiences of the divine. McGinn (2001) argues that this position is based on an “inadequate view of mysticism”: 

[M]ost contemporary scholars of mysticism, whatever their disagreements, scarcely think of mysticism in the manner Flasch and his colleagues conceive of it, that is, as something private, purely emotional, irrational, and always based on claims of personal ecstatic experience. If that is the true definition of mysticism, Eckhart is not a mystic, but neither is John of the Cross or a host of the other figures traditionally identified as mystics in the history of the church. Eckhart very rarely speaks in the first person about his own God-consciousness, but he everywhere speaks out of his conviction of the need to become one with Divine Truth. (pp. 21-22)

If ecstatic experiences of unity a la the oceanic feeling do not constitute the hallmark of mysticism, then what does characterize mysticism? In this project, I follow the lead of scholars of mysticism such as Michel de Certeau and Michael Sells who describe mysticism in terms of a certain mode of discourse. In his essay, “Mystic Speech,” Certeau (1976/1986) advises that “in the beginning, it is best to limit oneself to the consideration of what goes on in texts whose status is labeled ‘mystic,’ instead of wielding a ready-made definition (whether ideological or imaginary)” (p. 82). The most significant issues for Certeau in approaching mystical texts are “the formal aspects of the discourse and the tracing movement (the roaming, Wandern) of the writing” (p. 82). This
is the case because, for Certeau, “the other that organizes the text is not the (t)exterior \textit{[un hors-texte]}. It is not an (imaginary) object distinguishable from the movement by which it \textbf{[Es]} is traced” (p. 82). Thus, the absolute, the divine other, which mystic speech tries to express by effacing and erasing itself, is constituted and traced in and through this very movement of language.

Rather than emerging out of an oceanic unity with the divine, for Certeau – whose focus is on the mysticism of the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} Centuries – mysticism “proliferated in proximity to a loss. It is a historical trope for that loss. It renders the absence that multiplies the productions of desire readable” (p. 80). Thus, for Certeau, mysticism is a discourse, a trope, a style of language which emerges precisely in relation to the collapse of established systems of meaning which occurred – not coincidentally – at the moment of the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. For Certeau, mysticism represents a dual response to that loss. On the one hand, it attempts to recuperate the divine presence and the fullness of meaning which was perceived as lost when the Middle Ages came to a close: “Mysticism is the anti-Babel. It is the search for a common language, after language has been shattered. It is the invention of a ‘language of the angels’ because that of man has been disseminated” (p. 88). On the other hand, mysticism represents an open response to the rupture produced by the decline of established structures, an embrace of the possibilities for new birth provided by the collapse of meaning: “The literature of mysticism provides a path for those who ‘ask the way to get lost. No one knows.’ It teaches ‘how not to return’” (p. 80).

Psychoanalytic critiques of mysticism have focused on the regressive dimension of mysticism – i.e., the desire to recover a lost unity with the divine. However, the
critique of mysticism as oceanic unity fails to capture mysticism as departure, a mode of discourse which aims not at the recovery of meaning and presence, but which reveals a path of openness to the surprise of new birth. This is not a return to the security of the breast or the womb, but an embrace of the crisis and risk of birth and coming-into-being.

Indeed, these psychoanalytic critiques of mysticism obscure the many historical and functional similarities between them. Both psychoanalysis and mysticism emerged at moments when established systems of meaning were collapsing and people were turning inward. Sherry Turkle (1992) in Psychoanalytic Politics, her classic sociological examination of the development of psychoanalysis in France, offers a description of the cultural conditions in France which paved the way for psychoanalysis in terms strikingly reminiscent of Certeau’s historiography of mysticism:

When individuals lose confidence in their ability to understand the world around them, when they feel split between private and public identities, and when social “recipes” no longer offer a sense of meaning, they are apt to become anxious consumers of reassurances about their “authentic” subjectivity, their hidden “inner life,” and their deepest interpersonal experiences. People seem to respond to what Max Weber described as “the world’s disenchantment” by becoming fascinated with the mysteries of their interior alchemy. (p. 41)

This passage suggests the nostalgic dimension of psychoanalysis itself, the way in which it emerged in part as a way to find answers within when the answers offered by society were being called into question.

However, just as mysticism represents a radical response to times of change which transcends its nostalgic dimension, psychoanalysis occupies a subversive position
vis-à-vis the societal context out of which it emerged, which is suggested by the following passage from Certeau (1982/1992):

It would not be farfetched to compare the current history of psychoanalysis with the fate of the epistemological configuration of mystics.19 Psychoanalysis, too, was intended for the producers and clients of the “bourgeois” system, which even now supports it, and is bound to their “values” and to the nostalgic longings of an age that is replacing the bourgeois with the technician or the technocrat. Yet psychoanalysis at the same time undermines the presuppositions of the bourgeois system: the a priori of individual units (upon which a liberal economy and a democratic society rest), the privileged status of consciousness (the principle of the “enlightened” society), the myth of progress (a conception of time) and its corollary, the myth of “education” (which makes the transformation of a society

19 In his translator’s note to Certeau’s *The Mystic Fable*, Michael B. Smith explains the unusual word “mystics”:

>The theme of Michel de Certeau’s *Mystic Fable* is *la mystique*. This term cannot be rendered accurately by the English word “mysticism,” which would correspond rather to the French *le mysticism*, and be far too generic and essentialist a term to convey the historical specificity of the subject of this study. There is no need here to retrace the steps by which *la mystique*, the noun, emerged from the prior adjective, *mystique*, as that process is carefully reconstructed in chapter 3. But it may be of some interest to note that this grammatical promotion has its parallel in English, in the development of such terms as “mathematics” or “physics,” fields of inquiry of increasing autonomy, also taking their names from an adjectival forerunner. I have, therefore, in *extremis* adopted the bold solution of introducing a made-up English term, *mystics* (always in italics, to distinguish it from the plural of “a mystic”), to render *la mystique*, a field that might have won (but never did, in English) a name alongside metaphysics, say, or optics. (pp. ix-x)
and of its members the ethical duty of the elite), and so on. But that erosion takes place within the field it destroys by questioning the conditions of its possibility.

(pp. 7-8)

Thus, at stake in both mysticism and psychoanalysis is a form of praxis which enables the stripping away of an old order and the birth of something new – a praxis applied at the level of society as well as the self. The present study examines the significance of a particular Christian mystic’s view of the self – namely, that of Meister Eckhart – for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, with particular emphasis on the work of Jacques Lacan. In this section, we will examine several areas of the literature on mysticism and psychoanalysis in order to situate this dissertation in the broader literature. Given the substantial body of literature on psychoanalysis and mysticism, this section will focus on two areas very closely related to the topic of the present study: the literature on Lacan and Buddhism and the literature on Meister Eckhart and Lacan.

Lacan and Zen Buddhism

Psychoanalytic interest in Buddhism has its roots in the early history of psychoanalysis, for example, in Jung’s (1938/1971) psychological commentaries on Buddhist texts and Jung’s (1955/1983) interest in mandalas. In 1957, a conference in Mexico bringing together prominent psychoanalysts such as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney with major Buddhist scholars such as D. T. Suzuki led to the publication of the seminal collection *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (Fromm et al., 1960). There has been a surge of interest in recent years in Buddhism and psychoanalysis (Epstein, 1995, 1998, 2007, 2008; Rubin, 1996; Molino, 1998a; Safran, 2003; Magid, 2005), and the
present study aims to extend the fruitfulness of these dialogues into the relatively neglected area of Christian mysticism and psychoanalysis.

Within this growing literature on psychoanalysis and Buddhism, the emphasis has largely been on object relations, as is the case, for example, in the work of Mark Epstein. Dialogues between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Buddhism have been relatively rare. Anthony Molino (1998b) argues that despite the “fun but facile analogies” that commentators have noticed between Lacan and “the baffling, quizzical persona of the Zen Master” – for example, similarities between “Lacan’s short sessions” and the Master’s timely whack across a befuddled disciple’s head, or musing on knots and Buddha-nature” – there has been “little to no interdisciplinary work of a theoretical nature” which has “explored the links between Lacan’s thought and Zen” (p. 291). Since Molino wrote that in 1998, a small but growing literature has developed which has begun to explore the dialogue between Lacan and Zen. This dialogue between a French psychoanalyst and a Japanese strain of Buddhism may seem arbitrary, but it is rooted in Lacan’s work and interests. Indeed, Lacan made two trips to Japan to learn more about Zen (Purser, 2011), and he mentions Zen in Seminars I and XX.

---

20 This is a reference to Lacan’s introduction of the variable-length session. Rather than starting out with a fixed set of time, Lacan proposed that the analyst end the session abruptly on a point of particular significance, ambiguity, etc. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Fink’s (2007) chapter “Scanding (The Variable-length Session)” (pp. 47-73).


The master breaks the silence with anything – with a sarcastic remark, with a kick-start.

That is how a buddhist master conducts his search for meaning, according to the technique of zen. It behooves the students to find out for themselves the answer to their own
Like the present study, the theme of many of these dialogues between Lacan and Zen has been the self. Many authors have noted similarities between the Buddhist concept of no-self and Lacan’s critique of the ego: In both cases, the self is conceived as something lacking substance, unable to constitute itself as a whole or a unity, fragmented and evanescent. These explorations of the self in Lacan and Buddhism have often been grounded in a reading of Lacan’s essay on the mirror stage, which, in addition to being one of the earliest translations of Lacan’s work into English and the most widely read of his essays in the English-speaking world, also lends itself to a Buddhist reading. Lacan’s main thesis in that essay\(^\text{23}\) is that the child, who initially experiences its body as fragmented, identifies with the wholeness of the image reflected in the mirror, thereby constituting an ideal ego characterized by mastery and completeness.

However, Lacan maintains that the ego thus constituted is an illusion, and that the tension between the desire for wholeness and the sense of oneself as fragmented is never resolved, leading to a fundamental alienation which characterizes the human condition. This leads Molino (1998b) to conclude that “the question of onto-existential alienation, or ‘inauthenticity,’ is central to both Lacan and Zen” (p. 292). In a similar vein, Fink (1995) questions. The master does not teach *ex cathedra* a ready made science; he supplies an answer when the students are on the verge of finding it. (p. 1)

\(^{22}\) Lacan (1975/1998): “What is best in Buddhism is Zen, and Zen consists in answering you by barking, my little friend. That is what is best when one wants, naturally, to get out of this infernal business, as Freud called it” (p. 115).

\(^{23}\) Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage will be explicated in greater detail in Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject.
acknowledges a link between Lacan’s conceptualization of the ego and “Eastern philosophy”:

This self or ego is thus, *as Eastern philosophy has been telling us for millennia*, a construct, a mental object . . . . Rather than qualifying as a seat of agency or activity, the ego is, in Lacan’s view, the seat of fixation and narcissistic attachment. (p. 37, emphasis added)

There seems to be substantial agreement that Lacan and Zen offer similar diagnoses of the roots of human alienation and suffering in their accounts of the ego; however, Lacan and Zen seem to part ways on the question of whether a solution can be found to this alienation. After all, the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha begin with an acknowledgement of the reality and sources of suffering, but then go on to describe the path to the *cessation* of suffering.24 Along these lines, Molino (1998b) asserts that Lacan and Zen diverge “on the possibility of such a realization of enlightenment, or **atonement**. For Zen this possibility goes unquestioned. For Lacan . . . though we are compelled to seek such a realization, it is one we will never attain” (p. 299). This leads

---

24 The Sanskrit word “*dukkha*” is often (somewhat misleadingly) translated as “suffering.” When the Buddha speaks of liberation from *dukkha*, he is referring to liberation from the discontent, dissatisfaction, dis-ease, and lack which characterize life lived from an exclusively ego-centered identity. However, the Buddha does not claim that his teaching will liberate us from the personal, existential pain and suffering inherent to the human condition. This resonates with the psychoanalytic goal of alleviating neurotic suffering through the acceptance of unavoidable suffering. However, for Lacan, a certain alienation is an endemic, structural part of the human condition which cannot be surmounted, and in this sense, Lacan sees *dukkha* as structurally constitutive of the subject.
Molino to conclude that “the two worldviews of psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism remain fundamentally at odds” (p. 300).

Purser, in his essay “A Buddhist-Lacanian Perspective on Lack,” also identifies the impossibility of overcoming lack as the point which distinguishes Lacanian psychoanalysis from the Buddhist perspective on the subject. Purser (2011) asserts that “for Lacanians . . . lack is unresolvable and something for which there is no cure” (p. 299). Purser opposes this to the Buddhist notion that “we falsely experience our inherent groundlessness as lack” (p. 300); in other words, the subject’s emptiness only appears as lack if we are striving for wholeness. Purser argues further that by abandoning the search for wholeness and “fully embracing the fundamental lack, that is, by becoming completely groundless in body and mind, abiding in no-mind and in nothing, we become grounded in the totality of all things” (p. 297).

This last quote from Purser suggests another pattern evident in the literature on Buddhism and Lacan: the notion that the sacrifice of the ego leads dialectically to a higher unity, what Purser describes as becoming “grounded in the totality of all things.” Moncayo (2003), in his essay “The Finger Pointing at the Moon: Zen Practice and the Practice of Lacanian Psychoanalysis,” succinctly summarizes this point when he argues that mystical experience “is a necessary symbolic death that dialectically affirms a larger and more ultimate form of psychical identity beyond ego identifications” (p. 338). In another passage from the same essay, Moncayo asserts that “the aphanisis (disappearance) of the ego results in the epiphany (appearance) of the subject: true subject is no-ego” (p. 355).
Unlike Molino, who maintains that Lacan denies the impossibility of overcoming alienation in some sort of higher unity, Moncayo sees a correspondence between the Lacanian Real and the higher identity or “ultimate Reality” beyond the ego, which he suggests is the aim of Zen practice:

It is thus possible to find areas of intersection between the Buddhist notion and experience of emptiness or ultimate Reality and the Lacanian register of the Real. Lacan stresses the importance of language as an organizer of experience (of thoughts, feelings, and consciousness) in a way that Buddhism does not . . . but also includes a register of experience beyond language. The finger is the signifier pointing at the moon, but the finger/symbol is not the moon itself within the experiential register of the Real. The Real is that which the signifying chain encircles and yet remains free of a fixed signification within language. (p. 345)

Thus, Moncayo identifies the Lacanian Real with the transcendent, ultimate Reality of Buddhism, which is represented to the ego by the signifier: The finger pointing at the moon represents the Symbolic, and the moon itself belongs to the Real. Purser (2011) similarly describes the Lacanian Real in terms of an “extralinguistic level of experience” (p. 300).

Both Zen and Lacanian psychoanalysis, according to Moncayo (2003), aim at the death of the ego in order to become one with a higher self, which he also links to a prior, lost unity, anterior to the emergence of the subject:

[T]here is an element of the Real that is lost in the process of birth itself . . . .

What is lost with birth – life and underneath language – is the Real, the unborn, the thing or no-thing without a name. In relationship to this Real, Lacan says that
the subject is in the unborn and the unrealized. The question for our purposes is whether, following Buddhism, this subject is realizable. (p. 248)

Moncayo never directly answers the question he poses about whether for Lacan some sort of unity with the Real beyond the Symbolic is achievable; however, his references to “the real being of the subject” and “the emergence of a new subject or the being of the subject within the Real” suggest that, in contrast to Purser and Molino, he believes that a transcendence of alienation by becoming one with the Real is possible in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the above quote suggests that this transcendence is actually a return to and recovery of the Real understood as arche prior to the emergence of the subject.

Consequently, we have observed several general tendencies in the literature on Buddhism and Lacan. First, there is general agreement that the Lacanian and Zen critiques of our conventional, limited, and limiting identification with the ego share much in common. Furthermore, the process of both Zen practice and Lacanian analysis involves a form of ego-death, but this death is understood in dialectical fashion as leading to the realization of a higher, “true” self. While Purser and Molino maintain that this higher unity is only attainable according to Buddhists and that Lacan insists on the insurmountability of alienation and lack, Moncayo suggests that even within the Lacanian framework it is possible to overcome alienation through a unity with the Lacanian Real beyond language.

While the extant literature on Lacan and Buddhism has demonstrated the value of putting these two schools of thought in dialogue, particularly with regard to the question of the self, there are several significant problems in the current literature. First, while
there is no doubt that Lacan understood the Real as that which resists symbolization, the
tendency in this literature to regard the Real as something that is simply transcendent to
the Symbolic fails to incorporate the Lacanian notion of extimacy – i.e., intimate
exteriority. For Lacan, the Real is both beyond the Symbolic and immanent to the
Symbolic as lack. The Real is not simply exterior, but extimate.

Likewise, there is a tendency in Moncayo’s paper to think of the Real as simply
anterior, as that which is prior to the subject’s constitution and the emergence of the
Symbolic. However, this fails to account for the complex and paradoxical temporal
structure which characterizes the relationship between the Real and the Symbolic. For
Lacan, the Real is constituted by the Symbolic. The Symbolic does not simply circle
around an already-extant Real; rather, the gaps in the Symbolic produce the Real. The
tendency in this literature to emphasize the exteriority and the extralinguistic character of
the Real at the expense of its intimate relation to the Symbolic is especially ironic in light
of the fact that one of Zen’s most prominent features is its focus on an immanent
enlightenment – finding nirvana in the everyday.

Another prominent feature of this literature is the tendency to think of ego-death
as leading dialectically to a higher unity, or a oneness with the totality. This bears

---

25 Cf. Lacan (1986/1992, p. 139), and Miller (1994). The notion of extimacy will be explicated in greater
detail in Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject.

26 See Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject (pp. 64-72) for a detailed explanation of how
the Symbolic produces the Real.

27 While the authors we are reviewing in this section tend to employ terms such as “higher unity,”
“oneness,” and “true self” in order to describe enlightenment from a Buddhist perspective, it is worth
noting that not all Buddhist writers use the same terms or, when they do, sometimes use them in a different
resemblance to a similar tendency evident in much of the literature on Eckhart and the self reviewed in Literature Review III. An assessment of the accuracy of this view from within the perspective of Zen Buddhism is beyond the scope of this project; however, there is much in Lacan’s work to suggest that such a view is inconsistent with his brand of psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the death of the imaginary ego does not lead to a transcendent self or a higher plane of reality; rather, stripping away the imaginary ego results in a confrontation with the fundamental lack which characterizes human existence and around which subjectivity is structured. For this reason, Lacan (1986/1992) says in Seminar VII that “at the end of a training analysis, the subject should reach and should know the domain and the level of the experience of absolute disarray” (p. 304). Lacan also asserts in Seminar VII that “to have carried an analysis through to its end is nor more nor less than to have encountered that limit in which the problematic of desire is raised” (p. 300). Lacanian analysis aims not at a higher unity, but an affirmation of finitude.

Thus, the present study offers an alternative perspective on the Lacanian subject as compared to the one offered by the extant literature on Lacan and Zen. Furthermore, as

way. So, for example, rather than speaking in terms of “oneness” or “unity,” some Buddhist authors refer to “not-two,” indicating a state distinct from both unity and difference, neither multiple nor one. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the discussion of Buddhism in this section is limited to the way in which it is taken up by the particular authors under consideration. However, Buddhism is a vast, heterogeneous tradition which can be interpreted in highly diverse ways. To the extent that the current literature on Zen and Lacan is limited by the way in which Buddhism is taken up by these particular authors, these limitations could doubtless be addressed by making use of the myriad resources within Buddhist traditions. Further research on Buddhism and psychoanalysis, generally, and Buddhism and Lacan, in particular, is needed.
we will see in our close reading of Eckhart in the Findings section, the present study puts Lacan in dialogue with a mystic who aims to empty the self not in order to achieve a higher unity with God’s being, but to become one with God’s self-emptying in the act of creation. Thus, this dissertation shifts the problematic from one of *overcoming* and *transcending* to a problematic of Eckhartian releasement (*gelâzenheit*): letting be and letting go *into finite existence*.

Lacan’s Engagement with Christian Mysticism

In addition to the extensive literature which has appeared in recent years on Buddhism and psychoanalysis, sources have also recently appeared putting psychoanalysis in dialogue with the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah (Berke & Schneider, 2008; Starr, 2008; Eigen, 2012) and Islam, including Sufi mysticism (Akhtar, 2008). However, the lack of literature on Christian mysticism and psychoanalysis is striking. Much of the literature specifically on Eckhart and psychoanalysis (Dourley, 1992, 1997, 2004, 2010; Micklem, 1996) has been written from a Jungian perspective, and Jung himself wrote specifically about Eckhart (Jung, 1921/1971). However, there remains a paucity of literature on Lacan and Christian mysticism, despite the fact that a discussion of Christian mysticism features prominently in Seminar XX, including Lacan’s (1975/1998) explicit location of his own work in the mystical tradition:

> It [mysticism] is something serious, about which several people inform us – most often women, or bright people like Saint John of the Cross, because one is not obliged, when one is male, to situate oneself on the side of $\forall x \Phi x$.\(^\text{28}\) One can also

\(^{28}\) This is Lacan’s matheme which roughly translates as “the whole.” It is a combination of two symbols, the first of which Fink (1995) describes as the “logical quantifier meaning ‘for every x’ (whether it be an
situate oneself on the side of the not-whole. There are men who are just as good as women. It happens. And who also feel just fine about it. Despite – I won’t say their phallus – despite what encumbers them that goes by that name, they get the idea or sense that there must be a jouissance that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics . . . . These mystical jaculations are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage; they provide, all in all, some of the best reading one can find – at the bottom of the page, drop a footnote, “Add to that list Jacques Lacan’s Écrits,” because it’s of the same order. (p. 76)

Lacan’s discussion of Christian mysticism is central to his explication of what he alternately refers to as “the other jouissance” and “supplementary jouissance” in Seminar XX – which is to say, the possibility of a jouissance beyond the phallus. Lacan identifies male subjective structure – a deep personality structure which, for Lacan, cannot be identified with biological sex – with the whole, the desire for totality, completeness, the one. This goes by the name of the phallus, which Lacan defines as serving the symbolic function of covering over the fundamental lack at the heart of subjectivity. For Lacan, male desire is channeled according to the Oedipal Law – i.e., castration – and the lack imposed by castration leads to the (imaginary) fantasy of wholeness expressed by the phallus.

However, Lacan locates women on the side of the “not-whole”; women, while being subject to the Oedipal Law, are not subject to castration in the absolute way that

---

apple, a person, an element, or whatever) or ‘for (any and) all x’s’ Lacan allows for the new gloss on this old quantifier: ‘for the whole of x’” (p. 174). Fink describes the second symbol as “the phallic function, associated with symbolic castration: the alienation to which speaking beings are subjected due to their being in language” (p. 173).
men are. For women, access to the free-flowing jouissance of the body is not barred completely by castration. This jouissance is what Lacan refers to as “the other jouissance” or “supplementary jouissance.” Amy Hollywood (2002) describes how the feminine position enables access to the other jouissance in her book Sensible Ecstasy, which includes one of the few extant examinations of Lacan and mysticism:

> Women, symbolically effaced by the primacy of the phallus (although they can still “take it on” and speak from the side of the masculine subject), are in a particularly apt position to see the emptiness of its claims and to experience the jouissance that emerges in and through that recognition. (p. 151)

Thus, for Lacan, mysticism represents a form of discourse spoken from the feminine position (whether one is biologically male or female) which calls into question claims of wholeness and totality and enables access to jouissance that is normally barred by the phallic economy.

Based on her reading of Seminar XX, Hollywood suggests several significant similarities in the goal and function of both mysticism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. She argues, for example, that the interplay in Lacan’s thought between the phallic function of generating meaning through an all-encompassing transcendental signifier and the feminine destabilization of that meaning mirrors the tension in Christianity between the attempts to grasp God’s being through the enumeration of God’s properties and the *apophatic* stripping away of all names for God in mystical texts.

---

29 For a more detailed discussion of the other jouissance, see Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject, as well as the Discussion section.

30 See the following passage from Sells (1994) for an explanation of the term “*apophasis*”:
Jacques Lacan and Meister Eckhart

There has been very little written specifically putting Eckhart and Lacan in dialogue\textsuperscript{31}: this literature is comprised by two book chapters, both written by psychoanalysts in the German-speaking world. The first is by the Swiss Lacanian psychoanalyst Peter Widmer, whose chapter “Das Ding – Von Meister Eckhart bis zu Lacan” (“The Thing – from Meister Eckhart to Lacan”) is not so much an explicit attempt to explore the connections between Lacan and Eckhart as it is a brief history of das Ding (the thing) in Western philosophy, with Eckhart and Lacan as its bookends. Still, Widmer’s piece links Eckhart and Lacan implicitly through the concept of das Ding in ways that carry implications for the present study. First, Widmer notes that Eckhart uses the word “Ding” in the context of his writing on the soul. Eckhart regards the soul as a “thing” with a unique epistemological status that distinguishes it from objects in the world. While the soul is able to form images of objects to itself (i.e., representations), the soul is a thing that resists representation: “That’s why there is no thing so unknown to the soul as itself” (Eckhart, qtd. in Widmer, 2002, p. 241, my translation).\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Apophasis} is the common Greek designation for this language [of negative theology]. Apophasis can mean “negation,” but its etymology suggests a meaning that more precisely characterizes the discourse in question: 	extit{apo phasis} (un-saying or speaking-away). The term \textit{apophasis} is commonly paired with \textit{kataphasis} (affirmation, saying, speaking-with). (pp. 2-3)

\textsuperscript{31} One notable contribution to the literature is Wyschogrod et al.’s (1989) \textit{Lacan and Theological Discourse}; however, this edited volume, which puts Lacan in dialogue with theology and Continental philosophy of religion, does not deal specifically with mysticism.

\textsuperscript{32} Darum ist der Seele kein Ding so unbekannt, wie sie sich selbst.
Widmer goes on to trace the continuity between this conception of *das Ding* as something in the self that is unknown and the self in Freud and Lacan. According to Widmer, in Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, “*das Ding* is that which remains misunderstood,” and “Lacan locates *das Ding* accordingly as immanent to language. It relates to the core of the subject as well as the unrecognizable outside of language” (p. 248, p. 249, my translation). This is the structure of extimacy which we have already discussed and will explore in greater detail in Literature Review II: *das Ding* is that which is simultaneously absolutely other and at the core of the subject; moreover, it is the lost object which is constitutive of the subject, around which the subject is structured.

Widmer draws significant conclusions for the direction of psychoanalytic treatment from his discussion of *das Ding*:

The analytic cure is about the encounter with the inaccessibility of *das Ding*; it is about experiencing that the retrieval of *das Ding*, which if it were accomplished would ultimately be tantamount to the annihilation of the subject, is misguided. The work of mourning consists of realizing that the highest good cannot be attained and that perfection is impossible and structurally unreachable. In the long run, this is not a sad perspective, rather the release from a fantasy which is the origin of melancholy. The melancholic is the one who believes in the accessibility of *das Ding*. (p. 249, my translation)

---

33 Das Ding ist das, was unverstanden bleibt . . .

34 Das Ding situiert sich Lacan zufolge im Diesseits der Sprache. Es betrifft sowohl den Kern des Subjekts wie das Unerkennbare außerhalb der Sprache.

35 In der analytischen Kur geht es um die Begegnung mit der Unerreichbarkeit des Dings, um die Erfahrung, daß die Einholung des Dings, die, falls sie gelingen würde, letztlich der Aufhebung des Subjekts
Although Widmer does not explicitly connect this passage to Eckhart’s work, there are clear parallels between the spiritual path that Eckhart outlines and the analytic cure which Widmer describes. Lacanian analysis aims at the realization of the emptiness at the core of the self, the lack that can never be filled and, therefore, the abandonment of the attempt to find the missing piece. Similarly, for Eckhart, the core (or in Eckhartian terms, the grunt) of the soul is God, but this Ding cannot be apprehended as an object of consciousness and is, therefore, “perceived” or “experienced” as emptiness. The unity with God which Eckhart calls for is not a unity of substance which would fill this emptiness with being, but a self-abandonment which leads to a unity of the soul with the activity of God’s birth in the soul (the Gottesgeburt). Thus, for both Lacan and Eckhart, the subject is called to abandon the search for transcendent being and wholeness and is thrown back upon the singular path of existence.

Although Widmer’s chapter suggests many fruitful points of convergence between Eckhart and Lacan through the notion of das Ding, these connections are left mostly implicit. The only explicit attempt to put Eckhart and Lacan in dialogue of which I am aware is a paper by the Austrian psychoanalyst Georg Gröller which he kindly sent.

gleichkäme, ein Weg in die Irre ist. Die Trauerarbeit besteht darin, einzusehen, daß das Höchste Gut nicht zu erlangen, das Vollkommene unmöglich, aus strukturellen Gründen unerreichbar ist. Auf die Dauer ist das keine trauerige Einsicht, sondern die Befreiung von einem Phantasma, das am Ursprung der Melancholie steht. Der Melancholiker ist der, der an die Erreichbarkeit des Dings glaubt.

36 Cf. Widmer (2002): Of course, Meister Eckhart speaks of the soul as a Ding. And it is clear that Ding here means an activity which relates to the (recognizing) subject (p. 241, emphasis added, my translation). [Auf eine selbstverständliche Weise spricht Meister Eckhart von der Seele als von einem Ding. Und es ist ganz klar, daß dieses Ding hier eine Tätigkeit meint, die das Subjekt, das erkennende Subjekt betrifft].
Gröller’s (2011) key contribution – which is suggested by his title “Im Ödipus über den Ödipus hinaus” (In the Oedipal and Beyond the Oedipal) – is to link Eckhart’s mysticism and the Lacanian notion of the other jouissance through their *immanent* – or, more precisely, *extimate* – character:

> For Lacan, in the phenomenon of feminine jouissance an experience appears to emerge, which, although it is completely situated within the Oedipal framework is, however, not exhausted by it but instead points beyond it: thus, in the Oedipal and beyond the Oedipal. ³⁸ (p. 3)

Thus, in contrast to the psychotic position – which according to Lacan is constituted by the foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) of the paternal function and, therefore, a rejection of the Symbolic – the feminine position offers the possibility of experiencing the jouissance of the Real from *within* the Symbolic.³⁹

---

³⁷ Since the writing of this dissertation, Gröller’s 2011 paper has been accepted for publication as a chapter titled “Im Ödipus über den Ödipus hinaus. Zu Lacans »Geniesssen der Frau« und Meister Eckharts »Rückkehr zum Grund«” [In the Oedipal and beyond the Oedipal. On Lacan’s “feminine jouissance” and Meister Eckhart’s “return to the ground”] in the edited volume Forschungsgruppe Psychoanalyse stuzzicadenti (Ed.), *Übertragungen: Psychoanalyse – Kunst – Gesellschaft* [Transferences: Psychoanalysis – Art – Society], which will be published in 2013.

³⁸ Wie auch immer, für Lacan selbst scheint jedenfalls in diesem Phänomen des weiblichen Genießens eine Erfahrung aufzutauchen, die, obwohl sie sich ganz im Rahmen des Ödipus situiert . . . dennoch nicht in ihm erschöpft, sondern über ihn hinausweist: Also im Ödipus über den Ödipus hinaus . . .

³⁹ See in this connection, the following quote from Clément (1981/1983):

> Lacan takes great pains to distinguish Schreber’s insane relationship to God from “the Presence and Joy that illuminate mystical experience.” Schreber does not address God with the familiar “Du.” A true mystic addresses the Other in person in the “Union of being to being.” From the
Gröller explicitly links the estimate structure of the other jouissance with Eckhart’s mysticism. Specifically, he identifies the mode of being which characterizes creatures in Eckhart’s work – i.e., beings in their separateness from God – with the phallic order and contends that mystical union with God for Eckhart does not lead to the transcendence of creatureliness but occurs within the creaturely realm – just as the other jouissance which Lacan describes represents a form of transcendence of the phallic order from within the phallic order. According to Gröller:

The human being – and with it, its God – is and remains a split subject. It is at the same time creature (creator/creature) and indivisible, ineffable divine being. It lives in language and at the same time beyond language – i.e., in the phallic meaning and at the same time in the jouissance of the other . . . . Either way, the relation between the two forms of experience always remains antagonistic and laden with tension; both attempt to pull the subject, so to speak, to their respective sides. And hence the need for the work of detachment . . . which, however, by no means leads to the sublation of the split – there is, of course, in life no release from creatureliness.40 (p. 10, my translation)


39
Thus, at stake in Gröller’s reading of Eckhart is a critique of otherworldly mysticism – which is to say, mysticism which would seek to transcend the creaturely realm, rather than transform it from within. Furthermore, by distancing Eckhart from such otherworldly mysticism, Gröller’s reading of Eckhart allows us to distinguish Eckhart’s mysticism from the traditional psychoanalytic reading of mysticism as regressive – whether in the form of Freud’s (1930/1961) critique of the oceanic feeling or Kristeva’s (2010) more positive reading of the regressive dimension in St. Theresa of Avila’s writing (G. Gröller, personal communication, March 24, 2012). Eckhart’s rejection of otherworldliness and Lacan’s conceptualization of mysticism in terms of the estimate structure of feminine jouissance make a dialogue between them ideally suited to circumvent the stale psychoanalytic readings of “regressive” or “escapist” mysticism and to open up a new kind of dialogue. Furthermore, Lacan’s work not only facilitates a new psychoanalytic reading of mysticism; his identification with mystical discourse opens up a psychoanalytic receptivity to mystical thought which allows for the question: What might psychoanalysis be able to learn from Eckhart?

In many ways, the current study continues in the trajectory established by Gröller but takes up the dialogue between Lacan and Eckhart in dissertation-length form and explores this dialogue for the first time in the English-speaking world. This dissertation takes up the following call issued by Gröller:

So, the most obvious way to proceed here is to turn to the point of reference which Lacan himself cited for feminine jouissance, namely the field of mysticism. Here, there are actually theories of knowledge and living which have been elaborated over the course of centuries and whose relevance for (or
incompatibility with) the theory and clinical practice of psychoanalysis largely remain to be assessed.\(^{41}\) (p. 7, my translation)

This dissertation represents the first attempt to explore the relationship between Eckhart and Lacan in the English-speaking world – and, specifically, to do so with a focus on the topic of the self. There is, however, one recent effort in the English-speaking world to explore the significance of Meister Eckhart’s view of the self for modern understandings of subjectivity, which, although it does not specifically examine its significance for psychoanalysis, generally, or Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically, does make use of Lacan’s theory as part of the theoretical backdrop for its study. Ben Morgan is a German professor at Oxford University and has written a recently published book titled *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self*, in which he extends and expands on the thesis of his 1999 article “Developing the Modern Concept of the Self: The Trial of Meister Eckhart.”

Morgan argues based on the absence of the word “self” (*das Selbst*) in Meister Eckhart’s *oeuvre* that Meister Eckhart viewed the self not as a fixed, independent entity, but as a loose connection of characteristics (*eigenschaften*) and practices that can – without a great deal of effort – be abandoned in order to become one with God.

Furthermore, Morgan identifies the trial of Meister Eckhart as heralding a pivotal shift in

---

\(^{41}\) Was liegt also, wenn wir hier weiterkommen wollen, näher, als dass wir uns jenem Referenzpunkt zuwenden, den Lacan selbst für das weibliche Genießen angeführt hat, nämlich dem Gebiet der Mystik. Hier gibt es ja tatsächlich über Jahrhunderte hinweg elaborierte Theorien der Erkenntnis und der Lebensführung, deren Relevanz für (oder auch Widersprüchlichkeit zur) Theorie und Klinik der Psychoanalyse weitgehend erst auf ihre Überprüfung warten (Gröller, p. 7).
the medieval notion of self; he points to the appearance of the word “das sich,” a nominalized notion of the self which he identifies as a precursor to the MG word “das Selbst” (the self), in the work of Eckhart’s student and follower Henry Suso (MG: Heinrich Seuse) as evidence that the notion of the self as an entity independent from God emerged as a result of the policing of self-abandonment and the condemnation of the looser boundaries between the human subject and God which ultimately prevailed in Eckhart’s trial. For Morgan, the trial of Eckhart and the different, more alienated, notion of the self which is evident in Suso’s work planted the seeds of modern atomistic individualism.

In order to establish the relevance of his thesis, Morgan adds a line of argument in his book which is absent in his 1999 article: He contends that postmodern critiques of the individualistic notion of the self developed in modernity are incomplete and ultimately remain embedded in the modernist framework they attempt to transcend. He draws this conclusion from his examination of the work of Lacan, Irigaray, Hollywood, Lyotard, Žižek, Derrida, and Adorno, but his reading of Lacan is, of course, most relevant for our purposes. While Morgan (2013) acknowledges that Lacan uses mysticism in Seminar XX to challenge “the illusions of a coherent and self-contained identity associated with the phallus,” he asserts that “even though he [Lacan] criticizes as illusory the wholeness that he associates with the phallus, it turns out that it is an illusion that constitutes identity and is, as such, inescapable” (pp. 12-13). Thus, the notion of the other jouissance which Lacan develops out of his reading of mystical texts is dismissed by Morgan as an “empty epiphany,” a type of experience he identifies throughout his reading of postmodern thinkers:
The figure of thought that recurs again and again in the texts of critical theorists is that of an empty epiphany: an experience beyond the confines of current identity that is longed for but simultaneously made inaccessible because the theoretical preconceptions to which it offers an alternative define it as impossible. (p. 23)

However, there are several problems with Morgan’s reading of Lacan. First, he argues, building on his review of Stanley Cavell and Toril Moi’s critiques of Lacan, that Lacan uses “spatial metaphors that make language appear to have an ‘inside’ and an inaccessible ‘outside,’ where Lacan situates femininity or the jouissance of mystics” (p. 14). However, as we have already seen in our review of Gröller’s examination of the other jouissance, the jouissance which Lacan identifies with mysticism does not lie inaccessibly on the other side of language; rather, the other jouissance (just like the Real with which Lacan associates it) stands in an extimate relation to the Symbolic, or phallic, realm. The other jouissance does not simply lie beyond the phallic order; it is an otherness that is nevertheless intimate or immanent. For Lacan, psychosis, not feminine subjectivity, represents an attempt to simply transcend the phallic order through foreclosure (Verwerfung) of the paternal function. To claim that Lacan reifies gender difference, as Morgan does, or exoticizes feminine jouissance is to miss the centrality of the structure of extimacy for any understanding of the Lacanian subject.

Indeed, Morgan’s misreading of Lacan’s notion of the other jouissance and his tendency to think of it as an “empty epiphany” which remains embedded in the “isolation” of modern subjectivity because it does not lead to the total transcendence of the self (i.e., “becoming God”) is symptomatic of a larger problem with Morgan’s understanding of mysticism and his reading of Eckhart. Morgan’s reading of Eckhart is
founded, above all, on the notion of “self-abandonment” – which is to say, that the goal of Eckhart’s mysticism is the abandonment of the self in order to become one with and identical to God. This essentially captures the notion of detachment (MHG: *abegescheidenheit*) in Eckhart’s work, but it stops there, without going on to explicate the *Gottesgeburt*, the birth of God in the soul, which is the other central feature of Eckhart’s mysticism. As Reiner Schürmann (2003) asserts, in a quote that we will be using throughout this dissertation, the “concrete aim” of detachment is “singularization,” which “comes to pass with the birth of the Word in the denatured soul” (p. 287). Thus, detachment does not simply aim at the abandonment of the self; rather, the unity with God to which self-abandonment leads culminates in the *production* of the perfect singularity: the birth of the Son in the *Gottesgeburt*. Consequently, Eckhart’s mysticism does not aim at the simple transcendence of the self in order to merge with some sort of divine formlessness; it aims at the *creation* of a subject (i.e., a form or a signifier) which expresses the emptiness of the Godhead (*Gottheit*) in form/creation. This mirrors the structure of extimacy we have reviewed in Lacan’s work: the other jouissance as an otherness, a not-whole, which is *immanent* to the phallic order.

Furthermore, Morgan may be correct that *das Selbst* is nowhere to be found in Eckhart’s work, but it is fallacious to conclude on that basis that Eckhart lacked a notion of the self in its separateness from God. There can be no dispute that *sève* (soul) and *créature* (creature) were words in Eckhart’s vocabulary, the latter of which is employed by Eckhart specifically to convey a notion of being in its distance from God. Creatureliness is the point of departure for the mystical path that Eckhart develops – and why would such a path be necessary at all if human beings, in the Middle Ages just as
much as today, did not experience themselves as alienated from God? Similarly, Heidegger (1953/1996), whose work Morgan seems to regard positively, uses “fallenness” as the point of departure for his analysis of being – the search for the ontological occurs within the ontic. Morgan may argue that the alienation from God captured in the notion of “creature” is ultimately illusory – in other words, that Eckhart sees this as ultimately surmountable, whereas for Suso, there are limits to transcendence – however, Eckhart’s strong opposition to otherworldly asceticism and his emphasis on the act of creation through the Gottesgeburt suggest that he views unity with God as a transformation of fallen creation while remaining in it, as opposed to a transcendence of it.

These distinctions are crucial because to conceive of Eckhartian mysticism as the simple abandonment of the self, as Morgan does, is to revert to the otherworldly, regressive mysticism which is the target of psychoanalytic critiques. The continuity between medieval and contemporary notions of alienated subjectivity only confirms the significance of the mystical path preached by Eckhart for our contemporary approaches to subjectivity. Morgan wants to argue that Eckhart has something to teach us because his worldview – and the view of the self that attends it – calls into question and destabilizes the atomistic individualism that characterizes the (post)modern understanding of the subject. However, rather than rejecting the alienation and isolation of the self that he sees persisting in postmodern texts in favor of an otherworldly medieval Weltanschauung, in which an evanescent self can transcend itself with ease, this dissertation reads Eckhart as developing a spirituality of immanence.42 Reading Eckhart in this way allows us to get

---

42 Or, more precisely, a mysticism of extimacy – a transcendence within the immanent realm.
beyond the traditional psychoanalytic critiques of mysticism as regressed oceanic unity and to show the way in which psychoanalysis is already mystical, so to speak, when it is properly understood. In this way, we can take seriously Lacan’s claims that his Écrits belong to the mystical canon.
Chapter 3 – Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject

Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline Freud and Lacan’s theories of the subject. In general, the focus will remain squarely on Lacan, with the references to Freud usually serving to clarify or illuminate Lacanian concepts. Several caveats are, however, necessary before proceeding. A comprehensive account of the subject in either Freud or Lacan is beyond the scope of this dissertation, as either one would require a book-length study in its own right. Indeed, Fink (1995) in The Lacanian Subject and Chiesa (2007) in Subjectivity and Otherness have already written book-length elaborations of the Lacanian subject – the former from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory and practice, the latter from a philosophical perspective. These books demonstrate that any attempt to interrogate the Lacanian subject requires coverage of practically every key concept in Lacan’s body of work: the mirror stage; das Ding; extimacy; the Law; castration, the unconscious; the split subject; jouissance; and the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, to name just a few.

Rather than offering a comprehensive account of the subject in Freud and Lacan as an end in itself, the purpose of this chapter is more instrumental: I will focus only on the terrain in Freud and Lacan that is most relevant to the dialogue between psychoanalytic theories and subjectivity and the work of Meister Eckhart which I take up in the Discussion section. Thus, my coverage of the subject in Freud and Lacan, while valuable for setting up the analysis carried out in the Discussion section, will represent a highly incomplete portrait. There are several important ways in which this treatment of the subject in Freud and Lacan will be incomplete.
First, this chapter does not pretend to cover the complex relationship between Freud and Lacan’s work. Although I largely accept Lacan’s claims about his fidelity to Freud, it is clear that at the very least even those who want to emphasize the continuity between Freud and Lacan have to acknowledge the significant reworking of Freudian theory which Lacan’s work represents. The mere existence of Freudians who are not Lacanians and who regard Lacanian theory variously as irrelevant, fundamentally mistaken, or a betrayal of Freud is sufficient to demonstrate that the continuity between Freud and Lacan which I emphasize here is clearly contested. An evaluation of these competing claims is beyond the scope of this chapter; I will merely say, by way of justification, that I take up Freud and Lacan together in this chapter on largely pragmatic grounds: There is clearly proximity between key concepts in Freud and Lacan’s respective work, even if there are those who would dispute the continuity of their respective bodies of work as a whole.

Another way in which my analysis in this chapter is incomplete is that it does not make any particular attempt to contextualize Freudian and Lacanian concepts in the development of their work over time. For instance, I do not go out of my way to explore the way in which the Real and the concept of jouissance assume greater importance in Lacan’s later work and represent either a significant re-working of or a break with his earlier emphasis on the Symbolic, depending on one’s point of view. This is in contrast to the approach of Chiesa (2007), on the one hand, who adopts a chronological approach which aims to examine the subject as it evolves over the course of Lacan’s career, and the approach of Fink (1995), on the other, who while acknowledging the way in which Lacan re-works and revises his thinking on the subject, explicitly adopts the perspective of
Lacan’s work from the 1970s. While I will occasionally comment on when a particular concept appears in Freud or Lacan’s work and will also occasionally refer to the relationship between a concept and the rest of their respective works, this will not be my emphasis, as my aim in this chapter is limited to a reading of particular concepts that are especially relevant for the dialogue with Eckhart in the Discussion section.

The Lacanian Subject: A Brief Introduction

I will attempt to elaborate Lacan’s complex understanding of subjectivity in this section by offering a story, a narrative, about the subject’s constitution. This is meant as a very rough sketch and is intended as an introduction for the reader who is unfamiliar with Lacan’s work. However, this narrative is subject to the critique of all narratives which Žižek (2000) offers in the context of a discussion of the work of the literary theorist Fredric Jameson:

It is not only that some narratives are “false,” based upon the exclusion of traumatic events and patching up the gaps left over by these exclusions – the answer to the question “Why do we tell stories?” is that the narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by way of rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative that bears witness to some repressed antagonism. (p. 31)

This is a relevant quote on several levels, as it points to the limitations of the narrative that I am about to recount, suggesting the ways in which it will smooth over so many aporias and open questions in Lacan’s work. Furthermore, it suggests that the

43 “I have endeavored to provide a view of several of Lacan’s major concepts, not as they evolved from the 1930s on, but rather from a 1970s perspective” (Fink, 1995, p. xvi).
“temporal succession” which characterizes all narratives, including this one, will need to be problematized and complicated, which I carry out in two sections following this narrative that treat key themes in greater detail. Finally, this quote is valuable at the level of content, as the structure and function of narrative which it outlines succinctly expresses one of the key features of the Lacanian subject itself: that its orderly character (i.e., lawfulness) and seemingly substantial structure cover over (and emerge defensively in response to) a fundamental trauma or gap which is both constitutive of the subject and persists within it.

For Lacan, this trauma is bound to the Real. The Real (in the Lacanian triad of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary) should not be confused with “objective reality”; rather, the Real is prior to the emergence of the subject in the Symbolic and is in principle beyond symbolization. It is linked by Lacan to jouissance, the French term for “satisfaction” or “enjoyment,” which also, however, suggests a pleasure which is too much, to the point of being painful. At the most concrete level, jouissance “originally” has to do with the child’s state of fusion with the mother. This state of unity with the mother is simultaneously pleasurable and overwhelming/engulfing (and, therefore, traumatic).

The process of separation from the mother (and, therefore, differentiation out of the Real) is decisive for understanding the emergence of the subject for Lacan. This

44 See Fink (1997):

The French have a fine word for this kind of pleasure in pain, or satisfaction in dissatisfaction: jouissance. It qualifies the kind of “kick” someone may get out of punishment, self-punishment, doing something that is so pleasurable it hurts (sexual climax, for example), or doing something that is so painful it becomes pleasurable. (pp. 8-9)
process of separation is elaborated by Lacan through a linguistic reading of Freud’s Oedipus complex. In the more literal Freudian version, the child’s desire for the mother is forbidden under threat of castration by the father. The child, in turn, realizes that he cannot compete with the father for his mother’s affections and abandons the mother as his object of desire. This forbidden incestuous desire is, however, never truly renounced, but repressed and persists, therefore, as an unconscious wish. The child, then, hopes that by becoming like the father, he will be able one day to attract a woman like his mother. Thus, the Oedipus complex culminates in the assumption of the father’s values (in the form of the ego-ideal or superego) and the opening up of a sexual desire that leads outside the family, since access to the original object of desire (the mother) has been blocked.45

Lacan, however, replaces the literal figures of father and mother in this narrative with symbolic functions. Thus, the paternal function is anything which signals that the mother is interested in something beyond the child.46 Lacan refers to the paternal function

45 Freud discusses the Oedipus Complex throughout his work, but one of the earliest and most clearly stated descriptions of it can be found in The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1900/1965, pp. 294-298).

46 According to Fink (1997):

The paternal function is a symbolic function, and can be just as effective when the father is temporarily absent as when he is present. Mothers appeal to the father as judge and castigator when they say to their children, “You’ll be punished for that when your father gets home!” But they appeal to the father as a more abstract function when they ask a child to consider what its father would do or say if he found out that the child had done such and such. They appeal, in such cases, to the father as a name, as a word or signifier associated with certain ideas. Consider the case of a woman whose husband has died; she can keep him alive in her children’s minds by asking them, “What would your father have thought about that?” or by saying, “Your father
as the *Nom-du-père*, which in French phonemically carries both the meaning of “Name-of-the-Father” and “No-of-the-Father,” suggesting the way in which the prohibition instated by the paternal function simultaneously involves identification with the father through the assumption of his name.\(^{47}\)

For Lacan, the child’s response to the paternal function determines the structure of his or her personality.\(^{48}\) But, at least with regard to the “normal” path of neurosis, the

\(^{47}\) See again Fink (1997):

What has thus far been rendered in English translations of Lacan’s work as the “Name-of-the-Father” is much more striking in French: *Nom-du-père*. *Nom* means both “name” and “noun,” and with this expression Lacan is referring to the father’s name (for example, John Doe), to the name insofar as it plays the role of the father (for example, in the case of a child whose father died before it was born, the father’s name is pronounced by the mother, as it is given a place in the mother’s discourse, can serve a paternal function), and to the noun “father” as it appears in the mother’s discourse (for example, “Your father would have been very proud of you”). Lacan is also playing off the fact that, in French, *nom*, is pronounced exactly like *non*, meaning “no,” evoking the father’s “No!” – that is, the father’s prohibition. (p. 81)

\(^{48}\) The three basic structures for Lacan are psychosis, perversion, and neurosis (the last of which is further divided into the subcategories of obsession, hysteria, and phobia). All three basic structures are determined by a specific response to the paternal function in its role of effecting separation from the mother: psychosis by foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), perversion by disavowal (*Verleugnung*), and neurosis by repression (*Verdrängung*). A full discussion of Lacanian diagnosis is beyond the scope of this chapter; see Fink (1997, pp. 75-204) for in-depth treatment of this topic.
child’s response is repression, through which the desire for the mother goes underground, leading to a split between the conscious and unconscious subject. For Lacan, this split is constitutive of the subject as such; the subject cannot be said to exist, strictly speaking, before this originary repression which results from the paternal function. As with the Freudian account of the Oedipus complex, the symbolic process of castration through the paternal function described by Lacan produces mixed results: On the one hand, the subject is forever alienated from originary jouissance; on the other hand, as we described before, there is something about this jouissance that is excessive and overwhelming, making this alienation a kind of rescue and a source of relief.

Furthermore, according to Lacan, the alienation which characterizes the split subject corresponds to the subject’s position in language itself; Lacan equates the split subject with the speaking subject. For a subject to speak means that it is already fundamentally lacking, that direct or unmediated access to satisfaction or jouissance has been barred.\(^49\) At the level of language, the paternal function’s prohibition of the maternal object has the symbolic effect of barring unmediated access to all objects-in-themselves; thus, our only remaining access to them is through signifiers that represent them. Thus, the split between signifier and signified corresponds to the split subject produced by the paternal function.

The child, with no recourse to jouissance other than through signification, must assimilate a symbolic system which is fundamentally external to it in order to obtain


> We must keep in mind that jouissance is prohibited \(\text{[interdite]}\) to whoever speaks, as such – or, to put it differently, it can only be said \(\text{[dite]}\) between the lines by whoever is a subject of the Law, since the Law is founded on that very prohibition. (p. 696)
satisfaction. Although as adults we tend to regard our mother tongue as our own, as something that we have mastered, it is at the beginning and always remains a foreign system that we had to learn and assimilate. Thus, to come into being as a subject in language involves a form of castration and alienation which, nevertheless, is our only path to assuming a position as a subject. Fink (1995) offers the following account of this relationship to language as a foreign Other in the following passage:

Though widely considered innocuous and purely utilitarian in nature, language brings with it a fundamental form of alienation that is part and parcel of learning one’s mother tongue. The very expression we use to talk about it – “mother tongue” – is indicative of the fact that it is some Other’s tongue first, the mOther’s tongue, that is, the mOther’s language, and in speaking of childhood experience, Lacan often virtually equates the Other with the mother. (p. 7)

Consequently, at stake in Lacan’s reading of the Freudian Oedipus Complex is the subject’s coming-into-being in language. The loss of the mother, the alienation from the Real, produced by castration is the condition for the possibility of the emergence of the Symbolic subject. For Lacan, the Symbolic is inextricably bound to the Law. The Law corresponds to the superego or ego-ideal described by Freud: our sense of what we should do, our moral sense of what is right, our values. And, like Freud, Lacan understands the subject’s coming-into-being under the Law as bound to the resolution of the Oedipus Complex; all particular moral values ultimately derive from and point back to the incest taboo enforced by the father’s threat of castration. Furthermore, just as Freud (1913/1950, 1930/1961) depicts the Oedipus Complex as a necessary but mixed bag (it is a loss that, nevertheless, gives rise to the self-restraint necessary for the emergence of
culture), Lacan similarly understands the Law as necessary for the emergence of the Symbolic subject – and, even further, the meaningfulness of language as such – that nevertheless is an oppressive force under which the subject suffers. The Law organizes and channels free-flowing and excessive jouissance into particular desires; Lacan (1986/1992) posits the Law and desire as co-extensive: “The dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes our desire to flare up only in relation to the Law” (pp. 83-84). This stance ultimately leads Lacan (1966/2006) to the famous declaration that “desire is a defense, a defense against going beyond a limit in jouissance” (p. 699). Eigen (1998), expanding on this famous quote from Lacan, writes:

Our very desires place limits on jouissance. Our desires channel jouissance, filter it, make it this or that form. Our desires are steeped in and oriented toward jouissance, but express a lack, a gap, or we would not be so driven. (p. 136)

Over the course of his work, Lacan adopts a progressively more critical stance vis-à-vis the Law, and this leads him to depart in some significant ways from Freud, who remained steadfast to the end in his belief in the necessity of the law imposed by castration for the maintenance of civilization. The distance between Freud and Lacan produced by this differing attitude toward the Law is nowhere more apparent than in how they conceptualize feminine subjectivity. Freud has been relentlessly and justifiably criticized by feminists both within and outside of psychoanalysis for his claim that women are morally inferior to men because they do not come to identify with the father and, hence, fail to acquire a fully-developed superego through the process of internalizing
his values.\textsuperscript{50} However, where Freud sees moral inferiority as a result of women’s status beyond castration, Lacan, while basically accepting Freud’s premises, arrives at diametrically opposed conclusions.\textsuperscript{51} Lacan, who identifies individuals as “men” or “women” on the basis of personality structure rather than biological sex,\textsuperscript{52} sees women as superior to men precisely because their jouissance has not been as completely subordinated to the Law as men’s. Although Lacan understands women as split subjects who have been castrated like men, he argues that, while remaining under the Law, women retain access to what Lacan calls “the other jouissance” or “supplemental jouissance.” This is the jouissance which remains as a supplement in desire that has been channeled and contained by the Law, a residue of the Real in the Symbolic. Lacan’s critical stance toward the Law, which he regards as demanding the sacrifice of more and more jouissance from those who try to fulfill it,\textsuperscript{53} leads him (especially in his later work)

\textsuperscript{50} There is a vast literature on this topic, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but some classic critiques include Mitchell’s (2000) \textit{Psychoanalysis and Feminism} and Chodorow’s (1989) \textit{Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory}.

\textsuperscript{51} According to Fink (1995):

Freud suggests that women have a different relation to the law, which he correlates with a less highly developed ego-ideal or superego, but which perhaps can be better understood as implying that the relations to boundaries of subjects characterized by feminine structure are fundamentally different: the opposition between inside and outside is inapplicable. (pp. 124-125)


\textsuperscript{52} “According to Lacan, men and women are defined differently with respect to language, that is, with respect to the symbolic order” (Fink, 1995, p. 105).

\textsuperscript{53} In Seminar VII, Lacan (1986/1992) says:
to celebrate the subversive potential of the other jouissance, which in some sense manages to subvert the Law from within, rather than foreclosing it as in psychosis. This celebration of women’s “other jouissance” is consistent with Lacan’s emphasis on the incompatibility between the unconscious and the norms of society underscored by Freud, which Lacan radicalizes by understanding it as an inevitable gap that must be widened through a non-normalizing analysis, rather than a discontent (Unbehagen) that is the necessary cost of adaptation to society.

This critique of normalizing analysis that stresses adaptation to society is what is at stake in Lacan’s critique of ego psychology, which in the 1950s was the dominant current in American psychoanalysis. Ego psychologists understand the aim of analysis

Freud writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that everything that is transferred from jouissance to prohibition gives rise to the increasing strengthening of prohibition. Whoever attempts to submit to the moral law sees the demands of his superego grow increasingly meticulous and increasingly cruel. (p. 176)

Writing about the feminine structure to which the other jouissance belongs as a structural potentiality, Fink (1995) writes:

A woman is not split in the same way as a man: though alienated, she is not altogether subject to the symbolic order. The phallic function, while operative in her case, does not reign absolutely.

With respect to the symbolic order, a woman is not whole, bounded, or limited. (p. 107)

For an excellent sociological analysis of the relationship between the different forms that psychoanalysis takes in relation to different cultures (including the prevalence of ego psychology in the U.S. and Lacanian psychoanalysis in France), see Turkle’s (1992) *Psychoanalytic Politics*. For an excellent description of how Lacanian psychoanalysis – in contradistinction to ego psychology – is non-normalizing at the level of clinical technique, see Fink’s (2007) chapter on “Non-normalizing Analysis” in *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*. 

54 Writing about the feminine structure to which the other jouissance belongs as a structural potentiality, Fink (1995) writes:

A woman is not split in the same way as a man: though alienated, she is not altogether subject to the symbolic order. The phallic function, while operative in her case, does not reign absolutely.

With respect to the symbolic order, a woman is not whole, bounded, or limited. (p. 107)

55 For an excellent sociological analysis of the relationship between the different forms that psychoanalysis takes in relation to different cultures (including the prevalence of ego psychology in the U.S. and Lacanian psychoanalysis in France), see Turkle’s (1992) *Psychoanalytic Politics*. For an excellent description of how Lacanian psychoanalysis – in contradistinction to ego psychology – is non-normalizing at the level of clinical technique, see Fink’s (2007) chapter on “Non-normalizing Analysis” in *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*. 

57
as making the unconscious conscious – in other words, bringing the unconscious under control by the conscious ego. They stress the role of the ego as the agency responsible for mediating between the competing demands of the unconscious and superego, finding ways to channel the forbidden wishes of the unconscious in ways that are socially adaptive and constructive.

Lacan critiques ego psychologists for their de-emphasizing of the unconscious in their reading of Freud, which Lacan regards as Freud’s central and most radical discovery. We can sum up Lacan’s critique with reference to two main points, corresponding to the two agencies of Freudian metapsychology at whose expense the unconscious is de-emphasized by ego psychology. (1) The superego, the internalization of cultural norms, is regarded as a legitimate standard to strive for,56 while, for Lacan, attempts to heed the demands of the superego are futile and, furthermore, a key source of

56 While this is a prevalent opinion in the ego psychology literature, see the following quote for a more critical view of the superego from Anna Freud (1936/1993), one of the earliest and most important contributors to ego psychology:

So long as our attention is confined to the defense against instinct set up by adult neurotics we shall regard the superego as a redoubtable force. In this context it appears as the originator of all neuroses. It is the mischief-maker which prevents the ego’s coming to a friendly understanding with the instincts. It sets up an ideal standard, according to which sexuality is prohibited and aggression pronounced to be antisocial. It demands a degree of sexual renunciation and restriction of aggression which is incompatible with psychic health. (p. 55)

Thus, this passage suggests that a more sympathetic reading of the primary texts of ego psychology could be undertaken, which may reveal more continuity between ego psychology and Lacanian psychoanalysis than Lacan’s critique would suggest – however much that critique may have applied to the way that ego psychology was often taken up in the U.S. during the post-war era.
neurotic suffering.\footnote{“Just as Freud’s superego oversteps its boundaries – in a sense, inflicting the most severe punishment precisely on those who act most ethically – the law inevitably exceeds its authority” (Fink, 1995, p. 101).} (2) The strengthening of the ego, the conscious part of ourselves that negotiates between unconscious wishes and superego demands, is understood as the goal of analysis, while, for Lacan, the ego is ultimately illusory and epiphenomenal and must be challenged and stripped away, rather than built up. In Lacan’s reading of Freud, the primacy of the unconscious is irreducible; the core of Freud’s message is that our conscious sense of ourselves – in other words, our ego – excludes and covers over aspects of ourselves that are repressed and unconscious. It is precisely these unconscious dimensions of the subject that emerge through symptoms, slips of the tongue, and dreams, which the analyst uses as material to underscore the incompleteness and defensiveness which characterize our conscious, egoic narratives about ourselves. Lacan states this even more radically, going so far as to say in Seminar I that “the ego is structured exactly like a symptom. At the heart of the subject, it is only a privileged symptom, the human symptom \textit{par excellence}, the mental illness of man” (p. 16).

In order to illustrate Lacan’s critique of the ego as illusory, it will be necessary at this point to discuss that part of the Lacanian triad of Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic which we have so far neglected: the Imaginary. Lacan’s early essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” represents the best point of departure for understanding why Lacan understands the ego primarily in terms of the Imaginary. The basic premise underlying Lacan’s development of the mirror stage is the unique significance of helplessness for human infants, which is a consequence of humans’ uniquely early birth. Although most mammalian offspring
require some form of care by one or both parents, human infants are unique in the animal kingdom for their utter helplessness and dependence. Paralleling this helplessness, Lacan postulates that the bodily experience of infants is in principle fragmentary; due to the limits of the visual field, the infant is never able to perceive its whole body in a single glance.

However, the child’s interest in its own image in the mirror – which, according to empirical studies in developmental psychology cited by Lacan usually emerges between six and 18 months (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 94) – offers the child an image of a body that is whole, in contrast to his fragmentary bodily experience. According to Lacan, the mirror stage occurs when the infant, usually encouraged by its parents’ interest in and excitement about its image in the mirror, identifies with the wholeness and

58 Although this brief summary of the mirror stage uses Lacan’s 1937 paper as its point of departure, this point about the important role played by parents’ reaction to the mirror image only emerges as a point of emphasis in a much later essay currently unavailable in English. I owe this part of my summary to the following passage from Fink (1997):

More important than this early description of the mirror stage, however, is Lacan’s 1960 reformulation of the mirror stage, currently available only in French. Here Lacan suggests that the mirror image is internalized and invested with libido because of an approving gesture made by the parent who is holding the child before the mirror (or watching the child look at itself in the mirror). In other words, the mirror image takes on such importance as a result of the parent’s recognition, acknowledgement, or approval – expressed in a nodding gesture that has already taken on a symbolic meaning, or in such expressions as “Yes, baby, that’s you!” often uttered by ecstatic, admiring, or simply bemused parents . . . . In human beings, the mirror image may . . . be of some interest at a certain age, but it does not become formative of the ego, of a sense of self, unless it is ratified by a person of importance to the child. (p. 88)
completeness represented by the image in the mirror. Lacan argues that this identification with an image of the body that is whole produces a sense of mastery that is constitutive for the ego, the seat of conscious agency.

However, Lacan (1966/2006) argues that the assumption of the mirror image through identification always remains in tension with the fragmented body and that this conflict can never be completely resolved:

But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality. (p. 76)

In other words, the wholeness of the mirror image which is appropriated in the mirror stage represents the anticipation of future mastery which would overcome the helplessness represented by the experience of the fragmentary body. However, the ideal-ego which is constituted through the appropriation of the mirror image remains forever an illusory aim which can never be reached because “the total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power is a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority” (p. 76). The mirror image “symbolizes the I’s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination” (p. 76).

In sum, before discussing the relationship between the ego constituted in the mirror stage and the Lacanian category of the Imaginary, let us review our discussion so
far. What leads the subject to identify itself with the mirror image? Chiesa (2007) argues that

... the completeness of the subject’s body image as reflected in the mirror provides him with a form of unity that compensates for human helplessness ... the anxiety provoked by his real fragmentation accelerates the subject’s alienating identification with the mirror image. (p. 18)

Thus, the mirror stage represents an attempt to overcome the anxiety provoked by the infant’s experience of helplessness through an identification with a self-image that is unified, whole, and complete, rather than fragmentary and lacking. However, the internalization of the mirror image in the form of the ego represents an illusory solution:

According to Chiesa (2007):

[I]f, on the one hand, the mirror stage allows the subject to individuate himself as ego, on the other, the emergence of the ego constitutes the primary source of the subject’s alienated status, since it is based on an alienation in the other, that is to say, a structural disjunction between the ego and the subject. The image that institutes the subject as an ego is the same image that separates the subject from himself. (p. 19)

Consequently, the subject, in an attempt to compensate for its own sense of helplessness and fragmentation, identifies with the specular image, which, because it represents an ideal external to itself, leads to a fundamental, structural alienation between the subject and the ego constituted by the identification with the specular image.

Having come into being through an identification with something external to itself, the ego tends to relate to others, analogously, by projecting its own internalized
ideal-ego (derived from the specular image) onto others, measuring them against itself. It is this tendency on the part of the ego to measure others against itself that characterizes the Imaginary register for Lacan. According to Fink (1995):

“Imaginary relations” are not illusory relationships – relationships that don’t really exist – but rather relations between egos, wherein everything is played out in terms of but one opposition: same or different . . . . Corresponding to the main imaginary opposition of same and different, imaginary relationships are characterized by two salient features: love (identification) and hate (rivalry). (pp. 86-87)

Thus, the Imaginary is the realm in which the ego relates to others and the world on its own plane or axis: Others who are regarded as similar to the ego are idealized and loved, while others who are regarded as different are hated and regarded as rivals. In either case, the Imaginary involves a mistaken and fundamentally false relationship to others and the world. Just as the ego itself is constituted through a false identification with the specular image, its projections are equally erroneous, always failing to fully capture others in their qualitative, categorical otherness (and not only their sameness or difference to us). Thus, the ego is just as false as the imaginary relations it constitutes through projection. 59

Consequently, the reasons behind Lacan’s critique of ego psychology and its aim of bolstering the ego should by now be clear. The ego is a source of falsehood, alienation, and narcissism. Fink (1995) sums this up in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

59 As we have already noted in Literature Review I: Psychoanalysis and Mysticism, the misrecognition involved in the constitution of the ego resonates with mystical critiques of the ego as illusory.
This self or ego is thus, as Eastern philosophy has been telling us for millennia, a construct, a mental object, and though Freud grants it the status of an agency (*Instanz*), in Lacan’s version of psychoanalysis the ego is clearly not an active agent, the agent of interest being the unconscious. Rather than qualifying as a seat of agency or activity, the ego is, in Lacan’s view, the seat of fixation and narcissistic attachment . . . . The point of analysis is not to strive to give the analysand a “true” or correct image of him or her self, for the ego is by its very nature a distortion, an error, a repository of misunderstanding. (p. 37)

Although in this particular passage, Fink does not distinguish between the subject and the ego, it is clear that for Lacan (1975/1988) the subject cannot be reduced to the ego; as he says in Seminar I, “If the ego is an imaginary function, it is not to be confused with the subject” (p. 193).

At this point, we will conclude our very brief outline of Lacan’s theory of subjectivity and turn to more in-depth coverage of two key themes for the purposes of this dissertation: the causality/temporality of the subject and the subject’s “extimate” structure.

The Subject’s Cause

In the brief introductory sketch provided above, I characterized the Real as that which is prior to the emergence of the subject in the Symbolic. Indeed, this is the easiest way to begin to grasp the meaning of the Real in Lacan’s work; as Fink (1995) writes, “The real is perhaps best understood as *that which has not yet been symbolized*, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization” (p. 25). However, in order to more fully explicate Lacan’s account of how the subject comes into being, it will now be necessary
to complicate this picture. How could we have access to a state prior to the emergence of our own being? How could we remember such a state when there was no subject there to remember it? Since the Symbolic order is necessary for language, thought, and memory, we can only speculate about a period prior to the Symbolic. Along these lines, Fink (1995) notes

Thinking always begins from our position within the symbolic order; in other words, we cannot but consider the supposed “time before the word” from within our symbolic order, using the categories and filters it provides. We may try to think ourselves back to a time before words, to some sort of presymbolic or prelinguistic moment in the development of *homo sapiens* or in our own individual development, but as long as we are thinking, language remains essential. In order to conceive of that time, we give it a name: the real. (p. 24)

Thus, although I described the subject’s constitution above in terms of the Symbolic emerging out of the Real, it is nevertheless only in terms of the Symbolic that anything can have any existence or meaning. We may think of the Real as prior to the Symbolic and may, therefore, think that the cause of the subject lies in the Real. However, we can only construct this creation narrative from the vantage point of the Symbolic.

This point may seem obvious or even trivial, but it leads us to a key conclusion about the causality and temporality of the subject’s constitution for Lacan: Causality is characterized by a retroactive structure. Although we can speak of the Symbolic emerging out of the Real, it is nevertheless the case that the Real has no existence whatsoever prior to or without the Symbolic. We cannot step outside of the Symbolic realm, outside of our own subjectivity, in order to describe the process of the subject’s
emergence out of the Real. Indeed, it is precisely through our attempt to conceptualize our cause in the Real that the Real itself is constituted. Our attempt to reconstruct our lost origin actually constructs the Real. It is for this reason that Fink (1995) posits two distinct levels of the Real:

(1) a real before the letter, that is, a presymbolic real, which, in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis (R₁), and (2) a real after the letter which is characterized by impasses and impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself (R₂), that is, which is generated by the symbolic. (p. 27)

It is not just our attempt to think the Real that brings it into being; rather, the real exists (and comes into being) as a structural gap in the Symbolic; this is what Fink refers to above when he writes of the “impasses and impossibilities” of the Symbolic. The Real comes into view (and, even further, is constituted) when the Symbolic reveals itself to be incomplete, not-whole, lacking.

Although the distinction which Fink draws between the pre-symbolic Real (R₁) and the “symbolic” Real (R₂) that is constituted by the gaps and inconsistencies of the Symbolic is useful as an aid for conceptualizing Lacan’s difficult notion of the Real, it is nevertheless the case that there is only one Real. The Real constituted by the Symbolic (R₂) is the Real as such (R₁). The Real is constituted from within the horizon of the Symbolic precisely as the Real in and of itself. As Žižek (1996) writes, we are not dealing with a “subjectivist platitude according to which every being is already subjectively posited,” but rather, “the paradox of an object which is posited precisely as existing in and for itself” (p. 406). To say that the Real is constituted by the Symbolic is, for Lacan,
emphatically not tantamount to saying that the Real is reducible to the Symbolic, thereby lapsing into a sort of linguistic subjectivism. As Fink (1995) asserts, “[T]he symbolic order . . . produces something [the Real], in the course of its autonomous operation, that goes beyond the symbolic order itself” (p. 27). Consequently, it is not correct to say that the Symbolic is a unified, closed system which constitutes the Real as immanent to that system; on the contrary, the Real is constituted as that which is utterly transcendent by the gaps in the Symbolic. The Symbolic produces the Real as the Real, not as a subjective or linguistic representation. The Real is not something standing over and against the Symbolic; rather, it is an estimate structure, an immanent exteriority.\(^{60}\)

---

\(^{60}\) Cf. the following Eckhart (2009) quote:

In my birth all things were born and I was the cause of myself and of all things . . . . If I were not, God would not be either. I am the cause of God’s being God: if I were not, then God would not be God. (p. 424)

Sells (1994) provides an excellent gloss on Eckhart’s notion that God is brought into being by the soul (which parallels Lacan’s notion that the Symbolic constitutes the Real):

The notion that the deity might be vulnerable, dependent upon its self-birth within the human soul, is shocking to some. It would be a mistake, I believe, to deny the radical nature of Eckhart’s position. Yet such a position is not at all indefensible according to the criteria of apophatic logic. In one sense, the dependence of the deity upon the soul’s reception is a function of a purely contrary to fact condition; if there were no justice in the soul (i.e., in the ground of the soul which is the ground of the deity), the deity, as justice, would not give birth to itself. Yet this birth, by definition, always has occurred and always is occurring. When Eckhart speaks of the divine being depending upon the birth in the soul, he is speaking from within the imperfect “always is occurring.” From within the imperfect, the birth is a matter of faith and risk, in which the deity and the human soul are mutually vulnerable and mutually dependent upon the birth of justice in the soul. (p. 177)
Significant conclusions about the causality of the subject follow from this discussion of the paradoxical causal relationship which inheres between the Real and the Symbolic. Indeed, Žižek offers the following definition of the subject on this basis: “[T]he subject is an effect that entirely posits its own cause” (p. 404). It would be easy to understand this definition as suggesting that the subject, in a moment of supreme agency and self-possession, posits itself, somehow stepping outside of itself and getting behind its own origin. The fact that Lacan often refers to the Real cause in terms of trauma should indicate the problems with this understanding. The Real is constituted by the cracks and fissures in the Symbolic, precisely where the symbolic subject’s ostensible self-possession and spontaneity are undercut. Thus, when we speak of the symbolic subject “positing” its own Real cause, it is important to stress the utterly passive character of this process. Thus, Žižek (1996) underscores that “the gesture of subjectivization/positing, in its most fundamental dimension consists of a purely formal gesture of conceiving as the result of our positing something which occurs inevitably, notwithstanding our activity” (p. 406). Far from representing a moment of triumph for the subject, the Real is constituted out of the Symbolic in the form of trauma: the subject is confronted with its own dispossession. Thus, the Real is “produced” or “constituted” by the Symbolic not in the sense of an agency actively producing something, but rather in a purely formal sense. The Symbolic is a system or structure, and the Real is constituted out of the gaps in this system. The Real is the cause which sets the Symbolic system in motion, but the Symbolic cannot encompass its own cause. So, the cause inheres in the Symbolic as a gap, a missing piece. However, that gap only “exists” in relation to the Symbolic system.
The following Žižek quote offers an excellent summary of our discussion so far and is, therefore, worth quoting in full:

Herein lies the trauma’s vicious circle: the trauma is the cause which perturbs the smooth engine of symbolization, throws it off balance, and gives rise to an indelible inconsistency in the symbolic field; but for all that, the trauma has no existence of its own prior to symbolization; it remains an anamorphic entity that gains consistency only in retrospect, viewed from within the symbolic horizon – it acquires its consistency from the structural necessity of the inconsistency of the symbolic field. As soon as we obliterate this retrospective character of the trauma and “substantialize” it into a positive entity, one that can be isolated as a cause preceding its symbolic effects, we regress to common linear determinism. (p. 399)

Thus, linear causality must be abandoned in attempting to account for the subject’s constitution because the subject is an effect (of the traumatic cause in the Real) that posits its own cause (the trauma of the Real that emerges out of and as the gaps and inconsistencies of the Symbolic field). The cause can only be “substantialized” – i.e., conceptualized as a positive object – if we forget that the cause is constituted as a lack, as

---

61 Anamorphosis is an artistic technique discussed by Lacan in Seminar VII. Lacan (1986/1992) defines it thus: “It is any kind of construction that is made in such a way that by means of an optical transposition a certain form that wasn’t visible at first sight transforms itself into a readable image” (p. 135). Although Lacan’s examples focus on art from the 16th and 17th Centuries, a more recent and perhaps clearer example is Salvador Dalí’s (1940) painting “Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy,” in which the forms of the three faces representing each of the ages emerge as an optical illusion, appearing mainly through gaps in other objects. Thus, Žižek can describe the trauma of the Real as an “anamorphic” entity because it “appears” as a lack or gap in the structure of the Symbolic.
absent. An object can only appear in a context, a whole, a comprehensive system of meaning – in other words, a totality, in which the origin and the end are included in the system. The cause cannot be understood as an object, however, because it is precisely the origin that is missing/excluded from the system. Thus, Lacan (1973/1978) asserts that “cause is to be distinguished from that which is determinate in a chain, in other words the law . . . there is cause only in something that doesn’t work” (p. 22). Although we usually think of causality as ensuring the order of the universe – because it adheres to the law of cause and effect – Lacan understands the cause as the anarchic origin, that which brings the Law of the Symbolic into being but, as such, remains beyond the horizon of the Law.

The following quote from Fink (1995) sheds light on the antagonism between the cause and the Law in the context of Lacan’s grappling with the scientific status of psychoanalysis:

Lacan understands cause . . . as that which disrupts the smooth functioning of lawlike interactions. Causality in science is absorbed into what we might call structure – cause leading to effect within an ever more exhaustive set of laws. A cause as something that seems not to obey laws, remaining inexplicable from the standpoint of scientific knowledge, has become unthinkable, our general tendency being to assume that it will just be a matter of time before science can explain it. (p. 140)

Nowhere is this point about the anarchic origin more clear in Lacan’s work than in his discussion of creation ex nihilo in Seminar VII. In this discussion, Lacan (1986/1992) distinguishes between what he calls “evolutionism,” on the one hand, which he identifies with the Aristotelian position that matter is eternal and that nothing comes
from nothing (p. 121), and creationism, on the other, which is the notion that the signifier, the word – indeed, the Symbolic order – comes into being in an instant of pure beginning out of nothing. Lacan (1986/1992) argues that “the whole of ancient philosophy is articulated around” the notion of evolutionism and tells his audience in 1960 that their worldview is likewise shaped by evolutionist assumptions (pp. 121, 126). What unites ancient philosophy and the modern empiricist/scientific worldview is the notion of a unified, orderly *kosmos*, governed by a linear and predictable causality that ensures that that which cannot yet be explained is, at least in principle, intelligible. In other words, the universe is fundamentally *lawful*. However, Lacan (1986/1992) asserts that the emergence of the signifier occurs in a moment of “absolute beginning, which marks the origin of the signifying chain as a distinct order” (p. 214). In other words, this is not a moment among others in a chain of moments, but *the constitutive instant* prior to an order or *kosmos* in which it could be located and grasped.

Indeed, one of the most crucial points Lacan makes for our purposes is that this absolute beginning is in principle prior to consciousness. He criticizes “an evolution that insists on deducing from continuous process the ascending movement which reaches the summit of consciousness and thought” because it “necessarily implies that that consciousness and that thought were there at the beginning” (1986/1992, p. 213). In other words, to the extent that evolutionist thought understands consciousness (i.e., the Symbolic order) as emerging out of a gradual, orderly, causal sequence, it can logically be deduced that consciousness was the inevitable result of this process from the beginning. Thus, the *telos*, the end result, of this evolutionary process was always there from the *arche*, the beginning. In other words, the cause of the lawful universe, the
universe of meaning which belongs to consciousness, is not truly prior to but rather always already embedded in the very order of law and meaning which it brings into being. For Lacan, however, the Symbolic system which emerges from the cause is always too late to grasp or appropriate its own origin. The cause remains in the Symbolic system only as a structural lack/remainder. It is to this remainder of the Real in the Symbolic that we now turn in the following subsection in order to elucidate Lacan’s notion of “extimacy.”

**Extimacy and das Ding**

Having discussed the paradoxical temporality of the subject for Lacan, we are now in a position to discuss the corresponding structural consequences of this temporality. Because the subject’s origin belongs to a fundamentally different order than the subjectivity which emerges out of it, the origin remains forever other and is structurally unassimilable. As a necessary consequence, the subject is not whole; it is haunted by a basic lack. The missing cause is encountered as a lack in the symbolic subject that, as the very origin of its own being, is simultaneously other and familiar, absolutely transcendent but somehow more immanent than anything else. Lacan (1986/1992) coins the term “extimacy” in Seminar VII to designate the “intimate exteriority” of this strange/familiar “object” at the heart of the subject, which he discusses throughout Seminar VII in terms of the Freudian Thing (*das Ding*) (p. 139).

The paradoxical interiority/exteriority that is denoted by the term extremacy has to do with the way in which emptiness and form are mutually co-constitutive: As we have seen, the Symbolic structure (the realm of being, meaning, and form) both emerges out of and constitutes the Real in the “form” of emptiness. In a discussion that in some ways
foreshadows his later topographies, Lacan illustrates this play of form and emptiness in a
discussion of the form of the vase which is heavily influenced by Heidegger’s
(1951/2001) essay “The Thing”:

It [the vase] creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it.
Emptiness and fullness are introduced into a world that by itself knows not of
them. It is on the basis of this fabricated signifier, this vase, that emptiness and
fullness as such enter the world . . . (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 120)62

With the help of the visual aid of the vase which Lacan describes in this passage, we gain
a clearer sense of the way that the Real is constituted by the Symbolic as a gap in the
Symbolic system and the way that the Real ex-ists63 as an absence in the Symbolic. It is
for this reason that Jacques-Alain Miller (1994) asserts that extimacy refers to “the real in
the symbolic” (p. 75).

Lacan’s notion of extimacy finds its precursor in Freud’s (1919/1955) essay “The
Uncanny,” in which Freud defines the uncanny as “proceed[ing] from something familiar
which has been repressed” (p. 247). Freud arrives at this conclusion by analyzing various
uncanny phenomena, such as doubles and inanimate objects (e.g., dolls) that appear alive,
which represent a “harking-back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding
feeling, a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the
external world and from other people” (p. 236). These experiences qualify as uncanny not

62 Cf. a parallel notion in Buddhism: “[F]orm is emptiness, emptiness is form; emptiness is not separate
from form, form is not separate from emptiness” (Heart Sutra, c. 609/2004).
63 According to Fink (1995), Lacan’s use of the term “ex-sistence” is derived from Heidegger and refers to
“‘an existence which stands apart from,’ which insists as it were from the outside; something not included
on the inside, something which, rather than being intimate, is ‘extimate’” (p. 122).
simply because they are strange, but precisely because they represent a form of strangeness which was at one time familiar – namely, when we were children and the boundary between our thoughts and reality was much more fluid (corresponding to the undifferentiated state of the ego, the seat of “reality-testing”). Freud refers to this fluidity between thought and reality with a term which also appears in *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1950) and his case study of the Rat Man (1909/1955): the “omnipotence of thoughts” (1919/1955, p. 240).

In addition to analyzing uncanny phenomena, Freud also arrives at his definition of the uncanny through an etymological analysis of the German word for uncanny: “das Unheimliche.” “Heim” is a German word for “home,” and the adjective “Heimlich” has two basic meanings: “[O]n the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight” (1919/1955, pp. 224-225). “Unheimlich” should be the opposite of “heimlich,” but it is actually only the opposite of the first definition, while overlapping with the second definition: “Thus, heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich” (Freud, 1919/195, p. 226). The uncanny is, therefore, a familiar strangeness or the realization of the strangeness of that which we usually regard as familiar.

Freud emphasizes this latter sense when he makes a highly evocative parenthetical comment in the context of his examination of the meaning of foreign words for “uncanny”: “But the dictionaries that we consult tell us nothing new, perhaps because we ourselves speak a language that is foreign” (1919/1955, p. 221). In this comment, Freud points to the uncanny nature of language itself: we speak a language that we
typically regard as familiar but which is, nevertheless, not our own. Žižek (1996) captures the uncanny character of language nicely in the following passage:

The function of language is thus ultimately parasitic: not only do words and phrases seem to impose themselves on us, trying to gain the upper hand, fighting for hegemony, but the very fundamental relationship between language and human beings who use it can be reversed – it could be argued that not only do human beings use language to reproduce themselves, multiply their power and knowledge, etc., but also, at perhaps a more fundamental level, language itself uses human beings to replicate and expend itself, to gain a wealth of meanings, etc. (p. 29)

However, Freud not only links his notion of the uncanny to our mother tongue, but to the mother herself, in a way that will bring us back to the extimacy of the missing origin:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. The unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking [sic] saying that ‘Love is home-sickness’; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: ‘this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before’, we may interpret the place as being his mother’s
genitals or her body. In this case too, the unheimlich is what was once heimisch, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ ['un-'] is the token of repression (1919/1955, p. 245)\(^{64}\)

In this passage, Freud characterizes both the encounter with the female genitals and the feeling of being at home in a new place as uncanny in that they represent the experience of something new or strange which nevertheless reminds us of something familiar that has been repressed.

When Freud refers to something familiar that has been repressed, he means not only the womb, the breast, or the body of the mother as a whole, but the state of being which the child experiences in relation to these: namely, the experience of unity or oneness which we have already discussed in the context of Freud’s notion of “the omnipotence of thought.” This notion, however, only reached its full flowering later on in Freud’s oeuvre in the discussion of the “oceanic feeling” in Civilization and Its Discontents (1930/1961, pp. 10-21).\(^{65}\) However, it is important to emphasize that the oceanic feeling, in accordance with the logic we have already extensively outlined in Lacan’s work, is only constituted after the fact. It is always already lost; we can never know that we had it until it is already gone. As Lacan (1986/1992) says in Seminar VII, “The object is by nature a refound object. That it was lost is a consequence of that – but after the fact. It is thus refound without our knowing, except through the refinding, that it was ever lost” (p. 118). To the extent that we “have” it at all, it is only in the form of a

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{See footnote 151 on p. 201 of the Discussion for our related exploration of the etymological connections between the German word for the female genitals (Scheide) and the German word for “departure” (abscheiden), which is also etymologically related to Meister Eckhart’s term “detachment” (Abgeschiedenheit).}
\footnote{See our discussion of the oceanic feeling in Literature Review I: Psychoanalysis and Mysticism, pp. 17-19.}
\end{footnotes}
longing after the fact, a “memory,” that is actually a discovery and a constituting. As with
the image of the vase described by Lacan, the oceanic feeling as a form of longing or
nostalgia only emerges in relation to the structure of an already-constituted subject.

To return again to Lacan, it is impossible to address the topic of extimacy without
examining what Lacan calls das Ding (the Thing), the term which for Lacan designates
this missing Other which is paradoxically at the core of the subject. The following
passage from Seminar VII conveys das Ding’s extimate structure:

. . . das Ding is at the center only in the sense that it is excluded. That is to say, in
reality das Ding has to be posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that it is
impossible to forget – the Other whose primacy of position Freud affirms in the
form of something entfremdet [alienated], something strange to me, although it is
at the heart of me . . . (Lacan, 1986/1992, p. 71)

Thus, das Ding is the name by which Lacan designates the extimate Other at the heart of
the self.

However, we may fairly ask what then das Ding is and why this particular term
has been chosen by Lacan to refer to it. Lacan takes it up from Freud’s use of the term in
the Project for a Scientific Psychology (1895/1955) and the article “Negation”
(1925/1955); however, Lacan himself freely admits that the significance it assumes in his
thought represents a departure from Freud’s usage of the term:

We are progressing this year around an axis that I take to be essential, namely,
that Ding, which is not without causing problems, indeed, not without causing
some doubts to emerge as to its Freudian legitimacy . . . . I take full responsibility
Lacan emphasizes the importance of the particular word *Ding* by distinguishing it from the other German word for thing, *Sache*, which Lacan links to the word, based on an analysis of etymology and everyday usage (Lacan, 1986/1992, pp. 43-45). *Das Ding*, in contrast, is that notion of thing which remains set apart from the word, the letter, the Symbolic; it is therefore already clear that *das Ding* is associated with the Lacanian Real.

Another way of approaching the riddle of *das Ding* is to ask how it is distinguished from the object. The answer is that Lacan ties the object to the imaginary register and *das Ding* to the Real:

We have to guide us the Freudian theory of the narcissistic foundations of the object, of its insertion in the imaginary register. The object that specifies directions or poles of attraction to man in his openness, in his world, and that interests him because it is more or less his image, his reflection – precisely that object is not the Thing to the extent that the latter is at the heart of the libidinal economy. (1986/1992, p. 112)

In other words, an object, to the extent that it is located in the Imaginary register, has to do with an already-constituted ego: The ego measures itself against the object and relates to it narcissistically. *Das Ding*, on the other hand, is at the heart of the libidinal economy because it is vis-à-vis *das Ding* (more precisely, the absence of *das Ding*) that the structure of the subject is constituted as such.

---

66 This will change over the course of Lacan’s work as the notion of object *a* emerges and gains importance as an object which is associated with the Real – a piece of the Real which the subject tries to use to fill its lack and (re-)gain the fullness of originary jouissance.
In conclusion, there are many terms which are associated by Lacan with the structure of extimacy: *das Ding*, the cause, the Real-in-the-Symbolic, the parasitic Other of language itself which inhabits us. And we have seen how – although Lacan never mentions this explicitly in Seminar VII\(^{67}\) – Freud’s notion of the uncanny (and its associations with the oceanic feeling and the omnipotence of thought) shares the structure of extimacy. However, Miller (1994) adds to the list the unconscious:

If we use the term “extimacy in this way, we can consequently make it be equivalent to the unconscious itself . . . . In a certain way, this is what Lacan is commenting on when he speaks of the unconscious as discourse of the Other, of this Other who, more intimate than my intimacy, stirs me. And this intimate that is radically Other, Lacan expressed with a single word: “extimacy.” (p. 77)

The unconscious for Lacan is the discourse of the Other; as Fink (1995) puts it, “[W]e can think of the unconscious as expressing, through its irruptions into everyday speech, a desire that is itself foreign and unassimilated . . . . the unconscious is full of other people’s desires” (p. 9).

This is the structure of the subject we are left with in Lacan: an inside-out, extimate subject, permeated by foreign desires. The Lacanian notion of the unconscious suggested above points to the way that the subject always comes into being in relation to an other; indeed, perhaps the best single bottom-line summary of Lacan’s (1978/1988) understanding of the subject is his assertion in Seminar II that “I is an other” (p. 9).\(^{68}\) This

---

\(^{67}\) Lacan (2004) does, however, take up the theme of the uncanny explicitly in Seminar X, which has not yet been translated into English.

\(^{68}\) This is a saying that Lacan borrows from Rimbaud (1954/1962).
otherness that always remains lodged at the heart of the subject produces a feeling of lack, emptiness, and longing that cannot be overcome. The Lacanian subject is finite, lacking, not-whole – the egoic fantasy of a unified or totalized subject is nothing but an illusion. It is our attempt to fill this lack (or at least to compensate ourselves for the lost object) that produces symptoms, and it is the clinical task of psychoanalysis to strip away our fantasies of wholeness and confront us with our structural lack, our insurmountable finitude – but this discussion of the symptom and the aims of analysis will be taken up in-depth in the Discussion section.69

69 See pp. 188-199 below.
Chapter 4 – Literature Review III: Meister Eckhart on the Self

This chapter reviews the existing secondary literature explicitly exploring Meister Eckhart’s view of the self. Compared to literature on other themes in Eckhart’s work (e.g., detachment, the ground, or the Gottesgeburt), the literature on the self in Eckhart is relatively scant. Indeed, one of the aims of this dissertation is to make an original contribution to Eckhart scholarship by offering a systematic articulation of Eckhart’s view of the self. However, this brief literature review section makes an original contribution in its own right by providing a roadmap to the existing literature on Eckhart and the self, which I hope will be helpful to scholars in a variety of disciplines interested in undertaking research on Eckhart’s view of the self.

Whether or not there is a self to speak of at all in Eckhart’s work is a matter of some controversy. Maxime Mauriège – both in the text of a paper he presented (2009) and in personal conversations (2010) – has expressed doubts about whether Eckhart elaborates a theory of human subjectivity at all, leading him to pose the explicit question: “Is there a metaphysic of subjectivity in Meister Eckhart?” (2009). Indeed, Mauriège’s doubts have in part led him to focus his research on “divine subjectivity” in Eckhart, and this focus can be justified in light of Eckhart’s (2009, W17, Q28) own assertion that “ego, the word ‘I,’ is proper to none but God in His oneness” (p. 132). Mauriège’s focus on divine subjectivity finds confirmation in Udo Kern’s (1995) assertion that “the only I that is I is the I of God” (p. 614, my translation).

70 See the Findings section, in particular the conclusion to the Findings.

71 “Das eine Ich, das Ich ist, ist das Ich Gottes” (p. 614).
Part of what leads Mauriège and others to question whether subjectivity as such is thematized by Eckhart – and, if so, whether subjectivity for Eckhart in any way pertains to human being – has to do with the debate over how to contextualize Eckhart’s work in the history of philosophy and, indeed, within the larger debate over how the notion of subjectivity has evolved historically. As McGinn (2001) notes, the issue of the “status of the ‘I’ and subjectivity” in Eckhart’s mysticism has produced considerable discussion in recent years and some disagreement between those who would see Eckhart’s thought as the beginning of a trajectory that leads to modern theories of transcendental subjectivity, and those who argue that his notion of the destruction of the created self should be viewed primarily within the context of medieval theology, asceticism, and mysticism. (p. 138)

Thus, McGinn identifies two camps with regard to scholarship on Eckhart and the self: Those who think of Eckhart as a precursor to modern theories of subjectivity and those who conceptualize Eckhart’s view of the self primarily within his native medieval, theological context. It is clear that Mauriège falls into the latter of the two camps, having argued that attempts to explore Eckhart’s view of the self tend to fall into the trap of projecting modern notions of subjectivity (in particular from the German Idealist tradition) onto Eckhart’s thoroughly medieval worldview (M. Mauriège, personal communications, 2010).

Ben Morgan (1999) agrees that Eckhart’s notion of subjectivity differs qualitatively from modern notions of the subject. Indeed, Morgan – a professor of medieval and modern German at Oxford University – puts forth the quite interesting linguistic argument that “Eckhart’s Middle High German did not contain the word ‘self.’
It had reflexive verbs, possessives, and pronouns: but it did not have the noun “the self.” (“Das Selbst” did not make it into a German dictionary until 1702.) (pp. 63-64). Morgan cites this as evidence for his claim that

[T]he self, in the culture from which Eckhart emerged, was not abstractable in the way it now is . . . . Where a modern reader might suppose a self, Eckhart seems to have seen particular actions, habits, and attributes to which the individual clung with varying degrees of inflexibility. (pp. 63-64)

However, this does not lead Morgan to interrogate Eckhart’s view of the self purely within his medieval context; rather, he is primarily interested in the way that the modern concept of subjectivity is developed through Eckhart’s work and, more specifically, through his trial. Like Reiner Schürmann (2003), who asserts that “for a reader at the end of the twentieth century, to read Eckhart is to witness the fading away of principles by which an age has lived” (p. 275), Morgan’s (1999) primary interest lies in the trial of Eckhart as “a liminal moment in the development of modern selfhood” (p. 61). Indeed, perhaps more than any other offence, Eckhart’s teachings were condemned because of his forceful assertions that, by abandoning itself, the soul could achieve absolute oneness with God.72

In an analysis of the key Eckhart disciple Henry Suso’s [MG: Heinrich Seuse] Book of Truth, Morgan finds evidence for the internalization of the trial in the form of a self-monitoring or self-policing of the longing for absolute surrender to God:

72 See, for example, Mojsisch (2003): What the arrayed powers of the church summoned against him, however, was his theory of thought, or of homo divinus, the divine human” (p. 184, my translation). [Was die geballte Kirchenmacht aber gegen ihn auf den Plan gerufen hatte, war seine Theorie des Denkens oder des homo divinus, des göttlichen Menschen].
The main symptom of this internalization is the absolute limit Seuse imposed on surrender. However far the individual pursued the path of self-overcoming, in Seuse’s eyes he would never finally kick off the limiting traces of humanity. He would never “be born in the Son and become one with the Son” in the way Eckhart sermons suggested, he would always be human. (p. 76)

Morgan goes on to argue that “from these habits of self-control, the modern subject is born, quite literally, in Seuse’s Book of Truth” (p. 77), offering the following provocative linguistic evidence:

Where Meister Eckhart’s text had no equivalent to the modern word “self,” Seuse’s text unexpectedly discovers the noun: “das sich.” The discovery is superficially prompted by an analysis of the verb “to take leave of oneself,” the Middle High German word “sich lazsen.” True to the scholastic habit of cutting up a phrase or sentence arbitrarily, so as to draw meaning from its individual elements, Seuse offers a series of glosses on both of the words “lazsen” and “sich.” In effect, he is trying to define more closely what it is the mystical subject must abandon when he takes leave of himself, to define the self that differentiates and distances the individual from God. However, the effort of definition forces Seuse to group together and fix as a noun impulses that, for Eckhart, never have the same abstract coherence of rigidity. It forces him to invent the term “ein eigen sich.” (p. 78)

Despite Morgan’s suggestion that the discovery of “das sich” is only “superficially prompted” by the analysis of “sich lazsen,” it seems to me highly significant that the more fully abstracted, nominalized self developed by Suso emerges
precisely in the context of an analysis of a verb that is closely related to the MHG noun “gelâzenheit” (MG Gelassenheit, i.e., letting go, releasement), which expresses the core of Eckhart’s preaching. This is entirely consistent with Morgan’s central thesis that what is at stake in the trial of Eckhart – and its subsequent internalization in Suso’s work – is the emergence of a fundamental barrier to self-releasement (i.e., gelâzenheit) which is constitutive of the modern subject. Rather than indicating Eckhart’s lack of relevance to modern notions of subjectivity, however, Morgan sees in this distance between the “self” found in Eckhart and the modern notion of subjectivity an invaluable resource in the service of relativizing and critiquing modern notions of subjectivity:

It helps to edge our way beyond the apparently inescapable, abstractable self, allowing us to grasp that our way of being a self is just one among many of coming to terms with the longing for contact and surrender with “mimesis”73 or with “God.” (p. 80)

In terms of McGinn’s distinction between those scholars who tend to see Eckhart’s view of the self in its distinctness from or continuity with modern approaches

73 Morgan (1999) borrows this term from Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/2002) Dialectic of Enlightenment:

The pivotal concept in their [Horkheimer and Adorno’s] account is that of mimesis, which they define as a double-edged experience: a combination of terror and awe. On the one hand, there is a feeling of wonder and connectedness, a desire to blend with a world from which one has no awareness of being separated, a letting go that makes other versions of freedom pale in comparison. On the other hand, there is the sheerest panic at being delivered up by one’s surrender to an overpowering and life-threatening force. Mixed with the glory is the fear of imminent eradication. (Morgan, 1999, p. 59)
to subjectivity, we could say that Mauriège and Morgan (albeit in very different ways and with very different aims) fall into the former camp, while Halfwassen and Mojsisch, respectively, represent the latter camp, in particular emphasizing the continuity of Eckhart’s view of the self with the transcendental subjectivity of German Idealism. Halfwassen (1997) notes that the question with which the title of his article begins, “Is there a philosophy of subjectivity in the Middle Ages?,” contains a “provocation”:

Because the belief that the discovery of subjectivity and its elevation to the principle of philosophy is precisely the defining characteristic of modern philosophy belongs to the philosophical self-understanding of modernity, which distinguishes it from antiquity and the Middle Ages – and especially from the latter. (p. 337, my translation)\(^74\)

For Halfwassen’s interpretation of Eckhart’s view of the self, the unity of God and soul in the Intellect is decisive, and it is this emphasis which allows him to underscore Eckhart’s roots in Neoplatonism – e.g. the influence of Plotinus’s (ca. 270/1992) notion of Intellect (Latin: *Nous*) – as well as his continuity with German Idealism – e.g., in the self-coinciding of the subject and the Absolute in self-consciousness for Hegel (1807/1977). Thus, in stark contrast to Mauriège and Morgan’s respective differentiations between Eckhart’s view of the self and modern theories of subjectivity, Halfwassen declares in his final paragraph that “these connections forwards and backwards relativize the borders of

---

the epochs in the history of philosophy and authenticate the continuity of the intellectual/metaphysical theme of antiquity up to modernity”\(^75\) (p. 359, my translation).

Although he is less explicit about locating Eckhart in a German Idealist trajectory, Mojsisch’s (2003) reading of Eckhart’s view of the self is likewise characterized by an emphasis on the unity of the subject and object of thinking [MG: *Denken*] in his understanding of subjectivity for Eckhart. Mojsisch makes the obligatory caveats about the principle of analogy (*inquantum* principle),\(^76\) in order to qualify that “the godly human is admittedly only godly insofar as (*in quantum*) he is godly, not insofar as he is human”\(^77\) (p. 194). However, Mojsisch’s emphasis remains for the most part on what he calls the “univocity” [MG: *Univozitāt*] between the soul and God. For Mojsisch, this univocity assumes a characteristically German Idealist form, in which the soul’s divinity is defined according to its self-possession through self-consciousness:

> The human should forget that which he constantly remembers in order to remember that which he constantly forgets: himself as I, as which he aims at nothing foreign, to not expose himself to the spatio-temporal images, which flow to him from objects in space and time, rather, to be unwed from these images, un-

\(^{75}\) Diese Verbindungen nach vorwärts und rückwärts relativieren die Grenzen der philosophiehistorischen Epochen und verbürgen die Kontinuität der geistmetaphysischen Thematik von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit.

\(^{76}\) The *inquantum* principle is the principle of analogy which recurs throughout Eckhart’s work, which Eckhart uses to temper his claims about the identity of the soul with God – for example, by arguing that the just man is identical to Justice, only *insofar as* he is just. See Findings section, pp. 173-177 for a detailed discussion of the *inquantum* principle.

\(^{77}\) ’Göttlich’ ist der göttliche Mensch freilich nur, *insofern (in quantum)* er göttlich ist, nicht, insofern er Mensch ist.
formed as it were, free from otherness, in order to be I as I, in order to be consciousness, which possesses its aim in itself, namely: self-consciousness as freedom.⁷⁸ (p. 196, my translation)

In other words, the soul, in “forgetting” the perceptual realm of spatio-temporal images and withdrawing into its own pure self-consciousness, discovers its absolute freedom and self-possession in self-consciousness.

Although we have so far proceeded in our review of the Eckhart literature according to a historical approach, classifying authors on the basis of their tendency to place Eckhart in a certain historical trajectory – either in Eckhart’s native medieval context or from the standpoint of modern philosophy – this passage from Mojsisch should make clear that contextualizing Eckhart historically is already to take a stand on decisive questions about Eckhart’s view of the self. This passage by Mojsisch indicates that the stakes include how to read Eckhart on the self’s causality, aims, and freedom. In what follows, I will attempt to classify the literature on Eckhart’s view of the self into two categories determined more by content than an historical approach.

(1) In the first category are those who understand the self in its unity with God as a form of absolute being. This stance is fundamentally ontological; detachment in Eckhart is understood as the shedding of particular, determinate being in order to become one with a higher, ultimate ground of being (i.e., God). So, for example, Kern (1995) asserts:

⁷⁸ Der Mensch soll das vergessen, dessen er sich stets erinnert, um sich dessen zu erinnern, was er stets vergißt: sich as Ich, als welches der Mensch nicht Fremdes erstrebt, sich nicht den raum-zeitlichen Bildern, die ihm von den Gegenständen in Raum und Zeit zufliessen, aussetzt, vielmehr dieser Bilder ledig ist, sozusagen ent-bildet ist, freier ist von Andersheit, um Ich als Ich zu sein, um das Bewuβtsein zu sein, das seinen Zweck in sich selbst besitzt, nämlich: Selbstbewuβtsein als Freiheit.
If this “abnegare” [Latin: “to renounce”] occurs, if the human gives up the establishment of its own self [*die Etablierung des selbstischen Selbst*], the discovery of the I does not arrive at destruction, but the ontological “*oikodomê*” [Greek: building up] of true human being *par excellence*. (p. 618).

Thus, for Kern, self-renunciation ultimately leads to the recovery/discovery of the true essence of human being, which is its unity with a God that Kern understands in explicitly otherworldly, onto-theological terms.

The fully detached soul achieves an all-encompassing universality; indeed, Mojsisch (1983) identifies this subject with “transcendental being”79 (p. 120, my translation). Thus, the view of the self is conditioned by a fundamentally metaphysical, onto-theological approach to God. From this perspective, Eckhart’s comments on the soul being the cause of itself (*causa sui*) are understood to indicate that the soul possesses its own origin. The following passage from Summerell (2002), whose essay “Self-causality from Plotinus to Eckhart and from Descartes to Kant” represents one of the only sustained meditations on self-causality in Eckhart, exemplifies this point:

> Standing in its first cause, or the Godhead, the I stands freely in itself, completely self-related, being cause of itself . . . . In appropriating the Neoplatonic notion of self-causality, Eckhart conceives the Godhead in terms of the autonomy and autarky [self-sufficiency] of the I as such. (pp. 502-503)

As this quote makes clear, the subject’s freedom is understood in this perspective as defined by its autonomy and self-sufficiency, and this freedom is secured by its self-causality.

---

79 “Transcendentales Sein.”
This understanding of the self’s freedom is similarly paralleled by a certain understanding of the subject’s relationship to its ends/goals (telos). Mojsisch’s (2003) gloss on the just man living without why is illustrative in this regard:

For the just there is in his action no ‘why’, no aim or purpose of his action.

Because the goal of the action of the just is justice, and this is identical to the just. The just possesses, consequently, no goal that is external to himself. Discourse about a goal for the action of the just is only in this way meaningful, that this goal is grasped as immanent to the just; the just is, therefore, his own goal.²⁸ (p. 188, my translation, emphasis added)

Thus, living without why for Eckhart is conceptualized as indicating a prior self-possession; in this view Eckhart is not calling for an abandonment of goals or ends but a perfect possession of them that renders all striving superfluous.

David Kangas – writing in a different context, namely, in a book about Kierkegaard’s philosophy of time – nevertheless offers a resource for understanding what brings these disparate works on Eckhart together and what ties them to the German Idealist tradition. Kangas (2007) asserts:

The philosophies of German idealism constitute an extraordinary theoretical elaboration and defense of the priority of the problematic of self-consciousness to any other problematic. Self-consciousness finds its legitimation as ground. The

values associated with self-consciousness become preeminent: (self)-presence, identity, unity, freedom, and (self)-possession. Nothing can be more intimate to the ego than itself. Such self-intimacy or self-possession, raised to the point where the subject is conceived as positing itself, is what transcendental idealism would call “interiority.” *The trajectory of idealism from Kant to Hegel discovers the illusory or provisional quality of everything exterior.* (p. 195, emphasis added)

Demonstrating the proximity of their thought to German Idealism, this is precisely what brings together the readings of Eckhart’s view of the self by Mojsisch, Halfwassen, Summerell, and, ultimately, Milne (n.d.), who sums up this position with his contention that Eckhart calls for a journey “to that which truly is from that which only partly is and which is always in the flux of becoming but never in being.” The defining characteristic of the perspective exemplified by all of these authors is the search for a ground of being and freedom in the form of a self-consciousness that is fully present to and possesses itself. This ultimately results in the expulsion of any transcendence or exteriority; the self overcomes all difference, all otherness. Everything is ultimately immanent to the I.

(2) The second category of authors who have examined Eckhart’s view of the self represents a fundamentally different perspective; rather than emphasizing the subject’s self-possession, these authors focus instead on detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) and releasement (*gelâzenheit*) as the concepts which should be given priority in interpreting Eckhart’s view of the self. This is not to say that the first group of authors neglect the negative theological dimension of Eckhart’s work (it is impossible to read Eckhart and miss this aspect); rather, they approach the abyss of detachment as a negative *moment* in Eckhart which is ultimately overcome in dialectical fashion. The self must give itself up
in order to become one with a higher form of being: namely God conceived as ground of being. This second group of authors, however, understands detachment in terms of a loss without recuperation, appropriation, or Hegelian sublation (Aufhebung).

Kangas (2007), for instance, asserts that “the subjectivity of the subject” for Eckhart is releasement:

*Gelassenheit* expresses the idea that the self must become dispossessed of itself, its *Eigen-wille* (will to possession of itself), and make itself nothing. To “becoming nothing,” to “sink” into nothing . . . signifies the self’s letting go its conception of itself as originally capable of securing its being. A released self does not attempt to secure itself in relation to some ultimate ground (for that is what a ground does, it secures), but rather holds itself open to the groundless, ungrounding ground: what Eckhart names the “Godhead” (*Gottheit*) . . . (p. 10)

In addition to *Gelassenheit*, Kangas identifies the *Gottesgeburt* (the birth of God in the soul) as the other “great theme . . . of the Eckhartian tradition,” arguing that at stake in the primacy of the *Gottesgeburt* in Eckhart is “the sustained critique of presence in the name of the granting or birth of presence – which amounts to privileging the event of coming-into-existence (Eckhart’s *Gottesgeburt*) over being” (p. 9). Thus, by privileging the moment of the subject’s coming-into-being and the moment of the subject’s self-releasement, Kangas portrays the Eckhartian soul as utterly passive (rather than self-positing and self-possessing) and, in contrast to the autarky of the subject as depicted by Summerell, fundamentally relational. Rather than encompassing and overcoming all, making everything transcendent immanent, the subject in Kangas’s reading of Eckhart
never overcomes its finitude; rather, it adopts a radically affirmative stance which transforms its relationship vis-à-vis that finitude.

If the first category of authors follows what Reiner Schürmann (2001) calls the path of “indicative thought,” which “apprehends the real and establishes a noetics of it” and in which “being is represented as the totality of objects comprehended by the mind,” Kangas and the rest of the authors in this category – Schürmann included – can be classified under the rubric of “imperative thought,” in which “being is known when a concrete existence assumes the path of detachment, which is the condition and the sole content at the same time of its understanding” (p. 29). Schürmann’s emphasis on Eckhart as an imperative thinker leads him to develop an understanding of the unity which Eckhart describes between God and soul in terms of the operation of the Gottesgeburth, rather than a unity of substance:

The decisive point is that Meister Eckhart in no way teaches a simple unity between the human intellect and God, but he teaches the imperative of an identity to be accomplished. Identity is not thought of here according to a nominal scheme, but rather a verbal one. (p. 29)

Consequently, Schürmann asserts that “identity with God is bound to an operation (werk, ereignis) whose condition is detachment and whose consequence is the engendering of the Son” (p. 28). Thus, for Schürmann a different, non-onto-theological understanding of God leads to a different view of that self which is called by Eckhart to become one with God through releasement; God in God’s self is understood not as fullness of being, but rather in terms of God’s kenotic self-emptying through the act of creation, giving birth.
In conclusion, all of those authors in the second category (Kangas, Schürmann, and Morgan) represent challenges in various ways to onto-theological readings of Eckhart’s view of the self. The self, rather than achieving absolute being and self-possession, is dispossessed, stripped away through the process of detachment and opened up to God through the process of releasement. Morgan (1999) sums up this perspective nicely with his assertion that “the end of the personal quest is not selfhood, but self-abandonment in what Eckhart, using the theological vocabulary of his era, calls God” (p. 64). Furthermore, and importantly for this dissertation study, Morgan explicitly links this self-abandonment to a therapeutic process, properly understood: “The closest analogy in modern society is a course of constant psychotherapy, but one in which there are no fixed terms, no Oedipus complexes or transcendental signifiers, only the constant exhilaration and frequent terror of self-relinquishment” (p. 65).

In the Findings and Discussion sections, my reading of Eckhart’s work will lead me to critique the first category of authors we have reviewed in this session – who understand the unity between soul and God in the ground (grunt) in Eckhart’s work as culminating in the soul’s merger with an ultimate reality or ground of being – and to endorse, instead, a position which is consistent with the view represented by the second category of authors that Eckhart’s view of the ground poses a challenge to foundationalist, onto-theological thought. In other words, the ground of the soul is a groundless ground; the unity of God and soul in the ground is a unity in the work of creating, not the discovery or attainment of a higher being. Despite my – and, in my reading, Eckhart’s – emphasis on the unity of God and the soul in the act or event of creating, Eckhart and I both lapse at times into ontologizing/substantializing language.
when discussing the ground. Since the ground denotes for Eckhart the “site” of the pure event of creating out of nothing, language inevitably falls short of describing this and tends to nominalize what is, in fact, pure verbality and pure process. Since the ground is that “part” of the soul which for Eckhart is completely identical with God, attempts to offer an account of the ground inevitably run into the central aporia which animates all *apophatic* discourse (including Eckhart’s): the impossible attempt to say the unsayable. This is not an aporia which can be circumvented by either Eckhart or me, but is rather the problematic which both calls forth and delimits all mystical speech.
Chapter 5 – Method

“Understanding is but the sum of our misunderstandings.”


“There is hermeneutics where there is misunderstanding.”

-- Schleiermacher (qtd. in Ricoeur, 1981, p. 46)

Methodology – Introduction

The methodological approach of this dissertation attempts to synthesize
hermeneutics – specifically, the radical hermeneutics outlined in the work of the
philosopher of religion John Caputo – with a contemplative method influenced by Lectio
Divina and centering prayer – two forms of Christian spiritual practice. Given that both
radical hermeneutics and contemplative practice are associated with fields other than
psychology, this dissertation’s method represents an attempt to incorporate
interdisciplinarity not only at the level of content, but also at the level of process. Due to
the novel character of this method, a significant portion of this section will be devoted to
laying out a case for the appropriateness of this approach. I will first provide a brief
orienting introduction to the hermeneutic tradition, and then I will move on to a
discussion of Meister Eckhart’s contribution to the field of hermeneutics. Next, I will
discuss the complex relationship between psychoanalysis and hermeneutics, with a
particular emphasis on Lacanian psychoanalysis. Then, I will make the case for adapting
John Caputo’s work on radical hermeneutics to a psychological context. Finally, I will
provide some background on Lectio Divina and centering prayer and will explain how I
translated these contemplative practices into a concrete contemplative method. The
section will conclude with a detailed, step-by-step outline of the contemplative method employed.

The decisive consideration in the selection of a method was the fit between method and the object of inquiry. In the case of the present study, the object of inquiry is the significance of Meister Eckhart’s view of the self for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity, and it is clear that this object of inquiry poses many significant challenges from the perspective of traditional psychological methods, quantitative or qualitative. The theoretical nature of the present study precludes a quantitative approach, and many of the most well-known qualitative approaches to psychological research are intended for the analysis of interviews – e.g., conversation analysis, Giorgi’s (1985) empirical-phenomenological method, etc. Furthermore, since I knew that Eckhart developed his views (on the self and in general) out of the ground of contemplative awareness and articulated and elaborated those views via reason, I wanted to craft a method which would enable an analysis of Eckhart’s work from the perspective of rational interpretation as well as enabling access to the contemplative depths of Eckhart’s thought. Indeed, the ostensible incompatibility between contemplative awareness and reason which seems intuitive from the perspective of a modern worldview stands in contrast to their commonplace coexistence during the Middle Ages. Indeed, as O’Walshe argues in his introduction to his translation of Eckhart’s (2009) sermons and treatises, “highly formalized” Scholasticism, which aimed at the “philosophical clarification and justification of the Christian faith,” is “often contrasted with mysticism, but the two are in fact, in medieval Christianity, complementary and indeed combined almost inextricably in the thought of Eckhart and others” (p. 4). Thus, I have attempted to develop a method
which is able to access both the scholastic (i.e., rational and philosophical) dimension of Eckhart’s thought as well as the mystical and contemplative core of Eckhart’s views.\footnote{Additionally, the limitations of traditional empirical psychological methods in illuminating the topic of Eckhart’s view of the self will become more clear in the Findings section, where we will argue that the self for Eckhart is, at the most fundamental level, unity with the divine process of creation which he calls the \textit{Gottesgeburt}: the birth of the Son in the soul. Thus, we are dealing with a self that is not an essence, an already-constituted being, but with the instant of birth itself prior to the fixity of presence. Thus, we are confronting a “phenomenon” which is prior to and otherwise than presence and being and is, therefore, particularly elusive from the perspective of psychological inquiry. If research typically aims at the production of positive knowledge, what kind of method is appropriate to research whose object of inquiry requires, above all, a form of awareness that is conceived in terms of detachment (\textit{abegescheidenheit}) – in other words, to paraphrase what Eckhart says about how God is found in the soul, a process of \textit{subtraction}?}

In order to better understand the kind of knowledge which this dissertation attempts to pursue, it will be helpful to turn to Ken Wilber’s (1983) book \textit{Eye to Eye}, in which he discusses “the three modes of attaining knowledge” posited by St. Bonaventure:

[T]he \textit{eye of flesh}, by which we perceive the external world of space, time, and objects; the \textit{eye of reason}, by which we attain a knowledge of philosophy, logic, and the mind itself; and the \textit{eye of contemplation}, by which we rise to a knowledge of transcendent realities. (p. 3)

The basic idea behind the distinction between these three “eyes” is that different domains of knowledge require different methods for gaining knowledge; as Wilber asserts, “[E]ach eye has its own objects of knowledge (sensory, mental, and transcendental) (p. 6). Wilber goes on to argue that:

[W]hen one eye tries to usurp the role of any of the other eyes, a category error occurs. And it can occur in any direction: the eye of contemplation is as ill-
equipped to disclose the fact of the eye of flesh as the eye of flesh is incapable of grasping the truths of the eye of contemplation. Sensation, reason, and contemplation disclose their own truths in their own realms, and anytime one eye tries to see for another eye, blurred vision results. (p. 10)

Consequently, any attempt to approach Eckhart’s view of the self, which for him emerged through contemplative experience, with the eye of flesh – in other words, empirically – would be as misguided and as guilty of category error as would an attempt to use Christian contemplative practices to study the laws of thermodynamics, for instance, which properly belongs to the realm of the natural sciences.

The relationship between the eye of reason and the eye of contemplation for the purposes of the present study is, however, more complex. Eckhart himself straddled the two worlds which correspond to the eye of reason and the eye of contemplation: He was a professional theologian steeped in the Scholastic tradition and ancient philosophy, and, at the same time, he was a mystic who preached a message of breakthrough to the Godhead beyond the God who constitues the horizon of Scholastic theology’s proofs and propositions.  

82 This tension in Eckhart’s work and life is encapsulated in the label of “speculative mysticism” that is sometimes applied to his work, which is meant to differentiate him from the supposedly more ecstatic or emotional mysticism of female mystics like St. Theresa of Avila who lacked the formal theological training which Eckhart had the privilege of receiving.

82 See footnote 10, p. 11, in the Introduction.

83 For a discussion of the debate surrounding this label for Eckhart’s mysticism, see McGinn (2001), pp. 36-37.
The method developed for this dissertation corresponds to the tension in Eckhart’s work between the eye of reason and the eye of contemplation. The hermeneutic piece of the method represents the eye of reason; hermeneutics is an interpretive method which aims at understanding. It is the hermeneutic dimension of the method which allows for the interpretation of primary texts and the evaluation of secondary texts, as well as the production of a new piece of academic writing which makes a contribution to a body of scholarly literature. However, the contemplative piece of the method was included in order to allow for the possibility of another layer of reading and understanding – both for myself when reading texts related to this dissertation and, hopefully, for the reader of this dissertation. This other layer corresponds to Eckhart’s message of breakthrough: a form of reading, listening, and understanding which, rather than representing the assimilation or appropriation of knowledge by a subject, leads to an experience whereby the reader is transformed into something new. To leave out this contemplative piece would be to neglect the core of Eckhart’s message and to reduce his work to the eye of reason. Thus, the method for this dissertation has been developed in an effort to approach the object of inquiry on its own terms to the greatest extent possible.

Additionally, the method represents an attempt to address the potentially anachronistic character of a study which, by exploring Meister Eckhart’s view of the self from a 21st perspective, runs the risk of projecting contemporary notions of the self onto Eckhart’s work which Eckhart himself would not have shared. The method addresses this risk in two main ways. First, my version of radical hermeneutics brackets the entire question of the author’s intention and focuses instead on the text itself. Such hermeneutic interpretation is not meant to reconstruct the author’s mind, but to unpack the
significance of the text for contemporary concerns – in this case, the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. Second, I undertake my examination of Eckhart’s work on the basis of my practice of Lectio Divina, which allowed me to take up the meaning of Eckhart’s texts in the context of a disciplined practice which incorporated my own personal associations and experiences. Thus, by incorporating both radical hermeneutics and Lectio Divina, the method explicitly sets aside the question of Eckhart’s “original” intention and focuses instead on the significance of Eckhart’s work for contemporary psychoanalysis. Furthermore, this method is guided by the belief that while it is certainly helpful to understand Eckhart’s medieval context when approaching his work, his writing remains of vital importance for present-day questions.

Before moving to the discussion of Eckhart’s relationship to hermeneutics which we will take up in the next subsection, it will be necessary at this point to review some general background on hermeneutics. A full history of hermeneutics from its origins in 16th Century Protestantism through Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur is beyond the scope of this study. However, most general surveys of hermeneutics begin with a reference to the etymological connection of the word “hermeneutics” to the Greek messenger god Hermes. In the introduction to one such survey of hermeneutics, Mueller-Vollmer (1985) writes the following about Hermes:

In order to deliver the messages of the gods, Hermes had to be conversant in their idiom as well as in that of the mortals for whom the message was destined. He had to understand and interpret for himself what the gods wanted to convey

84 For a summary of the history of hermeneutics, see Mueller-Vollmer’s (1985) introduction in The Hermeneutics Reader (pp. 1-53).
before he could proceed to translate, articulate, and explicate their intention to mortals. (p. 1)

Thus, this etymological connection to Hermes and the tasks involved in his role as messenger already indicate that interpretation is the central feature of hermeneutics. This element of mediation between the divine and human worlds is evident in how hermeneutics emerged as an independent discipline: As the authority of church tradition in interpreting the Bible was called into question in the wake of the Reformation, Protestant theologians were left with the task of developing a discipline of Biblical interpretation.

Although hermeneutics continues to play an important role in contemporary theology and Biblical interpretation, the most prominent contributions to hermeneutics in recent times have come from secular quarters. Gadamer’s (1960/2004) *Truth and Method* has probably exercised the greatest influence of any single text on the shape that hermeneutics as a discipline has taken in the 20th and 21st Centuries. In Gadamer’s work, “the hermeneutical has to do with bridging the gap between the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world” (Linge, 1970/1976, p. xii). In other words, interpretation of a text is not about trying to ascertain the author’s intentions; for Gadamer, the text and the reader remain embedded in their respective historical and cultural contexts – the “horizons” which constitute the text and reader’s respective worlds. Interpretation consists of a “fusion of horizons” between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Thus, mediation between two worlds remains decisive in the philosophical, as well as the Biblical/religious, context –
in this case, mediation between the text and reader’s respective worlds, rather than the divine and human worlds.

Since we cannot access the “original” meaning of the text or the author’s intentions, interpretation for Gadamer is always a “productive process” (Packer, 2011, p. 93). Having rejected the notion that hermeneutics is a form of reconstructive interpretation, Packer argues that for Gadamer “[W]hen we read, understand, and interpret a text, we do it for its relevance to our present situation . . . . Interpretation, then, is a process of interrogating a text, asking it questions that arise from our own time” (p. 93). This is one reason why hermeneutics was chosen as the method for this project: The aim of this dissertation is the interrogation of Eckhart’s texts for their significance for contemporary questions in psychoanalysis.

However, if the act of interpretation primarily has to do with the experience of the interpreter, how can the validity of an interpretation be assessed? More specifically, how can the validity of the interpretations of Eckhart’s texts in this dissertation be assessed if we have abandoned the search for objectivity which underlies traditional psychological research? Packer summarizes Gadamer’s hermeneutic understanding of validity in the following passage:

Gadamer titled his best-known book *Truth and Method* (1960/2004) because in it he argued that the search for a foolproof method for interpretation can never lead to truth. But he did not believe that there is no truth. Instead, we need to think

---

85 Packer (2011) asserts: “For Gadamer, what a text means is not a matter of the author’s thoughts or intentions but the experience that someone has when reading it, so that ‘understanding is an event’ (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 441)” (p. 93).
differently about truth: *a true interpretation is one that points out something relevant in our present situation that we had not noticed*. . . . The meaning of a text is changing and multiple, and an interpretation is true when it applies the text to successfully answer contemporary questions. (p. 94, emphasis added)

Thus, we cannot assess the validity of this dissertation by measuring its interpretations against the “truth” of the text. Nor can we ensure its validity by developing a foolproof method which somehow would guarantee objectivity. This dissertation will have been successful if it interprets Meister Eckhart’s work in a way that sheds light on contemporary questions about the meaning of the self in psychoanalysis – it is up to other readers to decide whether this dissertation has succeeded in the task it has set itself.

**Methodology – Meister Eckhart and Hermeneutics**

Meister Eckhart is a noted figure in the history of hermeneutics. Caputo (1987) asserts that Eckhart belongs to “the protohistory of hermeneutics”; Braak (2011) calls Eckhart’s mysticism a “mystical hermeneutics” due to the importance he places on the interpretation of scripture (p. 152); and Jasper (2004) includes a section on Eckhart in his survey of hermeneutics (pp. 48-51). A full review of Eckhart’s unique contributions to hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this dissertation; rather, the primary purpose of this subsection is to ground the hermeneutic approach employed in this dissertation in Eckhart’s own methods. Thus, our review of Eckhart’s hermeneutics will be guided primarily by our attempt to demonstrate the fit between this dissertation’s method and object of inquiry.

In his article “Meister Eckhart and Hermeneutics,” Duclow (1984) explicates several of the key hermeneutic features of Eckhart’s work which are most relevant to our
study. Duclow identifies “a hermeneutical circle between breakthrough and the Word’s birth” in Eckhart’s work (p. 41). He understands breakthrough as a form of interpretation which involves a movement backward from creatures to the divine. This understanding of Eckhart’s work locates him in the quintessential hermeneutic position between the human and the divine; he attempts to read the trace of the divine in creatures in order to effect a breakthrough to the source of being.86 Duclow goes on to argue that:

The breakthrough to Godhead is not, however, the last word and must not be considered in isolation . . . . because the silence of the Godhead is the source of the Word, the drive into this silence yields new expression. (p. 41)

In other words, breakthrough follows the trace of the divine from creatures back into the utter emptiness of the Godhead beyond God: the utterly silent ground of the soul which is beyond being. This ground is, however, a fertile emptiness, and the breakthrough to the ground/Godhead gives rise to new expression: the Gottesgeburt, the birth of the Word in the soul. Thus, Duclow arrives at the conclusion that “breakthrough as interpretation presupposes and responds to the Word’s expression, while the Word’s birth arises from and is received within the silence which breakthrough discloses” (p. 41).

Thus, Eckhart’s hermeneutic approach mirrors the mystical path of the soul: The challenge for the soul qua creature is to avoid ossification into a static, independent entity and, instead, to maintain its essential connection with the process of divine creation – the speaking/birth of the divine Word – out of which it emanated. In light of this reading of Eckhart, the hermeneutic act of interpretation qua breakthrough does not involve the

86 The influence of Eckhart’s approach on Heidegger (1953/1996) is clear in the latter’s use of “fallenness” as the point of access to authentic being in Being and Time.
acquisition of knowledge which would increase the self-possession and spontaneity of the ego; rather, hermeneutic interpretation involves a shattering of the ego which leads to abyssal disorientation and dislocation. This corresponds to the questioning of pre-understandings which is part of the hermeneutic circle:

Understanding is the tacit, prereflective comprehension one has of a text or a situation. Interpretation is the “working out,” that is to say, the articulation, of this understanding. In the process of articulating understanding, inconsistencies and confusion become evident, so interpretation can lead to a modified understanding.

(Packer, 2011, p. 87)

Thus, the hermeneutic method employed by this dissertation incorporates the hermeneutic circle between breakthrough and birth described by Duclow in Eckhart’s work. Concretely, pre-understandings were detailed in the literature review, interpretations of a text by Eckhart have been made in the Findings section in a way that call into question certain pre-understandings in the existing literature, and a “modified understanding” (i.e., a new expression or birth) is outlined in the Discussion section.

Another hermeneutic feature of Eckhart’s work identified by Duclow (1984) is what he describes as “a dialectic of silence, hearing and speech” (p. 38). Silence here refers to the stilling of the powers of the soul: “desire, willing and knowing” (p. 38). This silence is a prerequisite for hearing, when “the Word enters the soul’s foundations” (p. 38). Having detached itself in silence and become one with the divine Word in hearing, the soul attains unity with the process of speaking the divine Word: the

---

87 Cf. the famous Eckhart sermon on poverty of the spirit (W87, Q52), in which Eckhart (2009) asserts that “a poor man is one who wants nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing” (p. 420).
This dialectic of silence, hearing, and speech is incorporated into my research method perhaps most clearly in my inclusion of contemplative practice.\footnote{This will be discussed in more detail in the subsection of this chapter on contemplative practice.} Receptive silence is fostered through the practice of silent contemplative prayer; Lectio Divina represents a particular approach to listening to a text; and the writing process itself, which represents a translation of Eckhart’s work for a new time and place and a new audience, corresponds to the expression of the divine Word.

At the end of his essay, Duclow (1984) addresses the possible limitations of Eckhart’s engagement with hermeneutics: “Whereas Gadamer emphasizes the radical historicity of understanding and being, Eckhart seeks to move beyond time altogether” (p. 42). Thus, Duclow seems to assert that Eckhart is striving for a mystical union that transcends the temporal realm and, therefore, is at odds with the hermeneutic notion that all knowledge is contextual. Despite Duclow’s claim that Eckhart’s work is “deeply hermeneutical,” if this limitation is true, it would pose a serious problem for any attempt to examine the hermeneutic dimension of Eckhart’s thought. This is because if Eckhart is indeed after a knowledge that transcends time, it would be easy to identify this with an eternal, objective truth that is not subject to temporal vicissitudes – and with that, the entire hermeneutic approach would be called into question.

The claim that Eckhart is seeking a truth beyond time rests on the premise that Eckhart understands eternity, the Godhead, the ground, etc., as existing in a state beyond time and being. But is this how Eckhart understands the emptiness of the Godhead? In the Findings and Discussion sections, I will argue that detachment and birth occur in a single moment – that is, that the emptiness of the Godhead is the fruitfulness of the
The Godhead is not opposed to ontological/temporal presence in the sense of being a timeless eternal realm on the other side of time and being; rather, the \textit{Gottesgeburt} is opposed to presence insofar as it is \textit{presencing} – in other words, the spacing of time, the granting of being, the movement which constitutes all that is. Eckhartian releasement (\textit{Gelassenheit}) aims not at withdrawal from time and being; rather, it aims at \textit{participation} in the process of the coming-into-being of existence. \textit{Gelassenheit}, far from representing a release from existence, is a stance of releasing oneself to the existential flux.

This position is supported by Braak (2011): “[M]ysticism is not so much a pure intuition of an ineffable realm as the ongoing affirmation and verification of this presencing of truth” (p. 164). For Braak, this insight is related precisely to the importance of hermeneutic interpretation of scripture to Eckhart’s mysticism:

As Dobie comments, revelation is both the transcendent act that breaks through the finite categories of mental thought and simultaneously the immanent ground of the soul’s self-understanding. It is tempting to distinguish between the “inner revelation” of the mystic, and the “outer revelation” of the textual tradition, and to privilege the inner revelation over the outer. However, as Dobie notes, the “inner realization” of the mystic is not separate from or parallel to the revealed text: “In fact, the ‘inner’ revelation is nothing but the ‘outer’ or ‘textual’ revelation become the living ground of the soul’s being, thinking, and acting” (Dobie, 2010: 7). The immanent revelation that springs from the soul can never be separated from revealed scripture. (pp. 161-162)

\footnote{89 See Findings section, pp. 148-150, and Discussion section, pp. 183-185.}
The notion that Eckhart’s mysticism does not aim at a simple transcendence of time, being, or language into a wordless, timeless eternal realm of truth is further supported by Caputo (1997), who argues in a Derridean vein that it is precisely the ineffability of God that accounts for the linguistic innovativeness of mystics like Eckhart:

For Derrida, negative theology is an event within language, something happening to language, a certain trembling or fluctuation of language. That is why the effect of negative theology is always so verbal and verbose – so grammatological – and why these lovers of wordlessness are so excessively wordy, why Meister Eckhart, for example, was one of the greatest preachers of the day, and one of the founders of the German language, there at the creation of modern Deutsch. (pp. 11-12)

Caputo (2000) makes a similar argument in a work on the significance of Meister Eckhart for radical hermeneutics:

Silence, we insist, is not to be taken as a simple or absolute silence, an escape from language into the Mystical Secret, a mystical hors-texte, but rather as a linguistic operation transpiring in the inner chambers and most secret resources of textuality and écriture. When Meister Eckhart prays God to rid him of God, is that not . . . the most remarkable way to speak of God, the most felicitous way to speak of not speaking of God . . . . The silence does not, therefore, constitute a prelinguistic or nonlinguistic contact with The Secret, with unmediated being, kath’auto, but, on the contrary, a sublime work of language which calls for, which prays and weeps for, the other of language, for the incoming of the other, l’invention de l’autre. (pp. 250-251)
Consequently, Eckhart’s work is not opposed to textuality or temporality and does not aim at a flight from existence. The need for hermeneutic mediation between humans and the gods is not dissolved. As Caputo writes, mystics “have not been secreted away from the human condition and given privileged access to The Secret. They remain caught up in the hermeneutic situation, in which they turn and twist with exquisite and memorable ingenuity” (p. 252). Eckhart’s method as a theologian and as a preacher was to read and interpret texts and to translate their significance for his contemporaries. As the many instances of creative reading documented in Frank Tobin’s (1986) *Meister Eckhart: Thought and Language* evince, Eckhart’s reading of texts was a productive event in which new meanings were created. Indeed, the core of Eckhart’s message

---

90 In the following passage, Caputo (2000) summarizes “the interesting catalogue of ways Eckhart played with the phonic and graphic substance of the two languages he spoke” which Tobin documents:

Eckhart reads *mutuo* (reciprocal) as *meo tuo et tuo meo* (mine is yours and yours is mine). He asks us to hear in the angel’s *ave* to Mary the Middle High German *ane we* (without pain) which is what Mary experienced once she consented to God’s demands. (*Ave* is the reversed anagram of *Eva*, the first woman who brought sin into the world, while *Mary* is *immacula*, the only human being born free of this first sin.) He toys with the proper name of his own religious order (*ordo praedicatorum*, order of preachers) which he said meant order of praisers, those who offer divine predicates. Eckhart even tinkered with the word “eagle,” hearing in the Middle High German *adeler* (eagle) . . . *edeler*, the noble man. He said that true thankfulness (*dankbaerkeit*) is, not thoughtfulness, but fruitfulness (*vruhtbaerkeit*), that is, to be made fruitful by the gift one receives, and that means to give birth (*geb ern*) from it in return (*in der widerbernden dankbaerkeit*). In the Vulgate version of Rom. 6:22, *nun vero liberati a peccato* (“Now, however, you have been liberated from sin”), Eckhart finds eight grammatical functions in *vero*, including: “truly” (*vere*) delivered from sin; “delivered from sin by truth (*vero*, the dative of *verum*, “by truth”), and so on. In the opening line of John’s Gospel, “*In principio erat verbum*” (“In the beginning was the
could be summed up as the call for human beings to participate in the act of divine creation. Thus, in contradistinction to the possible limitation raised by Duclow, Eckhart’s thought is hermeneutic through and through, and the present study has adopted a hermeneutic method that attempts to read Eckhart in the way that Eckhart read.

Methodology – Psychoanalysis and Hermeneutics

Having demonstrated the affinities between Eckhart and hermeneutics, we now turn to the relationship between psychoanalysis and hermeneutics. The most basic question concerning this relationship is whether or not psychoanalysis is a form of hermeneutics at all. It is impossible to confront this question without reference to the work of Paul Ricoeur (1965/1970), who argued in his seminal book *Freud and Philosophy* that psychoanalysis is a form of hermeneutics. Costello (2010) summarizes Ricoeur’s stance on the hermeneutic status of psychoanalysis thus:

According to Ricoeur, there is present in Freudian psychoanalysis, which lies within the works of language, a textual element. The analysand recounts the ‘text’ of the dream, the parapraxis or the joke . . . . Thus Ricoeur reads the Freudian

Word”), the words “principium,” “erat,” and “verbum” are submitted to similar multiple readings, disseminating and multiplying their senses. He even changes the opening lines of the *Pater Noster*, according to Christian belief the only prayer to come from the lips of Jesus himself, so that “thy will be done” becomes “will, become thine” (= God’s),” because he taught that willing to do God’s will is not as high as getting beyond willing altogether.

The only test to which Eckhart seems to put his innovations is their ability to generate new spiritual vitality, to keep the life of the soul with God in motion. (p. 260, emphasis added)

This exemplifies Jasper’s (2004) characterization of Eckhart’s method as “eisegesis,” as opposed to exegesis, which is “a reading into (eis-) the text rather than a reading out of or from (ex-) the text” (p. 50)
interpretation of dreams, parapraxes, jokes and works of art, as a type of hermeneutics. The subject who is undergoing a psycho-analysis is, therefore, also undergoing a hermeneutic analysis, and becomes like a text. (pp. 21-22)

Thus, for Ricoeur psychoanalysis can be conceived as a hermeneutic practice due to the centrality of interpretation of the analysand’s speech, which constitutes the text of psychoanalysis.

Lacan (1973/1978), however, vociferously denied that psychoanalysis belongs to the field of hermeneutics and takes aim specifically at Ricoeur in the following passage from Seminar XI:

I was recently rereading . . . what someone else said about the unconscious. This person – it was M. Ricoeur in fact – was trying to remove himself as far as possible from his own position in order to conceptualize our domain. He had certainly gone a long way to reach what, for a philosopher, is the area most difficult of access, namely, the reality of the unconscious – that the unconscious is not an ambiguity of acts, future knowledge that is already known not to be known, but lacuna, cut, rupture inscribed in a certain lack. M. Ricoeur concedes that there is something of this dimension to be retained. But, philosopher that he is, he monopolizes it for himself. He calls it hermeneutics.

A lot of fuss is made nowadays of what is called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics not only objects to what I have called our analytic adventure, it objects to structuralism, as it appears in the works of Lévi-Strauss. Now, what is hermeneutics, if it is not to read, in the succession of man’s mutations, the progress of the signs according to which he constitutes his history, the progress of
his history – a history that may also, at the fringes, extend into less definite times?
And so M. Ricoeur casts into the limbo of pure contingency what the analysts at
every stage are dealing with. One has to admit that, from the outside, the
corporation of analysts does not give him the impression of an agreement so
fundamental as to impress him. But this is no reason to leave the field to him. (pp.
153-154)

A clue to understanding this difficult passage comes earlier in Seminar XI:

Now, we analysts are interested in this hermeneutics, because the way of
developing signification offered by hermeneutics is confused, in many minds,
with what analysis calls interpretation. It so happens that, although this
interpretation cannot in any way be conceived in the same way as the
aforementioned hermeneutics, hermeneutics, on the other hand, makes ready use
of interpretation. (p. 8)

Thus, the very element which unites psychoanalysis and hermeneutics for Ricoeur
– interpretation – is for Lacan precisely that which separates them. Lacan contends that
there is a fundamental difference between psychoanalytic and hermeneutic interpretation,
and it is telling that Lacan refers to the latter in the above passage as a way of
“developing signification.” This reference to “developing signification” suggests that for
Lacan hermeneutic interpretation operates at the level of the signified – that is, meaning.
In contrast, analytic interpretation for Lacan aims precisely at the stripping away and
destabilizing of meaning by drawing attention to the materiality of the signifier, la lettre.
Properly Lacanian interpretations do not convey any meaning or content to the analysand;
they operate at the level of the unconscious as it manifests itself in the literality of the
signifier. Lacan speaks of Ricoeur as trying to “monopolize” the unconscious with hermeneutics because he views hermeneutic interpretations as an attempt to situate the absurdity—the non-sense—of the unconscious within a system of meaning.

Furthermore, the insufficiency of the signified which is underscored by Lacanian interpretation points to the insufficiency of the ego, the seat of meaning, with regard to its ability to posit itself as a unified self-consciousness. In this way, the textuality of the analysand’s speech—which for Ricoeur serves as the prerequisite for the hermeneutic understanding of psychoanalysis—is itself called into question. This speech constitutes a text, yes, but not a narrative. Indeed, psychoanalysis is most interested in the limits of the analysand’s speech as narrative—in other words, the way in which the story falls apart or fails to hold up. It is for precisely this reason that Freud invents a method of dream interpretation which is fundamentally suspicious of the dream’s narrative structure—described by Freud (1900/1965) as a product of secondary revision—and which elicits associations to the individual elements of the dream rather than treating the dream as a whole. This psychoanalytic suspicion of narratives is summed up well by Žižek (2000) in a quote we have already seen in Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject:

[N]arrative as such is ideological, the elementary form of ideology: it is not only that some narratives are “false,” based upon the exclusion of traumatic events and patching up the gaps left over by these exclusions—the answer to the question “Why do we tell stories?” is that the narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by way of rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative that bears witness to some repressed antagonism. (p. 31)
This quote indicates the way in which narratives circle around a traumatic core which escapes and surpasses meaning. By insinuating the holes in the analysand’s narrative suggested by the signifier’s resistance to any particular signified, Lacanian interpretation leads the analysand back to the traumatic core of his or her subjectivity: in other words, the Real, which we have explicated in the literature review. Thus, Lacanian interpretations strip away the narratives which we spin about ourselves – as we have seen, in a process not unlike Eckhartian detachment (abegescheidenheit) – and lead to a confrontation with the Real which lies at the heart of the Symbolic.

As with Eckhart, however, this contact with the emptiness at the core of the self – the abyss of the grunt, or, as Žižek (2002) calls it, “the desert of the Real” – turns out to be a productive process, leading to the production of something new. In Lacanian terms, this is known as the “traversal of the fantasy,” the reconfiguration of the analysand’s desire which is effected through a confrontation with the fundamental fantasy. The fundamental fantasy is the Lacanian notion that everyone has a basic fantasy which structures our desire, and this idea relates to the notion of the “primal scene” which Freud described. While the notion of primal scene may suggest the uncovering of an original

---

91 See Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject, p. 50, pp. 64-72.

92 See Fink (1997), pp. 70-71, for a discussion of traversing the fantasy.

93 See the following passage from Fink (1997):

Lacan suggests that there is one single fantasy – an unconscious fantasy for most of us – that is absolutely fundamental. This notion is related to Freud’s theory of a “primal scene,” a scene that plays a fundamental role in the constitution of the analysand’s sexuality and life in general. The way one reacted to the scene (real or imagined) as a child colors the whole of one’s existence, determining one’s
trauma, it is actually a new construction developed via the process of analysis; it is in some sense a myth that emerges as a way to symbolize the ultimate limit which the analysand encounters in his- or herself. As Belau (2002) notes, “There are, Freud tells us, certain scenes from infancy that are not reproduced during analysis as recollections. They are, rather, the products of construction” (p. 3). Belau goes on to identify a shift in Freud’s analytic technique from interpretation as discovery of unconscious material to interpretation as construction and illustrates this point with the following quote from Beyond the Pleasure Principle:

Twenty-five years of intense work have had as their result that the immediate aims of psycho-analytic technique are quite other today than they were at the outset. At first the analyzing physician could do no more than discover the unconscious material that was concealed from the patient, put it together, and, at the right moment, communicate it to him. Psycho-analysis was then first and foremost an art of interpreting. Since this did not solve the therapeutic problem, a further aim came in view: to oblige the patient to confirm the analyst’s construction from his own memory. (qtd. in Belau, 2002, p. 4)

Fink (1997) echoes this sentiment when he writes that “insofar as interpretation hits the real, it does not so much hit the truth as create it” (p. 158).

In sum, there are several unique features which distinguish psychoanalytic interpretation from hermeneutic interpretation. The text which psychoanalysis interprets is a narrative structure which circles around an originary trauma that is external and prior

relations to one’s parents and lovers, one’s sexual preferences, and one’s capacity for sexual satisfaction. (pp. 56-57)
to that narrative. However, that trauma – to the extent that it “exists” at all – is present as the lacunae in the subject’s self-narrative. Psychoanalytic interpretation hits the Real in the Symbolic; in other words, it draws attention to the way in which the traumatic Real continues to irrupt into the subject’s speech. The Real in itself remains forever inaccessible; however, the analyst’s interpretations constitute constructions which ultimately lead to the restructuring of the analysand’s desire. As we have seen, this mode of interpretation differs from hermeneutic interpretation insofar as it aims at bringing out the non-sense of the text, the materiality of the signifier which resists signification, rather than interpreting the text at the level of meaning or content. Furthermore, whereas hermeneutic interpretation aims at synthesis – a “fusion of horizons” between interpreter and text – psychoanalytic interpretations “offer nothing to the analysand other than the awareness of the signifier’s fundamental incompleteness” (Belau, 2002, p. 1).

In spite of the above quote from Belau and the critique of hermeneutics which is evident throughout her article, there are still many passages in her article to indicate that there is, after all, a hermeneutic dimension to psychoanalysis – none more direct than the title of her article, “Reading Otherwise: The Hermeneutics of Psychoanalysis.” Belau refers to psychoanalysis as engaging in a “hermeneutic practice” and characterizes interpretation as construction as “a reading strategy” (pp. 1, 5). Nevertheless, she contrasts psychoanalytic technique with “a straight-forward practice of hermeneutics” and concludes that the “act of reading in psychoanalysis is not about plumbing to the secret depths of the true content of the unconscious repressed. It is, rather, about engaging the extimate limit of the signifier and the abyssal structure of the subject” (pp. 6, 7)
Thus, psychoanalysis constitutes a practice of reading which remains in some sense hermeneutic while nevertheless standing at odds with any “straightforward” hermeneutics. The question may be not whether hermeneutics can incorporate psychoanalysis, but whether hermeneutics is up to the task of opening itself up to be transformed by psychoanalysis, to allow psychoanalysis to find the cuts and fissures in the history and practice of hermeneutics. Both Lacan and Meister Eckhart concern themselves with the birth of presence, the origin of structure, the trauma which resists and nevertheless (or therefore!) gives rise to narrative. And, at the same time, the point of departure for both Lacan and Eckhart is the traces of these originary events prior to presence which continue to haunt presence and persist (or, even more radically, are constituted) in language, structure, and being. Eckhart and Lacan both challenge us to attend to these gaps, this emptiness at the core of the self – in other words to open ourselves to the irreducible remainder which resists structure.

Methodology – Radical Hermeneutics

As we have seen, while it may be true that Eckhart made significant contributions to hermeneutics and that there is a hermeneutic dimension to psychoanalysis, the radical core of Eckhart and Lacan’s thought poses a challenge to hermeneutics (at least in any “straightforward” form). Radical hermeneutics is a form of hermeneutics developed by the American philosopher of religion John Caputo (1987, 2000). Caputo primarily uses Heidegger and Derrida (among others, including Eckhart) to critique the “straightforward” hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur, and his critique shares much in common with the Eckhartian and psychoanalytic critiques of hermeneutics we have so far reviewed in this chapter. At the same time, however, Caputo seeks to preserve
hermeneutics on the other side of this critique, to put hermeneutics through the crucible of deconstructive critique not to discard it, but to radicalize it.

So, what is radical about radical hermeneutics? How exactly does it distinguish itself from traditional hermeneutics? While acknowledging his debt to Gadamer,94

94 See the following passage in More Radical Hermeneutics:

I am not interested in a wholesale critique of Gadamer, to whom I owe too much, but in pushing his hermeneutics a step further, into a more radical hermeneutic, and this by means of passing it through the passion for the impossible, the passion of the secret and of non-knowledge, that I take from Derrida. But I also see Gadamer and Derrida coming together on the issue of the hermeneutic of friendship – a point thoroughly obscured by their earlier exchange – which respects the alterity of the other. I will work this out by posing to Gadamer – whom I want to treat with a gentler hand in this volume than he received the first time around in Radical Hermeneutics (RH, 108ff.) – and to Derrida a similar aporia: how to prepare for the coming of the other? How to prepare for the one for whom one precisely cannot be prepared? (Caputo, 2000, p. 8)

In many ways, Caputo’s critique of Gadamerian hermeneutics is in the spirit of what is best in Gadamer, as in the following passage from Truth and Method, for example: “Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness . . . The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 295, emphasis added).

Indeed, the same could be said about Ricoeur, who despite Lacan and Caputo’s critiques, in certain passages foreshadows elements of their respective approaches. See, for example, the following passage from Freud and Philosophy which points to the limits of knowledge:

The reason, along with others, why an absolute knowledge is impossible is the problem of evil . . . . The symbols of evil . . . resist any reduction to a rational knowledge; the failure of all theodicies, of all systems concerning evil, witnesses to the failure of absolute knowledge in the Hegelian sense” (1965/1970, pp. 526-527).

Thanks to Dr. Kevin Smith for pointing me to this passage (K. Smith, personal communication, March 31, 2013).
Caputo regards traditional hermeneutics as “bent on interpretive projection and finding meaning”; whereas, “radical hermeneutics arises only at the point of breakdown and loss of meaning, the withdrawal and dissemination of meaning – in short, the thunderstorm” (1987, p. 271). Caputo makes a similar argument in his (2000) chapter “How to Prepare for the Coming of the Other” in More Radical Hermeneutics, which represents his most sustained reflection on the common ground and differences between Gadamerian hermeneutics and Derridean deconstruction. What hermeneutics and deconstruction share, according to Caputo (2000), is “a common commitment to hear the other, to make the other welcome, a common affirmation of what Derrida calls l’inventions de l’autre, the arrival, the in-comings, of the other” (p. 42). Although Caputo is referring to the other here in a very broad sense, in the context of hermeneutic interpretation, we may think of the text as one kind of other, which confronts us with a foreign world, beyond our own horizon.

While both hermeneutics and deconstruction share the concern of how to prepare oneself for the coming of the other qua text, Caputo contends that their modes of response to this concern fundamentally diverge. Hermeneutics aims at the fusion of horizons, a form of dialogue between the other of the text and the horizon of my own understanding which produces a modified understanding, a synthesis of meaning. For Derrida, however, this hermeneutic interpretation remains a form of appropriation which reduces the otherness of the text to our own understanding. In contrast, Caputo maintains that “Derrida would not say we make the other our own, but one would let the other break into what is our ‘own,’ which means that for Derrida the other would breach, not fuse with, our horizons” (p. 42).
Caputo explicitly links this stance of opening oneself to the coming of the other with Eckhartian releasement (*Gelassenheit*) – letting the other be, remaining open to the “mystery” of the other, as he puts it – and identifies this as analogous to Eckhartian *breakthrough* (MG: *Durchbruch*):

So there is an experience in radical hermeneutics which is a distant cousin, an analogue perhaps, of what Eckhart called *Durchbruch*. It is of just this sort of thing that Heidegger was speaking when he wrote about “openness to the mystery.” (1987, p. 270).

Thus, radical hermeneutics represents a form of hermeneutics which is based on many of Eckhart’s key ideas and, moreover, addresses many of the problems of traditional hermeneutics from an Eckhartian perspective. To the extent that Gadamerian fusion of horizons retains an element of appropriative synthesis on the part of the reader, it is based on a model of subjectivity that is far too active from Eckhart’s point of view.\(^{95}\) The act of interpretation of the divine Word for Eckhart is not about fusing his understanding with the meaning of the text, as if he could stand in some sort of reciprocal or dialogical relationship with God. Rather, the act of interpretation requires, for Eckhart, becoming nothing, emptying the soul of everything it has (*eigenschaften*) to prepare to be *penetrated* and *transformed* by the other of the text. It is, thus, not surprising that Caputo

---

\(^{95}\) That said, there are many moments in Gadamer’s work which come closer to Eckhart’s view of the self. See, for example, the following passage from *Truth and Method*:

[L]anguage speaks us, rather than we speak it . . . . the hermeneutical event is . . . an event that is at once appropriation and interpretation. Thus here it really is true to say that this is not our action upon the thing, but the act of the thing itself. (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 459)
recognizes Eckhart as “one of the background heroes” of his radical hermeneutic project (p. 268).

However, Eckhart, psychoanalysis, and radical hermeneutics share the even more radical notion of otherness not as something beyond, but something within – in Lacanian terms, an extimate otherness. And for this reason, the question in radical hermeneutics of how to prepare for the coming of the other bears directly on the question of subjectivity.

Caputo finds the word “self” problematic because it “is something which we define in terms of its self-identity”; while “what seems to characterize ‘us’ above all is non-identity, difference, our power or, better, our vulnerability to spin off into the abyss” (p. 289). Caputo continues:

The self is precisely not that which always abides in itself, self-identically present to itself, but that which breaks under the strain, gives way to the pull of the flux, which is constantly being divested of its illusions, tormented by the unconscious, constantly being tricked by its history and its language. (p. 289)

We hear in this passage an echo of the Lacanian idea that the subject comes into being precisely in and through a foreign system, language, which it never masters, which remains forever other. Thus, the other of language is not something outside but something intimate, an immanent transcendence. The same could be said about the relationship between God and the soul for Eckhart: God is an absolute other who lies at the heart of the soul, the ground of the soul that is even more deeply “me” than “I” am.

Furthermore, in the cases of both Eckhart and Lacan, we have already seen in this study the way in which the subject which emerges out of this ostensibly more primordial
otherness nevertheless *constitutes* the other which would be logically and temporally prior. Caputo (2000) takes up precisely this point in his Derridean critique of Gadamer:

What Gadamer refuses is exactly what Derrida calls the thought of the trace, not the trace which follows after and copies an original, but the trace which produces, which effects, which pre-delineates, precedes, and makes possible the multiple unities – of “meaning,” “being” and even “language” – within which Gadamerian hermeneutics functions. (p. 53)

In other words, the otherness which we would imagine as prior to and constitutive of the text (e.g., the original meaning intended by the author) and the trace of which we find in the text is, in fact, an *effect* of the text itself.

Even though Gadamer argues that the original meaning of the text is inaccessible, forever lost, he still regards it as a plenitude, a fullness of meaning, which the finite interpretation can never quite capture or exhaust. In contrast, what makes radical hermeneutics radical is its insistence on the text as a pure play of language – a *text* and not a *narrative*. It is not simply that the text is full of meaning that we cannot access; rather, the text is *nothing other than a text*. Thus, the trace of meaning or the author’s intention which we find in the text – in other words, the trace of the origin which is beyond the text and ostensibly *produced* the text – is, in fact, an *effect* of the text itself, is constituted by the text. Thus, Caputo deconstructs the binary text/other with the Derridean notion of the trace. The other is always lost; to the extent that it “is” at all, it is in and through the trace, the remainder in the text. The same logic prevails in the binary subject/other; we are not dealing with a subject, on one side, who is whole, a unity who

---

96 See Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject, pp. 64-72.
stands in relation to an other, on the other side, who is also a wholly formed unity. Rather, otherness lies at the core of the subject; the subject is not identical to itself.97

Furthermore, this non-identity of the subject produces significant implications for any notion of truth or reason. What is truth if not self-identity, and what is reason if not unity? But if the subject is not identical to itself, how could it arrive at any truth so understood, least of all about itself? This leads Caputo to develop what he calls “postmetaphysical rationality,” and he sums up his position by asserting that “the problem with reason today is that it has become an instrument of discipline, not a mark of freedom, and that, when it is put to work, it is taken out of play” (1987, p. 211). Caputo’s conception of reason is directly tied to the tension we will see in the Findings and Discussion sections in how Eckhart and Lacan understand the origin, what Schürmann (2003) describes in Eckhart’s work as “the double bind of a determining principle and an indetermining origin” (p. 315). To the extent that the origin qua determining principle constitutes a structure organized according to various laws, then we are justified in assuming that there is a reason (Grund) for everything and that everything must be justified (begründet). However, as we have seen, the origin is also the indetermining

97 Again, there are moments in Gadamer (1960/2004) which anticipate Derrida/Caputo’s perspective:

The fundamental thing here is that something occurs . . . from the point of view of the interpreter, “occurrence” means that he is not a knower seeking an object . . . the word . . . really encounters us and does so as if it addressed us and is concerned with us . . . the questioner becomes the one who is questioned . . . (p. 457)
origin, the cause which remains structurally outside the system it constitutes, which prevents structure from hardening into totality.\textsuperscript{98}

It is this indetermining, an-archic origin – an origin which is otherwise than \textit{arche} or principle, which does not ground (\textit{Grund}) the structure, but is, rather, an abyss (\textit{Abgrund}), a groundless ground – which opens the structure to play. Caputo aims to develop a notion of reason which includes play,\textsuperscript{99} which, he maintains, does not represent a flight into irrationalism, but a restoration of the creative force which underlies and drives reason. Caputo asserts that “it is much better to infiltrate the corporation of reason,” than to reject reason outright, and he recommends working “in the whole spread of the ‘sciences’ – natural, social, and human” – including, I would add, psychology – in a way that would “show the play which is at play within reason” (pp. 227-228). This is not frivolous play; on the contrary, something is at stake in the play of reason. This is captured in the German expression “etwas auf dem Spiel steht,” which means “something is at stake” but literally means “something is in play.” Along these lines, Caputo asserts that his goal is to “establish a Spielraum for reason” and maintains that “just because reason is serious business, we must keep it in play” (p. 226).

\textsuperscript{98} For a famous example of how Derrida (1967/1978) thought of structure open to play, see “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.”

\textsuperscript{99} Cf. Gadamer (1960/2004):

\begin{quote}
[T]his occurrence means the coming into play, the playing out, of the content of tradition in its constantly widening possibilities of significance and resonance, extended by the different people receiving it . . . . something new comes into being that had not existed before . . . . as in genuine dialogue, something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself. (pp. 457-458)
\end{quote}
Caputo’s development of postmetaphysical rationality, a reason that is not governed by a fixed set of rules but is flexible and open to play, poses a serious challenge to traditional notions of method in psychology. Indeed, a critique of the traditional sense of method is at the core of the hermeneutic project for Caputo:

Hermeneutics pits itself against the notion that human affairs can finally be formalized into explicit rules which can or should function as a decision-procedure, whether in scientific theory building or in ethics. An important part of the hermeneutics of play is to deconstruct, to undo that myth. (p. 213)

In contrast to this “methodologism,” Caputo characterizes method “in the best sense” as “the suppleness by which thinking is able to pursue the matter at hand” and “an acuity which knows its way about, even and especially when the way cannot be laid out beforehand, when it cannot be formulated in explicit rules” (p. 213).

Psychology suffers from precisely the methodologism which Caputo describes, a rigid demand for a set of fixed rules which rests of the presumption of a lawful universe, a system which is in principle orderly and predictable. But as we have seen, it is precisely when approaching the question which is ostensibly the domain of psychology par excellence, the human being, that this demand for a set of fixed rules becomes most

---

100 Cf. Gadamer (1960/2004):

Our inquiry started from our dissatisfaction with the modern concept of methodology . . . . The true method was an action of the thing itself . . . . But this activity and this effort consist in not interfering arbitrarily – latching onto this or that ready-made notion as it strikes one – with the immanent necessity of thought. Certainly, the thing does not go its own course without our thinking being involved, but thinking means unfolding what consistently follows from the subject matter itself. (pp. 459-460)
absurd. Accordingly, the final subsection of this chapter will offer a detailed, concrete, procedural description of the method employed in this dissertation. However, this procedural description is offered in the spirit of transparency, not because it is assumed that truth or objectivity is secured by the selection of the proper method. No method offers an escape from the ambiguities and difficulties involved in the subject matter examined in this study. I describe my method in detail so that it is clear to the reader how this study has been guided by my pre-understandings, but there is no escaping pre-understandings.

Procedures

Psychologists in recent decades have become fascinated by contemplative practice. Neuropsychologists have studied what happens in the brain when people meditate (Lutz et al., 2007; Cahn & Polich, 2006; Austin, 2006), and mindfulness practices have been incorporated as clinical tools by psychotherapists (Segal, et al., 2013; Dimidjian & Linehan, 2002; Robins, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Contemplative practice has, thus, emerged as a significant *object* of psychological research and has proven useful as a *clinical technique*, but it is striking that the field of psychology has, as far as I know, never attempted to employ contemplative practice as a research method.

There is, however, a growing openness among scholars in a variety of fields to the use of contemplative practices in research and teaching. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has promoted the integration of contemplative practice with pedagogy through its program “Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education.” Additionally, the physicist Arthur Zajonc (2009) has written about “the method of contemplative inquiry” as an attempt to incorporate “the contemplative life into the active
life” (p. 15), a call that is wholly consistent with Eckhart’s critique of ascetic withdrawal. However, psychologists have so far not joined with this incipient movement to make use of contemplative practice as a means of academic inquiry.

One can only speculate as to why psychologists have avoided incorporating contemplative practice into their research methods in an explicit way, even those who may engage in such practices personally and who believe contemplative practices benefit their research in indirect ways. The applied character of clinical work has likely made clinicians more open to the explicit incorporation of contemplative practices in their work with patients; whereas, the value placed on objectivity by researchers, in addition to the long history of skepticism vis-à-vis spirituality in the field, has likely hindered the integration of contemplative practice with research methodology. Even in qualitative psychological research, which values reflexivity and encourages reflection by the researcher on his or her subjective position and context, there has been a paucity of research attempting to integrate contemplative practice as a means of inquiry.101

As Zajonc has argued, the use of contemplative practices can yield benefits in a wide variety of research, including research on topics that have no obvious connection to the spiritual traditions out of which these practices have emerged. However, given that the object of inquiry in the present study is the work of Meister Eckhart, the link to contemplative practice is clear. Thomas Keating (2008), the Trappist monk who has most visibly promoted Christian contemplative prayer in recent decades, describes contemplative practice as “a way of bringing the procedures to be found in the

---

101 Some authors – for example, Adams (1995) and Patrik (1994) – have highlighted points of similarity between the phenomenological method and meditative awareness.
contemplative teachings of the spiritual masters of the Christian tradition out of the dusty pages of the past into the broad daylight of the present” (p. 19). Thus, engaging Eckhart’s texts via contemplative practice represents one way in which I have attempted to illuminate their significance for the present.

Specifically, I used *Lectio Divina* to engage the passage from the Eckhart sermon (W59, Q39) about which I wrote my Findings section. This passage from Eckhart’s work was chosen because its particular focus on the character of the union between the soul and God provides an especially clear point of departure for our understanding of Eckhart’s view of the self.102 *Lectio Divina* is a form of Christian contemplative practice designed specifically for the reading of short passages of sacred texts. It literally means “divine reading” in Latin and was “the method of prayer proposed for lay persons and monastics alike in the first Christian centuries” (Keating, 2008, p. 141). *Lectio Divina* consists of four steps:

1. *Lectio* – This is the Latin word for “reading.” This step is fairly straightforward, as it simply refers to the reading of the text. However, Thelma Hall (1988) stresses:

   It is not ordinary reading in matter or manner. The matter is the “Divine Word,” or scripture, and the manner of reading is, more accurately, a “listening” and a “hearing,” attuned to the inspired word and attentive to the speaker. (p. 36)

---

102 For a more detailed explanation of the rationale for selecting this particular passage, see pp. 138-139 of the Findings section.
2. *Meditatio* – This is the Latin word for meditation.¹⁰³ I began to enter this step when, according to Hall (1988), “I have been drawn to a particular phrase, and I am beginning to reflect on its meaning for me” (p. 38). Meditation here simply refers to rumination and reflection on the personal meaning of the passage or a particular word or phrase.

3. *Oratio* – This is the Latin word for prayer. During this step, I offered a spontaneous discursive prayer based on whatever phrase I felt most spoke to me.

4. *Contemplatio* – This is the Latin word for contemplation. This is a wordless resting in the direct presence of God. For this step, I used the centering prayer method, which I will describe in more detail below.

Unlike *Lectio Divina*, which involves structured, discursive prayer based on a reading of a text, centering prayer is a form of silent prayer whose goal is the direct experience of oneness with God. However, Keating (2008) has suggested that the stages of *Lectio Divina* that are discursive can be helpful as a form of preparation for the wordless contemplation of centering prayer and has, therefore, suggested integrating centering prayer with *Lectio Divina* (pp. 154-155). Keating (2008) gives the following summary of centering prayer (see Appendix for a more complete summary of the method in narrative form):

I. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within . . . .

---

¹⁰³ Whereas the word “meditation” in the Buddhist tradition is roughly equivalent to “contemplation” in the Christian tradition, “meditation” in the Christian tradition specifically refers to structured, discursive prayer that is typically practiced in relation to the reading of a scripture.
II. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within . . .

III. When engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word . . .

IV. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes . . . (pp. 177-179)

I practiced centering prayer as the Contemplatio step of Lectio Divina for 20-30 minutes, in accordance with Keating’s advice that “twenty to thirty minutes is the minimum amount of time necessary for most people to establish interior silence and to get beyond their superficial thoughts” (p. 23).

After reading the passage by Eckhart and completing all four steps of Lectio Divina, I wrote “field notes” in which I recorded what arose for me during each of the four steps. For Lectio, I wrote the particular phrase from the passage that spoke to me that day. For Meditatio, I wrote about what particular meaning I felt that phrase had for me. For Oratio, I recorded the discursive prayer that I prayed, which was inspired by the passage that spoke to me. For Contemplatio, I recorded anything noteworthy about my centering prayer session: the length of time my session lasted, what kinds of thoughts or feelings arose and how I responded to them, and any other associations I may have had.

Reflexive Discussion of the Contemplative Method

In my experience, this contemplative method aided my project by allowing me to enter into and work out of the kind of awareness that Eckhart’s writings attempt to evoke. So, for example, on one occasion during the writing of my Findings section, I was drawn
to the passage, “Therefore enter into your own ground and work there: the works that you perform there are all living” (Eckhart, 2009, p. 306). In the Meditatio, I reflected on the meaning of this passage for my own work. I wondered what it would mean for me to enter into my own ground and work there, and I wondered how that would make my work on the dissertation “living.” It occurred to me that living works are, for Eckhart, those performed “without why” – that is, focusing on the process of creation itself, rather than the end result. In the Oratio, I prayed that I would be able to set aside thoughts about the final product (e.g., thoughts about finishing the dissertation to complete my Ph.D., and so on) and focus on serving the project, letting it have a life of its own. Some of my associations that came up while practicing centering prayer during the Contemplatio included instances in the past when I have enjoyed the process of creation for its own sake. Afterward, I felt relaxed, focused, and open to the task of writing, wherever it leads. In this example, I was able to approach Eckhart’s notion of living without why not only as a concept to be explicated but experientially as an approach to life and, more specifically, to the task of research.

The kind of openness which contemplative practice aims to foster dovetails in significant ways with the spirit of Caputo’s radical hermeneutics. Consider, for instance, how Keating (2008) begins the first chapter of his book Open Heart, Open Mind: “Contemplative prayer is the world in which God can do anything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure. It is to be open to the Infinite and hence to infinite possibilities” (p. 11). Keating’s stance of openness to the unknown of infinite possibility resonates with Caputo’s characterization of radical hermeneutics as a form of opening to the unknown, beyond any horizon of anticipated possibilities. Keating is, like Caputo,
considering the paradoxical question of how to prepare oneself for that which is, by
definition, a surprise – the other who is in principle unpredictable. Thus, I conceived my
contemplative practice as a way of *doing* radical hermeneutics: a concrete practice which
I used to prepare for the surprise of the coming of the other, precisely the (impossible)
task which Caputo seeks to address in his development of radical hermeneutics.
Chapter 6 – Findings

Introduction

In this section, I carry out a commentary on one paragraph of one of Eckhart’s MHG sermons (W59, Q39). Writing commentaries on Eckhart’s sermons represents a long and venerable tradition within Eckhart scholarship, and the legitimacy of this tradition is further reinforced by the fact that Eckhart himself wrote commentaries on Biblical texts.

---

104 To date, there is no English-language edition which collects all of Eckhart’s work (for the complete Latin and German works, see Eckhart, 1936-). I have chosen to primarily rely on Walshe’s translation because, as Bernard McGinn notes in his foreword to it, “Walshe’s versions are the most complete collection in any language” (Eckhart, 2009, p. xiii). Although Walshe comes close to including Eckhart’s entire MHG work, there are still some sermons missing that have been more recently added to DW (see Eckhart, 2009, p. xvi for more details). Still, Walshe’s collection remains the most comprehensive in English of Eckhart’s MGH works and is further enhanced by McGinn’s updates and corrections. Throughout the dissertation, I use Walshe’s numbering system (designated by the capital letter “W,” followed by the sermon number), cross-referenced with Josef Quint’s numbering system in DW (designated by the capital letter “Q,” followed by the sermon number). Given that many other versions of Eckhart’s work adopt their own numbering systems or simply refer to sermons on the basis on the Bible verse or theme treated (i.e., “Jesus Entered”), I have attempted to offer the reader a system of reference as standardized and convenient as what I wish I would have encountered as I conducted my research. See the concordance in the back of Walshe’s collection (pp. 591-593) for a clear chart which allows for cross-referencing sermon numbers among a variety of translations. See a similar chart at the very end of Fox (2000).

105 See, for example, Schürmann (2001), Fox (2000), Largier (1993), and Houedard (2000).

106 See Eckhart (1986) for the full commentary on Exodus and selections from his commentaries on the Book of Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, and John. See Eckhart (1981) for selections from the commentaries on Genesis and John.
In approaching this text, I have been guided by the following distinction made by Reiner Schürmann (2001) as a preface to one of his Eckhart commentaries:

To make Meister Eckhart’s thought come to life for us today, the exegesis of his texts is hardly enough. The interpretation has to show which are the concrete steps that lead man’s existence towards God and finally beyond God. *Exegesis isolates the elements of Eckhart’s thought according to the letter of the argument, interpretation restores it according to the order of reasons.* (p. 81, emphasis added)

My goal in this dissertation is to help bring Eckhart’s thought to life, as Schürmann says, by putting it in dialogue with the contemporary theory and practice of psychoanalysis and, ultimately, by exploring its transformative potential for everyday life. However, in this section, I have limited myself primarily to the kind of exegesis which Schürmann describes: carefully and closely reading a text, paying close attention to the particular words chosen and the particular order in which they appear. What Schürmann describes as interpretation in the above passage is primarily reserved for my Discussion section, although I will also undertake some interpretation in the conclusion to the Findings section.

Although a commentary focuses on a particular sermon or passage, the goal is not only to reconstruct or illuminate a particular argument, but, as Schürmann puts it, to make “Meister Eckhart’s teaching . . . appear in its unity” (p. 81). The attempt to relate a part of Eckhart’s work to the whole of his teaching itself opens onto one of Eckhart’s deepest preoccupations: What is the relationship between the part and the whole (i.e., human and God, soul and ground, etc.)? As we will see in this commentary, Eckhart
understands this relationship in the following way: The particular (the creature in
Eckhart’s terms, or the alienated ego in more modern terms) must be stripped away
through the process of detachment (MHG: *abegescheidenheit*) to realize its unity with
God. But this unity, rather than representing a unity of two beings or substances, is a
unity in activity and operation: specifically, of the *Gottesgeburt*, the birth of the Son.
Thus, the particular is stripped away, not to become one with some kind of primordial,
formless unity, but to give birth to the singularity (the Son) which embodies (and is one
with) the perfection of the whole.

Eckhart’s message, although expressed in many different modes – some of which
may appear contradictory at first glance – is remarkably consistent: strip away your self
(*qua* creature) and give birth to this singularity (the Son)!
The singular brilliance of
Eckhart’s German sermons is not only his elaboration of this process, but his
performance of it through language. We can regard each sermon – even each passage and
each word – as a singularity which stands in relation to the whole of his work much in the
same way as the Son (the Word, the ultimate singularity) stands in relation to the all-
encompassing unity of the Father. Thus, from the perspective of exegesis of Eckhart’s
work, the deeper we go into a single sermon, passage, or even word, the more we uncover
Eckhart’s message as a whole. This paradox is entirely consistent with Eckhart’s view of
the self (which, one with the Son, is another singularity): The deeper we go into the
singularity of the self and discover the ground, the more we find that it opens out onto
God.

It is with these insights in mind that I have chosen a commentary as the form in
which to present my findings. Although my commentary is located in the tradition of
Eckhart commentaries mentioned above and shares many of the same basic goals, it
distinguishes itself by its micro-level focus (one paragraph, rather than an entire sermon),
which, in keeping with the Eckhartian logic outlined above, I have used as a point of
departure for exploring the central themes which unify Eckhart’s work as a whole. The
themes I explore in this commentary include: the relation between the just man and
justice, living/working without why (Eckhart’s *apophatic* ethics), the pure gift (as
opposed to sacrificial economy), the relation between time and eternity, the question of
God’s being and its relation to human being, detachment (*abegescheidenheit*), the
*Gottesgeburt* (the birth of the Son in the soul), and the ground and its relation to the soul.
Thus, the paragraph I analyze serves as a point of departure for a discussion of many of
the most important themes of Eckhart’s work, and in order to elucidate these themes, I
weave in references to other sermons in which Eckhart takes them up.

In addition to covering many key themes from Eckhart’s work as a whole, my
commentary also makes significant use of secondary literature on Eckhart and addresses
several debates within Eckhart interpretation. These include a critique of the prioritization
of the doctrine of analogy (*inquantum* principle) in interpreting Eckhart, an exploration of
the meaning of Eckhart’s role as a preacher, an evaluation of different perspectives on the
unity of God and soul in the ground, and a differentiation of various modes of Eckhart’s
discourse – e.g., three discourses about the ground (Sells, 1994) and Schürmann’s (2001)
distinction between indicative and imperative discourse. After having raised and
examined many central themes of Eckhart’s thought and many debates in the Eckhart
literature in my commentary, in the conclusion of the Findings section, I offer a
systematic elaboration of Eckhart’s view of the self that emerges from my findings.
This particular sermon (W59, Q39) was chosen for several reasons. First, the sermon deals with justice, and Eckhart (2009) himself declares in another sermon (W65, Q6) that “whoever understands about the just man and justice understands all that I am saying” (p. 329). In this sermon, it becomes clear why this theme is so important to understanding the whole of Eckhart’s work: First, he identifies justice with a certain way of working – namely, without why – which is at the heart of Eckhart’s *apophatic* ethics and recurs throughout his writings. Second, Eckhart identifies justice – and the working without why with which it is associated – with God, declaring that “the just man is like God because God *is* justice. Therefore: whoever is in justice is in God and *is* God” (p. 306, second emphasis added). Thus, Eckhart’s discussion of justice in this sermon directly leads us to the question of God’s being and the nature of the union between God and the soul – of central significance in any attempt to interrogate Eckhart’s view of the self.

In keeping with the theme of work, Eckhart goes on to define both God and the self with reference to a particular mode of operation or activity: namely, the *Gottesgeburt*, the birth of the Son in the soul. Eckhart asserts: “For all that is in God moves Him to beget: His whole ground, His essence, and His being move the Father to generation” (p. 307). Thus, this sermon (indeed, this particular passage) was chosen because Eckhart is especially explicit here that the being of God and the being of humans (and precisely what unites them) is none other than the process of creating, becoming, birthing, without why. As will become clear in the Discussion section, this sermon’s particular focus will make it ideally suited as a vehicle for putting Eckhart in dialogue with psychoanalysis (in the context of Freud’s theory of symptoms as substitutive
satisfactions and in the context of Lacan’s theory of creation *ex nihilo*). More generally, the sermon’s focus on coming-into-being offers many insights relevant to psychotherapy, understood as a process of change and becoming. As Eckhart says at the end of the sermon, “Once born, he [the spirit] neither sees nor pays heed to God: but at the moment of birth, *then* he has a vision of God” (p. 307). It is precisely at this level – the level/moment of birth, event, *ereignis* – that the therapeutic process of (re)constituting the self operates.

Although this sermon represents, based on my research, a uniquely explicit treatment of these themes, it is by no means the only instance in which they appear in Eckhart’s MHG sermons and treatises. In addition to my work on this sermon, I applied the contemplative method (see Method section) to nine other short passages from Eckhart’s MHG work as well as one complete sermon and one complete treatise.107 I have selected this one passage for a full commentary, but many of the themes presented here are also found in the other passages/texts: the relation between the just man and justice (W43, p. 239), living/suffering without why (W43, p. 239; “Book of Divine Comfort,” p. 540), the relation between time and eternity (“The Nobleman,” p. 563), the unity of God and the soul (W49, p. 263), detachment (W3, p. 51; W49, p. 263; W69, p. 354; W87; W92, p. 448; “The Nobleman,” pp. 561-562; “On Detachment,” pp. 571-572)

In the commentary that follows, I will first present the entire passage from Eckhart, and I will then present an interpretation of each individual phrase, which will be introduced in italics.

Excerpt of Sermon

Sermon W59 (Q39), pp. 305-306:

The just man seeks nothing in his works: for those who seek anything in their works or work for any ‘why’ are thralls and hirelings. Therefore, if you would be informed with and transformed into justice, have no ulterior purpose in your work, allow no ‘why’ to take shape in you, as regards either time or eternity, reward or blessedness, or this or that: for in truth such works are all dead. Indeed, even if you create an image of God in your mind the works you do with that in view are all dead and your good works are ruined. And not only do you spoil your good works, you commit sin as well, for you act like a gardener who was to plant a garden, who should first root out the trees and then expect to be paid for it. In this way you ruin good works. And so, if you would live and have your works live, you must be dead to all things and reduced to naught. It is the property of creatures to make something from something, but it belongs to God to make something from nothing: therefore, if God is to make anything in you or with you,

\[^{108}\text{Cf. Eckhart (1986, p. 296), Fox (2000, p. 464), and DWII (pp. 253-256). Additionally, note that this is not a complete paragraph in Walshe’s translation (Eckhart, 2009), although it is a complete paragraph in the MHG original.}\]


you must first be reduced to nothing. Therefore enter into your own ground and
work there: the works that you perform there are all living. Therefore he says,
“The just man lives,” for he works because he is just, and his works are living.

Commentary

The just man . . .

At the beginning of this sermon, Eckhart announces, “I have sometimes said what
a just man is, but now I speak differently and in another sense” (p. 305). One would
expect two parts to such a definition: the meaning of “man” and the meaning of “justice,”
the former being especially important in our attempt to elucidate Eckhart’s theory of the
self. But this is not what Eckhart offers, as he wants to “speak differently and in another
sense.” Eckhart wants to show that “just” is not an attribute or property that modifies the
noun “man.” Rather, the just man, insofar as he is just,\(^{109}\) is justice.\(^{110}\)

\(^{109}\) This is the doctrine of analogy – or inquantum principle – which will be discussed in more detail later in
this section.

\(^{110}\) Indeed, in the original text, Eckhart uses ein gereht mensche (a just man) in the first sentence but
thereafter uses simply der gerehte (the just). Tobin (Eckhart, 1986), in his footnote explaining his
translation of the Latin verse from the Book of Wisdom on which Eckhart’s sermon is based, offers a
helpful discussion of the tension between noun and adjective throughout this sermon:

This awkward translation has been chosen to point up the fact that Eckhart translates the Latin
\textit{iustus} [justice] with [Middle High German] \textit{der gerehte}. Both the Latin and the [Middle High
German] words are adjectives used as nouns. In other words, they imply but do not state the noun
\textit{man}. This will be a point of interpretation later in the sermon. Eckhart generally uses the adjective
\textit{just} for the just man throughout; however, because of the awkwardness of reproducing it literally,
it will henceforth be translated “just man,” except where its meaning as the “just \textit{man}” is called
into question. (p. 299)
. . . seeks nothing in his works: for those who seek anything in their works or work for any ‘why’ are thralls and hirelings.

Eckhart wants to address not only the theological/ontological question of the just man, but also, at the level of praxis, how one can become just. As is typical of Eckhart’s sermons, however, he proceeds in a fashion designed to confound common presuppositions. Eckhart’s audience would have expected an explanation of the practice of virtue through good works as the means to becoming a just man. This common view would start with an already-present self and then ask how it is possible for the self to acquire the characteristic of justness.

However, Eckhart criticizes this common view harshly, dismissing those who would set out to obtain justice, or any other virtue, through their works as “thralls and hirelings.” Indeed, Eckhart argues, in a theme that recurs throughout his sermons, that works must be detached from all “why.” It is not an accident that Eckhart denounces the common view of virtue in specifically economic terms. By expecting something in return (in this case, the quality of “being just”) for doing or sacrificing something (performing...
good works), the common view remains inscribed in the circle of economy. The
foundation of economy is giving something in order to get something else – in other
words, trading one thing for another. The German word which Eckhart uses for “hireling”
(or mercenary in other translations, see footnote 112) is “Mietlinge,” which is related to
the verb “mieten” (to rent). Those whom Eckhart criticizes literally rent out their souls in
order to acquire the virtue of justice.

The just man, on the other hand, is precisely the one whose works are free of all
ends; he works purely for the sake of justice, not to obtain justice as a virtue or attribute.
The just man does not perform good works in order to “be” just. Justice is not a trait that
is added to the just man’s being; on the contrary, becoming one with justice itself requires
a process of subtraction, rather than addition. 112 “Just” is not something added to “man”;
rather, in order to become one with justice, it is the “man” that has to fall away – which is
to say, the ego, which by clinging to its separate being, can only relate to justice as a
property or trait to be appropriated and, therefore, remains alienated from justice. A
similar process of subtraction is described by Eckhart in his treatise “The Nobleman”
with the following metaphor:

[I]f an artist wants to make an image from wood or stone, he does not put the
image into the wood, but he cuts away the chips that had hidden and concealed
the image: he gives nothing to the wood but takes from it, cutting away the

112 Along these lines, see the following quote from the Latin sermon Existimo quod non sunt condignae
passiones huius temporis, which is often cited by Matthew Fox: “. . . God is not found in the soul by adding
anything but by a process of subtraction” (Eckhart, 1958, p. 194).
overlay and removing the dross, and then that which was hidden under it shines forth. (p. 560)

This passage points to the connection between justice and the practice of detachment (abegescheidenheit), which we will explore in more detail later on in this commentary.

*Therefore, if you would be informed with and transformed into justice, have no ulterior purpose in your work, allow no ‘why’ to take shape in you, as regards either time or eternity, reward or blessedness, or this or that: for in truth such works are dead.*

Here, Eckhart makes clear that the point is not to be just but to become justice itself (to be “informed with and transformed into justice”). Why does Eckhart claim that works which are done with an “ulterior purpose” are dead? This echoes a passage from another of Eckhart’s MHG sermons (W43), in which Eckhart explicitly links justice, working without why, and life: “. . . the just man acts without why and has no why; and just as life lives for its own sake and asks for no why for which to live, so the just man has no why for which to act” (p. 239). Another way of putting this would be to say that such works are impermanent because they remain within the realm of time. A good work performed in order to acquire the virtue of justice may indeed have some positive effect, but because it remains in the realm of time, its effects will eventually perish.

The “eternity” which Eckhart mentions in this passage is not genuine eternity. Eckhart seems to be addressing the common belief in eternity as a kind of endless duration after death and is cautioning his audience not to perform good works in order to secure some reward in *that* eternity. Genuine eternity is of a fundamentally different order than time, as opposed to being simply time without end. Eternity, properly
understood, is the realm of life, of beginning, of creation, out of which the temporal order springs. As we will see, the only works that live are those performed out of – and as a manifestation of – this eternity. Such works are not performed for some future “eternal” reward; rather, their “reward” lies precisely in the fact that they already emerge out of and participate in (and as) God’s eternity right now.

Indeed, even if you create an image of God in your mind the works you do with that in view are all dead and your good works are ruined. And not only do you spoil your good works, you commit sin as well, . . .

Like the false “eternity” mentioned above, works performed for “God” are also dead and ruined. Why? Because when someone performs a good work for God, this is still to take God as an object standing over and against the self. Such acts are performed from a position of alienation from God; for Eckhart, they fail to grasp the oneness of God and the soul. Although one may approach good works in this way with the best of intentions, this alienation from God is the very definition of sin for Eckhart. And this understanding of sin, in turn, already suggests that Eckhart views the self as fundamentally one with God and, therefore, divine.

113 For more on Eckhart’s view of sin – particularly the way that this alienation manifests in the context of attempts to reduce God to human language – see Fox (2000):

He [Eckhart] calls our putting talk about God ahead of silence with God a sin. For such relationships to God are a kind of control over God that all projection is about. To project onto others, especially the divine Other, is to operate from a sinful consciousness, one that lacks reverence for the other.” (p. 183)
Eckhart elaborates on this point at length in his famous sermon on poverty of the spirit (W87, Q52), describing in the following passage the original state of absolute unity with God and the way in which the appearance of God as an object standing over against the subject is only a product of our alienation from this state of unity:

While I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God and was my own cause: then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth. Then I wanted myself and wanted no other thing: what I wanted I was and what I was I wanted, and thus I was free of God and all things. But when I left my free will behind and received my created being, then I had a God. (p. 421)

This leads up to his famous declaration: “Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God” (p. 422), by which Eckhart means that he prays to, as, and out of the ineffable and infinite Godhead (Gottheit) to be free of the finite, limited, and reductive image of God as a separate being. In the same sermon, Eckhart dismisses those who attempt to perform good works for God’s sake, saying that, their good intentions notwithstanding, “these people are called holy from their outward appearances, but inwardly they are asses, for they are ignorant of the actual nature of divine truth” (p. 421).

... for you act like a gardener who was to plant a garden, who should first root out the trees and then expect to be paid for it. In this way you ruin good works.

The metaphor of the gardener offered by Eckhart here is highly illustrative because it offers a strikingly vivid depiction of what we could call Eckhart’s apophatic
ethics. It is not a coincidence that the gardener works the *ground*, perhaps the central idea of Eckhart’s thought. For Eckhart, the ground is the soul’s deepest dimension, which opens out onto (and is actually one with) God. The ethical imperative for Eckhart is that the soul empty itself completely so as to become one with the ground.

And when everything has been stripped away (like the trees in the metaphor), this enables the birth of the Son in the soul, another one of Eckhart’s central themes. As Reiner Schürmann (2001) asserts, in a commentary on a different sermon (W8, Q2):

> The reception of God . . . in us is a gift which must bear fruit: detachment is completed by fertility. God becomes fertile in a mind deliberately deprived of all images and of all works . . . . In the supreme emptiness of detachment, man and God are united in fertility; one sole determination joins them together: that of giving birth. (p. 19)

Thus, the metaphor of the gardener condenses many of Eckhart’s central ideas into a single sentence: the ground of the soul must be cleared of images to make possible the birth of the Son in the soul. Along these lines, Eckhart (2009) makes the following

---

114 Note that Schürmann translates as “mind” what all other versions translate as “soul.” Schürmann explains his rationale in his introduction (2001):

> There is one interpretive option in the translations that requires an explanation. We have consistently rendered Eckhart’s *sēle* not as “soul,” but as “mind.” One could object that this translation disregards the etymological evidence. But Eckhart’s vocabulary in this case is Augustinian. *Sēle* mostly stands for Augustine’s *mens* or *animus*, both of which are usually translated as “mind.” Only when *sēle* is used in the sense of *anima*, designating the animating principle of the body, have we used “soul.” In Eckhart’s Latin writings, though, he follows Scholastic terminology, and there even *anima* is often translated as “mind.” (p. xx)
metaphor in his treatise “On Detachment”: “[I]f I want to write I must erase or destroy whatever is on the tablet, and the tablet is never so suitable for me to write on as when there is nothing on it” (p. 572).

However, the problem with the gardener in this particular passage is that he expects payment for the stripping away of the trees. In other words, he demands compensation for his renunciation. He will only give something up if, in so doing, he accrues some reward. And at this point, we again find the circularity of economy asserting itself: something is given or sacrificed in exchange for something else. In the context of this particular passage, this would mean that good works are performed for the sake of obtaining the virtue of justice.

In contrast, Eckhart’s apophatic ethics hinges on the notion of a pure gift, given without expectation – just as God freely empties and gives away God’s self. And this is the point at which the spatio-temporal narrative of the parable itself has to be apophatically stripped away, as it runs aground on the parable’s deeper layer of meaning. The gardener’s expectation of payment requires a future, demonstrating the way in which economy is constitutive of temporality.115 The gardener gives up something in the present which he already had in the expectation of obtaining something in the future. But Eckhart’s message is that the cutting down of the trees is the gardener’s whole task – the

115 Thinkers from a variety of fields have approached the relationship between time and economy, taking it in a variety of directions that would be interesting to put in dialogue with Eckhart. See, for example, The Gift by Marcel Mauss (1950/1990) in the field of anthropology, Given Time by Jacques Derrida (1991/1992) in the field of philosophy, and The Future of Futures by Elena Esposito (2009/2011) in the field of economics. See also Fink (2011) for a discussion which touches on some of these themes in the context of psychoanalytic practice.
complete and perfect manifestation of God. It is even deceptive to say that the trees must be stripped away so that the soil is fertile for the birth of the Son, as even that reveals the traces of teleology. For Eckhart, a “giving up” which remains a pure “giving” is already oneness with God, as God’s “nature” or “being” is likewise nothing more than God’s pure giving (i.e., God’s creative act, fertility, giving birth). The resurrection, heaven, eternity, the kingdom of God: these are not to be awaited at some point in the future; rather, they are already present in and as a certain kind of (properly understood) crucifixion (i.e., sacrifice). Indeed, Eckhart asserts in another MHG sermon (W92), that “if a man puts off self, in the putting off he takes in Christ and holiness and blessedness and becomes very great” (p. 448, emphasis added).

Understood in this way, the resonance of the trees in this parable extends to the “tree” of Calvary and opens up the problematic of suffering without why— the affirmation of life and God in the midst of suffering, rather than for some retroactive reward, goal, or consolation – which Eckhart elaborates most fully in his “Book of Divine Consolation”:

116 The notion of suffering without why, which can be traced back to Eckhart, has gone on to exert a significant influence on later thinkers. See, especially Kierkegaard’s (1847/1964) discussion of “useless suffering” in Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing and Levinas’s (1982/1998) essay “Useless Suffering.” Useless suffering has emerged as a significant question in post-Holocaust spirituality.

117 Although Walshe, on whose translation I primarily rely, translates this as “comfort,” I prefer Colledge’s decision to translate the MHG word trœstunge as “consolation” for several reasons. First, the first definition of the modern German equivalent Trost is “consolation.” Second, the use of “consolation” retains the resonance with the Boethian tradition, to which one could argue, Eckhart’s “Book of Divine Consolation” belongs (or, alternatively, critiques, although either way it is clear that Eckhart knew Boethius’s work and was in dialogue with it). The original Latin title of Boethius’s (c.524/2001) Consolation of Philosophy is
She [the soul] does not wish to have suffered and to have got over pain and suffering: she is willing and eager to suffer always without ceasing for God and well-doing. All her happiness lies in suffering, and not in *having suffered*, for God’s sake. And therefore our Lord says quite deliberately: “Blessed are those who suffer for righteousness’ sake” (Matt. 5:10): he does not say ‘who have suffered.’ Such a man hates ‘having suffered,’ for ‘having suffered’ is not the suffering he loves. (p. 540)

*And so, if you would live and have your works live, you must be dead to all things and reduced to naught.*

Here we are confronted with a perfect example of the paradoxical character of Eckhart’s *apophatic* discourse: In order for the soul and its works to live, it must become dead to all things and be reduced to nothing. But what does it mean to become “dead to all things” in this context? In a note to this sentence, Walshe directs the reader to Sermon W57 (Q12), and there is a passage there that nicely captures what Eckhart means when he speaks of being “dead to all things”: “That man who is established thus in God’s love must be dead to self and all created things, paying as little regard to himself as to one who is a thousand miles away” (Eckhart, 2009, p. 298). Thus, the sentence under consideration finds Eckhart speaking in an *apophatic* mode, calling for the stripping

---

*Consolatio Philosophiae*, and the etymological relationship between the Latin *consolatio* and the English “consolation” further recommends Colledge’s translation. Finally, the way in which consolation, more than comfort, conveys the sense of compensation for a loss further reinforces the economic logic of sacrifice discussed in this commentary and facilitates the dialogue between Eckhart’s work and the psychoanalytic notion of symptoms as compensatory or substitutive satisfactions carried out in the Discussion section.
away of the self *qua* creature (i.e., alienated and ostensibly independent). It is to the meaning of “creature” in Eckhart’s work that we now turn.

*It is the property of creatures to make something from something, but it belongs to God to make something from nothing:*

In order to understand this difficult passage, we must first take a brief detour into what Eckhart says about creatures and their fundamental difference from God. With the term “creature” (MHG: *créatûre*), Eckhart denotes being in its apparent separateness from God. For Eckhart, human beings, insofar as they are creatures, have no being. As Tobin (1986) puts it, “Creatures, in themselves or insofar as (in quantum) they are creatures, are simply nothing . . . As separate from God, a creature is just a sign pointing to what is real” (pp. 63-64). This is not to say that creatures do not exist at all; rather, their existence is derivative. Humans *qua* creatures exist only in and through God, rather than possessing any being of their own; as Eckhart writes in his “Book of Divine Consolation,” “[T]o creatures He *gives* nothing good, but only lends it” (p. 538). Within this particular mode of Eckhart’s discourse, then, “God alone will be said to be being,” while creatures are in themselves nothing (Tobin, 1986, pp. 63-64). Indeed, in one representative passage from another MHG Sermon (W91, Q79), Eckhart (2009) says, “The masters say that all creatures can say ‘I,’ for the word is common property, but the word *sum* ‘am’ can only properly be spoken by God alone” (p. 446).

This is why the gardener in the metaphor above fundamentally errs: He expects something in return for stripping away the trees, but the trees never really belonged to him in the first place. He cannot bargain with God by giving up “possessions” which are
themselves borrowed from God. As Tobin (1986) argues in his discussion of Eckhart’s critique of this business-like (i.e., instrumental and calculative) relationship to God (MHG: *koufmanschaft*), the gardener and those like him err because “they think they have independent capital as bargaining power. Their utter dependence on God for what they are and do shows the illusory nature of their position. God has given them everything and owes them nothing” (p. 121).

However, the sentence from this sermon with which we are currently concerned represents a shift in Eckhart’s rhetoric. Up to this point, Eckhart has been speaking within a typically *apophatic* mode of discourse, emphasizing the error of thinking that human beings possess independent being and making the ethical call for the self to empty itself of its self-representations. But if Eckhart’s thought can be understood as centering on two main themes – negation and fertility – it is to the latter theme which Eckhart now turns. For in this sentence Eckhart begins to explore the meaning of creation and the way in which creatures and God differ in their modes of creating.

Eckhart asserts that “it is the property of creatures to make something from something, but it belongs to God to make something from nothing.” However, this assertion seems at first glance to be at odds with the notion that God alone has being and that creatures only exist contingently in and through God’s being. If creatures are nothing, why would it be their property to make something from something? And if God is the only real being, why would it belong to God to make something from nothing? This sentence belongs to a parallel strain of Eckhart’s thought, in which creatures have being and God is nothingness. Tobin (1986) asserts that Eckhart aims to demonstrate that “it is
not legitimate to use the term *esse* [Latin: being] to describe God in any real sense. *Esse* is limited to creatures and thus is too confining to be applied to God” (p. 36).

In order to understand how being could be too confining a category for God, it is important to understand the difference between the Latin terms which Eckhart (and the Scholastics in general) employ. According to Tobin (1986): “*Ens* (plural *entia*), a present participial noun, is used to signify a being (or beings) in the concrete,” while the infinitive form *esse* (to be) was used to describe the *act* of existing, and the term *essentia* (essence) denotes “the principle which accounts for the differences in beings” which “limits the *esse* an individual concrete being has” (p. 32). Tobin goes on to say:

However, a being is conceivable in which, because its act of existence or *esse* is not limited in any way, the essence or what it is (*id quod est*) is identical with its *esse*. A being of infinite essence is simply pure *esse*, pure infinite act of existing. To describe a being in which *esse* and *essentia* are completely one and cannot be distinguished is to describe God. God has no essence insofar as this is considered as a limiting principle. (p. 32)

Thus, God’s essence (*essentia*) is God’s existence (*esse*). In other words, God’s *esse* is not constrained by any principle which would determine the nature of God’s being. Indeed, this contention lies behind Eckhart’s *apophatic* discourse; in order to maintain God’s unity, it is necessary that God not be constrained by any external principle. For this reason, Eckhart is critical of – and attempts to *apophatically* strip away – ways of understanding God through particular categories or properties, such as goodness. However, one mark of the radicality of Eckhart’s thought is that he extends this critique to being itself. If being inevitably carries with it determination and
This point about God’s nothingness is illustrated well in another sermon (W65, Q6), in which Eckhart explicitly links the notion of God’s nothingness to justice. The key passage in this connection is the following: “The divine being is equal to nothing, and in it there is neither image nor form” (Eckhart, 1987, p. 187). Although Eckhart continues here to refer to God as “the divine being,” he says that this “being” is “equal to nothing.” Eckhart’s play on the word “equal” suggests two points: (1) Seen from the perspective of being or ontology, God is nothing; (2) there is no thing which can equal God; God, in God’s divine being, surpasses all creatures. The second point captures the sense in which God remains identified with the notion of a divine being for Eckhart; the first point captures the sense in which Eckhart refers to God as nothing or nothingness. In the same sermon, Eckhart (again, playing with the word “equality” and its association with justice) suggests that the “just soul” is “equal with God,” and that “they who are thus equal . . . . are equal to nothing, they alone are equal to God” (p. 187). Thus, in order to become equal to God (i.e., become/give birth to the Son), the just soul must become nothing (i.e., strip away all attachments [eigenschaften] through the process of detachment [abegescheidenheit]). Thus, we arrive at stripping away and giving birth, the two key moments of Eckhart’s thought and the organizing principles underlying his sermons. “God” understood as a being must be stripped away in order to give birth to the Son – who, as the absolute singularity remains utterly refractory to all forms or categories of being.
If it is sometimes difficult to reconcile Eckhart’s statements on God as being and nothingness, this has to do with the fact that for Eckhart being, at its deepest level, must be understood as a verb, as a process of emerging, coming-forth, birthing. As Tobin suggests, the term *esse* denotes the pure *act* of being. God “is” the pure activity of God’s coming-into-being, namely the process of creation. And this is why, as Eckhart’s emphasis shifts to the discourse of fertility, it is not surprising that we find him suggesting God’s nothingness, despite the appearance of contradicting what came before in the same paragraph. God’s defining “property” is fertility, which is to say, the act of creation, which is prior to being as such. Indeed, later in the sermon under consideration (W59, Q39), Eckhart (2009) says, translating this idea into trinitarian language:

The Father is begetting His Son, and in the begetting the Father finds such peace and joy that *His entire nature is expended.*\(^\text{118}\) For all that is in God moves Him to beget: His whole ground, His essence, and His being move the Father to generation. (p. 307, emphasis added)

Thus, God’s “nature” and ground is to give birth. Furthermore, this pure act of generation is eternal in that, as coming-into-being, it is prior to – and beyond – temporality as such.

And now we are finally in a position to understand what Eckhart means when he says in the sentence under consideration that “it belongs to God to make something from nothing.” When reflecting on this sentence, we cannot think of God as a subjective actor or agency who, starting with a vacuum of some kind, calls something into being, like a

---

\(^{118}\) The word which Walshe translates as “expended” is (MHG) “*verzert*”, which literally means “consumed.” Tobin’s rendering is closer to the original: “The Father gives birth to his Son, and in giving birth the Father has so much peace and delight that he consumes his whole nature in it” (Eckhart, 1986, p. 298).
magician pulling a rabbit out of an empty hat. God is not a being or entity that creates; rather, God’s being or nature is nothing other than this act of creation. God is the process or act of creation coming into being. God is the highest “being” insofar as being in its purest “form” must be understood as creating, emerging, coming-into-being.

Eckhart’s particular choice of words is very interesting in this clause. He uses the MHG word “eigen” twice, which means “property.” Walshe translates this directly as property the first time (“the property of creatures”) but in the second instance verbalizes it so that it becomes “it belongs to God,” rather than maintaining the parallel structure of the original text, which literally translated would be “God’s property.”119 Walshe’s decision to verbalize what is a noun in the original is understandable, given that speaking of “God’s property” could lead to misunderstandings, since Eckhart belongs to an apophatic tradition which aims to problematize the kataphatic project of enumerating God’s properties. However, the word “eigen” is interesting because it is etymologically related to the MHG word “eigenschaft,” which according to Tobin (1986) has “three clearly different applications in Middle High German,”120 but which usually means “possessiveness” (p. 121). And the word “eigenschaft” is precisely the word that Eckhart uses throughout the German sermons to indicate what his listeners must strip away.

119 The whole clause in the original reads as follows: “Der créâtûre eigen ist, daz si von ihte iht mache; aber
gotes eigen ist, daz er von nihte iht mache . . .”

120 According to Tobin (1986):

Most frequently it denotes ownership or proprietary rights. Hence, the use of “possessiveness” here [referring to a passage that Tobin has translated from Sermon Q2]. Second, it can indicate bondage, the social and legal condition of the serf. Third, even this early it can also express the idea of quality or characteristic. (p. 121)
Thus, if we translate the text word-for-word, Eckhart’s playfulness with language becomes clearer: “God’s property is that he makes something from nothing” (my translation). With this linguistic playfulness, Eckhart aims to challenge the everyday way of thinking of God as a being with properties. God’s “property” is that God is not constrained by properties; rather, God’s defining “characteristic” is precisely God’s nothingness. God is empty of content, free of qualities, pure possibility. And the fact that God’s “property” is that God is free of properties is precisely God’s freedom, as *eigenschaften* always function as constraints. “Something” is always determinate and therefore limited, but God cannot be constrained by something. It is only in nothingness that God is free.

... therefore, if God is to make anything in you or with you, you must first be reduced to nothing.

God cannot work in a human being, insofar as that human being is a creature. When the soul remains a creature, it is something (determinate) and therefore limits the way that God can work. To become nothing means to strip away all determinate *eigenschaften* – in other words, all of our attachments to particular properties which form and define our being. Eckhart calls for his listeners to open themselves to the infinite possibility that is God, which cannot be constrained by properties.

We can understand this clause as a segue into an even more radical theme of Eckhart’s which he introduces at the end of this paragraph (and which we will examine presently): namely, the absolute oneness of the soul and God. In this clause, however, we

---

121 “... gotes eigen ist, daz er von nihte iht mache ... ” (DW II, p. 256).
remain at an intermediate level of Eckhart’s discourse, at which he has not yet completely purged his language of essentialism. There is still a soul *qua* entity to speak of, at the very least as a location “in” which God could work. We are still left with the image of the soul as a place, like the gardener’s land, which could be stripped away to “make room” for God.

Although Eckhart arrives at the absolute oneness of God and the soul later in this sermon (“Therefore: whoever is in justice is in God and is God” [2009, p. 306]), this is an appropriate moment in the text to draw attention to the limits of this particular mode of Eckhart’s discourse and to compare it with other sermons in which he *apophatically* strips away the remnants of essentialism in his own discourse. The clearest example of this double movement of negation in Eckhart’s work comes to us in his sermon on poverty of the spirit (W87, Q52), one of his most celebrated sermons and the sermon in which his *apophatic* discourse of stripping away (*abegescheidenheit*) assumes its most radical dimensions. After employing language similar to what we find in the clause currently under consideration suggesting that the soul should empty itself to make room for God’s work, Eckhart (2009) begins to problematize his own discourse:

> Now pay earnest attention to this! I have often said, and eminent authorities say it too, that a man should be so free of all things and all works, both inward and outward, that he may be a proper abode for God where God can work. Now we shall say something else. If it is the case that a man is free of all creatures, of God and of self, and if it is still the case that God finds a place *in him* to work, then we declare that as long as this is *in* that man, he is not poor with the strictest poverty. For it is not God’s intention in His works that a man should have a place within
himself for God to work in: for poverty of spirit means being so free of God and all his works, that God, if He wishes to work in the soul, is Himself the place where He works” (p. 423)

Thus, Eckhart himself makes clear that we should not regard the discourse employed in this clause as the terminus of his thought, but rather, should understand it as an aid to thought which is necessary to lead his audience out of everyday, commonsense notions of God and the self. Eckhart uses the very categories of thought (in this case, space and the notion of place\textsuperscript{122}) in order to strip away these categories and induce in his audience the breakthrough to absolute unity with God beyond thought and being. Thus, it is best to regard this mode of discourse as a rhetorical tool employed by Eckhart the preacher, rather than the deepest expression of his mystical philosophy.

\textit{Therefore enter into your own ground and work there: the works that you perform there are all living.}

In order to understand this passage, we will have to explore three major themes of Eckhart’s: ground, work, and life. But before that we must consider the meaning of the word “therefore” (MHG: \textit{dar umbe}) – in other words, how this sentence relates to what precedes it. This sentence is actually the second of three sentences that begin with the

\textsuperscript{122} Although I do not emphasize it in my analysis of this passage, it is also clear that Eckhart’s discourse in this clause remains within the realm of temporality and causality, in addition to space, as is suggested by Eckhart’s use of the word “first”: You must \textit{first} be reduced to nothing, if God is to make anything in or with you. This aspect of the passage could just as easily have been chosen to critique and strip away, especially with the help of Schürmann’s (2001) assertion that for “the perfectly realized man . . . the quest for causes is forgotten” (p. 185).
word “therefore,” and this parallel structure suggests that they all follow as consequences from a single key phrase, namely: “It is the property of creatures to make something from something, but it belongs to God to make something from nothing.” If we consider the sentence under consideration as standing in direct relation to this previous sentence, it demonstrates more clearly the meaning of the “ground” and already subtly problematizes the suggestion that this ground is somehow our “own” (eigenen). In order to make this clearer, we could rephrase this passage in the following way: “Since it belongs to God to make something from nothing, you must enter into your own ground and work there.” Thus, we must enter into our ground and work there because that is precisely “where” God works and makes something from nothing.

Eckhart continues to play with the word “eigen,” which in this sentence assumes new heights of polyvalence. Eckhart exhorts the listener to “enter into your own ground” (“ganc in dinen eigenen grunt”), which, taken at face value, suggests that this ground belongs to the soul. Indeed, by repeating the word “eigen” again here, Eckhart is echoing its usage in the sentence to which this sentence is related as effect to cause. In that previous sentence, Eckhart used “eigen” as a noun which is translated into English as “property” – i.e., it is the property of creatures to create something from something, but the property of God to create something from nothing. Although in the sentence under consideration Eckhart uses “eigen” as an adjective (in the sense of “your own ground”), its repetition in this context echoes its prior usage to indicate a property. Thus, Eckhart

---

123 “. . . therefore, if God is to make anything in you or with you, you must first be reduced to nothing. Therefore enter into your own ground and work there: the works that you perform there are all living. Therefore he says, ‘The just man live,’ for he works because he is just, and his works are living.”
subtly suggests that this ground into which we should enter is our property, a defining characteristic; the ground belongs to us in the way that it belongs to God to make something out of nothing, which is God’s property or defining characteristic.

Thus, examining Eckhart’s usage of “eigen” in this passage with its usage in preceding sentences leads to a number of significant and paradoxical consequences for our understanding of the ground. On the one hand, the repetition of “eigen” suggests that the ground is a fundamental property of the soul. On the other hand, the previous sentence suggests precisely that God’s defining “property” (eigen) is that God cannot be constrained by properties and creates, therefore, out of pure nothingness and, furthermore, that if God is to work in us, we must become nothing (i.e., strip away all eigenschaften). Thus, the ground is our own – indeed our defining property – while also being a “place” empty of and beyond being, out of which God creates something from nothing. Indeed, Eckhart seems to suggest through these paradoxical repetitions of “eigen” that the defining property of human being, insofar as it is identified with the ground rather than creatures, is, like God, precisely the absence of properties. And, to state this even more radically, we will see as we examine Eckhart’s notion of the ground more broadly that the defining “property” of human beings is our absolute oneness with God: the divinity of humanity.

A full examination of Eckhart’s notion of the ground is beyond the scope of this project; indeed, Bernard McGinn (2001), who is probably the most respected Eckhart scholar in the English-speaking world, has devoted a book-length study to Eckhart’s notion of the ground, in which he argues that the ground is the central, organizing
principle of Eckhart’s work and the key to understanding his entire oeuvre. That said, Eckhart’s notion of the ground is important for any attempt to understand Eckhart’s understanding of the self; as McGinn (2001) notes, “Grunt [ground] was often applied to the ‘innermost of the soul’ (innigsten der sêle; DW 2:259.7), what Eckhart, Tauler, and others spoke of metaphorically as ‘spark,’ ‘castle,’ ‘nobleman,’ ‘highest point,’ ‘seed,’ etc.” (p. 41). If the ground is the “innermost” part of the soul, then reflecting on the meaning of the ground will clearly comprise an important part of our attempt to elucidate Eckhart’s view of the self.

And from the perspective of our interest in the self, our first question must be: what is the relationship between the soul and the ground? Elsewhere (W1, Q101), Eckhart (2009) describes the ground as “the purest thing that the soul is capable of . . . the noblest part . . . the very essence of the soul which is the soul’s most secret part” (p. 30).

In the same sermon, Eckhart goes on to say:

. . . in that ground is the silent ‘middle’: here nothing but rest and celebration for this birth, this act, that God the Father may speak His word there, for this part is by nature receptive to nothing save only the divine essence, without mediation.

Here God enters the soul with His all, not merely with a part. God enters here the ground of the soul. None can touch the ground of the soul but God alone. (p. 31)

Thus, the ground is the “part” of the soul – the purest, noblest, most secret part – where only God can enter. It is only there, in the ground, where God can speak God’s word

---

124 For McGinn’s (2001) most direct explication of Eckhart’s notion of the ground, see especially “Chapter 3: Eckhart and the Mysticism of the Ground” (pp. 35-52).
without the mediation of the senses or cognitive faculties, and this lack of mediation allows God to enter the soul fully, “with His all,” and not merely as a part.

But how can such a ground – which is the direct and unmediated presence of the divine word and the eternal birth of God – somehow be a “part” of the soul which resides “in” the soul? Michael Sells (1994), in his chapter on Eckhart in Mystical Languages of Unsaying, which analyzes the discursive strategies of a number of apophatic thinkers across various traditions, distinguishes between three “paradigms” for understanding the way in which the birth of God occurs “in” the ground of the soul:

The first paradigm implies locus and containment: the son is born “in” the soul. The second paradigm insists that the birth can only occur insofar as the soul has become “equal to nothing,” has emptied itself and gone out of itself. In doing so, it becomes equal to its ground, to naked being, to nothingness. Such nothingness cannot serve as a place or locus. It is beyond place. With the third paradigm, the ground of the soul is identical with the ground of the deity, with the godhead. When the soul gives up its eigenschaft (properties, attachment), its images, its will, and becomes nothing, it is said to be virgin. It is “in” that virgin soul that the son is born, not only as contained in the soul, but as being “in” its principle. (p. 163)

Although the sermon currently under consideration (and even the short excerpt we have chosen for our commentary) contains instances of all three of the paradigms described by Sells, it is clear that in the sentence on which we are currently reflecting, Eckhart is working within the first paradigm alone. By exhorting his listeners to “enter into” their “own” ground and work “there,” Eckhart refers to the ground in terms that still
imply locus and containment. That said, this exhortation follows immediately on the heels of an explicitly *apophatic* assertion which clearly falls into the second of Sells’ paradigms: “If God is to make anything in you, you must first be reduced to nothing.”

Finally, in another passage from the sermon under consideration (W59, Q39), Eckhart makes a bold declaration of the unity of God and the soul which can be classified under the third of Sells’ paradigms: “Therefore, whoever is in justice is in God and is God.” It becomes clear in this last declaration that God, as Sells suggests, is “in” the soul in its principle, not in spatial terms.

If the ground is really the shared and utterly unified identity of God and the soul, then is it even proper to speak of a theory of the self or of subjectivity in Eckhart?125

Along these lines, McGinn (2001) emphasizes that

[I]t is better to speak of the ‘mysticism of the ground’ than the ‘mysticism of the ground of the soul.’ The essential point, as Eckhart often put it, is that ‘God’s ground and the soul’s ground is one ground.’ It is not because *either* the soul is grounded in its essential reality, *or* God in his, but because they are both *grounded in the same ground* in a fused identity that Eckhart and his followers found the language of the ground so rich in meaning . . . . It is true that Eckhart often speaks of God “penetrating” and “being in” the soul’s ground, thus indicating an analogical relationship between two realities. But as Otto Langer has pointed out, texts such as those cited above indicate that on the deepest level, that of fused identity, there is only one univocal *grunt*. (p. 45)

125 I would like to thank Dr. Maxime Mauriège for raising this question to me.
Indeed, the centrality of this argument to McGinn’s thought is underscored by the fact that he lists it as one reason why he chose the ground as the theme around which he would organize his book *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*.

If we were to accept that the “deepest” understanding of the ground is the “fused identity” between God and the soul, then we would be justified in understanding Sells’ three paradigms as a hierarchical categorization, with the absolute unity of God and the soul being the highest understanding of the ground, and the first and second paradigms being mere shadows of that perfect understanding, watered down for the pedagogical purposes of Eckhart’s preaching. Why, however, was Eckhart a preacher at all? And, more precisely, is it a coincidence that, despite having written numerous Latin theological treatises in the Scholastic tradition, Eckhart’s most celebrated and enduring theoretical contributions emerged precisely in the context of his vernacular sermons?

Could it be that the understanding of the ground as our “own,” as a “part” of the human subject, rather than representing a spatio-temporal crutch to tide us over on the way to the difficult metaphysical truth of the unity of God and the soul, actually represents an equally valid insight into the ground that was facilitated by Eckhart’s role as a preacher? Since the remainder of the passage which is the subject of this commentary will ascend rapidly to the heights of this “fused identity” of the just man and God in justice, the sentence currently under consideration, which is in the imperative tense and represents the high ebb of Eckhart’s exhortatory tone in this paragraph (“Therefore enter into your own ground and work *there*: the works that you perform *there* are all living”) offers a good moment to reflect on the unique value of what Reiner Schürmann (2001) calls Eckhart’s “imperative” thought (p. 29).
In stark contrast to McGinn’s emphasis on the “fused identity” of the ground, Schürmann asserts that “Meister Eckhart in no way teaches a simple identity between the human intellect and God, but he teaches the imperative of an identity to be accomplished” (p. 29). Indeed, Schürmann goes on to characterize the confrontation between what he calls “imperative thought,” which “urges a path upon existence,” and “indicative thought,” which “apprehends the real and establishes a noetics of it,” as the reason why Eckhart ran afoul of the Catholic authorities and was ultimately tried and condemned by the pope. Although Schürmann sets up this conflict as an opposition between the church’s dogmatic Scholasticism and Eckhart’s radical thought, it is clear that this is a tension evident within Eckhart’s thought itself, which is exemplified by the difficulty labeling his thought, the question of his status as a mystic, and the somewhat awkward compromise label “speculative mysticism” that is sometimes attached to his body of work. Moreover, it is this tension between metaphysical Scholasticism and proto-existentialism which continues to present a hermeneutic fork in the road for Eckhart interpretation.

Despite the textual evidence within Eckhart’s work to support both of these divergent interpretations of the ground offered by McGinn (God and the soul always already one in the ground) and Schürmann (imperative of an identity to be accomplished), respectively, the temptation to reify the ground and to dismiss the more anthropocentric depiction of the ground exemplified by the sentence currently under

126 For a discussion of the debate surrounding this label for Eckhart’s mysticism, see McGinn (2001), pp. 36-37.

127 For a discussion of this tension, see Schürmann (2001), pp. 229-230, note 51.
consideration ("Therefore enter into your own ground and work *there*: the works that you perform *there* are all living") as a poor reflection of the higher metaphysical truth of the union between God and the soul makes Schürmann’s position especially valuable. As Schürmann (2001) says, “It is not by chance that Eckhart chose to preach. His word calls upon a hearer” (p. 29). In other words, the form in which Eckhart delivered his message (i.e., the sermon, addressed to particular individuals who needed to hear it) mirrors and expresses the content of his teaching. The imperative “enter into your own ground” is not just a means to an end, a path on the way to unity with God. Rather, the highest challenge of Eckhart’s thought is to realize this unity with God in the ground as an act which is always underway – indeed, which can only be properly understood as underway. Along these lines, Schürmann (2001) asserts that “identity with God is bound to an operation (*werk, ereignis*) whose condition is detachment and whose consequence is the engendering of the Son” (p. 28). To emphasize the static, metaphysical unity of God

---

128 See also Fox (2000) for a more political take on Eckhart’s role as a preacher:

Indeed, the fact that Eckhart gravitated more toward preaching and counseling than toward teaching might be taken as a subtle rebuke of academia in favor of new ways to educate. Henry Suso, a young disciple of Eckhart, observed that most students of theology entered academia in order to be able to make more money. Eckhart was first and foremost a preacher – that is, an artist. Here lies the key to his language, his ambiguity, and his genius. He lived in a time of the end of a culture and, as Charles Fair has pointed out, at such a time language is lost and the very meaning of “soul” is lost. Eckhart sought all his life for new images, new names for “soul.” (p. 15)

Although Fox seems to underestimate the importance of Eckhart’s academic position (he was one of the most prominent academic theologians of his day), it is certainly true that Eckhart sought a new mode of expression (and a way to reach non-academics) in his preaching, which is apparent to anyone who compares his vernacular sermons with his Latin treatises.
and the soul in the ground is to miss God as *process* and *act*. The ground, as we already saw in our discussion of the gardener, is the fertile emptiness that both God and the soul *are*. Thus, God’s coming-into-being in the ground of the soul *is* God’s identity with the soul.

Continuing with our analysis of this passage, we can now begin to examine the phrase “work *there*.” Thus, Eckhart implores his listeners to work in the ground. If we listen only superficially to this phrase, we understand it simply as an imperative to a subject to labor in a particular place. As always, in order to penetrate to the deeper meaning of this two-word imperative, we will have to strip away these everyday, commonsense associations. The peculiarity of the “there” referred to in this phrase (i.e., the ground) already destabilizes and problematizes our usual way of hearing. The ground is not a place at all; as we have seen, the ground is the unity of God and soul in the very activity of the divine birth. And it is this activity – the divine birth(ing), the eternally new coming-into-being of the Word – which is the work in question in this passage. In some sense, then, the words “work” and “there” indicate something identical: the work is the birth of God, and the “there” is the ground, which is the “locus” but also the activity of this birth. This represents yet another example of the way that Eckhart not only shows but performs with and through language the heart of his message: the melting of two terms into each other.

The third, unstated term in this phrase is the subject, which is implied by the imperative: “Work” means “you, work!” Again, everyday understanding grasps the meaning of this as a particular subject laboring in a particular location. But all everyday understandings are turned upside down in Eckhart’s work: In this case, it is the “location”
the ground – that does the work(ing). In order to work “there,” the subject must allow the “there” to work in and by itself. If there is a task for the subject, then, it is precisely to get out of the way of the “there”: the apophatic stance of detachment which Eckhart preaches throughout this sermon and his entire body of work. However, the notion that the soul must get out of the way in order to let the ground do its work does not go far enough because the soul is one with God in the ground, which is to say, the soul and God participate in the same activity of the divine coming-into-being. Thus, in the sentence “I work there,” we actually have three identical terms: the “there” of the ground is the working which is the very be-ing of the self.

The way Eckhart uses these three distinct terms while suggesting a kinship – even identity – between them is a perfect performatory illustration of his view of work. In his commentary on this same sermon, Fox (2000) contends that “Eckhart’s theology of work is based on his theology of the Word that flows out but remains within” (p. 471). This is precisely what Eckhart performs linguistically: He speaks the one Word (the oneness of everything in the event of being) while allowing three distinct words to flow out of this one Word (the soul, the work, and the ground), which, however, remain within this one Word. It is passages like this that lead Sells (1994) to declare that, while “the notion of a procession that does not proceed outside, that remains within, in a kind of interior welling up of life, is of course not unique to Eckhart,” what is distinctive about “Eckhart’s apophatic discourse on the trinity” is the way it “enacts or performs that interior unity” (p. 159).

It is this Trinitarian notion of distinction/indistinction and flowing out/remaining within which provides the key to understanding Eckhart’s view of work. Work is the
process of giving birth and creating, in which that which is produced (the fruit) is distinct but also one with the very process out of which it emerged. It is this property of all fruit (i.e., creatures, distinct entities or beings) – that they retain a trace of and ongoing fundamental relationship to the process of creation out of which they emerged – which makes possible Eckhart’s *apophatic* method. *Aphosis* involves a particular approach to a creature which involves stripping away everything but this trace in order to encounter the fundamental ground of being as event – dynamic, ceaseless, ongoing, ever unfolding.

We find that the highly condensed meaning of this simple two-word phrase “work there” goes even deeper, however, when we consider that the word for “work” which Eckhart uses (*würke*) is etymologically related to the MHG word for “event” (*gewürke*). God and the soul are one in the *event* of coming-into-being, not in a unity of substances. Indeed, in another sermon (W65, Q6), Eckhart (2009) asserts that “the work and the coming into being are one . . . . God and I are one in this operation: He works, and I come into being” (p. 332). At stake in Eckhart’s vocation as a preacher and, thereby, the attempt to *enact and perform* his ideas through language is precisely this conception of work as event (and, ultimately, an understanding of the being of God and the soul as event). The similarities between Eckhart and Aquinas are belied by their fundamentally different modes of discursive expression (*kataphatic* in Aquinas’ case,

---

129 I have based the translation of *gewürke* as “event” on Schürmann (2001), p. 205. This is not, however, the only way to translate *gewürke*; for example, Walshe translates it as “operation” in the following passage: God and I are one in this operation” (Eckhart, 2009, p. 332). MHG: “Got und ich wir sint ein in disem gewürke” (DWI, p. 114).

130 Daz würken und daz werden ist ein . . . . Got und ich wir sint ein in disem gewürke; er würket, und ich gewirde (DWI, p. 114).
apophatic in Eckhart’s case), which point back to their fundamentally different ontologies, which Sells (1994) characterizes as “Eckhart’s move toward a nonsubstantialist conception of deity as opposed to Thomas’s emphatic affirmation of divine substance” (p. 159). It is precisely this non-substantialist (i.e., non-essentialist) approach to God, being, and ultimately the self which Eckhart’s understanding of work as event opens up.

Having analyzed Eckhart’s view of the ground and of work, we are now in a position to move on to life: “[T]he works that you perform there are all living.” By living, Eckhart most certainly does not mean something like biological or natural life. Rather, that which is alive is that which is currently underway, coming into being, becoming. And that which is dead is precisely that which is, which has entered already into the realm of being and history.131 The ground is “where” works live because it is where work works – the bearing of fruit, rather than the fruits themselves. This is where the soul becomes one with the notion of God already described in this commentary: God understood as the act of becoming (i.e., Sells’ “nonsubstantialist deity”). This is the ground: the combined emptiness and fertility (virgin and wife) of pure existence (and existing), in which God and the soul are absolutely one – a productive emptiness

---

131 See, for example, the following passage from the end of the sermon under consideration (W59, Q39): “Once born, he [the spirit] neither sees nor pays heed to God: but at the moment of birth, then he has a vision of God” (Eckhart, 2009, p. 307).
Therefore he\textsuperscript{132} says, “The just man lives,” for he works because he is just, and his works are living.\textsuperscript{133}

In the final sentence of the paragraph, Eckhart links work and life, themes we have already examined, with the theme of the sermon: justice. This is one of the key motifs of Eckhart’s work; indeed, Eckhart (2009) himself says in another one of his sermons on justice (W65, Q6) that “whoever understands about the just man and justice understands all that I am saying” (p. 329). Although this commentary has operated at a very “micro” level of analysis, one of the reasons why this approach has been chosen and this particular passage selected is this claim by Eckhart. If we can understand what Eckhart says in this passage about the just man and justice, then we will have grasped the core of his teaching.

As we have already discussed at the beginning of this commentary, Eckhart approaches justice neither as a character trait nor as a virtue. On the contrary, Eckhart asserts later in the sermon under consideration: “The just man is like God because God is justice.” Thus, justice is identical with God in Eckhart’s work, and the “nature” or status

\textsuperscript{132} The “he” in this sentence refers to the “wise man,” the author of the \textit{Book of Wisdom}, a citation from which (Wisdom 5:16) is the point of departure for the whole sermon: “Justus in perpetuum vivet et apud dominum est merces eius.” This is translated variously as: “The just lives in eternity” (Eckhart, 1986, p. 296), “The just man lives in eternity” (Eckhart, 2009, p. 305), and “The just shall live forever” (Fox, 2000, p. 464).

\textsuperscript{133} The original MGH text reads: “Und darumbe sprichet er: ‘der gerehte lebet’, wan dar umbe daz er gereht ist, dar umbe würket er und sinieu werk diu lebent” (DW, p. 256). Fox (2000) breaks it up into two sentences: “And therefore the wise person says: ‘The just person lives.’ For because he is just, he works and his works live” (p. 465). Tobin also breaks it up in the following way: “This is why he says, ‘The just lives.’ Because he is just he works, and his works live” (Eckhart, 1986, p. 297).
of God’s being is, therefore, at stake in the question of justice. And at stake in the relationship between the just man and justice (according to Eckhart, the key to understanding his entire work) is, then, the relationship between God and the soul.

At first glance, the relationship between the just man and justice is one of identity; Eckhart (2009) says that “whoever is in justice is in God and is God” (p. 306, emphasis added). It is precisely such radical formulations of the unity between God and the soul which got Eckhart in trouble with the Catholic authorities. Many Eckhart scholars have argued, however, that this absolute unity between God and the soul can only be understood through the principle of analogy: in other words, that the just man is one with and identical to justice (i.e., God) only insofar as the just man is just. Although Eckhart makes explicit use of this analogical principle (often referred to as the inquantum principle in the literature) more often in the Latin than in the German works, Tobin (1986) maintains that “there is justification for assuming that it is in force in other passages, even when unexpressed, especially in vernacular sermons where fine distinctions are less appropriate” (p. 92).

The beginning of Eckhart’s (2009) Book of Divine Comfort provides a prominent example of the inquantum principle in the German work:

In the first place, we should know that the wise man and wisdom, the true man and truth, the just man and justice, the good man and goodness are in correspondence and are related to each other as follows: goodness is not created nor made nor begotten, it is procreative and begets the good; and the good man, in as far as he is good, is unmade and uncreated, and yet the begotten child and son of goodness. (pp. 524-525, emphasis added)
This passage could be read as pointing to the relationship between analogical thinking and the Neoplatonic logic of emanation. Sells (1994) explains:

In analogical relations, what descends from its producer is under the producer, not equal to it. Taking the example of a chest in the mind of its maker, Eckhart states that “Insofar as it is in it [its producer] it is not other than it in nature.” This chest in the mind of the craftsmen is not a chest, Eckhart tells us, but the life and understanding of the craftsmen. (p. 155)

To apply this explanation to the relationship between justice and the just man, then, the just man – understood as an emanation and, consequently a derivative form of being – is one with justice, out of which he emanated, insofar as he is just.

However, the justness in the just man is not merely a characteristic; it is identical to and one in being with the justice out of which it emerged. In what sense, then, can we speak of analogy? Is “identity” not a better term to describe this relation? The key to preserving the analogical dimension is that the created being (the just man, in this case), while being identical with divine justice, is entirely dependent on God for that justice. Schürmann turns to the following passage from one of Eckhart’s sermons to make this point about the dependence of creatures on God:

God has indeed infused sufficiency and pleasure into creatures, but the root of all sufficiency and the essence of all pleasure God has kept within himself. . . . The sun, although it illumines the air and penetrates it by its light, does not take root there. Thus the brightness of the air ceases when the sun disappears. That is how God communicates himself to his creatures. (quoted in and translated by Schürmann, 2001, p. 175)
In sum, the just man is identical to justice (and, therefore, God), but the analogical
dimension is that the just man’s possession of justice is totally dependent on God and is,
therefore, as effervescent as sunlight in the air. Thus, what is analogical is not justice as
such, but the mode of possession; God possesses justice perfectly, while the just man
possesses justice contingently.

However, Schürmann emphasizes the limits of the principle of analogy in
interpreting Eckhart’s work, which is so prevalent in the literature on Eckhart. He
employs Eckhart’s notion of the unity of God and the soul in releaseament (MHG:
gelâzenheit) in order to problematize the privileged status of the doctrine of analogy in
Eckhart interpretation:

Analogy requires a First as its support. It institutes God as the supreme support of
totality, the foundation of both being and knowing . . . . in the hand of God all
things are, and are explicable . . . . Being, as the cause of beings, procures their
necessary and sufficient condition of possibility. Under the “without a why” of
releaseament this foundation gives way. The ground of things is then abyss,
nothingness . . . . The polemic that turns the Eckhartian “without a why” against
the theory of the analogy of attribution certainly does not pretend that Meister
Eckhart speaks neither of foundation nor of cause. But the former, the grunt, is
thought of as the locus of the birth of the inner Word and of the great death of
God, man, and the world; and the latter, the cause understood as causa sui, is an
epithet not of God, but of man in the Godhead. (Schürmann, 2001, pp. 187-188,
emphasis added)

In sum, Schürmann argues that the usefulness of the doctrine of analogy in approaching Eckhart’s work is limited because it requires an onto-theological understanding of God as ground or foundation of being, which is incompatible with Eckhart’s dynamic theology of birthing. Furthermore, Schürmann contends that the doctrine of analogy depends upon a problematic notion of causality: namely, that God, already possessing some attribute, confers that attribute upon creatures in a straightforward, linear, and uni-directional manner. This is likewise untenable in the context of Eckhart’s writing on the *Gottesgeburt* (the birth of God in the soul), a process which is dependent on the soul’s stance. Indeed, as Schürmann suggests at the end of the passage quoted above, the soul – perhaps more than God – is understood as cause in Eckhart’s work. Eckhart understands the soul as “virgin wife,” playing on the double-meaning of the MHG verb *enpfangen* (MG: *empfangen*) to suggest the way in which the soul both *receives* and *conceives* the Son, the Word.\(^\text{135}\) A passage from Eckhart’s famous sermon on poverty of the spirit (W87, Q52) represents one of Eckhart’s most radical statements in this direction:

> In my birth all things were born and I was the cause of myself and of all things . . .
> . . . If I were not, God would not be either. I am the cause of God’s being God: if I were not, then God would not be God. (2009, p. 424)

Thus, Schürmann makes a compelling case for moving beyond the *inquantum* principle and prioritizing instead the dynamic union of soul and God in the *Gottesgeburt*. Indeed, this perspective, more than the lens provided by the doctrine of analogy, proves useful in our interpretation of the relationship between the just man and justice. Justice is not an attribute which is possessed by God; justice is the work of God’s coming-into-

\(^{135}\) See Sermon W8 (Q2).
being in the soul (i.e., the birth of the Son, the Word). The just man is just insofar as he participates in this work, this birthing, this creative act – not because he has borrowed the attribute of justice from God, which God possesses. When Eckhart says that the just man “works because he is just,” he does not mean this in the sense of cause and effect, or in the sense of motivation. Justice is not a characteristic which leads the just man to work; rather, justice is nothing other than this work, this pure activity of birthing.

Conclusion

By delving deeply into a single paragraph of one of Eckhart’s MHG sermons and connecting it to other key passages throughout his MHG work, we have reviewed many of the central themes of Eckhart’s mystical philosophy. Moreover, we have used this passage as a point of departure for exploring Eckhart’s view of the self. In the conclusion to this commentary, I will offer a summary of my reading of Eckhart’s view of the self. In keeping with the imperative approach put forth by Schürmann which we reviewed above, the best way to approach the question of the self in Eckhart is perhaps through his apophatic ethics – in other words, by exploring the kind of life that he calls his listeners to lead in his sermons. So, the question with which we must begin is: How would Eckhart have us live?

The most concise answer to this question is one word (and the way of life it denotes): detachment (MHG: abegescheidenheit; MG: Abgeschiedenheit). The MG word “Abgeschiedenheit” is the nominalized form of the verb “abscheiden.” “Scheiden” means to separate; in everyday usage, it is perhaps most immediately associated with the verb “to get divorced”: “sich scheiden lassen.” When we add to that the prefix “ab-,” which means “off,” we arrive at the literal translation of “to separate off.” This is what Eckhart
calls his listeners to do over and over again: to separate off. But from what does Eckhart
want us to separate ourselves?

The answer to this question can also be summed up with a single word: properties
(eigenschaften), in other words, our particular notions about ourselves, our concrete self-
understandings, the labels that we use to define who we are and who we are not. The MG
adjective “eigen” simply means “own” in the sense of “my own things” (meine eigenen
Sachen). By adding the suffix “-schaft,” we simply nominalize it; thus, we are dealing
here with properties in the sense of characteristics, as well as in the sense of “a piece of
property” – something which we possess, which belongs to us, which is our own. Our
properties are those aspects of ourselves that make us feel at home in ourselves, that give
us a concrete sense of identity – and yet, leave us haunted by a sense of lack, the feeling
that something is missing. Although they may be traits that have developed over time and
in response to particular events or people in our lives, we nevertheless cannot imagine
ourselves without them – in other words, they ossify and take on the character of
inevitability, at least in retrospect. Whether it is being generous or miserly, quick-
tempered or even-keeled, we imagine that we have always been this way and that we will
always be this way. Thus, we establish out of this collection of properties a sense of
ourselves and our personality that takes the form of an essence: we think of ourselves as
possessing a definable and durable being. It is these properties – which, taken together,
form a fixed essence and denote a habitual way of being that is dominated by our
impossible quest to bolster and defend these familiar properties – that Eckhart calls us to
separate ourselves from.
Why, though, does Eckhart call us to separate ourselves from this supposed essence? For Eckhart, this form of self-understanding is fundamentally mistaken; this collection of properties which we use to understand ourselves is too limited to encompass who we are. Properties are determinate, limited, and particular; they exclude possibilities. They tend to box us into certain patterns of behavior and relationships, which we repeat over and over again. These patterns make us feel comfortable on some level because they are familiar, and they usually function according to a certain logic; however, they also tend to cause problems – either by reproducing painful dynamics or experiences, or simply by closing us off to possibilities. Furthermore, properties, as we have noted, have the appearance of permanence and, thus, seem as if they have always been and will always be. They therefore preclude the possibility of change and becoming.

In addition to calling us to separate ourselves off from properties (a particular way of understanding and living our being), Eckhart calls us to separate ourselves from a certain way of acting and working, which, as we have seen, plays a central role in the passage which we have considered in this commentary. Eckhart calls us to abandon any notion of “why” – in other words, any external purpose or future aim for our work. In his call for us to act “without why,” Eckhart explicitly takes aim at the founding gesture of the structure of economy: the sacrifice which is made in the expectation of future reward. Furthermore, Eckhart associates the expectation of pay or compensation for works with sin and death; works performed with a why or purpose are dead works for Eckhart.

The desire for/illusion of knowledge, control, and security is what unites the attachment to our properties and the expectation of future reward. We are attached to our properties because they give us the illusion that we know who we are and, therefore, that
we are in control of defining ourselves. Similarly, when we act with the expectation of some reward or purpose in the future, we operate on the assumption that that we can predict (or at least calculate) the future and, therefore, have some control over it.

This last point suggests that both properties and acting with the expectation of a future reward are associated with a common temporal structure: namely, a fundamental continuity between past, present, and future which is founded on a linear causality. In other words, the present emerges in an orderly sequence out of the past, and the future likewise unfolds out of the present in a fundamentally lawful manner. As we have seen, when properties ossify into an essence, they have the appearance of permanence: We have always been this way and will never change – *this is who I am*. Similarly, acting out of the expectation of future reward presupposes that the ultimate effects of my actions will play out in an orderly sequence.

Consequently, when Eckhart calls us to separate ourselves off, to detach ourselves, this is what we are supposed to separate ourselves *from*: our properties (*eigenschaften*) and the expectation of reward (or any purpose or aim whatsoever) for our work. This is the core of Eckhart’s teaching of detachment. At the level of practice, however, the egoic dimension of detachment is probably unavoidable. Why would anyone want to practice detachment (at least initially) without any sense that she would benefit in some way. How can one undertake the practice of detachment without falling into this trap? This problem is unavoidable and endemic to the mystical literature, but Eckhart attempts to address this at least in part through the practice of unsaying. See, for example, the following passage from Eckhart’s (1981) famous sermon on poverty of the spirit:
So long as a man has this as his will, that he wants to fulfill God’s dearest will, he has not the poverty about which we want to talk. Such a person has a will with which he wants to fulfill God’s will, and that is not true poverty. (p. 200)

Thus, in this passage, Eckhart acknowledges the egoic element of will which motivates people to follow the path of detachment, while simultaneously attempting to unsay this. Now the question is: What does the Eckhartian call of detachment reveal to us about Eckhart’s view of the self?

For Eckhart, our attachment to properties and our tendency to work out of an expectation of external reward are associated with being what he calls a “creature,” which essentially means a being that is fallen, apparently separated from God. In more modern, psychological terminology, we could say that being a creature shares much in common with the perspective and way of being which characterizes the ego. A creature (like the ego) is ostensibly closed off, an entity unto itself, and everything it does ultimately refers back to itself. Everywhere it goes, it finds nothing but itself, nothing but experiences which conform one way or another to preconceived expectations or patterns of understanding. For a creature, everything is measured against its notion of itself.

To illustrate what it means to be a creature for Eckhart, we can turn to the image of the circle. The creature imagines itself to be a closed circle: a complete whole, a totality. All that concerns it is what is immanent, on the inside of the circle. The temporal structure of creatureliness can likewise be represented in the form of the circle. Because the creature conceives of itself in terms of a fixed essence, thereby reducing everything new to familiar modes of understanding, time moves in a circle – which is to say, it does
not move at all. The present is seen as inevitable in the light of the past, and the future is likewise regarded as a smooth extension of the present.

For Eckhart, however, God is at the very center of this circle, but rather than being contained by it, God is absolutely other. For Eckhart, the self is this other.\textsuperscript{136} Eckhart calls us to strip away everything that is familiar, everything that we hold onto or possess, and abandon ourselves to this mysterious other at the heart of the self. This other is beyond calculation and control; we cannot know it or understand it. It does not conform to our categories of knowledge or of ethics; it operates in a matter that we cannot grasp. It cannot be located according to the coordinates of any system, not even a system of goods (i.e., theodicy). This is the God who, after taking away everything Job loved, refused to provide a reason why and the God who in Isaiah 55:9 says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Eckhart calls us to abandon ourselves to the ground (\textit{grunt}) – the unknowable, absolutely transcendent God who is, paradoxically, at the heart of the self. This is the link between the practice of detachment and Eckhart’s message of releasement (MG: \textit{Gelassenheit}): We must strip away our attachment to properties (MHG: \textit{abegescheidenheit}) and release ourselves (\textit{Gelassenheit}) into the abyss (MG: \textit{Abgrund}), the groundless ground, of this unfathomable other which goes by the name of God. The Eckhartian ground is no foundation; it is not the deepest part of the self that opens out onto the onto-theological God, the foundation of meaning and being. Rather, the ground

\textsuperscript{136} Cf. Lacan’s (1978/1988) assertion which we have already used in Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject: “I is an other” (p. 9).
is the deepest part of the self which opens out onto the abyss of pure nothingness, of a radical indeterminacy which is also a radical openness – a dizzying freedom, not of self-possession, but of self-abandonment.

As we have seen in our commentary, when Eckhart calls us to abandon ourselves in *Gelassenheit* to God, he does not mean that we abandon ourselves to God understood as a being; rather, God is a pure *event* (*ereignis*) for Eckhart. God’s being is nothing other than the process of creating and becoming. And, although we forget this in our creatureliness, Eckhart maintains that, insofar as we *are* God, our being is also nothing more than this process of becoming, of coming-into-being. The Eckhartian ground is the soil/soul which is empty, but out of which – precisely to the extent that it is empty – anything can grow (*creation ex nihilo*). The unity of God and soul in the ground is a unity in fertility, in the activity of birthing (*Gottesgeburt*).

However, as we have seen in our examination of the metaphor of the gardener in the commentary above, it is important to underscore that the relationship between detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) and the *Gottesgeburt* is not to be understood dialectically. Although in some places in Eckhart’s work it appears that we have to strip away *so that* we can participate in the process of giving birth, this is not the deepest truth of Eckhart’s mysticism. Detachment is not a negative moment that is simply overcome; it is not about abandoning ourselves to achieve a higher unity with another being, and it is not about sacrificing ourselves only to be filled up again by the *Gottesgeburt*. For Eckhart, when we empty ourselves in detachment, we do become one with God, but as we have seen, God is nothing other than pure self-emptying. Becoming one with God is
not a moment after detachment – we become one with God precisely in detaching ourselves.

Detachment and fertility occur in one and the same moment for Eckhart; at stake in this insight is Eckhart’s rejection of asceticism and other-worldliness. Salvation is not attained by making sacrifices for some future reward in heaven; rather, it is attained by adopting a particular stance toward the losses and sacrifices which are an inevitable part of being human. Eckhart takes up in one of his sermons the theme of the nearness of the kingdom of God (W69, Q68), but this does not mean that Eckhart was blithely unaware of the suffering in and brokenness of this world. On the contrary, Eckhart’s spirituality is fundamentally an affirmation of life in the midst of suffering. He calls us not to seek consolation or compensation for suffering, but to regard the act of releasement itself as its own reward – whatever it may bring. Along these lines, Eckhart (1981) asserts in the “Counsels on Discernment” that whatever God wills is “the greatest consolation of all – whether it be consolation or desolation” (p. 259).

The figure of Christ refutes any notion that the Gottesburt in any way compensates or consoles for the self-abandonment of detachment. Eckhart describes the Gottesgeburt repeatedly as God giving birth to the Son in the ground. But the Son is brought into being precisely to die, to sacrifice himself. Indeed, Eckhart (1981) asserts the following in “The Book of Divine Consolation”:

Because God’s Son could not suffer in his divinity and in his eternity, the heavenly Father therefore sent him into time, to become man and to be able to

137 This could be compared to the insight from Mahāyāna Buddhism that samsara and nirvana are ultimately one.
suffer. So if you want to be a son of God and you do not want to suffer, you are all wrong. (p. 231)

Thus, the “product” or “fruit” of the *Gottesgeburt* is not a positive entity, but a being that is always already effaced, always already stripped away and detached. Thus, becoming one with the process of the *Gottesgeburt* means working in a similar fashion: creating for the sake of the process of creating – out of nothing and into nothing.\(^{138}\) Bringing forth new forms through the *Gottesgeburt* means enjoying them fully in their evanescence and emptiness, without becoming attached to them and projecting a fixed, permanent essence onto them. Indeed, this is the “wandering joy” which Schürmann (2001) identifies as central to Eckhart’s thought – a joy in and enjoyment of an itinerant identity, rather than an enjoyment contingent on permanence.

For Eckhart, *Gelassenheit* means a releasement to the flow of life, to the highs and lows, to the process of becoming which is always underway and which cannot be controlled. The stance of *Gelassenheit* is fundamentally passive; it is the renunciation of control and the adoption of a stance of affirmation vis-à-vis an existence whose whence and wherefore are utterly unknowable. It is the end of the search for causes and the search for ends.\(^{139}\)

We have outlined the core of Eckhart’s teaching through the key concepts of detachment (*abegescheidenheit*), releasement (*Gelassenheit*), the ground (*grunt*), and the

\(^{138}\) The sand mandala, built knowing it will be destroyed, is a perfect metaphor for this. One could say that this stance of affirmation is necessary to enter into a relationship with someone who, as is always the case, will inevitably die, or to bring a child into the world, knowing that it will die.

\(^{139}\) Cf. Schürmann’s (2001) assertion that “for the perfectly realized man . . . the quest for causes is forgotten” (p. 185).
birth of God in the soul (Gottesgeburt). And based on the above commentary and our reading of the way of life for which Eckhart calls in his sermons, we can summarize Eckhart’s view of the self: The self is the activity of God giving birth in the ground.
Chapter 7 – Discussion

Introduction

In our review of the existing literature on the topic of Eckhart’s view of the self, we divided what others have written into two broad categories which center on the meaning and function of detachment in Eckhart’s work. The first category of authors understand detachment as a negative *moment* in Eckhart’s work which is the necessary condition for a higher unity with God, understood onto-theologically as transcendent ground of being. For these authors, then, detachment involves a suspension or negation of the self that ultimately culminates in a higher self-possession and freedom. The second category of authors, in contrast, view detachment not as a negative moment to be dialectically overcome in order to achieve union with God, but rather, as a self-emptying and self-releasement that, precisely in its gesture of giving without expectation of reward, is *already* unity with God. In this perspective, God is not seen as a supreme ground of being, but as the pure activity of *becoming* – emptying and giving birth.

The conclusions we drew from our commentary on Sermon W59 (Q39) seem to confirm the latter perspective. This is particularly evident in our discussion of Eckhart’s critical stance toward the gardener who roots out the trees in his field and expects to be paid for it. We interpreted this passage in light of passages from other MHG sermons by Eckhart as representing a metaphor for a non-teleological view of detachment. The stripping away of the trees is not in the service of some future reward – neither the reward of monetary compensation, nor the redeeming value of the eventual growth of a garden. Rather, the gardener’s entire task consists of the clearing of the trees – a metaphor for properties (*eigenschaften*) – in other words, the work of detachment. In the
sermon we examined, Eckhart emphatically calls for the soul to become nothing through this work of detachment, but Eckhart links this nothingness with the creative process of the *Gottesgeburt*: God is distinguished from creatures in that God makes something out of nothing. Thus, becoming nothing – and thereby becoming one with God – is understood by Eckhart as becoming one with the process of God’s birth in the soul.

This leads to a particular view of spiritual practice and work, which in our commentary we referred to as Eckhart’s *apophatic* ethics. In order for our works to live, we must work out of the ground, which is the union of God and soul in the activity of the *Gottesgeburt*. Life is not to be found in God understood as transcendent supreme being, with whom we must strive to achieve oneness; rather, life (and salvation) are found in releasing oneself to the work of creating itself. Since God *qua* ultimate ground of meaning and being is suspended by Eckhart, the soul is thrown back upon the path of *existence*. Thus, the practice of detachment results not in transcendence of the concrete path of existence, but the birth of the soul in its absolute singularity on that path. As a singularity liberated from the system of determinate meaning and purpose – the coordinates which would be established by an onto-theological God *qua* ground of being – the soul’s imperative is to live and work *without why*.

Having summarized our findings and their significance for the existing literature on Eckhart’s view of the self, it is now our task in this section to discuss the significance of our reading of Eckhart’s view of the self for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity.

**Properties (*eigenschaften*) and Symptoms**

In the conclusion to the Findings section, the point of departure for our interrogation of detachment was the question: What is it that Eckhart wants us to be
detached from? This led to a discussion of *eigenschaften* – the properties or characteristics which we use to define ourselves, to establish a determinate identity. As we attempt to translate Eckhartian detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) into psychoanalytic language, our first task is similarly to ask, “What does psychoanalysis call us to strip away or detach ourselves from?”

One answer to this question is symptoms, which Freud (1917/1966) defines as “substitutive satisfactions for what is missed in life” (pp. 371-372). According to Freud’s theory, symptoms develop when a desire is repressed; the symptom develops as a form of substitution or compensation for the satisfaction lost through the repression of a wish. A symptom develops when a wish can neither be satisfied (due to repression), nor simply renounced without complications; thus, Freud also describes symptoms as “products of compromise,” which “represent not only the repressed but also the repressing force which had a share in their origin” (p. 373).

This substitutive character of symptoms is the most important aspect of Freud’s theory of symptoms for our purposes because it demonstrates the *economic structure* of symptoms. Indeed, Freud asserts regarding symptom formation that “something in the nature of an exchange has taken place” (p. 347). Although the process of symptom formation unfolds unconsciously, it nevertheless represents a substitution of one form of satisfaction (in Lacanian terms, *jouissance*), for another form of satisfaction that we have lost or have had to give up. Symptoms are our way of paying ourselves back when we give up on our desires and of consoling ourselves for unbearable losses.

This substitutive structure and consolatory function of symptoms has been evident in my work with patients in an intensive outpatient treatment program for substance
abuse issues. Many of these patients turned to alcohol or drugs in response to the demands and responsibilities of adulthood. They were working multiple jobs and having to renounce most pleasures in life in order to single-handedly hold together their families. Drugs or alcohol became their way of paying themselves back, the one thing they would do for their own enjoyment. Very often, these same clients had been in the role of having to function as caretakers to their own parents and/or siblings, due to their own parents’ substance abuse. Thus, the substitutive character of the symptom is clear here: These clients had to renounce jouissance from an early age and have found themselves repeatedly in the role of having to be responsible for others; they often turn to substances out of an attempt to recuperate that lost jouissance by indulging in the regressive satisfactions which they have been denied.

However, if symptoms provide satisfaction, why do people complain about them, and what accounts for their stubborn resistance to treatment? As Freud writes in one of the passages quoted above, symptoms represent a compromise between a repressed wish and the prohibition which prevents that wish from becoming conscious. Rather than representing a form of straightforward enjoyment, then, the satisfactions offered by symptoms are mixed with the guilt or shame that led to repression of the wish in the first place. Jouissance, the French term for satisfaction used by Lacan, captures this mix of pleasure and pain and “qualifies the kind of ‘kick’ someone may get out of punishment, self-punishment, doing something that is so pleasurable it hurts (sexual climax, for example), or doing something that is so painful it becomes pleasurable” (Fink, 1997, pp. 8-9). For example, the symptom of addiction which we discussed above combines both the wish for regression (which the signifier “substance dependence” suggests) and the
repression of that wish (i.e., the self-destructive character of substance abuse, which can be seen as a form of punishment for allowing oneself to obtain forbidden regressive satisfactions).

People tend to seek treatment when they are experiencing what Fink (1997) calls a “jouissance crisis” – in other words, when “a breakdown occurs in that person’s favorite or habitual way of obtaining jouissance” and “the jouissance-providing symptom is not working anymore or has been jeopardized” (p. 9). Fink goes on to make the point that patients in therapy “are not asking to be relieved of the symptom but rather of its recent ineffectiveness, its recent inadequacy”; they “are hoping that the therapist will fix it, patch things up, make the symptom work the way it used to” (p. 9). From this perspective, patients’ attachment to their symptoms is not surprising, despite their complaints, because of the jouissance which symptoms provide. So, for example, the substance abuse patients we have been discussing only end up in treatment when their symptoms have landed them in trouble with the law. Other substance abuse clients I have seen in outpatient settings have voluntarily sought treatment when their drinking or drug use began to affect their relationships or employment. In either case, the symptom is no longer working for the patient; the suffering caused by the symptom itself is beginning to eclipse the enjoyment it provides.

Thus, we can understand symptoms not as directly causing loss of jouissance, but rather, as representing a certain kind of response to that loss: namely, as the circuitous attempt to recover some jouissance in the face of the renunciation of satisfaction demanded by repression. In other words, symptoms are characterized by the structure of consolation, and this thesis provides us with a link to Eckhart’s work and the field of
religion more broadly. Consolation is the attempt, in the face of loss and suffering, to find comfort or meaning, to place suffering which is unbearable and excessive in a framework or context that renders it good, necessary, meaningful, or at least tolerable. It is precisely this function of religion which Freud aims to critique in *The Future of an Illusion*, his greatest and most sustained meditation on the topic of religion. According to Freud (1927/1961):

> Critics persist in describing as ‘deeply religious’ anyone who admits to a sense of man’s insignificance or impotence in the face of the universe, although what constitutes the essence of the religious attitude is not this feeling but only the next step after it, the reaction to it which seeks a remedy for it. The man who goes no further, but humbly acquiesces in the small part which human beings play in the great world – such a man is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the word. (pp. 41-42, emphasis added)

As in Freud’s characterization of religion, symptoms similarly function as consolation. They are a reaction to the suffering caused by the seeming impossibility of fulfilling a wish, the prohibition of a desire. They represent a second step after that suffering and seek a remedy for it. Thus, although symptoms cause suffering, they also somewhat counterintuitively represent an attempt to avoid suffering. So, for example, if my substance abuse clients could have simply allowed themselves to suffer the deprivation that they often experienced growing up due to their parents’ own substance abuse issues, they would not need to turn to substances as a remedy for those losses. Other children of alcoholics and drug addicts may cope in ways other than turning to substances themselves, for example, by blaming themselves, holding themselves
responsible, and then, later in life, unconsciously seeking out abusive or neglectful partners because they feel on some level that this is what they deserve. This illustrates the relationship between the symptom and the need to locate suffering and loss within a structure of meaning: The child in this case blames herself because she is unable to cope with the arbitrariness and meaninglessness of having been born to these particular parents and not having her needs met. In Eckhartian terms, the symptom emerges out of a failure of releasement (*Gelassenheit*); the patient cannot simply (which is obviously not so simple or easy) let things be what they are and passively undergo the suffering he is experiencing; he feels compelled to inject a meaning, a *why* into his contingent circumstances.

The ego shares this symptomatic structure of substitution and consolation. For Lacan, the subject is unable to constitute itself as a totality and is, therefore, fundamentally not-whole. However, because this lack is unbearable, we cling to the illusion of wholeness, unity, and control offered by the ego. In Lacanian terms, we have seen in our discussion of the mirror stage in Literature Review II that the child identifies with the whole image in the mirror precisely to overcome its fragmented sense of self.\textsuperscript{140} This illusion of wholeness belongs to the imaginary register\textsuperscript{141} and occurs through introjection.\textsuperscript{142} Correspondingly, in the symbolic register we find a divided, not-whole

\textsuperscript{140} See pp. 59-62 above.

\textsuperscript{141} For a discussion of the meaning of the Imaginary for Lacan, specifically as it relates to the formation of the ego in the mirror stage, see Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject, pp. 62-64.

\textsuperscript{142} See Fink (1997):

The best-known aspect of Lacan’s work to date in the English-speaking world is the “mirror stage,” a concept Lacan developed in 1936. Briefly stated, the mirror stage corresponds to the time
subject who, nevertheless, believes in the wholeness of the Big Other – an Other who does not lack knowledge or jouissance. While the illusion of wholeness developed through the mirror stage occurs through *introjection* of an external image, the illusion of the symbolic Other’s wholeness occurs through *projection* of the subject’s own fantasies. It is this belief in the Big Other that is the prerequisite for transference in the context of therapy and which Lacan describes in terms of the “subject-supposed-to-know.” Thus, in the imaginary register, the subject clings to the illusion of the ego’s wholeness; whereas, in the symbolic register, the subject clings to the illusion of the Other’s wholeness.

---

143 The Big Other is Lacan’s term for the Other who is whole, complete, all-powerful, and lacking nothing, designated by the symbol *A* (i.e., capitalized *Autre*, or Other). For a discussion of the relationship between the Symbolic, castration, and the Other, see Literature Review II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject, pp. 50-55.

144 The subject-supposed-to-know is Lacan’s term for the analysand’s projection of knowledge and authority onto the analyst. Because the analyst attends to the manifestations of the unconscious, the analysand supposes that the analyst knows what they mean and has the answers to the analysand’s problems. In reality, the actual subject-supposed-to-know is the analysand’s own unconscious, and over the course of an analysis, the analyst as subject-supposed-to-know should fall away. Cf. Fink (1997), pp. 30-31.
For example, we have been using the example of patients who, having suffered significant deprivation and loss due to their own parents’ addictions, turned to alcohol or drugs themselves or engaged in self-blame as ways of dealing with an environment that was painful and chaotic. The ego functions in a similar way as the symptom but emerges in response to an *internal* sense of fragmentation and lack, instead of external chaos and loss. The ego is an illusory self-representation which allows the child in the mirror stage to believe that she is in control, whole, and powerful. This is, however, simply a way of covering over the painful reality of the child’s lack of coordination and fragmentary sense of self. Later, when the subject comes to realize the limits of its power through the Oedipal prohibition, it deals with this by projecting its fantasies of power and wholeness onto an Other. Patricia Gherovici (2003) summarizes this in the context of her discussion of the case of Bertha Pappenheim (a.k.a. “Anna O.”).145

What the hysteric is looking for is not her father, but an improved and revised version of him – the complete mythical father. In this sense, we can understand that the hysteric is in fact looking for a Master . . . . Her anger results from the entrapments of the doomed enterprise of finding this primitive father, a noncastrated Other, an Ideal, impossible, dead *Urvater*. (p. 117)

Thus, the imagined wholeness of the ego and of the Big Other are ways of dealing with the anxiety provoked by our own lack. The subject either imagines itself to possess an ego that is whole or, failing that, imagines that there must be some Other out there who is

145 See Breuer (1895/2000) for the case of “Anna O.,” arguably the first psychoanalytic patient, who coined the term “talking cure.”
whole. What is denied in either case is the realization of the lack in ourselves and in others, which makes us vulnerable, fragile beings.

However, it is this vulnerability which makes us alive; indeed, it is interesting from an Eckhartian perspective that Gherovici identifies the Big Other in the passage above with the dead father. As we saw in our commentary in the Findings section, for Eckhart, that which is living is that which is underway, becoming, birthing. That which is complete, whole, or finished is dead. For Eckhart, the living God is the God that is being born in the soul, and this God is unknown, incalculable, and fragile. We might say this is God in the form of the baby Jesus – a weak, vulnerable child whose life path is unknown.146 This image of God stands in stark contrast to the all-powerful Father – in Lacanian terms, the Big Other. In contrast to the baby Jesus, who is vulnerable in the midst of existence and whose life is as yet unknown, God qua Big Other is both all-knowing and knowable; indeed, this God has established the universe as an orderly, lawful kosmos according to a determinate and knowable set of laws and serves, therefore, as the foundation of knowability.

When Eckhart prays to God to rid him of God, he takes aim at God qua Big Other, the God of onto-theology, the God with determinate, knowable properties who lays down the law and orders the universe. “Serving” this God with good works is not really service; it is just a form of control. The “thralls and hirelings” whom Eckhart (2009, p. 305) rebukes are those who attempt to serve their image of God in order to get something in return. For Eckhart, however, the God they serve is nothing but a dead idol,

---

a projection of their own fantasies of wholeness. By subjecting themselves to this Big Other (i.e., in Lacanian terms, accepting their castration, their fundamental lack), they hope, nevertheless, to overcome it, by accessing the qualities (*eigenschaften*) which they project onto God. A God with determinate properties (*eigenschaften*) is a God whose desires we can *know*; we know what this God wants from us, and we know how to position ourselves vis-à-vis this God’s desires.

Two significant implications follow from belief in God *qua* Big Other: The soul is correspondingly understood as possessing determinate properties (*eigenschaften*), and ethics is reduced to the attempt to conform to a particular set of virtues.147 The soul who thinks it knows who and what God is likewise believes that it knows who and what *it itself is* and how it should act in conformity with God’s knowable will. Virtue in this perspective represents the path by which the soul, understood as possessing independent being, can make particular sacrifices in order to achieve the end of attaining determinate being, the solid *substance* offered by properties (*eigenschaften*), like “being a just man.” These sacrifices conform to the structure of neurotic symptoms which we have outlined so far; the subject gives something up, renounces some pleasure, but always demands something in return: the paltry compensation offered by the jouissance provided by the symptom. To provide an example in Eckhartian-Lacanian language, the losses involved in renouncing certain pleasures are compensated for by the jouissance offered by particular properties (*eigenschaften*), for example, the pride involved in *being* a virtuous person or *possessing* particular qualities. This is only an illusory giving up because it

---

147 For an excellent discussion of the mystical critique of virtue in Marguerite Porete’s *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (by which Eckhart was heavily influenced), see Kangas, 2011.
always aims at getting something in return; it is a giving up that is the opposite of
Eckhart’s self-releasement (**Gelassenheit**), as it ultimately only shores up the ego’s sense
of control and mastery.

Eigen (1998) beautifully describes this illusory giving up in terms of “imaginary
castration”:

The neurotic clings to an enslaving imaginary castration to avoid a deeper, freeing
castration. The neurotic hides, denies, clings to, refuses to sacrifice his imaginary
castration. One’s fantasy of being castrated is used as a defense to hide just how
castrated one really is. (p. 145)

The sacrifices demanded by the path of virtue are forms of imaginary castration,
sacrifices made to bolster the ego’s sense of self-possession, autonomy, and individual
freedom. However, as Eigen points out, these imaginary castrations only serve to defend
against and deny the more fundamental, existential castration of being finite and
dependent – in a word, **vulnerable**. To turn again to a quote from Tobin (1986) also used
in our Eckhart commentary:

**Merchants are those who think they can make business deals with God. They are**
**good people who avoid sin, but they practice good works for the purpose of being**
in a better bargaining position with God. **Their mistake is that they think they have**
independent capital as bargaining power. Their utter dependence on God for
what they are and do shows the illusory nature of their position. God has given
them everything and owes them nothing. (p. 121, emphasis added)

Consequently, we have so far outlined the parallels between what must be
stripped away according to Eckhart and according to Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis.
The ego as a collection of determinate properties (*eigenschaften*) is the symptom *par excellence*; it offers the tempting illusion of a jouissance that we can master and control, covering over the deeper cut of genuine, existential castration – i.e., the subject’s lack of *substance* or independent being. In addition to the ego, the belief in the Big Other must also be stripped away, paralleling Eckhart’s prayer to be rid of God, as this belief, like the ego’s faith in its own self-mastery, covers over the subject’s fundamental lack. As David Loy (1996) writes in his Buddhist/psychoanalytic meditation on death *Lack and Transcendence*, our “earliest and our most natural way of trying to fill up our sense-of-lack” is “by identifying with someone who, we think, *is* real” (p. 13). At stake in the *apophatic* stripping away of God *qua* Big Other is the problematizing of the totalizing system of meaning which the Big Other secures and through which our fundamental lack is redeemed with a *meaning*. Loy writes of

> our need to organize the chaos of life by finding a unifying meaning-system that gives us knowledge about the world and a life-program for living in it, informing us both what it is and what we should do. A meaning-system teaches us what our *lack* really is and how we can overcome it” (p. 14)

As Loy notes in his reference to a “life-program,” the metaphysical system of meaning secured by the Big Other is also tied to an ethical system, which we have outlined in terms of a path of virtue that stands in stark contrast to Eckhart’s call to live without why (*ohne Warum*).

Having identified what must be stripped away, we now turn to the process of detachment itself.
Detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) and Castration

As we noted in the conclusion to the Findings section, detachment (MHG: *abegescheidenheit*; MG: *Abgeschiedenheit*) comes from the MG verb “*abscheiden,*” which means “to separate off.” There are many important etymological associations to this word. The first of these is the MG verb “to cut off” (*abschneiden*), which immediately presents us with a connection between Eckhartian detachment and psychoanalytic notions of castration. Detachment is a process, a set of techniques, and a way of life for Eckhart. It involves giving up, separating oneself from properties (*eigenschaften*), which offer the illusion of being something or someone definite.

Furthermore, the process of detachment involves stripping away God’s properties just as much as it does the soul’s properties. Along these lines, Schürmann (2003) asserts that “in the great work of non-attachment, I as singular lose all particular predicates, and this by the same process by which God loses all his divine names” (p. 283). Moreover, detachment means giving up all ultimate meaning, purpose, or why.

As we saw in the conclusion to the Findings section, the notion of “separating off” (*abscheiden*) that is contained in the notion of detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) involves the notion of divorce (*Scheidung*). Detachment is close in spirit to the passage in the Gospels where Jesus says that he has come to divide families against each other.¹⁴⁸

---

¹⁴⁸ Matthew 10:34-36 (NIV):  

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn  

“a man against his father,  
a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her
This means feeling out of place instead of feeling at home – giving up the sense of belonging with which home and family are associated. Detachment is the renunciation of the sense that “this is my place in the sun.” In contradistinction to the complacency of knowing who one is and where one belongs, detachment reveals itself in every confrontation with the question of identity: Who am I? Detachment leads ultimately to the sense of not being at home in oneself, not being settled in one’s own skin.

Indeed, as the etymological connection between “separating off” (abscheiden) and “cutting off” (abschneiden) suggests, separation (Scheidung) always involves a cut (Schnitt). Moreover, the separating off of detachment is a process and technique of cutting away that aims to lead us back to the primordial cut: the cut of the umbilical cord, separation from the mother. It is the cut that signifies the end of the original home of the womb, and indicates the provisional character of all dwelling. 149 This includes the provisional status of our dwelling in the world – our life – whose inevitable fate is foreshadowed in the original cut of the umbilical cord. Birth and death, the beginning and

mother-in-law –
A man’s enemies will be the members of his household.”

Note that the quote within that passage is a reference to Micah 7:6.

149 Indeed, we can add to this the etymological connection to “Scheide,” a German word for the female genitals which includes both the vulva and the vagina. “Scheide” is also the word for the splitting of one river into two, and Scheideweg means “crossroads.” Here the etymology of detachment (Abgeschiedenheit) leads us to the female genitals not as a signifier of return or fusion (a la the oceanic feeling), but as a signifier of departure (abscheiden), the original crossroads or parting of ways, where one becomes two. Cf. Certeau (1976/1986), who defines mystical literature by its “power to induce a departure” (p. 83).
the end, *arche* and *telos* – these are the moments, the *instants* which remain structurally separated off, which we cannot appropriate, and which cannot be synthesized by the categories of consciousness. They signify the fundamental passivity of the human subject, the inability of the subject to constitute itself as a totality. This is the fundamental, existential lack to which the process of detachment always tries to lead us.

However, this lack should not be confused with a portrayal of the self as isolated; on the contrary, it is the self’s fantasy of *wholeness* that is inextricably intertwined with the self’s isolation. The self believes itself to be a whole unto itself, complete and lacking nothing. In my reading (which we have seen in the Findings section), Eckhartian detachment leads us to the realization of the self’s lack, which is to say, its need for others, its *interdependence*, and its *vulnerability* vis-à-vis others. The notion of separateness developed here via an exploration of the etymological connections between detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and “separating off” (*abscheiden*) is intended not to reinforce notions of the self as an *isolated* individual, but to underscore the self’s inability to constitute itself as a totality, which, in turn, makes the self *open* – the opposite of isolated. Psychoanalytically, this is illustrated by the notion that the child’s sense of omnipotence is directly related to its sense of fusion with the mother and, indeed, the entire outside world. Its realization of its separateness punctures the illusion of its omnipotence and brings it to awareness of its vulnerability and dependence on the environment.

This lack cannot be signified within any system of meaning, which means that it cannot be captured by language. The attempt to do so, however, is tied to the structure of the symptom which we have outlined: the attempt to find meaning in this lack which
would compensate and console us. We outlined a number of phenomena which share the structure of the symptom; another of them is the Lacanian notion of the phallus. Fink (1995) describes the phallus in a passage worth quoting in full:

Insofar as desire is always correlated with lack, the phallus is the *signifier of lack*. . . . Whereas castration refers to a primordial loss which sets the structure in motion, the phallus is the signifier of that loss. As Lacan says in his 1959 paper “On Ernest Jones’ Theory of Symbolism,” “the phallus . . . is the signifier of the very loss the subject undergoes due to the breaking into pieces brought on by the signifier [*morcellement du signifiant*]” (Écrits, 1966, p. 715). Elsewhere in the same article, Lacan says that “the phallus functions as the signifier of the lack of being [*manque à être*] that determines the subject in his relation to the signifier.” It is thus the signifier of that loss or absence of being which is behind the subject’s very relation to the signifier: there is no subject at the outset, and the signifier names the as yet empty space in which the subject will come to be. (pp. 102-103)

This passage captures the very important relation between castration and the phallus.\(^{150}\) Whereas the penis refers to the biological organ, the phallus for Lacan refers

\(^{150}\) Despite Lacan’s phallocentric language, he argues, as Hollywood (2002) notes:

> [T]he position one occupies in language is not dependent on the kind of body one has . . . . The difference between the two positions [i.e., masculine and feminine positions] . . . is in the relationship they take toward the phallus, the transcendental signifier *within male-dominant society*, through which meaning is fixed and grounded (although, as Lacan will go on to argue, the transcendental signifier is always empty and hence meaning always loosed once again. (p. 154, emphasis added)
to the symbolic function of the penis, the signifier of desire *par excellence*. However, as Fink suggests in the above passage, there is always a link between lack and desire for Lacan, and it is in this sense that the phallus is also the signifier of lack. Intuitively (and from a more traditionally Freudian perspective), we think of castration as a threat that the penis could be cut off. However, when it comes to the phallus, the order is reversed: Rather than representing a threat to an already-extant organ, castration is logically prior to the phallus, and the phallus is always a response to it. Castration refers to the primordial loss of the Real which is necessary in order to come into being in language.\(^{151}\) It is the subjection of the subject to the Other, the symbolic order of language. The

---

Cf. the following passage from Fink (1995):

> Psychoanalytic practice suggests . . . that in Western cultures in general, that signifier [of that which is desirable] is the phallus. Though many claim that this is no more than a preconceived notion, psychoanalysis claims that it is a clinical observation, and as such contingent. It is verified time and again in clinical practice, and thus constitutes a generalization, not a necessary, universal rule. There is no theoretical reason why it could not be something else, and there perhaps are (and have been) societies in which some other signifier plays (or played) the role of the signifier of desire. (p. 102)

Thus, despite his seeming naturalization of these phallocentric terms, Lacan insists upon their historical and cultural contingency, namely, their sense within patriarchal society. However, Hollywood ultimately critiques this view:

> What is required is a symbolic system in which the site of the transcendental signifier (*significance*) is not symbolically associated with either sex – one in which the privileging of particular kinds of bodies is no longer made viable by their symbolic association with that which tends to wholeness in language. (p. 170)

\(^{151}\) For a fuller discussion of Lacan’s understanding of castration, see Literature Review, Section II: Freud and Lacan on the Subject, pp. 50-56.
phallus is the attempt to signify that original loss of the Real in and through symbolic language.

Detachment (abegescheidenheit) in the context of psychoanalytic treatment involves a form of castration, a cutting away or cutting off (abschneiden) of this phallus. The phallus represents an attempt to appropriate originary castration and cover over it by locating it within a larger system of meaning (the Other of language). Like the Eckhartian practice of detachment, this process of cutting away is meant to put us back in touch with the primordial cut of castration: the loss of the real (m)Other which was required by the Other in order to assume a position in language. Thus, the phallus functions in a similar way for Lacan as properties (eigenschaften) do for Eckhart. For Lacan, the phallus is “the socially recognized signifier of value and desire” (Fink, 1997, p. 172). Having renounced jouissance in accordance with the Oedipal Law, the subject looks to recuperate that loss symbolically.

In concrete terms, when we are talking about the phallus, we are referring to anything we use to signify our value, our worth, or our esteem. Depending on a person’s personality and values, the phallus could take the form of sports cars, money, degrees, etc. These are things that can be used to make ourselves feel like we are something substantial, like we have something of value. They are ways to fix identity, to make ourselves feel whole. And in this sense, the phallus shares the structure of the symptom which we have outlined above, for example with reference to substance abuse: The phallus and the symptom both function in order to cover over or supplement a loss. They both attempt to turn a loss into an exchange, giving something up to get something else. However, the subject’s task in psychoanalysis is to stay with the loss, to undergo and
mourn it, without attempting to fill it, whether through a symptom such as substance abuse or through the pursuit of phallic signifiers of worth. This parallels the Eckhartian practice of detachment (abegescheidenheit) which similarly aims at bringing the soul to a point of pure giving up and self-emptying, without expectation of reward. Furthermore, as in Eckhartian detachment, this psychoanalytic process of detachment (abegescheidenheit) involves cutting away our notions about the Big Other, just as much as it involves cutting away the phallus. Indeed, the process of calling into question the Big Other is sometimes what leads people to seek treatment, which I have witnessed on many occasions in my work as a therapist.

I will now present a clinical vignette which for reasons of confidentiality is a fictional composite drawing on my experience with various patients.152 “Bradley” was a Caucasian, homosexual male in his 20s who sought therapy for anxiety. The onset of Bradley’s symptoms of anxiety coincided with his questioning of his Christian faith after a pastor in his church was fired for embezzling money. Additionally, Bradley had served in the National Guard domestically, but his faith in the institution of the military was shaken as a result of events in Iraq. Thus, Bradley’s anxiety was related to his loss of faith in the trustworthiness and competence of authority figures in whom he had previously placed his trust.

However, his faith in a Big Other did not simply go away; although his faith was shaken, he continued to want to believe. This manifested itself in the context of his romantic relationships; he was drawn to men whom he could idealize as strong,

152 All identifying details have been changed, and any resemblance to actual individuals is purely coincidental.
masculine, and reliable and tended to lose interest when they revealed themselves to be weak or vulnerable. His ongoing fantasy of finding a Big Other in whom he could place his faith likewise manifested itself in the context of the transference. He tended to idealize me as a knowledgeable expert who had the answers to his problems. He tended to position me in the transference in much the same way he did his boyfriends, and he ultimately developed feelings of erotic transference for me. In this sense, we find confirmation of Fink’s idea that people seek treatment not to change, but to get their symptoms and old patterns back in working order: Having his faith in the Big Other shaken only increased the urgency of finding a new Other who could replace him.

According to Verhaeghe and Declercq (2002), the condition for the creation of a new subject through the analytic process is that both the analyst and the analysand “fall” from their belief in the Other. It is this process which Lacan consistently tries to grasp from Seminar XI onward with expressions such as “separation,” the “traversal” of the phantasm, or “subjective destitution.” (p. 11)

After several months of working through the erotic transference, Bradley recounted a dream which heralded the end of the erotic transference and more generally the “fall” of the belief in the Other: In the dream, I cut my arm in an industrial accident, and it was ultimately amputated because doctors were unable to heal it. Bradley’s associations to the dream revealed an increased awareness and acceptance of the therapist as a vulnerable human being capable of making mistakes. Furthermore, the cut seemed to represent the falling away of Bradley’s projection of wholeness onto me. The fact that the doctors were unable to heal my cut in the dream demonstrated an incipient awareness of the limits of
the treatment. As a castrated and vulnerable human being, I would be unable to heal
Bradley’s wounds and make him whole again; rather, the direction of the cure would lie
in accepting the vulnerability of others and, ultimately, his own vulnerability. Around the
time of this dream, the erotic transference lifted, and he entered into the longest-term
relationship of his life – and, thus, a relationship in which he would inevitably be
confronted with his boyfriend’s lack and vulnerability.

Bradley’s case exemplifies the structure of the symptom that we have outlined in
this section. His symptoms of anxiety emerged in response to the loss of the sense of
enjoyment and security he experienced as his belief in the Other began to fall away. The
symptoms of anxiety represented an attempt to recuperate some of that lost jouissance
through control. As with Freud’s discussion of the “religious” attitude in Future of an
Illusion, Bradley could not simply acquiesce to the falling away of his belief in the Other
(which included losing his faith in God qua ground of being); the anxiety he experienced
was an attempt to cling to some semblance of the control that he felt himself losing as he
was confronted with the lack in the Other. Likewise, his relationship problems and the
erotic transference represented attempts to regain the lost jouissance he had derived from
his belief in the Other.

The course and outcome of the treatment demonstrate the process of analytic
detachment (abegescheidenheit) through which the belief in the Other falls away and
which Verhaeghe and Declercq describe as necessary for the emergence of a new subject
in the course of analytic treatment. And, as Verhaeghe and Declercq stress, this process
necessarily involves the falling away of the patient and therapist’s respective beliefs in
the Other, which during my work with Bradley involved avoiding the temptation to put
myself in the position of the knowing Other by identifying with his projections. As a therapist-in-training who was sometimes unsure of my abilities, it was especially tempting to believe in the notion that I was somehow an expert with the answers and ability to “fix” my patients’ problems, and in this sense supervision and my own therapy involved a parallel process of detachment which, like my work with Bradley, continually put me in touch with my own lack and cut away attempts to fill that lack with imaginary ego projections. Conceived in this way, therapy training can be grasped as the acquisition of skills and knowledge which, far from providing any ultimate answers, always remain secondary to the ability to stay with both the patient and therapist’s unknowing.

This therapeutic stance of unknowing accords with Eckhart’s critique of attempts to know God as well as Lacan’s rather cryptic maxim that “there is no Other of the Other.” According to Fink (1995), this assertion indicates the absolute radicality or otherness of the Other: there is no Other (i.e., no outside) of the Other. The Other is not just an outside relative to a particular, determinate inside; it is always and inescapably Other, “outside” any and all systems. (p. 120)

Thus, the process of detachment (abegescheidenheit) leads us to the absolute otherness of the Other; it aims to strip away all attempts to make sense of the Other, to situate the Other within any structure or system of meaning and being. “There is no Other of the Other” means that the removal of the Other from such a system does not mean reconstituting the Other within a higher system “beyond” this one. We find here the seeds of Derrida’s critique of negative theology as a form of “hyperessentiality,”153 in other

---

153 See Coward and Foshay’s (1992) edited volume *Derrida and Negative Theology*, which includes both primary and secondary source material.
words, the persistence of the belief, even after the denial of being as an attribute of God, that God nevertheless “is” somehow “beyond being.” Rather than representing a wholesale rejection of negative theology in the tradition of Eckhart, however, this stance can serve to radicalize the *apophasis* of negative theology with an insistence upon the radical uncertainty which faith entails – in other words, the insurmountability of the horizon delimited by our finite existence.

Our outline of a mysticism – and, ultimately, a psychoanalysis – that is defined by a confrontation with the Other’s lack represents a departure from conventional understandings of mysticism, which according to Amy Hollywood (2002), “generally claim that in mystical experience one encounters the putative source of wholeness and plenitude in which (or in whom) the individual actively participates” (p. 148). In contrast to this view, shared by many of the Eckhart scholars covered in Literature Review III, Hollywood traces a conception of mysticism through Bataille, Beauvoir, and Lacan’s work in which “an other who is radically contingent, partial, and incomplete” is decisive, rather than an other who is “an all-encompassing divine being through whom the fragmented self achieves wholeness and plenitude” (p. 148). She accounts for the frequent proximity of these two views in the following passage, making use of her reading of Lacan’s Seminar XX:

[Lacan] describes two tendencies in language; the first attempts to fix meaning by positing a transcendental signifier . . . . Yet there is another movement in language away from the stability of meaning, for Lacan argues that the transcendental

---

signifier is always, in fact, empty; its putative wholeness and fixity is an illusion that psychoanalysis aims to expose . . . Hence, mysticism, as a quest for the absolute, for that which would ensure meaning, stability and being, encounters instead that which radically destabilizes subjectivity and meaning – mysticism seeks the transcendental signifier but discovers the paradoxical interplay of presence and absence through which signification is made possible. (p. 149)

Thus, Eckhart’s mysticism and Lacan’s psychoanalysis are both characterized by the structure of detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*); they aim to destabilize subjectivity and meaning and to expose the emptiness of the transcendental signifier – whether it goes by the name of God or by the name of the Other. They cut away (*abschneiden*) all illusions of wholeness and attempts to situate lack in a larger system of meaning: the symptom, the ego, the phallus, and the wholeness of the Other. As Verhaeghe and Declercq (2002) assert, “The essence of the subject . . . is situated at the place of the lack of the Other, the place where the Other does not provide us with all answers” (p. 10).

**Jouissance Without Why**

As we have seen in Eckhart’s work, the stripping away involved in the practice of detachment leads us to the pure desert, the absolute emptiness of the ground. This desert is, however, far from sterile or barren; Eckhart identifies it with fertility: the birth of the Son in the soul (*Gottesgeburt*). Indeed, Schürmann (2003) asserts that the “concrete aim” of detachment is “singularization,” which “comes to pass with the birth of the Word in the denatured soul” (p. 287). Thus, the goal of the practice of detachment is the removal of all images, representations, and predicates so that, having emptied itself completely,
the soul becomes a “site” (or non-site) in which God can operate freely, giving birth to the Son (the Word) in the soul.

The notion which perhaps most vividly conveys this interplay of stripping away and giving birth is the “virgin wife,” which Hollywood (2001) has explicitly taken up as a way of understanding the soul in Eckhart’s work. In one of Eckhart’s most famous sermons (W8, Q2), he uses the following verse from the story of Martha and Mary (rather creatively translated from the Latin) as his point of departure: “Our Lord Jesus Christ went up into a little town, and was received by a virgin who was a wife” (Eckhart, 1981, p. 177). Eckhart interprets this verse in the following passage:

A virgin who is a wife is free and unpledged, without attachment . . . . She produces much fruit, and it is great, neither less nor more than is God himself. This virgin who is a wife brings this fruit and this birth about, and every day she produces fruit, a hundred or a thousand times, yes, more than can be counted, giving birth and becoming fruitful from the noblest ground of all – or, to put it better, from that same ground where the Father is bearing his eternal Word, from that ground is she fruitfully bearing with him. (pp. 178-179)

Thus, the soul becomes fertile (i.e., becomes a wife who gives birth to the Son, the Word) by emptying itself through detachment (i.e., becoming virgin).

Rather than representing two stages, however, self-emptying and giving birth occur in a single moment and, as we will see, are identical. One hint in this direction is the way that Eckhart plays with the double meaning of the MHG word “enpfangen”, which like its MG equivalent “empfangen” can mean either to receive or to conceive, suggesting that the Son is simultaneously received and conceived by the soul qua virgin.
wife. On the one hand, the soul receives its being, is brought into being, through the Gottesgeburt; on the other hand, the soul itself as the conceiver of the Word (the Son) is responsible for birthing God. It is this latter point that leads Eckhart to make radical statements about the dependency of the deity on this subjective process, part of what got him in trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities, for example:

> In my birth all things were born and I was the cause of myself and of all things . . .
> . . If I were not, God would not be either. I am the cause of God’s being God: if I were not, then God would not be God. (Eckhart, 2009, p. 424)

The key to understanding the paradox captured in the double meaning of enpfangen is to grasp the unity of God and soul in the operation – the pure event – of creating, rather than thinking of them as already constituted entities in some kind of reciprocal or mediated relationship. We cannot think of God as a subjective actor or agency who, starting with a void or vacuum of some kind, calls something into being, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. For Eckhart, God is not a being or entity that creates; rather, God’s being or nature is nothing other than this act of creation. God is the process or act of creation coming into being. The unity which the soul achieves with God is precisely a oneness with and as this process of creation. Along these lines, Schürmann (2001) asserts that “identity with God is bound to an operation (werk, ereignis) whose condition is detachment and whose consequence is the engendering of the Son” (p. 28)

We find a similar interplay between detachment and engendering expressed in psychoanalytic terms in Lacan’s work. In the following passage from Seminar XI, Lacan uses a series of etymological associations to link the verbs “to separate” to “to engender”: 
Separare, to separate – I would point out at once the equivocation of the *se parare*, of the *se parer*, in all the fluctuating meanings it has in French. It means not only to dress oneself, but also to defend oneself, to provide oneself with what one needs to be on one’s guard, and I will go further still, and Latinists will bear me out, to the *se parere*, the *s’engendrer*, the *to be engendered*, which is involved here. How, at this level, has the subject to procure himself? For that is the origin of the word that designates in Latin *to engender*. It is juridical, as indeed, curiously enough, are all the words in Indo-European that designate *to put into the world*. The word *parturition* itself originates in a word which, in its root, simply means to procure a child from the husband – a juridical and, it should be said, social operation. (p. 214)

In this quote, Lacan is describing the way that the subject is engendered or “put into the world” in response to the lack/desire of the Other. In response to its parents’ discourse, the child is always wondering what that discourse *wants* from it. And this questioning inevitably leads the child to wonder about its own indispensability to its parents. According to Lacan: “The first object he proposes for this parental desire whose object is unknown is his own loss – *Can he lose me?*” (p. 214). Thus, the parent’s lack/desire constitutes the subjectivity of the child in the response, not as a being, but as an emptiness or lack.

As in Eckhartian detachment, the separation or cutting away involved in analytic detachment (*abegescheidenheit*) aims not at stripping away the particularity of the individual subject in order to merge with some larger whole or universality; rather, psychoanalytic detachment aims at becoming one with a *mode of production or creation*. 
Thus, in the words of David Kangas (2007), “a ‘metaphysics of birth’ deconstructs a metaphysics of the subject-as-ground” (p. 4). We are not simply privileging non-being or emptiness over being; we are privileging “the event of coming-into-existence (Eckhart’s Gottesgeburt) over being” (Kangas, 2007, p. 9). As we saw in Literature Review II, Lacan similarly privileges what he calls “creationism,” which maintains that the subject emerges suddenly out of nothing, over “evolutionism,” which holds that the subject emerges out of a continuous, gradual, and orderly process. Lacan (1986/1992) asserts that the emergence of the signifier occurs in a moment of “absolute beginning, which marks the origin of the signifying chain as a distinct order” (p. 214). Psychoanalysis aims at stripping away the illusion of a fixed essence underlying the subject in order to put the patient in touch with this absolute beginning, which is opposed to the order of being.

For Eckhart, the stripping away of the soul’s properties (eigenschaften) engenders the Son – the perfect singularity. This singularity is perfect because it embodies this process of creation; it is a subjective structure which, rather than ossifying into a static being that covers over the order of creation and birth, represents the perfect expression of that process of creation in being and form. This notion of singularity is precisely the form of subjectivity which psychoanalysis aims to produce and is closely related to Lacan’s (1986/1992) definition of sublimation in Seminar VII: “[I]t raises an object . . . to the dignity of the Thing” (p. 112). As we saw in Literature Review II, the Thing (das Ding) designates the primordial “object” whose loss is constitutive for subjectivity and leads to the structure of extimacy which characterizes subjectivity in Seminar VII.

---

155 See pp. 70-72 above.
156 See pp. 72-80 above.
Although it is identified with the Real which is prior to and beyond all signification, Lacan is clear that it is the *signifier of the Real’s emptiness*; as such, “the Thing is situated in the relationship that places man in the mediating function between the real and the signifier” (p. 129). Lacan continues: “This Thing, all forms of which created by man belong to the sphere of sublimation, this Thing will always be represented by emptiness. . . . in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative” (p. 129).

Thus, the Thing stands in stark contrast to the phallus. Both represent in some sense the attempt to signify lack; however, the phallus covers over that lack, while the Thing underscores it. The phallus compensates for primordial loss and attempts to inscribe that loss within a system of meaning and being. In contrast, Crockett (2007) in *Interstices of the Sublime* asserts that “the Thing represents a creation out of nothing because it is a *signifier of signifying as such* . . . not within symbolic discourse, but the process of signifying the Real” (p. 61, emphasis added). Whereas the phallus is a reduction of the Real to a symbolic representation, the Thing represents the production of a signifier that manifests the very activity of creation *ex nihilo* which underlies all signification and, ultimately, all subjectivity. Crockett explicitly links sublimation to subjectivity in the following passage:

> What I am calling the Freudian sublime indicates two distinct tendencies in Freud’s thought: the notion of sublimation on the one hand, and trauma – or the death drive – on the other. These two processes cannot be thought separately, but must be seen as profoundly interrelated. Traumatic events open up holes – interstices that must then become stitched together in a complex process of sublimation *that makes us who and what we are*. The stitches are what Lacan calls
quilting points, and they form knots or folds that open up a window on the Real as they simultaneously weave imaginary and symbolic discourses together. (p. 11, emphasis added)

Thus, sublimation – that psychoanalytic concept which is most closely tied to creation – makes us who we are: we are fashioned out of nothing and structured around emptiness. We lack any solid foundation and are above all characterized by a continual process of becoming. We are characterized by the “double bind of a determining principle and an indetermining origin” which Schürmann (2003) describes as central to Eckhart’s work (p. 315), and which is also evident in Lacan’s work in the tension between “absolute beginning” and the structure of the Law.

This may well describe the subject from the perspective of Eckhart and Lacan, but we do not always apprehend this. The subject is faced with a choice: to identify with the “indetermining origin” and maintain the structure of sublimation which, as Crockett puts it, “open[s] up a window on the Real,” or to retreat into the refuge of structure and identify with the Law, the “determining principle.” This could be framed as a choice between the symptom, on the one hand, and the sinthome, on the other. The symptom, as we have seen, represents the consolation/compensation we seek for the loss of jouissance which is demanded by submission to the Law. Fink (1995) describes the sacrifice of jouissance to the Other involved in castration in the following passage:

Castration has to do with the fact that, at a certain point, we are required to give up some jouissance . . . . What happens to the jouissance that is sacrificed? Where does it go? Is it simply annihilated? Does it simply vanish? Or does it shift to a different level or locus? The answer seems clear: it shifts to the Other; it is, in a
sense, transferred to the Other’s account. Now what could that possibly mean? A
certain jouissance that is “squeezed” out of the body is refound in speech . . . .

The sacrifice involved in castration is to hand over a certain jouissance to the
Other and let it circulate in the Other . . . (p. 99)
The *sinthome*, on the other hand, is “the idiosyncratic jouissance of a particular subject”
(Verhaeghe and Declercq, 2002, p. 10). If the jouissance of the symptom can be
categorized as Symbolic, the jouissance obtained through the *sinthome* is Real. In
Lacan’s (2005) seminar on the *sinthome*, he argues that the *sinthome* is akin to an artistic
production through which the subject organizes its jouissance. The *sinthome* is the
idiosyncratic, singular way in which a subject enjoys the unconscious. Lacan argues in
Seminar XXIII that analytic treatment is directed at the analysand’s identification with
the *sinthome*.

Thus, at stake in the production of the subject *qua* singularity (i.e., the Son
produced by the *Gottesgeburt*) is the possibility of a jouissance that is not alienated in the
Other – in other words, a jouissance other than phallic jouissance. This is the “other
jouissance” or “supplementary jouissance” which Lacan associates with feminine
structure and mystical experience in Seminar XX. It would be tempting to set up a clear
dichotomy between phallic jouissance and supplementary jouissance with regard to their
status vis-à-vis castration.157 A superficial reading of this concept would lead to the
conclusion that phallic jouissance is the enjoyment accessible to men living under the
Oedipal law, while women have direct, unmediated access to the jouissance of the Real.

---
157 For an explanation of the difference between phallic jouissance and the other jouissance, see Literature
It is clear, however, that the picture is not so simple. For Lacan, women are subject to castration; they live under the Oedipal law. To say otherwise would be to equate feminine structure with psychosis, which is not consistent with Lacan’s argument in Seminar XX. On the contrary, the other jouissance is simultaneously within the Oedipal order while transcending it. It is precisely this paradoxical structure which the Austrian psychoanalyst Georg Gröller (2011, 2013) captures in the title of his article “Im Ödipus über den Ödipus hinaus” (“In Oedipus, beyond Oedipus”). We are confronted again with the structure of extimacy which pervades Lacan’s thought: the other jouissance is the jouissance of the Real which is immanent to – indeed, as we have seen, constituted by – the Symbolic.

For Lacan, both men and women (so long as they are neurotic) have experienced castration. The difference is that men compensate for it, try to cover it over or recuperate that loss with the phallus. The other jouissance that is accessible to women

158 According to Fink (1997):

Neurosis can, of course, be characterized in many ways. In contradistinction to psychosis, it implies the instating of the paternal function, the assimilation of the essential structure of language, the primacy of doubt over certainty, considerable inhibition of the drives as opposed to their uninhibited enactment, the tendency to find more pleasure in fantasy than in direct sexual contact, the mechanism of repression as opposed to foreclosure, the return of the repressed from within, as it were, in the form of Freudian slips, bungled actions, and symptoms – the list goes on and on. Unlike perversion, neurosis involves the predominance of the genital zone over the other erogenous zones, a certain degree of uncertainty about what it is that turns one on, considerable difficulty pursuing it even when one does know, the refusal to be the cause of the Other’s jouissance, and so on. (p. 112)

For a more complete discussion of neurosis and the way it differs from the other Lacanian diagnostic categories of psychosis and perversion, see Fink, 1997, pp. 112-164.
is possible precisely in and through the capacity to stay with the primordial loss of castration without taking a second step to remedy it. According to Gröller (2011, my translation):

Since women have already suffered the loss definitively and are no longer constantly threatened by it, they are also not hypnotized in the same way by desire, and a space on the other side of that remains open to them, the space of jouissance. (p. 5)\textsuperscript{159}

Women have suffered the loss definitively; they do not hope to fill the lack opened up by castration with the phallus. This is not a flight to some sort of jouissance in the “fullness” of the Real, a jouissance simply conceived as prior to castration: the jouissance of the psychotic, who aims to keep his entire libido to himself. If the psychotic \textit{Verwerfung} (foreclosure) is a form of holding onto Real jouissance prior to the Symbolic, the feminine stance is a form of self-releasement, letting go into the lack of the Real at the \textit{heart of the Symbolic}. The feminine “not-whole” structure which Lacan identifies enables the enjoyment of the hole.

Thus, the self-releasement which characterizes the feminine position for Lacan shares several key characteristics with Eckhartian releasement (\textit{Gelassenheit}). Whereas phallic jouissance is essentially characterized by a sacrificial and teleological structure – the man gives up jouissance to the Other but only with the expectation of recuperating that jouissance through the phallus – the other jouissance is radically without why (\textit{ohne}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{159} Da die Frau den Verlust bereits definitiv erlitten hat und nicht mehr ständig davon bedroht bleibt, ist sie auch vom Begehren nicht in gleicher Weise hypnotisiert und es bleibt ihr ein Raum jenseits davon offen, Raum des Genießens.  
\end{flushright}
Warum). The other jouissance is accessible through contact with the sheer facticity of one’s existence, the that-is-ness of being, which is captured by the Eckhartian neologism “istigkeit.” It is not a flight into emptiness beyond being; rather, it is the enjoyment of being as such – which is to say, the emptiness which suffuses being, the absurdity and strangeness (Fremdheit) of being anything at all, without foundation in the principle of reason.

This strangeness (Fremdheit) has to do with the stranger (Fremde) at the heart of the subject: the Other. If we could know the Other, we might be able to ascertain the reason (Grund) which would serve as a ground (Grund) for our existence. This is the fantasy of many a patient in psychotherapy. However, one aim of treatment, as we have seen in the brief clinical vignette provided above, is the realization of the lack in the Other. This corresponds to Eckhart’s prayer to be rid of God, to strip away any God that could be captured by determinate properties (eigenschaften).

But now, to use the characteristic turn of phrase identified by Kurt Ruh (1985) in Eckhart’s work, we must go further. We must learn not only to give up on trying to know the Other; we must learn to serve this Other whom we cannot know, who may or may not even exist. It is with this assertion that Lacan’s essay “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire” reaches its climax:

What the neurotic does not want, and what he strenuously refuses to do until the end of his analysis, is to sacrifice his castration to the Other’s jouissance, by allowing it to serve the Other . . . why would he sacrifice his difference (anything but that) to the jouissance of an Other, which, let us not forget, does not exist. Yes, but if by chance it was to exist [existait], it would enjoy it [il en
And that is what the neurotic does not want. For he figures that the Other demands his castration. (2006, p. 700)

Thus, the neurotic, while complaining about his or her castration by the Other, clings to it and tries to obtain jouissance through it. The neurotic tries to turn the loss caused by castration into a gain out of spite toward the Other, rather than serve the Other’s jouissance. Michael Eigen (1998) describes this castration as “an enslaving imaginary castration” to which the neurotic clings to avoid “a deeper, freeing castration” (p. 145). Furthermore, Eigen asserts that “genuine castration is like a hole in the omnipotent ego that lets jouissance shine through” (p. 148). Although Lacan had not yet developed the notion of supplemental jouissance at the time of writing “Subversion of the Subject,” it is clear that the notion of “genuine castration” which Eigen employs in his reading of that essay corresponds to the feminine supplemental jouissance Lacan outlines in Seminar XX, which we have been explicating. The feminine position is to let go in response to castration, not to try to re-inscribe the lack of castration in an economy of jouissance. This may be formulated in highly abstract language by Lacan, but we are dealing here with the concrete path of Eckhartian self-releasement (Gelassenheit): serving the (unknowable) Other’s jouissance, letting go without being subjected. The subject who adopts this stance abandons itself to the abyss of the absolute Other – and, therefore, the groundlessness of its own existence – rather than the Other as foundation. This is the only possibility for jouissance, and it is the end of analysis: pure undergoing, pure releasement, allowing the highs and lows of existence to wash over oneself without trying to control or calculate.
It cannot be emphasized enough that what we are releasing ourselves to in the stance of releasement (Gelassenheit) is neither a higher being nor some sort of pure emptiness; rather, the practice of Gelassenheit releases us to the emptiness of being – in other words, the singularity of our existence. Kangas (2007) makes this point when he asserts that “through its letting go its need for grounds, through un-learning the onto-theological will toward foundations, the self finds itself precisely liberated toward its temporality and finitude” (p. 10).

Conclusion

This section has explored the question: What is the significance of Meister Eckhart’s view of the self for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity? First, I argued that there is a parallel between Eckhart’s notion of properties (eigenschaften) and the psychoanalytic understanding of symptoms. For Eckhart, properties represent a problematic view of the self which requires and calls forth another way of being. Similarly, symptoms are the problems which lead to the need for psychoanalytic theory and practice. Thus, properties and symptoms are the starting point of our analysis. For Eckhart, properties are the determinate characteristics to which we cling in order to define ourselves; these are problematic because they harden into a fixed identity that leaves no room for that to which God wants to give birth in us. Similarly, patients in psychoanalysis derive a form of satisfaction from symptoms which closes them off from free-flowing, incalculable jouissance.

In the section that followed, we put Eckhartian detachment (abegescheidenheit) in dialogue with Lacan’s notion of castration. For Eckhart, detachment means stripping away the properties (eigenschaften) that we ascribe both to God and to ourselves. The
problem with these properties, as we have seen, is that we use them in order to feel like we know who we are and who God is, to feel like the self is a solid and fixed *substance*. We search for something to hold onto, some fixed identity, to cover over the *groundlessness* of the self. Detachment aims to strip away these determinate properties in order to put us back in touch with the abyss of the self’s groundlessness – which is to say, its lack of any solid foundation, but also its infinite openness. The phallus functions in a similar way for Lacan as properties do for Eckhart. For Lacan, the phallus is “the socially recognized signifier of value and desire” (Fink, 1997, p. 172). Having renounced jouissance in accordance with the Oedipal Law, the subject looks to recuperate that loss symbolically. This can take the form of anything that we use to signify our value, our worth, our esteem – in other words, to make ourselves feel like we *are* something substantial, like we *have* something of value. They are ways to fix identity, to make ourselves feel whole. But for Lacan what the phallus covers over is the fundamental lack which castration represents. We are not-whole. Thus, the phallus, symptoms, and properties all share the common function of making us feel like we are someone or something determinate, and castration and detachment both aim at stripping away this sense of ourselves as possessing a solid substance or being in order to return us to a more primordial sense of lack, emptiness, or groundlessness.

However, this groundlessness or lack – while it may be anxiety-provoking – is also an *openness*. Eckhartian detachment and psychoanalytic castration open up possibilities for enjoyment (jouissance) that are otherwise closed off by properties/symptoms, and this is the theme of the final section of our discussion: jouissance without why. We arrive at our determinate sense of ourselves through
properties by locating ourselves within a system of meaning and reason. To think of our self as an essence means to think of it as necessary, inevitable, arising logically out of our past and heading ineluctably toward our destiny. Eckhartian releasement (Gelassenheit) means letting go of the need for grounds and living without why. We are thus released into the present; we become one with the process of divine birth and creating which is happening in us right now. And this opens up the possibility of a joy – what Schürmann (2001) calls “wandering joy” – that is greater than anything that would have conformed to our plans for ourselves:

A detached man, Eckhart says, experiences such joy that no one would be able to tear it away from him. But such a man remains unsettled. He who has let himself be, and who has let God be, lives in wandering joy, or joy without cause.

(Schürmann, 2001, p. xx)

Similarly, in psychoanalysis, the patient lets go of symptoms and the phallus, which represent the need to signify and give meaning to the lack underlying subjectivity. In doing this, the patient lets go of forms of enjoyment which conform to a constricted sense of self and releases himself to a jouissance that is beyond – what Lacan calls the other jouissance. Lacan specifically links this other jouissance with mystical experience.

At stake in this discussion is a reconfiguration of the relationship between mysticism and psychoanalysis. The history of psychoanalytic interpretations of mystical experience is characterized by reductive readings which characterize mysticism as a form of regression and escapism. At the same time, those more sympathetic to mysticism have critiqued the reductionist tendencies of psychoanalysis and have argued that the insights of psychoanalysis need to be augmented by a spiritual perspective. However, by drawing
attention to the ways in which Eckhart and Lacan’s respective views of the self are
guided by a similar structure and logic, I have attempted to demonstrate that there is
already something mystical going on in psychoanalysis – call it, to paraphrase Caputo
(1986), “the mystical element in psychoanalysis.” I have refrained from offering a
Lacanian reading of Eckhart, which would reduce Eckhart’s concepts to a psychoanalytic
framework in the manner of Freud in his discussion of the oceanic feeling. Additionally, I
have avoided offering a critique of psychoanalysis from a mystical perspective, calling
for a modification of psychoanalytic understanding on the basis of Eckhart’s view of the
self, as Ben Morgan (2013) does in his recent book. Rather, by using Eckhart’s view of
the self to illuminate what is already mystical about psychoanalysis, I have sought to
open up a new kind of dialogue and to circumvent the stalemate which characterizes so
much of the literature on mysticism and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis should turn to
mystical texts for insights, not because it is lacking and in need of instruction from a
discipline foreign to itself, but because it is already guided by a mystical impulse. It is
this approach which allows us to take seriously Lacan’s claim that his writing belongs to
the mystical canon.

The impulse which guides both mysticism and psychoanalysis is change – indeed,
the joy in change, as in Schürmann’s wandering joy. How to facilitate processes of
change? How to become someone new? In this way, Eckhart, whose thought is founded
on the priority of birth over being, is an ideal dialogue partner. The question which
Eckhart the preacher calls us to consider is: How can the soul become one with God’s
process of creating? How can the soul become nothing, which is to say, become one with
the birth of the Son in the ground of the soul? The central truth of Eckhartian detachment
is that cutting away (*abegescheidenheit*) – and the crisis that attends it – is necessary for fundamental change to occur.

The impetus to let go into the ground emerges in everyday life out of disruption, a suspension of our assumptions about how things are supposed to be. Suddenly, everything that seems familiar and comfortable is thrown on its head, and nothing appears as it did a moment before. Falling in love, becoming an immigrant, undergoing a sex change, having children, experiencing a trauma, getting divorced, the death of a loved one, our own death – deep changes, whether good or bad, are always traumatic. They turn our world upside-down, and they call us to open ourselves to changes which we never could have anticipated. The question is, will we double down in the face of such changes and cling to the familiarity of the self to which we have grown accustomed, or will we detach from that self and release ourselves to the process of undergoing transformation.

This stance of opening ourselves through self-releasement (*Gelassenheit*) entails a suspension of grounds and goods. We try to inject an element of control into these traumatic events by looking for a reason (*Grund*) or a why (*Warum*). But Eckhart calls us to live without why. And Lacan, in Seminar VII, develops a psychoanalytic ethics that involves the suspension of the entire system of goods.\(^{160}\) We must let go of how we think life is supposed to be and find a way to affirm the facticity of being.

Other possibilities for identity, for being a different kind of self, appear to us in everyday life in the form of the uncanny. Every now and then, that which is familiar

\(^{160}\) Although I have suggested parallels between Eckhart’s “without why” and aspects of Lacan’s work throughout this study, it would be interesting in future research to specifically examine the connections between Eckhart’s apophatic ethics and Lacan’s seminar on psychoanalytic ethics, both of which are critical of organizing ethics according to any system of goods.
appears to us as somehow strange. We become aware of the sheer facticity of our being, the contingency of it, the emptiness of it. That which we usually take for granted as solid begins to reveal itself as groundless, abyssal, open. The self that we are is released from any and all systems of goods and grounds; it has no whence or wherefore, no ground or purpose, no reason. We cannot gain a determinate sense of who we are until we know what we will have been, but when we realize that the future is radically open, fundamentally surprising, it calls into question the meaning of who we are in the present. We cannot know who we will have been. We cannot look behind the curtain, cannot fast forward to see how it will all turn out. We are left with the radical uncertainty – and openness – of the present. Thus, the negation involved in detachment is absolute. By detaching ourselves from our creature-being, we do not discover who we always were and always meant to be – our “authentic” selves. We release ourselves to radical openness and uncertainty, the groundlessness of identity. And through that, we become open to the process of becoming something new through affirming the traumatic events that shape us.

At stake in the affirmation of these events is the possibility of being a self that is alive and open versus a self that is closed off and dead. As Eckhart (2009) exhorts us in the paragraph we examined in the Findings section, “Therefore enter into your own ground and work there: the works you perform there are all living” (p. 306). Only by becoming one with the ground – which is to say, by releasing oneself completely to the process of birth and transformation – can the soul be alive. There is only life in the \((ab)\)grunt.\(^{161}\)

\(^{161}\) I.e., the abyss, the groundless ground.
Chapter 8 – Conclusion

I carried out this study in order to explore the significance of Meister Eckhart’s view of the self for psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity (with Jacques Lacan as our primary psychoanalytic interlocutor). As a result of the interdisciplinary nature of this study, we have been inevitably confronted with the question of the relationship between the fields of psychoanalysis and religion. Past interdisciplinary studies of this kind have often represented attempts by one discipline to appropriate or colonize the other – e.g., reductionistic psychoanalytic interpretations of mystical experience as based in a regression to the infant’s state of fusion with the breast, on the one hand, and studies by religious authors which claim that a transcendent perspective is needed to supplement the secular worldview underlying psychoanalysis, on the other. In contrast to these studies, this study has sought to elucidate the common logic, structures, and objectives of mysticism and psychoanalysis. Despite their disparate worldviews, I have demonstrated that mysticism and psychoanalysis both have developed theories and practices in order to facilitate processes of transformation and, therefore, share a common orientation around change and becoming. Thus, mysticism does not need to be reduced to psychoanalytic categories, and psychoanalysis does not need to be supplemented by mystical insights; our study of mysticism through the work of Eckhart has aimed at highlighting and elucidating the mystical element which is already present is psychoanalysis.

The question of the self has been chosen as the topic for this dialogue between mysticism and psychoanalysis due to its central significance in psychoanalytic theory and because divergent theories of subjectivity have played a decisive role in controversies between various schools of psychoanalysis. Perspectives on the self, whether implicit or
explicit, tend to inform fundamental assumptions about the aims and technique of psychotherapy. So, for example, ego psychologists’ attribution of a great deal of power and agency to the ego, which they view as able to appropriate and control the unconscious, underlies their goal of bolstering the ego in treatment. In contrast, Lacan’s critique of the ego as illusory, constituted in a moment of misrecognition in the mirror stage, and sharing the structure of a symptom, leads to the goal of stripping away the ego and attending instead to the workings of the unconscious.

For Lacan, the unconscious is an other at the heart of the subject, an intimate exteriority (extimacy), and this has provided us with an opening for dialogue with Meister Eckhart, who views God as an other at the heart of the soul – i.e., the ground (grunt). As we have seen, for both Lacan and Eckhart the goal is to release ourselves (Gelassenheit) to this other at the core of the self. This releasement requires letting go of the properties and patterns which characterize our habitual way of relating to ourselves and the world through a process which Eckhart describes in terms of detachment (abegescheidenheit). We have compared Eckhartian detachment – i.e., the stripping away of the self’s properties (eigenschaften) – to a specific notion of castration in Lacan’s work which aims to strip away the phallus – i.e., the ways in which we attempt to feel whole. Moreover, releasement to the other at the core of the self culminates not in the fusion of one being with another, but in union with the process of birthing and creating (Gottesgeburt). Thus, the self is characterized not by a fixed essence, but by a continual process of coming-into-being.

For both Eckhart and Lacan, at stake in identification with this process of coming-into-being is the possibility of a certain kind of joy or enjoyment (jouissance).
Identification with properties (eigenschaften) or symptoms aims to manage and control jouissance, to channel it in particular directions, and to ensure that all loss and suffering is redeemed by some value or meaning; whereas, releasing oneself to the process of becoming leaves one maximally vulnerable and, therefore, open to both the deepest lows of suffering and highest peaks of joy.

The present study’s focus on two particular exponents of Christian mysticism and psychoanalysis, respectively – Meister Eckhart and Jacques Lacan – is one of its strengths, but this narrow focus is also a limit. Although Eckhart is one of the most prominent of all Christian mystics, the particular form his mysticism assumes by no means exhausts the Christian mystical tradition. Thus, future research could put psychoanalysis in dialogue with other Christian mystics. Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross would be promising candidates for such research, both because of their importance in the Christian mystical tradition and because Lacan (1986/1992) specifically mentions them as exemplifying mysticism (p. 76). The Beguine mystic Marguerite of Porete would be another promising mystical interlocutor, especially given that her significant influence on Eckhart means that their mysticisms share much in common. Similarly, future dialogues between mysticism and psychoanalysis could make use of psychoanalytic interlocutors other than Lacan. Winnicott and Bion would be two obvious candidates in light of Eigen’s (1998) extensive use of their ideas in The Psychoanalytic Mystic.

Another limitation to the present study is its theoretical nature. Although I have provided some clinical examples to illustrate what these ideas might look like in the context of clinical practice, future research could focus on the implications for psychotherapy. This research could take the form of a case study, or another theoretical
project could be undertaken preliminary to empirical research outlining more specifically what psychoanalytic therapy informed by mysticism would involve. Future research exploring connections between mysticism and psychoanalysis could also examine themes other than the self. Other topics, such as an examination of parallels between psychoanalytic and mystical uses of language, could easily be explored using qualitative empirical methods, such as the analysis of psychotherapy transcripts. My hope is that the present study has not only made an original contribution to psychoanalytic theory but has also laid a foundation for future empirical research on the implications for clinical practice.

In conclusion, I would like to end this dissertation with a quote from David Kangas (2011) about the Beguine mystic Marguerite of Porete, which could just as easily be about Meister Eckhart: “[F]or Porete, joy outweighed the pleasure of an identity gained” (p. 319). At stake in this dissertation is not only a particular theory of subjectivity, but a certain stance toward existence and a way of living. The mystical path is the joy of releasement, letting go of the quest for wholeness, completeness, and control and surrendering instead to the always-underway path of existence. A certain symptomatic pleasure can be gained by clinging to our fixed notions about ourselves and thereby gaining an ostensibly solid sense of who we are; however, this pleasure pales in comparison to the joy of releasement (Gelassenheit). And in the act of releasement, we release ourselves to the surprise of new creation; we become a fertile nothingness, an emptiness which gives birth. The challenge is not simply to annihilate the soul, but to give birth to a soul that is empty, that remains in a state of becoming, always underway. This dissertation has attempted to highlight the ways in which psychologists act as
midwives to this process of birth by helping people let go of their desire to “gain” an identity and release themselves to the joy of surrendering to a process of becoming.
REFERENCES


Kierkegaard, S. (1964). *Purity of heart is to will one thing.* (Original work published in 1847)


Appendix: Summary of Centering Prayer

The following is an excerpt from Keating’s (2008) chapter summarizing the method of centering prayer:

The method of centering prayer is designed to detach us from the ordinary flow of thoughts that reinforces our habitual way of thinking of ourselves and of looking at the world. It is like turning a radio from a long wave to a short wave. You may be used to a long wave set and the stations it picks up, but if you want to hear stations from far away, you have to turn to the other wavelengths. In similar fashion, if you let go of your ordinary thinking and emotional patterns, you open yourself to a new world of reality . . .

To do this systematically, take up a comfortable position that will enable you to sit still. Close your eyes . . . In order to slow down the usual flow of thoughts, think just one thought. For this purpose choose a word of one or two syllables with which you feel comfortable as a gesture or symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within you during periods of centering prayer.

A general loving look toward God may be better suited to the disposition of some persons. In either case, the same procedures are followed as in the use of the sacred word. The word is sacred because it is the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence beyond thoughts, images, and emotions. It is chosen not for its content but for its intent.

To start, silently introduce the sacred word as gently as if you were laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton. The sacred word is not meant to be
repeated continuously. It can become vague or just an impulse of the will, or even disappear.

When you become aware that you are thinking about or engaged with some thought, return to the sacred word as the expression of your intent. The effectiveness of this prayer does not depend on how distinctly you say the sacred word or how often, but rather on the gentleness with which you introduce it in the beginning and the promptness with which you return to it when you are engaged mentally or emotionally with some thought.

Thoughts are a normal, inevitable, and integral part of centering prayer. Our ordinary thoughts are like boats sitting on a river so closely packed together that we cannot see the river that is holding them up. A “thought” in the context of this prayer is any perception that arises in consciousness, whether a body sensation, feeling emotion, image, memory, plan, concept, reflection, psychological breakthrough, or spiritual experience. We are normally aware of one object after another passing across the inner screen of consciousness. When we pay no attention to that flow, space begins to appear between the boats. Up comes the reality on which they are floating.

Centering prayer is a method of directing your attention from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the formless. At first you are preoccupied by the particular “boats” that are going by. You become interested in seeing what is on them. But just let them all go by. If you notice you are becoming interested in them, return to the sacred word as the gift of your whole being to God present within you. (pp. 120-122)