

Roberto Vinco*

Meister Eckhart's Non-standard Natural Theology

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Summary: In this paper, I discuss Meister Eckhart's approach to natural theology and specifically to the question of God's existence. I argue that, according to the Eckhartian position, God's existence is not to be regarded as the result of an (*a posteriori* or *a priori*) inference, but as metaphysical self-evidence. This non-inferential conception, based on a fundamental unity between natural theology and general metaphysics, constitutes an alternative to the standard Avicennian paradigm that lies at the heart of most of the natural-theological projects of the scholastic tradition.

Keywords: Natural Theology, Metaphysics, Medieval Philosophy, Meister Eckhart

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Aufsatz analysiere ich Meister Eckharts Zugang zur natürlichen Theologie und insbesondere zur Frage nach der Existenz Gottes. Ziel des Aufsatzes besteht darin zu zeigen, dass nach der Eckhartschen Auffassung die Existenz Gottes nicht als Resultat einer apriorischen oder aposteriorischen Inferenz zu verstehen ist, sondern als eine metaphysische Selbstevidenz. Diese nicht-inferentielle Konzeption, die auf einer fundamentalen Einheit zwischen natürlicher Theologie und allgemeiner Metaphysik beruht, bietet eine Alternative zum Avicennischen Standard-Paradigma an, das den Kern der Mehrheit der naturtheologischen Projekte der scholastischen Tradition ausmacht.

Schlüsselwörter: Natürliche Theologie, Metaphysik, Mittelalterliche Philosophie, Meister Eckhart

*Korrespondenzautor: Roberto Vinco, Philosophisches Seminar der Universität Heidelberg, Schulgasse 6, D-69117 Heidelberg, E-Mail: Vinco@uni-heidelberg.de

I Introduction

In this paper, I shall present and clarify the peculiar and non-standard¹ character of Meister Eckhart's natural theology.

While in more prominent scholastic conceptions, natural theology tends to be understood as an internal branch or articulation of general metaphysics (ontology), in Meister Eckhart's philosophical perspective these two disciplines form a unity.

The peculiarity of this approach has a major consequence especially with regard to the question of God's existence. This is, namely, regarded not as the *result of an inference* but as *metaphysical self-evidence*.

To better elucidate the distinctiveness of the Eckhartian position, I will divide my paper into two major parts. In the first part, I will supply a general presentation of the standard version of natural theology, of its relation to general metaphysics and of some problems that it generates. In order to represent these issues more effectively, I will connect them with the scholastic debate concerning the "subject of metaphysics".

The second part will be divided in two sections: in the first one I will provide a general exposition of the non-standard conception of natural theology. In the second, I will demonstrate that this position is at the center of Eckhart's metaphysical thought. This last point will be proven by an analysis of some ideas of Eckhart's major and unfinished *Tripartite Work* (*Opus tripartitum*).

II Standard natural theology

II.1 Some preliminary notes

When we talk about "natural theology", we usually refer to a philosophical discipline that aims, first, at proving the existence of God; and second, at explaining His attributes.

Concerning the first point, there are traditionally two possible approaches. The first one might be called a "bottom-up" approach (*quia*), since it starts with a consideration of "worldly features" and moves from there to the existence of God. The second one might be called, on the contrary, a "top-down" approach (*propter*

¹ The term "non-standard" does not mean of course that this position is unique, but it refers to the fact that it is not as prominent as those developed, for example, by other scholastics such as Aquinas and Scotus.

quid), since it starts with a consideration of God's essence and moves from there to His existence.

The first approach can be illustrated through a broadly Thomistic example (the so called first way)²:

- 1) It is a fact that there are things which are in motion.
- 2) Now, whatever is in motion is put in motion by another.
- 3) Hence, if a mover is itself in motion, it must be put in motion by another mover.
- 4) Now, it is not possible for this series of moved movers to be infinite.
- 5) Therefore, there must be a first unmoved mover and this everyone understands to be God.

This proof starts with a consideration of motion and it may be regarded, from an Aristotelian point of view, as a so called physical proof, but it has at its core (at least according to some Thomistic interpretations) a more fundamental metaphysical character.

First of all, "motion" does not mean here simply local movement. It may refer also to different kinds of change and variations, such as the heating of water or the ripening of an apple. At the heart of this idea lies the concept of motion as "actualization", or as a transition from potency to actuality. As a result: the idea that everything in motion requires something that moves it, is based on the fact that potency cannot rise itself to actuality and needs therefore something already in act.

Now, the metaphysical character of this proof emerges if we consider being itself as actuality. The coming into existence (i.e. the substantial change) or the acquiring of a new property (i.e. accidental change) are thus to be regarded as forms of actualization³.

The general idea is therefore the following: the different forms of actualization could not happen if there were not, at the bottom, a difference between what something is (essence) and the fact that it is (act of being). For example, human beings can come into being and cease to be, or acquire a new way of being (for

2 St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I q. 2 a.3. For an interesting and insightful analysis of the Thomistic five ways see Edward FESER, *Aquinas* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 62–130.

3 St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I q.4 a.1 ad. 3 "ipsum esse est perfectissimum omnium, comparatur enim ad omnia ut actus [...] unde ipsum esse est actualitas omnium rerum, et etiam ipsarum formarum." This thesis is also quite important for the Eckhartian conception, see Meister ECKHART, *Die lateinischen Werke* (=LW), Josef Koch a. o. (ed.), (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936 f.) LW I, 153, 8–9.

example the ability to speak French), because existence and the ability to speak French are not necessarily connected with the essence of humanity. But this also means that these actualizations, based on the separation between essence and the act of being, require a “pure actualizer” in which these two principles are identical.

If we now come back to the argument for God’s existence, we can reformulate it in the following terms:

- 1) The separation of existence and essence presupposes the identity of existence and essence.
- 2) Now, there are things in which existence and essence are different.
- 3) Therefore there is the identity of existence and essence.

So far we discussed a bottom-up-approach to God according to a broadly Thomistic view. There is, as I mentioned before, another possible way, which we might define as broadly Anselmian and starts from a sort of quasi definition of the essence of God and infers from that His existence. So we could say, for example, that:

- 1) God is the greatest conceivable thing.
- 2) Now, it is greater to exist than not to exist.
- 3) Therefore, God exists (otherwise we should assume that there is something greater than the greatest conceivable thing).
- 4) Besides, the greatest conceivable thing exists necessarily because to have only a factual existence is less great than to have a necessary one⁴.

In this case we have, as I also mentioned before, a top-down-movement, in the sense that the starting point is not the consideration of worldly features but a pure reflection on God’s essence.

In spite of the fundamental differences existing between these two approaches, there is an important common point. In both cases we *come* to conceive of God as identity between essence and existence. This conception of God is, in other words, the *result of an inference*. That means that, *at least preliminarily*, both the idea of God and of existence can be considered as something separable.

In the case of the ontological argument, we begin for example with a quasi-definition of God. Now, if this definition has to work as a starting point for an argument proving God’s necessary existence, it has, again preliminarily, to leave

⁴ St. ANSELM, *Proslogion*, chapter 2 and 3. For a presentation of the ontological argument, see, for example, Brian DAVIES, “Anselm and the ontological argument”, in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157–178.

open the possibility that God does not exist and thus it has to concede an initial form of separability of His essence and existence.

In the broadly Thomistic *a posteriori* argument, not only do we presuppose the preliminary separability of God's essence and existence, but we also initially grasp existence in finite and contingent things, and we move from there to the inseparability in God.

This feature, common to the two approaches, has a fundamental consequence: the preliminary separability presupposed by the inferential nature of natural theology implies a form of existence of something which is not divine (since the separability of essence and existence is the main character of the non-divine being). But this means also that the identity-thesis (of existence and essence) is something referring to a portion of reality only (namely to God, and *His* existence).

Put in another way: from the inferential nature of natural theology it is possible to derive the thesis that the proper domain of this discipline (divine being) is *internal* to being in general, which contains divine and non-divine being. The inferential nature of natural theology is therefore related to its being part of a more general ontology. In a word: inferential natural theology is (at least partially) *special* metaphysics.⁵

II.2 Standard natural theology and the subject of metaphysics

This relationship between the inferential nature of natural theology and its local dimension should be considered now in a more precise historical way. In order to achieve this, I will concentrate on the question of the so called “subject of metaphysics”. This theme, being also a central topic of scholastic metaphysical debate, will enable us to reframe our discussion in a more specific medieval way and prepare us to approach Meister Eckhart's text.

⁵ It is interesting to notice that natural theology seems to have a local dimension even if we consider the preliminary separation of essence and existence as a pure “*distinctio rationis sine fundamento in re*”. Even in this case it seems that the rational/mental being presupposed by the inference, points to the existence of something non-divine existing beside the divine being. Divine being appears therefore, once again, to be something internal to being as such.

II.2.1 The Avicennian approach

In the context of scholastic philosophy and theology, the term “subject” is often used in a quasi-technical manner and it refers to the common notion circumscribing and unifying what a particular science describes and analyzes. So we might say, for example, that the soul constitutes the subject of psychology.

What is now the subject of metaphysics? The founder of this discipline, Aristotle, defines first philosophy (metaphysics) in different ways, but two aspects are especially central in this context: the idea of first philosophy as universal science of being (book IV) on the one hand, and the idea of first philosophy as science of the first causes and of the “most dignified” kind of being (book VI) on the other.

Now, these two approaches regarding the subject of this science raise a fundamental problem because the first universalistic conception seems to contradict the second paradigmatic and local one.⁶ What was the answer given to this problem by medieval philosophers? Aristotle came to the medieval West not in his pure form, but specifically through the mediation of Arabic and Persian Philosophers, most notably, Avicenna. He argues that God cannot be regarded as the subject of metaphysics, because He is for this discipline an object of *research* and *demonstration*, and these features are incompatible with the idea of a subject as such. In other words: the subject of a science is something presupposed by that particular science and must be accepted by it as a given.⁷ The subject of metaphysics is therefore, according to Avicenna (and this became also the prominent scholastic point of view), not God, but being as such. This means that this discipline is first of all to be considered as a *universal* science studying and analyzing the most general features of reality (ontology).

What is in this context the role of the theological moment of metaphysics? According to Avicenna, divine being is not to be considered as something grounding being in general, since being, absolutely considered, does not have a principle (*ens in se absolute non habet principium*)⁸. The theological principle has to be regarded as something internal to the ontological frame.

⁶ The classical study on the “subject of metaphysics” in the philosophy of the 13th and 14th centuries is the one written by Albert Zimmermann. See Albert ZIMMERMANN, *Ontologie oder Metaphysik? Die Diskussion über den Gegenstand der Metaphysik im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert*, (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1998).

⁷ So we might say that, if the soul is the subject of psychology, this discipline has to accept the soul as a given domain to which its explanatory power is bounded.

⁸ AVICENNA LATINUS, *Liber de Philosophia prima sive scientia divina*, I, c. 1 (ed. Van Riet), 14. “Deinde principium non est principium omnium entium. Si enim omnium entium esset princi-

We see therefore that the Avicennian approach contains both elements characterizing the standard form of natural Theology: inference and local dimension.⁹

There are some problems, however, connected with this approach and these are, at least from a medieval point of view, at the same time exegetical and theoretical.¹⁰ They are exegetical because they exclude the Aristotelian idea that metaphysics studies the first causes and the principle of being as being, and that the subject of metaphysics is God.¹¹ There are also theoretical problems, because, if we accept this Avicennian line of thought, we have to consider being qua being as a sort of objective area of research for metaphysics and we have to regard metaphysics itself as a sort of super-science which differs only in quantity (in extension) from other sciences. Now, the problem with this conception is that being seems to remain (at least partially) a sort of super-genus and this seems to contradict its transgeneric (transcendental)¹² character.

Besides, since this position regards being as being as the subject of metaphysics itself, and since the subject of a science cannot be the object of demonstration, metaphysics has to consider being as being as a sort of brute fact. The foundational power of the first cause (of God) must therefore be limited. It is a portion of reality grounding another portion of reality. But this position generates again a fundamental problem because God and creatures, being part of the same

pium, tunc esset principium sui ipsius, ens autem in se absolute non habet principium; sed autem principium unumquodque esse quod scitur. Principium igitur est principium aliquibus entibus. Quapropter haec scientia non erit inquirens principia entis absolute, sed principia alicuius entium, sicut principia ceterarum scientiarum particularium.”

9 It is in this sense interesting to notice that it has been suggested, not only that Avicenna is the father of the metaphysical argument for the existence of God *a posteriori*, but that he is also the founder of the ontological argument. See for example Parviz MOREWEDGE, “Ibn Sina Avicenna and Malcolm and the ontological argument”, *The Monist* 54 (1970), 234–249.

10 For the development of this theme I rely particularly on Stephen D. DUMONT, “Scotus’s Doctrine of Univocity and the Medieval Tradition of Metaphysics”, in: Jan A. Aertsen and Andreas Speer, ed. *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 193–212.

11 ARISTOTELES, *Met. E.1*. This approach was famously defended by Averroes.

12 “A transcendental notion is one which is above every genus, common to all things and thus not restricted to any category or individual. *Being* is a transcendental insofar as everything real, whether a substance, an accident, or whatever, is a being of some sort or other.” Edward FESER, *Scholastic Metaphysics. A contemporary introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones scholasticae 2014), 139. For an extensive presentation of the “transcendental thought” in medieval philosophy, see Jan A. AERTSEN, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012). Wouter GORIS, Jan A. AERTSEN, “Medieval Theories of Transcendentals”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed. URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/transcendentals-medieval/>>.

subject, cannot be considered as completely different und this leads, on the side of God, to a loss of transcendence and absoluteness.

II.2.2 Aquinas' solution

To avoid this problem, a tendency developed amongst some scholastics to attenuate the role of the subject of metaphysics. This aspect appears for example in Saint Thomas Aquinas' position.

Aquinas starts his exposition of the Aristotelian metaphysics recalling three main definitions given by Aristotle: metaphysics as science of the first causes, as science of being as being and as science of the separated substances (God and angels). In his introduction, he identifies the most general causes with God (and also the other separated substances) on the one hand and on the other (in agreement with Avicenna) the subject of metaphysics with being as being.

Now, and this is the main point of Aquinas, we should consider the theological aspect not as something subordinate or internal to the ontological frame, but we should regard it as a sort of second moment of the same metaphysical dynamic, since

it pertains to one and the same science to consider both the proper causes of some genus and the genus itself; for example, the philosophy of nature considers the principles of a natural body. Therefore, it must be the office of one and the same science to consider the separate substances and being in general (*ens commune*), which is the genus of which the aforementioned substances are the common and universal causes.¹³

There is, however, a difference concerning the way through which we discover the starting (*ens commune*) and the end point (*Deus*) of metaphysics.

According to Aquinas

that which the intellect first conceives as, in a way, the most evident, and to which it reduces all its concepts, is being. Consequently, all the other conceptions of the intellect are had by additions to being. But nothing can be added to being as though it were something not included in being – in the way that a difference is added to a genus or an accident to a subject – for every reality is essentially a being.¹⁴

13 St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame, Ind.: Dumb Ox Books, 2001), Prologue.

14 St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and Robert W. Schmidt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), I.1, 5. This is also the development of an Avicennian idea. See AVICENNA LATINUS, *Liber de philosophia prima*, I, c. 5.

In this passage being emerges as the result of a so called “resolution”. A resolution is a process through which we make explicit what our epistemic access to reality presupposes. That means: we have a cognitive access to reality, which we articulate in different sciences, because we have known being all along. Now, the kind of being that we reach through this resolution is on the one hand something running through all categories, and thus something transcendental (transgeneric), on the other hand it still has a genus-character, because it is to be conceived as the most general predicate. In another work, Aquinas describes this characteristic by calling the commonness of this being “commonness by predication”¹⁵. In short, the sort of being resulting from this resolution is the same super-genus (common being/*esse commune*) that constitutes the subject of metaphysics.¹⁶

Now, Aquinas emphasizes that the result of this resolution consists in the expression of something self-evident, of something which is first for us (knower). God (the result of the second moment of Metaphysics) is, on the other hand, “common by causality” and that means that He is the first ontologically, but He is the last epistemologically. In other words, while common being is a sort of self-evidence, which we express through the resolution, divine being is the result of a metaphysical inference.

Aquinas’ point might therefore be reframed in the following way: on the one hand he connects the subject of metaphysics (common being/*ens commune*) with creatural being and, on the other, he extends the task of metaphysics to the foundation of its subject.

This thesis of Aquinas is ingenious, but is not uncontroversial. One problematic aspect might be formulated in the following way: if we reduce the subject to creatural being it seems that we break the unity of this science, since this particular subject pertains more properly to second philosophy, and that therefore the only metaphysical moment is the second theological one. If, on the other hand, the subject is a real metaphysical one (and thus the most general), it seems that the inferential theological movement can be only an internal articulation.

The resulting general impasse might be reformulated in this way: the inferential nature of natural theology implies the renunciation of the transcendental character of being and the renunciation of God’s transcendence and thus the local impact of divine causation. The solution of Aquinas seems, on the other hand, to break the unity of metaphysics.

15 St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4.

16 The term “resolution” plays a role also in Aquinas’ prologue to his commentary to Aristotle’s metaphysics. See also Jan A. AERTSEN, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 234.

In the following, I will present Meister Eckhart's non-standard position as a possible solution to this impasse. Before I move to the interpretation of the Eckhartian text, I will introduce it in a general way using some ideas developed by Saint Bonaventure.

III Non-standard natural theology

III.1 From Bonaventure to Eckhart

We have seen that Aquinas reaches his conception of common being through a so called resolution, moving from the common material things of the world and coming to the idea of being as a super-genus. This common being is, as said before, the starting point of the theological inference.

It is possible, however, to consider this resolution-movement as a sort of continuous dynamic coming *directly* to God and not just stopping with the *esse commune*. A good example for this position can be found in Saint Bonaventure. He makes his viewpoint clear in his *Journey of the mind to God*:

The activity of the intellective faculty consists in understanding the meaning of terms, propositions, and inferences. The intellect grasps the meaning of terms when it understands by a definition what each thing is. But a definition must be given in more general terms; these, in turn, must be defined by others still more general, until we arrive at the highest and more general. If these last are unknown, we cannot understand the less general by way of definition. Consequently, unless one knows what being *per se* is, he cannot fully know the definition of any particular substance. But being *per se* cannot be known unless it is known together with its properties, which are one, true, and good.¹⁷

This passage points to the same resolution which Aquinas describes in his work *De veritate*. In spite of this commonness there is however a difference: common being (*esse commune*) is not the last stage of the resolution, since

being can be understood as incomplete or as complete, as imperfect or as perfect, as in potency or in act, as existing in a qualified or in an unqualified manner, as a part or as a whole, as transient or permanent, as existing through something else or *per se*, as mixed with non-being or as pure being, as dependent or as absolute, as posterior or prior, as changeable or

¹⁷ St. BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, transl. by Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), 19. On this theme, see, for example, Jan A. AERTSEN, Andreas SPEER, "Die Philosophie Bonaventuras und die Transzendentalienlehre", *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 64 (1997): 32–66.

unchangeable, as simple or composite, and since “privations and defects can in no way be known except through something positive,” therefore our intellect does not make a full and ultimate analysis (*ut plene resolvens*) of any single created being unless it is aided by a knowledge of the most pure, most actual, most complete and absolute Being [...].¹⁸

Resolution is, in other words, complete only when we reach divine being itself.¹⁹ This opens a new approach concerning the role and the function of natural theology in the metaphysical dynamic itself.

We have seen that the idea of metaphysics as a super-science analyzing and considering the most general objective area of reality, and the inferential character of natural theology are strictly connected and we have also seen that this inferential movement cannot affect being as such (which remains a sort of brute fact), but a particular portion inside the boundary of the ontological frame. On the contrary, the idea suggested by Bonaventure, and completely developed by Eckhart, identifies the ontological and the theological moment of metaphysics.²⁰

This means, that we really grasp being as such, if we grasp it as divine and we really grasp the divine, if we grasp it as immediately identical with being as such. “To really grasp being as such” means in this context to grasp being, not as a genus or as super-genus, but really as the all-embracing reality (as transcendental). “To really grasp God” means in this context to grasp Him not as a particular (although extraordinary) portion of being, but as the absolute being, as being itself. In a word, the grasping of the transcendental of being leads immediately to its transcendence (divine character).

Another very important aspect is the fact that this conception of natural theology excludes every form of metaphysical inference. Obviously, in our everyday-occurrences we are occupied with particular things and we live unaware of the divine being, nonetheless the function of the resolution is not to perform a metaphysical inference (for example from the being of the world to the one of God), but to awake what we have known all along (namely the divine being). Once again: God is metaphysical self-evidence and this implies that metaphysics (ontology) and natural theology are completely united.

¹⁸ St. BONAVENTURE, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 19.

¹⁹ St. BONAVENTURE writes in *In I Sententiarum*, d.28 dub.1: “Intellectus resolvente semiplene potest intelligi aliquid esse non intellecto primo ente. Intellectus autem resolvente perfecte non potest intelligi aliquid primo ente non intellecto.”

²⁰ This element of continuity between Bonaventure and Eckhart is emphasized for example by AERTSEN. See Jan A. AERTSEN, “What is first and Most Fundamental? The Beginnings of Transcendental Philosophy” in: Jan A. AERTSEN and Andreas SPEER, ed. *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 177–192.

III.2 Meister Eckhart's non-standard natural theology

III.2.1 The divine Being

After this introduction we can now move to the final analysis of the Eckhartian position. My aim is to show that his idea of natural theology coincides with the one I have just delineated. To show my point I will concentrate on Eckhart's major Latin work, the so called *Tripartite Work* (*Opus tripartitum*).

The *Tripartite Work* remained unfinished, but it is still possible, especially through the analysis of the general prologue and the prologue to the *Work of Theses* (*Opus propositionum*, the first part of the *Tripartite Work*)²¹, to ascertain the central idea of this project. Referring to the main thesis of this work "Being is God/*esse est Deus*", Eckhart makes some introductory remarks in the prologue to the *Work of Theses*:

- 1) That being means in this context just being (as white signifies only the quality of whiteness)
- 2) That it must be distinguished between being and 'this' and 'that' being.²²

Eckhart's idea may be summed up in the following way: when we talk about *esse* in the sentence "*esse est Deus*", we are not dealing with this or that being or with being understood as this or that, but we are dealing with *being qua being*. In a word, the point of view, we are dealing with, is the one of metaphysics.

In the general prologue to the *Opus tripartitum* Eckhart makes also some remarks regarding the nature of this pure being. Pure being is a general term (*terminus generalis*), a transcendental running through all categories. Now, this general term is first of all *prior*. This priority has both an epistemological and an ontological meaning: it is the first on an epistemological *and* an ontological level (first in-itself and for us). Being as being is in this sense a bit like substantiality (*esse per se*): it is something that must be there and must be understood, in order for accidentality (*esse in alio*) to be and to be understood.²³

21 The second and the third parts are called *Work of Problems* (*Opus questionum*) and *Work of Interpretations* (*Opus expositionum*).

22 LW I, 166, 6–167, 8.

23 This comparison does not intend to suggest the idea that the Eckhartian position is a sort of Spinozism. Eckhart would probably object to a Spinozistic point of view that it reduces God to something categorial (the substance) and thus finite, and that it confounds the absolute being (*esse absolutum*), which is really divine and transcends the finite determination, with the being inhering as a form (*esse formariliter inhaerens*), which is intrinsically finite. Regarding this difference see LW V, 289, 6–7.

Being as being is, according to Eckhart, not only *prior*, it is also *superior*²⁴. It is therefore transcendental not just in the sense that it is scattered through all categories, but also in the sense that it transcends them in a higher unity embracing all their perfections²⁵. Transcendentality (all-embracing unity) is therefore transcendent (divine). The starting point of the *Opus tripartitum* is thus the one delivered by a complete resolution, in which being manifests its divine character.

This position is particularly evident if we consider the manner through which Eckhart makes his case for the general thesis: “esse est Deus/ being is God”.

Patet haec propositio primo, quia si esse est aliud ab ipso Deo, Deus nec est nec Deus est. Quomodo enim est aut aliquid est, a quo esse aliud, alienum et distinctum est? Aut si est deus, alio utique est, cum esse sit aliud ab ipso. Deus igitur et esse idem, aut Deus ab alio habet esse. Et sic non ipse Deus, ut premissum est, sed aliud ab ipso, prius ipso, est et est sibi causa, ut sit.

This proposition is evident, first, because if being is something different from God, neither God is nor He is God. How can something be or be something, from which being is different, alien and distinct? Or if God is, he is surely by another, since being is different from Him. Therefore God and being are the same, or God has being from another, and then he is not God himself, as was said above, but something else and before him and it is the cause of his being.²⁶

Eckhart is not trying here to offer an argument for the existence of God, the more so as the question “Does God exist?” concerns the second part of the *Opus tripartitum* (*Opus quaestionum*). What he is claiming, is that we do not really understand what God and being mean, if we do not *immediately* identify them.

²⁴ See Jan A. AERTSEN “Ontology and henology in Medieval Philosophy”, in E.P. Bos and P.A. Meijer ed., *On Proclus and his Influence in Medieval Philosophy*, (Leiden, New York, Cologne: E.J. Brill, 1992), 120–140.

²⁵ LW I, 152, 8–155, 5.

²⁶ LW I, 156, 15–157, 4. The translation above is based (with some variations) on the one by Armand A. Maurer. See Master ECKHART, *Parisian Questions and Prologues*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 85. I translated the verb “esse” as “being” and not, as Maurer does, as “existence”, because the Eckhartian being contains not only the existential but also the predicative being.

Many interpretations of these passages have been given. See for example: Karl ALBERT, *Meister Eckharts These vom Sein. Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik des “Opus tripartitum”* (Saarbrücken: Universitätsverlag, 1976); Fernand BRUNNER, “Commentaire: Les deux Prologues”, in *L’œuvre latine de Maître Eckhart*, Vol. 1, intr., text, transl. and comm. by Fernand Brunner, Alain de Libera, Édouard-Henri Wéber, Émilie Zum Brunn (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 1–129; Robert J. DOBIE, *Logos and Revelation* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 123–157.

According to Eckhart, there are only two alternative positions to this immediate identification: the first one posits God beyond (or besides) being (*esse est aliud ab ipso Deo*). But this position, that we could define as broadly “Neoplatonic”, does not seem to take into account that, if being is really transcendental and all-embracing, it cannot be transcended in any meaningful sense. In other words, there is neither ontological nor logical space beyond (or besides) being. In fact, if we say that God is something beyond being, we are not stating anything meaningful, because the meaningful “logos” (discourse) is always an expression of being.

The second position (*aut si est deus*) considers God as something inside of being, “something that is”, but in this way it regards Him as something objectifiable and categorical. This position, which is connected with the Avicennian paradigm of metaphysics and with the inferential character of natural theology, tends to consider God as a portion of reality, but in this way it does not seem to take into account that, if God is really God (absolute), He is also the ground of the categorical being as such and cannot therefore be in any genus. In a word, this second alternative is (against its premises) not really talking about God.

The only possibility left is therefore the one that identifies being and God, ontology and theology. It is important to note that the two excluded options are not to be considered as simply false, but rather as self-defeating positions that cannot really express what they want to. They are, to use the Parmenideian expression, paths “wholly without report”²⁷. They are not real alternatives. The identity of being and God appears thus to be the only viable option and this shows once again its character of self-evidence.

III.2.2 The finite being

This Eckhartian position that I have delineated so far, seems, in spite of its advantages, to have a fundamental problem.

If the grasped being is immediately divine, we are bound to say that God occupies the “entire ontological space”. But, if this is the case, is there any place for non-divine being at all? In a word: this conception seems to imply an acosmism, which is, especially from a Christian point of view, impossible to maintain.

Before we move to the Eckhartian solution, it is important to emphasize that Eckhart himself explicitly rejects the conception of non-divine being as something

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existing *besides* God, since this would constrain God himself and reduce him to something particular (*ens hoc*). It is also important to note that he explicitly refuses a conception of creation as an act projecting something outside of God in a sort of void space, because there is no space besides God.

What is then the Eckhartian way out? Eckhart writes in one of the central theses of the *Opus propositionum* that this or that being (determinate being), insofar it is this or that, does not “add anything of entity” (*addunt entitatis*) to being itself.²⁸ How can we translate this idea? A mathematical comparison might be helpful. As the addition of a finite set (a set with a finite number of elements) to an infinite one (for example, the set of the natural numbers) cannot change the cardinality (the number of elements) of the infinite set, so a determinate and categorical being cannot add anything to the infinite (transcendental) divine being. This does not mean that a finite set does not express a real quantity, or that the determinate finite being is an illusion. Determinate being is in reality, but this does not imply that there is “more being” because of its existence.

It is important to notice that Eckhart maintains that this thesis of his does not imply the destruction of the non-divine being, but rather constitutes its real foundation.²⁹ Why is this the case? It is a real foundation because the determinate and finite being doesn't have any kind of subsistence in itself. It is dependent through and through from the divine causation. At the same time, this being is in reality; it is not a deception.

But what kind of reality is the one of the finite and determinate being? We can say that the non-divine being is a *relational being*, it is a *sign*, whose essence consists in expressing (in a finite and determinate way) the infinite and transcendent divine being.³⁰

We can thus conclude by saying that Eckhart maintains a Parmenidean conception,³¹ according to which only pure being is what really is, but at the same time

28 LW I, 168, 2–5 “cum dico hoc ens aut unum hoc aut unum istud, verum hoc et istud, li hoc et istud nihil prorsus addunt seu adiciunt entitatis, unitatis, veritatis aut bonitatis super ens, unum, verum, bonum.”

29 LW I 176, 5–7 “Hoc autem dicentes non tollimus rebus esse nec esse rerum destruimus, sed statuimus.”

30 This idea is connected with Eckhart's particular conception of analogy. On this theme, see among others, Alain DE LIBERA, *Le problème de l'être chez Maître Eckhart: logique et métaphysique de l'analogie* (Genève/Lausanne/Neuchâtel: La Concorde, 1980), Jan A. AERTSEN, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*, 361–368.

31 On the “Parmenidian nature” of Meister Eckhart's thinking see: Cornelio FABRO, *Participation et causalité selon S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain/Paris: Editions Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1961), 551ff. Vladimir LOSSKY, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin,

(against Parmenides) he does not regard the “doxa” (the realm of the finite beings) as an illusion, but as a reflection of (and participation in) the pure and infinite being.³²

1960), 162–164. Jan A. AERTSEN, Der ‚Systematiker‘ Eckhart”, in: Andreas Speer and Lydia Wegener, ed. *Meister Eckhart in Erfurt* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 189–230. Roberto VINCO, “Zum parmenideischen Charakter des Denkens Meister Eckharts”, *Theologie und Philosophie* 88 (2013): 161–175.

32 In this sense it is possible to say that Eckhart combines a Parmenidian conception with a Platonic one. Absolute reality is only the pure being (there is thus no pluralism), but, at the same time, this pure infinite being is a sort of being in itself (being *kat’auto*) to which every finite partakes.