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{ CHAPTER FIVE }

# The Science of God

*What is truth? The truth is such a noble thing that if God were able to turn away from truth, I would cling to truth and let God go; for God is truth, and all that is in time, and that God created, is not truth.*

GERMAN SERMON 25

# The World of the University

When Eckhart arrived at the University of Paris in 1293, a year before being named prior of his monastery in Erfurt, he was already a rising star in the Order of Preachers. Graduate study in theology was the most competitive and demanding of all the higher degrees, typically requiring at least fifteen years of study—including three or four years of undergraduate work—to attain the title of “Master,” the equivalent to the modern “Doctor.” Advanced degrees in law and medicine, by comparison, were usually completed in only ten and six years respectively. The demanding track of the self-proclaimed “queen of the sciences” obviously required a significant investment of time and money. Bishops and heads of religious orders predictably selected only the most intellectually gifted among their brethren to pursue serious theological study in Paris, men identified as future administrative leaders or perhaps even professors themselves. For the great majority of Dominican friars, three years in their own house’s *studium artium* would be the extent of their formal education, supplemented of course by daily lectures

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01 on the Bible and whatever private reading they wished to pursue. At most  
 02 one in ten Dominicans went on to some form of higher learning, and the  
 03 roughly fifteen-thousand-member order annually sent only two friars—  
 04 men judged to possess “a vast capacity and a great aptitude for grasping sci-  
 05 ences of this sort”—to attend classes at the University of Paris in preparation  
 06 to receive the distinguished and relatively rare title of “master of theology.”

07 Eckhart’s 1293–94 stay in Paris was not his first encounter with the city.  
 08 Unfortunately we don’t know the number or duration of previous stays,  
 09 which would have occurred between 1277, when Eckhart was in his late  
 10 teens, and 1286, when he was in his mid-twenties. During the intervening  
 11 years, the still youthful friar had completed at least six additional years of  
 12 theological study at Dominican houses, most likely in Erfurt and at the or-  
 13 der’s advanced institute, or *studium generale*, in Cologne. By Eckhart’s time,  
 14 there were at least seven of these advanced programs throughout the prov-  
 15 inces, and the house at Cologne enjoyed a reputation as the most vibrant  
 16 theological community after the era’s preeminent universities in Paris and  
 17 Oxford.

18 As the now thirty-three-year-old Eckhart approached Paris’s Saint-Denis  
 19 gate once more, he must have recalled the great cultural shock of his initial  
 20 encounter with the city years earlier. First, there had been his unprecedented  
 21 youthful foray out of “the lands of the German tongue.” Traveling more  
 22 than four hundred miles from Erfurt by foot—friars were forbidden to jour-  
 23 ney by horse—would have required at least three weeks, perhaps twice that  
 24 long. Typically, Dominican friars journeyed in pairs, with each *socius* look-  
 25 ing after the physical and spiritual welfare of the other. A young friar such as  
 26 Eckhart would never have been permitted to make such a trip without at  
 27 least one older companion along. The brothers would have traveled light,  
 28 with few provisions, relying on the generosity of those they met along the  
 29 way for food and shelter. Of course they could count on support from fellow  
 30 Dominicans, but this was a more haphazard prospect than we might expect.  
 31 Even though the order boasted more than 590 priories scattered throughout  
 32 Europe, most of these were in cities; establishments in the sprawling coun-  
 33S tryside were less common. Further complicating matters, as the brothers  
 34N moved into territories beyond their native Thuringia, they would encounter



German dialects so different from their own as to be unintelligible, and, eventually, non-Germanic languages including a variety of regional French dialects. In these foreign lands, not only would Eckhart and his companions have difficulty communicating their basic needs, they would be unable to preach for donations, except in Latin, a language typically spoken only by some nobles and those affiliated with the church.

Even now, a decade or more after Eckhart's first visit, Paris remained a metropolis like none the friar had seen elsewhere. The sheer size of the city and its environs far eclipsed that of Cologne, the largest urban center he had known to that point. Earlier in the century, Philip Augustus had undertaken a major public works program to accommodate the city's burgeoning population of fifty thousand, including newly paved thoroughfares, two new bridges across the Seine, and an encircling town wall nearly three and a half miles long, with ten gates and seventy-five defensive towers. The king also continued construction on the famed cathedral of Notre-Dame, begun in 1163 (and still incomplete at the time of Eckhart's death thirty-five years later).



Paris, ca. 1350, viewed from north to south. The left bank, home to the university, is at the top of the image. The still-unfinished cathedral of Notre Dame is on the island at the center.

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01           Meanwhile, the city had continued to grow exponentially and, by the  
02 time of Eckhart's arrival, encompassed an urban center of more than a thou-  
03 sand acres and a population of nearly 200,000, making it the largest metrop-  
04 olis in Christendom. Most of the demographic growth occurred on the Right  
05 (or north) Bank of the Seine, home to the shipping wharves, markets, and  
06 banks of the city's thriving economy. The Left (or south) Bank was domi-  
07 nated by the university and was thus called the Latin Quarter, as all in-  
08 struction, and much of the nonacademic conversation among students and  
09 professors, who came from all corners of Europe, occurred in Latin. Both  
10 Louis IX and Philip IV made further efforts at urban planning, but the city  
11 Eckhart knew remained crowded, noisy, dangerous, and dirty, with visitors  
12 often complaining about the pervasive stench of excrement and other refuse  
13 tinged with the ubiquitous odor of burned charcoal and wood.

14           Like Erfurt and Cologne, Paris was home to many who were foreign-  
15 born—some merely passing through, others longtime residents—who filled  
16 the streets with languages, foods, and apparel from every part of the known  
17 world. Most of the city's denizens worked in some sort of commerce or man-  
18 ufacturing. In addition to the large merchant houses and banks, there were  
19 more than a hundred different trade guilds, comprising more than 1,300  
20 distinct professions, from goldsmiths to tanners. As in many modern cities,  
21 the contrast between rich and poor was stark, with the top 1 percent holding  
22 three quarters of the community's wealth and 70 percent of the population  
23 too destitute to pay any taxes at all. Most strikingly, especially from a mod-  
24 ern perspective, at least a tenth of residents—roughly twenty thousand  
25 people—enjoyed clerical status of some sort. This included some eight thou-  
26 sand undergraduates at the university, most of whom were only temporarily  
27 considered "religious," but also thousands of monks, mendicants, parish  
28 priests, and religious women. As in most urban centers of the era, the day's  
29 rhythm was set by church bells that announced the eight monastic hours, and  
30 all business was conducted according to the liturgical calendar, with its doz-  
31 ens of public feast days.

32           The University of Paris, less than a century old but already famous,  
33S contributed mightily to the cosmopolitan nature of the city, drawing thou-  
34N sands of students, all male, to pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees.



The great majority of these were in their late teens or early twenties and were technically considered clerics, which entitled them to a kind of diplomatic immunity vis-à-vis local secular authorities. In reality, the character of the university was distinctly practical and worldly. Their monastic tonsures and mandatory gowns notwithstanding, undergraduates were much more likely to be ambitious future professionals than prospective preachers or pastors. Even at the graduate level, classes and degrees often exhibited what one modern historian calls “a vocational emphasis,” focusing less on the leisurely contemplation of a classical education than on skills that would fuel career advancement in government, medicine, law, or ecclesiastical administration.

As a return visitor to the university, Eckhart was already familiar with the structures of academic life. Most of his daily activity would have centered on the Left Bank, where professors and especially students were ubiquitous. And they came from everywhere. Officially, the undergraduate student body was divided into four “nations”: Picard (primarily made up of students from the Netherlands), English (which also included Germans and Scandinavians), French (made up of students from most regions of France, as well as those from Spain and Italy), and Norman (whose members came exclusively from northwestern France). Classes were conducted entirely in Latin, and residential halls similarly prohibited vernacular tongues in an effort to minimize factions and gossip. Despite the use of paid informers and other disciplinary measures, young men tended to congregate along linguistic lines. Perhaps fortunately for the enhancement of Eckhart’s Latin, German speakers constituted a tiny minority of the student body, far outnumbered by peers from England, the Netherlands, and of course France.

During his first sojourn at the university, the young Eckhart was no doubt shocked by the undisciplined living of many students, some as young as fourteen and experiencing full freedom for the first time. Although college statutes repeatedly condemned the frequenting of taverns and “dishonest places,” the goliards, or young satirist poets, wrote odes to the vices of “dice, wine, and wenches.” Not surprisingly, in student letters that survive from the era, young scholars spent most of their ink requesting more money, ostensibly for food, clothes, rent, and books. In the town-and-gown tradition



01 that has survived to this day, Parisians relied on and often exploited the huge  
02 numbers of young men with money in their pockets, yet also deplored the  
03 violence and disorder that frequently ensued. A few decades earlier, one par-  
04 ticularly destructive student riot, starting with a bar fight, had resulted in  
05 several severe injuries and at least one student death. Outraged university  
06 masters went on strike for two years until townspeople made further provi-  
07 sions for student safety. As in college towns today, drunken disturbances of  
08 various sorts erupted weekly, sometimes daily, particularly during such  
09 rowdy winter feasts as St. Nicholas (December 6), when a student was elected  
10 bishop for a day, and the particularly notorious Feast of Fools on New Year's  
11 Day. The French king Philip Augustus marveled at the aggressive instincts  
12 of Parisian undergraduates, exclaiming that they surpassed even those of his  
13 knights.

14 Wealthy families leased entire houses for their sons, staffing them with  
15 tutors and servants to keep the young men in classes and out of trouble. The  
16 great majority of undergraduates, lacking such resources, rented rooms in  
17 houses, or colleges, run by masters or other scholars. Here the university  
18 charged the adults with enforcing discipline and helping to identify "putrid  
19 members" or "fictitious scholars and hangers-on." The most common of-  
20 fenses ranged from sneaking food out of the kitchen or bringing uninvited  
21 friends to dinner to keeping women or pets in their rooms. Most violations  
22 entailed a fine of money or pint of wine; the ultimate punishment of expul-  
23 sion was kept in reserve. Poorer students slept five or six to a room, and  
24 some were even forced to find lodging in a tavern or bordello, with no super-  
25 vision whatsoever.

26 The worldly, even materialistic nature of the university and its denizens  
27 presented a stark contrast to the plain and regimented life of monks who  
28 came to study or teach in Paris. Dominicans and other mendicant orders  
29 accordingly strove to cultivate separate enclaves within the larger commu-  
30 nity for their own students. Eckhart and his fellow friars, for instance, were  
31 required to reside at the Dominican house of St. Jacques, located near the  
32 southern wall of the Left Bank. Originally a pilgrim hospice dedicated to St.  
33S James, the priory served as the primary base for Dominicans in France, who  
34N became known as Jacobins. (Not until the much later French Revolution was





the name associated with the political club that had taken over the building.) 01  
 In theory, the Paris priory might house as many as 110 undergraduates 02  
 each year, but in fact most provinces never sent their full quota of young 03  
 friars to the university, and the actual number of these “externs” might be 04  
 only half that. 05

While excused from choir and some other typical obligations, friar stu- 06  
 dents still followed the Rule in their daily routines, rising at midnight to pray 07  
 and again before sunrise, eating all meals in house, and retiring to bed by 08  
 eight p.m. Some of their classes were even held within the walls of St. Jacques 09  
 itself. As an undergraduate, Eckhart had usually been accompanied to out- 10  
 side lectures or debates by his Dominican *socius* (probably a fellow German), 11  
 presumably so that each might help the other avoid the temptations sur- 12  
 rounding them. Of course, the young friars couldn’t completely avoid inter- 13  
 actions with secular clerics or laypeople, but they lived a carefully restricted 14  
 version of the university experience enjoyed by most students. 15

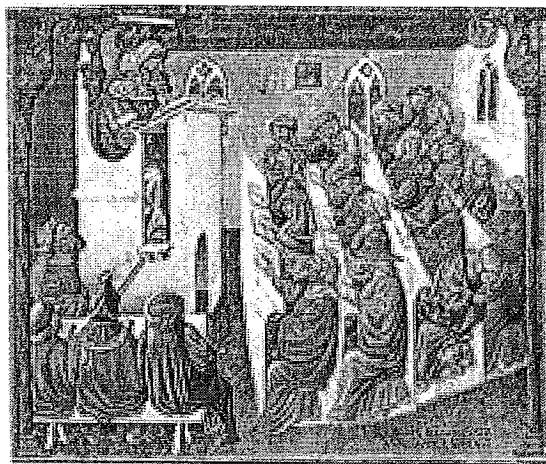
The Dominican “in but not of the university” approach for its students 16  
 and teachers naturally generated some tensions with other members of the 17  
 university as well as townspeople. Since their arrival in the 1220s, mendi- 18  
 cants in general had assumed ever more prominent roles in academic life. 19  
 Their distinctive lifestyle and allegiances, meanwhile, continually put them 20  
 at odds with the secular clerics who dominated the administration and fac- 21  
 ulty. When both Dominicans and Franciscans refused to take oaths of obe- 22  
 dience to university statutes in 1253, decades of animosity finally burst into 23  
 the open, culminating in the formal expulsion of mendicant lecturers and 24  
 students. Friars were routinely assaulted in the streets with impunity, excre- 25  
 ment and straw were dumped on them from upper windows as they passed 26  
 by, and the Dominican house of St. Jacques was even attacked with arrows. 27  
 After a few years, university administrators lifted the ban, largely under 28  
 pressure from Pope Alexander IV. Of the fifteen faculty chairs in theology, 29  
 the university allotted six to be split among five mendicant orders, with two 30  
 of those going to Dominicans. Of course the formal settlement did little to 31  
 address collegial or popular resentment of mendicants, a constant source of 32  
 tension throughout Eckhart’s numerous residencies in the city. S33

Even as a double outsider—Dominican and German—the young friar N34

01 could not have avoided immersion in the dominant academic culture of  
 02 Paris. Judging from his brilliant successes and frequent return to the univer-  
 03 sity over the years, it was a way of life he found—at least initially—  
 04 intoxicating. As an undergraduate, he had attended daily lectures on the  
 05 seven liberal arts, composed of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic)  
 06 and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). As in ev-  
 07 ery subject, classical Roman and Greek authors provided the substance of  
 08 lessons. The *trivium*, for instance, relied heavily on Donatus (fourth century)  
 09 and Priscian (fifth century) for teaching Latin grammar, and Aristotle  
 10 (fourth century BCE) for logic—all works that Eckhart had already encoun-  
 11 tered during his earlier studies in Erfurt and Cologne. The *quadrivium* fea-  
 12 tured Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *libri naturales* as  
 13 standard texts, along with Euclid’s *Geometry*. None of Eckhart’s subsequent  
 14 treatises or sermons reflects any interest in the *quadrivium*, but he was un-  
 15 doubtedly well versed at a fundamental level in all four subjects.

16 Now a lecturer as well as a graduate theology student, Eckhart still began  
 17 his typical class day at the monastic hour of *prime*, roughly six a.m., delivering  
 18 a lecture that lasted two to three hours, after which a “student master” sum-  
 19 marized the professor’s main points in a *repetitio*. At the lowest level, profes-  
 20 sors lecturing to classrooms full of undergraduates made no pretense of  
 21 “knowledge production.” Their task was essentially that of knowledge trans-  
 22 mission. A professor would read long excerpts from the writings of past “mas-  
 23 ters,” particularly Aristotle and St. Augustine, to students from his chair (*ex*  
 24 *cathedra*) and explicate the text. Good lecture notes, bolstered by weekly re-  
 25 views with student masters, provided the key study resources for subsequent  
 26 oral exams. Given the great cost of parchment, many undergraduates suppl-  
 27 mented their own scribblings—crammed to fill every available space on the  
 28 sheet—with various eight-page book excerpts, known as *peciae*, produced by  
 29 the scores of copyists working in Paris. College libraries obligingly main-  
 30 tained unbound copies of the most important textbooks, allowing students to  
 31 borrow individual *peciae* for copying.

32 Passive reception of traditional wisdom, however, was by no means the  
 33S sole defining feature of medieval academic culture, even among undergrad-  
 34N uates. The scholarly life also had an intensely interactive, often combative



A lecture at the University of Paris. The professor reads from a classical text, occasionally adding his own interpolations. Medieval scholastics considered themselves dwarves standing upon the shoulders of giants. They could only see a bit farther because of the monumental work of their ancient predecessors.

character. Eckhart might have detected hints of rival interpretations among his professors during their lectures, but the true arena of academic competition was the open *disputatio*. In a disputation, the lecturer would put forward and defend against all comers “a proposition open to doubt,” such as “Adam and Eve were created mortal,” or “It is never permissible to tell a lie.” Candidates for a bachelor’s degree were required to participate in at least five of these frequent public events per year. In an ordinary disputation, the *quaestio* was chosen by the presiding master; in a less frequent and extemporaneous version, known as the *quodlibet* (“what you please”), the question would come from the audience. During each two-day debate on a given thesis, masters, lecturers, and a few bold undergraduates would gather in a lecture room or auditorium and present alternate positions based on their quotation and interpretation of acknowledged sources. Speakers were often accompanied by loud groups of supporters, sometimes known as “sects,” and the overall atmosphere was not unlike that of a joust, with many students and teachers attracted as much by great feats of memory and nimble oratory as by the definitive *determinatio*, pronounced at the end by a presiding regent

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01 master. More than the lecture hall, the disputation, especially in its *quodlibet*  
 02 form, was where academic reputations were made or destroyed. Thomas  
 03 Aquinas, to take one outstanding example, participated in more than five  
 04 hundred ordinary disputations during a two-year period, all delivered to  
 05 overflowing auditoriums. His *quodlibet* appearances, one in Advent and one  
 06 in Lent, were openly festive occasions, with all lectures and other classes  
 07 suspended for the duration.  
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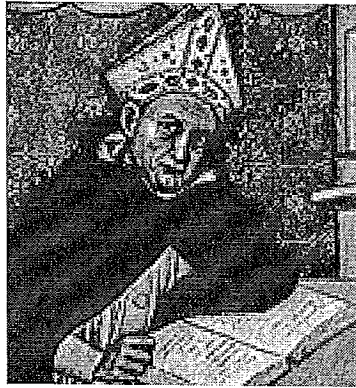
## 10 Dwarves on the Shoulders of Giants

11  
 12 What was not entirely clear to contemporaries outside the university and  
 13 remains fundamentally elusive for many modern observers is that members  
 14 of this scholarly culture were not merely arguing for the sake of mental ex-  
 15 ercise and academic posturing (although there was a fair amount of that too,  
 16 especially during public disputations). Eckhart and other advanced theolog-  
 17 ical students believed they were living in an exceptionally dynamic period of  
 18 intellectual exploration, epitomized by the rise of “speculative theology,” a  
 19 field pioneered by Peter Abelard in the previous century. Speculative theol-  
 20 ogy went far beyond the usual issues of morality and ethics to explore pro-  
 21 found metaphysical questions about the nature of God and human existence.  
 22 The very notion that one could question and investigate spiritual matters in  
 23 a rationalist, “scientific” manner remained revolutionary and controversial.  
 24 Yet by the time of Eckhart, this unprecedented Christian project of philo-  
 25 sophical discovery was in full force. Thus, in addition to disputing the na-  
 26 ture of sin and virtue according to the Church Fathers, some professors  
 27 introduced their advanced students to metaphysical debates about the soul,  
 28 the intellect, and—most significant for Eckhart’s subsequent career—the na-  
 29 ture of God.

30 By far the greatest influence on the budding theologian’s thinking was the  
 31 towering figure of Albrecht of Lauingen, better known as Albert the Great (ca.  
 32 1200–1280), a fellow Dominican and a fellow German. Historians still debate  
 33S whether a passing reference by Eckhart—*Albert always said*—indicates that the  
 34N two men became personally acquainted during the older man’s final years in



Cologne. During Eckhart's formative years, the scholar known as "the wonder and miracle of our time" was regularly quoted by contemporaries—especially Dominicans—as an equal of Aristotle, enjoying during his own lifetime "authority which no man has ever had in doctrine." In the words of a later chronicler, "if he had not been, Germany would have remained an ass." Even Albert's most famous student, Thomas Aquinas, didn't attain as great a level of acclaim until many years after the latter's death in 1274.



Albertus Magnus, aka Albert the Great, the most revered German scholar of Eckhart's day.

The polymath Albert had been recruited as a young man to the order by Dominic's direct successor, Jordan of Saxony (ca. 1190–1237). As in Eckhart's case, superiors quickly recognized the future theologian's exceptional leadership and intellectual abilities. He was the first German Dominican to become a master of theology at the University of Paris; Eckhart would be one of the last. Also like Eckhart, he served as a German provincial for the order and taught theology at Dominican houses. Most crucially, Albert became a central figure in the thirteenth-century debate over the use of pagan philosophy in Christian scholarship. In 1248, despite much internal resistance, he established the first Dominican *studium generale* at Cologne and proceeded to incorporate Aristotle and pagan philosophy into the order's theological curriculum in 1255.



01           The European recovery of Aristotle during the previous one hundred  
 02 years was the most important intellectual development of the era we now  
 03 know as the Middle Ages. Greek philosophy had been a foundational compo-  
 04 nent of all higher learning during the Roman Empire, but most of that  
 05 knowledge was lost—along with a great number of Greek texts—following  
 06 the Western Empire’s decline. Byzantine and later Islamic scholars contin-  
 07 ued to study and debate Plato and Aristotle, but in the West only a small  
 08 number of Greek manuscripts remained, dutifully copied (but not necessar-  
 09 ily understood) by a handful of monks. At the beginning of the twelfth cen-  
 10 tury, just two of Aristotle’s works (*Categories* and *On Interpretation*) had been  
 11 translated into Latin, and Plato’s *Timaeus* was the sole representative of his  
 12 own corpus. Three more centuries would pass before the remainder of Pla-  
 13 to’s works would be known in the West. Aristotle, by contrast, was about to  
 14 become the most dominant intellectual figure in all of Christendom.

15           Between 1250 and 1350, more than forty-two books of Aristotle were  
 16 translated into Latin. Most of the new publications came from the transla-  
 17 tions and commentaries of Islamic philosophers, whose rediscovery of the  
 18 Greeks in the eighth century had ignited a golden age that was just beginning  
 19 to wane. The Latin version of *Metaphysics*, for instance, was based on a trans-  
 20 lation of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā; ca. 980–1037), perhaps the greatest of a distin-  
 21 guished series of thinkers. At the same time, these Muslim philosophers’ own  
 22 sophisticated analyses themselves became part of the Aristotelian corpus of  
 23 the thirteenth century. The 1230 Latin version of the *Commentary on Aristotle’s*  
 24 *Metaphysics* by Averroës (Ibn Rushd; 1126–98), another influential author,  
 25 would become as well known as Aristotle’s original book.

26           The impact of Aristotle in Eckhart’s time is hard to overstate. While  
 27 many scholars, such as Albert, delighted at the insights of the philosopher on  
 28 such a vast array of subjects, just as many feared the deleterious effects of  
 29 Aristotelian thought on Christian faith. Learned opposition to the inter-  
 30 weaving of philosophy and revelation dated back to the earliest days of Chris-  
 31 tianity and would continue well beyond the time of Albert and Eckhart.  
 32 During the thirteenth century, the most frequent objection concerned the  
 33S relevance or practicality of speculative theology itself, a discipline occupied  
 34N with such metaphysical issues as the origin of the universe, the nature of





A medieval portrayal of Aristotle, aka the Philosopher.

God, and the attributes of the soul. Theology, such critics argued, was for pursuing good morals and righteous living, not—as Dominican master general Humbert de Romans put it—for “seeking to know the incomprehensible, which cannot be clearly understood either by philosophical reasons or from holy scripture . . . learning things curious and subtle but of little use.”

Even more alarming to these critics, some contemporary admirers of Aristotle appeared to accept certain claims of “the” Philosopher that contradicted scripture and church tradition. In 1270, just fifteen years after the introduction of Aristotle’s writings into the undergraduate curriculum, the archbishop of Paris, Étienne Tempier, struck the first blow for conservatives, condemning thirteen such propositions allegedly found in the writings of “radical” Aristotelians, known as Latin Averroists, because of their admiration for the Muslim philosopher. The young and popular Siger of Brabant, for instance, appeared to argue that truths derived from religious revelation could coexist with truths derived from philosophy, even when they seemed to contradict one another. Christians should accept in faith, he argued, that God created the universe, even though Aristotle logically proved the absence of such a beginning. Looking for reputable allies, Siger invoked the ostensible endorsement of the long dead but highly respected Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon; 1135–1204), who had conceded that “something might be impossible in the realm of nature and yet possible in the supernatural realm.”

Obviously this was an unsustainable position, yet the new movement

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01 continued to attract many enthusiastic supporters. Dominican theologians  
 02 attempted to find a safe middle ground, arguing that natural philosophy and  
 03 Christian faith were not only compatible but overlapping and complemen-  
 04 tary. As the great Thomas Aquinas explained, while some Christian teach-  
 05 ing had to be accepted on faith, many truths were knowable through unaided  
 06 reasons. The controversy over using Aristotle in theology raged on, how-  
 07 ever, including a second, more comprehensive condemnation of the Aver-  
 08 roists in 1277. Not until Eckhart's return to Paris in 1293 had the rancor of his  
 09 undergraduate years eased, with the incorporation of ancient and recent  
 10 pagan works mostly accepted among academic theologians.

11 As a graduate "Reader in Sentences," Eckhart's own lectures focused  
 12 exclusively on theological questions related to Lombard's *Four Books of Sen-*  
 13 *tences* and the Bible, seemingly safe and uncontroversial topics. Building on  
 14 his earlier work as a young friar in Erfurt, the more mature Eckhart moved  
 15 from passive reception of Lombard's points, or *distinctiones*, to an active in-  
 16 vestigation of specific questions. Lombard himself had actually conceived  
 17 of his collection as a theological casebook, intended to spur informed  
 18 conversation—an invitation Eckhart eagerly accepted.

19 Logic, a component of all undergraduate training, lay at the heart of the  
 20 dialectical method employed by thirteenth-century theologians. The goal  
 21 was to extend knowledge on a subject by means of inference from certain  
 22 authoritative texts as well as from common knowledge. Whether in an oral  
 23 disputation or on the page of a *summa*, Eckhart and other theologians of his  
 24 time believed that adversarial debate, the practice of arguing both sides of a  
 25 question, would demonstrate the truth or falsehood of any statement. After  
 26 stating a question—for instance the initial query of Aquinas's *Summa Theo-*  
 27 *logica*, "whether sacred science (i.e., theology) is a science"—a debater would  
 28 begin with the principal objections to an affirmative response, providing  
 29 evidence for each ("It would seem that sacred science (i.e., theology) is not a  
 30 science because . . ."). In written format, the author would then rebut his  
 31 own objections, first stating his thesis ("On the contrary . . ."), then giving  
 32 evidence in support of that thesis ("I answer that . . ."), then making specific  
 33S replies to each objection. Although the ostensibly true conclusion did not  
 34N



necessarily satisfy all listeners or readers, consensus emerged on some points, allowing scholars a sense of intellectual progress. 01  
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No records survive of Eckhart's lectures from this year, but a later collection, preserved in the Erfurt priory, suggests that a mixture of old and new questions intrigued the young theologian. "Whether theology is a science" (i.e., provable by rational means) continued to be a relevant issue throughout Eckhart's life, as did various questions about the Trinity, the subject of Book I of Lombard's *Sentences*. Typically, a lecture would focus on a question raised by one of the chapters, such as "Whether it is to be granted that God generated Himself," or "How God can be said to be able to do all things, since we can do many things which he cannot do" (such as be mistaken, sin, die, etc.). The Erfurt collection suggests that Eckhart often used the *Sentences* as a launching pad for metaphysical questions of more current academic concern, principally about the intellect, the will, and the soul. And while the *Sentences* relied overwhelmingly on one Church Father in particular—St. Augustine—theologians of Eckhart's generation were far more likely to employ broader scriptural support, thanks to the more accessible format of the Bible, as well as the various non-Christian sources that had come to prominence during the century that had passed since Lombard composed his work. 03  
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Eckhart's new academic position allowed him to continue his pursuit of God among the most brilliant theological minds of his day. It also represented a significant career step within the Order of Preachers, enabling him to teach as a principal lector of philosophy at any Dominican house in Europe once he left Paris. His privileges would thereafter include a private study, a research assistant, an allowance for food and clothing, and—perhaps most significant—exemption from all pastoral and administrative duties. In practice, very few Dominicans were permitted to pursue full-time academic careers—Aquinas being the most notable exception—and Eckhart, despite his status as a lector, would in fact be called upon to devote more time to preaching and performing administrative functions once he left Paris and returned to priory life. There are indications that he continued to harbor academic ambitions for at least another two decades, but if he resented their 21  
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01 consistent curtailing by the demands of his order, those thoughts are lost to  
02 history.

03 He also recognized that at the University of Paris he was still closer to the  
04 bottom of the hierarchy than to its top. His "Second Bachelor" status was a  
05 step up from undergraduate and "Bible Reader," but still below "Student  
06 Master" (essentially a teaching assistant), which required an additional year  
07 of study, and "Principal Lecturer," which required yet another year. Al-  
08 though Eckhart would eventually attain the status of master (the equivalent  
09 of a modern Ph.D.), the path to that degree must have appeared daunting  
10 and uncertain to the young second bachelor: in addition to the six years of  
11 arts study Eckhart had already completed in the *studium generale* of various  
12 Dominican houses, he would need to complete eight more years of advanced  
13 theological study, including the current academic year. The university typi-  
14 cally waived the six-year residence requirement for Dominicans and other  
15 mendicants, so some of this demanding work might be completed back in  
16 Germany, but even then he stood little chance of reaching this goal before  
17 the age of forty.



18 Eckhart's inferior status among the intellectual aristocracy of Paris was  
19 undoubtedly challenging in other ways. Those very few scholars who at-  
20 tained the vaunted status of master enjoyed considerable power within the  
21 university, leading to a widespread reputation among those below them for  
22 arrogance and caprice. Outside of the academic world, resentment could be  
23 even more palpable, especially toward the admittedly elitist theological fac-  
24 ulty. Alvarus Pelagius, a member of the papal curia a generation after Eck-  
25 hart, skewered the insider culture of professors who "despise simple persons  
26 who know how to avoid faults of conduct better than those of words," choos-  
27 ing instead "to teach useless, vain, and sometimes false doctrine . . . they try  
28 to say what is subtle, not what is useful, so that they may be seen of men and  
29 called rabbis, which is especially reprehensible in masters of theology."  
30 Sometimes outsider resentments were prompted by a more fundamental  
31 anti-intellectualism. Francis of Assisi thought that book learning of any sort  
32 inevitably "puffed up" an individual: When one of his novices asked permis-  
33S sion to purchase a psalter, the saint replied, "After that you'll want a

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breviary. And when you have that, you'll sit in your chair like a prelate and say to your brother: 'Fetch me my breviary!'" 01

Whatever personal slights and indignities Eckhart suffered during the 02  
 early stages of his own academic career, his regular return to Paris suggests 03  
 that at some point he made his peace with the hierarchies and injustices of 04  
 university life. His subsequent promotions and other rewards likewise indi- 05  
 cate that he became adept at its particular mix of genuine intellectual curios- 06  
 ity and personal ambition. And even a sincerely humble young friar would 07  
 have had difficulty suppressing his pride in the high degree of success Eck- 08  
 hart would eventually enjoy in this arena, an intellectual accomplishment 09  
 far beyond the abilities of almost all his fellow Dominicans. How could he 10  
 not feel a surge of satisfaction upon hearing one of his professors, Henry of 11  
 Ghent (1217–93), tell promising young scholars that it was far better for a 12  
 young doctor to use his gifts at the university than to squander them in a 13  
 parish church? Was not scholarship also a sacred and noble vocation? 14  
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## Cracking the Celestial Code

There was also the sheer intellectual excitement around speculative theol- 17  
 ogy in Eckhart's university days. To understand what a charged experience 18  
 this represented to many intelligent seekers, we must suspend most precon- 19  
 ceptions about the medieval scholastic endeavor. Since the inception of the 20  
 university, it has been common to portray the theological work of "the 21  
 schoolmen" as petty squabbling over unknowable abstractions. Long before 22  
 the pejorative characterizations of Martin Luther and other Protestant re- 23  
 formers, even during Eckhart's own time, outsiders like Alvarus Pelagius 24  
 mocked both the jargon and abstractness of professional theologians' de- 25  
 bates. Much as today, when a fine point of no apparent real-world signifi- 26  
 cance is dismissed as "academic," most people in Eckhart's time spoke of 27  
 arguing "in the manner of the schools" to describe quibbling over irrelev- 28  
 ant subtleties. There is no known record of an actual scholastic debate on how 29  
 many angels could dance on the head of a pin (an invention of the later 30  
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01 satirist François Rabelais), but the absurdity of both the question itself and  
02 the image of a roomful of professors fervently attempting to resolve it has  
03 come to emblemize an entire intellectual culture.

04 From the perspective of Eckhart and his professors, however, they were  
05 “scientists” engaged in cutting-edge research on a question of monumental  
06 importance—the very nature of reality. Their big questions still preoccupy  
07 us today: Why is there something instead of nothing? How does the uni-  
08 verse work? What is the place of humans in that universe? With the aca-  
09 demic rigor and bold imagination that characterize today’s theoretical  
10 physicists, they systematically accumulated evidence and built scholarly  
11 consensus, all inspired by the goal of achieving a comprehensive outline of  
12 human knowledge and—even more exciting—a unifying theory. The intel-  
13 lectual level of their debates and the intense scrutiny applied to all argu-  
14 ments easily matched the cerebral exchanges of a modern MIT conference  
15 or Caltech symposium. To grasp the points of contention among scholastic  
16 theologians, let alone their very language, required years of specialized  
17 training, as well as a tremendous capacity for abstract thinking—an ability  
18 to temporarily suspend understanding of “the real world” and engage in  
19 prolonged thought experiments that often relied on purely speculative ob-  
20 jects and categories.

21 The guardians of church doctrine from the pope on down may not have  
22 understood the specifics of most scholastic arguments, but they were eager  
23 to cite scholarly consensus in making pronouncements that suited their own  
24 beliefs and goals. The Eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation, for in-  
25 stance, endorsed by the Council of Lateran IV in 1215, relied on Aristotelian  
26 notions of universal essence (which changed from bread and wine to the  
27 body and blood of Christ even while the external appearances, or “acci-  
28 dents,” remained the same). Most laypeople were even less likely than ordi-  
29 nary clerics to comprehend the subtleties of the schools, but they indirectly  
30 experienced the consequences of such debates in the everyday administering  
31 and veneration of the sacraments.

32 At the same time, the *scientia* (“way of knowing”) of Eckhart’s theology  
33S professors was obviously not the same as the science of modern researchers.  
34N There is of course a fundamental difference in the nature of proof, but an



even bigger difference between the two approaches was the scope of their respective ambitions. Whereas today's cosmologists limit themselves to the material universe and remain officially agnostic on spiritual matters, scholastic theologians took it upon themselves to come up with theories that also encompassed the nonmaterial universe, including God, angels, and the soul. This new quest for a spiritual-material unified theory was controversial in its own time. As is true today, many believers of Eckhart's era saw the two spheres of knowledge—material and spiritual—as overlapping at best, but believed that each relied on essentially different ways of knowing and different sources for evidence. What gave these theological theorists the confidence to undertake such a bold and unprecedented endeavor?

The answer, in a word, is Aristotle. In order to explain something as complex as the universe, speculative theologians needed to break it up into parts and give the parts some kind of order based on mutual relationships. Grafting the dominant concepts and terms of natural philosophy (i.e., natural science) onto theological questions provided Eckhart and his contemporaries with a well-established method of observation, analysis, comparison, and generalization. Aristotle's most basic taxonomy, for instance, which distinguished between the substance, or "essence," of all things and those nonessential traits of individual things called "accidents," allowed thirteenth-century theologians to discuss and categorize all created things, living or inanimate, material or spiritual.

For instance, every discernable "species" of everything in creation, from angels to rocks, was believed to possess an essential nature, defined by a combination of certain attributes. Scholastics referred to this essence as the universal of the species (similar to the Platonic "form"). The universal chicken, for instance, was feathered, warm-blooded, reproduced by laying eggs, and so forth. By various logical means, a scholastic might then distinguish between the essential traits of the universal "chicken" and the secondary, or "particular" traits of distinctive varieties or families of chickens, such as coloring, size, or other aspects of physical appearance.

By the time of Eckhart's study in Paris, this understanding of universals had become the norm among speculative theologians. There was still room, however, for disagreement on whether universals existed in reality. Some



01 scholars believed that universals were part of God's creation but remained  
02 essentially abstract ideas from which material examples flowed. For so-called  
03 Realists, though—including both Aquinas and Eckhart—universals were  
04 real entities in themselves, albeit directly knowable only to God. Everything  
05 else in creation—material or spiritual—flowed from this divine constella-  
06 tion of universals.

07 Thirteenth-century theology was thus a science in the Aristotelian sense,  
08 in that it was internally consistent in terms and eminently logical. The integ-  
09 rity of the scholastic system relied on univocity (“one meaning”), a “pure”  
10 and constant language like mathematics. Yet as disputations over even the  
11 pivotal concept of universals demonstrated, this degree of consensus proved  
12 elusive. Many of Eckhart's professors also recognized the challenges inher-  
13 ent in applying Aristotle's categories to spiritual matters. Generalizing about  
14 chickens and other poultry is one thing (the favored example of Eckhart's  
15 teachers was actually how individual horses participated in the universal  
16 “horseness”). Using the same technique to understand the essence of “love”  
17 or “the soul” was an endeavor of a completely different order. The even  
18 more audacious prospect of reaching back from any particulars and univer-  
19 sals to understand the uncreated Creator Himself struck some scholars as  
20 hubristic, even blasphemous. Yet whatever the risks, for most members of  
21 the Paris faculty of theology—including the young Eckhart—the potential  
22 to unlock mysteries of this magnitude was what made the entire project  
23 worth the while.

24 In his studies as a second bachelor, Eckhart learned that there were two  
25 generally accepted ways to demonstrate the truth of a philosophical claim  
26 about God or any aspect of creation, material or spiritual. The first, called  
27 *propter quid* (“on account of which”), was a fact deduced from an indisputable  
28 truth. In many instances, this was a priori information attainable to humans  
29 only through divine revelation, usually via scripture, and preferably elabor-  
30 ated on by St. Augustine or another Church Father. The most frequent  
31 scholastic example was the triune nature of the Godhead—not something  
32 that human beings could adduce from the natural world, but once revealed,  
33S a truth that could be rationally explored, at least to a certain degree. The  
34N second method of demonstration scholastics named *quia* (“because” or



“that”), meaning knowledge induced from observed phenomena. One could observe the commonalities of all chickens in the world and thereby come closer to understanding the universal chicken—or tree or human or rock. Or, to take the most famous example, while humans cannot know God directly, they can induce God’s existence by observing various effects in nature. Aquinas actually began his *Summa Theologica* with five such *quia* or “natural” proofs of God’s existence: from motion (since rest is the natural state of things, a universe in motion requires a prime, unmoved mover), from efficient causation (since every effect requires a cause, one can work backward from any effect in nature and must eventually arrive at a prime cause), from contingency (a universe of completely contingent beings could not exist; a prime being is necessary), from degrees (all things have degrees, including perfection, which must have a pinnacle), and from the governance of things (the universe reflects intelligent design).

The scholastic method of Eckhart’s day was simultaneously traditional—relying on authoritative texts (*auctoritates*) and Aristotelian logic for proof—and innovative, often juxtaposing the wisdom of past masters and Christian teachings in creative ways. What had changed most from the eleventh-century beginnings of scholastic thought to the time of Eckhart’s own work at the university was a much greater tendency of theologians to cite pagan and even contemporary scholars as authoritative alongside the Church Fathers of late antiquity. Frequently this approach produced contradictory, even paradoxical results, leading to the bitter disputes for which the theological schools were famous.

Many of those conflicts stemmed from the inevitable incompatibility of even limited empiricism with official dogma. “Authority is the weakest form of proof,” Aquinas professed, yet he repeatedly invoked it to support the claims in his own *Summa*. Reason and revelation were compatible, he argued, but they were not interchangeable. When human reason concluded, for instance, that “three persons in one God” was an inherent contradiction, and thus impossibility, revelation and faith must come to the rescue with the doctrine of the Trinity. Even such a vocal proponent of incorporating the methods of natural philosophy was forced to concede that theology as a whole ultimately relied on divine revelation and was thus more of a *propter*



01 *quid* science derived from self-evident truths than a purely Aristotelian proj-  
02 ect of inductive reasoning based on observation. To the twenty-first-century  
03 mind, this reliance on revealed truth would disqualify theology as a science  
04 at all and makes its claims—including the very existence of God—impossible  
05 to prove at best, at worst, patently false. Not so for Aquinas and his fellow  
06 scholastics, including Eckhart, who found theology's basis in divine revela-  
07 tion reassuring, the equivalent of having the answer key to a set of perplex-  
08 ing problems. This confidence in the powers of human perception and  
09 reason, fortified by the revealed truths of the Bible and the divinely inspired  
10 teachings of the Christian tradition, gave Eckhart and his fellow speculative  
11 theologians hope (their critics said hubris) that they actually might reach up  
12 toward the mind of God.

13 One protracted debate from Eckhart's day provides an illuminating exam-  
14 ple of the strengths and weaknesses of the scholastic method, as well as  
15 its internal logic. Virtually every theologian of Eckhart's time, including the  
16 Dominican friar himself, at some point took part in the lively discussion of  
17 angels. Why this apparent obsession with the theological subfield known as  
18 angelology? Certainly angels were a well-embedded part of Christian tradi-  
19 tion, inherited from Judaism, and prominent throughout the Old and New  
20 Testaments. Another reason scholastic theologians felt compelled to write  
21 about angels is that they simply never met a question they could resist trying  
22 to answer. This propensity attests to the insatiable curiosity and optimism of  
23 their inquiring minds and helps explain their frequent digression into excep-  
24 tionally speculative questions of interest only to specialists (hence the  
25 angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin stereotype).

26 There was, however, a more significant motivation at work, based on the  
27 scholastic conceptualization of the universe as a hierarchical great chain of  
28 being, with God at the top and inanimate objects at the bottom. The prox-  
29 imity of a thing—human, animal, rock—to God determined how much of  
30 God's essence that thing shared. The closer on the chain one got to the Cre-  
31 ator, in other words, the closer one got to understanding Him. For example,  
32 any especially saintly person was thought to be closer to God than the aver-  
33S age Christian, and this belief gave rise to its own category of scholarly study,  
34N known as hagiography. But if a speculative theologian wanted to get even





closer to the divine essence, the better option was a scientific examination of angels. 01  
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Angels were created beings, like humans, but noncorporeal, like God. 03  
They were, according to scholarly consensus, not eternal like God but they 04  
also weren't temporal like humans. Their status was unquestionably far 05  
above that of humans, who suffered from the temptations of the flesh and 06  
other limitations, but they remained distinct beings from the Godhead. This 07  
middle status between God and humans made angels an irresistible subject 08  
of study. According to Aristotelian logic, if one could define distinctions at 09  
the top of a hierarchy, in this instance between God and the angels, it inevi- 10  
tably helped explain similar phenomena, albeit in debased form, that oc- 11  
curred at a much lower level, such as that of humankind. Angelic love, to 12  
take one example, provided both a point of aspiration for humans and a cru- 13  
cial conceptual link between divine love and human love in the scholastic 14  
conception of a hierarchical universe. 15

Theologians carefully avoided arguing that God had been compelled to 16  
create angels, since that would be an infringement of His absolute freedom. 17  
But Thomas Aquinas, who devoted a significant section of his *Summa Theo-* 18  
*logica* to the subject, openly admitted that “the perfection of the universe”— 19  
as scholastics understood it—“requires the existence of an incorporeal 20  
creature,” that is, angels. What he and another prominent angelologist, the 21  
Franciscan St. Bonaventure (aka the Seraphic Doctor), called “beings of pure 22  
intelligence” were indispensable components of their scientific model, a 23  
kind of medieval Higgs boson particle. Unlike modern physicists, though, 24  
scholastics did not build elaborate machinery to establish the existence of 25  
their theoretical link; they turned, as always, to the usual written authori- 26  
ties, which they interrogated with a rigorous sense of higher purpose. 27

Most of the groundwork for thirteenth-century angelology had been laid 28  
in the six centuries following the death of Christ. Both Paul and Augustine 29  
wrote about angels as divine servants and aspirational models for humans. 30  
Several later fathers—most notably Ambrose (ca. 340–397), Jerome (ca. 347– 31  
420), Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), and especially Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth 32  
century)—actually enumerated nine angelic orders, each endowed with a 33  
specific heavenly function. N34



01           The major intellectual work at Eckhart's University of Paris, however,  
02 was less concerned with a seating chart of heaven than with various meta-  
03 physical and physical questions prompted by angels' unique status in crea-  
04 tion between God and humans. Why and where, specifically, did God  
05 create angels? Do they have form and matter? What does it mean to be age-  
06 less and sexless? To have a spiritual body? Do angels speak with their mouths  
07 or in some other way? If they don't have bodies, can they exist in a certain  
08 place, or be in several places at once? Are angels capable of joy or other emo-  
09 tions? Can they see the future? There was virtually no question Eckhart's  
10 professors could resist asking about angels, impelled by their hierarchical  
11 model of creation and the Aristotelian tools of analysis and debate now at  
12 their disposal. And in the process, of course, they would also learn more  
13 about those above and below angels in the hierarchy of creation, that is,  
14 about God and humankind.

15           As always, passages from the scriptures and Church Fathers often pro-  
16 vided evidentiary support, but both the questions and their answers were  
17 constrained by the core assumptions of the scholastic system. Because scho-  
18 lastic consensus taught, for instance, that individuation—creation of an indi-  
19 vidual from a universal—required matter, the only logical conclusion was  
20 that each of the hundreds of millions of noncorporeal angels had to be its  
21 own species. A few scholars proposed a nebulous kind of "spiritual matter,"  
22 but no scholastic would have questioned the starting assumption about indi-  
23 viduation (or universals), leaving a befuddled Godfrey of Fontaines (ca.  
24 1250–1309) to agree with the conclusion but concede that such a plurality of  
25 angelic species was "difficult to understand." In this instance and in count-  
26 less others, the science of God, in other words—despite its rigorous logic and  
27 insights—proved itself an elaborate construct built on faith, not just in  
28 Christian doctrine but in the Aristotelian method itself.

29           Eckhart was an eager participant in this inspired project of discovery, yet  
30 he was also attuned early on to the dangers of hubris among his fellow ex-  
31 plorers at the university. Naturally he encountered some arrogant senior ac-  
32 ademics, impervious to criticism and ripe for rebuke in the name of humility.  
33S But as his Easter sermon from 1294 indicates, Eckhart was concerned with  
34N something beyond mere academic courtesy, a more fundamental notion of



scholarly humility. As he explained, the writings of Aristotle and all philosophers provided many useful tools for understanding God's creation, but reason alone could lead to some flawed conclusions—as the Averroists had discovered twenty years earlier. Like his contemporary the English monk Roger Bacon (ca. 1220–92), Eckhart believed that a Christian philosopher should think of his task as “correcting Aristotle through a pious and reverential interpretation.”

As a junior and later senior scholar, Eckhart would continue to employ the dominant academic language and methodology of the day in his pursuit of God. And later, in the German sermons where he questioned church teaching to the point of near heresy, he would consistently rely on the phrases and terms of the scholastic world model—including many references to angels. Gradual dissatisfaction with the limitations of academic discourse would never lead him to abandon his youthful faith in the accumulated wisdom of prophets and masters before him, or his confidence in rational exploration. Whatever its flaws, the university was a place where ideas about God were taken seriously. In that sense, the alien academic community Eckhart first encountered years earlier would become a home and refuge to him, second only to the Erfurt priory itself.

It was, in fact, his duty to that first home that would compel the young friar to leave Paris in the summer of 1294. The order had called him to return to Erfurt to serve as head of the priory. Now thirty-four and recognized by the university as a second bachelor, he put aside—at least for the moment—the life of the scholar. Taking up the few travel provisions allowed and accompanied by a small band of brother Dominicans, Eckhart walked back through the Saint-Denis gate, and turned his steps toward Erfurt.

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{ CHAPTER SIX }

# Master of Learning

*Now a master [i.e., Aristotle] says no man is so foolish that he does not desire wisdom. Why, therefore, do we not become wise? Much is required for this. The main thing is that a man must pass through and transcend all things, and the causes of things, and a man becomes weary of this, and so man stays in his pettiness.*

GERMAN SERMON 10

## A Scholastic Mind

One late summer evening in 1302, Eckhart was again in Paris, this time the focus of great attention. After an interval of four years as prior of Erfurt and four additional years during which his activities are lost to history, the now middle-aged friar had finally reached the pinnacle of academic learning—installation as a master of theology in the premier faculty of Christendom. The solemn ceremony of induction required two days, beginning on the first evening at vespers (roughly seven p.m.) in the priory of St. Jacques. All other lectures and disputations had been suspended that day, so that the theology masters and bachelors (graduate students) could make final preparations for a *disputatio* in Eckhart's honor.

Four debate questions had been circulated among the group eight days earlier. (Unfortunately, no record of these questions has survived.) After a brief introduction by the most senior master, teams of masters and bachelors

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01 successively debated the first two questions, allowing the guest of honor to  
02 formulate his own response to each. At the conclusion of the last debate, the  
03 presiding master made a few remarks about the teaching of sacred scriptures,  
04 then closed with a bit of wry commentary on Eckhart himself, something  
05 akin to a modern roast.

06 On the morning of the second day, around ten a.m., all masters and bach-  
07 elors of theology again assembled at St. Jacques. Eckhart sat in the center of  
08 the dais, with the chancellor of the university on his right side, along with all  
09 the senior masters, and the presiding master on his left, together with the  
10 junior professors. At a signal from the chancellor, all the young men about  
11 to receive their bachelor's degree came forward and presented their sworn  
12 testimony to Eckhart, who accepted their oaths on behalf of all the masters.  
13 Then the presiding master rose and reverently set the traditional cap of  
14 learning on Eckhart's head, saying, "I place on you the magisterial biretta in  
15 the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

16 Surviving records don't indicate whether this ritual was followed by loud  
17 acclamation from the assembled scholars or a moment of reverential silence.  
18 While Eckhart remained standing, the chancellor rose and solemnly pro-  
19 claimed the new master's right to teach. After Eckhart's brief inaugural lec-  
20 ture (also no longer extant), the students and bachelors debated the third and  
21 fourth questions, followed by dialogues between the senior and junior mas-  
22 ters, with Eckhart ceremoniously deciding which team's argument had car-  
23 ried the day. Finally, the newest member of the theology guild led a joyous  
24 procession to a feast in his honor, which might have lasted the rest of the day  
25 and would include a second lecture by Eckhart, as well as more disputations.  
26 Henceforth his Latin-speaking colleagues would address him as Magister  
27 (Master) Eckhart. To the German speakers in his homeland he was Meister  
28 Eckhart, the name by which he would come to be known to subsequent  
29 generations the world over.

30 For the next three academic years, Meister Eckhart was to hold the St.  
31 Giles chair as regent professor of theology at the University of Paris, a posi-  
32 tion of great honor previously occupied by both Albert the Great and Thomas  
33S Aquinas. Having already served as prior of Erfurt for four years, Eckhart  
34N was being groomed by the Dominican master general as a future leader of



the order. There were only two regent professorships allotted annually to foreign Dominicans, and in recent years the honor had gone almost exclusively to Italian friars. The last German to receive the chair before Eckhart was one of Albert's most eminent pupils, Ulrich of Strasbourg, who unfortunately had died en route to Paris twenty-five years earlier.

Eckhart's summons to the prestigious professorship thus represented not just a personal triumph but a victory for his entire province. His responsibilities included lecturing daily on one book of the Bible (apparently he chose Genesis), presiding over a weekly disputation, and preaching every Sunday at St. Jacques or elsewhere. He was also expected to serve on bachelor examination panels with three fellow masters. In return, the university provided him with two graduate teaching assistants who handled all communications and negotiations with undergraduates, including the payment of fees. As a Dominican, Meister Eckhart was exempt from the usual university taxes and his living and book costs were assumed by the St. Jacques priory, where he resided.

What of his continuing pursuit of God? Although only a few disputation questions and one sermon survive from Eckhart's first academic year as a master, he was clearly still intent on the same intellectual project he had announced during his Easter sermon eight years earlier at St. Jacques: the construction of a philosophy of Christianity, arrived at by combining the wisdom of both pagan and Christian thinkers. This was in fact an endeavor shared by several of his fellow Dominican theologians. Albert the Great had been one of the first and strongest advocates of a new metaphysics, as was his student Thomas Aquinas, who so masterfully interwove Aristotle and Augustine, philosophy and theology, in his *Summa Theologica*. When the archbishop of Canterbury and other church leaders throughout Europe lauded the 1277 Parisian condemnation of the Averroists, the Dominicans of Cologne had pronounced it a mere local decision and continued to investigate scripture with a more moderate combination of reason and revelation in the tradition of their common mentor Albert.

The most important direct Dominican influence on Eckhart, however, was not Albert or Aquinas but Dietrich of Freiberg (ca. 1250–ca. 1319). A decade older than his protégé, Dietrich followed a career path very similar to



01 Eckhart's, including coursework at the *studium generale* of Cologne from  
 02 1267 to 1270 (possibly under Albert himself), further theological study at the  
 03 University of Paris from 1272 to 1277 (overlapping with Aquinas), a brief stint  
 04 as lector at the priory of Trier (1280–81), and twelve years as a lecturer in  
 05 Paris. He met and got to know Eckhart when they both lived in the St.  
 06 Jacques house, during the younger man's year of study in 1286–87, if not  
 07 earlier. In 1293 Dietrich was elected provincial of Teutonia, whereupon he  
 08 immediately appointed Eckhart to a graduate lectureship in Paris. A year  
 09 later, he approved the election of the young friar as Erfurt prior, guarantee-  
 10 ing that he would see Eckhart at least twice a year at provincial and general  
 11 meetings.

12 Dietrich of Freiberg's influence on Eckhart went far beyond his promo-  
 13 tion of the younger man's career in the order. He read the same texts as his  
 14 protégé, and was likely the person who introduced Eckhart to some of them,  
 15 particularly Neoplatonist works. He embraced the same scholastic method  
 16 and expressed himself in a precise (and dry) Latin similar to that in the  
 17 younger man's scholarly writings. (By contrast, Eckhart's German sermons  
 18 ring with rhetorical flourishes.) Most important, Dietrich's conception of re-  
 19 ality itself, including the relationship of the individual soul to the divine es-  
 20 sence, profoundly shaped Eckhart's own thinking.

21 Like most speculative theologians, Dietrich sought a unifying theory for  
 22 the material and spiritual worlds. He differed in some significant ways, how-  
 23 ever, from his fellow Dominican Aquinas, and he passed some of that skep-  
 24 ticism about the Thomist model on to Eckhart. The most important way in  
 25 which the mentor and his acolyte differed was their ultimate intellectual  
 26 goal. While Dietrich's writings on the Beatific Vision (a direct experience of  
 27 the divine) clearly influenced Eckhart, the older man looked more to an in-  
 28 tellectual appreciation of all creation through natural philosophy. Light, he  
 29 believed, was the key to a universal theory encompassing both the material  
 30 and spiritual realms, and Dietrich subsequently devoted far more attention  
 31 to theories of optics, including a famous treatise on rainbows. Eckhart,  
 32 meanwhile, continued to pursue a subjective experience of God, with learn-  
 33S ing playing a supportive role.

34N His pursuit of that goal, however, remained entrenched in the culture





of scholasticism. As a regent professor of theology, Meister Eckhart had to follow the conventional rules of argumentation or risk accusations of irrational—or worse yet—unscholarly behavior. Accordingly, Eckhart’s disputation questions were (unlike his German sermons) terse, dialectical, and full of scholastic jargon. He wielded such concepts as universals, species, distinctions, and accidents with confidence and careful qualifications. Logic, not rhetorical eloquence, was the prime scholastic aesthetic; mastering its established vocabulary and methods was essential if Eckhart wanted his arguments to have bearing on the larger controversies debated by his peers.

The influence of scholasticism was not limited to form and style. The regent professor likewise embraced that other conceptual foundation of speculative theology: the great chain of being. Like his mentor Dietrich, Eckhart framed his arguments around three hierarchical levels of being: intelligences (God and the angels), human souls, and bodies (including human bodies and the animal world). All creatures, he believed, possessed something of the divine essence, and were thus linked with one another, albeit in graduated ranks determined by their respective proximity to the Creator. *Nature*, he wrote, *does not make a leap, but descends in an ordered process or progressive order by degrees, and in the smallest steps possible.* In a later sermon, Eckhart acknowledged that this interconnectedness of all creation was not a recent or even a Christian idea:

*Pagan masters say that God has so ordered all creatures that one is always above the others, and that the highest touch the lowest and the lowest the highest. What these masters have declared in obscure words, another states openly, saying that the golden chain is pure and bare nature, which is raised up to God and which relishes nothing that is outside of Him, and which touches God. Each creature affects the other, and the foot of the highest is set on the crown of the lowest.*

Like his fellow theologians, Eckhart relied on the great chain of being to construct unified theories of reality. But the interconnectedness of all creation was more than an abstract philosophical concept to him; he frequently expressed awe at the beauty of the whole. As he wrote in a later reflection on

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A late medieval portrayal of the great chain of being, with plants and animals furthest from the Divine Creator, humans above them, and angels closest.

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this period of his life, *I used to wonder . . . whether I should be asked why one blade of grass is so unlike another; and as it happened, I was asked why they are so different. Then I said it is more marvelous that all blades of grass are so much alike.* His own spiritual affinity with all the interconnected parts of creation also provided him great comfort, as he explained in a later German sermon: *If I were in a wilderness alone and was afraid, the presence of a child would dissipate my dread and give me courage, so noble, so joyous and mighty a thing is life itself. And failing a child, even a beast would comfort me . . . Likeness gives strength in all things.* This likeness, he would preach, is not mere similarity but a shared divinity, and extends to all of God's creation. *The masters say all creatures are striving to bring forth and to emulate the Father. . . if God had not previously begotten something that was uncreated that [thing] bore within itself the images of all creatures.*

Eckhart also accepted but adapted the conventional authoritative texts of the day to his purpose. Like virtually all academic theologians of his time, he possessed a thorough knowledge of the philosophical works of Aristotle and his medieval commentators. In the academic works that have survived,

Meister Eckhart makes more than two hundred explicit references to “the Philosopher” and thirty-one direct mentions of “the Commentator,” Averroës. But the two non-Christian masters he most admired were the Persian polymath Avicenna, whom he explicitly cited 102 times in his Latin works, and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, known to Eckhart as “Rabbi Moses,” whom he directly quoted 119 times. Together with several Neoplatonist authors (to be encountered in the next chapter), these two towering figures provided Eckhart with creative ways to talk and think about the ineffable Creator and his creation, as well as the individual soul’s return journey to God, a topic of particular concern. By comparison, Thomas Aquinas—the pride of the Dominicans, who was on the cusp of becoming a preeminent theological authority (not to mention a saint)—merited only 65 explicit mentions.

The most important intellectual and spiritual inspiration for Eckhart throughout his life was Augustine, whom he quoted directly nearly three times as often as Aristotle in his Latin works. The new regent professor had been steeped in many of the saint’s works from his days as a lecturer on the Augustine-heavy *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. By the time of his elevation to master of theology, Eckhart had become an expert on Augustine’s writings, especially his cherished *Confessions*. “Let me know Thee who knowest me, let me know Thee even as I am known” are words that resonated deeply with the German friar, nine centuries after they were written—words that he himself might have written. In the bishop of Hippo’s lifelong struggle toward God Eckhart recognized his own passionate pursuit of the Creator, although Augustine described his journey in a much more emotional fashion than the more circumspect professor would ever embrace. Only the Bible itself outranked Augustine as an authority in Eckhart’s Latin writings, and even there, he usually fell back on an Augustinian reading of the passage in question.

The profound kinship between the two men was especially evident in Eckhart’s approach to biblical exegesis, or spiritual interpretation of biblical passages. Like Augustine, he compared the richness of sacred scriptures to *the deep sea*. But without guidance, even the clever and pious reader risks drowning in the vastness of the Holy Writ. The Bible, according to Eckhart,



01 was not a collection of logical demonstrations or natural philosophy (*scien-*  
 02 *tia*) but rather, borrowing the words of Maimonides about the Old Testa-  
 03 ment, *a book of spiritual wisdom (sapientia)*. Every passage, he believed, had  
 04 two basic levels: *the plain meaning [or] the surface of the letter [and other mean-*  
 05 *ings] hidden beneath the shell*. His commentary on the first line of Genesis, for  
 06 instance, contained seven philosophical explanations and ten points on the  
 07 moral meaning of the verse “In the beginning God created Heaven and  
 08 earth.” This plurality of truths beneath the shell or surface led Eckhart to  
 09 again exclaim, *I am astonished that Holy Scripture is so full, and the masters say*  
 10 *they are not to be interpreted barely as they stand: they say that if there is anything*  
 11 *crudely material in them it must be expounded, but for this parables are necessary.*

12 In parables, virtually every word had multiple meanings, many of them  
 13 *hidden beneath sensible figures* and requiring special diligence and insight on  
 14 the part of the reader. God deliberately made the surface meaning more ac-  
 15 cessible, with the hope that deeper understanding would eventually follow.  
 16 Like his master Augustine, Eckhart believed that the meaning offered “in a  
 17 most humble style of speaking . . . arouses the attention of those who are not  
 18 light-hearted.”

19 In admitting his fondness for using ambiguous symbols and paradoxes in  
 20 his own writing, Eckhart explained, *I do this to arouse the more skilled readers*  
 21 *to seek better and richer explanations of the theological, natural, and moral truths*  
 22 *hidden behind the form and surface of the literal sense, both in the few passages I*  
 23 *briefly treat and in the many others I omit*. Again quoting Augustine, who called  
 24 the Bible a “book of mysteries,” he compared extraction of this multifarious  
 25 *mystical understanding of parables to bringing honey forth from the depths of the*  
 26 *honeycomb or rubbing the ears of grain with our hands to find the hidden kernels.*  
 27 *No one, he reiterated, can be thought to understand the Scriptures who does not*  
 28 *know how to find its hidden marrow—Christ, the Truth.*

29 Of course Eckhart’s method did not guarantee that every reader would  
 30 find the same meanings. He conceded as much, noting that often the same  
 31 scriptural words [*have been*] *interpreted in different ways by different saints*, as  
 32 well as by distinguished Jewish scholars, such as Maimonides. But unlike  
 33S those who feared such diversity of interpretation, Eckhart reveled in the

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astounding variety of ways that God’s revelation could assist readers on their  
 respective spiritual journeys. In fact, in his own works, he frequently pro-  
 vided multiple interpretations of a single line of scripture so that fellow  
 Christians might learn to consider a wide range of possible meanings. As he  
 wrote in the conclusion to his commentary on the gospel of John: *Please note*  
*that the preceding words have been interpreted in many ways so that the reader can*  
*freely take now one and now the other as seems useful to him. I use the same method*  
*of multiple exposition in many of my commentaries.* As the prior Brother Eckhart  
 had preached to young friars in his *Talks of Instruction*, there was no one uni-  
 versal path to God. Moreover, *since the literal sense is that which the author of a*  
*writing intends, and God is the author of the holy scripture, as has been said, then*  
*every true sense is a literal sense . . . every truth comes from the Truth itself.* Here,  
 as in many of his own scriptural interpretations, Eckhart was following his  
 favorite authorities, Augustine and Maimonides. God’s truth was so power-  
 ful, they all believed, that it could potentially reach anyone reading the Bi-  
 ble, *even if the [human] author he is reading [had] not grasp[ed] it.*

Eckhart’s lifelong dedication to both usefulness and subjectivity in his  
 own pursuit of God consequently led him to make eclectic—some might say  
 arbitrary—choices of which biblical texts to explicate. Like his hero Augus-  
 tine, he favored books that he thought had the most interpretive possibili-  
 ties, particularly Genesis (which he wrote about twice), Exodus, Wisdom,  
 and the gospel of John. He showed no interest in narrative or history or  
 broader context in general. His *Commentary on John*, for instance, focused  
 intensely on the Prologue (“In the beginning was the Word . . .”) but omitted  
 nearly the entire life and passion of Jesus. His especially copious *Commentary*  
*on Exodus* used only fourteen of the book’s forty pericopes, or subsections.  
 Some modern scholars have argued that Eckhart treated the Bible as a “hy-  
 pertext,” with his own complex system of intertextual references, pasting  
 together various fragments that served his argument. Certainly, a general  
 disregard for context was common among speculative theologians (includ-  
 ing Aquinas), but Eckhart took this tendency to new lengths, actively en-  
 couraging diverse and subjective readings—as long as they resonated with  
 larger truths.

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## The Dialectical Path to Truth

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As with his *Talks of Instruction*, given a few years earlier, it is mainly in hindsight that we perceive Eckhart's more radical tendencies in the writings he produced during his time as a regent professor in Paris. In most respects, he was still thinking and writing like a typical scholastic, albeit one consumed by a personal spiritual quest. His three surviving disputations from 1302–3 accordingly reflect his ongoing pursuit of God, but couch it in the context of the leading scholarly debates of the day. Now that he was a member of the theological guild, Eckhart intended to further bolster his intellectual reputation by proving both his mastery of relevant terms and concepts and the distinctiveness of his own scholarly project. In short, he sought to make his own mark as a theologian, and the surest way to do that was to weigh in on the contentious issues of the moment.

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For more than twenty years, the most controversial topic among speculative theologians had been the relationship between existence (*that* something is) and essence (*what* something is). Resolving this question could yield one of the first principles that scholastic metaphysics relied on for a variety of scientific deductions. If existence and essence were distinct from each other, for instance, which had priority? If they were the same, what was the relationship between God, who had no beginning, and humans, who did? Without any preexisting essence, some argued, humans must first exist and then derive their essence from God (a kind of medieval existentialism).

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As in the twentieth-century debate on the relationship between time and gravity, a lot of contingent questions hung in the balance. Plato had argued that all living things shared the same essence, but this posed problems for Christian philosophers who believed that each human soul—and its path to salvation—was distinct. Aristotle, by contrast, thought it meaningless to distinguish between the existence of a thing and its essence. Instead, he preferred to speak of the difference between primary and secondary substances—or, in scholastic terms, between universals, the perfect form of each thing, which had always existed, and particulars, the countless individual iterations of each thing, which came into being at a certain



time and exhibited a particular constellation of the essential qualities of the universal. 01  
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The debates Eckhart participated in at the University of Paris mainly focused on whether there was a real or merely a formal distinction between existence and essence. For example, during Eckhart's previous stay as a lecturer, the Augustinian monk Aegidius Romanus (ca. 1243–1316) engaged in a number of famous debates on the subject with Master Henry of Ghent, who claimed there was no distinction at all between the two. Thomas Aquinas, by contrast, argued that the distinction was real, that is, existence and essence were two different principles of things that could be separated—and that existence came first. In the years following his death, this Thomist position was taken up by a number of his fellow Dominicans. 03  
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Again, the terms and the arguments of the debate were highly technical; it is less important to grasp the specifics than the intellectual stakes. Eckhart's entry into the fray during his year as a regent professor is represented by two surviving disputation questions: *Are Intellect and Being identical in God?* and *Is an Angel's Understanding, as it denotes an action, the same as his existence?* In both instances, Meister Eckhart's response was no, but his reasoning was quite different from that of his revered Dominican predecessor Aquinas. In the first disputation, he actually turned Brother Thomas on his head, accepting the real distinction between existence and essence, but boldly refuting six of the Angelic Doctor's arguments for the priority of existence. According to Eckhart, *understanding*, which he identified as an aspect of essence, *is superior to existence and belongs to a different order*. Thus God's understanding, or his thinking, preceded his existence; by thinking, God brought himself into existence so that his own being was the first of all created things. *I am no longer of the [Thomist] opinion that God understands because he exists, but rather that he exists because he understands . . . God is intellect and understanding and understanding itself is the foundation of His being.* 13  
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This was not an earlier version of Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum*, which was meant as a proof of the thinker's existence. Eckhart did not doubt the existence of God or humans and thus did not seek to prove it. Rather he sought to reverse Aquinas's existential argument—God thinks because He is—and argued instead that, for God as well as for humans, thinking is the 30  
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01 act of being. He was heavily influenced by Dietrich in this approach, but the  
02 new master went further than his mentor, proposing pure thought itself as  
03 the reason for and substance of reality, the cause of all things, including time  
04 and space. This argument was not mere theological sparring for Eckhart; its  
05 purpose was intensely practical and personal. In the idea that pure thought  
06 is both the cause of God's existence and the essence of his being, Eckhart had  
07 found the key to his own lifelong pursuit of God. For if God is thought, and  
08 some small part of God exists in the essence of every human being, then  
09 human thought offers a direct connection to the Creator. The intellect pro-  
10 vided the link he had been searching for.

11 Eckhart's favoring of the intellect stemmed from a Dominican tradition  
12 going back to Albert—hardly surprising in a religious order that so esteemed  
13 learning. It was also the subject of a secondary, ongoing debate between  
14 Dominicans and Franciscans over whether the intellect or the will is the  
15 primary pathway to God. These terms are not as self-evident as they appear.  
16 Intellect, for example, was considered to be compatible with reason but was  
17 not the same thing. The closest modern equivalent would be "intuition." As  
18 Thomas Aquinas explained, "Intellect is the simple (i.e., indivisible) grasp of  
19 an intelligible truth, whereas reasoning is the progression towards an intel-  
20 ligible truth by going from one understood point to another. The difference  
21 between them is thus like the difference between rest and motion or be-  
22 tween possession and acquisition." Aquinas believed the intuitive way of  
23 knowing to be a more reliable pathway to God than reason, but cautioned  
24 that many divine truths remain beyond the grasp of either type of human  
25 thought. For Dietrich and his protégé Eckhart, however, intellect was much  
26 more than a pathway to God—it was a direct experience of the divine mind.  
27 Intellect in individual humans, they argued, was the shared part of divine  
28 essence that was able to recognize itself and its Creator.

29 Similarly, the term "will" denoted more than simple desire to the mostly  
30 Franciscan scholars who argued for its primacy over the intellect. God, they  
31 pointed out, wants humans to love Him but He wants it to be a free choice.  
32 Accordingly, the will is the choice, freely made, to love God, and, because of  
33S that love, to follow God's ways. The supreme example of this was Christ's  
34N own willingness to suffer and die on a cross—a choice freely made out of



love for God that resulted in the salvation of the world. Will and choice also lay at the heart of medieval Christianity. In the minds of most clerics and laypeople alike, understanding the ways of God was difficult, if not impossible, and—in the end—less important than choosing to perform the concrete acts of love and devotion that would ensure personal salvation.

Sometime during Eckhart’s regent professorship, he entered into a public disputation on this subject with the holder of the Franciscan regent professorship, Gonsalvo of Spain (ca. 1255–1313). The question they addressed was a typical scholastic offshoot of the larger issue: “Is the praise of God in heaven more excellent than the love of God in this life?” Gonsalvo argued that love (which was expressed through the will) was more important than praise (which was a result of knowing God). Eckhart asserted that intellect held preeminence over being, and being over love and free will. Love, he said, represented a mere striving toward God, while through the intellect, a believer experienced God directly. Eckhart’s position in the debate put him in the odd situation of seemingly denigrating the love of God, yet he refused to waver. Will and love, he argued, focused on God’s attributes rather than His essence and thus remained inferior to the intellect, which yielded a direct experience of God:

*Will and love fall on God as being good, and if He were not good, they would ignore Him. Intellect penetrates right up into the essence without heeding goodness or power or wisdom, or whatever is accidental. It does not care what is added to God, it takes Him in Himself, sinks into the essence and takes God as He is pure essence. Even if He were not wise nor good nor just, it would still take Him as pure being.*

One of the preacher Eckhart’s favorite metaphors compared God to a naked man in his dressing room, completely exposed, stripped of all his adornments and protective clothing. Intellect embraced the man himself; love (or the will) remained obsessed with the fine garb the man has cast off: *Goodness is a cloak under which God is hidden, and will takes God from under the cloak of goodness. If there were no goodness in God, my will would not want Him.* In this way, Eckhart explained, love was not only inferior to knowing, it held



01 the seeker back from actually encountering God. *Love infatuates and entangles*  
 02 *us in goodness, and in love I remain caught up in the gate, and love would be blind if*  
 03 *knowledge were not there. A stone also possesses love, and its love seeks the ground.*

04 Putting aside Eckhart's premodern understanding of gravity, his main  
 05 point is clear: in the pursuit of God, go straight to the source, without inter-  
 06 mediaries or attributes. In a departure from Eckhart's view during his priory  
 07 days that discipline and willpower were key to the pursuit of God, the scho-  
 08 lastic Eckhart now identified the intellect as both the source of God's being  
 09 and the only direct and reliable human connection to the essence of that  
 10 being. Freedom of will was still real, he conceded, but it would be pointless  
 11 without knowing God and His truth.

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## A Masterwork for the Ages

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Eckhart's participation in scholastic debates during the 1302–3 academic year helped the new master crystallize his thinking on the two mysteries that were most important to him: the nature of God and the connection between God and humans. By the end of his tenure as regent professor, a new and coherent theology had begun to emerge. While clearly drawing on the tradition of Albert and Dietrich, the interpretations of the friar from Erfurt already displayed many of the distinctive traits for which he would become famous. The coalescence of his diverse thoughts and experiences into a system marked a significant turning point in his spiritual quest. It would be several years before Meister Eckhart took the still bolder step of preaching on how to put his understanding of the divine-human bond into practice. Instead, he poured himself into a project that most successful scholastics attempted but only a select few achieved: writing a scholarly magnum opus, or *summa*, that would elevate him to the ranks of the theological giants.

To understand the irresistible appeal of the *summa* among academic theologians, consider these lines from the introduction to Lombard's *Sentences*, a work all scholastics knew intimately: "In this brief volume, we have brought together the sentences of the Father and the testimonies apposite to them, so that one who seeks them shall find it unnecessary to rifle through numerous



books, when this brief collection effortlessly offers him what he needs.” 01  
 Lombard’s work served that inspirational purpose for many generations, but 02  
 soon other scholars were attempting to build on the *Sentences* or even im- 03  
 prove upon it. Alexander of Hales (c. 1185–1245), aka the Unanswerable Doc- 04  
 tor, authored the first major commentary on the *Sentences*, itself a *summa*, 05  
 but was unable to complete the magnum opus before his death. While his 06  
 fellow Franciscans revered and continued his work, Alexander’s reputation 07  
 had waned by the end of the thirteenth century, with his massive volume 08  
 mocked by Roger Bacon (1214–92) for being as heavy as a horse and full of 09  
 errors. Like Albert and Dietrich, Bacon (aka the Miracle Doctor) looked to 10  
 natural philosophy for a unifying metaphysical theory, although he decried 11  
 the great deference accorded Albert as an unprecedented “monstrosity,” 12  
 given the latter’s indirect and incomplete knowledge of Aristotle. 13

To Bacon’s disappointment, his own attempt at a universal vision received 14  
 little attention among contemporary theologians, especially compared with 15  
 the brilliant and influential Franciscan scholar Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308). 16  
 Admirers and enemies alike considered Scotus the most philosophically 17  
 talented theologian of the day. His *summa*, framed as a commentary on Lom- 18  
 bard’s *Sentences*, aimed to surpass all previous works on the subject, includ- 19  
 ing the esteemed four-volume commentary of his fellow Franciscan 20  
 Bonaventure. Like Eckhart, Duns Scotus sought a theory encompassing 21  
 God and all his creatures, for “unless being implies one single concept, the- 22  
 ology will simply perish.” Eckhart encountered Scotus during his regent 23  
 professorship, when the Scotsman came to Paris to lecture on the *Sentences*. 24  
 We don’t know the nature of their personal relationship, but the two men 25  
 shared many beliefs about the divine essence, even though they disagreed 26  
 about its distinction from existence. Later in that academic year, Scotus was 27  
 expelled from the university for siding with Pope Boniface VIII in his feud 28  
 with King Philip IV of France over the taxation of church property. Within 29  
 five years, Scotus was dead at the age of forty-two, his much-anticipated but 30  
 incomplete *summa* surviving mainly in lecture notes and disputation ques- 31  
 tions from his time at Oxford and Paris. 32

Sometime during this academic year, Meister Eckhart resolved to write S33  
 his own *summa*. Of course the competing achievement foremost in his mind N34

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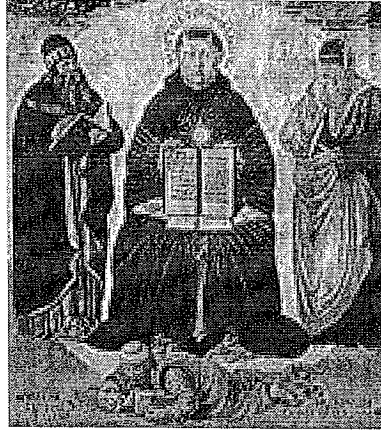


John Duns Scotus, considered by most scholastic peers to be the most talented theologian in Eckhart's day.

was the magisterial *Summa Theologica* of his fellow Dominican Aquinas. Aquinas's reputation outside the Order of Preachers was still far from the universal acclamation he enjoyed in later Catholic tradition. Duns Scotus, for one, clearly considered Henry of Ghent a more formidable intellectual rival than Aquinas, even though he had more in common with the anti-Aristotelian Henry. Among Dominicans, however, the thirty-year-old magnum opus had already taken on canonical status: Aquinas's *summa* was the *summa* Eckhart needed to surpass, or at least challenge. Yet if he disagreed with the Angelic Doctor on any point, the argument still needed to be couched in respectful, if not reverential terms.

Like Aquinas, Meister Eckhart presented his prospective work as an aid to theological beginners. His goal, he claimed was *to satisfy as far as possible the desires of some of the diligent friars who already for a long time with pressing requests had often asked and compelled me to put in writing what they used to hear from me in lectures and other school activities, and also in preaching and daily conversations*. For Eckhart, all intellectual endeavors needed to have some practical justification of this sort. His objective remained the one he had announced in his Easter sermon nine years earlier: a philosophy of Christianity that allowed the seeker to see behind the curtain of perceived reality and know God directly.

Also like Aquinas, Eckhart relied on a supposedly seamless combination of Christian revelation and natural philosophy, although his preferred



St. Thomas Aquinas, holding his *Summa Theologica* and flanked by his pagan predecessors, Plato and Aristotle.

sources more closely followed the Aristotelian interpretation of the Maimonides than that of his Dominican predecessor. The scope of the German master's ambition is evident in his remarkable claims about thoroughness:

*By way of preface, it should be noted beforehand that I have gone through the Old and New Testaments in order from beginning to end and I have written down whatever came to me then and whatever I remembered I said about the interpretation of these authoritative texts at any time. Not to be long-winded, I have taken care to abbreviate or to omit completely most of it, especially so that the better and more useful interpretations that the saints and venerable teachers, particularly Brother Thomas [Aquinas], have written are not neglected. On a few occasions I decided merely to note where their interpretations are to be found.*

Eckhart's foundational premise of unifying all knowledge likewise echoed the confidence of Aquinas and all members of the Dominican tradition of Albert:

*What the philosophers have written about the natures and properties of things agrees with [the Bible], especially since everything that is true, whether*

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01                    *in being or in knowing, in scripture or in nature, proceeds from one source*  
 02                    *and one root of truth. . . . Therefore, Moses, Christ, and the Philosopher*  
 03                    *[i.e., Aristotle] teach the same thing, differing only in the way they teach.*  
 04

05                    In rare instances of conflict, he added, obviously the opinions of pagan mas-  
 06                    *ters, who knew only by the light of nature*, should always give way to the words  
 07                    *of saintly masters, who knew by a much higher light*. My intention, Eckhart wrote,  
 08                    *is the same as in all my works—to explain what the holy Christian faith and the two*  
 09                    *Testaments maintain through the help of the natural arguments of the philosophers—*  
 10                    *not the other way around, as with the Averroists.*

11                    Also like Aquinas, Eckhart conceived of his own *summa* as a three-part  
 12                    work, and that in fact became its name: the *Opus Tripartitum*. The planned  
 13                    scale of the work, described by Eckhart at the end of his year in Paris, was  
 14                    breathtaking. Whereas the entire *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas comprised  
 15                    512 Questions (subdivided into 2,669 articles, with more than 10,000 objec-  
 16                    tions), Part I of the *Opus Tripartitum* alone would contain more than twice  
 17                    that number of theological propositions, divided into fourteen tracts on  
 18                    paired conceptual opposites: 1. Being/Nothingness; 2. Unity/Multiplicity; 3.  
 19                    Truth/Falseness; 4. Good/Bad; 5. Love/Sin; 6. Virtues/Vices; 7. Whole/  
 20                    Parts; 8. Common/Particular; 9. Upper/Lower; 10. First/Last; 11. Ideal and  
 21                    Unformed/Private; 12. Why something is/What something is; 13. Highest  
 22                    Essence (God)/Nonessence; 14. Substance/Accident. Part II would contain  
 23                    disputed questions, like most traditional *summae*, and Part III would com-  
 24                    prise various “expositions,” namely systematic commentaries on all the  
 25                    books of the Bible, followed by a collection of sermons.

26                    Even by the standards of scholastics, famed for their love of systemiza-  
 27                    tion, Eckhart’s ambitions for the *Opus Tripartitum* were unprecedented. Un-  
 28                    like the authors of other *summae*, including Aquinas, he envisioned a holistic,  
 29                    organic approach to his philosophy of Christianity. First he would resolve  
 30                    most of the current disputes about first principles—a formidable (some would  
 31                    say impossible) task in itself. Then he would proceed to address more specific  
 32                    questions according to the findings of Part I, taking on many of the positions  
 33S                    staked out by Aquinas and other rivals. Finally he would expound on the  
 34N                    practical truths found in both the philosophy he has described and scriptures



themselves. Eckhart knew that completing a work of this magnitude would require several years, perhaps the rest of his life. This, he decided at the end of his regent professorship, would be his practical contribution to the pursuit of God: a universal metaphysics of Christian morality.

Eckhart's 1303 announcement of his massive project included the first thesis for Part I, the first question for Part II, and the first commentary for Part III, whereby he demonstrated his method. The first thesis, in Part I, propounded what he now considered his central insight into the divine nature: God is pure intellect and pure being and everything else in creation emanates from Him. God was not *a* being or *the most powerful* being; God was *being itself* (*esse ipsum*). Humans and other creatures had no existence without Him. As in one of Eckhart's favorite metaphors, creatures were like the image of a face in a mirror; take the face away and the image disappears. *An image is not of itself or for itself; it is solely that thing's whose image it is, and all that it is belongs to that.* Humans have no existence of their own apart from God. This new interpretation actually reversed one of his arguments from earlier that year, in which he posited that if creatures are essentially being, then God is a nonbeing, or beyond being. This new position—*God is being*—would be the one that Eckhart ultimately embraced, expounding on it later that fall in the first of a series of sermons and lectures on Ecclesiastes to his fellow German Dominicans at their annual provincial chapters.

As promised in the general prologue, Part II of the *Opus* then proceeded to build on the proposition established in Part I with specific questions, following the order established by *the Summa of the illustrious and venerable friar Thomas of Aquino*. The first question, "whether God exists," thus became a *self-evident* four-point demonstration, since God had already been established as existence or being itself, and if God didn't exist, nothing existed. *Everything that exists, in other words, exists through existence, and existence is God.* Part III accordingly picked up the same four points of Part II in its commentary on Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning . . ."), drawing extensively from Eckhart's lectures and notes from his regent professorship. As interpreted by the master, scriptures further demonstrated the truth of what he had written in Parts I and II about the nature of God and existence.

For the *Opus Tripartitum* to prove useful in the way its author intended, it



01 would need to be succinct rather than comprehensive. Even so, Eckhart's  
 02 confidence in the originality of his contribution is remarkable:

03

04 *All of this would seem to require an ocean of words, but two factors lend to*  
 05 *brevity, as far as this is possible, and tighten up the work: first, because the*  
 06 *explanations here are very seldom found elsewhere, and some topics scarcely*  
 07 *at all; second, because in the Book of Questions and Book of Commentaries I*  
 08 *treat piecemeal and concisely only a few matters.*

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10 St. Augustine, the master claimed, favored this same selective approach, and  
 11 Eckhart's own work merely provided a modern, systematic, and scientific  
 12 amplification of the hallowed Father's insights. Since the *Opus* would simply  
 13 touch upon a distinction in the text and some noteworthy matters arising from the  
 14 text under discussion . . . It will be left to the experienced reader to delve further into  
 15 Scripture to harmonize it.

16



17 *Studios brothers, not casual lay or clerical readers, were the master's in-*  
 18 *tended readers, and even this select audience had to proceed carefully to*  
 19 *grasp the new and rare things that the Opus would reveal. Contrary to the ac-*  
 20 *cusations of Eckhart's later critics, anxiety about being misunderstood or*  
 21 *accused of unorthodox statements always weighed heavily on his mind. In*  
 22 *introducing the Opus, he warned readers that at first glance some of the follow-*  
 23 *ing propositions, questions, and expositions will seem monstrous, doubtful or false,*  
 24 *but he simultaneously reassured and admonished them that it will be other-*  
 25 *wise if they are considered cleverly and more diligently.*

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27 Meister Eckhart completed his first year as regent professor confident  
 28 that he had at last found his life's work. The magisterial *summa* he envisioned  
 29 would provide an unprecedented metaphysical foundation for all Christian  
 30 beliefs and morality. His "utterly original" attempt to surpass both Thomist  
 31 and Franciscan systems would put forward a new theology (God is intellect)  
 32 and a new anthropology (intellect is part of uncreated divinity and present  
 33S in all humans). Eckhart must have known that many of the brethren for  
 34N whom he was supposedly composing the *Opus Tripartitum* would find much  
 of the massive work beyond their understanding. But at least he could be  
 confident that his ideas would make their mark in the schools and in the





theological faculties of Christendom, where his new composition might supplement, and perhaps eventually supplant, the *summae* of Aquinas and Bonaventure. Naturally it would have been unseemly for any theological author, particularly a Dominican friar, to admit such worldly ambitions for his own efforts. But the scope of Eckhart's *Opus* alone left no doubts about how high he was aiming.

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{ CHAPTER SEVEN }

# Knowing the Unknowable God

*Where is this [hidden] God? It is just as if a man were to hide himself and then to give himself away by clearing his throat. God has done the same. No man could ever have found God, but He has revealed His presence.*

GERMAN SERMON 79



## The Limits of Reason

Meister Eckhart's dreams of intellectual immortality had no sooner taken shape than they confronted the stark reality of a friar's duty to his order. During the three decades since Eckhart entered the Dominican priory at Erfurt, the order had continued to grow significantly in German lands, now claiming at least 3,500 male members and perhaps 2,500 nuns. During May of Eckhart's regent professorship, Dominican leaders decided to break off part of the German province of Teutonia to form a new province, Saxonia (Saxony). By the end of the following month, the new master had left Paris, with two years still remaining in his regent professorship. It's possible that Eckhart, like Duns Scotus, got caught up in the political controversy between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip the Fair that resulted in so many university masters being banished from the city. More likely, the Dominicans decided to create a new province with one particular experienced leader and distinguished scholar in mind as its chief administrator. Three months

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01 later, in September 1303, the first provincial chapter for Saxony met in Erfurt  
 02 and elected Meister Eckhart its leader.

03 The new province contained forty-seven male houses and seventy female  
 04 convents. Its geographical scope was vast, encompassing Holland, Frisia,  
 05 Westphalia, Hessa, Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Pomer-  
 06 ania, and the Baltic. Eckhart's new position required him to be "prayerful  
 07 and respectful" of his predecessors and their traditions, while also undertak-  
 08 ing many personal inspections and instituting reforms as needed. As a Do-  
 09 minican provincial, Eckhart oversaw all liturgical practices in his jurisdiction  
 10 and was charged with maintaining discipline "in a just and fraternal man-  
 11 ner." Usually such oversight involved counseling, interventions, and "gen-  
 12 tle" corrections. Sometimes disobedient or "dangerous" brothers needed to  
 13 be relocated or, in rare cases, imprisoned. Eckhart handled all internal rela-  
 14 tions among Saxony's priories, as well as external contacts with other Do-  
 15 minicans from the master general on down. He was the province's chief  
 16 diplomat, responsible for maintaining good relations and supervising legal  
 17 arrangements with bishops and other secular clergy, with Franciscans and  
 18 other orders, with nuns and tertiaries, and with local lay leaders, both noble  
 19 and bourgeois. The provincial also managed all the order's property in his  
 20 district, maintaining and supplying existing houses, negotiating to establish  
 21 new ones, and overseeing all major purchases and donations. The cumula-  
 22 tive responsibilities of the job required nearly constant travel, often over  
 23 great distances.

24 The Dominicans had a long history of scholar-administrators, dating  
 25 back to Dominic himself and continuing to Eckhart's own mentor, Dietrich  
 26 of Freiberg. With four years of previous administrative experience under his  
 27 belt and new status as a master of theology, the middle-aged Eckhart was  
 28 embarking on a path that could well lead to his becoming master general of  
 29 the entire order. Clearly the academically talented scholastic must have also  
 30 possessed some notable leadership skills. Not only were no complaints regis-  
 31 tered against him during his tenure as provincial—remarkable given the  
 32 size of his province—but just four years later, in 1307, he was elected to an  
 33S additional office: general vicar of Bohemia, charged with restoring order  
 34N to the especially unruly province. Apparently the new general vicar's



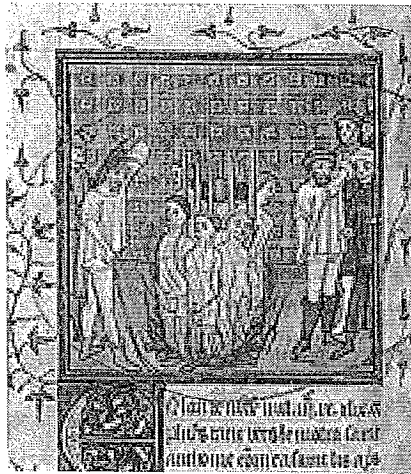
housecleaning went well, as no further complaints circulated about Bohemia and the province was allowed to elect a new provincial a year later. The new leader's unsteady tenure, however, required Eckhart to remain in his oversight role for another three years, until Bohemia's long-serving former provincial Brother Zdislav was persuaded to return to his post.

With his administrative success in both Saxony and Bohemia, Eckhart seemed destined for higher office within the Dominicans. But this was not to be. Instead, the Order of Preachers had a new diplomatic mission for Meister Eckhart: another term as regent professor at the University of Paris. A second term as regent professor was a distinct honor, one previously granted only to the great Aquinas. Eckhart undoubtedly merited the distinction, but his Dominican superiors had an eminently practical motive for the assignment as well.

In 1311, Paris and all of Christendom were still reeling from the aftershocks of the French king Philip the Fair's single-minded obliteration of the Knights Templar. The Templars had been the most famous and most successful military order to emerge from the crusades. During the thirteenth century, their victories on the battlefield began to be surpassed by their prowess as bankers, which was rivaled only by certain Lombard and Jewish houses. After despoiling both of these groups, in 1291 and 1306 respectively, Philip turned his attention to the impregnable Templar fortresses within his own kingdom. Employing a series of intermediaries, he accused the Knights of various blasphemies, including a secret initiation ceremony that culminated in new recruits spitting on the crucifix and later committing sodomy. On October 13, 1307, the king ordered the Templars' grand master, Jacques de Molay, arrested along with several of his brethren as "enemies of the faith." Critics of Philip's bold action noted that the king remained heavily in debt to the Templars for his recent English wars.

Aymericus de Piacenza, the master general of the Dominicans, who resided in the order's house in Paris, was commissioned by Pope Clement V to examine Philip's charges against the Templars. After a brief investigation, he had the temerity to find the knights innocent. This outcome did not sit well with the king, who demanded Aymericus resign as inquisitor, then resumed his campaign against the Templars by other means, including pressure on

01 the pope to support him. Following this embarrassing incident, the Order of  
 02 Preachers required a friar with proven diplomatic skills and a stellar aca-  
 03 demic reputation to help revive Dominicans' status in Paris, especially at the  
 04 university and Eckhart was the ideal man for the job.  
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18 A contemporary portrayal of the burning of Grand Master Jacques de Molay and  
19 other Templars in Paris, 1314.  
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22 Seven years had passed since Eckhart's previous professorship in Paris.  
23 Although he had continued to work on his *Opus Tripartitum* during that  
24 time, progress had been slow amid all his travel and administrative work on  
25 behalf of the order. Eckhart's second regent professorship in Paris ~~once again~~  
26 offered him the time and resources to make significant progress on the *Opus*.  
27 Ironically, it was at just this point that his ambitious intellectual pursuit of  
28 God appears to have hit a deeply troubling impasse—namely the outer lim-  
29 its of human reason. It was a paradox that Aquinas too had discovered during  
30 the composition of his own *Summa*: “Man reaches the peak of his knowledge  
31 of God when he realizes that he does not know Him, understanding that the  
32 divine reality surpasses all human conception of it.” Shortly before his own  
33S death, in fact, the Angelic Doctor had experienced a deeper understanding  
34N of the divine that “made everything I had written seem as straw.” For

Aquinas and Eckhart, all human perceptions, however logical, remained limited by the derivative and subsequently partial nature of our understanding. As Eckhart had explained back in 1303, *[God]’s knowledge is the cause of things, whereas our knowledge is caused by them. Consequently, because our knowledge is dependent upon the being by which it is caused, with equal reasoning it is itself dependent on God’s knowledge.* Human reason, like humans themselves, was a creation, a dim reflection of God that could only point to the infinite, not truly or fully convey its essence. Rational thought was accordingly limited by its own very partial experience of the universe. In other words, any speculation about God and the infinite involves not just what former U.S. secretary of defense and philosopher Donald Rumsfeld once described as known unknowns but also unknown unknowns—countless realities beyond our ability to even imagine them.

For some theologians, such a disheartening ~~end~~<sup>challenge</sup> to a cherished project might have triggered a cascade of professional and personal crises. It’s possible that the philosophically gifted Eckhart experienced doubt and anxiety upon reaching the limits of his rational pursuit of God. If so, he nonetheless remained an active participant in the learned debates that were the hallmark of scholastic life during his new tenure in Paris, arguing such questions as “Does motion without a terminus imply a contradiction?” and “Did the forms of the elements remain in the Body of Christ while Dying on the Cross?”

There are other reasons to conclude that Eckhart’s uncertainty about the future of his Christian philosophy project was not personally devastating. Over the past several years, the master had become increasingly intrigued by an alternate way of knowing God—the intuitive or “mystical” approach embraced by his spiritual father, Augustine. According to Eckhart, Augustine had grasped that theologians were always trying to balance the understanding of God offered “through a glass darkly” by reason with other wisdom obtained more directly by nonrational experience of the divine. Now Eckhart decided that knowing God intuitively from within was no longer merely a complementary method to knowing God from without through rational inquiry, but was in many important ways superior to it. The master never completely abandoned his philosophical work, but he



01 increasingly acknowledged its inadequacies, particularly in reaching his  
02 own ultimate goal of achieving direct experience of the divine.

03 Recognizing the divine in oneself, and in the universe, offered Eckhart a  
04 direct experience of God that was much more satisfying than any rational-  
05 ized model. But how exactly did this intuitive approach to God work? Was  
06 reason an aid to this different kind of knowing, or should it be disregarded  
07 entirely (if such a thing were possible)? Should one engage in specific spiri-  
08 tual practices? Meditate on certain scriptural passages? The pastoral Eckhart  
09 had offered his monastic charges practical advice about how to pursue God,  
10 but the scholastic Eckhart concluded that such a pursuit was doomed until  
11 one abandoned all preconceptions about God Himself. The God most Chris-  
12 tians thought they knew was not the true God. To know the uncreated Cre-  
13 ator directly required first unknowing the human-created God, a process  
14 known to theologians as the *via negativa*, or negative way.

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16

## 17 Unknowing God



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19 Eckhart first indicated his attraction to the *via negativa* in a sermon delivered  
20 a decade earlier, at the St. Jacques priory—appropriately enough—on the  
21 feast of St. Augustine (August 28), in either 1302 or 1303. While still praising  
22 scholarly pursuit of divine wisdom, “the golden vessel, encrusted with every  
23 kind of precious stone” (Ecclesiasticus 50:10), the new master proposed a  
24 notably different definition of the theologian’s quest for wisdom from that of  
25 his Easter sermon of 1294. His inspiration, Eckhart claimed, was Augustine  
26 himself, whom he characterized as *a good theorist, an outstanding logician, and*  
27 *a superb ethicist*. Ethics, which Eckhart for the first time declared synony-  
28 mous with theology, drew its insights from different sources than the other  
29 philosophical branches of mathematics and physics. Unlike the natural sci-  
30 ences, theology sought *to see more deeply the ideas of things in the divine mind,*  
31 *before they proceed into the physical world.*

32 Yet when it came to the highest things, Augustine agreed with Plato that  
33S “it is impossible to say anything about God, and how difficult it is to find  
34N Him.” Here Eckhart explicitly proposed the negative way to God described





by Boethius and Pseudo-Dionysius as offering the best point of departure. He also quoted extensively from Augustine's *Confessions* on the effect of experiencing the divine light directly, leading to higher understanding, practical grace in overcoming temptations, as well as occasionally prophetic insights or ecstasy of the spirit. Reason was not to be despised, but in the end it was less reliable than direct, intuitive knowledge of God, which Eckhart variously compared to cooling snow on hot desires, the gentle dew of a verdant valley, the refreshment of an intoxicating wine or soothing oil, a purifying fire, a reassuring light in the darkness, and a mighty wind.

Unfortunately, direct experience of the divine light was usually blocked by reason itself, which had constructed its own ideas about the divine. Eckhart had long opposed the anthropomorphic images of God that remained common even among highly educated people. The Creator of the universe was not an old man with a beard, or even a man, and imagining God with any human attributes inevitably caused confusion and harm. Twenty years earlier, Prior Eckhart had lectured his young charges that *a man should not have, or be satisfied with, an imagined God, for then, when the idea vanishes, God vanishes! Rather, one should have an essential God, who far transcends the thought of man and all creatures. Such a God never vanishes unless a man willfully turns away from Him.*

But what did an essential God look like? Human minds have great difficulty thinking of any sentient entity without an image, even an abstract one. Here Eckhart's many years of study offered an intellectual starting point: negative theology, a school of thought endorsed by both Augustine and Maimonides. Negative theology is the process of knowing God from what He is not, of unknowing all the attributes we might previously have assigned to God. The *via negativa* required first disposing of, or at least suspending, some basic ways of rational thinking. Yet, paradoxically, Eckhart believed that only this path provided hope for a rational pursuit of God.

Eckhart's espousal of negative theology grew steadily during the ten years between his two regencies in Paris, making him increasingly wary of attempts to make affirmative statements about God based on His creation. Like most of his colleagues, he had long rejected equivocation, or applying human terms such as "good" or "just" to God, but other affirmative



01 methods had previously held some appeal for him. Arguing from cause, for  
 02 instance—favored by Aquinas—permitted theologians to know the Creator  
 03 through His actions, such as a hierarchical ordering of the universe, or His  
 04 fashioning of humans in His own image. Eventually Eckhart agreed with  
 05 Maimonides, however, that statements about God inferred in this manner  
 06 were *unsuitable, improper, and not in keeping with the truth*. The same was true  
 07 about positive statements based on analogy and metaphors, which Eckhart  
 08 himself often used, albeit cautiously and with qualifications. Eckhart even  
 09 rejected reasoning by eminence—a method he had favored earlier—in  
 10 which one tried to describe the nature of the divine by imagining ever  
 11 greater degrees of virtues, such as goodness, or of powers, such as under-  
 12 standing. The human mind, he concluded, remained hopelessly limited by  
 13 its own “creaturely” concepts, leaving only the *via negativa*.  
 14

15 *Know that whatever you add by way of negative names with respect to the*  
 16 *Creator, you come nearer to grasping Him and will be closer to Him than the*  
 17 *person who does not know how to remove from God the perfections and at-*  
 18 *tributes that have been proven to be far from Him.*

19  
 20 Embracing negative theology required a radical demolition of the most  
 21 basic human preconceptions about reality itself, a process Nicholas of Cusa  
 22 (1401–64) later called “learned ignorance.” Maimonides, the most formative  
 23 influence on Eckhart’s thinking in this respect, began with the Socratic ax-  
 24 iom, “The one thing I know about God is that I do not know Him.” Like the  
 25 ancient Athenian, the Jewish sage believed that negative theology could not  
 26 guarantee absolute truths, but it could help us to be less wrong. Specifically,  
 27 Maimonides posited in his *Guide for the Perplexed* that there were four basic  
 28 mental categories that had no relevance to God and consequently distorted  
 29 all human understanding of Him: corporality, mutability, privation, and  
 30 similarity. Eckhart streamlined this list of rational barriers to three funda-  
 31 mental notions: time (which included mutability), corporeality (or space),  
 32 and multiplicity. In other words, anything that most of us can imagine exists  
 33S in time and space, and is distinct from something else. God, by contrast,  
 34N exists outside of time, throughout and beyond space, and is one with all



creation. He is totally other, *outside and above every genus*. Our concepts of time, space, and distinctiveness do not apply to this unique entity, which Eckhart had already identified as pure thought and existence (one of the few affirmative statements about God he thought possible). Only the negative way of theology, which strips away what God is not, allows us to come closer to understanding what God is.

Take our common notion of temporality. Even after all of the modern theorizing about the elasticity of space-time, most of us still tend to think of time in linear terms, with one thing happening before or after another. Eternity is often imagined as just a really long time, with the notions of “no beginning” or “no end” used more for emphasis than with any genuine understanding of what such words actually mean. Yet according to Eckhart, *Nothing is so firmly opposed to God than time. Paul [in Ephesians 5:8] means not just time, but clinging to time; he means not just clinging to time but contact with time: not only contact with time but even a smell or savor of time—for just as where an apple has lain the smell lingers, so you must understand it with time.*

What would happen, he asks, if we attempted to suspend this human perspective on time and imagine the universe from God’s perspective, what philosophers called *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under the aspect of eternity”)? *Some people ask how a man can do the work that God was doing a thousand years ago and will be doing a thousand years hence. They cannot understand it. In eternity there is no before and after. Therefore, what God did a thousand years ago, and what he does in a thousand years, and does now, is all but a single act. From the divine perspective, in other words, there is no past and no future, only one present Now.*

Eckhart knew that *the Eternal Now* was virtually inconceivable for most human minds. He recounted being asked, “*What was God doing or what kind of life did he lead when he was alone before creation?*,” and he conceded that *untaught people falsely imagine that some delay or suspense intervened when time did not exist. To God, however—and thus in reality—all that happened a thousand years ago, the day that was a thousand years ago, is in eternity no further off than this moment I am in now; or the day which shall be a thousand years hence, or in as many years as you can count, is no more distant in eternity than this moment I am in.* Distinctions in time and development, key to human understanding,



01 remain antithetical to the divine perception of *Now*. In eternity, *being and*  
02 *youth are in it the same, for eternity would not be eternal if it could become new and*  
03 *were not always so. The eternal Now*, according to Eckhart, was the meaning of  
04 the scriptural phrase “fullness of time,” and should be the true objective of  
05 any meaningful pursuit of God. Breaking free of the sensory world of cause  
06 and effect, change, and other temporal constructs might be impossible for  
07 most humans but the aspiration to do so might at least provide direction for  
08 those seeking to grasp the divine perspective.

09 Human concepts of physicality and space likewise hindered even an  
10 approximate understanding of what or where God is. Eckhart had no  
11 truck with a sky god or even an outer space god. *If I were asked where God is,*  
12 *I should reply, “He is everywhere.” If I were asked where the soul is that dwells in*  
13 *Love, I should reply, “She is everywhere.” . . . Thus God is one All without every-*  
14 *thing.* Borrowing a popular Neoplatonic metaphor, the master compared  
15 God to a circle with no circumference, where the center is everywhere.  
16 Preaching in a Dominican church, possibly in front of a painting of the Trin-  
17 ity enthroned in heaven, Eckhart playfully asked, *Where are we to look? . . .*  
18 *Where is Christ sitting? He is sitting nowhere. Whoever seeks him anywhere will*  
19 *not find him.*

20 Heaven itself was also not how most people imagined it. *Heaven is at all*  
21 *points equidistant from earth . . . untouched by time and place.* It was also, he  
22 added, *so vast and so wide that if I told you, you would not believe it. If you were to*  
23 *take a needle and prick the heavens with it, then that part of heaven that the needle*  
24 *point pricked would be greater in comparison to heaven and the whole world, than*  
25 *heaven and the world are compared with God.* Like perceiving the *Eternal Now*,  
26 imagining a God and a heaven of such vastness was beyond the capability of  
27 most finite minds. (Just as well, since the purpose of negative theology was  
28 not to provide a new way of imagining God but to deconstruct all such im-  
29 ages that the rational mind might create.)

30 Eckhart’s third mental barrier to imagining God is perhaps the most  
31 difficult to understand. Humans exist in a world of multiplicity, perceiving  
32 various individual things at all levels, all distinct from one another. Our rea-  
33S son knows only parts and boundaries and degrees of separation, and thus we  
34N imagine God in those terms. But God has no distinctions: *He is utter*



*simplicity, pure unity.* On the great chain of being, God is *the One, both male and female, odd and even*, the unity of the reality from which the created many emerged. His indistinctiveness and unity never change (change being a temporal concept in itself), meaning that *God is in all things. The more He is in things, the more He is out of things: the more in, the more out, and the more out, the more in.* I have often said, *God is creating the whole world now this instant.* This apparent lack of distinction between God and His universe is not pantheism, as some of Eckhart’s critics later charged, but what scholars today call panentheism. Pantheism considers the divine and the universe identical; panentheism sees the entire material cosmos infused with a transcendent divinity, known to Eckhart as *the One*. 01  
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Grasping the master’s point on this question requires distinguishing between the One—absolute unity and intellect—and numbers themselves. In calling God *the One*, Eckhart was referring not to the number one (a human distinction) but 12  
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*. . . the source of all numbers . . . a number that is numberless, one without oneness, or more properly, one which is above oneness . . . We must understand that the term “one” is the same as indistinct, for all distinct things are two or more, but all indistinct things are one. Furthermore, there is an indistinction that concerns God’s nature, both because He is infinite, and also because he is not determined by the confines or limits of any genera or beings.* 16  
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Imagining God as one being is a fundamental distortion, he argues, as erroneous as perceiving the Trinity as three persons, based on human perception of numbers and distinctions. Any apparent contradiction between God’s unity and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity stems purely from human lack of imagination. Consequently, *everything that is said or written about the Holy Trinity is in no way really so or true. . . . Hence the Psalm text, “Every man is a liar” [Psalms 115:11]. It is true, of course, that there is something in God corresponding to the Trinity we speak of and to other similar things.* 24  
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In one of his most difficult passages, Eckhart returned to the meaninglessness of distinctions for God: S33  
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called “creaturely concepts,” profoundly inadequate in representing His “diverse perfections.” Eckhart continues in typically provocative style:

*God is nameless because none can say or understand anything about Him. . . . If I now say God is good, it is not true; rather, I am good, God is not good. I will go further and say I am better than God: for what is good can become better, and what can become better can become best of all. Now God is not good, therefore he cannot become better. And since He cannot become better, therefore He cannot become best; for these three, good, better and best are remote from God, since He is above them all.*

Neither is God wise, just, or true; rather He is the active principles of wisdom, justice, and truth. *If you think of anything He might be, He is not that. No distinction, Eckhart insists, can exist or be understood in God Himself.*

The only true proposition we can make about God in language is “God is” (*Deus est*). This was the burning bush’s response to Moses’s query about the divine name: “I am who am.” As Eckhart explains, “*Shaddai*” signifies that God is Existence itself and that his essence is Existence itself. It is a name that is not really a name, yet it conveys one of the few truths about divine nature that the human mind is capable of understanding. In this sense, Eckhart agrees with Avicenna that *we may as well say “Being” instead of “God.”* Otherwise, he counsels, *we should learn not to give God any name . . . for God is above names and ineffable.*

Confounded by the utter inadequacy of human expression, Eckhart in fact decided that *every word that we can say of it is more a denial of what God is not than a declaration of what He is.* Here he was sharing the conclusion of his spiritual father, St. Augustine, who had lamented that *whatever we say of God is not true, and what we do not say of Him is true.* Eckhart also agreed with Pseudo-Dionysius, author of a celebrated work about the names of God, who wrote that *the finest thing one can say about God is to be silent from the wisdom of inner riches.* Therefore, the master counseled his audiences,

*. . . be silent and do not chatter about God, because by chattering about Him you are lying and committing a sin. Nor should you (seek to) understand*

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01                    *anything about God, for God is above all understanding. One master says:*  
 02                    *“If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God.”*

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Eckhart’s advice to his listeners did not prevent him from continuing to talk about God in his own sermons and academic writings, but he did appreciate the resulting conundrum for a theologian. Like Augustine, he recognized that even declaring God beyond words or images was itself an internal contradiction: *The more one tries to speak about the ineffable, the less one says about it as ineffable.* Yet as a member of the Order of Preachers, Brother Eckhart’s mission was not silent contemplation of the divine wonder but helping others find their way to God. His biblical predecessors grappled with the same dilemma. The prophets, Eckhart preached, *fell silent and were tongue-tied*, utterly incapable of conveying the vastness and sublimity of what they encountered, yet *it sometimes happened that they did turn outward and speak, but owing to the incommensurability of the truth they lapsed into gross matter and tried to teach us to know God with the aid of lower, creaturely things.*

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## Finding Our Way Back to the One

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Eckhart’s frustration with the inadequacy of *lower, creaturely things* when he spoke about God led him to two conclusions. The first was that human language and concepts could at best only point toward the infinite, and always inadequately at that. There was only one unambiguously true statement one could make about God: that He (i.e., existence) cannot not exist. Put differently, since existence exists, God is necessary. This tautological statement, based on the self-evident fact that there is existence, provides *the purest form of affirmation and the fullness of the term affirmed.* The existence of the One, source of all created things, negates the negation of nonexistence, for *outside of God there is nothing but—nothing!* This was Eckhart’s version of the mathematical formula  $-1 \times -1 = 1$ .

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Even then, the master remained wary, warning that *anything we ascribe to [God] except pure being, encloses Him*, limiting His absolute freedom and unity. *He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a midge. I would be as wrong*



to call God a being as I were to call the sun pale or black. God is neither this nor that. It would be better, Eckhart advised, to think of God as *pure nothing* (or rather no thing), for he is neither this nor that; if you think of anything he might be, He is not that. He is being above all being; He is beingless being, or more simply, He is beyond all speech.

The second conclusion Eckhart drew from the inadequacy of human language to convey the essence of God was that the only way to truly know God was to experience Him directly. Only intuitive recognition allowed the human mind to transcend the limitations of rational perception and description. Here the ancient authority Eckhart most relied on was not Aristotle, but the Philosopher's own mentor, the sage Eckhart called *that great priest*: Plato. Most of what the German Dominican and his contemporaries knew of Plato, however, came to them secondhand: Only the first part of Plato's *Timaeus* dialogue was available in Latin translation to Eckhart. While this provided him some direct familiarity with Plato's cosmology, he relied more on the interpretations of the Philosopher's teachings by his two most prominent later disciples, Plotinus (ca. 205–ca. 270), founder of the movement today known as Neoplatonism, and Proclus (412–85). Scholars today debate the fidelity of Plotinus—and Proclus in particular—to Plato's original teachings, but this distinction was unknown to Eckhart, who in fact cited Proclus more frequently than either Albert the Great or Aquinas.

Proclus's ideas arrived in the thirteenth century in various forms. First there was the *Book of Causes*, a collection of thirty-one propositions on the nature of the universe and God, available only in a twelfth-century Latin translation of a ninth-century Islamic version of the lost Greek original. *The Book of Causes* enjoyed wide acclaim, particularly within the Dominican Order, and by 1255 it had become a part of the University of Paris curriculum. About the same time, a Latin translation of Proclus's *Elements of Theology* appeared, complemented by a Latin version of the *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*, supposedly written by the ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus. Here several Procline ideas emerge from the lips of various wise men of old, each positing a different enigmatic definition of God.

Eckhart's embrace of Neo-Platonic philosophy in his own pursuit of God was in fact part of a long tradition among Christian thinkers he admired,





01 beginning in antiquity with Augustine, Boethius, and Pseudo-Dionysius,  
 02 and continuing all the way up to his own time with Albert the Great and  
 03 Dietrich of Freiberg. Virtually all theologians since antiquity, for instance,  
 04 had accepted Augustine's identification of the gospel of John's "Word made  
 05 flesh" (1:14) with the Platonic *Logos* that ordered the universe. The Church  
 06 Father even went so far as to detect "the book of the Platonists" in the first  
 07 eleven verses of John's gospel, Eckhart's favorite New Testament book.

08 The Neoplatonic intuitive approach to "knowing" God had an especially  
 09 profound impact on Albert the Great and the German Dominicans who fol-  
 10 lowed him, including Eckhart. In 1265, Albert's disciple Hugh Ripelin of  
 11 Strasbourg published the master's various "mystical" writings in the collec-  
 12 tion *Compendium of Theological Truth*. The great man's interpretations of  
 13 Paul, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius on divine union sent heavy ripples  
 14 throughout the Order of Preachers. Even Aquinas, the supposed champion  
 15 of "Christian Aristotelianism," was deeply influenced by Albert's Neopla-  
 16 tonism, citing Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Summa* more often than the Philoso-  
 17 pher himself. Eckhart and his fellow Dominicans naturally differed on  
 18 specifics, but all accepted Albert's general adaptation of Platonic cosmology  
 19 and its privileging of intuition, which, unlike reason, provided an infallible  
 20 way of "knowing" God.

21 The basis for this confidence was simple. According to Albert's version of  
 22 the Platonic teaching of emanation, all human souls—or at least the most  
 23 important part of them—were in fact divine in essence. These souls were  
 24 themselves the result of a primordial big bang, or what Albert and his fol-  
 25 lowers called a boiling-over (*bullitio*) of the Godhead into the divine Trinity,  
 26 followed by a creation (*ebullitio*) of the universe, flowing out into time and  
 27 space. One image in circulation among Christian and Jewish philosophers of  
 28 Eckhart's day was that of sudden expansion from a dense point of light, not  
 29 unlike the singular density postulated by modern physicists. In Eckhart's  
 30 mind at least, Creation was simultaneous, not the laborious process de-  
 31 scribed in the first chapter of Genesis:

32  
 33S *Do not imagine that God, when he made heaven and earth and all things,*  
 34N *made one thing one day and another the next. Moses describes it like that,*



*but he really knew better: he did so for the sake of the people who could not  
conceive or grasp it any other way. All God did was this: He willed, He spoke,  
and they were!*

Nor, wrote Eckhart, was this Neoplatonic vision of the universe's origin  
in conflict with the laws of Aristotelian science as interpreted by the Aver-  
roists. God's intellect did indeed create only one thing at a time—the entire  
universe!

During this process, tiny pieces of the divine essence were scattered  
throughout the cosmos within creatures. This is what Eckhart meant when  
he argued that human beings had only virtual existence, borrowed from  
God. *Creation is the production of things from nothing; or put differently, the  
giving of existence after non-existence.* There was only existence (God) and non-  
existence; take away the face in the mirror (God) and the reflection (the hu-  
man soul) is lost. Fortunately for humans, the act of Creation endowed every  
person with what Christians called the *imago dei* ("image of God"), provid-  
ing every soul with an innate guide back to its source. The terrestrial pil-  
grimage was thus a story of the soul's rejoining its Creator, a gradual reversal  
of the spiritual big bang.

How did this return journey (*reditus*) work for individual souls? Surpris-  
ingly, most scholastic theologians did not address this topic, preferring to  
leave ordinary Christians to conventional means of individual purification,  
such as penance and good works. For Eckhart, by contrast, this was *the* topic.  
Like his spiritual father Augustine, he believed that the human soul was  
*created as if at a point between time and eternity, which touches both. With the  
higher powers she touches eternity, but with the lower powers she touches time.*  
While the *lower powers* faced toward the world, the *higher powers* possessed a  
"mind's eye" that provided access to the divine mind, albeit in a limited ca-  
pacity. Intuition was in fact one function of this mind's eye: it was the soul  
re-cognizing, or remembering, its divine origins.

Following the Dominican tradition of Albert, Eckhart identified this  
mind's eye within the soul as the Intellect, which encompassed both intu-  
ition and reason. The highest part of this Intellect, what academic theolo-  
gians called the active intellect, provided direct access to the divine, whereas



01 the potential or passive intellect merely received guidance from the superior  
 02 active intellect. Like Albert, Eckhart actually believed in a collective of ac-  
 03 tive intellects, each with a corresponding passive partner rooted in the sen-  
 04 sory world. But unlike Albert and Dietrich of Freiberg, Eckhart argued that  
 05 it was through the passive intellect that the soul was joined with God, *in*  
 06 *unity, not like in likeness*. God came to the passive intellect through its divine  
 07 *spark (vünkelin; or Latin synderesis)*, which did not require reason or any other  
 08 intermediary in order to grasp God *in his pure essence*. This part of the intel-  
 09 lect, in fact, had *no actual existence of its own*—it was God Himself, and the  
 10 human act of intuition was that part of God recognizing Himself.

11 The Intellect, like all of creation, was always being irresistibly pulled  
 12 back to its divine source, like a metal filing drawn to a gigantic magnet. This  
 13 was a fact of existence for Eckhart, a kind of spiritual electromagnetic or  
 14 gravitational force:

15  
 16 *You must know that all creatures strive and work naturally to become like*  
 17 *God. The heavens would not revolve if they did not pursue or seek for God, or*  
 18 *a likeness to God. If God were not in all things, nature would cease operation*  
 19 *and not strive for anything; for, whether you like it or not, and whether you*  
 20 *know it or not, nature secretly and in her inmost parts seeks and aims at God.*

21  
 22 In another evocative metaphor, Eckhart compares the pursuit of the di-  
 23 vine to an insatiable appetite, where *God, as infinite Truth and Goodness and*  
 24 *Existence, is the meat of everything that is, that is true and good. And he is hungered*  
 25 *for. They feed on him, because they exist, are true, and are good; they hunger, be-*  
 26 *cause he is infinite*. Reason and the will remain susceptible to lesser, carnal  
 27 appetites, but the Intellect knows that it can be satisfied only by God; all else  
 28 is vile in comparison.

29 But how exactly did the Intellect or *divine spark* work? On this question  
 30 some of Eckhart's most revered philosophical forebears remained silent.  
 31 Maimonides, like many Aristotelian-oriented scholars, looked down on  
 32 "mystical" pursuits, such as the Cabbalistic practices of his contemporary  
 33S Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (aka Nahmanides; d. 1270). Most scholastic theo-  
 34N logians also avoided discussions of the inner spiritual life, with a few notable



exceptions, particularly among the German Dominicans. Thus Eckhart again relied heavily on Albert and especially Dietrich of Freiberg in his early attempts to describe the gradual process he called *letting-go* through which the Intellect might achieve a moment of illumination and perhaps even divine union. In his Latin writings, however, the master seemed noticeably reluctant to discuss this key question in detail, perhaps because he anticipated hostility from his academic audience, perhaps because he had not yet clearly formulated his ideas on the subject.

Only in his German sermons, mostly from the period after his second regent professorship in Paris, would Meister Eckhart begin to speak at length about the actual process through which the soul might achieve reunion with its Creator, an experience known to theologians as the Beatific Vision or Divine Union. Most scholastics agreed with the apostle Paul that a “face to face” encounter with God was normally reserved for the afterlife, despite the extrasensory experiences described by Paul himself and by Augustine. The divine light was simply too powerful for the human mind, in Augustine’s opinion. Eckhart agreed—in most instances—that the human experience of God was partial and distorted. *Is there then, he lamented, no way of seeing God quite clearly?* Yes, Eckhart replied to his own question, but the master would not fully explore the specifics of achieving the divine union until his popular sermons after leaving the university.

The same reluctance was evident in his first tentative mention of the most radical and distinctive new component in his theology: the explosive notion of a common ground (*grunt*) of reality from which both God and human souls emanated. Building on Augustine’s notion of a *fundus animae* (foundation of the soul), Eckhart ventured still further than his Dominican mentors had dared, when discussing the universality of the active intellect. God the Creator, he claimed, was distinct from *the hidden darkness of the eternal Godhead, which is unknown and has never been known and shall never be known. God and Godhead are as different as heaven and earth*, he intuited, in the same way *the inner man* (soul) is superior to *the outer man*, although *God is loftier by many thousands of miles*. The key point was that God Himself was not the ultimate source of the soul, but rather also emerged from the nameless *ground*, becoming “God” through the act of creation.



01            Meister Eckhart rarely mentioned this radical concept in his academic  
 02 writings, and when he did the full implications were not yet developed. In  
 03 the *Commentary on Exodus*, for instance, composed as part of the *Opus Tripartitum*,  
 04 the discussion of God's timelessness contains a startling comment,  
 05 made in passing: *When someone asked me why God had not created the world*  
 06 *earlier, I answered that he could not because he did not exist. . . . God's speaking is*  
 07 *his making, and also unlike us his speaking is the cause of the entire work and of all*  
 08 *its parts.*

09            In a later vernacular sermon, Eckhart was less guarded and more explicit  
 10 about the common origin of both God and the individual soul. He daringly  
 11 described a primordial state, before creation itself, where the essence of the  
 12 individual soul existed without a Creator.

13

14            *When I yet stood in my first cause, I had no God and was my own cause:*  
 15 *then I wanted nothing and desired nothing, for I was bare being and the*  
 16 *knower of myself in the enjoyment of truth. . . . But when I left my free will*  
 17 *behind and received my created being, then I had a God. For before there were*  
 18 *creatures, God was not "God": He was That which He was.*

19

20            The effect of such a statement on his audience must have been consider-  
 21 able. The master concluded his discourse with one of his most shocking and  
 22 oft-repeated pleas.

23

24            *I pray to God to make me free of God, for my essential being is above God,*  
 25 *taking God as the origin of creatures. For in that essence of God in which God*  
 26 *is above being and distinction, there I was myself and knew myself so as to*  
 27 *make this [earthly] man. Therefore I am my own cause according to my es-*  
 28 *sence, which is eternal, and not according to my becoming, which is*  
 29 *temporal.*

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31            Meister Eckhart's theatrical flourishes aside, this triangulated notion of  
 32 the ground, God, and the soul was remarkable. More than any of his other  
 33S insights, the master's recognition of an ultimate origin and destination be-  
 34N yond God Himself transformed his lifelong spiritual pursuit. Eckhart now



believed that the soul's journey toward union with the Creator was more complicated than the conventional vertical ascent he and other theologians had long espoused. The more apt analogy, he decided, was an excavation within the quiet of the soul, in which

*Intellect forces its way in, dissatisfied with goodness or wisdom or truth or God Himself. In very truth it is as little satisfied with God as with a stone or a tree. It never rests; it bursts into the ground whence goodness and truth proceed, and seizes it in principio, in the beginning where goodness and truth are just coming out, before it has any name, before it burgeons forth, in a much higher ground than goodness and wisdom.*

← *The simple ground, again only described in vernacular sermons, was a silent desert into which no distinction ever peeped, of Father, Son, or Holy Ghost.*

Eckhart realized the dangerous implications of such a radical position and accordingly refrained from such explicit declarations during his time in the institutional heart of Christian orthodoxy. His broader championing of the intuitive pursuit of God, on the other hand, while controversial, was not without precedent (both Augustine and Albert had embraced similar ideas). Members of the world of disputations were accustomed to master theologians proposing innovative positions, usually in the hope of making a name and establishing a following. Intellectual experimentation was the very stuff of the academy and virtually every argument was open to vigorous debate.

Privately, Eckhart knew that his embrace of intuition as the surest way to God generated profound questions. Was this a path open only to an enlightened few, as most Neoplatonists believed, or a universal route that might be made available to all through a common, perhaps even teachable, approach? Was philosophical understanding needed for this inner journey? More unsettling still, what about the Church and its sacraments—might even these be unnecessary? From his perch atop the academic mountain, Meister Eckhart pondered the significance of his hard-won insights for the future course of his life.

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