



**Marco Perini**

**3. MEISTER ECKHART AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABSOLUTE**  
ANALOGIES WITH *ADVAITAVĀDA*

By discriminating between the Self and the non-Self, he who seeks the Truth discovers under all manifestations the Absolute Subject, the Witness. However, making correct discrimination does not mean separating what is Self from what is not; there is nothing besides the Self-*Ātman*. Rather, it means rejecting - as they are not real - all the multiple forms covering the One without-second Reality. Knowing the Absolute, the Reality, does not involve adding a new object of knowledge to one's own erudition. Rather, it means ceasing to identify with what is different from it: thus, as Eckhart also said, it means "to be" the Absolute; an experience that transforms, removing the veils that cover reality and revealing the absolute identity with it. The two masters affirm it with one voice.

*Therefore, being satisfied with the realisation of the absolute Bliss, live happily in the identity with the true Brahman, the One without a second.*<sup>1</sup>

Eckhart echoed it on different occasions:

*This knowledge is out of time and space, without a here and a now. In this life all things are one, all common, all in all and all united.*<sup>2</sup>

*[...] So I say that in this sense there is no similarity or difference; rather, we are the same being, without any difference, the same substance or nature that he is.*<sup>3</sup>

*However, "Similar to Him" implies a certain distinction and distance, whereas between God and man there is neither distinction nor distance. Therefore, man is not "similar" to God, but absolutely one and the same.*<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, knowing the Absolute means eliminating any distinction between "I" and "He", in a transcendental and impersonal dimension:

*[...] God must<sup>5</sup> necessarily become me, and I God, so completely one that this "He" and this "I" become and are an "is" [...].*<sup>6</sup>

Eckhart affirms that this dimension, although inaccessible to objectifying thought, is still a form knowing; which, we repeat, is at the same time the being and knowing of God.

*God makes us know Himself; knowing, he makes us know Himself, and his being is his*

<sup>1</sup> VCM 523.

<sup>2</sup> SE, 76, p. 519.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.520.

<sup>4</sup> SE, 77, p. 527.

<sup>5</sup> Another theme very dear to Eckhart. When man strips himself of his "I", in that detachment God "is forced" into that space, in an indiscernible and mutual co-belonging that removes any duality. See for example, SE, 6, p. 133, SE, 73, p. 506. As mentioned, there are many sermons that deal with the theme of "forcing God" or "God must".

<sup>6</sup> SE, 83, p. 554.



*knowing. That He makes me know or that I know, is the same thing. This is why His knowledge is mine, one and the same [...] And, since His knowledge is mine and it constitutes His substance, His nature and His being, it follows that His being, His substance and nature are mine.*<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, it is not enough to be united with God, because being and knowing are not yet One.

*If the eternal light envelops us, You and I we are one, and this two-one is an ardent spirit, which sits above all things but below God, in the circle of eternity. It is two because it does not see God without mediation. Its knowing and being, or its knowing and its representation of knowing, never become one.*<sup>2</sup>

Eckhart describes “the circle of eternity” as an impermanent state, in which man is elevated to the presence of the Absolute, beyond his understanding and by grace of a divine gift, in a fashion similar to that in which Arjuna received the divine eye to contemplate Īśvara in his cosmic form, otherwise inconceivable<sup>3</sup>. Such awareness of being One with the Absolute is not yet fully achieved and Godhood is still seen through the filter of duality, not in its “nudity”.

The road to God is one that takes man further from his usual boundaries. A road that is no longer a distance to travel, but a dwelling in the bosom of the Absolute, in perfect and indistinguishable unity with it, in a silent awareness that expresses itself in wonder and bliss:

*[...] it is called road, but it is actually a dwelling, or contemplating God without mediation, in His own being. [...] being led on this path in God with the light of his Word, surrounded by the love of the Spirit that comes from both, all this surpasses what can be expressed in words.*

*Look how wonderful! How wonderful it is: being outside as well as inside, embracing and being embraced, contemplating and being the same thing contemplated, holding and being kept: this is the aim in which the spirit dwells in peace, united with dear eternity.*<sup>4</sup>

Is evident here the difficulty of understanding this state for those who do not “become equal to this truth”. As a result, numerous misunderstandings have always accompanied the thought of the Dominican preacher. Being One with the Absolute has nothing to do with the lack of humility on the part of he who compares himself to God. Both God and Man are no longer perceived in the same way that a gaze captive of duality sees them. The Man free from the identification with his body-mind and its egoic-subjective component, through which is commonly derived the distinction from other objects, is no longer the same “man” that this term usually refers to. As Eckhart would say: “in unity there is neither Conrad nor Henry”<sup>5</sup>. God, on the other hand, is no longer an entity that resides in the heavens, more or less merciful. What remains of both is the silent and unfathomable bottom of the Godhood, which unites man and God and on which no creature can lay its gaze without getting lost in this same bottom.

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<sup>1</sup> SE, 76, pp. 520-521.

<sup>2</sup> SE, 86, p. 564.

<sup>3</sup> Bhagavad Gītā (BhG), XI.8.

<sup>4</sup> SE, 86, p. 566.

<sup>5</sup> SE, 64, p. 453.



For this reason, the One can only be experienced, transcending every possible explanation and conjecture. The message of the two masters in question is clear: all distinctions and oppositions belong to imperfection and, therefore, must be overcome in a further unity.

*[...] this number (without number) is in the time of the imperfection. [...] This spirit must go beyond every number and leave behind every multiplicity [...].<sup>1</sup>*

Only then, in the One, is it possible to comprehend the Wisdom that derives from its listening:

*He who understands the eternal Wisdom of the Father, must be in the inner self, with himself, must be one; [...] Three things prevent us from hearing the eternal word. The first is corporeality, the second multiplicity, the third temporality. If man had overcome these three things, he would live in eternity, he would live in the Spirit, he would live in unity [...].<sup>2</sup>*

Reaching the One is described as breaking into freedom, above all will, beyond the usual knowing: a rediscovering of what we have always been, even though we were unaware of it.

*But in my breaking in, in which I am free of my will and of that of God, of all his works and of God himself, I am above all creatures and I am neither God nor creature; rather, I am what I was, what I am, and what I will be in eternity. [...] in breaking in I get to be one with God. Then I am what I was [...].<sup>3</sup>*

The Upaniṣad convey the same concept in a similar way. Once the inference of the One is drawn, nothing has the same meaning anymore, nothing is the same anymore.

*Therefore, a father is no father, a mother is not mother, the worlds are no worlds, the Gods are no Gods, the Vedas are no Vedas. Therefore, a thief is no thief, the killer of a brāhmaṇa is no killer, an untouchable is no untouchable, a tribal is no tribal, a monk is no monk, an ascetic is no ascetic.<sup>4</sup>*

Only where there is identification with a body is it possible to speak of the agent, the action and the fruits of it. We repeat the important upaniṣadic quote in harmony also with the present context:

*Because when there is duality, as it were, then one sees something, one smells something, one tastes something, one speaks something, one hears something, one thinks something, one touches something, one knows something. But when to the knower of Brahman everything has become the Self, then what should one see and through what, what should one smell and through what, what should one taste and through what, what should one speak and through what, what should one hear and through what, what should one think and through what, what*

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<sup>1</sup> SE, 12, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> SE, 52, p. 395.

<sup>4</sup> BU IV.3.22.



*should one touch and through what, what should one know and through what?*<sup>1</sup>

Again, to indicate the end of knowledge that separates subject and object, but not true Knowledge:

*That it does know in that state is because, though knowing then, it does not know; for the knower's function of knowing can never be lost, because it is imperishable. But there is not that second thing separate from it which it can know.*<sup>2</sup>

All means of knowledge and the very path that leads to the One are instantly burned the moment this liberating understanding is reached: “*the Vedas are no longer the Vedas*” says the aforementioned passage from the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Both the Scriptures and the ritual and behavioural prescriptions are intended only for those who have not yet reached such Knowledge, with the aim of bringing them closer to the correct understanding of Reality. The wise, recognizing themselves as not different from the One, know that limitation (*bandha*) and liberation (*mokṣa*) do not belong to the Self but are always the result of a wrong understanding, of a superimposition. Therefore, they no longer need any path or guide, having recognized their illusory appearance. For this

[...] *we do admit the uselessness of the Śruti when Knowledge is realized* [...].<sup>3</sup>

Eckhart expresses the same concept with an eloquent metaphor:

*If I want to cross the sea and I want a boat just to sail, when I made the crossing, I no longer need the boat.*<sup>4</sup>

It is not conceivable for the *advaitins* to follow a path to reach the supreme Brahman, the One-without-second, as it cannot be associated with a place. Rather, it is all-pervading and the very Self of everything, even of those who apparently proceed along a path. It is truly impossible to reach what is always present! Therefore, Brahman is not the achievement that derives from the completion of a path of perfection. On the contrary, it can only be realized as a liberating awareness, which takes place in an eternal ere” and “now” are That”.

Only with respect to the *Brahman saḡuṇa* is it in fact “logically”<sup>5</sup> possible to speak of a gradual path. Where tradition speaks of correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, between divine and human plan, between universal and individual being, it always refers to the *Brahman saḡuṇa*, which is defined as One-with-second precisely because of its relationship with the universe. But the unity with the qualified Being, the indefinite synthesis and epitome of the entire possibilities of the finite, despite being the highest point one can reach at the level of multiplicity, still remains at the qualification level, the playground of *māyā*. The One-without-second, on the other hand, transcends every possible qualification, including the universal unity<sup>6</sup>. It is, therefore, free from any relationship with anything else. It is the non-dual Reality, achievable only in the attainment of the Knowing-Being, where the distinction between the

<sup>1</sup> BU IV.5.15.

<sup>2</sup> BU IV.3.30.

<sup>3</sup> BUŚBh 4.1.3. An analogous concept is expressed by Śaṅkara in his commentary to *Bhagavad Gītā*, XIII.2.

<sup>4</sup> SE, 57, p. 422.

<sup>5</sup> BSŚBh 4.3.7.

<sup>6</sup> BhG VIII, 20-21.



knower, the known and the knowledge is overcome, that is in the Consciousness devoid of second. It is evident here the affinity of this view with the distinction made by Eckhart between what he calls “being united to God” and being the One in the immutable background that transcends everything.

From this point of view, it no longer makes any sense to wonder whether the he who is free is united with God or is One with him. Only the One really exists.

*I am indeed Brahman, the One without a second, matchless, the Reality that has no beginning, beyond such imagination as ‘thou’ or ‘I’, or ‘this’ or ‘That’, the Essence of Eternal Bliss, the Truth.*<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, every vision that separates man and God, however devout it may seem, is always the result of ignorance:

*While he who worships another God thinking: “He is one, and I am another”, does not know, he is like an animal to the Gods.*<sup>2</sup>

As a demonstration of how Eckhart is in harmony with the *Advaita* on this point, we find in his sermons similar expressions, in which, in a perhaps more compassionate but no less decisive way, he calls “simple people” (but also “asses”) those who continue to think of God as something other than themselves:

*Many simple people imagine that they have to consider God up there, and themselves down here. It is not so. God and I are one.*<sup>3</sup>

By removing of the veil of individuality man discovers the absolute fullness that he really is. This does not happen in an ecstatic vision of God seen as other, who embraces him and with whom he reunites. The One that man discovers does not represent a unity but, rather, a oneness that transcends every form of multiplicity and synthesis.

*[...] here is the fullness of the entire Godhood; here is oneness. As long as the soul recognises a distinction, it is not how it should be; as long as something looks inside or outside there is still no true unity.*<sup>4</sup>

*The infinite is that where one does not see anything else, does not hear anything else, and does not understand anything else. Hence, the finite is that where one sees something else, hears something else and understands something else.*<sup>5</sup>

In both the *Advaita* and Eckhartian views, the achievement of this state is the ultimate goal of human being: the only condition that can set him free from suffering, always tied to what is finite, to what is determined, and that can eventually make him whole by recovering his real nature. Although this dimension is surrounded by an impenetrable silence, it is not foreign to knowing. Indeed, only this is true Knowledge; and not the distinctive one we are used to. The communication of this Wisdom is the

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<sup>1</sup> VCM, 493.

<sup>2</sup> BU I.4.10.

<sup>3</sup> SE, 6, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> SE, 29, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> ChU VII.14.1.



transparency of Silence.

Pointing out the differences in the ways the Dominican and the Indian masters express this last step - the dwelling in the deserted and silent background of the Godhood and in the identity with *Brahman* without attributes – defeats the purpose of the conveyed message. Here there is no room for interpretation. One can only *be* this Truth. Only by being Reality can one truly communicate it and let it speak for itself. The dimension of the usual knowing and distinguishing does not concern this state; nothing is worth inquiring and breaking down. He who knows the Absolute become the Absolute itself and can only let it emanate. It is then up to every human being in silence to recognize, in silence, what he truly is.

*One with the One, one from the One, one in the One and, in the One, eternally One.*<sup>1</sup>

*Om. That (Tad) is full<sup>2</sup>, and this (idam) is full.*

*The full proceeds from the full.*

*Taking the full of the full  
it remains as full alone.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Dell'uomo nobile*, in *Opere tedesche*, a cura di M.Vannini, Firenze, La nuova Italia, 1982, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> In *sskrt. pūrṇa*, which has the meaning of accomplished, total, complete, perfect. Fullness is expressed by the term *Ānanda*.

<sup>3</sup> *BU V.1.1.*