Heidegger and Meister Eckhart on Releasement

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Heidegger mentions Meister Eckhart occasionally in some of his writings. However there is reason to presume that the proximity of the two thinkers is greater than it may appear. Indeed, Heidegger in private conversations emphasizes the authenticity of Meister Eckhart's experience of Being.

In the history of the disclosure of Being (Lichtungsgeschichte des Seins), every thinker has to bear the charge of responding to an essential mittence (Geschick) that is always unique. A philosopher's thought is fateful due to the irrevocable event in which Being comes to presence. The desire to detect "influences" is therefore a misunderstanding about the advent of truth, the epochal a-letheia, itself. Thinking means precisely the remembrance of this destiny of Being for its own sake.

In the metaphysical errancy Being is represented in terms of a sensuous or transcendent otherness, as the object of experience, or as the highest reason or foundation of what is in general. The ontologist may or may not oppose Being to the thinking subject; he will ordinarily not think of it as an accomplishment. Nevertheless, in spite of the dominating representation, the coming forth of Being as the presence of what is present has not been thoroughly forgotten. During a period in which Being has retired into a being among others, be it into the greatest, the remembrance of that which has to be thought occurs as a glimpse. In an otherwise "destitute time" (Hölderlin), there may be voices that release an inner recalling and that intimate the withdrawal of Being. They may utter man's essence out of the event of such a withdrawal, although they may not question the withdrawal as Being. In some of Meister Eckhart's sermons, especially in those
handed down to us in Middle High German, something like an unconcealedness calls to the listener. As witnesses of a genuine understanding of truth, these beckonings are quickly obstructed by Eckhart’s scholastic vocabulary and Christian concerns.

Meister Eckhart’s doctrine of man’s identity with God was condemned by the Inquisition in 1329. Fortune punishes poets and preachers who anticipate the historical exposures of truth granted by Being. Bernhard Welte writes: “The trial against the theses of the Master before the pope’s court at Avignon gives the impression of a trial brought in action by Being itself against him who daringly forstalls its destiny.”

Whenever Heidegger mentions Meister Eckhart, the context is a development of Heidegger’s own essential thought: Being that lets beings be (Gelassenheit); the thinging of the thing (dinc) understood as the nearing of the world; man’s essence (Wesen) needed by Being to uphold its truth; thinking as thanking (Gedanc); the unspoken speech (ungesprochene Sprache) that bestows a world; and last but not least, life without why (ohne Warum). Nevertheless Heidegger does not consider Meister Eckhart to be a “modern philosopher.” Heidegger’s attitude towards him is that of a critical interpreter of the history of Being. Ours will be that of a listener to releasement that grants beings forth to their beingness and Being itself to our thought. Therefore this is not an article on a topic of the history of philosophy.

I.

Being shows its way to be: Gelassenheit, which we translate as “releasement” or “letting-be.” Before considering the difference between what releases and what is released, we shall summarize the seven passages in Heidegger’s writings in which Meister Eckhart is mentioned.

Bernhard Welte, “La métaphysique de Saint Thomas d’Aquin et la pensée de l’histoire de l’être chez Heidegger,” in: Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques, 50 (1966), p. 614. The only study hitherto analyzing the relation between Meister Eckhart and Heidegger is: Käte Oltmanns, Meister Eckhart, Frankfurt/M. 1935 and 1957, but her attempt to discover Heidegger’s concept of freedom in Meister Eckhart has been received rather critically. Jacques Rolland de Reneville, Aventure de l’Absolu, The Hague, 1972, replaces the issue within the larger context of a reseizure of a hidden tradition in the history of the ontological question: announced in marginal texts of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, the understanding of Being as the reflexive Self becomes explicit in Eckhart, Hegel, Heidegger. This (anti-Eleatic) tradition views Being as not possessing itself, as requiring the mediation of an existence to overcome its unsatisfactoriness and the posing-opposing interrogation as which it appears. Unfortunately, the passages on Meister Eckhart are the least developed.