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1. MEISTER ECKHART AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABSOLUTE

ANALOGIES WITH ADVAITAVĀDA

Since the early 19th century, Meister Eckhart has been a central figure when comparing the Western and Eastern thoughts¹. The Dominican monk - who lived during the 13th century and was two times appointed *Magister*², master of sacred theology, at the University of Paris, the highest recognition a member of the order could receive – despite his deep Christian roots, was however always distant from the common interpretation of the doctrine, so much so that on March 27, 1329 the ecclesiastical authority, with the papal bull *In Agro Dominico*, declared heretical seventeen of his propositions. However, Eckhart did not live long enough to hear the verdict of his trial. He passed away in unknown circumstances probably in early 1328.

Although there have been many published works that measure the differences between the thought of the Dominican with Eastern doctrines, most of them are focused on the comparison with Buddhism, particularly with the conception of Zen. In our opinion, however, it is with the *Advaita* doctrine of Śaṅkara that the greatest affinities and concordances can be seen; considering first of all that for the Dominican master the main road to salvation passes through the knowledge of the Absolute. Such knowledge is not seen as a “scientific” theoretical exercise on the universe and its foundations, but as a reality to be experienced, discovering thus the union with God, which he asserts to be inherent to the human being. Indeed, man cannot know God in the same way he knows the rest of the world. God cannot be an object for a subject, describable and representable. In the sermon *There once was a rich man*, centered on Saint Paul’s ascent to the third heaven, the Dominican states:

*In fact, he could not express what he saw, for what must be known can only be known in its first cause, or form, or rather in its action. Therefore, God remains unknown, because He is not caused by anyone; He is always the First. He is also formless, in His unknowability. He performs no action, thus remaining in His unfathomable silence. Therefore, He remains nameless. Where then are all the names given to him? Moses asked His name. God replied: you have been sent by He-who-is. Otherwise he could not have understood Him, because what God is he himself cannot describe it to any creature - and not due to a possible limit of His, but because creatures are unable to understand. Therefore, the master of the Book of Lights says that God is above being, above all praise, incomprehensible and unknowable.*³

Only through negations is possible to speak about God:

Everything is contingent about God must be rejected. He dwells purely in Himself, where there is

¹ Niklaus Largier, the German scholar who is considered the main bibliographer of the works on the Dominican master by collecting over 1500 titles of critical works on Eckhart in his *Bibliographie zu Meister Eckhart*, indicates about sixty works on the subject.

² The first in 1303, the second in 1310. This is a completely exceptional fact. Before him only Thomas Aquinas held the position twice.

³ *I sermoni* (hereafter SE) 80, p. 535, ed. by M. Vannini, Milano, Paoline, 2002.



*neither this nor that, since whatever is in God is nothing but God Himself.*¹

This is clearly reminiscent of the fundamental texts of *Vedānta*:

[...] *Not this, not this (neti neti). Nothing is more descriptive than saying “not this”. The name [of Brahman] is the truth of truth.*²

There is no object or phenomenon that can elude the apophatic method, which consists of an infinite series of negations that demolishes any possible limitation of the Absolute through words.

*He who conceives any differentiation in that [Ātman] which is beyond any fancying and thought, existence and not existence, unity and multiplicity, with and without attributes, caused and not caused [...] that man may as well wish to roll up the sky like leather, to ascend there with his feet like ascending up a staircase, or to trace the footprints of the fish in water and birds in sky. For the Śruti declare “not this not this”.*³

Meister Eckhart, centuries later, seems to confirm it:

*I cannot see what One is. [...] God is nothing and yet is something. What is something is also nothing. [...] Neither this nor that can be attributed to him, thus suggesting that he is something undefined, far above, far away. If you see something or if something finds its way in knowledge, that is not God, for the reason that he is neither this nor that.*⁴

[...] *He is neither this nor that which can be expressed; it is a being above all beings.*⁵

Tuttavia, come appare chiaro, l'ineffabilità della Divinità, la sua inesprimibilità, non vuol significare la sua identificazione con il Nulla. Ciò che Eckhart intende indicare è l'incapacità del pensiero oggettivante e del linguaggio che definisce di coglierlo: Essa è sì un niente, ma solo un niente di creatura, assolutamente altro ed oltre a questa, ma non è il Nulla assoluto, che in quanto tale sarebbe inesistente. È la negazione della determinazione che la creatura ha sempre in sé in quanto appunto determinata, separata, distinta da ogni altra cosa: affermando sé stesso ogni cosa nega assieme di essere altro da sé.

However, as is clear, the ineffability of the Godhood, its inexpressibility, does not imply its identification with Nothing. What Eckhart intends to indicate is the inability of the objectifying thought and of the language that pretend to grasp it. It is indeed a nothing, but only if considered as a non-creature, altogether distinct and beyond it. Yet it is not the absolute Nothing, otherwise it would be non-existent. It is the negation of the very determination that is always intrinsic to the creature that makes it determined, separate and distinct from everything else. By affirming itself, everything evidently denies that it is other than that.

¹ SE, 3, p. 110.

² *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BU)*, II.3.6.

³ Commentary on *Aitareya Upaniṣad* by Śaṅkara, in *The Aitareya - Tattirīya Upaniṣad and Sri Śaṅkara's commentary*, tr. by S. Sitarama Sastri B. A., Madras, V. C. Sheshacharri, B.A., B.L., M.R.A.S., 1923.

⁴ SE, 71, p. 492.

⁵ SE, 82, p. 549.



Godhood is, therefore, “negation of negation”, that is, negation of limitation, finiteness and multiplicity. Ergo, it is fullness of being, infinite and unlimited. It goes with saying that from this perspective only God is true being, nothing other than being, “he who is”, in his unity without distinction. Being other than Him means being nothing, devoid of reality. Thus, it is the creatures who in fact are not real, for to be what they are is necessary “[...] the immediate and continuous presence in them of God himself”¹.

Also in *Advaita* the apophatic argumentation is an instrument for discrimination and not an insurmountable limit. It does not lead to a formless Nothing², but to the knowledge of true Reality. Only what does not change is truly Real; hence, only the Absolute is truly Real. Querying whether this Absolute is immanent or transcendent is pointless. Immanence and transcendence always imply reference to something else, whereas It is “One without-second”. Therefore, Brahman is the only reality, the supreme Reality, the foundation of all that is commonly considered real and which instead is nothing but superimposition of names and forms to It. God himself, in his personal form, is a superimposition on the Undifferentiated. Thus Śaṅkara, in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, distinguishes the passages of the scriptures in which one refers to one or the other:

The Supreme Brahman is spoken of where It is indicated by such terms as “not gross” through a negation of all the distinctions of names, forms, called up by ignorance. That very Brahman becomes the non-supreme Brahman where It is taught as possessed of some distinct name and form for the sake of meditation, as in such words as: “Identified with the mind, having prāṇa as his body, and effulgence [bhārūpa, individual consciousness or taijasa] as his form.”³

We are not faced with two forms of Brahman but with two different points of view on the one and only Reality; on the one hand, the *Brahman nirguṇa*, without qualifications or attributes, impersonal, without any relationship with the world, “completely free from any superimposition”⁴, One without second, purity of Being; on the other hand, the *Brahman saguṇa*, or “with attributes”, derived and relative, which emerges from the *nirguṇa* by projection of its own *māyā*⁵, first among all “superimpositions” on the undifferentiated Supreme. The latter is used for meditation purposes, so as to allow its understanding also to whom he cannot grasp its absolute Reality due to his *avidyā*, the ignorance that gives rise to the distinction between meditator, meditation and the object of meditation.

Similarly, Eckhart points out that if you think of God as something, then what you are thinking about is not God. As a thought, God is but an imagination of man, who continues to see Him as an object of his own interest and need. According to the Dominican, knowing the divine as One, totality of being, which is the maximum abstraction that the human intellect can reach, remains a relative knowledge. It is indeed impossible to think of the One without juxtaposing anything to it.

But now the masters take it as One, since One is more properly one than what is united. Everything else is taken from what is one; however, what is removed is identical to what is added, in that it

¹ A. Klein, *Meister Eckhart. La dottrina mistica della giustificazione*, Milano, 1978, p. 64.

² Hence the continued distancing of Śaṅkara from Buddhist *anātmaka vāda*. Those who considered *Advaita* as crypto-Buddhism did not grasp the total incompatibility between the two doctrines.

³ *Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara Bhāṣya (BSŚBh)*, IV.3.14.

⁴ *BSŚBh* I.1.12.

⁵ Cfr. *BSŚBh* IV.3.14. [with ‘its own *māyā*’ we refer to its illusory appearance projected by the ignorance of he who conceives it other than the Supreme].



*presupposes a diversity.*¹

The knowledge of the divine is always lowered to the knowledge of an object when it falls under the power of the subjective human intellect. It is therefore necessary to rise above the determinant thought. The insignificance of the contents makes sense only as a liberation from them, and it must not in turn become the “truth”, ossifying in a new utilitarian knowledge or content related to God.

Eckhart, therefore, distinguishes the silent and unspeakable abyss of Godhood (*Gottheit*), in which all differences cancel each other out in absolute Unity, from God (*Gott*), Trinitarian, personal and creator.

*God and Godhood are far from each other and as distinct as heaven is from earth.*²

God in the “*purity of his substrate*”³, hence considered as Godhood, is “*unspeakable and inexpressible for every creature*”. Godhood is God considered in himself, without any relations with creatures, separated from them by an abyss, unknowable. It is the goal of apophatic knowledge: God above God, Being who is beyond being, free from any image. It is One, unrelated and featureless.

Conversely, Godhood is the object of cataphatic knowledge when it is put in relation with creatures, thus becoming the Trinitarian God, manifest and revealed. In this vision, Godhood gives rise, as by superabundance, to determinations and the multiplicity. Thus, from it proceed the three persons of God always, eternally flowing back to it.

The many misunderstandings about this point, which gave rise to the hypothesis of an evolution if not a contradiction of Eckhart’s thought, refer precisely to this distinction. If sometimes God “*is a being*” and other times he is not an “*entity or being*” it is precisely due the twofold meaning that term God entails. In his primary meaning, God represents the creator, the reference of creatures, in the second it is intended as Godhood, “*free from all things*”, indistinct, homogeneous unity. God “*becomes and unbecomes*”⁴, says the Dominican: the former when considered as determined and in relation to the creature, the latter when considered as immovable and immutable Godhood:

*God comes where all creatures express God: here he becomes God. [...] So all creatures speak of God. And why don't they speak of Godhood? All that is in the Godhood is One, and this cannot be talked about. God acts, whereas Godhood does not since it has nothing perform. There is no action in it, and it never pursued any. God and Godhood are distinct from each other by action and non-action.*⁵

Wherever there is a relation with the creature there is a determined and active God. God “*unbecomes*” and does not act in his immutable background, where no “*question can be asked*”, since there is no distinction whatsoever, not even between creature and creator, where everything is One.

¹ SE, 23, p. 239.

² SE, 100, p. 622.

³ What Eckhart calls ‘background’ in *Vedānta* is called ‘substratum’ (*adhiṣṭhāna*), ‘true nature’ (*sattā svarūpa*) or ‘Reality’ (*tattva*).

⁴ SE, 100, p. 623. “*unbecome*” here means not to become, thus remaining eternally unchanging.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 624.



[...] *the Godhood of God consists in the fact that he is not separated from anything.*¹

Therefore, the understanding of Godhood is not within the scope of formal knowledge, but it implies a real spiritual experience:

*All that can be thought of God is not God at all. No one can reach what God is in himself unless everything is transcended into that light which is God himself.*²

Man can know the highest Truth only within himself:

*In fact, he who aspires to fathom the profoundness of God, into what is most intimate, must first fathom his own profoundness, into what is most intimate, since no one knows God unless he first knows himself.*³

Finding yourself, knowing what we really are, in our essence, is at the same time knowing the Godhood, the Absolute. Within man there is a place, or better, a non-place - being this undetermined - where God and man are one; an abyss, “*uncreated and uncreatable*”⁴, where a divine spark shines, forever acting and generating. There the divine dwells in the human, in a “background” that unites them both.

Far from the objects of the senses, from the limitations, devoid of any image, even that of God himself, this “place” is surrounded by quiet and silence and, precisely for this reason, it is the only one suitable for hearing and listening. Only in this silent abyss can unity with Godhood be perceived:

[...] *since God and the soul have only one being and are one in essence. [...] The soul knows God when she is one with him and with the divine essence.*⁵

*And this is the knowledge of God, which removes all other knowledge and being. The soul knows herself and nothing but herself in God, and God in her, and in Him all things. All that is in God, she knows with Him [...]. Then she is nothing, she knows nothing, except herself in God and God in her.*⁶

Based on this, the Dominican master distinguishes the essence of the soul, its background, from what are the foreground powers, intellect, memory and will, considered - as his beloved St. Augustine⁷ had already done before him - images of the Trinity.

All the activities of the soul are carried out through her powers. Whatever she knows, she knows through the intellect. Whatever she remembers, she remembers through memory. Whatever she loves, she loves through the will. Everything is performed through such powers and not through her

¹ SE, 77, p. 526.

² SE, 99, p. 620.

³ SE, 54b, p. 408. But also in many other: cf. SE, 10, p. 161; SE, 12, p. 171; SE, 29, p. 272; etc.

⁴ SE, 10, p. 161.

⁵ SE, 94, pp. 600-601.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

⁷ Often cited by Eckhart, he is considered by him a true spiritual authority.



essence. Every external activity is always based on some mediating element. [...] all outward activities are carried out by the soul thanks to some means. Differently, in the essence there is no activity. In fact, the powers through which the soul acts indeed flow from the bottom of the soul, but in this bottom the “medium” is silent; here only the quiet dominates [...] This bottom is, in fact, by its nature accessible only to the divine essence, without any mediation. God enters the soul here with all of himself, not with a part; God enters the profoundness of the soul.¹

Therefore, the divine that is within oneself can only be experienced in the essence of the soul and not in its powers, which inevitably remain, through images, in contact with the outside, with the multiplicity of the finite. In fact, according to Eckhart, knowledge of the world comes about with the formation of an image within the soul, created by the powers which can be recalled when necessary.

Indeed, when the powers of the soul come into contact with the creature, they acquire an image and likeness from it and then they draw it into themselves. So, they know the creature.²

¹ SE, 101, p. 628.

² SE, 23, p. 241.