

and expensive treatments rather than to treat simpler, more mundane illnesses? Some public debate must be encouraged on these issues. Arguments about euthanasia or 'voluntary assisted suicide' are likely to have a bearing on this matter too. Even the most conscientious administrator must be aware of the cost benefits of the disappearance of expensive patients from the healthcare budget.

The secretary for the Pontifical Council of the Family might have been undiplomatic in his remarks about Nazi eugenic policies; the government of the Netherlands cannot be compared accurately to Nazi totalitarianism. However, the spectre of Nazism casts a long shadow. In 1933, it was the votes of the mainly Catholic Centre Party, under its priest-leader Monsignor Kaas, which gave Hitler the necessary two thirds majority in the *Reichstag* enabling him to gain power. Monsignor Kaas was not aware of the consequences of his action and spent the next years attempting to undo them. It was from the ranks of the bishops: von Galen, von Preysing, and Faulhaber, that the prophetic warnings of the iniquity of the eugenic agenda came. The question of the dignity of the human person is something on which the Church has something to say; history shows us the dangers that spring from not saying it.

AJW

## The Way of the Void

Paul Murray OP

On the 30 March 1992 Damian Byrne, the former Master of the Dominican Order, wrote to Cardinal Ratzinger:

The Order of St. Dominic has obviously a very direct interest in Meister Eckhart's life, works and reputation. This is why the General Chapter of 1980 welcomed one petition concerning the great theologian and mystic. It originated in Great Britain from a group of Dominican laity and friends of the Order in that country headed by the late Mrs. Ursula Fleming who founded the association, Friends of Meister Eckhart.<sup>1</sup>

If today the fundamental innocence and theological integrity of Meister Eckhart are generally acknowledged, both within and outside the Dominican Order, this is due in no small measure to the efforts of people

like Ursula. Today, when we read Eckhart's work it is not with an inquisitorial gaze or scrutiny—rather, we ourselves feel we are under *his* gaze, *his* quiet scrutiny. Eckhart comes towards us almost as if he were one of our own contemporaries and as a master among them. We do not put him to the test, rather his words—ancient words, yet eloquently new in their serenity and freshness—probe and test us.

Needless to say there are still many difficulties that remain. But our questions today—my own questions at any rate—are not those born of suspicion or fear, rather they are the questions of one interested reader, even a sort of disciple, who finds himself gripped and fascinated by what Eckhart is saying, but also sometimes confused and even bewildered by the extraordinary depth and range and daring of the master's teaching.

If God is to shine divinely in you [Eckhart declares] your natural light cannot help towards this end. Instead it must become pure nothing and go out of itself altogether. . . . In truth no creaturely skill, nor your own wisdom, nor all your knowledge can enable you to know God divinely. For you to know God in God's way, your knowing must become a pure unknowing and a forgetting of yourself and all creatures.<sup>2</sup>

'Well, Sir,' exclaims another voice, a questioning voice, within Eckhart's text, 'what use *is* my intellect then, if it is supposed to be empty and functionless. Is *that* the best thing for me to do—to raise my mind to an unknowing knowledge that can't really exist. For if I knew anything at all it would not be ignorance, and I should not be empty and bare. Am I supposed to be in total darkness?'<sup>3</sup> And later the same voice: 'O Sir, is it really always necessary to be barren and estranged from everything outward, and inward: the powers and their work, must all that go? . . . If a man is in such a state of pure nothingness, is it not better to do something to beguile the gloom and desolation?'<sup>4</sup> Not once, as here in sermon 4 (Walshe), but over and over again in Eckhart's sermons, we are allowed to hear this voice of the questioning, confused disciple or student breaking in, as it were, upon the master's ecstatic discourse. The sermons as a result often assume the character of a dialogue between, on the one hand, Eckhart the confident preacher and, on the other, his keen but often somewhat anxious disciple. Not being myself an Eckhartian scholar nor, indeed, any kind of expert in the field, it is here, behind, or should I say *within* this voice of the student or beginner that I find my point of entry into Eckhart's work.

On one occasion when someone complained to him that no one could understand his sermons Eckhart replied—and his reply is for me at least an encouragement—that in order to understand his preaching the student or the would-be contemplative must be, among other things, 'a

student or the would-be contemplative must be, among other things, 'a beginner among beginners'.<sup>5</sup> So, Eckhart is by no means unaware of the difficulties his listeners have to face, even in the simple comprehension of his ideas. 'If anyone cannot understand this sermon,' he remarks at the close of sermon 87 (Walshe), 'he need not worry.'<sup>6</sup> And elsewhere, 'People say to me, 'You say many fine things which mean nothing to us.' I too regret this fact.'<sup>7</sup> But Eckhart is never afraid to speak out from the heart of his vision. In a sense he finds himself compelled to speak. He has no choice, it seems, but to try almost like a child or an intellectual *magus* or a poet to conjure up through words the unprecedented. Thus:

When I subsisted in the ground, in the bottom, in the river and font of the Godhead, no one asked me where I was going or what I was doing: there was no one to ask me. When I flowed forth all creatures said 'God'. . . . When I return to God, if I do remain there [i.e. if I do not remain at 'God' but penetrate through to the Godhead] my breakthrough will be far nobler than my outflowing.<sup>8</sup>

At this point in his discourse Eckhart seems suddenly to become aware of the furrowed brows of his listeners down beneath him. And he is so affected that his high ecstasy of thought gives way at once to a humble wry good humour: 'Whoever,' he says, 'has understood this sermon, good luck to him.'<sup>9</sup> And again, 'If no one had been here I should have had to preach it to this collection box'!<sup>10</sup>

*The Way of the Void. Notes on the Rediscovery of an Ancient Path:* my title alludes to one of Eckhart's most mysterious themes, the way or the 'state of pure nothingness'.<sup>11</sup> I have at least once come upon the suggestion that this theme preoccupied Eckhart merely as a theologian and as a philosopher but not as a spiritual guide or master of the spiritual life. In fact, as I hope to make plain in this paper, Eckhart's teaching on the void is eminently practical and illuminating for anyone attempting in this age, or indeed in any age, to follow a spiritual path. My rather unusual and, I fear, ambitious sub-title 'Notes on the Rediscovery of an Ancient Path' is, I hope, redeemed somewhat by the suggestion of tentativeness and modesty evoked by the word 'notes'. The 'path rediscovered'—the ancient path—is, needless to say, Eckhart's teaching concerning the way or state of 'pure nothingness'. My original plan had been to examine at some length the discovery or rediscovery in our own age of this particular way by certain spiritual authors in the West such as Thomas Merton and Simone Weil. But this original plan—although in part it still survives—has been disrupted by my becoming more and more absorbed in responding simply and directly to Eckhart's own astonishing

## The Meaning of 'Nothing'

It seemed to a man as though in a dream—it was a waking dream—that he became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with child, and in this nothing God was born: he was the fruit of the nothing. God was born in the nothing.<sup>12</sup>

These remarkable words are of unique interest for the student of Eckhart—not least because, by alluding to the Pauline formula used in 2 *Corinthians*, 'I know a man. . . etc.' Eckhart clearly intends us to understand that he is speaking about himself and about his own experience of God. But what kind of experience is it that compels Eckhart in this passage and in others as well to speak of God in such negative terms. 'If I say God is a being, that is not true: he is transcendent being and a superessential nothingness.'<sup>13</sup> And again, 'God is nothing: not in the sense of having no being. He is neither this nor that that we can speak of. He is being above all being. He is Beingless being.'<sup>14</sup> And finally: 'Whoever speaks of God by [using the term] *nothing* speaks of him properly.'<sup>15</sup> This strong theological conviction is not by any means shared by everyone. Dom Cuthbert Butler in his book *Western Mysticism* finds himself at odds with those mystics like Eckhart who 'heap up terms of negation—darkness, void, nothingness—in endeavouring to describe that Absolute which they have apprehended'.<sup>16</sup> But in Butler's view the method they use is 'the very opposite of the characteristically Christian one of affirmation.'<sup>17</sup> Whereas St. Paul, for example, according to Butler, stresses enhanced knowledge, Eckhart would seem to place all the emphasis on mere ignorance. This kind of objection is, as it happens, one of which Meister Eckhart himself was well aware. In sermon 2 (Walshe) we read, 'Sir, you place all our salvation in ignorance. That sounds like a lack. . . . where there is ignorance there is a lack, something is missing, a man is brutish, an ape, a fool, and remains so long as he is ignorant.'<sup>18</sup> To this objection Eckhart replies, 'Ah, but here we must come to a transformed knowledge, and this unknowing must not come from ignorance but rather from knowing we must get to this unknowing. Then we shall become knowing with divine knowing, and our unknowing will be ennobled and adorned with supernatural knowing.'<sup>19</sup> In similar vein Eckhart says elsewhere concerning this 'transformed knowledge': 'Though it may be called a nescience, an unknowing, yet there is in it more than in all knowing and understanding without it, for this unknowing lures and attracts you from all understood things and from yourself as well.'<sup>20</sup>

As an instance of someone who has been graced with 'supernatural knowledge' Eckhart cites the experience of St. Paul at Damascus:

After he had been caught up into the third heaven where God was made known to him and he beheld all things, when he returned he had forgotten nothing, but it was so deep down in his ground that his intellect could not reach it: it was veiled from him.<sup>21</sup>

So, although St. Paul saw something of the mystery of God and knew something, this knowledge was so deep down in his ground and so hidden it was indeed as if he had seen nothing. In one of his most interesting sermons Eckhart takes as his text a sentence from the *Acts of the Apostles* which describes the Damascus experience of St. Paul: 'Surrexit autem Saulus de terra apertisque oculis nihil videbat' (Acts 9, 8). 'Paul rose from the ground and with eyes open he saw nothing.' What a sentence for Eckhart! It affords him, the preacher, a superb opportunity to begin to ring the changes on some of the different meanings, both positive and negative that he would attach to the word 'nothing':

It seems to me [he declares] that this little word (nothing) has four meanings. One meaning is: When he got up from the ground with eyes open he saw nothing, and the nothing was God; for when he saw God he [Luke] calls this a nothing. The second: When he got up he saw nothing but God. The third: In all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: When he saw God, he saw all things as nothing.<sup>22</sup>

Of all four meanings the first is by far the most striking and unusual: 'When he got up from the ground with eyes open he saw nothing, and the nothing was God.' At first hearing this statement may sound remote from ordinary spiritual experience and rather too deliberately esoteric. But in fact Eckhart's preoccupation here is one which sooner or later must confront every Christian who attempts to pray. Think for a moment of what happens in practice when a believer begins to raise his/her mind and heart to God:

In the beginning [according to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*] it is usual to feel nothing but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a *cloud of unknowing*. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent towards God in the depths of your being. Try as you might this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God. You will feel frustrated for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love. But learn to be at home in this darkness. Return to it as often as you can, letting your spirit cry out to him whom you love. For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud.<sup>23</sup>

In Eckhart the bride of the *Song of Songs* sings of an experience she had of God but of God as nothing—an experience beyond anything that can be described and one that always remained ‘within this darkness and this cloud’: ‘Then I heard without sounds, then I saw without light, then I smelled where no odour rose, then I tasted what was not there, then I felt where nothing was to be grasped.’<sup>26</sup> God, the object of this mysterious love, is for Eckhart Light itself, but He is, in the Dominican’s words, ‘that surpassing light that beats down and darkens our intellect.’<sup>25</sup> So when we open our hearts to God in prayer, to the God ‘in whom there is no darkness at all’ our experience is not perhaps what we might expect. Thinking here of the *Cloud’s* teaching on prayer and on Eckhart’s teaching I cannot help being reminded of a comment made by Charles Dickens concerning Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*: ‘Now being prepared for almost anything, he was not by any means prepared for nothing!’<sup>26</sup> Like Scrooge, Eckhart’s interlocutor, that questioning voice we hear so often in his sermons is ‘not by any means prepared for nothing.’ ‘Is that the best thing for me to do—to raise my mind to an unknowing knowledge that can’t really exist.... Am I supposed to be in total darkness?’<sup>27</sup> And again: ‘It is a grievous matter for God to leave a man without support. . . . If a man is in such a state of pure nothingness is it not better to do something to beguile the gloom and desolation. . . so as to help himself.’<sup>28</sup> Eckhart responds at once with great authority and great compassion:

In *The Book of Secrets* it says that our Lord declared to mankind, ‘I stand at the door knocking and waiting; whoever lets me in, with him I will sup’ (Rev. 3, 20). You need not seek him here or there. He is no further than the door of your heart. . . . Now you might say, ‘How can that be? I can’t feel him.’—Pay attention. Your being aware of him is not in your power but in his. When it suits him he shows himself, and he can hide when he wishes. . . . You should know, God cannot leave anything void or unfilled, God and nature cannot endure that anything should be empty or void. And so, even if you think you can’t feel him and are wholly empty of him, that is not the case. For if there were anything empty under heaven, whatever it might be, great or small, the heavens would either draw it up to themselves or else, bending down, would have to fill it with themselves. Therefore, stand still and do not waver from your emptiness. . . .<sup>29</sup>

A year or two ago a friend of mine told me of an interview given to a popular journal by the French actress Catherine de Neuve. De Neuve talked about a certain fear of the void which she experienced and confessed that much of the activity of her life seemed to her an attempt to

escape from this void.

Meister Eckhart and Catherine de Neuve—strange bedfellows indeed! You will, I am sure, be relieved to learn that I intend no simple equation here between these two perceptions or understandings of the void—one modern and one medieval. For a start the distinctively modern and contemporary sense of the void has its source in one event more than in any other, and an event which took place long after the fourteenth century, the event of atheism. '[I]t seems almost as if the place vacated by God has been filled by nothing at all,' writes Raimundo Panikkar, 'and that this nothing has loomed up before an unprepared humanity with a force that terrifies it and threatens to swallow it whole.'<sup>30</sup> The image is a melodramatic one but the point being made is surely not inaccurate. Rather interesting in this context is a private letter T. S. Eliot wrote in 1928 on Shrove Tuesday to his friend Paul Elmer More: 'I am one whom this sense of void ['The void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relationships and which there is only one thing to fill'] tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and only Christianity helps to reconcile me to a life which is otherwise disgusting.'<sup>31</sup> What, I wonder, would Meister Eckhart have made of this remark? An impossible question I know and, most probably, one which goes against all the canons of good scholarship. But, am I not right in thinking (apart, that is, from my obvious lapse here into hermeneutical heresy!) that if Eckhart could see the text of Eliot's letter he would not be entirely pleased? Yes, he would of course approve of Eliot's acceptance of Christianity. But what would he have to say about Eliot's negative attitude to the experience of the void? Would his advice to Eliot on this question not be the very same advice he gave to his anonymous medieval questioner: 'Stand still and do not waver from your emptiness'?

Sometime in the year 1938 Thomas Merton noted down the name 'Meister Eckhart' for the first time in one of his notebooks.<sup>32</sup> He seems not, however, to have devoted any serious attention to Eckhart until about 30 years later when, we are told, on one occasion he referred to the medieval Dominican as 'my life-raft'.<sup>33</sup> I draw attention here to Merton because at, what one suspects, was a critical moment in his life he seems to have absorbed something of Eckhart's teaching on the void. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, for example, published in 1966, Merton talks about Eckhart with the air of someone who has just made a great discovery. When we read this book today, apart from one or two explicit references to Eckhart, we can hear between the lines, as it were, the calm authoritative voice of Eckhart, repeating once again his quiet message: 'Stand still and do not waver from your emptiness.' Thomas Merton's 'emptiness', *his* first sense of the void rather resembles the void

as described by T. S. Eliot in his letter. It has therefore a somewhat anxious and even, one would have to say, depressed psychological character—something foreign to Eckhart. So, what then will happen to this distinctively modern sense of the void when it comes under the pressure, so to speak, of Eckhart's enlightened teaching? At one stage in his book Merton begins to speak about what he calls 'my own inner climate':

The change that is working itself out in me comes to the surface of my psyche in the form of deep upheavals of impatience, resentment, disgust. And yet I am a joyful person, I like life, and I have really nothing to complain of. Then suddenly a tide of this unexpected chill comes up out of the depths and I breathe the cold air of darkness, the sense of void. . . . Where does this naked and cold darkness come from? Is it *from* myself or is it a momentary unmasking of myself. Who is it that experiences this sudden chill? What does it mean? When I turn to it I sense that this chill and this fear has a friendly and important message. If I should back away from it and say 'it is nothing' then it returns more forcefully the next time. But if I do not evade it, if I accept it for what it is, I find it is after all nothing. . . a positive nothing, an unfulfilled possibility—almost an infinite possibility.<sup>34</sup>

A touch of Eckhartian wisdom is there in the phrase 'if I do not evade it.' Our temptation, of course, is to precipitate ourselves into activities of one kind or another, even worthy Christian activities, not for their own sake but in order to escape from this sense of void. 'Is it not better,' the questioner in Eckhart's sermon asks, 'to beguile the gloom and desolation, such as praying or listening to sermons or doing something else that is virtuous?'<sup>35</sup> Eckhart says no and says it over and over again in different ways. No, do not waver from your emptiness. He is, of course, well aware that many believers—many of us—are still afraid of the void and do not believe that God in fact supports us in our nothingness. We panic and we find, perhaps unconsciously, a wonderful alibi by becoming either socially and politically engaged or else—but with the same self-will and desperation—preoccupied with our need to explore diverse or novel spiritual paths or forms of prayer. But what if, in contrast, we were to be able to hold steady and not to waver from our emptiness? What if, in Eckhart's own astonishing phrase, 'the soul dared to become nothing,'<sup>36</sup> what then would happen to us? 'When the soul enters the unmixed light it plunges into its utter nothingness' Eckhart tells us, '. . . but God sustains its utter nothingness with his uncreatedness and holds the soul in his utter somethingness.'<sup>37</sup> *The soul dared to become nothing* This phrase and other statements by Eckhart remind me



of a remarkable poem by Emily Dickinson. It consists of two short stanzas, but it contains something of the exuberance, the joy and the daring of Eckhart's vision.

I'm Nobody! Who are You?  
Are You—Nobody—Too?  
Then there's a pair of us?  
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be Somebody!  
How public—like a frog—  
To tell one's name—the live long June—  
To an admiring bog!<sup>38</sup>

### **The Gospel Path and the Way of the Void**

So far no mention has been made in this article of Jesus, our risen brother and Lord, at least no obvious or explicit mention. Should this be taken to mean that the mystery of Jesus Christ is in no way connected with the way of the void? Or, to put it in other words, what has faith in the person of Jesus, the Son of God, to do with the experience of 'pure nothingness'? Is the mystery of Christian life—God's love for us in Christ and our love for him—in no way related, for example, to Eckhart's calm injunction, 'Stand still and do not waver from your emptiness'?

When on one occasion during one of Eckhart's sermons (83, McGinn) a question arose concerning love, 'How should I love God?',<sup>39</sup> Eckhart answered in a way that may seem to exclude any real love or loving knowledge of Jesus the Incarnate Lord: 'You should love him,' Eckhart said, 'as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as a pure, unmixed bright "One", separated from all duality: and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of "something" into "nothing".'<sup>40</sup> Whatever this means it is clear that our spirituality and our ordinary spiritual way of knowing must be purified to a quite remarkable degree. 'Your soul,' Eckhart says 'should be unspiritual and stripped of all spirituality, for so long as your soul has a spirit's form, it has images and so long as it has images it has a medium, and so long as it has a medium it has not unity or simplicity.'<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps one of the most vivid protests ever made against this kind of Eckhartian language was made just over two centuries later by another great preacher and administrator, the English poet John Donne. Donne, as Dean of St. Paul's, may or may not have seen the texts I have quoted already, but he obviously read comparable texts and he responds to them with a kind of passionate disdain.

There is [he declares] a cleanness imagin'd (rather dream't of) in the *Romane Church*, by which (as their words are) the soul is abstracted, not onely a *Passionibus*, but a *Phantasmaticibus*, not onely from passions and perturbations, but from the ordinary way of coming to know any thing; the soul (say they) of men so purified, understands no longer, *per phantasmata rerum corporalium*; not by having any thing presented by the fantasie to the senses, and so to the understanding, but altogether by a familiar conversation with God, and an immediate revelation from God; whereas Christ himself contented himself with the ordinary way; He was hungry, and a fig-tree presented it self to him upon the way, and he went to it to eat.<sup>42</sup>

A comparable objection was raised, though in a more benign spirit, by a priest in one of the apocryphal legends concerning Eckhart. This man approached Meister Eckhart on one occasion and complained,

Your sermons have become annoying to me. . . these high and subtle notions should be settled for the greater part in the universities. . . . Though I am unworthy to give you advice, nevertheless I should like to advise you out of divine love and with God's help to begin now and imitate the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and the method he used when he walked in this world of time.<sup>43</sup>

The legend goes on to tell us that when the priest had finally finished his very earnest and rather long speech he said,

Dear Meister Eckhart I have said too much and talked too long to you, forgive me. It is now time for me to go home.' Meister Eckhart turned around to him, gave him a kiss of peace and said: 'Dear Sir, I tell you that for many a year I have enjoyed hearing no discourse as much of this—which I have suddenly had to listen to from you. May God be your everlasting reward! And with divine love and Christian brotherliness, I bid you and exhort you for God's sake—as I may so exhort you—to tell me plainly about your life, as God has given it to you. For by the grace of God, I plainly see that you have spoken from the core of your life.'<sup>44</sup>

It is highly unlikely that these are Eckhart's own words, but it is interesting that this 'Eckhart' of the legend doesn't even attempt to give a detailed, intellectual answer to the priest's question. There is, of course, a sort of answer given—a beautiful answer too—in the gesture itself. But really the question remains. And if the present author in this short paper hardly begins to answer John Donne's or the priest's or his own basic question, I hope you will understand and forgive.

That Meister Eckhart may have somehow strayed away from the

ordinary gospel path is a suspicion that we can still hear voiced today, though far less often than it was voiced in the past. But the criticisms remain. Thus 'Eckhart', we are informed by one recent commentator, 'rarely refers to the Christian experience of divine love and grace and we will look in vain in his work for the warmth of the person of Christ.'<sup>45</sup> I am, I have to say, more than a little surprised by this conclusion since I have found almost the opposite to be the case. Take for example the theme of the present paper, namely the experience of 'pure nothingness' or the way of the void. If we abstract it from its context in Eckhart's sermons it may indeed appear to us as linear and as cold as algebra—a sort of spiritual or heavenly mathematics. But in its incarnate form—as preached by Eckhart—how different the impression it gives! Can we perhaps look again at sermon 4 (Walshe) and ask ourselves the question: Who or what is behind Eckhart's extraordinary confidence and authority when he declares, 'God cannot leave anything void or unfilled.... and even if you think you can't feel him and are wholly empty of him, that is not the case'?<sup>46</sup> The context of these remarks it should be noted first is not a philosophical discourse but a short presentation by Eckhart of Christ's teaching concerning the sensed absence and sensed presence of God: 'Christ meant,' Eckhart tells us 'that... you receive it [i.e. the grace of God's presence] but *unawares*.'<sup>47</sup> Here then is the gospel basis of Eckhart's faith in the way of unknowing, the way of the void.<sup>48</sup> Taken by itself the statement 'Stand still and do not waver from your emptiness' (which occurs within the same paragraph) might well have seemed somewhat cold or even abstract to Eckhart's listeners, but the statement has been preceded not only by Jesus' own words taken from the gospel but also by this image which Eckhart gives us of Jesus, our Lord: 'He is no further than the door of your heart: there he stands patiently. . . . He can hardly wait for you to open up. He longs for you a thousand times more than you long for him. . . .'<sup>49</sup> The force of divine love becomes at times almost an obsessive theme with Eckhart: 'God loves the soul so mightily', he says, 'it is a wonder. If anyone were to rob God of loving the soul he would rob him of his life and being, or he would kill God, if one may say so.'<sup>50</sup> 'Since God loves the soul so mightily,' Eckhart concludes, 'the soul must be a very important thing.'<sup>51</sup> Eckhart's conviction that 'God cannot leave anything void', although it springs in part from a particular intellectual and philosophical tradition,<sup>52</sup> is also grounded in Eckhart's own inner sense of the overwhelming power of God's love as it is revealed in Jesus. 'Jesus,' he tells us, 'reveals himself too in infinite sweetness and richness, welling up and overflowing and pouring in from the power of the Holy Ghost with superabundant richness and sweetness into all receptive hearts.'<sup>53</sup> 'So much is God love,'

he says in another place, 'and so loveable that everything that *can* love him *must* love him, whether it will or no.'<sup>54</sup> And again: 'God is love because he is totally loveable.'<sup>55</sup>

There are many other comparable passages in Eckhart on the theme of divine love but I would like to turn now not to one of these but to a short passage which I quoted earlier from sermon 83 (McGinn) in which Eckhart seems deliberately to contradict himself. Not only does he suggest in this sermon that we must love God 'as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person. . . etc.' He also makes bold to declare, 'God is unlovable. He is above all love and loveableness.'<sup>56</sup> So determined is Eckhart to create or rather to uncover in our minds an open place, a void or a desert, wherein something of his own overwhelming vision of God's glory can be revealed, he is prepared, as here in this case, to talk in contraries and unsay what he is saying, until at last, purified as it were by the grace of his words and of his preaching 'a void becomes visible'.<sup>57</sup> His dilemma and his strategy as a theologian are not that different perhaps from those of the modern theologian Karl Barth. Barth writes, 'Does one single word of mine formulate the Word after which I am striving and which I long to utter in my great misery and hope? Does not each sentence I frame require another to dissolve its meaning?'<sup>58</sup>

Eckhart desires that we should come to love God *divinely*. God cannot be loved in a merely human way. He is unloveable in that sense, but *only* in that sense. 'Some people,' Eckhart says, 'want to see God with their own eyes as they see a cow, and they want to love God as they love a cow. . . . for her milk and her cheese!'<sup>59</sup> In order for our love of God to be real we need to be detached to a remarkable degree from our own thoughts and feelings; we need in other words to stand still and not to waver from our emptiness. 'Empty yourself so that you may be filled,'<sup>60</sup> Eckhart says quoting St. Augustine; and again, emphasizing strongly his point about the positive nature of detachment: 'Learn,' he says, 'not to love so that you may learn how to love.'<sup>61</sup>

For Eckhart the condition of perfect detachment and the state of 'pure nothingness' are almost the same thing and they both have the same wondrous effect of drawing down God's love into the emptied soul. Eckhart knows of course that many of the wise have said great things in praise of love. Nevertheless *he* dares to say, 'I praise detachment above all love.'<sup>62</sup> Why? Because although in Eckhart's words love 'compels me to love God,' which is something good, 'detachment compels God to love me,'<sup>63</sup> which is something far greater. As soon as a person becomes detached in this way he or she, in Eckhart's phrase has 'dared to become nothing' and he becomes 'pregnant with nothing as a woman does with child, and in this nothing God [is] born: he [is] the fruit of the nothing.'<sup>64</sup>

God cannot leave anything void. He is compelled—almost with the compulsion of a lover—to enter and fill the emptied soul. ‘This is what God does,’ Eckhart says: ‘If you humble yourself God comes down from above and enters into you. The earth is the farthest of all from the sky and has crept into a comer, being ashamed. She would like to flee the beautiful heavens from one corner to another, but what would her refuge be. . . . [The sky] chases her into a comer and presses his power into her making her bear fruit.’<sup>65</sup> In another sermon *Ave gratia plena* Eckhart returns to the theme of compulsive divine love: ‘The earth [meaning in this case the human soul] can flee nowhere so deep that the heavens will not flow into it and impress their powers on it and make it fruitful, whether it likes this or not.’<sup>66</sup> This extraordinary thought or meditation would seem to have touched Eckhart very deeply. As you know it is a commonplace in Eckhart studies to think of him primarily as a kind of intellectual mystic. But here in this sermon Eckhart admits to being overcome with emotion at the thought of God’s uncontrollable love:

As I was coming here [he says to his listeners] I was thinking that... man can reach the point where he is able to compel God.... God cannot withhold his own goodness and must flow into the humble man, and to him who is least of all he gives himself the most of all, and he gives himself to him completely. What God gives is his being, and his being is his goodness and his goodness is his love. All sorrow and all joy come from love. On the way, when I had to come here, I was thinking that I did not want to come here because I would become wet with tears of love. If you have ever been all wet with tears of love let us leave that aside for now.<sup>67</sup>

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- 1 See ‘Relatio de statu ordinis’, appendix 1 in *Acta capituli generalis electivi Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum* (Rome 1992), p. 207.
- 2 Sermon 4, in *Sermons and Treatises*, trans. M. O’C. Walshe, vol. 1, London 1979, p. 40. (Sermon 59 in Josef Quint’s modern German version, *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* [DP] 1963.)
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 41.
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 43.
- 5 Quoted in R. B. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* (New York 1941) p. 93.
- 6 Sermon 87, Walshe, vol. 2, p. 268 (sermon 52 in critical edition *Die deutschen Werke* [DW], ed. J. Quint 1936 ff.)
- 7 Sermon 21, Blakney, p. 193 (DW 29).
- 8 Sermon 56, Walshe, pp. 81–2 (DP 26).
- 9 *Ibid.* p. 82.
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 82.
- 11 Sermon 4, Walshe, p. 43 (DP 59).
- 12 Sermon 71 in Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher* (New York 1986) p. 323 (DW 71).
- 13 Sermon 96, Walshe, p. 332 (DW 83).
- 14 Sermon 62, Walshe, p. 115 (DW 82).

- 15 Sermon 71, McGinn, p. 323 (DW 71).
- 16 Statement by a reviewer in *The Nation* ('Curé de campagne') quoted by C. Butler in *Western Mysticism* (New York 1966), p. 123.
- 17 *Ibid.* p. 123.
- 18 Sermon 2, Walshe, p. 21 (DP 58).
- 19 *Ibid.* p. 22.
- 20 Sermon 1, Walshe, p. 11 (DP 57).
- 21 *Ibid.* p. 9.
- 22 Sermon 71, McGinn, p. 320 (DW 71).
- 23 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. W. Johnston (New York 1973), pp. 48–9.
- 24 Quoted in H. U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, (Edinburgh 1982), p. 425. The reference von Balthasar gives to F. Pfeiffer, ed, (1857), II, p. 597 would seem to be mistaken.
- 25 *Commentary on Exodus*, par. 237, McGinn, p. 117.
- 26 *A Christmas Carol* (London 1946), p. 68.
- 27 Sermon 4, Walshe, p. 41 (DP 59).
- 28 *Ibid.* pp. 42–3.
- 29 *Ibid.* p. 44. The word helpfully translated in this passage as 'void' is 'itel' in Middle High German and apart from this one instance is used nowhere else by Meister Eckhart. It belongs to a group of words which express different kinds or states of emptiness or nothingness. See Pfeiffer, vol. 2, p.28,II.16 ff. (DW 104 in the forthcoming critical edition, ed. G. Steer).
- 30 *The Silence of God* (New York 1989), p. 162.
- 31 C. B. A. Harries, 'The Rare Contact: Correspondence between T. S. Eliot and P. E. More', *Theology* 75 (1972), p. 141.
- 32 See M. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London 1984), p. 117.
- 33 *Ibid.* p. 456.
- 34 *Conjectures...* (New York 1966), p. 262.
- 35 Sermon 4, Walshe, p. 43; DP 59. See also sermon 3, Walshe, p. 33 (Pfeiffer 3).
- 36 Sermon 1, McGinn, p. 242 (DW 1).
- 37 *Ibid.* p. 242.
- 38 *The Complete Poems* (London 1970), no. 288, p. 133.
- 39 Sermon 83 in B. McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defence* (New York 1981), p. 208 (DW 83).
- 40 *Ibid.* p. 208.
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 John Donne, Sermon XXIV in *XXVI Sermons*, p. 324, D-E, quoted in H. C. White, *The Metaphysical Poets: A Study in Religious Experience* (London 1956), p. 117.
- 43 'Legends' in Blakney, pp. 254–5.
- 44 *Ibid.* pp. 255–6.
- 45 O. Davies, *God Within: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (London 1988), p. 72.
- 46 Sermon 4, Walshe, p. 44 (DP 59).
- 47 *Ibid.* p. 44.
- 48 See also in this context sermon 2, Walshe, p. 20 (DP 58): 'God needs and must have a vacant, free and unencumbered soul, containing nothing but Himself alone, and which looks to nothing and nobody but Him. As to this, Christ says: Whoever loves anything but me, whoever loves father and mother or many other things is not worthy of me. . . . If your eye wanted to see all things and your ear to hear all things and your heart to remember all things, then indeed your soul would be dissipated in all these things.'
- 49 Sermon 4, Walshe, p. 44 (DP 59).
- 50 Sermon 42, Walshe, p. 294 (DW 69).
- 51 *Ibid.* p. 294.
- 52 On Eckhart's general philosophical background see A. de Libera, *Introduction à la mystique rhénane d'Albert le Grand à Maître Eckhart* (Paris 1984).
- 53 Sermon 6, Walshe, p. 61 (DW 1).
- 54 Sermon 5, Walshe, p. 49 (DW 65).
- 55 Sermon VI, McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, p. 213 (sermon VI in critical edition *Die lateinischen Werke* [LW], 1936ff.).
- 56 Sermon 83, McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons...*, p. 208 (DW 83).
- 57 A phrase used by K. Barth in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford 1977), p. 33.

- 58 Ibid. pp. 260–1.  
59 Sermon 14(b), Walshe, p. 127 (DW 16b).  
60 *The Book of 'Benedictus': The Book of Divine Consolation* in McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*. . . , p. 220.  
61 Ibid.  
62 *The Book of 'Benedictus': On Detachment* in McGinn *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*. . . p. 286.  
63 Ibid.  
64 Sermon 71, McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, p. 323 (DW71).  
65 Sermon 14, McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, p. 272 (DW 14).  
66 Sermon 22 in McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*. . . , p. 195 (DW 22).  
67 *ibid.*

## On Not Starving the Unconscious

Anthony Fisher OP

The Hillsborough football disaster in 1989 left Tony Bland in what doctors call a 'persistent vegetative state' ('PVS'). His heart still pumped, he breathed, and most of his other vital organs worked, all unassisted. His eyes opened and shut; he yawned and moved reflexively; he reacted to loud noises with a start. But as far as doctors could tell he could not perceive, think or feel, and would never regain consciousness in this life. The English High Court, the Court of Appeal and (last month) the House of Lords all ruled that all food, water and antibiotics might be withdrawn from Tony Bland and sedatives administered so that he would die peacefully and soon.<sup>1</sup>

### **The sanctity of life?**

The judges were keenly aware of the moral, legal and social dilemmas which the case occasioned. In general they took the view that the law should closely reflect what is 'morally right' in such areas, or at least 'what society accepts as morally right'. They thought there were three principles to be balanced and applied in this case: the sanctity of life; the autonomy of the patient; and the duty of care. The principle of the sanctity of human life was said to be deeply embedded in our law and ethics, in Britain and throughout the world, included in international human rights documents, and strongly felt by people of all religions and none.

In the classical tradition human beings are held to be the bearers of