

Erich Fromm: “To Be” instead of “To Have” as a Model for the Justice of Distribution

An Inquiry on Fromm’s Reference to Meister Eckhart

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Abstract: The ambivalence that accompanies becoming wealthy is widely acknowledged. Wealth only is valuable if it can be put to good use, or, in other words, when it is used responsibly. Like Meister Eckhart in the later Middle Ages Erich Fromm also (*To Have Or to Be?*) pointed out that the alternative to the lack of distribution of goods is not merely a spiritual understanding of poverty but an ethical understanding of what responsibility should come together with being wealthy/rich. Wealth is, in this understanding, the capacity to distribute. In a religious approach, which Fromm maintains even as an agnostic, he proposes with Meister Eckhart to imitate the “divine” capacity of a distribution without making differences between the possible recipients, who all have the same dignity (cf. Mieth 2012a). For Fromm (like for Eckhart) “to be” is seen as a process of “detachment” as a promotion of a “productive character” which leads life and intellect to a real freedom and to the capacity of Being as an openness to Giving. In the actual discussion about the global dimension of poverty, philosophers search for the foundation of so called “positive duties”. In the case of Fromm, we have an example of a humanistic foundation of such positive duties in the orientation of human character. The normative answer to the questions raised by Fromm’s cultural, sociopsychological analysis is offered, in my opinion, by Alan Gewirth’s *The Community of Rights* (1996), in which the correlation of liberal, social and economic rights is demonstrated.

Fromm writes: “Biblical ethics are not primarily concerned with wealth and poverty as such but with the social relations between those who are powerful and those who are powerless. (...) God appears in the bible as the God of justice and the God of compassion” (Fromm 1966a, p. 185).

“All knowledge of the other is based on shared experience. In cannot understand in another that which I do not experience in myself (...)” If I know only my customers, “I know myself only as the *social man*.” I must become an “*universal man*.” This concept of a *universal man* Fromm found in Maimonides (cf. Fromm 1966a, pp. 166–7). Fromm’s ethical concept is related to Freedom, Justice and Compassion. In his book *To Have Or to Be?* (Fromm 1976a) he tried to find a spiritual key for a better distribution in an unjust world and in unjust societies. My conviction is that this key lies on the one side in Fromm’s analysis of the negative assimilation and socialization of men in a post-industrial world, leading to a total economization of all behavior. The “having” character is a name for an inwardness according to Fromm that is the source of a wrong orientation. This inwardness Fromm labels “to have” orientation. It corresponds to an outwardness of “wealth”. I will take Meister Eckhart’s work, read and quoted by Fromm, as presenting a concept of wealth understood as inwardness which expresses not “to have”, but “to be” – to be as God. By this I am joining the radical interpretation of the Old Testament by Fromm.

The ambivalence that accompanies acquiring wealth is widely acknowledged. Wealth only is valuable if it can be put to good use, or, in other words, when it is used responsibly. Similarly to Meister Eckhart in the later Middle Ages Erich Fromm (*To Have Or to Be?*) pointed out, that the alternative to the lack of distribution of goods is not merely a spiritual understanding of poverty but an ethical understanding of what responsibility should come together with being wealthy/rich. Wealth is, in this understanding, the capacity to distribute.

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Eckhart (1260–1328) worldwide, even within the context of non-Christian approaches to religious experience. Through his connections to Jewish and Islamic philosophy and mysticism Meister Eckhart’s legacy continues to live on in these traditions. Declared atheists, too, are fascinated by his thought, at least those with a certain interest on religion. A representative example is Erich Fromm whose book *To Have Or to Be?* (Fromm 1976a; cf. also Frederking 1994) is well-known. The chapter on Meister Eckhart is relatively brief, and refers to my works for further detail. Yet Fromm, a declared humanistic psychologist, actually read Meister Eckhart daily over a period of twenty years, more frequently than he read Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud, two major authors that he read regularly in addition to reading the Bible. I had the opportunity to spend an intense working weekend with Fromm in Locarno in 1975. He impressed me greatly (see Mieth 2001), and from then on we began correspondence on Eckhart which lasted for quite a while. Unfortunately, Fromm’s deteriorating health did not allow him to conduct any further studies. Despite our consensus in reading Meister Eckhart we remained divided on the question of God. Fromm read Eckhart agnostically, I read him theologically, from a Christian perspective (cf. Mieth 2002, pp. 99–112).

Meister Eckhart is, in my opinion, writes something that essentially can be seen as presenting a compendium of knowledge and experience of the Judeo-Christian Bible with the assistance of philosophical interpretation. In accordance with his title, *magister sacrae scripturae*, he was a *Meister*, an expert on the Holy Scriptures, an exegete, an interpreter of scripture. In fact, Eckhart was both an exegete and a philosopher, since he considered it essential to interpret the Holy Scriptures “with the natural arguments of the philosophers” (see Meister Eckhart, *Expositio sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem*, n.2, LW III, p. 4). His approach was twofold: to open the Bible to the highest form of scientific knowledge – in the tradition of his teacher Albert the Great – and to interpret it with the subtlest type of philosophical thought. The reverse is also conceivable: to retranslate the subtlest form of philosophical thought and the broadest forms of human knowledge about the world into the language of faith, i.e., given these intellectual possibilities, and given these possibilities in knowledge, to revert to an authentic, existentially fundamental experience. Faith and its “virtues,” hope and love, are to be taken seriously.

All creatures say God's name, but lose themselves in the incomprehensible, the ineffable. For God does not answer to names, even if it is permissible to call on him with the name which holy persons have used to call on him. God remains unspeakable and unnamable in the clarity of his ground. Similarly, the human soul is also unspeakable and wordless, where it is grasped in its own ground (see Pr. 77, DW III, pp. 337–8; = Sermon 49, CMW, p. 263). God and the soul are so completely one that there is no longer a counterpart. The unspeakability of God contrasts with his essence as self-revelation, as the one who “shares Himself most of all” (Pr. 9, DW I, p. 149 = Sermon 67, CMW, p. 343), who totally emanates from himself. It can also be grasped by distinguishing God from himself, as Eckhart tries to do in his famous sermon on poverty: God works and shares himself; the Godhead, by contrast, remains silent. The person contemplating God, not as relation but in himself, must become “godless”, “free of God” (see Pr. 52, DW II, p. 493: “gotes ledic” = Sermon 87, CMW, p. 424 as well as Pr. 77, DW III, p. 344; Sermon 49, CMW, pp. 262–4), must look into a silent desert. There, where knowing and willing can no longer comprehend themselves reflexively as knowledge of knowledge or as loving will, being is in itself, is the “negation of negation” (see, for example Pr. 21, DW I, p. 361–2 = Sermon 97, CMW, p. 467–8), that is, the “*purum nihil*” of contingent creature-liness. In this passage Eckhart is wordy, using language in an expressive way in order to talk about circumstances where there is no longer a word. In this sense he goes beyond his theories of relation – relation through the language of creation, through the language of birth, through the language of self-assurance. He surpasses the conception of happiness in seeing God that was still important to Augustine (see the conclusion to the model sermon on the nobleman, DW V, 118, p. 13–4 = CMW, 562).

Eckhart's Scholastic contemporaries criticize him for allegedly wanting to draw God too deeply into the human being, because the entering “spark of the soul,” to the extent that it emanates from God but does not remain in the human being, is “uncreated”; on the other hand, they admonish him for allegedly approaching blasphemy, because even blasphemous talk about God affirms God indirectly. This misconstrues Eckhart's processual theories of relation. For even if God is conceived as unrelated, as relationless, this still involves a relation from the perspective of the

human being, that no longer involves the criterion of consciousness. Only someone seeking a relationship can actually comprehend the termination of a relationship. Through this termination all intentions and goals are thwarted. What is to be strived for is a being, living, and knowing that no longer requires a goal and a why: “If a man asked life for a thousand years, ‘*Why* do you live?’ if it could answer it would only say “I live because I live” (Pr. 5b, DW I, p. 92 = Sermon 13b, CMW, p. 110). This indifference has revitalized the dialogue with Zen Buddhism. Indifference can also be understood as the immersion in nothingness as representative of the Absolute. Eckhart clearly knows the silent desert of the Godhead, but does not draw these conclusions; today they are occasionally drawn for him.

In Eckhart’s conception of a fulfilled relationship between God and the human being there is definitely the “two in one” (Pr. 86, DW III, p. 484 = Sermon 9, CMW, p. 86), difference and identity at the same time. For God is “*alius, non aliud*” (“another, but nothing other than reality”), if it is real. Eckhart calls the distinction between God and world “undifferentiatedness” or “indistinction” (“*distinctio per indistinctionem*,” see LW II, p. 489 as well as Fischer 1974, pp. 124–6). This is because, in the Dominican’s opinion, it is not a categorical but a “higher” distinction, unlike a distinction between two things, which are differentiated on the basis of a “distinguishing mark” (“*principium diiudicationis*”). It is far more radical: undifferentiated, indistinct in being, suspended into but separate from nothingness, a nothingness that would be all individually existent being as created in itself (“*purum nihil*”) if being did not continually flow into it “on loan.” Eckhart is striving for the “breakthrough” to a union without a difference in consciousness, but without the medium of consciousness: it is even more compelling than this “analogy,” distinction through indistinction, identity and difference, a “two in one.” Eckhart does not strive for a mediated but a direct union. For this union the simple working of the working – God as pure working, the human being introduced into this working as a worker – is more decisive than seeing God (see Sermon 86, DW III, pp. 482–6 = Sermon 9, CMW, pp. 83–90).

Experienced-ness as knowing of the conditions of character

The path leading from religious experience to moral experience is described within the context of Eckhart's theory of divine justice. Justice is one of the identities of God. If God would lose this identity he wouldn't be of interest anymore. Without justice, God cannot be recognized by man:

The just are determined by justice at such a rate, that if God were not just they would not care a fig for God: they are so firmly committed to justice and so thoroughly self-abandoned that they do not care for the pains of hell or the joys of heaven or anything at all. Indeed, were all the pain of those in hell, men or devils, and all the pain that has been suffered or ever will be suffered – were all this “to be set beside justice, they would not care a jot, so firmly do they stand by God and justice. (...) Whoever understands about the just man and justice understands all that I am saying (Pr. 6, DW I, pp. 103–5 = Sermon 65, CMW, p. 329).

This correlation of religion and moral in the divine origin doesn't mean that religious institutions and rules are allowed to dominate ethics. Eckhart attributes an eminent role to philosophy. That becomes clear when he conscientiously explains his approach in his famous sermon on Mary and Martha:

Life experience gives the finest understanding. Life experience understands better than experience of delight and light (can do). Whatever, except God, man can experience in this body, is truly given by life experience. And in some ways this experience seems clearer than eternal light seems to be. For the experience in the eternal light enables to perceive oneself and God, not oneself apart from God; life experience in contrast makes one perceive oneself, apart from God. When one identifies oneself and nothing more, it is easier for him to tell what is like and unlike (right or wrong). This may be proved by comparing St. Paul and the pagan masters. St. Paul in his ecstasy saw God and himself in spiritual fashion, in God, but not each single virtue was precisely present in his vision, and that derived from the fact that he had not practiced them exercising virtues. By exercising virtues, the (pagan) masters got hold of such profound discernment that they recognized the nature of each single virtue more clearly than Paul or any saint in his first rapture (Pr. 86, DW II, p. 482–3 = Sermon 9, CMW, p. 84).

We can see how important the word “practice” – or creating life-experience here is. Eckhart insists with his description of the figure of Martha on the necessity of life experience or to be experienced by practice and by habituating in practice. We can here understand Eckhart as a theologian of process and a “metaphysical pragmatist”.

And Eckhart continues in this sermon on Mary (Magdalen) and Martha (seen as her sister in Bethanien) a little later:

Three things especially are needful in our works: to be orderly, understanding, and mindful. “Orderly” I call that which corresponds in all points to the highest (principle). “Understanding” I call knowing nothing temporal that is better. “Mindful” I call feeling living truth joyously present in good works. When these three points are one, they bring us just near and are just as helpful as Mary Magdalenas (contemplative) joy in the wilderness (Pr. 86, DW III, p. 486 = Sermon 9, CMW, p. 87).

Eckhart’s definition of wealth

In his definition of wealth (cf. for the following reflections: Mieth, 2012a) Eckhart gives priority to the application of rich to God:

Rich is whatever has all things without lack. I am a man and I am rich, but I am not therefore another man (...) no one is rich but God alone, who embraces in simplicity all things in Himself (Pr. 47, DW II, p. 398 = Sermon 23, CMW, p. 156).

Richness and giving are for Eckhart the same. At the highest level of richness/wealth, the characteristic of God’s kingdom, distribution not preservation, is available. God is a gift. His real name is charity (mercy). Therefore, he not only can but he must, following his own nature, always give, and this is the second point about riches (cf. Sermon 23, CMW, p. 156). “Giving” is therefore the second definition of ‘wealth’, after having without lack” (DW II, 399, 2). God’s giving is without restitution:

the third point about riches is, that one gives without expecting any return, for he who gives in exchange for anything is not really rich. Therefore God’s

richness is shown in this, that He gives all His gifts for nothing (Sermon 23, CMW, p. 156).

Perfect wealth implies remaining rich despite constant giving. In the end, this is not only true for God. Humans can participate in this wealth/richness too, if they give without reservation, and if this giving is not accompanied by any wanting or self-reference. Giving does not happen on the basis of an approach towards-which [oriented towards something], but happens in the opposite direction, emerges from something, a from-which orientation: from including oneself in the fulfilment of God's will (cf. Pr. 62, DW III 59 = Sermon 55, CMW, pp. 289ff.).

God is Therefore the “Rich Man” of the Gospel

The Latin sermon VII (LW IV, p. 75ff. to Lk 16,19) is similar to Pr. VIII to Lk 14,16: *Homo quidam fecit coenam magnam*, (to Lk 14,16, cf. LW IV, p. 90). In these Latin Sermons as well as in the German Pr. 80, DW III, pp. 378–88 = CMW 94, pp. 455–7 (to Lk 16,1) Eckhart draws a connection between the “homo quidam” and God. For Eckhart, the “homo quidam” can alternatively be a reference to “the Godhead and to every delicate soul” (cf. CMW 94, p. 455). But God is the only subject in which wealth is originally and completely existing. God is the origin of wealth – in the understanding of a reigning principle.

The “Modistic” grammar of his contemporary Thomas of Erfurt (1972) – later taken up programmatically by Charles Peirce! – stipulates that a word can be transferred from a particular context to another context in order to bring out the richness of its meaning (cf. the related observations of Stephan Grotz (2003)).

God's Wealth/Richness and the Kingdom of God

The central thesis of Eckhart about the kingdom of God among humans is: the kingdom of God is in you (cf. Pr. 68, DW III, p. 140,2: “daz rîche gotes ist in uns” = Sermo 69, CMW p. 352ff.: “the kingdom of God is within

us”). The kingdom of God is the richness of the inner man. Inner richness concurs with the concept of real poverty. Inner richness is the positive side of the negative articulation: the threefold negation in poverty: not knowing, not willing, not having (see later on).

In his reception of the biblical message of the “kingdom of God”, Eckhart maintains a psychological interpretation of “regnum Deum intra vos est” (Lk 17,21), as does Luther, amongst others, instead of the social interpretation: the realm/Kingdom is “amongst you”, that is, constitutes a new social beginning. The Kingdom of God in the soul is an individualization of the biblical message: “I have a power in my soul which is ever receptive to God” (CMW 68, p. 352). This kind of individualization grants a distance from religious and political institutions (cf. Vinzent 2012). The door is then opened for a so called “mystical” interpretation.

Distance to institutions is derived from the distance to the “world”, seen as “mundus” (“pure contingent reality”) and as “society.” The three worldly realms are mundus, flesh, and devil: “der werlt rîche sol man überwinden mit der armuote des geistes” (the wealth of the world shall be overcome with the poverty of spirit, Pr. 33, DW II, pp. 150ff. = CMW 81, pp. 401–2). This is not available for religious communities. Eckhart’s anti-individualism is from the same strength as his Individualism of the inner man and the soul. The presence of Jesus Christ in the soul is also seen as a “communitarian” gift. I have exposed this element in a book about *Christ – the Social in Man* (Mieth 1972).

But Eckhart is not a “communitarian”, “he is a universalist. God’s wealth and his universal Kingdom belong together, once more what is at stake is the person’s inner being, which indeed is accessible to anyone, independently of their status (cf. Pr. 38, DW II, p. 232,4 = Sermon 29, CMW, p. 178).

The inner radicalness of the transformation from inner wealth into poverty and social distribution, radical like the conception of God as a gift, is often expressed by Eckhart, when he is explaining the meaning of “The Lord’s prayer.” We therefore find in Eckhart’s comments on the Lord’s Prayer [Our Father]: “thy will be done” which presupposes the relinquishment will of one’s own, indeed any intention of one’s own (cf. also Pf, pp. 414–5). In Eckhart’s prayer we read: “I was saying my Paternoster... that when we say ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done’, we are praying to God to deprive us of ourselves” (cf. Sermon 12, CMW, p. 102).

The Realm and Wealth of the Soul, the “Inner City”

“Rich” as an indication of man is related to *adelig* (“noble”, “aristocratic”) and *wirdekeit* (“honor”, “dignity”, cf. *The Nobleman*, CMW, p. 557ff.; cf. Sturlese’s *Homo divinus* – the divine man). The analysis about richness is connected with Eckhart’s doctrine of grace: grace accompanies one in becoming, while it is already “fundamentally” there. There is no distinction between grace in creation and grace in salvation (cf. Pr. 21, DW I, p. 367 = Sermon 97, CMW 97, p. 468). God’s love starts not in history at a specific time, but exists before time is starting, “when we were not” (Sermon 12, CMW, p. 100).

The relation between rich and noble can be seen in the sermon *Homo quidam nobilis* (Lk 19,12). The given richness by God’s distribution without reservation is on the level of anticipation of the real being of man. On the other side is the “becoming rich” as a necessity to transform the empirical status of man into the status of “being”, which is at the same time the perfect status. Eckhart describes the way of becoming:

This man returns *richer*, than when he set forth. Whoever had gone out of himself like that would be given back to himself in a truer sense; and all things, just he had fully abandoned them in multiplicity, will be entirely returned to him in simplicity, for he finds himself and all things in the present “now” of unity. And the man who went forth thus would return much *nobler* than when he had departed. This man now dwells in unhampered freedom and pure nakedness, for he needs undertake and take nothing small or great – for whatever belongs to God belongs to him (Pr. 15, DW I, 245 = Sermon 51, CMW, pp. 270ff.).

In the background are the promises of Jesus in Mk 10,29.30 and Lk 18,29.30: The gain [benefit] of giving without reservation, the wholehearted giving is reached already *in this worldlife* not only later in the eternal life!

In the same manner in which Eckhart speaks of the inner kingdom he speaks also of the inner city (cf. Sermo VIII, LW IV, 90: *A view of the city* (civitas). The mentioned city (Naim) is a parable of the secure soul, which is a “holy city”, since it is blessed by God (cf. Sermo XXXVI, Lk 7,11–12, p. 313; cf. Pr. 18, DW Pr. 18 = Sermon 36, CMW), also on Lk 7,14: the city (Naim) is ordered, secured and sheltered. This is an inner purification,

illumination and unification. Eckhart develops the “power of inner liberation” not the political power (cf. Mieth 2009).

The Interrelation between Wealth and Poverty

“Alliu rîcheit und armuote und saelicheit liget an dem willen.” “All wealth and poverty and bliss depends on the will” (Pr. 36, DW II, 201 = Sermon 39, CMW, p. 222). “For the truly perfected man should want to be so dead to self, so lost in God to his own form and so transformed in God’s will, that his entire blessedness consists in unknowing of himself and all things, and knowing only God, willing nothing and knowing no will but God’s will” (BgT, DW V, 22 = Book on Divine Comfort, CMW p. 530). On Our Lord’s Prayer: “thy kingdom come, that I may possess nothing I prize and regard as wealth but You, who are all riches” (CMW p. 531). Doing the will of God means willing without a why. We have to realize where we come from and not to make a plan where we want to go!

Ob dich got naeme von innerlicher armuote und begâbe dich mit rîcheit innerliche. (Pr. Pr. 49, DW II, 446). There is another thing you should have. It is this: if God were to take you away from inner poverty and invest you inwardly with riches and with grace and were to unite you with Himself as much as your soul could endure this, you should hold yourself free of these riches and give the glory to God alone, just as your soul remained empty when God created it from nothing into something (CMW 89, p. 438).

The German sermon (Sermon 62, CMW and in German Pf. 55) may be a “collatio”, very close to the *Talks of Instruction*, and according to Wacker-nagel (1876, pp. 156ff.) it can also be taken as an “after-dinner speech” or a table talk (Quint 1955, p. 515). It orients itself with Mk 10,29.30, as we have seen, where the receipt is spoken of already in this lifetime. In the end, the message concerns one’s religious way through life: follow the first step and its direction, do not make a plan, but simply go ahead step by step. The beginning determines the direction, not the end. As a matter of principle, Eckhart argues from the ideal beginning, never towards a teleological planned ending. He prefers the light of the morning to the star of the evening.

What Eckhart means by “poor” is well known and discussed. We will find it for instance in the *Book of Divine Comfort*:

Poor in spirit means as the eye is poor and bare of color yet receptive for all colors, so is he poor in spirit who is receptive of all spirit, and the spirit of all spirits is God. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy and peace. Bareness, and poverty, having nothing and being empty transforms nature; water makes water run upward and perform many other miracles (DW V, p. 29 = CMW p. 535).

Most known is the *sermon on poverty* (Pr. 52, DW II, p. 486ff. = Sermon 87 CMW, pp. 420–425): to be poor is on the highest level explained as no knowing, no having, no willing. “No”, in Middle German “Niht”, here is adverbial, not the object “nothing” (therefore I do not follow Walshe’s translation and, Kurt Ruh, the best scholar on mysticism in Germany, acknowledged my translation). The no to knowing, having, willing on one’s own means the quality of a consciousness free of having, without willing, without knowing, and of an attitude which follows the inner drive which is conceived from a notion of radical freedom.

The battle against empirical poverty under the neighbors is based in the unity of being. In the Sermon about Elisabeth of Thuringen, Eckhart came to the conclusion:

Outwardly, in the eyes of the world, this woman dwelt in riches and glory, but inwardly she worshipped true poverty. And 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 touch her and she lost none of her perfection. Her desire was to wash and rend sick and filthy people with a pure heart (Pr. 32, DW II, p. 147 = CMW 52, p. 278).

We will find this also in the figure of Martha:

temporal work is as noble as any communing with God, for it joins us to Him as closely as the highest that can happen to us except the vision of God in His naked nature (Pr. 86, DW III, p. 488 = Sermon 9, CMW, p. 87).

Eckhart on Equality of Humans (cf. Mieth, 2014a)

Equality for Eckhart is initially seen in relation to the (gracious) equality of God and humans, then in relation to charity (cf. Pr. 4, NL p. 50; Pr. 9, NL p. 110); to man and woman [husband and wife]: Pr. 6, NL 82, pp. 2–7; and to master and servant: Pr. 27, NL p. 308 (cf. Mieth 2013a). Often we will find a dialectic of oneness and equality: the “two in one”:

If a man might and knew how to make a cup completely empty and keep it empty of whatever might fill it, even air, assuredly that cup would lose and forget its own nature, and emptiness would bear it aloft (in the heaven). So too, being bare, poor, and void of all creatures carries the soul to God. Likeness, too, and heat are causes of ascent. Likeness we ascribe to the Son in the Godhead, heat and love to the Holy Ghost. Likeness in all things, more especially and firstly in the divine nature, is the birth of the one, and likeness of one, in one and with one is the origin and source of the flowering, ardent love. One is beginning without any beginning. Likeness is beginning begotten of the One alone, getting its being, and it being-a-beginning, from and in the One. It is the nature of love to arise and flow out of two as a one. One as one is not love; two as two is not love; but two as one must produce natural, willing, ardent love (BgT, DW V, 30 = *Book on Divine Comfort*, CMW p. 535).

And again:

When I and you are once embraced by the eternal light, that is one and two in the same moment. Two in one is a fiery spirit, standing over all things, yet under God, in the circle of eternity (...) then one becomes two, two is one: light and spirit, these two are one in the embrace of the eternal light (Pr. 86, DW III, p. 486 = Sermon 9, CMW, p. 86. For my reconstruction of the text, see Mieth (1969), p. 200, note 266).

Nothingness (Poverty) and Plenitude (Wealth) – the two Sides of the Same Divine Realm

Eckhart’s describes rich and poor from different perspectives: someone who is poor outwardly, can be rich inwardly. Whoever is poor outwardly,

cannot be poor enough inwardly (see above: Thomas Aquinas). Someone who is rich outwardly, can be hampered inwardly – and then he is not truly “rich”. Someone who is rich inwardly, does not have to be poor outwardly. “Having, as if you did not have” (cf. Saint Paul: 1 Kor 7,29–32). From having coming to being: so goes the title of a book by Erich Fromm, in which he made a nice reference to my approach. But someone asked: what benefit is it for poor people, if they *are* more? This question is posed by Gonsalv Mainberger (1977). My answer to this critical question: If the rich *are* more, the poor will *have* more. That is Eckhart’s social approach.

Eckhart integrates richness and poverty in his “idealist” view: poverty and wealth are both taken on their ideal ranks – or viewed “in essence” [“fundamentally”/“in principle”/“at heart”], that is, “in spirit” – and on this highest level they are not opposed, but identical. The background to this is the doctrine of the higher reality of so called transcendentals. Eckhart often refers to the example of justice. Justice in itself is not an empirical fact but a transcendental reality which is the fundamental condition and the starting point for a reflection about justice in institutions and in doing well. On the transcendent level of being God has a commitment to justice: he cannot be else than just (cf. Flasch 2010, pp. 52–5; Mieth 2013b).

As we have seen, for Eckhart the first application of the term “rich” is based on God’s plenitude (fullness). This means “rich in principle”, in Latin *in principio*, in the beginning of all beginning. Eckhart’s internal conception of the kingdom of God places this kingdom in every individual soul. This concept promotes a religious individualization. Included in this individualization is the natural and spiritual equity of all humans (cf. Gal 3, 28). Typical for Eckhart is the possibility to exchange the terms “noble”, “rich” and “divine” and their spiritual implications in relation to man (Sturlese 2007). Therefore, the stages of poverty of the spirit and of being rich are under the same criteria, the “absolute no” to any adherence.

Some General Remarks on Eckhart’s Fundamental Social Engagement

Eckhart maintains a constructive tension between belief and intellect (cf. Mieth, 1972). There is not a concurrence between them. The intellect has

the obligation to accept that the belief does not exist because it has constructed it with its own instruments. On the other side the belief must be open for an intellectual disclosure. Belief will be disclosed by intellectual understanding – understanding by a reason which is placed in the heart of man. Belief will also be disclosed by natural science who delivers “parables” for a deeper understanding (cf. In Joh. n.2–3, LW III, p. 4 and n. 45, LW III, p. 37 and n. 361, LW III, p. 307).

Eckhart teaches the unity of grace. Grace is God’s nature, in German “Barmherzigkeit”, a word which needs to be translated with the “mercy” and “charity” at the same time. The unity of Grace is available from its start point in the heart of the Godhead. This unity stems from the grace of creation to the grace of salvation to grace as an individual support to develop the dispositions and to enforce the ongoing spiritual process. For Eckhart’s new “philosophy of Christianity” (Flasch 2010) is in my opinion constitutive of the Christology, this means the transformation of all human nature by the incarnation, so that humaneness and the Divine cannot be separated.

Starting with these presuppositions Meister Eckhart proposes breaking from the attachment to goods to the real richness in the realm of grace, which is distribution without loss. He clarifies this from several perspectives: freedom, poverty and detachment. This corresponds to the utopia of the expropriated existence, i.e., of a mode of existence that does not accept economic structures as valid and needs structures as definitive. It is not a matter of the abolition of physical conditions, nor of the ascetic life, but of the incompleteness of human striving, like a wound that remains open until a true, and not a supposed, healing process ensues. This striving or permanent breaking through is stimulated by Christian hope. The reference to Christ reveals the expropriated or property less existence as fulfilled existence. The infinite extension of the human way, which is announced in the conception of permanent breaking through, is not grounds for resignation, but for hope and commitment. The reference to Christ reveals the expropriated existence as a social and action-oriented existence.

Christocentric anthropology logically encompasses the solidarity and socialization of human beings in Christ (Mieth 1972). Through the exposure of human self-realization – at the expense of or under the forensic inclusion of the moral responsibility of other human beings – the social existence replaces the ownership and personal structure of the person of indi-

vidual means and individuality. Eckhart exposes self-realization in the sublime forms of piety and the *Do et des* relationship between human beings. The trend to sexual permissiveness with calculation of the consequences for the partner is one such form of private self-fulfillment, an equation with two unknowns, both being assumed as known in the blindness of supposed self-determination: the inaccessible self and the self of the other. The social is not simply the accumulation of self-determining, self-reliant individuals but an indeterminate system of relationships between and in human beings. Eckhart's thesis is that this system of relationships first attains its ultimate perspective in Christ, because Christ is the foundation of solidarity for the human race. Christ is the social in the human being, both from the perspective of his permanent expropriatedness as well as from the perspective of his human solidarity. He reveals the breakthrough character of human existence together with its meaning and its purpose.

Eckhart's orientation toward social action is already evident in the dynamism that this approach produces with regard to autonomy, the breaking through economic structures, and sociality. The dynamics of structure become a postulate of action for Meister Eckhart. This does not make the case for a rhetorical activism; an alienation of the human in over activity would not fulfill this orientation towards action as human "inwardness." The orientation toward action is the incarnation itself because it offers orientation and itself constitutes action, to the point that for Eckhart "incarnation" encompasses all the actions of Christ. Action on the basis of an autonomous faculty of reason impelled by the motivational power of faith is "inward," is not an outward drivenness induced by needs. Eckhart has illustrated this clearly in the figures of Martha and Elizabeth. The inwardness of acting is not, on the other hand, a quietist category. It simply distinguishes rational social "action" from mere "behavior," in that the human being acts not on the basis of inner distance (*"bei den Dingen, nicht in den Dingen"*) but "as if possessed," driven by short-term goals and expectations which he or she does not control but which control him or her.

Conspicuous is Eckhart's exclusive naming of love as the orientation for action. Love is more closely specified, however; it is neither a category of the needs structure nor a category of the just balance between giving and receiving. Love is essentially "social" love, i.e., "expropriated" or unpossessing love, a love free of motivation, not a category of acquisition or enti-

tlement, not a category of eros as a sophisticated form of the extension of the individual identity through the other. In this love Christ replaces the individuality of the human being; it is the love of the human being who has become truly incarnate, truly human, who already exists as a social being, and therefore unquestionably acts socially. The question is naturally justified whether this love of the truly incarnate human being is not a utopia, just as the expropriated existence is a utopia. For Meister Eckhart true human incarnation is actually existent. The existing reality is not the orienting standard, but rather the promised hope, the motivational power of faith, and the ultimate form of love, which is revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is not that which is that serves as orientation for acting, but that which is to be. On the other hand, that which is to be is a reality already anticipated in Christ. Thus, the utopia is not an illusion; the future has already been imparted to the human being. What is to be is *within* the human being. Eckhart's comprehension of Christ as the social in the human being appears as we have seen above to be an interpretation of Paul's words that the human being no longer lives as "I" but as Christ (Gal 2, 20). This is how God reveals the process of becoming human in Christ.

But what has this to do today with an opaque, anonymous financial system, loss of responsibility in individuals and in politics (*bonum commune*, community of rights). Can we retreat and withdraw into spirituality? Can we take some spiritual admonitions and make them political: wealth is for distribution; it is assumed by Christian faith that there is an equality of participation to goods. For Eckhart this is clear, an important quotation from him reads:

Whoever could exist in the nakedness of the nature, free from all mediation, must have left behind all distinction of person, so that he is as well disposed to a man who is across the sea, whom he never set eyes on, as the man who is with him and is his close friend. As long as you favor your own person more than a man you never have seen, you are assuredly not right and you have never for a single instant looks into this simple ground (Pr. 5b, CMW 13b, p. 109).

Eckhart's Christology is behind this (*ibid.*, p. 108): "God not only became man, but he took on human nature". When humanness is integrated in God's birth in the world, than human dignity with all its implications of

the rights and obligations of men, is assumed to be equal for all humans. Eckhart anticipates Kant, who sees, “human dignity as the absolute value”, but it is, as he says, “even harder.” Therefore, we can suggest as a conclusion: mysticism is an inner concept of social as universal. Our reading of Meister Eckhart has (hopefully) demonstrated that the experience of God and the inner-directedness of human beings do not signify a disregard of social dimensions. Remarks such as Thomas a Kempis’s “Lerne deine Umwelt verachten, um dich an deine Innenwelt hinzugeben” (to have contempt for the human environment and to cultivate only the inner life) are not to be found in Meister Eckhart. On the contrary, whoever attempts “Gott zu finden in Innerlichkeit und Verzückung” (to find God in inwardness and rapture) will not find him. Rather it is a question of how those around us and our environment have their foundation and their continuation in us ourselves. Concentration of this type – called *innicheit* – is always meant comprehensively here, i.e., in the sense that the concentration at the middle of the circle also reaches the circumference of the circle at the same time.

Eckhart’s ethics and social theology cannot be directly interpreted politically. Socialist-oriented interpretations prove inadequate because they employ presumed historical motivations which cannot be convincingly established in Meister Eckhart. Eckhart’s motivation is indicated clearly enough in his own words: to experience God and to become human through this experience, not for oneself but for others. “Gott und ich, wir sind eins im Wirken, er wirkt und ich werde” (God and I are one in this operation: He works and I come into being. – Pr. 6, DW 1, p. 114 = Sermon 65, CMW p. 332).

Yet a specific social-therapeutic approach is inherent in Eckhart’s fundamental ideas. Today we are also exceedingly aware that the adverse condition of human coexistence cannot simply be alleviated through structural and institutional changes. Necessary are human beings who choose to live differently so that life goes differently. Eckhart’s sermon is thus directed against our mentality (whether we choose to call it a practical-materialist or a capitalist mentality makes no difference). This sermon against our mentality is just as provocative today as in the cities of the Middle Ages, several indications: Eckhart exposes all motivations of humankind, including all objectified values, whether intellectual or material, as mere “appearance” or “pretense” in comparison to real human being as a preparedness for

continual rethinking or changing. Eckhart exposes our tendency to act as a superficial appropriation of our world and ourselves and preaches committed detachment or abandonment instead. Eckhart exposes our mentality of achievement in the subtlest of areas, for example, in the area of piety, as an unsuccessful attempt at self-union and world-union. Finally, Eckhart exposes the seemingly justified demands of our “I” as attempts to erect a boundary of self-righteousness for our love.

In the actual discussion about the global dimension of poverty, philosophers search for the foundation of so called “positive duties”. In the case of Fromm, we have an example of a humanistic foundation of such positive duties in the orientation of human character. The normative answer to the questions asked in Fromm’s cultural, sociopsychological analysis is, in my opinion, Alan Gewirth’s *The Community of Rights* (1996), in which the correlation of liberal, social and economic rights is demonstrated.

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- DW = Deutsche Werke; Pr. = Predigt = Sermons with Arabic Numbers;
LW = Lateinische Werke; Sermons with Roman chiffres;
CMW = *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. English translation by Maurice Walshe. New York (Crossroads Herder), 2008. Sermons with Arabic Numbers.
Pf. = Pfeiffer, F. (Ed.) (1857). Meister Eckhart Pfeiffer (= Deutsche Mystiker des 14. Jahrhunderts, Vol. 2). 4th Edition. Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1924.
NL = Niklas Largier (1993). Meister Eckhart. Werke in zwei Bänden. Berlin (Bibliothek Deutscher Klassiker). (Pr. with Arabic Numbers identical with DW)
BgT = *Daz buoch der goetlichen troestunge*
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