PART II

Letting Go of God

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

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

As the now thirty-three-year-old Eckhart approached Paris's Saint-Denis gate once more, he must have recalled the great cultural shock of his initial encounter with the city years earlier. First, there had been his unprecedented youthful foray out of "the lands of the German tongue." Traveling more than four hundred miles from Erfurt by foot—friars were forbidden to journey by horse—would have required at least three weeks, perhaps twice that long. Typically, Dominican friars journeyed in pairs, with each socius looking after the physical and spiritual welfare of the other. A young friar such as Eckhart would never have been permitted to make such a trip without at least one older companion along. The brothers would have traveled light, with few provisions, relying on the generosity of those they met along the way for food and shelter. Of course they could count on support from fellow Dominicans, but this was a more haphazard prospect than we might expect. Even though the order boasted more than 590 priories scattered throughout Europe, most of these were in cities; establishments in the sprawling countryside were less common. Further complicating matters, as the brothers 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.](image-url)
Meanwhile, the city had continued to grow exponentially and, by the
time of Eckhart's arrival, encompassed an urban center of more than a thou-
sand acres and a population of nearly 200,000, making it the largest metrop-
olis in Christendom. Most of the demographic growth occurred on the Right
(or north) Bank of the Seine, home to the shipping wharves, markets, and
banks of the city's thriving economy. The Left (or south) Bank was domi-
nated by the university and was thus called the Latin Quarter, as all in-
struction, and much of the nonacademic conversation among students and
professors, who came from all corners of Europe, occurred in Latin. Both
Louis IX and Philip IV made further efforts at urban planning, but the city
Eckhart knew remained crowded, noisy, dangerous, and dirty, with visitors
often complaining about the pervasive stench of excrement and other refuse
tinged with the ubiquitous odor of burned charcoal and wood.

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

The University of Paris, less than a century old but already famous,
contributed mightily to the cosmopolitan nature of the city, drawing thou-
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
that has survived to this day, Parisians relied on and often exploited the huge
groups of young men with money in their pockets, yet also deployed the
violence and disorder that frequently ensued. A few decades earlier, one par-
ticularly destructive student riot, starting with a bar fight, had resulted in
several severe injuries and at least one student death. Outraged university
masters went on strike for two years until townspeople made further provi-
sions for student safety. As in college towns today, drunken disturbances of
various sorts erupted weekly, sometimes daily, particularly during such
rowdy winter feasts as St. Nicholas (December 6), when a student was elected
bishop for a day, and the particularly notorious Feast of Fools on New Year’s
Day. The French king Philip Augustus marveled at the aggressive instincts
of Parisian undergraduates, exclaiming that they surpassed even those of his
knights.

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

The worldly, even materialistic nature of the university and its denizens
presented a stark contrast to the plain and regimented life of monks who
came to study or teach in Paris. Dominicans and other mendicant orders
accordingly strove to cultivate separate enclaves within the larger commu-
nity for their own students. Eckhart and his fellow friars, for instance, were
required to reside at the Dominican house of St. Jacques, located near the
southern wall of the Left Bank. Originally a pilgrim hospice dedicated to St.
James, the priory served as the primary base for Dominicans in France, who
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.) In theory, the Paris priory might house as many as 110 undergraduates each year, but in fact most provinces never sent their full quota of young friars to the university, and the actual number of these "externs" might be only half that.

While excused from choir and some other typical obligations, friar students still followed the Rule in their daily routines, rising at midnight to pray and again before sunrise, eating all meals in house, and retiring to bed by eight p.m. Some of their classes were even held within the walls of St. Jacques itself. As an undergraduate, Eckhart had usually been accompanied to outside lectures or debates by his Dominican sectus (probably a fellow German), presumably so that each might help the other avoid the temptations surrounding them. Of course, the young friars couldn't completely avoid interactions with secular clerics or laypeople, but they lived a carefully restricted version of the university experience enjoyed by most students.

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

Even as a double outsider—Dominican and German—the young friar
could not have avoided immersion in the dominant academic culture of Paris. Judging from his brilliant successes and frequent return to the university over the years, it was a way of life he found—at least initially—intoxicating. As an undergraduate, he had attended daily lectures on the seven liberal arts, composed of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). As in every subject, classical Roman and Greek authors provided the substance of lessons. The *trivium*, for instance, relied heavily on Donatus (fourth century) and Priscian (fifth century) for teaching Latin grammar, and Aristotle (fourth century BCE) for logic—all works that Eckhart had already encountered during his earlier studies in Erfurt and Cologne. The *quadrivium* featured Aristotle’s *Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics*, and *libri naturales* as standard texts, along with Euclid’s *Geometry*. None of Eckhart’s subsequent treatises or sermons reflects any interest in the *quadrivium*, but he was undoubtedly well versed at a fundamental level in all four subjects.

Now a lecturer as well as a graduate theology student, Eckhart still began his typical class day at the monastic hour of *prime*, roughly six a.m., delivering a lecture that lasted two to three hours, after which a “student master” summarized the professor’s main points in a *repetitio*. At the lowest level, professors lecturing to classrooms full of undergraduates made no pretense of “knowledge production.” Their task was essentially that of knowledge transmission. A professor would read long excerpts from the writings of past “masters,” particularly Aristotle and St. Augustine, to students from his chair *(ex cathedra)* and explicate the text. Good lecture notes, bolstered by weekly reviews with student masters, provided the key study resources for subsequent oral exams. Given the great cost of parchment, many undergraduates supplemented their own scribblings—crammed to fill every available space on the sheet—with various eight-page book excerpts, known as *peciae*, produced by the scores of copyists working in Paris. College libraries obligingly maintained unbound copies of the most important textbooks, allowing students to borrow individual *peciae* for copying.

Passive reception of traditional wisdom, however, was by no means the sole defining feature of medieval academic culture, even among undergraduates. 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 quæstio 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.
master. More than the lecture hall, the disputation, especially in its *quodlibet* form, was where academic reputations were made or destroyed. Thomas Aquinas, to take one outstanding example, participated in more than five hundred ordinary disputations during a two-year period, all delivered to overflowing auditoriums. His *quodlibet* appearances, one in Advent and one in Lent, were openly festive occasions, with all lectures and other classes suspended for the duration.

**Dwarves on the Shoulders of Giants**

What was not entirely clear to contemporaries outside the university and remains fundamentally elusive for many modern observers is that members of this scholarly culture were not merely arguing for the sake of mental exercise and academic posturing (although there was a fair amount of that too, especially during public disquisitions). Eckhart and other advanced theological students believed they were living in an exceptionally dynamic period of intellectual exploration, epitomized by the rise of "speculative theology," a field pioneered by Peter Abelard in the previous century. Speculative theology went far beyond the usual issues of morality and ethics to explore profound metaphysical questions about the nature of God and human existence. The very notion that one could question and investigate spiritual matters in a rationalist, "scientific" manner remained revolutionary and controversial. Yet by the time of Eckhart, this unprecedented Christian project of philosophical discovery was in full force. Thus, in addition to disputing the nature of sin and virtue according to the Church Fathers, some professors introduced their advanced students to metaphysical debates about the soul, the intellect, and—most significant for Eckhart's subsequent career—the nature of God.

By far the greatest influence on the budding theologian's thinking was the towering figure of Albrecht of Lausingen, better known as Albert the Great (ca. 1200–1280), a fellow Dominican and a fellow German. Historians still debate whether a passing reference by Eckhart—*Albert always said*—indicates that the 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.
The European recovery of Aristotle during the previous one hundred years was the most important intellectual development of the era we now know as the Middle Ages. Greek philosophy had been a foundational component of all higher learning during the Roman Empire, but most of that knowledge was lost—along with a great number of Greek texts—following the Western Empire's decline. Byzantine and later Islamic scholars continued to study and debate Plato and Aristotle, but in the West only a small number of Greek manuscripts remained, dutifully copied (but not necessarily understood) by a handful of monks. At the beginning of the twelfth century, just two of Aristotle's works (Categories and On Interpretation) had been translated into Latin, and Plato's Timaeus was the sole representative of his own corpus. Three more centuries would pass before the remainder of Plato's works would be known in the West. Aristotle, by contrast, was about to become the most dominant intellectual figure in all of Christendom.

Between 1250 and 1350, more than forty-two books of Aristotle were translated into Latin. Most of the new publications came from the translations and commentaries of Islamic philosophers, whose rediscovery of the Greeks in the eighth century had ignited a golden age that was just beginning to wane. The Latin version of Metaphysics, for instance, was based on a translation of Avicenna (Ibn Sinâ; ca. 980–1037), perhaps the greatest of a distinguished series of thinkers. At the same time, these Muslim philosophers' own sophisticated analyses themselves became part of the Aristotelian corpus of the thirteenth century. The 1230 Latin version of the Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics by Averroës (Ibn Rushd; 1126–98), another influential author, would become as well known as Aristotle's original book.

The impact of Aristotle in Eckhart's time is hard to overstate. While many scholars, such as Albert, delighted at the insights of the philosopher on such a vast array of subjects, just as many feared the deleterious effects of Aristotelian thought on Christian faith. Learned opposition to the interweaving of philosophy and revelation dated back to the earliest days of Christianity and would continue well beyond the time of Albert and Eckhart. During the thirteenth century, the most frequent objection concerned the relevance or practicality of speculative theology itself, a discipline occupied with such metaphysical issues as the origin of the universe, the nature of
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
continued to attract many enthusiastic supporters. Dominican theologians attempted to find a safe middle ground, arguing that natural philosophy and Christian faith were not only compatible but overlapping and complementary. As the great Thomas Aquinas explained, while some Christian teaching had to be accepted on faith, many truths were knowable through unaided reasons. The controversy over using Aristotle in theology raged on, however, including a second, more comprehensive condemnation of the Averroists in 1277. Not until Eckhart’s return to Paris in 1293 had the rancor of his undergraduate years eased, with the incorporation of ancient and recent pagan works mostly accepted among academic theologians.

As a graduate “Reader in Sentences,” Eckhart’s own lectures focused exclusively on theological questions related to Lombard’s Four Books of Sentences and the Bible, seemingly safe and uncontroversial topics. Building on his earlier work as a young friar in Erfurt, the more mature Eckhart moved from passive reception of Lombard’s points, or distinctiones, to an active investigation of specific questions. Lombard himself had actually conceived of his collection as a theological casebook, intended to spur informed conversation—an invitation Eckhart eagerly accepted.

Logic, a component of all undergraduate training, lay at the heart of the dialectical method employed by thirteenth-century theologians. The goal was to extend knowledge on a subject by means of inference from certain authoritative texts as well as from common knowledge. Whether in an oral disputation or on the page of a summa, Eckhart and other theologians of his time believed that adversarial debate, the practice of arguing both sides of a question, would demonstrate the truth or falsehood of any statement. After stating a question—for instance the initial query of Aquinas’s Summa Theologica, “whether sacred science (i.e., theology) is a science”—a debater would begin with the principal objections to an affirmative response, providing evidence for each (“It would seem that sacred science (i.e., theology) is not a science because . . .”). In written format, the author would then rebut his own objections, first stating his thesis (“On the contrary . . .”), then giving evidence in support of that thesis (“I answer that . . .”), then making specific replies to each objection. Although the ostensibly true conclusion did not
necessarily satisfy all listeners or readers, consensus emerged on some points, allowing scholars a sense of intellectual progress.

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 cannot 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.

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
consistent curtailing by the demands of his order, those thoughts are lost to
history.

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

Eckhart’s inferior status among the intellectual aristocracy of Paris was
undoubtedly challenging in other ways. Those very few scholars who at-
tained the vaunted status of master enjoyed considerable power within the
university, leading to a widespread reputation among those below them for
arrogance and caprice. Outside of the academic world, resentment could be
even more palpable, especially toward the admittedly elitist theological fac-
culty. Alvarus Pelagius, a member of the papal curia a generation after Eck-
hart, skewered the insider culture of professors who “despise simple persons
who know how to avoid faults of conduct better than those of words,” choos-
ing instead “to teach useless, vain, and sometimes false doctrine . . . they try
to say what is subtle, not what is useful, so that they may be seen of men and
called rabbis, which is especially reprehensible in masters of theology.”
Sometimes outsider resentments were prompted by a more fundamental
anti-intellectualism. Francis of Assisi thought that book learning of any sort
inevitably “puffed up” an individual: When one of his novices asked per-
sion to purchase a psalter, the saint replied, “After that you’ll want a
breviary. And when you have that, you'll sit in your chair like a prelate and say to your brother: 'Fetch me my breviary!'

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

Cracking the Celestial Code

There was also the sheer intellectual excitement around speculative theology in Eckhart's university days. To understand what a charged experience this represented to many intelligent seekers, we must suspend most preconceptions about the medieval scholastic endeavor. Since the inception of the university, it has been common to portray the theological work of "the schoolmen" as petty squabbling over unknowable abstractions. Long before the pejorative characterizations of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers, even during Eckhart's own time, outsiders like Alvarus Pelagius mocked both the jargon and abstractness of professional theologians' debates. Much as today, when a fine point of no apparent real-world significance is dismissed as "academic," most people in Eckhart's time spoke of arguing "in the manner of the schools" to describe quibbling over irrelevant subtleties. There is no known record of an actual scholastic debate on how many angels could dance on the head of a pin (an invention of the later
satirist François Rabelais), but the absurdity of both the question itself and the image of a roomful of professors fervently attempting to resolve it has come to emblemize an entire intellectual culture.

From the perspective of Eckhart and his professors, however, they were "scientists" engaged in cutting-edge research on a question of monumental importance—the very nature of reality. Their big questions still preoccupy us today: Why is there something instead of nothing? How does the universe work? What is the place of humans in that universe? With the academic rigor and bold imagination that characterize today's theoretical physicists, they systematically accumulated evidence and built scholarly consensus, all inspired by the goal of achieving a comprehensive outline of human knowledge and—even more exciting—a unifying theory. The intellectual level of their debates and the intense scrutiny applied to all arguments easily matched the cerebral exchanges of a modern MIT conference or Caltech symposium. To grasp the points of contention among scholastic theologians, let alone their very language, required years of specialized training, as well as a tremendous capacity for abstract thinking—an ability to temporarily suspend understanding of "the real world" and engage in prolonged thought experiments that often relied on purely speculative objects and categories.

The guardians of church doctrine from the pope on down may not have understood the specifics of most scholastic arguments, but they were eager to cite scholarly consensus in making pronouncements that suited their own beliefs and goals. The Eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation, for instance, endorsed by the Council of Lateran IV in 1215, relied on Aristotelian notions of universal essence (which changed from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ even while the external appearances, or "accidents," remained the same). Most laypeople were even less likely than ordinary clerics to comprehend the subtleties of the schools, but they indirectly experienced the consequences of such debates in the everyday administering and veneration of the sacraments.

At the same time, the scientia ("way of knowing") of Eckhart's theology professors was obviously not the same as the science of modern researchers. 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
scholars believed that universals were part of God’s creation but remained essentially abstract ideas from which material examples flowed. For so-called Realists, though—including both Aquinas and Eckhart—universals were real entities in themselves, albeit directly knowable only to God. Everything else in creation—material or spiritual—flowed from this divine constellation of universals.

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

In his studies as a second bachelor, Eckhart learned that there were two generally accepted ways to demonstrate the truth of a philosophical claim about God or any aspect of creation, material or spiritual. The first, called propter quid (“on account of which”), was a fact deduced from an indisputable truth. In many instances, this was a priori information attainable to humans only through divine revelation, usually via scripture, and preferably elaborated on by St. Augustine or another Church Father. The most frequent scholastic example was the triune nature of the Godhead—not something that human beings could adduce from the natural world, but once revealed, a truth that could be rationally explored, at least to a certain degree. The 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*
"quid science derived from self-evident truths than a purely Aristotelian pro-
ject of inductive reasoning based on observation. To the twenty-first-century
mind, this reliance on revealed truth would disqualify theology as a science
at all and makes its claims—including the very existence of God—impossible
to prove at best, at worst, patently false. Not so for Aquinas and his fellow
scholastics, including Eckhart, who found theology’s basis in divine reve-
lation reassuring, the equivalent of having the answer key to a set of perplex-
ing problems. This confidence in the powers of human perception and
reason, fortified by the revealed truths of the Bible and the divinely inspired
teachings of the Christian tradition, gave Eckhart and his fellow speculative
theologians hope (their critics said hubris) that they actually might reach up
toward the mind of God.

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

There was, however, a more significant motivation at work, based on the
scholastic conceptualization of the universe as a hierarchical great chain of
being, with God at the top and inanimate objects at the bottom. The prox-
imity of a thing—human, animal, rock—to God determined how much of
God’s essence that thing shared. The closer on the chain one got to the Cre-
ator, in other words, the closer one got to understanding Him. For example,
any especially saintly person was thought to be closer to God than the aver-
age Christian, and this belief gave rise to its own category of scholarly study,
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.

Angels were created beings, like humans, but noncorporeal, like God. They were, according to scholarly consensus, not eternal like God but they also weren't temporal like humans. Their status was unquestionably far above that of humans, who suffered from the temptations of the flesh and other limitations, but they remained distinct beings from the Godhead. This middle status between God and humans made angels an irresistible subject of study. According to Aristotelian logic, if one could define distinctions at the top of a hierarchy, in this instance between God and the angels, it inevitably helped explain similar phenomena, albeit in debased form, that occurred at a much lower level, such as that of humankind. Angelic love, to take one example, provided both a point of aspiration for humans and a crucial conceptual link between divine love and human love in the scholastic conception of a hierarchical universe.

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

Most of the groundwork for thirteenth-century angelology had been laid in the six centuries following the death of Christ. Both Paul and Augustine wrote about angels as divine servants and aspirational models for humans. Several later fathers—most notably Ambrose (ca. 340–397), Jerome (ca. 347–420), Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), and especially Pseudo-Dionysius (sixth century)—actually enumerated nine angelic orders, each endowed with a specific heavenly function.
The major intellectual work at Eckhart's University of Paris, however, was less concerned with a seating chart of heaven than with various metaphysical and physical questions prompted by angels' unique status in creation between God and humans. Why and where, specifically, did God create angels? Do they have form and matter? What does it mean to be ageless and sexless? To have a spiritual body? Do angels speak with their mouths or in some other way? If they don't have bodies, can they exist in a certain place, or be in several places at once? Are angels capable of joy or other emotions? Can they see the future? There was virtually no question Eckhart's professors could resist asking about angels, impelled by their hierarchical model of creation and the Aristotelian tools of analysis and debate now at their disposal. And in the process, of course, they would also learn more about those above and below angels in the hierarchy of creation, that is, about God and humankind.

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

Eckhart was an eager participant in this inspired project of discovery, yet he was also attuned early on to the dangers of hubris among his fellow explorers at the university. Naturally he encountered some arrogant senior academics, impervious to criticism and ripe for rebuke in the name of humility. But as his Easter sermon from 1294 indicates, Eckhart was concerned with 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.
[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...
successively debated the first two questions, allowing the guest of honor to formulate his own response to each. At the conclusion of the last debate, the presiding master made a few remarks about the teaching of sacred scriptures, then closed with a bit of wry commentary on Eckhart himself, something akin to a modern roast.

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

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

For the next three academic years, Meister Eckhart was to hold the St. Giles chair as regent professor of theology at the University of Paris, a position of great honor previously occupied by both Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. Having already served as prior of Erfurt for four years, Eckhart 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 Aristotelian and Augustinian, 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
Eckhart's, including coursework at the *studium generale* of Cologne from 1267 to 1270 (possibly under Albert himself), further theological study at the University of Paris from 1272 to 1277 (overlapping with Aquinas), a brief stint as lector at the priory of Trier (1280–81), and twelve years as a lecturer in Paris. He met and got to know Eckhart when they both lived in the St. Jacques house, during the younger man's year of study in 1286–87, if not earlier. In 1293 Dietrich was elected provincial of Teutonia, whereupon he immediately appointed Eckhart to a graduate lectureship in Paris. A year later, he approved the election of the young friar as Erfurt prior, guaranteeing that he would see Eckhart at least twice a year at provincial and general meetings.

Dietrich of Freiberg's influence on Eckhart went far beyond his promotion of the younger man's career in the order. He read the same texts as his protégé, and was likely the person who introduced Eckhart to some of them, particularly Neoplatonist works. He embraced the same scholastic method and expressed himself in a precise (and dry) Latin similar to that in the younger man's scholarly writings. (By contrast, Eckhart's German sermons ring with rhetorical flourishes.) Most important, Dietrich's conception of reality itself, including the relationship of the individual soul to the divine essence, profoundly shaped Eckhart's own thinking.

Like most speculative theologians, Dietrich sought a unifying theory for the material and spiritual worlds. He differed in some significant ways, however, from his fellow Dominican Aquinas, and he passed some of that skepticism about the Thomist model on to Eckhart. The most important way in which the mentor and his acolyte differed was their ultimate intellectual goal. While Dietrich's writings on the Beatific Vision (a direct experience of the divine) clearly influenced Eckhart, the older man looked more to an intellectual appreciation of all creation through natural philosophy. Light, he believed, was the key to a universal theory encompassing both the material and spiritual realms, and Dietrich subsequently devoted far more attention to theories of optics, including a famous treatise on rainbows. Eckhart, meanwhile, continued to pursue a subjective experience of God, with learning playing a supportive role.

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
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.

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

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

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

Of course Eckhart’s method did not guarantee that every reader would find the same meanings. He conceded as much, noting that often the same scriptural words [have been] interpreted in different ways by different saints, as well as by distinguished Jewish scholars, such as Maimonides. But unlike those who feared such diversity of interpretation, Eckhart reveled in the
astounding variety of ways that God’s revelation could assist readers on their respective spiritual journeys. In fact, in his own works, he frequently provided 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 universal 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 powerful, they all believed, that it could potentially reach anyone reading the Bible, even if the [human] author he is reading [had] not grasped 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 Augustine, he favored books that he thought had the most interpretive possibilities, 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 “hypertext,” 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 (including Aquinas), but Eckhart took this tendency to new lengths, actively encouraging diverse and subjective readings—as long as they resonated with larger truths.
The Dialectical Path to Truth

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.

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).

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.

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 lector, 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.

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.

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
act of being. He was heavily influenced by Dietrich in this approach, but the
new master went further than his mentor, proposing pure thought itself as
the reason for and substance of reality, the cause of all things, including time
and space. This argument was not mere theological sparring for Eckhart; its
purpose was intensely practical and personal. In the idea that pure thought
is both the cause of God’s existence and the essence of his being, Eckhart had
found the key to his own lifelong pursuit of God. For if God is thought, and
some small part of God exists in the essence of every human being, then
human thought offers a direct connection to the Creator. The intellect pro-
vided the link he had been searching for.

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

Similarly, the term “will” denoted more than simple desire to the mostly
Franciscan scholars who argued for its primacy over the intellect. God, they
pointed out, wants humans to love Him but He wants it to be a free choice.
Accordingly, the will is the choice, freely made, to love God, and, because of
that love, to follow God’s ways. The supreme example of this was Christ’s
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
the seeker back from actually encountering God. Love infatuates and entangles us in goodness, and in love I remain caught up in the gate, and love would be blind if knowledge were not there. A stone also possesses love, and its love seeks the ground.

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

A Masterwork for the Ages

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 opposite 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.” Lombard’s work served that inspirational purpose for many generations, but soon other scholars were attempting to build on the Sentences or even improve upon it. Alexander of Hales (c. 1185–1245), aka the Unanswerable Doctor, authored the first major commentary on the Sentences, itself a summa, but was unable to complete the magnum opus before his death. While his fellow Franciscans revered and continued his work, Alexander’s reputation had waned by the end of the thirteenth century, with his massive volume mocked by Roger Bacon (1214–92) for being as heavy as a horse and full of errors. Like Albert and Dietrich, Bacon (aka the Miracle Doctor) looked to natural philosophy for a unifying metaphysical theory, although he decried the great deference accorded Albert as an unprecedented “monstrosity,” given the latter’s indirect and incomplete knowledge of Aristotle.

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

Sometime during this academic year, Meister Eckhart resolved to write his own summa. Of course the competing achievement foremost in his mind
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*
in being or in knowing, in scripture or in nature, proceeds from one source
and one root of truth. ... Therefore, Moses, Christ, and the Philosopher
[i.e., Aristotle] teach the same thing, differing only in the way they teach.

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

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

Even by the standards of scholastics, famed for their love of systemiza-
tion, Eckhart’s ambitions for the Opus Tripartitum were unprecedented. Un-
like the authors of other summae, including Aquinas, he envisioned a holistic,
organic approach to his philosophy of Christianity. First he would resolve
most of the current disputes about first principles—a formidable (some would
say impossible) task in itself. Then he would proceed to address more specific
questions according to the findings of Part I, taking on many of the positions
staked out by Aquinas and other rivals. Finally he would expound on the
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
would need to be succinct rather than comprehensive. Even so, Eckhart’s confidence in the originality of his contribution is remarkable:

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

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

Studious brothers, not casual lay or clerical readers, were the master’s intended readers, and even this select audience had to proceed carefully to grasp the new and rare things that the Opus would reveal. Contrary to the accusations of Eckhart’s later critics, anxiety about being misunderstood or accused of unorthodox statements always weighed heavily on his mind. In introducing the Opus, he warned readers that at first glance some of the following propositions, questions, and expositions will seem monstrous, doubtful or false, but he simultaneously reassured and admonished them that it will be otherwise if they are considered cleverly and more diligently.

Meister Eckhart completed his first year as regent professor confident that he had at last found his life’s work. The magisterial summa he envisioned would provide an unprecedented metaphysical foundation for all Christian beliefs and morality. His “utterly original” attempt to surpass both Thomist and Franciscan systems would put forward a new theology (God is intellect) and a new anthropology (intellect is part of uncreated divinity and present in all humans). Eckhart must have known that many of the brethren for 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.
[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
later, in September 1303, the first provincial chapter for Saxony met in Erfurt and elected Meister Eckhart its leader.

The new province contained forty-seven male houses and seventy female convents. Its geographical scope was vast, encompassing Holland, Frisia, Westphalia, Hesse, Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and the Baltic. Eckhart’s new position required him to be “prayerful and respectful” of his predecessors and their traditions, while also undertaking many personal inspections and instituting reforms as needed. As a Dominican provincial, Eckhart oversaw all liturgical practices in his jurisdiction and was charged with maintaining discipline “in a just and fraternal manner.” Usually such oversight involved counseling, interventions, and “gentle” corrections. Sometimes disobedient or “dangerous” brothers needed to be relocated or, in rare cases, imprisoned. Eckhart handled all internal relations among Saxony’s priories, as well as external contacts with other Dominicans from the master general on down. He was the province’s chief diplomat, responsible for maintaining good relations and supervising legal arrangements with bishops and other secular clergy, with Franciscans and other orders, with nuns and tertiaries, and with local lay leaders, both noble and bourgeois. The provincial also managed all the order’s property in his district, maintaining and supplying existing houses, negotiating to establish new ones, and overseeing all major purchases and donations. The cumulative responsibilities of the job required nearly constant travel, often over great distances.

The Dominicans had a long history of scholar-administrators, dating back to Dominic himself and continuing to Eckhart’s own mentor, Dietrich of Freiberg. With four years of previous administrative experience under his belt and new status as a master of theology, the middle-aged Eckhart was embarking on a path that could well lead to his becoming master general of the entire order. Clearly the academically talented scholastic must have also possessed some notable leadership skills. Not only were no complaints registered against him during his tenure as provincial—remarkable given the size of his province—but just four years later, in 1307, he was elected to an additional office: general vicar of Bohemia, charged with restoring order to the especially unruly province. Apparently the new general vicar’s
housecleaning went well, as no further complaints circulated about Bohe-
mia 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 Meis-
ter 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 assign-
ment as well.

In 1311, Paris and all of Christendom were still reeling from the after-
shocks of the French king Philip the Fair's single-minded obliteration of the
Knights Templar. The Templars had been the most famous and most suc-
cessful 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 culmi-
nated 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 re-
sided 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
the pope to support him. Following this embarrassing incident, the Order of Preachers required a friar with proven diplomatic skills and a stellar academic reputation to help revive Dominicans' status in Paris, especially at the university, and Eckhart was the ideal man for the job.

A contemporary portrayal of the burning of Grand Master Jacques de Molay and other Templars in Paris, 1314.

Seven years had passed since Eckhart's previous professorship in Paris. Although he had continued to work on his *Opus Tripartitum* during that time, progress had been slow amid all his travel and administrative work on behalf of the order. Eckhart's second regent professorship in Paris once again offered him the time and resources to make significant progress on the *Opus*. Ironically, it was at just this point that his ambitious intellectual pursuit of God appears to have hit a deeply troubling impasse—namely the outer limits of human reason. It was a paradox that Aquinas too had discovered during the composition of his own *Summa*: "Man reaches the peak of his knowledge of God when he realizes that he does not know Him, understanding that the divine reality surpasses all human conception of it." Shortly before his own death, in fact, the Angelic Doctor had experienced a deeper understanding of the divine that "made everything I had written seem as straw." For
KNOWING THE UNKNOWABLE GOD

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

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

Unknowing God

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

Yet when it came to the highest things, Augustine agreed with Plato that “it is impossible to say anything about God, and how difficult it is to find 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
methods had previously held some appeal for him. Arguing from cause, for
instance—favored by Aquinas—permitted theologians to know the Creator
through His actions, such as a hierarchical ordering of the universe, or His
fashioning of humans in His own image. Eventually Eckhart agreed with
Maimonides, however, that statements about God inferred in this manner
were unsuitable, improper, and not in keeping with the truth. The same was true
about positive statements based on analogy and metaphors, which Eckhart
himself often used, albeit cautiously and with qualifications. Eckhart even
rejected reasoning by eminence—a method he had favored earlier—in
which one tried to describe the nature of the divine by imagining ever
greater degrees of virtues, such as goodness, or of powers, such as under-
standing. The human mind, he concluded, remained hopelessly limited by
its own "creaturely" concepts, leaving only the via negativa:

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

Embracing negative theology required a radical demolition of the most
basic human preconceptions about reality itself, a process Nicholas of Cusa
(1401–64) later called "learned ignorance." Maimonides, the most formative
influence on Eckhart's thinking in this respect, began with the Socratic ax-
iom, "The one thing I know about God is that I do not know Him." Like the
ancient Athenian, the Jewish sage believed that negative theology could not
guarantee absolute truths, but it could help us to be less wrong. Specifically,
Maimonides posited in his Guide for the Perplexed that there were four basic
mental categories that had no relevance to God and consequently distorted
all human understanding of Him: corporality, mutability, privation, and
similarity. Eckhart streamlined this list of rational barriers to three funda-
mental notions: time (which included mutability), corporeality (or space),
and multiplicity. In other words, anything that most of us can imagine exists
in time and space, and is distinct from something else. God, by contrast,
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. Eter-
nity is often imagined as just a really long time, with the notions of “no be-
genning” 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 eter-
nity 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 un-
taught 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,
remain antithetical to the divine perception of Now. In eternity, being and youth are in it the same, for eternity would not be eternal if it could become new and were not always so. The eternal Now, according to Eckhart, was the meaning of the scriptural phrase “fullness of time,” and should be the true objective of any meaningful pursuit of God. Breaking free of the sensory world of cause and effect, change, and other temporal constructs might be impossible for most humans but the aspiration to do so might at least provide direction for those seeking to grasp the divine perspective.

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

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

Eckhart’s third mental barrier to imagining God is perhaps the most difficult to understand. Humans exist in a world of multiplicity, perceiving various individual things at all levels, all distinct from one another. Our rea-son knows only parts and boundaries and degrees of separation, and thus we 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. Panentheism considers the divine and the universe identical; panentheism sees the entire material cosmos infused with a transcendent divinity, known to Eckhart as the One.

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

... 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.

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.

In one of his most difficult passages, Eckhart returned to the meaninglessness of distinctions for God:
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
anything about God, for God is above all understanding. One master says:

“If I had a God I could understand, I would no longer consider him God.”

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.

Finding Our Way Back to the One

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 $-1 \times -1 = 1$.

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

The Neoplatonic intuitive approach to "knowing" God had an especially profound impact on Albert the Great and the German Dominicans who followed him, including Eckhart. In 1265, Albert's disciple Hugh Ripelin of Strasbourg published the master's various "mystical" writings in the collection Compendium of Theological Truth. The great man's interpretations of Paul, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius on divine union sent heavy ripples throughout the Order of Preachers. Even Aquinas, the supposed champion of "Christian Aristotelianism," was deeply influenced by Albert's Neoplatonism, citing Pseudo-Dionysius in his Summa more often than the Philosopher himself. Eckhart and his fellow Dominicans naturally differed on specifics, but all accepted Albert's general adaptation of Platonic cosmology and its privileging of intuition, which, unlike reason, provided an infallible way of "knowing" God.

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

*Do not imagine that God, when he made heaven and earth and all things, 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 
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-
iton and reason. The highest part of this Intellect, what academic theolo-
gians called the active intellect, provided direct access to the divine, whereas
the potential or passive intellect merely received guidance from the superior active intellect. Like Albert, Eckhart actually believed in a collective of active intellects, each with a corresponding passive partner rooted in the sensory world. But unlike Albert and Dietrich of Freiberg, Eckhart argued that it was through the passive intellect that the soul was joined with God, in unity, not like in likeness. God came to the passive intellect through its divine spark (vünkeln; or Latin syncretesis), which did not require reason or any other intermediary in order to grasp God in his pure essence. This part of the intellect, in fact, had no actual existence of its own—it was God Himself, and the human act of intuition was that part of God recognizing Himself.

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

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

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

But how exactly did the Intellect or divine spark work? On this question some of Eckhart's most revered philosophical forebears remained silent. Maimonides, like many Aristotelian-oriented scholars, looked down on "mystical" pursuits, such as the Cabalistic practices of his contemporary Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (aka Nahmanides; d. 1270). Most scholastic theologians 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 (grund) 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.
Meister Eckhart rarely mentioned this radical concept in his academic writings, and when he did the full implications were not yet developed. In the *Commentary on Exodus*, for instance, composed as part of the *Opus Tripartitum*, the discussion of God's timelessness contains a startling comment, made in passing: When someone asked me why God had not created the world earlier, I answered that he could not because he did not exist. . . . God's speaking is his making, and also unlike us his speaking is the cause of the entire work and of all its parts.

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

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

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

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

Meister Eckhart's theatrical flourishes aside, this triangulated notion of the ground, God, and the soul was remarkable. More than any of his other insights, the master's recognition of an ultimate origin and destination beyond 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

*Intelllect 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.