

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 26 | Issue 3

Article 3

---

7-1-2009

## Eudaimonism, Teleology, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Meister Eckhart on "Living Without a Why"

John M. Connolly

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Connolly, John M. (2009) "Eudaimonism, Teleology, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Meister Eckhart on "Living Without a Why";" *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200926315

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# EUDAIMONISM, TELEOLOGY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: MEISTER ECKHART ON “LIVING WITHOUT A WHY”

John M. Connolly

Recent interest among both philosophers and the wider public in the tradition of virtue ethics often takes its inspiration from Aristotle or from Thomas Aquinas. In this essay I briefly outline the ethical approaches of these two towering figures, and then describe more fully the virtue ethics of Meister Eckhart, a medieval thinker who admired, though critically, both Aristotle and Aquinas. His related but distinctively original approach to the virtuous life is marked by a striking and seemingly paradoxical injunction to “live without why.”

The virtue ethics<sup>1</sup> of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas are related, Aquinas having incorporated into his moral theology substantial elements of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Their roles in the lively contemporary revival of virtue-ethics show that both of these ethical systems continue to inspire philosophers, and to exercise, in Thomas’s case, truly substantial influence beyond the academy, since much Catholic moral teaching and preaching derives from his writings. Obviously, many continue to feel the attraction of the idea that at the heart of ethics is a deep connection between the quality of the life we lead, as measured by our virtues and vices, and the fulfillment or happiness which each of us can attain.

But nowhere do Aristotle and Thomas—not to mention Meister Eckhart—differ more strikingly than over the nature of this fulfillment. Aristotle’s eudaimonism is the view that our happiness or perfection, that is, the objectively most desirable form of life, consists in the active practice of the moral and (especially) intellectual virtues.<sup>2</sup> While large stretches of

---

I am grateful for helpful comments from Ernie Alleva, Lynne Baker, Charles Donahue, Jay Garfield, Murray Kiteley, Gareth Matthews, Bernard McGinn, Janice Moulton, and Malcolm Smith, as well as audience members at the Fall 2003 meeting of the Northern New England Philosophical Association and the 39th International Congress on Medieval Studies, where versions of this paper were presented. I am particularly indebted to Harold Skulsky and to Tobias Hoffmann for careful criticisms of early drafts, to Theo Kobusch, and to two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

<sup>1</sup>Virtue-ethics has been one of the most active fields in moral philosophy in recent decades, while William Bennett’s *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) was a number-one best seller in the U.S. during the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup>More fully: the active practice of those virtues in a life not unduly beset with maladies, catastrophes, hunger, and the like. In insisting on a modicum of amenities



Thomas's writings on ethics (e.g., his analysis of human action) are plainly Aristotelian, non-Aristotelian elements dominate at many points, e.g., where core Christian notions (grace, salvation, charity, etc.) go beyond Aristotle's pagan this-worldliness.<sup>3</sup> The result, I will suggest, is a hybrid that on crucial points concerning the nature of both the virtues and happiness is thoroughly un-Aristotelian. That two thinkers from such different cultures should diverge on the content of happiness is not surprising. But I will point out a consequence of that difference, that is, Aquinas's tendency toward a moral instrumentalism alien in spirit to Aristotle's ethics.

In the generation following St. Thomas some thinkers, including John Duns Scotus, took issue with the eudaimonist framework altogether, arguing that we are called on to do what is right for its own sake, regardless of its impact on our happiness. At first glance, Scotus's contemporary Meister Eckhart (ca.1260–1328?) seems to be echoing this view when he advises his audience to "live without why," that is, without a goal. But after sketching Aristotle's eudaimonism (in section 1) and exploring how Thomas's moral theology compares with it (section 2), I will argue that Eckhart is actually a kind of eudaimonist. While no less Christian than his fellow Dominican Thomas, his ethical views are in a way more faithful than Aquinas's to the spirit of Aristotle. They deserve serious scholarly attention.

### I.

Is there in fact, or should there be, a supreme goal in our lives, by reference to which we can determine the rightness of our day-to-day actions? Aristotle famously thought there is such a goal, happiness (*eudaimonia*), which is not a subjective state of satisfaction, but rather consists in the complete fulfillment of our human nature. As essentially rational beings with lives that are also sensate and vegetative, our excellence consists in realizing to the highest extent possible our distinctive capacities. This is achievable only in a virtuous life in which on the one hand practical reason regularly controls our sensory impulses (desires and emotions), and—even better, though less common—wherein theoretical reason also devotes itself to contemplation or study of the highest realities.<sup>4</sup> Many of the virtues—e.g., justice, courage, generosity, etc.—are largely other-oriented. But in each case the role of the virtue in one's life is self-perfective. So, for instance, courage moderates on the one hand natural fears and a tendency to save oneself at the expense of others, and on the other an inclination to endanger oneself and others through reckless overconfidence. It is thus a part

---

and good fortune, Aristotle differed from other ancient champions of the virtues such as Socrates and the Stoics.

<sup>3</sup>The Aristotelian elements in Thomas's ethical thought coexist, sometimes uneasily, with the long tradition of Christian, substantially Augustinian, teaching. Thomas's overall attitude and debts to Aristotle are a topic of ongoing debate, for instance about the extent and import of Augustinian and other Neoplatonic influences on Thomas's thinking.

<sup>4</sup>There is scholarly disagreement—which I must ignore here—about how exactly to understand Aristotle's final view of the relationship between the practical and contemplative forms of life.

of the perfection of human nature in that it honors one's ties to others, e.g., to family, friends or country, ties rooted in our nature as essentially social beings. Just as a good carpenter *qua* carpenter builds houses well in fulfilling her function, so too a virtuous human being acts courageously because *that* is fulfilling her function *qua* human being; she is thus realizing her happiness or fulfillment. Eudaimonia is not simply a reward for virtuous living; it is living virtuously.

Aristotle's approach to ethics thus revolves around these central elements: First, there is the *goal* (*telos*) of life. Everyone agrees in calling it happiness. Aristotle claims it is a function of our nature, and its attainment a matter of our own efforts. Identifying the goal is the same as making it the object of one's *will* (*boulēsis*);<sup>5</sup> while *practical wisdom* (*phronēsis*) enables us to discern which of alternative actions available to us will promote attainment of the end. Hence his ethic is broadly teleological, that is, it aims to discover, describe, and advocate a process of human development toward the goal of life.

Second, attainment of the goal consists in the *performance*, the actual doing, of actions of a certain kind, that is, those identified by practical wisdom as right, in that they contribute to (by partially constituting) one's happiness. Essential to such actions is that they proceed from the right sort of principles, that is, from *virtues* as habits which we develop, and in the exercise of which (under the guidance of *phronēsis*) we live the best of human lives. Aristotle distinguishes (e.g., at *NE* 1094 a 1ff.) action (*praxis*) from production (*poiesis*); in the latter the "product beyond the activity" is the point; in the former, it is the activity itself that matters: a just action is a good-in-itself.

A serious danger for any teleological ethical theory is the tendency to exalt the end over the means, turning the latter into a mere instrument to realizing the former. Aristotle saw this threat of instrumentalization. His solution was to make the virtues, friendship, and the like *constituents* of the happy life. Justice, courage, etc. are their own reward, and at the same time help constitute the good life by fulfilling our nature as rational animals. If we are persuaded by Aristotle about the content of the good life, we do not choose to be virtuous in order to achieve happiness as an *extrinsic* good, something beyond. The just person is just because it is right to be so, i.e., fully consonant with her nature as a rational, social animal, but her conduct is itself a realization of happiness. Indeed, I cannot be just if my action is solely (or even principally) meant to attain some extrinsic goal: to instrumentalize a virtue is to destroy it (though Aristotle allows that we can act justly for its own sake *and* because to do so partially constitutes our happiness or fulfillment, *NE* 1097b, 1–7). Such is Aristotle's teleological eudaimonism, an ethic built on the notions of attaining the good life (happiness) through, and in, the kind of virtuous action which fulfills one's nature.

---

<sup>5</sup>The role, or even presence, of the concept of will in Aristotle's thought is controversial. I take it that his notion of *boulēsis*, the inclination toward—or wanting of—the goal of life, is a central element in the complex medieval concept of *voluntas*. See the discussion in Charles Kahn, "Discovering the Will from Aristotle to Augustine," in *The Question of 'Eclecticism': Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, ed. John M. Dillon and A. A. Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 103–126.

I propose to compare Aquinas and Eckhart with Aristotle on these elements: the goal of life, the structure of human action, and the virtues. In this process we should bear in mind correspondingly different senses in which we might speak of teleology in ethics:

(A) First, an ethic might be concerned with *moral development* in that it conceives as the (or a) central task of ethics to lead one from an unsatisfactory initial state of character to a perfected state (the *telos* or goal, eudaimonia, maturity, etc.) in which one is a fully developed moral agent. Call this a *teleological view of human life*. It is typical of, though not exclusive to, virtue-ethics.

(B) An ethic might allot an important role to the *means-end* aspect of *action* in moral conduct. The end could be intrinsic, i.e., living virtuously itself, but could equally be something extrinsic to the action, e.g., the greatest happiness of the greatest number. (Kant's ethic, by contrast, is famously non-teleological in this sense, since its central focus is the agent's motive, and neither her goal nor the consequences of her conduct).

(C) Finally, a teleological ethic might see virtuous action as itself a means to a further end. For instance, courage might be conceived as a good thing primarily as being *in a further way* meritorious, where earning this further merit from another (or others) is the real goal of life. So it is sometimes said that in the "Homeric ethic" the honor or esteem of one's peers is the principal good. When the rightness of actions is derived from their serving some such external goal, the resulting ethic is a form of consequentialism. As noted, the danger here is an undermining of the virtues.

Aristotle's eudaimonist ethic is teleological in the first way; and while he thinks of virtuous action as a means to happiness, such action's connection to happiness is internal and constitutive. I shall argue that Aquinas is, in a way, a stronger teleologist than Aristotle: his connection of virtuous action to what he calls "perfect happiness" is external and by way of merit. Eckhart, though he has a partially teleological account of our lives, differs importantly from Aquinas with respect to each of these senses of ethics and teleology, and—crucially—is a non-teleologist about action, in one sense, and the virtues.

## II.

When the *Nicomachean Ethics* first became available in Latin to Christian thinkers in the thirteenth century, it elicited strong reactions. Some, but not all, were opposed to the study of it in the universities. The Aristotelian eudaimonist conception of the good life, while attractively concise and powerfully argued, was after all essentially pagan, lacking notions of salvation, grace, creation, providence, etc. Without denying this point, many wrote commentaries on it. Aquinas did so too, and then incorporated parts of it into his moral theology.

Among the works of Aquinas addressed to moral themes is his monumental textbook, the *Summa Theologiae*. In the latter, starting in the second main part (the *prima secundae*, or 1a2ae),<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas lays out his ethic in

---

<sup>6</sup>Further citations to Thomas will be given in the text, and will refer to the 1a2ae unless otherwise noted.

a format somewhat like Aristotle's: (a) in the 'treatise on happiness' (articles 1–5) he investigates the goal of life, that is, happiness or beatitude; (b) the 'treatise of human acts' (articles 6–21) is his detailed analysis of human action, including moral action; (c) the 'treatises on the passions, virtues and vices,' as well as the Gospel Beatitudes (22–89), present his views on the role of these elements in the moral life; while (d) in the 'treatise on law' (90–114) he sets out his influential view of natural law. (The following segment of the *Summa*, the *secunda secundae*, is a detailed theological investigation of individual virtues, where charity assumes the central place.)

In the 'treatise on happiness,' "the centerpiece in the construction of the *Summa Theologiae*,"<sup>7</sup> Thomas for a while hews closely to Aristotle's argumentation: since "man's ultimate end is his complete good" (1,6, ad 3), our happiness cannot consist in wealth, power, sensory pleasure, etc., as none of these can fully satisfy our desire. But Aquinas then goes on to extend the point to virtue, contemplation or *any* "created good": none of them, nor all together, can fully satisfy us.<sup>8</sup> In thus rejecting the notion that a life of the virtues could constitute our happiness, Aquinas steps decisively beyond the framework of Aristotle: our longing for fulfillment implies that only the eternal possession of God in the Beatific Vision can fulfill us (2, 8, resp.). The teleological drive built into our nature points inexorably to this as its completion. The happiness we seek can be had fully only in that Vision.

Such a completion, however, is beyond the capacity of our nature (5, 5, resp.). Hence, from the point of view of virtue ethics, we find ourselves in a dilemma: the most our unaided human nature is capable of is a limited or "imperfect" (i.e., Aristotelian) happiness in this life; yet we long for a perfect happiness that is beyond our means and could only be given us, e.g., as a divine reward for our meritorious virtuous behavior. But can merit and an extrinsic reward coexist with virtue in a coherent ethic? Aristotle thought not, and if we were to follow him, we would have to set aside from ethics the Christian promise of salvation. For if salvation, conceived as an extrinsic reward for meritorious conduct, is our true goal, the life of the virtues is threatened by instrumentalization; yet if our virtues are undermined, how can our conduct possibly *merit* salvation?

We will return to this question, but even at this point it may seem doubtful that Thomas's approach, while clearly teleological and widely thought

---

<sup>7</sup>Servais Pinckaers, O.P., "Beatitude and the Beatitudes in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*," in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup>As Kenny points out, Aristotle's own conception of happiness vacillates in his two major ethical works between the "perfect" good (that best of all activities, that is, contemplation) and the "complete" good (that is, a set of activities so satisfying that nothing could be added to it that would make it more satisfying). Kenny contends that Aquinas, though following the former line in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, sometimes avails himself of the latter, as here in the *Summa*. Cf. Anthony Kenny, "Aquinas on Aristotelian Happiness," in *Aquinas's Moral Theory: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Scott MacDonald and Eleonore Stump, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 15–27.

to be eudaimonist,<sup>9</sup> can be called “eudaimonist” in Aristotle’s sense. For Aristotle the end or fulfillment of human beings consists in virtuous living, a form of life which is clearly open to us to choose (and certainly one which no one else can give us). It represents the perfection of our human nature. But for Christians this conception is at best incomplete. Our true ultimate goal is not discoverable by reason, but known only through revelation, and it is not—so Thomas—the perfection of our human nature, but rather something “beyond the nature of any created intellect” (1a, 62,1). Hence, already in the treatise on happiness a substantial gap is obvious: although Thomas uses Aristotle’s overall teleological framework, he must dramatically alter Aristotle’s eudaimonism (which indeed no Christian could embrace as the full account of our destiny). I will suggest that his alterations, when thought through, are so drastic that one must ask whether his constellation of positions, i.e., a Christian teleological ethics that is not eudaimonist in a sense at least analogous to Aristotle’s, is fully coherent. Eckhart, I will argue, does not think so.

With respect to virtuous action, we may note, first, that Thomas’s analysis of human action is more detailed and developed than Aristotle’s, but certainly at least as teleological. At the very beginning of the ‘treatise of human acts’ (6–21) Aquinas writes:

[E]very agent or thing moved acts or is moved for an end . . . ; those things which have a knowledge of the end [such as human beings] are said to move themselves because there is in them a principle by which they not only act but also act for an end. And consequently, since both are from an intrinsic principle, to wit, that they act and that they act for an end, the movements of such things are said to be voluntary. (6, 1, resp.)

The same focus on the end or goal of actions is at the heart of Thomas’s conception of their moral goodness and badness:

Now just as the being of a thing depends on the agent and the form, so the goodness of a thing depends on its end . . . human actions and other things, the goodness of which depends on something else, have a measure of goodness from the end on which they depend. (18, 1, resp.)

The “something else” on which “the goodness” of human actions depends is the will, with its orientation to the end. For an action to be morally good, the will must be intent on the right goal, a basically Aristotelian view. However, Thomas’s account of the virtues goes far beyond that of his classical predecessor.

---

<sup>9</sup>“Aquinas holds to an *eudaimonistic* ‘moral point of view’ . . .,” Denis Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), p. 53. Also: “St. Thomas adopted a similar [i.e., to Aristotle’s] eudaemonological (sic) and teleological standpoint . . .,” Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 2, Mediaeval Philosophy, Part II* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962), p. 119.

Measured simply by the sheer volume of the attention given to the virtues in his *Summa*, Thomas is clearly a virtue-ethicist. But as we saw, he characterizes Aristotle's version of eudaimonia as imperfect: a life of the virtues cannot satisfy our deepest longing. Are we, then, what Sartre called "a useless passion," yearning for something we cannot attain?<sup>10</sup> Thomas of course thinks not. The Christian promise that the just will see God "face to face" [I Corinthians, 13:12] must imply that our nature can be transformed so as to become capable of this Beatific Vision. In the process of this transformation we receive the divine gift of grace in the form of supernatural ("theological") virtues that enable us to act meritoriously.<sup>11</sup> The gist of his view on grace can be put this way: for us to attain the completion we long for in the Beatific Vision, we require God's supernatural assistance in the form both of a permanent alteration or restoration of our nature (sanctifying grace), and of ongoing assistance in the formation of the will and the execution of actions (actual grace).

Let us return to the dilemma mentioned above. Thomas's eudaimonism seems marked by a kind of instrumentalism: the goal of the Beatific Vision is extrinsic to, and a reward for, the virtuous life. Is he then "an egoistic rationalist," someone for whom the point of virtuous behavior is to be rewarded for it?<sup>12</sup> A charge of egoism cannot really touch Aristotle, if we understand egoism to be in tension with virtuous living. For Aristotle, the virtuous life is in fact the one most suited to the real interests of the individual, so justice for example cannot truly conflict with genuine self-interest. But the plausibility of this claim is rooted in Aristotle's view that living virtuously is itself the perfection of our nature: instrumentalism has no toe-hold here. Not entirely so, for Thomas; on his view the perfection of our nature is two-fold. Something like Aristotle's view may be right at the inferior "natural" level, but our inborn teleology points beyond the sphere of nature: "Our heart is restless until it rests in You," according to the famous prayer of Augustine (*Confessions*, 1, 1). We want more.

But neither is it quite right to call Thomas an egoist. For Aquinas, the principal form grace takes in us is charity, the greatest of the theological virtues. Thomas means by charity no mere disposition to alms-giving and the like, but nothing less than a form of the love with which God

---

<sup>10</sup>The phrase appears in part 4, chapter 1 of *Being and Nothingness*, 1943.

<sup>11</sup>Aquinas's teachings on the topic of grace "are complex and difficult to follow," and their development over the course of his mature years reflects "his growing pessimism over humanity's natural faculties," according to Alister McGrath, *Justitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd edition, 2005), p. 136. I restrict myself here to Thomas's mature view in the *Summa*.

<sup>12</sup>I borrow the phrase (in a slightly altered sense) from Scott MacDonald, "Egoistic Rationalism: Aquinas's Basis for Christian Morality," in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Michael D. Beaty (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 327–354. Put perhaps over simply, MacDonald's view is that for Thomas human beings naturally seek their own complete good, and they do so by means of the exercise of intellect and will. A critique of this position can be found in chapter 3 of Thomas Osborne, *Love of Self and Love of God in Thirteenth-Century Ethics* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

loves Himself, i.e., a love of God for God's own perfect goodness, a love beyond ordinary human ability and—very importantly—*not* self-serving. As Brian Davies puts it, "by charity we share in what God is from eternity insofar as we love God in the way God loves God . . . it is the presence [in us] of the Holy Spirit because it is caused by the Holy Spirit, who thereby produces in us what love is in God."<sup>13</sup> Charity enables us to act in selfless ways that are by definition done for the love of God, not for the sake of a reward, though such acts merit the Beatific Vision.

The Christian revelation points to an avenue that leads to a perfect beatitude undreamt of by the ancients: God offers to make us *deiform*, "participants in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:3 f.). As a result those who are saved can, *in patria*, enjoy a knowledge of the divine essence, while in this life (*in via*) God's grace blesses them with faith, hope and charity, each of which gives a foretaste of the joys of heaven. Indeed, these three "theological virtues" so transform the lives of the faithful that even those virtues praised by the ancients are made new, inspiring just or courageous actions that are now performed from charity, i.e., from the love of God for God's own sake. This, then, is the best life possible for human beings *in via*, a life in which we perform virtuous and meritorious deeds out of charity.

Such a life can hardly be called egoism. But has Thomas then, in describing the graced lives of the truly faithful, thereby avoided ethical instrumentalism altogether? Is his system a variant on that of Aristotle, who as we saw thought of virtuous behavior as done for its own sake and for the sake of happiness? Can we read him as saying that an action is meritorious (and that God rewards that action in the Beatific Vision), while at the same time the agent does not undertake it as a *means* to this end? Indeed, could we not say the action is meritorious precisely *because* it is not intended as a means to any further end?<sup>14</sup>

Although Thomas sometimes seems to suggest such a non-instrumental view of the theologically virtuous life, it is not his main point. In the Question on the theological virtues (62) he claims they "direct man to supernatural happiness *in the same way* as by the natural inclination man is directed to his connatural end." In particular, by hope "*the will is directed to this [supernatural] end . . . as something attainable*" (62, 3, resp., emphases added). In this life, we believe by faith in the possibility of the Beatific Vision; we are inspired by grace to *hope* for it; by grace we perform actions meritorious of it (109, 5, ad 1); while by charity, i.e., the divine love itself in us through grace, we enjoy a certain anticipation of the union we hope for in the life to come. In other words, we are *meant to aspire to* the Beatific Vision, an aspiration which we know can only be fulfilled as a reward for our merits.

My point can be made in another way, i.e., by asking, is this life of the theological virtues itself our *beatitudo*, our happiness? It is clearly the best we can hope for in this life, and so we must think of it as a certain level of happiness. But surely a Thomist Christian should be disappointed if

<sup>13</sup>Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 288–289.

<sup>14</sup>I am indebted for this important question to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.

this were “all” she were to attain. For although her Christian life is the best one possible *in via*, and is to an extent chosen for its own sake, she certainly also wants above all the Beatific Vision: *it* represents her deepest desire. The theological virtues, for all Thomas’s talk of “for their own sake,” are essentially aimed at attaining a Good beyond themselves, an end state which Thomas repeatedly speaks of as a “reward.”<sup>15</sup> Such an ethic, while not egoistic, is nonetheless clearly consequentialist. But this creates an unavoidable, and perhaps untenable, tension. The Christian is in effect told by Thomas that, God willing, her deepest desire will be fulfilled, but only if she succeeds in both letting and *not* letting it motivate her actions.

On reflection, one might wonder if anything besides *some* kind of consequentialism is possible for a medieval Christian moral philosopher within the broadly eudaimonistic framework. Duns Scotus, as mentioned earlier, anticipated more modern developments by rejecting (or curtailing) eudaimonism itself. But Meister Eckhart did not. Yet he speaks of “living without why.” What could that mean? Let us turn now to see.

### III.

Thus far we have seen some important similarities and differences between the virtue-ethical systems of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Each seeks to be a eudaimonist, viewing the goal of happiness as something to be achieved through a process of acquiring (or otherwise coming to possess) various virtues; and each thinks of action, conceived in means-end terms, as occupying a crucial place in the quest for the happy life. The principal difference between them, we saw, lies in their respective conceptions of the virtues (what they are, how we come to have them), and their place in the happy life. For Aristotle, they are excellences of mind and character acquired by education and effort, and the virtuous life constitutes eudaimonia; while for Thomas even a life of the divinely infused virtues is inferior to, and preparatory for, the reward of bliss that awaits the just in Heaven. In Meister Eckhart we encounter a third, and importantly different, version of virtue-eudaimonism.

Eckhart von Hochheim, born in Thuringia around 1260 when Thomas was coming into his prime, became an eminent philosopher/theologian and one of Aquinas’s successors on the Dominican chair for theology at the University of Paris. He was accorded the unusual honor of appointment to this rotating chair twice (1302–1303 and 1311–1313). In between he held important administrative posts in his order. After completing his second professorship, Eckhart was given special pastoral assignments by his superiors that called for much vernacular preaching in the Rhineland.

---

<sup>15</sup>As Joseph Wawrykow says, “When speaking of merit [in Question 114] Thomas repeatedly refers to the life of the Christian as a ‘journey’ or ‘movement.’ The basic idea here is that the Christian life is a journey in which one who is in grace moves further away from sin and draws nearer to God through the good actions/merits one performs. Eventually the Christian will attain in this way *the ultimate destination of this journey, God Himself.*” In *God’s Grace and Human Action* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 267, n. 13, emphasis added.

As one of the first to put philosophical and theological terminology into Middle High German, he became a celebrated, indeed notorious figure in the pulpit. In the religious turbulence of the early fourteenth century he was eventually accused of heresy and tried before the Inquisition. In 1329 Pope John XXII, who had canonized Thomas Aquinas a few years before, condemned as heretical or misleading twenty-eight propositions from Eckhart's writings, a substantial number of which expressed his criticisms of aspects of teleological ethics.<sup>16</sup>

Although generally regarded as a Neoplatonist on whom the works of Augustine had an enormous impact, "there is," as Bernard McGinn has pointed out, "no philosopher [Eckhart] knew better or cited more often than Aristotle."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he quotes St. Thomas hundreds of times, especially in his Latin writings. And Eckhart repeatedly uses the standard Aristotelian framework of final causality, often as a source of comparisons between the workings of nature and the human quest for happiness. A typical example is the opening paragraph of his Latin *Commentary* on John 1, 43, *Sequere me* ("Follow me"):

First of all one must know that through the creation God says and proclaims, advises and orders all creatures—precisely by creating them—to follow Him, the First Cause of their entire being, to orient themselves to Him, to return to Him and hurry to Him according to the Scripture: "To the place from which the waters flow they shall return" [*Ecclesiastes*, I, 7]. This is why the creature by its nature loves God, indeed more than itself.<sup>18</sup>

But if "all creatures" are meant to "orient themselves" to God, "to return to Him and hurry to Him," it is surprising that Eckhart seems to criticize teleological conceptions of the good life, especially as the official Dominican theologian, Aquinas, had so extensively and authoritatively formulated one such conception during Eckhart's own lifetime. Eckhart's flat and repeated rejection of an intuitively plausible approach to such a centrally important issue, namely how we should live, is unusual and surprising.<sup>19</sup> His rejection is furthermore often couched in memorable

---

<sup>16</sup>The Papal Bull *In agro dominico* of March 27, 1329 is available in English in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. and intro. E. Colledge, O.S.A. and B. McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). Articles 7 through 22 deal with Eckhart's views on how we should live. The Bull denounces Eckhart in harsh terms. But in 1985 Pope John Paul II, himself a philosopher, spoke approvingly of Eckhart's central teachings.

<sup>17</sup>Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), p. 168.

<sup>18</sup>Meister Eckhart, *Lateinische Werke* (hereafter *LW*—the German works, *Deutsche Werke*, are cited as *DW*—Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1936—), vol. 3, p. 189. Further references are given in brackets in the text. The English translations are, unless otherwise noted, from M. O'C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart: Sermons and Treatises*, 3 volumes (Shaftsbury [Dorset]: Element Books, 1979, 1981, 1987).

<sup>19</sup>Eckhart's critique, in both German and Latin works, of teleological eudaimonism is never explicitly stated as a criticism of Thomas or Aristotle. He comes close

(and what seems deliberately provocative) imagery — at one point he calls those who think of salvation in teleological terms *esel* (“asses”).

We begin, as before, with the central question of the goal of life. Eckhart could say with Aristotle that we want to be happy, that our happiness is a function of our nature, and that we are initially *de facto* ignorant of what it consists in. He agrees too that its attainment requires effort on our part. So Eckhart’s ethic, as with Aristotle and Thomas, is broadly teleological, that is, it aims to discover, describe, and advocate a process of human development toward the goal of life. It is also a virtue ethic, since justice and the like play a central role. But he gives all these ideas a radical twist. In vernacular sermon 1, *Jesus intravit in templum* (“Jesus entered the Temple,” DW 1, 4 ff.), Eckhart preaches on the Gospel text (Matthew 21:12) which tells of Jesus driving the merchants from the temple. After identifying, in typically allegorical fashion,<sup>20</sup> the temple with the (highest part of the) soul, Eckhart asks what the Evangelist meant by the merchants in the temple/soul. He answers that the merchants (and he explicitly says he means here “none but good people”) are those whose inclination it is to

do good works to the glory of God, such as fasts, vigils, prayers and the rest, all kinds of good works, but [to] do them in order that our Lord may give them something in return, or that God may do something they wish for—all these are merchants. That is plain to see, for they want to give one thing in exchange for another, and so to barter with our Lord. (p. 7)

Eckhart’s counterpart to the “spiritual merchant”<sup>21</sup> is the “just person” (*der gerechte*, in his Middle High German). In sermon 6, *Iusti vivent in aeternum* (“The just shall live forever,” DW 1, 99 ff.), Eckhart explains that the just person is one “who gives to God His due, and to the saints and angels theirs, and to his fellow man what is his.” It is in the first of these that the contrast to the merchant most strikingly emerges:

God’s due is honor. Who are they who honor God? Those who have gone completely out of themselves and seek not their own in anything at all, whatever it may be, whether great or small; who pay special heed to nothing anywhere, neither above nor below nor next to nor on themselves; who aim not at possessions or honors or com-

---

to doing so, however, in German sermon 101, where he declares the superiority of complete detachment (“to keep still and silent . . . and let God speak and work”) to a more active, one could say Aristotelian or Thomist, form of contemplation (“to do something . . . to imagine and think about God”). DW 4, vol. 1, p. 354; Walshe, vol. 1, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup>I have discussed Eckhart’s hermeneutical approach in “*Applicatio* and *Explicatio* in Gadamer and Eckhart,” in *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup>Eckhart appears to have principally in mind those monks, nuns, and others who think that their *ascetic practices* will assure salvation for themselves.

fort or pleasure or utility or inwardness or holiness or reward or heaven; and who have renounced all of this, all that is theirs. From such people God has honor, and they honor God in the proper sense and give Him his due. (p. 100, emphasis added)

Again, in sermon 41, *Qui sequitur justitiam* ("They who pursue justice," DW 2), Eckhart says:

[The just man] wants and seeks nothing, for he knows no why. He acts without a why just in the same way as God does; and just as life lives for its own sake and seeks no why for the sake of which it lives, so too the just man knows no why for the sake of which he would do something. (pp. 288–289)

Again, we are told in sermon 6 that the truly just differ from those who merely "want what God wants . . . but [who] if they should fall sick, would wish it were God's will that they should be better;" by contrast, "the just have no will at all: whatever God wills, it is all one to them, however great the hardship" (p. 102, emphasis added). Such people "are so set on justice that if God were not just they would not care a bean for God" (p. 103); further, "whoever understands about the just man and justice understands all that I am saying" (p. 105). What does all this mean?

For Aristotle, the just or virtuous life is itself (a central aspect of) happiness, so in a sense he too could say, "The just man wants and seeks nothing [other than justice], he knows no why" in acting virtuously. For Thomas, on the other hand, although the just person does what is just for its own sake, such behavior does not constitute complete happiness; at best it may merit it. Thus, in his moral theology a door is (perhaps inadvertently) opened to spiritual or ethical mercantilism, to virtuous behavior as a means of barter. And it is this door that Eckhart means to close, even though such behavior was (and still is) regularly encouraged by the Church. What does Eckhart think is lacking in behavior that, to ordinary common sense, not to mention the Church hierarchy, seems commendable? And why does he dwell on "going out of oneself," elsewhere identified as detachment (*abegescheidenheit*), of which he says in the treatise "On Detachment" that it "surpasses all things, for all virtues have some regard to creatures, but detachment is free of all creatures" (DW 5, p. 405)?

For Eckhart, what is wrong with the merchant mentality in the search for eudaimonia is that merchants have made the most fundamental of mistakes, i.e., who—or what—God is, and thus what they are themselves: knowledge of these things is essential if one is to know what eudaimonia consists in. In his Latin *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Eckhart sees in the Gospel's opening passage, "*In principio erat verbum . . .*," (usually rendered: "In the beginning was the Word . . .") a confirmation of his radical Parisian thesis of 1302: *Deus est intelligere*, ("God is understanding/thinking"—as opposed to: being, as Thomas taught—LW 5, p. 40). "*In principio erat verbum*" he renders as: the Word was in the Principle (or Source), i.e., in God. A word (*verbum*, *logos*) presupposes a mind, and a mind is constituted by, i.e., is nothing but, its thinking (knowing,

understanding).<sup>22</sup> Trading on the other meaning of *logos*, i.e., idea, Eckhart also takes the phrase as declaring the priority of the idea (or form) over its *exempla*: the idea (or form) that defines the *exempla* is found first and foremost “in the principle,” the pure Idea. Further, the form or idea in the *exemplum* is the *same* (only more eminently) in the principle as in the *exemplum* or product (also called “son,” i.e., “offspring,” a locution Eckhart particularly likes, and which implies that the principle is “father”). In his doctrine of the transcendental perfections (being, unity, truth, goodness, but sometimes also wisdom and justice) Eckhart can thus identify the perfections with God, as God’s “proper attributes” (*propria*)—he says, for instance, *esse est deus*, i.e., being is most truly said of God, not of creatures.<sup>23</sup> He can also claim that their manifestations, e.g., a just person (*justus*), are not distinct from Justice itself, *insofar as (inquantum) s/he is just*: the justice that such a person manifests is the same justice that itself is God. What Eckhart is saying here about goodness itself and justice itself is part of his understanding of analogy: a perfection such as goodness is properly present only in God, while the goodness of the good person is ‘adopted’; goodness itself is the original (or Principle), and the adopted goodness manifested in the person, character, or behavior of the good person is an image or offspring of it. This is not to identify the concrete, individual just person with God, which would make no sense; but it does imply that, were this person to detach from her particularities (her *propria* or individual properties) and recognize as her true reality what she shares with the Principle, she would *become*, to that extent, “God’s Offspring,” and hence indistinct from God, her Source.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the just person, insofar as she is just, “acts without a why in the same way as God does,” since she is in this way not distinct from God. But the spiritual merchant, who acts *for* a why, *ipso facto* fails to be just, and does not give God His due. Nor does the merchant give himself his own due, since he mistakenly pins his hopes of salvation on his own particular (teleologically oriented) efforts, whereas in fact these directly impede his progress, since they reinforce the very thing that separates us from God, our belief in our own metaphysical autonomy as the spatio-temporal individuals we take ourselves to be. In reality, whether we realize it or not, we are literally nothing without God, and as human beings are one with God in “the ground of the soul.” Thus to act out of this truest self is *eo ipso* to do God’s will, not our own, and to act justly. God never acts as a merchant,

<sup>22</sup>Eckhart takes his inspiration here from Aristotle, who wrote of the mind that “it is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing” (*De Anima* 429a24). Thus, for Eckhart, it is *above*, prior to, being.

<sup>23</sup>“Being is God” is the first proposition in the *General Prologue to the Tripartite Work*, LW 1, p. 156. In the *Commentary on John* Eckhart remarks that being, one, true and good are God’s “domestic servants,” whereas for creatures these perfections are “guests and foreigners.” LW 3, pp. 83–84.

<sup>24</sup>This doctrine of the transcendentals is also spelled out, with a strong focus on the moral virtues (goodness, justice), in the mature German treatise *Liber ‘Benedictus’* where Eckhart says, e.g., “Goodness begets itself and all that it is in the good man, and the good man receives all his being, knowledge, love and energy from the heart and inmost depth of goodness, and from that alone. The good man and goodness are nothing but one goodness . . .” DW 5, p. 9.

seeking something further—for what could God lack? “He is perfectly free in His acts, which he does out of true love. So too does a person who is one with God: she is perfectly free in her acts, she does them for love, without ‘why’—solely to glorify God and not seeking her own therein, and God works in her” (*DW* 1, p. 9).

In our everyday lives, we are (and are surrounded by) persons who are at best intermittently good and just. If manifesting these characteristics is, or is connected, somehow with the goal of life, what does it take to become and to be good (just, wise, etc.) as God is? On Eckhart’s view, this is not self-evident, though he thinks the truth of it was discovered by some of the ancient pagan philosophers and is also revealed in Scripture (for those who have the art to read it properly). The key lies in a practice foreign to Aristotle. Indeed, the extent of Eckhart’s departure from Aristotelianism shows itself in the supreme value he puts on detachment (sometimes called humility or obedience).<sup>25</sup> For Eckhart detachment, or “turning decisively to God,” is a propaedeutic to genuine virtue. For it is only by taking leave of our attachment to a false conception of ourselves that we are able to live the genuine life of happiness and virtue. Hence the crucial step in the quest for eudaimonia is less about doing (as in Aristotle and Aquinas) than *undoing*.

Detachment is an acknowledgement that—and this is the teleological element in Eckhart’s conception of the good life—we can (and must) “go out” of our everyday way of thinking, turn away from creaturely multiplicity in order to achieve or accept our fulfillment. According to Genesis I, 26, we humans alone were created “in God’s own image and likeness.” Since it is God’s nature to be *incomparable* (that is, “like to nothing else”) and free, we too must become “like to nothing” and “free” by detaching our minds from identification with our finite particularities, what Eckhart repeatedly calls our *eigenschaften*, literally “properties” (*propria*), our personal characteristics and rootedness in the particularities of time and space.<sup>26</sup> For Eckhart, human nature in its truth is what one might call a form of *emptiness*, an image of the Divine Emptiness (as *intelligere*), and the attempt to conform one’s actual self to one’s essential nature is the crucial first step on the road to fulfillment.<sup>27</sup> For, “Whenever a man in obedience

---

<sup>25</sup>Eckhart in various places gives a variety of names to the “ground-act” in which one turns decisively toward God, e.g., calling it “humility” (in German sermons 14, 15, 16b, 54a, 55), “obedience” in the *Talks of Instruction*, etc. Cf. Theo Kobusch, “Mystik als Metaphysik des moralischen Seins,” in *Abendländische Mystik im Mittelalter: Symposium Kloster Engelberg 1984*, ed. Kurt Ruh (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1986, hereafter *Mystik*), p. 53.

<sup>26</sup>“God’s being is like nothing; in it is neither image nor form” (*DW* 1, p. 107). Eckhart, unlike Thomas, agrees with Moses Maimonides and various Neoplatonists that no positive assertions at all can be made of God. He speaks instead, in his commentary on Exodus, of the *negatio negationis* as the “purest and fullest affirmation” (*LW* 2, p. 77, line 11). The matter is discussed in Burkhard Mojsisch, *Meister Eckhart: Analogy, Univocity, and Unity*, hereafter *Analogy*, trans., preface and appendix by Orrin F. Summerell (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2001), chap. 5.

<sup>27</sup>Alessandra Beccarisi stresses this developmental aspect of Eckhart’s ethics in her commentary on sermon 1. Eckhart calls to our attention “the intellectual

goes out of his own and gives up what is his, in the same moment God must go in there."<sup>28</sup>

If indeed "God and I are one," in Eckhart's special sense (a thesis never espoused by Aquinas, much less Aristotle), then the realization of this unity is of the highest importance. According to Dietmar Mieth, Eckhart teaches that "one should not locate happiness in the beatific vision, but rather in the unity [with God] in being" itself.<sup>29</sup> But whether we recognize it or not, this unity is already ours. Of course since, as Eckhart wrote, "being is God," there is no question of any ontological separation from our Source. But as rational beings, the crucial thing for us is the consciousness of this unity, an awareness that need not involve any visionary experience, but which is the core of what is often (and perhaps misleadingly) called Eckhart's "mysticism." In any event, achieving this awareness is the decisive step toward our eudaimonia, and it is taken by changing our minds through detachment.

But eudaimonia does not end with the fact, or even the blissful realization, of this oneness. As the highest virtues—goodness, justice, wisdom—are identified as transcendental realities with God,<sup>30</sup> the newly aware person recognizes that his unity with God amounts to a unity with these virtues themselves. As Rolf Schönberger puts it, "The unity of man with God is thus an ontological fact and at the same time a norm. Now it is first and foremost from this fact that the peculiar structure of what one calls 'mystical ethics' results . . . the 'should' [of ethics] follows not only from man's goal-determined being,"<sup>31</sup> that is, from his final cause (as in Aristotle), but also and especially from his inner nature or *formal* cause, which is his emptiness and freedom as the image of God. Thus Schönberger can speak of "Eckhart's ontologizing of ethics."<sup>32</sup>

---

experience of a person who has understood the nothingness of his creaturely dimension, and who seeks for his being a firmer ground, which of course can be found in none of the creaturely dimensions. . . . And here this person comes to the following conclusion: he understands that God is the ground, the substance, and being of his own soul. . . . Man receives his entire being from God alone, but not as being-for-itself or as being that belongs to itself, but as being-from-God." "Zu Predigt I: *Intravit Jesus in templum*," in *Lectura Eckhardi II. Predigten Meister Eckharts von Fachgelehrten gelesen und gedeutet*, ed. Georg Steer and Lorin Sturlese (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 2003, hereafter *Lectura II*), pp. 19–20.

<sup>28</sup>*The Talks of Instruction*, DW 5, p. 187.

<sup>29</sup>In "zu Predigt 86: *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum*," in *Lectura II*, p. 165. Mieth is referring to the German treatise, *The Nobleman*, DW 5, p. 117, lines 19–21, where Eckhart writes: "So too, I say, the nobleman takes and draws his entire being, his life, and his happiness simply from God alone, with God, and in God, and not from knowing-God, or the vision of God, or loving-God and the like."

<sup>30</sup>"It has been written that a virtue is no virtue unless it comes from God or through God: one of these things must always be. If it were otherwise, it would not be a virtue; for whatever one seeks without God is too small. Virtue is God or without mediation in God." (Sermon 41, DW 2, p. 296)

<sup>31</sup>Rolf Schönberger, "*Secundum rationem esse*: Zur Ontologisierung der Ethik bei Meister Eckhart," in *OIKEIΩΣΙΣ: Festschrift für Robert Spaemann*, ed. Reinhard Löw, (*Acta Humaniora*, Weinheim: VCH, 1987), p. 262, hereafter *Festschrift*.

<sup>32</sup>A clear statement of this ontologizing is Eckhart's "virtue is God," (see note 30).

Since Eckhart's focus on the realization of our ultimate unity with God as our blessedness is intimately connected with his unusual approach to the virtues, and since these two together explain his initially baffling injunction to "live without why," I proceed next to his treatment of virtue. In a passage from his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* Eckhart describes goodness as a state of being:

In every good work there are two things to consider, the inner and the outer act. The former is in the soul, in the will, and it is this that is truly praiseworthy, meritorious and divine, and God brings it about in us . . . this is the act of virtue, which makes both the person who has it and also the external act good. . . . The inner act, which is divine, can be neither interrupted nor hindered; it is constantly at work, neither sleeping nor slumbering, but watching over the person who possesses it. (LW 3, pp. 510–511)

He then proceeds to give as "an appropriate example" of the "inner act" the inclination of a stone to fall, i.e., a *formal* cause.<sup>33</sup> Just as a stone's natural heaviness can be impeded by "hindrance" and by what Aristotle called "violent motion," so too our "God-formedness" can be impeded, violated when we allow ourselves to be distracted by the particularities of life and our own finite, self-centered purposes, what Eckhart sums up laconically as "*hoc et hoc*." But when we "go out" of our (finite) selves, then, as Eckhart puts it, "God must go in there." But with the entrance of God into the soul, the soul "becomes by grace of adoption what the Son is by nature" (LW 3, p. 90). Whereupon, in Eckhart's most famous image, "The Father bears His Son in the inmost source," that is, in the shared ground of both God and the soul; "out of that the Holy Spirit blossoms forth, and then there arises in God a will that belongs to the soul" (5b, DW 1, pp. 93f.). This "birth of God's Son in the soul" thus transforms the finite, historical individual's self-awareness to become that of an image of the divine and thus a fountain of virtue who, like God, performs just/good/wise deeds simply because they are just/good/wise. Virtuous acts "pour forth" from such an individual with no further goal or purpose in mind. Their role in the drama of salvation is never that of means to the end (a role they play, in part, in Thomas), nor that of constituting the goal (Aristotle), but are rather a manifestation of the goal's already having been attained.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Thomas, Eckhart does not lay much stress on the distinction between "infused" and "acquired" virtues: *all* genuine virtues are really in God, and in us only by grace (in this they differ from our very being only in that they require that we "go out of our creatureliness," i.e., detach).<sup>35</sup> He says in his *Sermons and Lectures on Ecclesiasticus*:

---

<sup>33</sup>In the Aristotelian physics of that time gravity was seen as an intrinsic property of objects, essential to their corporeality.

<sup>34</sup>"In place of a guarantee [of salvation] via works, we have in them the expression of the Guarantor and of what has been guaranteed [i.e., salvation]: the imprinted seal." Mieth, in *Lectura II*, p. 173.

<sup>35</sup>Eckhart's treatment of grace with respect to virtue has thus far received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

[B]eing and every perfection, particularly the general ones such as being, oneness, truth, goodness, light, justice and the like are said analogously of God and creatures. From this it follows that goodness, justice, and the like [in creatures] have their goodness entirely from a being outside of themselves, that is, God, to which they stand in an analogous relationship. (*LW 2*, p. 281)

And a few pages earlier:

Every finite being . . . has its being not from itself, but from a superior being for which it thirsts, hungers, and longs. . . . Thus it thirsts for the presence of the superior, and one can more properly say that it continually receives its being than that it has it as its own fixed or even partially fixed possession. (*LW 2*, p. 274)

From the vantage-point of one's own finite being, one can mistakenly think one has in oneself a firm and fixed just character, just as one is tempted to think of oneself as an autonomous substance in one's own right.<sup>36</sup> What is at first glance puzzling is that Eckhart seems to be denying that the just person really is just, as we usually understand this in terms of a habit (acquired or infused). He is aware of this problem, and seeks to allay the worry:

What we want to say is that the virtues—justice and the like—are something more like gradually proceeding conformations than something impressed and remaining firmly rooted in the virtuous person. They are in a constant becoming, like the luster of light in its medium and the image in a mirror. (*Commentary on the Book of Wisdom, LW 2*, p. 368)

The metaphor of the "image" is a particular favorite with Eckhart, since the image is totally dependent for its being on the item imaged.

The person who has "gone out of herself" has given up the notion that her eudaimonia is a matter of fulfilling her particular purposes, be they banal and everyday or sublime and far-reaching. But it would be mistaken to think that she is meant to withdraw into quietism or non-action. We shall look more closely in a moment at the unusual notion of living and acting "without why," but for now we should note that to the extent she is unified with justice (for example), the just person acts justly, even as the released stone falls because of its "inner act." Paradoxical as it may sound, just (and good and wise) action becomes natural to such a person precisely in her state of detachment. Eckhart's "mysticism" has no more to do with avoiding the world than with "mystical experiences," but it has

---

<sup>36</sup>Both assumptions would, incidentally, be true on Thomas's understanding of analogy, according to which it is equally true to say that God is and that I am, though the verb 'to be' is used analogously, not univocally, in the two cases. Cf., e.g., *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 13, 5; whereas Eckhart says that "God alone properly speaking exists and is called being, one, true and good," *Tabula Prologorum, LW 1*, p. 132.

much to do with the realization of one's unity with God and its results in action: as Mieth notes, Eckhart "anticipated the idea of the just person as an *in actione contemplativus*."<sup>37</sup>

Mieth has written extensively on the active aspect of Eckhart's thought.<sup>38</sup> He points out that Eckhart has given us two examples of such "active contemplatives." One was Martha (of the Gospel story of Martha and Mary, Luke 10, 38–42), the other, St. Elisabeth of Hungary. Eckhart could say of each that she was "so well grounded in her essence that her activity was no hindrance to her." Of Elisabeth he tells his audience:

when her outward comforts failed her, she fled to Him to whom all creatures flee, setting at naught the world and self. In that way she transcended self and scorned the scorn of men, so that it did not touch her and she lost none of her perfection. Her desire was to wash and tend sick and filthy people with a pure heart.<sup>39</sup>

Eckhart seems to have wanted, here and in the very first sermon (*DW* 1, p. 1) cited above, to counter certain forms of ascetic spiritual practice. When Elisabeth wanted to renounce her title and her wealth, she was prevented, but these worldly advantages (a kind of particularity or "*hoc et hoc*" for Eckhart) meant nothing to her and so she could use them without attachment in the cause of justice and compassion. In sermon 86 it is not Mary, the sister who famously sits at the feet of Jesus to absorb everything he says, but rather Martha, who busily tends to the needs of the guest and the household, who exemplifies "groundedness in the essence," and from that ground does her good works.

Let us turn now to the notion of action itself in order to consider Eckhart's striking injunction to "live without why." How is that possible if meaningful action can, for the most part, only be conceived in teleological, that is, means-end, terms? When we ask an agent why she did this or that, we often expect to be told her goal or intention in what she did. And yet Eckhart says, in sermon 5b: "If you were to ask a genuine man who acted from his own ground, 'Why do you act?' if he were to answer properly he would simply say, 'I act because I act.'" But in real life such an answer would likely be regarded as either disingenuous or a rebuff to the questioner. Could Eckhart seriously be proposing that we eliminate the teleological framework altogether?

---

<sup>37</sup>In *Lectura II*, p. 164. The Latin epithet comes from Jerónimo Nadal, a sixteenth century Jesuit who advocated being contemplative in prayer and *likewise in action*.

<sup>38</sup>In addition to the works cited directly in this essay, see also his *Die Einheit von vita activa und vita contemplativa in den deutschen Predigten und Traktaten Meister Eckharts und bei Johannes Tauler* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1969).

<sup>39</sup>The first quoted sentence is from Sermon 86 (*DW* 3, p. 491). The sermon treats of Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary, in which Eckhart portrays the "contemplatively active" Martha as the one who deserves the highest praise; the second citation is from Sermon 32 on St. Elisabeth (*DW* 2, p. 147), a royal woman of the 13th c. who was devoted to the poor and the sick, and became their patroness.

No, I think not. Take again the example of the stone, whose inner inclination is realized by falling in the appropriate circumstances. So too the good/just/wise person's inclinations are realized, as Kobusch says, in "the concrete moral action," which "is characterized by the fact that it has its meaning in itself. Just as God performs all his works 'without a why,' and life is lived for its own sake, without needing to seek for a purpose outside of itself, so too the moral person *as such* acts 'without a why,' because he regards his activity as meaningful and purposeful in itself, an effect of the birth of the Son in the person."<sup>40</sup> Eckhart's "ontologization" of ethics, his stress on what we are *and thus* how we should act, forces us to distinguish between the inner act and the outer act: if an agent has "gone out" of her everyday self and recognized her true identity in the divine Source, then her 'inner act' has become justice, while her outer act is its concretization in given empirical circumstances, e.g., St. Elisabeth's attending to the needs of a particular poor person. For Eckhart, what is moral *per se* about her action is the inner act; indeed, the same outer act (say, alms-giving) could be performed by a "spiritual merchant," but since it would not be performed for its own sake, i.e., from justice, it would not express a virtue.

I want to suggest that what Eckhart means by the "inner act" of the just person, in spite of the associations of the term in modern philosophy, is not the agent's *intention*. Indeed, the intention is an integral part of the outer act; it makes the outer act the spatio-temporal particular that it is, e.g., taking care of a sick person. Eckhart's "inner act," by contrast, is (part of) the agent's nature, as seen in the example of the stone and its inclination to fall. Our human nature "by adoption" (i.e., by grace) is an image or offspring of the divine nature. It hence can express itself outwardly only in acts of virtue, that is, acts of justice, goodness, etc., marked by free choice, performed for their own sake, and proceeding from internal dispositions. For Aristotle these are fixed habits, but for Eckhart they "are something more like gradually proceeding conformations" of the individual to the divine source. This line of thought is powerfully developed in a lengthy passage in the *Liber 'Benedictus,'* where Eckhart says in part, "We have a clear illustration of this teaching [on inner and outer work] in a stone. . . . In the same way I say that virtue has an inner work: a will and tendency toward all good and a flight from and repugnance to all that is bad, evil and incompatible with God and goodness."<sup>41</sup>

In the (quasi-)Aristotelian framework of thought common to both Thomas Aquinas and Eckhart, the virtues and the virtuous actions to which they give rise play a central role. Indeed, for Aristotle they are the very essence of happiness, and it is fundamental to his conception of virtuous action *qua* virtuous that it is performed for its own sake. Aquinas, as we saw, argues that a life of virtuous behavior for its own sake is not our true happiness; virtuous behavior remains central, but now is largely a means to the end, the Beatific Vision.

---

<sup>40</sup>Kobusch, *Mystik*, p. 58.

<sup>41</sup>DW 5, p. 39. The entire long passage runs from page 38, line 3 to page 42, line 20.

Eckhart, for all his distance from Aristotle on the question of the nature of our blessedness, avoids Aquinas's uncoupling of virtuous action from our goal. Indeed, his idea that the just person *qua* just acts justly for its own sake, and not for some goal distinct from it, is Aristotelian through and through. So another way to express the idea of "living without why" would be to say: "live virtuously." That is, be just, good, wise, temperate, courageous, etc., without thought of reward: do not be a merchant. A third way to put Eckhart's point might be this: since on his view of analogy our very being is adopted from the divine being, and since the human mode of being is to live and live rationally, it follows that for us to "live genuinely" is to live a life of the virtues, that is, to live without why.

What then could the "genuine man" mean when he says "I act because I act"? Note, first, that this curt answer is somewhat misleading. Recall what Eckhart says of the just person in Sermon 6: "The just are so set on justice that if God were not just, they would not care a bean for God." The motivation of the "genuine man" does have content, but it comes from the "inner act," and not from anything whatsoever considered to be outside him:

one should not work for any 'why,' neither for God nor one's honor nor for anything at all that is outside of oneself, but only for that which is one's own being and one's own life within oneself. (Ibid., p. 113)

Kurt Flasch puts it this way: "The just person, insofar as he is just, is justice; next to that, heaven and earth, purgatory and hell count for nothing. This leads to the elimination of the *reward-motive* and every *means-end construction of life*. Life is its own goal. The just person lives in justice; he lives not to do the will of God and thereby attain heaven. God only interests him insofar as God is justice itself."<sup>42</sup> Thus, in saying "I act because I act," the "genuine man" means "I, the just person, act thus because justice, with which I am one, acts through me; and justice—which is my motive—has no goal outside itself."

Hence what Eckhart calls the "inner act," this "conformation" of the human being to the divine virtues, is not itself an intention. Indeed, I think it is best identified, as we just saw Flasch do, with a motive (or set of motives). As Michael Stocker and others have argued, motives—at least in one important sense of the term—are the ground-from-which we act, the "out of," rather than the goal or purpose, the "for the sake of."<sup>43</sup> While only implicit in Eckhart's texts, this distinction between motive and intention is the only way I can see to make sense of what Eckhart says, though it is not discussed by his modern interpreters. Beccarisi, for instance, writes that "God, in whom the general perfections are united,

---

<sup>42</sup>Kurt Flasch, "zu Predigt 6: *Justi vivent in aeternum*," in *Lectura II*, p. 50, emphasis added. Compare Bruce Miley, *The Unspoken Word* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), p. 125.

<sup>43</sup>In Stocker's turn of phrase these two orientations are 'teleology' (forward-looking) and 'archeology' (backward-looking). See his "Values and Purposes: the Limits of Teleology and the Ends of Friendship," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78:12 (1981).

is at work in man to the extent he is good or just, that is, in man in a non-creaturely sense, who is not guided by external principles, but rather . . . 'attends to no why outside himself,' but acts only through himself."<sup>44</sup> She is right about Eckhart, but what precisely is meant by the phrase she quotes from Eckhart, to wit, "acts only through himself"? So too with Kobusch: "This [ground-act of] self-negation, detaching from oneself and surrendering, is to be thought of as a movement of the will. For this reason, Eckhart can speak in the same sense of 'giving up the will.' It is not at all that giving up the will makes a person will-less, rather it annihilates only the 'natural will,' to use the terminology of Eckhart and Hegel, that is, the particular will with its drives, desires and inclinations."<sup>45</sup> True enough, but Kobusch does not specify what "giving up" this "natural will" which "does not make one will-less" might mean. In medieval thought, acts (or actualizations) of will can include inclinations, desires, choices, intentions, enjoyment, etc., to which one can appropriately add motives (as distinct from intentions). Which is it that Eckhart's "genuine man" gives up?

In an important passage for this theme, Kobusch writes: "The object of every act of will is the good. However, while the creaturely will always wants only 'this' or 'that,' that is, wants 'to have,' the moral person places his will in the Good that lies beyond all ways, in the simply and unconditionally Good, or as Eckhart says the 'Absolute Good,' the Good in its truth. This moral good in the sense of general justice *cannot be an object of the will like the many external goods*. Rather, as the *actually and finally willed*, it determines the essence of the human being. Hence everything that one does out of willing this absolute good bears the character of the moral."<sup>46</sup> I agree with the first italicized phrase, but not with the suggestion in the next two sentences, where the terms "willed" and "willing" suggest a final goal or intention, and thus, since every intention supplies a "why," would trap Eckhart in a contradiction. Instead, I suggest we see Eckhart as drawing tacitly on the distinction between motive and intention. His "general justice" is the new motive, replacing the merchant's "reward-motive." Acting out of it, the new person does all that she does. The Eckhartian agent becomes new in that she now has a different motivation for everything she does, including those same deeds, e.g., attending to the needs of her guests or of the poor and sick, which she might formerly have performed out of a different, and radically inferior, motivation.

If one's actions (e.g., tending the sick) were not intentional, they could not express any motive at all. An external goal or intention only makes one's action unworthy, according to Eckhart, when it is inconsistent with the motive of general justice. A spiritual merchant's failing is not that she has goals or intentions in her actions: these are unavoidable. Her error is to perform her good deeds out of an instrumental conception of virtue. She misunderstands herself and her relationship to God, and hence her motive is defective. Her will is oriented to a future or further end, based on the misconception that her eudaimonia lies either in a state outside

<sup>44</sup>A. Beccarisi, in *Lectura II*, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup>Kobusch, *Mystik*, p. 54. The Eckhart text referred to is in *DW V*, pp. 45, l. 12.

<sup>46</sup>Kobusch, *Mystik*, pp. 56–57, emphases added.

herself (Thomas), or in one always still to be achieved through her own efforts (Aristotle). Such a will we do not need; indeed, Eckhart's injunction to live without why means precisely to live without this kind of reward-motive. For through God's grace our eudaimonia already lies within us, in the ground of the soul. What we need is to accept it, through detachment, an acceptance that is then manifested in virtuous actions.

To the extent the moral virtues are character-traits, they represent a kind of standing motive: a courageous person is inclined toward certain sorts of acts, and not others, out of her courage. Motivations are embodied in intentional actions (as well as in attitudes, emotional responses, et al.), and the intentions that embody a motive depend on particular circumstances. As Mieth says, "Elisabeth lives from the infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. . . . The outcome of these virtues is true inner poverty, which can coexist with external wealth. But the completion of the virtues infused into the powers of the soul lies clearly in *active* love: 'she strives to be able, with a pure heart, to wash and care for sick and filthy human beings.'" <sup>47</sup> This "completion" is in concrete action, which of course embodies the 'why' of intentions, though without making the virtuous action itself a means to some external goal, such as salvation. <sup>48</sup>

Like Eckhart, Aristotle too thought that virtuous action is, in the sense explained here, "without a why," that is, performed for its own sake. In this respect Eckhart is closer to him than Aquinas is, though Eckhart differs from both in seeing a life of virtue as the *expression* of our perfection, and not as either a means to it or the mode of life which constitutes it. While Eckhart's ethic is what I call broadly teleological, that is, it aims to discover, describe, and advocate a process of human development toward beatitude or happiness, it diverges from Aquinas on the nature and role of the virtues, and from both Aquinas and Aristotle on the nature and role of moral action and of life's goal.

Such a striking break in ethics with teleological conceptions of action and virtue may be unique in university circles in the middle ages, <sup>49</sup> and it would seem to be deserving of closer attention from contemporary moral philosophers and theologians. An ethic that puts detachment at its center should have a serious claim on our interest in this day and age. Why then has Eckhart's approach been relatively ignored outside of Germany for so long? This is likely a long-term effect of the papal condemnation, which for centuries denied to Eckhart's works the careful collecting and editing given to the writings of many of his medieval colleagues. Even Nicholas Cusanus (d. 1464), himself inspired by Eckhart, wrote that "his books should be removed from public places, for the people are not ready for what he often intersperses," even though (Cusanus adds) "the intelligent

---

<sup>47</sup>Mieth, *Lectura II*, p. 172, emphasis added. The Eckhart citation is from *DW 2*, p. 147.

<sup>48</sup>The topic of intentions and motives in Eckhart is admittedly complex; I plan to treat it more fully in a future paper.

<sup>49</sup>But something very like it is to be found in the work of Eckhart's contemporary, the Beguine Marguerite Porète's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Eckhart's relationship to that work is explored in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1997).

find in [these works] many astute and useful things."<sup>50</sup> The ripple effects of this suppression have, for example, made his works largely unavailable to English-language scholars until quite recently. Perhaps Eckhart, now restored to "public places" by the sometimes heroic labors of recent generations of scholars, will again take his rightful place in the philosophical conversation.<sup>51</sup> If so, the debates over virtue-ethics can only benefit.

Smith College

---

<sup>50</sup>Nicholas of Cusa, *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, vol. 2, ed. Raymond Klibansky, (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1932f), pp. 25, lines 7–12. I owe this reference to Burkhard Mojsisch, "Meister Eckhart," in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/meister-eckhart/>.

<sup>51</sup>The books and other efforts of Bernard McGinn have been especially noteworthy on the American scene. Cf. also footnotes 17, 18, and 50, above.