THE THEORY OF THE TRANSCENDENTALS IN MEISTER ECKHART

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1. Historical Review

The theory of transcendentals is the central reference point of medieval ontology. The transcendentals can be considered as an opportunity to establish a philosophical ontology. A theory of the transcendentals discusses the transcategorical designations that are expressed in everything and are broader than generic, specific, and individual beings. Transcendentals in their universal meaning transcend the scope of the Aristotelian categories: they are not based on one category but cover all of them. Although they are convertible with each other, they are not synonyms. It follows that the transcendentals are identical in their subject, but differ according to their concepts. And so, truth expresses something different from goodness, although both of them, goodness and truth, are in the things simultaneously.¹

Transcendentals are characterized as the communissima and prima. These concepts and realities have different philosophical functions. In the ontological sense, transcendentals are the most general (communissima) concepts because they can be expressed by all things. In the cognitive sense, they are the first (prima), because they cannot be reduced to something prior. Thus, the theory of the transcendentals is an indication of the tendency to be comprehensive in later medieval philosophy.

In 1230, the Summa de bono of Philip the Chancellor was published. In the prologue, he writes that the most general (communissima) terms are Being (esse), One (unum), Truth (verum), and Goodness (bonum).² Philip discusses two main problems that are the most important in the theory of transcendentals: the problem of the difference between the general terms (communissima) that are convertible with each other, and the problem of their relation to the highest being, God. The communissima are identical

according their *supposita*, but they are different *secundum intentionem*. The negative definition of the One by Aristotle becomes a model for the order of the *communissima*. Not only the One but also Truth and Goodness are added to Being, which itself is undivided. Because Eckhart makes the doctrine of the transcendentals the centerpiece of his doctrine about God, Theo Kobusch maintains that this doctrine is Eckhart’s greatest innovation.

With regard to his metaphysics, the basic text of Meister Eckhart is the *Opus tripartitum*. As the name indicates, this work was intended to be tripartite in its construction: (1) the *Opus propositionum* with more than 1000 theses provides the main principles of Eckhart’s doctrine; (2) the *Opus quaestionum* was to have been based on the questions in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas; and (3) the *Opus expositionum* was to deal with the exegesis of Holy Scripture. It was to have two parts: a biblical exegesis and an *Opus sermonum*. Eckhart intended to discuss the specific citations of the Bible that for him were the most important in terms of their content. We cannot be sure if Eckhart completed this program, because all we have now is merely the torso of the *Opus expositionum*—from the *Opus quaestionum* we know almost nothing, and we only have the prologue to the *Opus propositionum*. However, a good representative part of the *Opus expositionum* is extant.

The prologues to the *Opus tripartitum* display the speculative general project, which considers metaphysics, theology, and biblical exegesis to be parts of one interrelated work of interpretation. Eckhart considers such interrelation to be a strict, rationally coherent philosophical approach. In the *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Iohannem*, he claims:

> In the explanation of this word and others which follow, the intention of the author, just as in all of his works, is to explain by means of the natural

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