

Eckhart's *Bilder*

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Resumo: A extrema originalidade da doutrina eckhartiana dos *bilder*, ou formas, deve-se, mais do que ao facto de conter novos elementos, à conciliação entre três fontes à primeira vista incompatíveis: Platão, Aristóteles e o pensamento cristão. Neste artigo mostra-se que a doutrina eckhartiana dos *bilder* é simultaneamente a) a recriação epistémico-aristotélica da doutrina platónica das ideias e b) a recriação ontológico-cristã da doutrina aristotélica da cognição. Como tal, trata-se de uma manipulação técnica destas fontes, mais do que de uma doutrina mística.

Palavras-chave: *Abegescheidenheit*, *Bilder*, Intelecto, Ideias Platónicas, Universais

Abstract: Eckhart's doctrine of the *bilder* is highly original not so much for containing new elements as for the conciliation it achieved among sources at first sight incompatible; these sources can be reduced to three main ones: Plato, Aristotle, and Christian thought. In this paper, I show that Eckhart's doctrine of the *bilder* is simultaneously a) an Aristotelian epistemic recreation of Plato's doctrine of ideas, and b) a Christian ontological recreation of Aristotle's doctrine of cognition. As such, it is a technical manipulation of these sources, rather than a mystical doctrine.

Keywords: *Abegescheidenheit*, *Bilder*, Intellect, Platonic Ideas, Universals

Eckhart's² doctrine of the *bilder* is undoubtedly the crux of his thought and the core of its misinterpretations, and this mainly for the following reasons: firstly, though his starting point is the Platonic teaching of the ideas, he adapts it to both an Aristotelian epistemic and a Christian ontological viewpoints; this suffices to deceive many interpreters, and the fact that in his German sermons Eckhart translates much of the Latin philosophical terminology into Middle High German, thus rendering it more accessible to a secular audience while making it dangerously equivocal for the expert, explains to some extent the

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¹ Most of the research conducing to this paper was carried out at the Université Paris IV – Sorbonne and was funded by a doctoral fellowship granted by FCT. My thanks to both.

² Eckhart of Hochheim (c. 1260 – c. 1328), also known as Meister Eckhart.

wildly diversified interpretations of this doctrine. Once one realizes these two factors, his doctrine of the *bilder* loses its supposedly mystical overtones, and is seen for what it is, a doctrine on representation as *real* content.

1 The Context: Late Medieval Intellectualism vs. Voluntarism

To a great extent, medieval epistemology can be characterized by the realist 'slogan' of the adequacy between the thing and the intellect (*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*); in other words, truth is secured when there is a one-to-one correspondence between an object and the mental representation that expresses/captures its essence. The background for this formula is Christianity and the belief in a creation carried out by a unique god; this creation is said to be *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, from the ideas in the verb; it is thus an act of self-expression, according to the Trinitarian view that sees the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one and the same person. For the Christian believer, God expressed himself with a view to being known by man, the most sublime of his creations in the physical world, and therefore its objects somehow carry his 'brand'; they are material, no doubt, but each one of them was created from an intellectual archetype that must somehow be accessible to the human mind if the creator is to be known through his creation. Therefore, man somehow has, or participates in/of, the verb. The source of this doctrine is Plato's world of ideas, a source metamorphosed by his disciple into what would become the highly polemical controversy of the categories that spans the entire duration of the Middle Ages; because Platonism was highly compatible with Christian beliefs, and Aristotelianism was not completely inadaptable to them, with Bonaventure, a major figure of Christian orthodoxy, one has an extremely unequal synthesis in which the different elements are utilized in the direct proportion to their plasticity in relation to faith: there is a material world, indeed, but it is a mere copy, or imitation, of the essences in the verb; moreover, knowledge of nature gives but a partial knowledge of its creator: only a completely transcendental kind of knowledge, a sort of 'mystical night,' can open the door to a complete or absolute knowledge of God. Plato's finger in all this is all too obvious, and Aristotle's influence is also not difficult to dig out:

beyond the obviousness of his hylomorphic metaphysics, there is the also patent doctrine of the resemblance between knower and thing known, which now becomes one between man and God. Augustine's doctrine of divine illumination that makes of knowledge an act of grace, the generation in man of the very verb, not only fitted well into this synthesis, but actually overcame the deficiencies of both Platonism (the object of knowledge is inaccessible to man) and Aristotelianism (it is the principle of knowledge that is inaccessible), or so Bonaventure thought.³ But his is a highly Christian-biased view, because this divine grace is *technically* identical to the Platonic myth in the *Phaedrus* that explains the ideas in the human soul, *and* to the Aristotelian doctrine of the two intellects, the agent one 'giving' the forms to the possible intellect. There is thus no synthesis in Bonaventure, but a manipulation of diverse non-Christian sources for what Kant would call empirical ends, i.e. happiness.

Thus, the realist 'slogan' "*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*" is but the christianization of an epistemology that since Aristotle tended more and more to concentrate its entire foundation in the world, albeit for wholly different reasons from those of the Christian philosophers; moreover, it is a highly deceiving slogan, because the coordinating conjunction 'and' is there for mere syntactic sense, the hidden adequacy being one of the intellect *to* the thing that was first created by God. To change the conjunction 'and' by the preposition 'to' (*ad*) in this 'slogan' (*veritas est adaequatio rei ad intellectum*), a change carried out by Albertus Magnus,⁴ amounted technically to a clear separation between truth in the world *and* truth for faith; psychologically, this amounted to the beginnings of a liberation from both a creator and its created world: not man, yet, but philosophy stands or falls alone.

This is the result of the affirmation of a growing intellectualism as opposed to voluntarist views. The opposition is not always clear-cut; for instance, Aquinas', an intellectualist, and Bonaventure's 'slogan'

³ Cf. É. Gilson, *La philosophie de saint Bonaventure*, Paris, Vrin, 1924, p. 377.

⁴ *Liber de praedicamentis* II, ed. Borgnet, *Opera Omnia* I, Paris, L. Vivès, 1890, p. 193.

concerning truth is the same; however, there are evident different interpretations in both cases: for Aquinas, there are undoubtedly objects in the world, but their truth, or essence, is in the intellect inasmuch as this is their principle; as he put it, “truth is first and foremost in the intellect; secondarily in things, according as they are compared to the intellect as to a principle.”⁵ Indeed, the principles in the intellect are still those of the verb, but the *intellectualist turn* is there in that they *are* there, integrally so, while for Bonaventure the ‘principle’ was in the human intellect in a sort of corrupted or incomplete way.⁶ This is easily explained inside the opposition in question in that for a voluntarist knowledge depends on an act of the will, or of the appetite (*appetitus*), and this tends to the thing itself, while for an intellectualist knowledge depends on an act of the intellect, which per force tends to the principles of cognition, and, therefore, to the object as it is in the mind of the knower.⁷ Because of this, the principles of cognition would soon inevitably be seen as constituting ones – namely with Dietrich of Freiberg – and no longer as merely receptive principles; if the doctrine of divine illumination saw the intellect as a first and foremost receptive faculty, the intellectualist turn hampered such an approach, the intellect being seen as a ‘transforming’ faculty, as the following passage clearly conveys:

As the true is in the intellect inasmuch as it conforms to the thing known, it is necessary that *the reason of the true derive from the intellect to the thing known*, so that the thing known is said true according to its having some relation to the intellect. But the thing known can have a relation to the intellect either essentially or by accident. Essentially, it has an essential

⁵ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 16, a. 1 co.

⁶ Cf. *Les six jours de la création*, IV, 9, trans. M. Ozilou, Paris, Desclée-Cerf, 1991, p. 176-7.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, *ibid.*: “Just as the good denominates that towards which the appetite tends, so does the true denominate that towards which the intellect tends. However, there is this difference between the appetite and the intellect, or any form of cognition, that cognition is according to what the thing known is in the knower, while the appetite is according to the way the desirer is directed to the desired thing. And thus the end of the appetite, which is the good, is in the desired thing, but the end of cognition, which is the true, is in the very intellect.” [all translations are my own]

relation to the intellect on which it depends in terms of its being; by accident, however, to the intellect by which it is cognizable. Just as if we said that the house is compared to the intellect of the architect essentially, but by accident it is compared to the intellect on which it does not depend. A judgment on a thing is, however, not made according to that which is in it by accident, but according to that which is in it essentially. Hence *a thing is said true in an absolute sense according to the relation to the intellect on which it depends*. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I, q. 16, a. 1 co.) (my italics).

One cannot emphasize too much the fact that never before in Latin thought had the *human* intellect been given such power of being the source of truth; only with Albert's intellectualist turn did the intellect acquire such a property that amounts to a primacy over reality.⁸ Aquinas, Albert's student, accepts his doctrine of the universal *post rem*, in the intellect, and conciliates it with the Platonic doctrine of the ideas: of every existing thing, there is an idea.⁹ They are firstly in the divine intellect, and this in two ways, as the principles of the 'making' of things (*principia factionis rerum*), and as the principles of knowledge (*principia cognoscitiva*); as far as the first way is concerned, the ideas are 'models' (*exemplares*) according to which things are created, thus belonging to the terrain of practical knowledge; in the second case, they are *rationes*, 'types,' and can belong to theoretical knowledge. This duplicity is explained by the need to separate in God the things he creates from the things he knows, and this especially because of the problem concerning the existence of evil, given that for everything there is, there must be in him an idea; this separation consists in that the ideas, as *exemplares*, concern every thing that god has created, while as *rationes* they concern every thing that God knows, even those things that will never be created.

Man, too, has the twofold feature of being capable of knowing as well as creating, and he does both through the ideas in his intellect; however, for Aquinas it is necessary to clearly distinguish God's

⁸ For Albertus Magnus' role in the origin of late medieval intellectualism, see L. M. Augusto, "Albertus Magnus and the Emergence of Late Medieval Intellectualism" (forthcoming).

⁹ Cf. *Summa theol.* I, q. 15, a. 3 co.

creative power, a power to create *ex nihilo*, from man's, which is no more than a mere form-giving to already existing matter; this he does by 'creating' according to the resemblance in his mind, that is to say that he creates according to the intelligible being (*esse intelligibile*), i.e. the idea. Thus, the difference between man and God is that the latter creates natural beings, endowed with an *esse naturale*, while the former can only make 'artificial' things. We can now complete the quotation above:

And that is why artificial things are said true in relation to our intellect, the house being said true that achieves the resemblance of the form in the mind of the architect ; and a discourse is said true inasmuch as <it is> a sign of the true intellect. And in the same way the natural things are said to be true according to whether they achieve the resemblance of the species that are in the divine mind; thus the stone is said true that achieves the proper nature of a stone according to the preconception of the divine intellect. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I, q. 16, a. 1 co.)

Eckhart shook this entire edifice when he made being depend completely on the intellect, because in him, as in his elder contemporary Dietrich, existence *is* essence, and if the intellect gives being, it is because it has the essence of that to which being is given. This means that Aquinas' distinction between the *esse naturale* and the *esse intelligibile* becomes, if not inexistent, opaque; the Eckhartian intellect creates truly, if not in a 'creationist' sense, in an emanating way, undoubtedly, as was to be expected from his Neoplatonic influences.

Given this, to say that for the Thuringian the intellect is the 'place' of truth¹⁰ is to say something altogether different from the same expression when referring to Aquinas, or Albert, for that matter; it is not only the realist 'slogan' of the adequacy between the thing and the intellect, but also Albert's 'slogan' that becomes entirely obsolete for the German master, given that there is no longer an *adequacy*, but an *identity* truth = thought = being. This epistemological 'revolution,'

¹⁰ Cf. *In Sap.*, c. 1, n. 6, ed. J. Kocher & H. Fischer, *Die lateinischen Werke* [LW] II, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1994, p. 327; *ibid.*, c. 16, n. 274, LW II, p. 604; *In Exod.*, c. 20, n. 176, ed. K. Weiss, LW II, p. 152.

technically transparent in Dietrich,¹¹ is carried out by Eckhart in a highly metaphorical style and language, which contributes to a great extent to the proliferation of misidentifications with mystic thought. If this is not correct, the 'translation' of Eckhart into a phenomenological language¹² is perhaps even less so, because there is not in him a concept, however incipient, of phenomenon; for him, the moment one thinks, or knows a thing, it is a true thing, a true existent, but the subject does not contribute much to this 'creation,' that is, it does not constitute the object, or the phenomenon; knowledge, and therefore the giving of being, is something that simply happens to the subject when it is receptive, i.e. when it is a blank slate, and the effort that it has to make is one of erasing whatever may be on the slate, and this is none other than his doctrine of the *abegescheidenheit*. Because this roots directly in Aristotle's theory of abstraction, one can speak of representation and, thus, and obliquely, of phenomenon, but it is rather a sort of attention, or concentration; it is not so much an effort of self-annihilation as a preparation to receive the object to be known by 'erasing' every representation in the mind. As we shall see, his doctrine of the *bilder* consists in a theory of 'content': the idea *is* its own content, and this causes an immediate identity between the knower and the thing known; but this is nevertheless a merely *formal* identity – for example, s/he who knows justice can be nothing else but just because s/he has a formal identity with justice, in other words, both justice and the subject have the same form, and therefore both *are* the same content, in the same way as the eye seeing a chunk of wood remains an eye, but an eye whose visual content is not itself but the chunk of wood.¹³ In itself, the eye is mere possibility of seeing, and in itself, the chunk of wood is merely the possibility of being seen; it is

¹¹ Namely in his *De origine rerum praedicamentalium*, ed. L. Sturlese, *Opera Omnia* III, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983.

¹² E.g.: Michel Henry, "La signification ontologique de la critique de la connaissance chez Maître Eckhart", in E. zum Brunn (ed.), *Voici Maître Eckhart*, Grenoble, Jérôme Million, 1994, p. 175-185. It is hardly necessary to give examples of mystical interpretations of Eckhart's thought, such is their profusion.

¹³ Cf. below.

when the eye sees the chunk of wood that both are some content: in idealist terms, reality.

2 Eckhart's *bilder*

2.1 An Aristotelian Epistemic Recreation of Plato's Doctrine of the Ideas

Among other characteristics, Plato's ideas are separated from the things that imitate them and of which they are the cause, existing thus before them; Aristotle criticized this tenet for epistemic reasons: if separated from the things that 'imitate' them, there is no visible epistemic role for them, and they might as well be altogether dropped. He concludes that, if there must be ideas, they must be in the things, but if they are to have an epistemic function, then they must be in the human intellect, too; he transposes Plato's world of ideas into the agent intellect, *apparently* part of the human soul, and thus 'humanizes' it (by this, I mean that he turns the ideas into human tools, as against their supernatural character in Plato's postulation). This was the legacy that Plato and Aristotle left to their successors, and much of western thought from then on was the more or less desperate attempt to conciliate two views that seemed to be correct in themselves, but that simply did not work together. Plato's ideas reach Eckhart already mixed with the Aristotelian universals, or said intelligible species, and he clearly 'neglects' the problem of universals, siding with Aristotle; for him the universals – now clearly conceived as *rationes* – are both in the things and in the intellect. His first major contribution to this issue was a clarification of the metaphysical nature of the intelligible species, or images, and this with, too, epistemological ends in view: the *bilde* must be completely non-distinct from the reality whose *bilde* it is – without which it would be epistemically useless –, without, nevertheless, being one and the same thing.¹⁴

But Plato, too, had his epistemic reasons to separate the ideas, given that if mixed somehow with the things that participated in/of them, they would risk corruption, and their role of guaranteeing

¹⁴ Cf. *In Ioh.*, c. 1, n. 194, ed. J. Koch et al., LW III, p. 162-3.

absolute knowledge would cease. Eckhart thus separates them.¹⁵ Before Albert the Great and his intellectual turn, Eckhart would be expected to put the *rationes* in the verb, just as Augustine had claimed was the only reasonable thing to do,¹⁶ but the Thuringian was too much of an intellectualist himself, and he placed them in the locus of truth, which, as seen, is the intellect. Now, he was too much of a Christian, too, to take them completely away from the verb, and he seems at first sight to make a sort of conciliation – the ideas are both in the verb and in the intellect – but the important fact is that he sees no difference whatsoever between the ideas in the verb and those in the human mind, which eliminates the hypothesis of a mere conciliation and forces us to see the obvious: for him, the ideas in the verb and in the human mind are the same, with no difference whatsoever in status or function:

The reasons of the created things are <themselves> not created, nor creatable as such. *They are before the thing*¹⁷ and *after the thing*,¹⁸ as the original cause of those very things. That is precisely why through them the changeable things are known as through causes and by an immutable science, as is evident in the science of the natural things. The outer thing itself is changeable as far as its formal, creatable and created being is concerned. And that is what is meant here: god created so that everything would be. The things in him are the reasons of things, *Iob.* 1: “in the beginning there was the verb,” or *logos*, which is the reason;¹⁹ and Augustine [*De trin.* VI, c. 10, n. 11] says that it is an “art” “filled with the reasons of everything.” (*In Sap.*, c. 1, n. 22, LW II, p. 343) (my emphasis)

Eckhart's use of the conjunction 'and' is so subtle that it risks inconspicuousness, and thus being overlooked by most interpretations of his thought. But the fact is that he himself seems quite unaware of the impact he causes in the medieval landscape, seeing himself as merely following the authorities, namely Aristotle and Augustine.²⁰

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 12, LW III, p. 12.

¹⁶ Cf. *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII*, 46, 2, PL 40/30.

¹⁷ *Ante rem.*

¹⁸ *Post rem.*

¹⁹ Also: the notion.

²⁰ Cf. *In Eccli.*, c. 24, n. 10, ed. J. Koch & H. Fischer, LW II, p. 240.

His epistemic foundations are not different from those of the Stagirite, in that he requires that one know the causes if there is to be true knowledge of a thing,²¹ but this entails an onto-epistemic gap if one follows the ‘orthodox’ theory of knowledge that separates the thing known, its cause or *ratio*, and the source of its *ratio*, i.e. realism. Following this stance, knowing a thing is either not knowing the thing itself (because the thing is not its cause just as the cause of a circle is not a circle itself),²² or not knowing the cause (for the same reason), which is altogether but a very partial – if any – knowledge. True knowledge is only knowledge at the same time of the thing itself and of its cause, similar as dissimilar they might be, and if one followed the realist view, knowledge of God would be impossible through his creation, because the reasons in him would be different from those in the things; moreover, God’s reasons are also not those in the human mind, according to this stance, the reasons in the human intellect being formal, while those in God are causal and virtual, i.e. “they in no way designate, they give neither the species nor the name.”²³ These are the theological consequences of epistemological realism.

Although Eckhart seems to accept the distinction above between formal and causal-virtual reasons, and this perhaps for theological reasons more than philosophical ones, he does not comply with it, entirely neglecting the latter, firstly in the process of cognition and, ultimately, as an ontological tool: if a thing is nothing more than the ‘effect’ of its formal notion (*ratio*), which gives it the name and the species, a priori in the intellect and in a superior way in relation to the thing, this means that a thing *is* when it *is known*; it is simultaneous with the act of knowing; it *is* its *being known*, the very intellect itself.²⁴

²¹ Pr. 8, ed. J. Quint, *Die deutschen Werke* [DW] I, Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer, 1958, p. 135: *Waz man bekennen sol, daz muoz man bekennen in siner ursache. Niemer enmac man ein dinc rehte in im selber bekennen, man enbekenne ez in siner ursache.* (What one must know, one has to know it in its cause. Never can one rightly know a thing in itself unless one knows it in its cause.)

²² Cf. *In Exod.*, c. 20, n. 120, LW II, p. 113-4. Cf. also *In Ioh.*, c. 1, n. 12, LW III, p. 12.

²³ *In Exod.*, c. 20, n. 121, LW II, p. 114.

²⁴ *In Ioh.*, c. 1, n. 38, LW III, p. 33: *Iterum etiam [ratio] coeva est intellectui, cum sit ipsum intelligere et ipse intellectus.*

But Eckhart goes further: in his – supposedly – first Parisian *quaestio*, he made being depend on the intellect;²⁵ this was emphasized in the Middle High German sermon no. 9, in which God's being itself is no more than his churchyard, God *being* actually an intellect;²⁶ in his *In Iob.*, he is faithful to these claims, but he goes further, making of the intellect the *absolute* condition of existence: "there is nothing beyond knowing."²⁷ This leads him into an idealist ontology: every creature is nothing in that it is only when it is known; when the knowledge of a thing ceases, it, the thing, ceases to exist altogether. Berkeley will say exactly the same four centuries later on: *esse est percipi*. And about one century after this, Hegel will take being as the very beginning of the dialectical process and, as such, the most indeterminate category of all,²⁸ becoming *real* only at the end of the movement in which the mind realizes that being is precisely this progress in knowledge, the absolute idea.²⁹

The connection established by Aristotle between the forms in the intellect and in the things (to be abstracted in the case of the material things, identical to the very thing in the case of the intelligible things) is one of a formal identity: the intellect knowing a form is that very form, and nothing else beyond it, because without a form it is mere possibility of thought; this in the case of the possible intellect, while the agent intellect always thinks, being the totality of the forms

²⁵ *Quaestio Parisiensis* I, n. 5, ed. B. Geyer, LW V, p. 42: [*I*]ntelligere est altius quam esse et est alterius condicionis.

²⁶ Cf. *Pr.* 9, DW I, p. 150.

²⁷ *In Iob.*, c. 1, n. 38, LW III, p. 33: [*N*]ihil praeter intelligere est.

²⁸ *Wissenschaft der Logik* I, ed. F. Hogemann & W. Jaeschke, Gesammelte Werke [GW] 11, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1978, p. 43-4 (Being, pure being, – with no other determination. In its undetermined immediacy it is only identical to itself, and it is not unequal as opposed to the other, has no difference inside its own, nor to the outside. Through some determination or content that is differentiated in it or through which it would be posited as different from another, it would not be captured in its purity. It is the pure indetermination and void. There is *nothing* to intuit in it, if one can speak of intuiting here; or it is only this pure, empty act of intuiting itself. It is very little to think something in it, or it is only this empty thinking. Being, the undetermined immediacy is in fact nothing, and nothing more nor less than nothing.)

²⁹ Cf. *Wissenschaft der Logik* II, ed. F. Hogemann & W. Jaeschke, GW12, p. 236f.

in act; but Aristotle never said clearly that this agent intellect is in the human soul, though in certain passages he says that the soul is the place of the forms (yet again, he could be referring to the possible intellect). What matters to us is that the Stagirite establishes a *formal identity* between the subject and the object, and Eckhart, again, is faithful to this source:

But it so happens that my eye is one and simple in itself, and that it opens and is directed to the piece of wood in contemplation; so remains each that which it is, but both become in the act of the contemplation only one in such a way that one can truly say eyewood, and the wood is my eye.³⁰

However, we are not facing a pure Aristotelianism, and the entire metaphysical tradition of the Middle Ages makes itself evident in the fact that Eckhart sees this identity as one in being (though not ontological, i.e. the subject *is not* the object, and vice versa): the intellect knowing a thing and that thing are *formally* just one being.³¹ And we already know why: because being is a product of the intellect. But that the intellect is at the same time also a being, when according to the Neoplatonic metaphysics to which Eckhart remains attached the cause cannot be present in the effect if it is a true cause³² means only that the intellect is, as a being, cause of itself.

³⁰ Pr. 48, DW II, p. 416: *Geschihet aber daz, daz mîn ouge ein und einvaltich ist in im selben und ûfgetân wirt und ûf daz holz geworfen wirt mit einer angesiht, sô blîbet ein ieglichez, daz es ist, und werdent doch in der wûrklichkeit der angesiht als ein, daz man mac gesprechen in der wârheit: ougeholz, und daz holz ist mîn ouge.*

³¹ *Ibid*: *Wære aber daz holz âne materie und ez zemåle geistlich wære als diu gesiht mînes ougen, sô möhte man sprechen in der wârheit, daz in der wûrklichkeit der gesiht daz holz und mîn ouge bestüenden in einem wesene. Ist diz wâr von liplichen dingen, vil mê ist ez wâr von geistlichen dingen.* (But if the wood were without matter and purely spiritual like the vision of my eye, one could say in truth that, in the act of vision, the wood and my eye would consist in one single being. If this is true of the corporeal things, it is even more so of the spiritual things.)

³² Cf. *Quaestio Parisiensis* II, n. 10, ed. B. Geyer, LW V, p. 54. Cf. also Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, II, 8, 645C-D, ed. B. R. Suchla, *Corpus Dionysiacum* I, Berlin – New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1990.

2.2 A Christian Ontological Recreation of Aristotle's Doctrine of Cognition

Interestingly enough, Eckhart's doctrine of the *bilder* is elaborated mostly in the German sermons, in which he goes from orthodoxy to daring, sometimes in the same paragraph. His expression is somehow 'conservative' in the Latin texts, the doctrine of the ideas remaining in them very much unchanged in relation to the tradition that handed it to him. Given that his sermons in German are usually more innovative, and that in the same text Eckhart often mixes orthodoxy with originality, one is hardly surprised to find in sermon no. 17 a monotonous explanation of the doctrine of the forms – *bilder* for him – as it was conceived by Latin thought³³ being used merely as an introduction with a view to some sort of philosophical 'impact': explained the doctrine of the ideas within an Aristotelian background (that is to say that in order to know something, and thus become that very thing, the intellect must be like a blank slate), Eckhart claims that it is the responsibility of the knower to become 'blank,' so as to be capable of accepting all forms and therefore become every thing, and especially, as a Christian, God himself.

This is none other than the doctrine of the *abegescheidenheit*, the source of the most mystical interpretations of his thought precisely because they miss this eminently technical aspect: that it roots directly in Aristotle's doctrine of abstraction. At most, it is an Aristotelian doctrine *adapted* to a Christian worldview that renders the individual responsible not only for her/his actions, premeditated or accidental, but even for thoughts, conscious or unconscious. This is obviously difficult to conciliate with Eckhart's intellectualism, inasmuch as this is a notoriously voluntarist doctrine,³⁴ but again this is mere appearance:

³³ Cf. *Pr.* 17, DW I, p. 290-1.

³⁴ I do not really think there can be any doubt of the side chosen by Eckhart; the following passage from *Pr.* 37, DW II, p. 216, merely one in many, shows this side-taking: *Vernünflichkeit ist eigenlicher 'kneht' dan wille oder minne. Wille und minne vallent uf got, als er guot ist, und enwære er niht guot, sô enahteten sie sîn niht. Vernünflichkeit dringet uf in daz wesen, ê si bedenke güete oder gewalt oder wisheit oder swaz des ist, daz zuovellic ist.* (The intellect is a more genuine servant than the will or love. The will and love attach themselves to god as long as he is good, and if he were not good, they would not care for him. The intellect penetrates in the being before

as a consistently devoted Neoplatonic, he is again only following these masters according to whom it is inevitable that the created thing will turn to its creator, the One, and this in a spontaneous way; Eckhart's man, too, turns spontaneously to God, and because this is a spontaneous act not dependent so much on the will as on the nature of creation, he rejects all sorts of actions deemed capable of bringing God to man, i.e. fasts, unending prayers, self-flagellations, the morbid whatnot that seemed to make the cup of tea of many medieval Christians. His *abegescheidenheit* is a detachment, without doubt, but it is a positive one in that it is merely intellectual: just as one who solves a mathematical problem concentrates on the numbers and their relations, so the individual willing to know – better: *be* – all the forms has to abstract him-/herself from all materiality. Rather than of abandonment or detachment, and as already pointed out, one should speak of *concentration*.

This interpretation counterbalances those more mystical ones, which see in the *abegescheidenheit* some sort of doctrine of ecstasy, or even of *apatheia*, the absence of sensation and feeling. It is a fact that Eckhart abundantly uses terms and expressions that convey the meaning of detachment and disinterest,³⁵ but he always makes a connection between this 'self-annihilation' and Aristotle's doctrine of abstraction, which suggests that he constantly keeps in mind the technical meaning of this source. One can also hypothesize that this vocabulary is addressed to an audience in its vast majority composed by Dominican nuns, most of them not learned in philosophical matters, and who were certainly far better acquainted with the vocabulary of the female Rhineland mystics than with that of both technical theology and philosophy, namely that of Aristotle. By this I do not mean that he made his thought more accessible; much on the

thinking about the good or power, about wisdom or whatever it is that is accidental.)

³⁵ Words of these semantic fields are, for instance, nouns such as *gelâzenheit*, not caring, *vernichtung*, annihilation, *abelegung*, undressing, *blôzheit*, nudity, and verbs such as *[sich] ergeben*, to abandon [oneself], *[sich] abeschelen*, *[sich] berouben*, *[sich] entschelen*, to undress [oneself], *lâzen*, leave, *ledic machen*, detach, *uzgân*, go out, leave, flow, etc.

contrary, this highly metaphorical language makes the interpretation of his thought if anything more difficult. Moreover, Plato, too, advocated the need to 'escape' this world in order to reach the realm of ideas, and so far no one succeeded in making of him some sort of mystic of detachment.³⁶

Back to the doctrine of the *bilder*, and having discussed Aristotle's role as its main background, let us now turn again to its most direct source, Plato; according to this, the ideas were the formal causes, the *ousia* of things that were but mere copies of them; we are thus facing a model-copy relation, a relation that Bonaventure took without much originality for his Christian aims, and a relation that was first rejected by Aristotle in his harsh criticism of the thought of his former master (a criticism, however, that was firstly carried out by Plato himself in the *Parmenides*). This relation between the model (*paradeigma*) and the copies (*homoiômata*) is precisely the core of the difficulties of the doctrine of the ideas, the main difficulty being the resemblance between them: to postulate a resemblance between model and copy, does this not imply that one has to postulate yet another form, that of the resemblance between them? Certainly, answers Socrates, unaware of where this answer is going to take him: if the resemblance is caused by the form of resemblance, then the copy does not resemble the model, because, besides this form, another one would be required to justify the relation of resemblance, and so on ad infinitum (indeed, this is precisely Aristotle's criticism in *Met. A*, 9, known as the argument of the third man); Parmenides' conclusion, which Socrates is forced to accept, is that the resemblance cannot explain the relation of participation between model and copy and that it is necessary to search for another explanation.³⁷

This problem is so embarrassing that it is altogether forgotten for centuries, and it is precisely Eckhart who will be bold enough to

³⁶ My criticism of the mystical interpretations does not aim at their elimination; if anything, and in the name of the *principle of proliferation* proposed by Paul Feyerabend, it aims to force its supporters to do a much better work than they have done so far, neglecting or simply missing the 'technicalities' that, whether they want it or not, are everywhere in Eckhart's thought.

³⁷ Cf. *Parmenides* 132c-133a.

retake it, attempting to find a good account of this relation between the models and their copies. Sermon no. 16b is almost integrally a treatise on this subject. In it, the solution found by the Thuringian is ingenious: to speak of model and copy as far as the eidetic relation is concerned has nothing to do with speaking of *material* models and *material* copies; the terrain is altogether different. A recipient, or container has two features: it simultaneously *receives* in itself a content, and it *contains* it; this relation is clearly one between two different things when we are speaking of a material container, given that a jug is not its content, and the content is not the jug either; for instance, a jug *contains* wine, and the wine is *in* the jug, and in spite of this to drink the wine does not obviously mean that one drinks the jug. This clear distinction ceases when one is talking of spiritual things; a spiritual ‘jug’ is that which it contains, and the content is that which contains it.

It is very much evident that Eckhart establishes the analogy between jug and soul through the notion of containing, and the soul is thus characterized by this notion: it contains all the forms of all things. And if one follows Aristotle’s claim that the knower resembles the thing known, then there can be no distinction between the container and the content. Eckhart’s conclusion is abrupt, and it is ultimately of a theological character, in that the soul of the individual that ‘contains’ God is God himself. His highly allegorical explanation features eggs: two resembling eggs are not the same egg, precisely because they are not each other’s *bilde*; if there is *bilde*, then there is resemblance, because if something has to be the *bilde* of another thing, then that relation must come from its very nature, it must be a fruit of that nature, and must be identical to it.³⁸ For all this, it is very much obvious that the Middle High German word *bilde* is better left untranslated, since it means at the same time the model, the copy, and the archetype, and that the term resemblance, translating the Middle High German ‘*glicheit*,’ is but a very poor translation itself, the original word conveying a mixture of resemblance and *identity*.

³⁸ Pr. 16b, DW I, p. 265: [*W*]an daz des andern bilde sol sîn, daz muoz von sîner natûre komen sîn und muoz von im geborn sîn und muoz im glich sîn.

Adopting an analytical structure much more frequent in his Latin texts, Eckhart characterizes this resemblance, which entails an ontological identity in four properties between the *bilde* and that of which it is the *bilde*:

1. The *bilde* receives its being immediately from that of which it is the *bilde*;
2. this 'resemblance' entails that:
 - 1.1. the *bilde* is not of itself or for itself;
 - 1.2. it derives from that of which it is the *bilde* and belongs to it completely;
 - 1.3. it has a being with that of which it is the *bilde* and it is the same being.

The example he gives is the one of vision, an example very much resorted to since Antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages to illustrate theories of perception and cognition, and thus theories of intelligible forms. The eye has an image when it perceives something, but this image does not belong to it; it belongs to the thing of which it is the image. Although the image 'comes out' of a thing, it is 'one' with that thing: it is the very thing itself, the same being. But when the eye sees the thing, vision, the action of seeing, becomes that very thing, too, having the same being precisely because they both share the same image. Is there anything new in this doctrine? Not really: a brief analysis shows us that we are not far from Aristotle's *De anima*:

- (1) In sensation, it is the things themselves that affect the body.
- (2) They do it through their qualities, such as color, sound, taste, etc; therefore, they do it through their forms and not through their matter.³⁹
- (3) In sensation, like is affected by like.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cf. *De anima* II, 12, 424b10-11 and 424a17-24.

⁴⁰ That is, the perceiving organ, in the act of sensation, becomes the 'quality' it senses; cf. *ibid.*, 5, 417a18-21 and 418a4-6.

If

(4) thinking is a –bodily? – process like sensing,⁴¹
then

(5) in the act of knowing, like is affected by like.⁴²

The conclusion one draws from this argument is that, when one knows a thing, one becomes in a way that thing; the subject and the object ‘share’ the same intelligible form in act in the action of cognition. But Eckhart seems to go further than this, claiming that the form is the very being of a thing, its quoddity; moreover, he claims that the being of a thing is given by the intellect possessing its essence. But there is still nothing really new in this, because Aristotle, too, had stated that the agent makes that which is in potency identical to itself,⁴³ i.e. the sensible object makes the sense organ like it: eyesight, being in potency all its *sensibilia*, the visible things, is made into gold by the vision of gold. If thinking is a process akin to sensing, as seen above, then having the form of a thing is to become that form in act, because the soul is potentially all the intelligible forms.

3 Conclusion

With the above analysis, I showed that, at the technical and formal levels, Eckhart’s doctrine of the *bilder* is an Aristotelian epistemic recreation of Plato’s doctrine of the ideas and a Christian ontological recreation of Aristotle’s doctrine of cognition. It is an intellectualist⁴⁴ solution to the problem of the resemblance relation between the model and its copy, and it is an intellectualist solution in that it first establishes a formal-epistemic identity between both to establish the ontological identity between thought and reality: reality is nothing but

⁴¹ Actually, Aristotle rejects that thinking is a *bodily* process like sensation (cf. *ibid.*, III, 3, 427a19-427b6), but he seems to accept that thinking and sensation are alike processes, at least in the case of the possible intellect (cf. *ibid.*, 4, 429a13-22).

⁴² Although Aristotle apparently rejects this theory (cf. *ibid.*, III, 3, 427a27-8), it does not differ from his statement that the possible intellect thinking an object *is* in entelechy that object (cf. *ibid.*, 4, 429b31).

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, II, 11, 424a1-2.

⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, it is an idealist solution, but I cannot go into that subject in this paper.

thought, because it is the latter that first has the essences, or forms of everything there *is*. Eckhart's intellectualism is coherent through and through, inasmuch as he never leaves the terrain of the intellect, making of both the Platonic ideas and the Aristotelian intelligible forms true tools of donation of being. If much in his thought seems at first 'too' original, or even mystical, this is only when one neglects or altogether misses its Aristotelian and Platonic roots.

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