Master Eckhart. The Names of God

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Master Eckhart has meditated with a new radical thoroughness the Neoplatonist difficulty concerning the names of God, and this name which among the names, and maybe among all names, would be the proper name of God : what is the name of God, all names, only one name, no name ? He who has no name has yet one name and gathers all names. The aporetical legacy of the question is in a way intensified in Eckhart's thought by the attempt at translating in German language and passing on beyond the University an unheard word. Eckhart's sermon is the right place for this radical attempt in which German language welcomes for the first time a contemplative experience of meaning, an experience which was first a Latin one of a meaning which was itself given for the first time in the word of God. The meditation of the Scripture is the translation of this word in which God revealed himself. « God's design is to give himself entirely to us », the Master says. (Hegel will write : the absolute is and wants to be in and for itself by now with us[1]). The first question is the question of this name that God once attributed to himself, and the initial difficulty is the translation and interpretation of this name. The difficulties are those the Neoplatonist tradition raised. Are all names which will be attributed to him liable to name him in himself, if he is one and the same, and how should we understand the multiplicity of attributes and perfections in which his essence is said without being divided ? Has human language any other possibility than a negative way of saying the divine principle, and has this way itself, the negative one, an absolute meaning and significance, or is it only the way of a cathartical eminence freeing the attribution from all limitations ? Does the attempt at saying the name of God not reach its heights in silence, which does not mean the defeat of language but on the contrary its highest intensity and even its final possibility ? Silence belongs to language itself, it is the culmination of language, language itself withdraws in it, and it becomes possible only from its own breakthrough (*Durchbruch*) through the names. Maybe this is the only one act that the Eckhartian sermon wants to fullfil, maybe it is what the Master calls detachment (*abgescheidenheit*) : the rising of silence, this silence in which we will be one with the Nameless (*namelôs, sunder namen*), this one, who « never had name », who « is beyond all name », who is « the negation of all names » (*logenung aller namen*)[2]. Names are the way of joining the Nameless, in a search for him which does not reach its end in discovering his name (« You have to search him so that you never find him »), but culminates in no-searching, in the way which frees itself from itself as a way to him, where you find him (« The most man searches you, the less man finds you », « If you do not search for

him, you find him »). The ineffable essence of the Nameless gives its strong necessity to the search for his name, far from leading us away from language and thought's experiences for which language remains the right and only place. Thus our language offers two pretenders for the dignity of being the proper name of God : *Esse,* being, and *Unum,* the One. The search for the name of God gives rise to an ontological and henological meditation in human language, in which God's will for revelation as revelation of himself is fulfiled : « God has to give himself to me as properly as he is himself his proper, or nothing is given to me and nothing tastes for me »[3]. The language of the Master has no other reason for being than this attempt at being standing in the heart of the divine event of such an unreserved revelation of himself.

Every attempt at saying the Nameless will first come up against the bounds of language : « There was a man », the Master says in his commentary on *Luke*, 14, 16, « this man had no name, because this man is God »[4]. The divine principle is the Nameless because of the « excess of limpidity of his being », Eckhart says, a limpidity of being which language does not reach, because language, according to the other nameless Master called upon by Eckhart, would not be able to go back to the first cause. Then Eckhart wonders how it is possible to say something about something. Three ways open for language : a name can be given « by what is above things », « by what is equal to things », « by the works of things ». The impossibility of the first two ways concerns God as he is the first cause, and from this side we shall have to say that the divine being is the *esse innominabile* (the unnameable being), as he is the cause of all existing beings and is himself an existing being beyond all existing beings[5], from which he, who is beyond them, could not receive his name. Thus the Sermon 20a will explain : « That is the reason why about God man can not properly say anything, because nothing is above God, and God has no cause »[6]. But the inequality and even incommensurability between God and things in their being closes together with the second way the third one : « Because all creatures include in their being such a little of God that it is nothing, they can neither reveal anything of him ». The ontological inequality is so important that all revelation and expression of the principle in its works is also impossible : « All creatures are not able to express God, because they are not able to receive what he is »[7]. The principle, which gives itself when it gives being, is nevertheless incommensurable to its work, which remains anyway unequal to himself, and from which it will neither get its name. But thus language seems to come to a standstill in front of the divine being, « the unspeakable

man for whom there is no word ». In its purity or limpidity, the divine being seems on principle to ban any true word which would reach his essence : « What is said about God is not true, and what is not said about him is true. When man says what God is, he is not so ; what is not said about him, he is so, more properly than he is what is said about him »[8]. The truth concerning the divine being is the truth of what is never said, because the proper being of God is this one, which is never said. But we have to consider more closely such a silence, such an impossibility of any proper name. The Master in his Latin work[9] comments on the question which arises in *Genesis*, 32, 29 : *Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name ?*, but he alters it, and he is then inspired by another one, from *Judges*, 13, 18 : *Cur queris nomen meum, quod est mirabile ? (Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret (or admirable, or wonderful) ?).* The third interpretation suggested by Eckhart understands the name itself as *mirabile*, because it is the name *super omne nomen* (*Philippians*, 2, 9 : *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name*) or, second possibility, *quia nomen est innominabile, nomen indicibile et nomen ineffabile* (« because the name is unnameable, an unspeakable name and an inexpressible name »). As it is above every name, or itself the « unnameable name », the « admirable name » is in a way the name with which language goes beyond itself. The first two interpretations suggested by the Master had successively considered that the name of God was « the Admirable » (*Psalms*, 8, 2 : *quam admirabile est nomen tuum*, or 9, 1 : *O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth !* and *Isaiah*, 9, 6 : *vocabitur admirabilis, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counseller, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace*), then that the admirable name of God was *quod est* (« that, what is »), which the Master translated in this way : *hoc quod est*, or *qui est* (« he, who is » : *Exodus*, 3, 14 : *Ego sum qui sum*, « I am that I am »). But the third one is the most radical : the oxymoron of the « unnameable name » (which comes from Dionysus' treatise *On Divine Names*) says in human language the name which is beyond all language. The Master however suggests a fourth interpretation : it is admirable, according to three possibilities, to search for the name of the Unnameable, or to search for the name of the being whose nature is *esse absconditum* (which can be understood in two ways : the *hidden being* is his nature, or : his nature is *to be hidden*, *Isaiah*, 45, 15 : *Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour*), or, in an Augustinian tradition, to search anywhere outside the name of the being who is inside. The Commentary on *Genesis* gives us the way of understanding the Unnameable, in all Master's interpretations, from the divine being itself : God's being is itself beyond all name, unless it is itself, as in the second interpretation, the name of God (*qui est*). That was what we could infer from the sermon : the absolute limpidity of the divine being goes beyond language : this

being is precisely what is not said and could not be said without being clouded, and in that sense God is the « unnamed man ». In the sight of this being, as the sermon 20b mentions it, all creatures which are called by any name are nothingness : the one who is being, or who the being is (because that is the right interpretation of the proposition : *esse est deus* in the *Opus propositionum* of the Master, where *deus* is the proper name of being[10]) will not be named by the same name as nothingness. The sermon 20b will not hesitate to refer to the authority of Dionysus : who is speaking about God does not say anything about him. Is that to say that language is absolutely disqualified ? « No word can express God », the Master says, but he puts it right immediately : « or rather : he says himself certainly in himself ». How can we understand such a divine word, which says God in God ? Silence is not only the highest possibility of language, when it is the *will* not to speak about God, but the name of God is the name which God says in himself, the name which he himself attributes to himself. But is such a name revealed ? How can we reconcile the *esse absconditum* and the divine design to reveal himself entirely, and particularly to give himself properly ? Let us make a shift in the question : to whom is the name given, when it is said in God himself, or *where*, so to speak, is it uttered ? The two sermons comment on the divine operation in the soul, which is at the same time its divine-becoming, the eternal event of its one-becoming with the divine principle, in this place the Master calls « the little spark of the soul », which is none of its powers (even if the sermon 20b recognizes it as the intellect), whose the Master distinguishes the two acts, or the double way of its activity : « one act of making one, and one act of diverting ». To be one with God means also fighting against all which is not divine, and refusal of it. This spark is turned toward the limpidity of God's being, as it is a picture of God which receives all from its model, according to the Eckhartian doctrine about pictures (they receive from nothing else but from their model's being, but they receive the whole being of their model) : it happens in the « eternal now », always new, it « stands in God's being »[11]. Thus is the anonymity of the Unnameable the divine *esse* itself, and such a being gives itself in the Unnameable part of the soul itself, and gives itself by itself entirely, as the Master will emphasize it. But we are now able to understand the last interpretation, the Augustinian one, of the Unnameable : you have to search for the name in yourself, in the most intimate of yourself : *Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi, in interiori homine habitat deus, veritas* (« Do not go outside, return in yourself, God (truth) lives in the inner man »)[12]. In the Unnameable place of man — for this power in itself has no proper name — must be searched the Unnameable of God, he utters his name in this unnameable place only, in this « secret and hidden » place, which is higher than intellect and will[13]. The Eckhartian thought of the *absconditum esse* of Isaiah is the thought of a radical immanence as well as the concept of a latency[14], in which

the intimate part is also the highest one, and God, the « unnamed man », gives himself entirely to the unnamed man. The Eckhartian attempt, which recognizes the unequality between language and what it aims at saying, the being which remains in its purity *ineffabile*, remains however itself the resolute search for the name of such an Unnameable, or maybe for the silence, belonging to language, in which only such a name will be uttered. Such a name however is not only God's name, or rather the God which is called by this silent name is a God who gives himself : thus it is the name of being itself, and as far as creatures *are*, they are as well unnameable as he is. Unnameable is being as it is secret, unnameable is the place in the soul where it is equal to God, where the soul, which as a created one is *purum nihil* (« pure nothingness »), *is* properly. The sermon 36a goes back over such a nameless place and its paradox, a place whose name is precisely « the nameless », « the unnamed ». Such a nameless place — whose name is « the unnamed » — is that place where « all things were God in God »[15], and so the place which is God himself : such a place is in the soul, or the soul is in this place. The place is nameless exactly like God, who is the Unnamed. But the Master does not forget to notice this paradoxical naming of God, when language calls him « the Unnamed » or the Unnameable. But then language, even when it acknowledges that it has no proper name for him, when it confines itself to say that he is « the Nameless », says too much, because saying is even too much when being silent would be properly required. Then appears in the Eckhartian Sermon « one of our oldest Masters », who once « wanted to be silent » : « All what he could say about things would have in itself something irrelevant and not true »[16]. Astonishing Heraclitean or Cratylian Master, who refused to reduplicate being by a language which would not be equal to it, which would be for ever irrelevant in its attempt at saying being, would not concern being at all and would never say the truth about being. There is no possibility to say the truth about being when it is considered so. For the limpidity of being is every time, according to this oldest Master, clouded by language : « He did not want to speak about things, because he could not speak about them with the same limpidity as they arise from the first cause ». The Heraclitean becoming is understood by Eckhart as the original birth of beings : such a birth in the limpidity of the first rising can not be reached by language. The first being, in its verbal meaning, thus the rising of being, had led this ancient Master to prefer the silence of gestures. He did not want to say anything anymore, he did not ask for anything, he just wanted to *show* : « He preferred to be silent, and he just made understand what he needed with the help of signs of his fingers ». The Greek Master would not and could not say the first rising of being. We want to say the absolute origin, the first cause itself, and the place in the soul which is equal to it, the place which is itself the place of the birth and pure rising of every being, because every being is in this place like it is in God : all the more reason to be

quiet or at least, when it is a matter of this « nameless place », to recognize, because we do want to speak about it, that we can only « stammer ». The sermon 36 makes clear the own limitations of the *via negationis*. The Master first said : even the name « Unnamed » is still an affirmation. Now he makes it clear : every affirmation is inappropriate, there is just the negation left to say what God is not (as he is the being which is not said at all, all what is said about him only says truly what he is not). Even the negation however might say always too much, if saying itself is anyway too much : the only appropriate negation would be the negation of language, in which the negation would mean the negation of the negation, the negation of what in every language is irrelevant and of another kind than the limpidity of being. Such a negation of the negation is included in the divine name of *Unum* (the One).

However, there is a name which has been revealed as the proper name of God, in the book of *Exodus*. The Eckhartian interpretation then concentrates on the *reduplication* of being in the divine name which is thus revealed. This name is an affirmation indeed, but a reduplicated one, the affirmation of the limpidity as well as of the plenitude of the *esse* : the affirmation of the unity of God with himself,[17] or of his identity with himself as a link between him and himself (the spirit has the meaning of such a link). Master Eckhart considers the divine name not as the attribution of the predicate *qui sum* to the subject *ego* by the copulative verb *sum*, but as the reduplication of the affirmation *sum*, which means the purity of an affirmation which excludes all negation. Thus the divine name points out « a kind of reflexive conversion in himself and on himself, a staying and being fixed in himself » (*quandam in se ipsum et super se ipsum reflexivam conversionem et in se ipso mansionem sive fixionem*)[18]. The divine being returns to himself and stays in himself, in a being-in-himself which Eckharts sometimes calls « foaming » (*bullitio*) of being. Then Eckhart compares the divine name with the Augustinian *bonum bonum*[19] : « As *bonum bonum* means the unmixed good and the highest good, which is fixed in itself, does not lean on anything else, returning to itself by a complete return, so the *sum qui sum* means the unmixed being and its plenitude »[20]. The affirmative plenitude of the *esse* goes with the exclusion of all which would cloud its limpidity. In this way the limpidity of the divine being remains the heart of Eckhartian meditation about the divine name in *Exodus* and its reduplicated affirmation of being, which means the identity of being with himself. Thus the affirmative way is open anew, but now it concerns only being, whose unmixed identity with itself is in this way asserted. The *sum qui sum* is insofar the true name of God : *Quid enim tam idem quam esse et esse : « sum qui sum ». Nulla enim propositio propter hoc est verior illa, in qua idem predicatur de se ipso*[21]. (« For what is so identical as being and being : « I am that I am ». That is the reason why no proposition is more true than this one, in which the same is attributed to itself »). But such a pure

affirmation in its ontological reduplication is itself the affirmative side of the negation of all negation which distinguishes the limpid being of God. The affirmation of the identity of being with itself is the negation of all negation or all what would be negative in God, who has for that reason to be called « the One », *Unum negative dictum*. Thus, if no other affirmation is suitable for God, no other negation will be either in place : « No negation, nothing negative is suitable for God, except the negation of negation which the One means, when it is negatively attributed : « God is the One », *Deuteronomy*, 6, 4, *Galatians*, 3, 20. But the negation of negation is the purest and fullest affirmation : « I am that I am » »[22]. The reduplicated negativity of God, as the negation of negation, is truly the pure affirmation, the affirmation of affirmation, which excludes from itself all non-being, that is to say : all multiple, and thus gives us the meaning of the limpidity of the sermons. In Eckhart's thought the One is not a divine name which would stand above being, as if the One was a more proper name for God than being : it is the name of being itself, considered in its purity which excludes all non-being. If the reduplication of the affirmation says the reflexive life of being in itself, and in that way its *plenitudo*, it means at the same time the One that being is in its essence : the spiritual unity of God with himself is the same as his affirmation as the One. But the exclusion in the *Unum* is really the inclusion in God of all what is (or of all what he is, because he is every being), and thus *Unum*, the negation of negation, includes in itself all affirmation, and therefore, as a name, includes all names : it is now the *nomen super omnen nomen* or the *nomen omninominabile*[23]. The Master will point it out in the sermon 21, where he comments on the *Unus deus* of *Ephesians* (4, 6 : *One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*). *Unum*, says the Master, is more limpid than *bonum* and *verum*, it is the one among the transcendentals which stands as close as possible to the *esse*, to which it adds nothing but the exclusion of the multiple (« One » says precisely that nothing is added, it says therefore the limpidity of being : « What does the One mean ? », will ask the Master, and he will answer : « The One means that, to which nothing is added »[24]), while *bonum* and *verum* add something in a thought (to think is to add). The One is thus God as the first and the highest, or as the father, or, so to say, God secluded in himself : « The One adds nothing, as he is in himself before flowing in the Son and in the Holy Spirit ». *Unum* is thus the name which said himself as he is in himself. This stay in himself (what the Master called *mansio*) of the One is the same as the negation of negation : « The One is : to deny denying », *ein versagen des versagenes*, Eckhart says, or « it takes the deity » in its purity and simplicity, « where nothing is added, where nothing is thought » : where nothing else can be said. Only the negation which turns in on itself is itself divine or suitable for the deity : any other negation is only the negation of being-other (every created being « denies being another one in anything »), in God only the negation is the negation of negation,

and thus an absolute affirmation, so that nothing is excluded from God (the exclusion in the *Unum* has an inclusive meaning, it includes all what is) : « But God has in him denying of denying ; he is one and denies every other, for nothing is outside God ». God's limpidity is thus linked to his being's plenitude : « All creatures are in God and are his proper deity, and that means a plenitude ». The deity is the name of the divine being as he is secluded in itself without any addition in thought or, what is the same, the name of the divine being as he has every being in him, or as every being is God himself — a radical deity, or « father of all deity » before flowing out of himself in the creation. But the One is also reflected in itself, so that the life of the One is the development of the deity in itself. Thus Eckhart says : « The unity, God alone has it. The unity is his proper. From there God takes its divine being, otherwise he would not be God »[25]. All what God is is One, his life and plenitude is One. The limpid Eckhartian deity denies the multiple, the being-other in God insofar as it is the absolute affirmation of being. Thus the affirmation : « God is One » ends in this one : « God is all » (« God is all and is One »). The two divine names, the *nomen innominabile* and the *nomen omninominabile*, say equally the same essence and essential limpidity, the divine being in its absolute limpidity, the one by the way of an oxymoron, in the silence of the Unnameable, the other by the way of the negation of negation, that is to say, of the pure affirmation of God as the One. When the Master says like Dionysus that God is above being, he will himself warn us it is not a negation but an elevation of being[26]. The silence of the radical negativity, excluding all affirmations because of the limpidity of God's being, is one with the language of the pure affirmation, excluding all negation and saying nothing but such a limpidity. In this silence as well as in this language, the same negation of negation, the same absolute affirmation prevails. The Eckhartian teaching attempts to stand in such an affirmation, in such a silence, and thus in the will of being to give and reveal itself.

Notes

1. *Sermon* 11, according to the translation of A. de Libera, *Traités et sermons*, Paris, GF, 1995, p. 291. Hegel, *Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, tr. B. Bourgeois, Paris, Vrin, 2006, p. 118

2. *Sermon* 15, tr. Libera, p. 315.

3. *Sermon* 4, tr. Libera, p. 245.

4. *Sermon* 20a, tr. Gw. Jarczyk and P.-J. Labarrière, Paris, Albin Michel, vol. 1, p. 189.

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super Dionysium, De divinis nominibus, lectio III*, quoted in Vl. Lossky *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart*, Paris, Vrin, 1998, p. 23.

6. *Sermon* 20b, p. 196-197.

7. *Sermon* 20a, p. 189. Thomas noticed a different consequence : Ita igitur Deo, qui est omnium causa, et tamen super omnia existens, convenit et esse innominabile inquantum super omnia existit, et tamen conveniunt ei

omnia nomina existentium, sicut omnium causae.

8. *Sermon* 20a, p. 189-190.

9. *I. Exp. Gen.*, *LW* I, p. 95.

10. *LW* 1, p. 41, n. 1.

11. *Sermon* 20b, p. 198.

12. *Cf. De vera religione*, I, 39. *Cf.* also *Confessions* : *Tu autem eras interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (III, 6, 11).

13. *Cf. sermon* 7, tr. A. de Libera, p. 268 (« What soul is in its bottom, nobody knows »).

14. The word appears in the Commentary on John, *Exp. In Joh.*, 2, 10 : « *servare bonum* » *tamquam latens et absconditum.*

15. *Sermon* 36a, tr. Jarczyk-Labarrière, vol.1, p. 46.

16. *Sermon* 36a, p. 46.

17. Or of what the Master himself does not hesitate to call the *fold* (*plica*) : « Reduplication is said in the meaning of a reduplication of the two, a fold and a knot of the two, the Father and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Trinity » (*In Ioh.*, n. 556, quoted by A. de Libera and E. Zum Brunn, *Maître Eckhart. Métaphysique du Verbe et théologie négative*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1984, p. 142).

18. *In Exodum*, n. 16, *LW* II, p. 21.

19. *De Trinitate*, VIII, 3.

20. *In Exodum*, n. 17.

21. *In Exodum*, n. 73.

22. *In Exodum*, n. 73, *cf.* A. de Libera and E. Zum Brunn, *Maître Eckhart. Métaphysique du Verbe et théologie négative*, p. 148.

23. *Exp. In Gen.*, n. 84. *Cf.* Vl. Lossky, *Op. cit.*, p. 60 *sq.*

24. *Sermon* 21, tr. Jarczyk-Labarrière, vol. 1, p. 204.

25. *Sermon* 21, tr. p. 207.

26. *Sermon* 9, tr. A. de Libera, p. 276 : « But when I said God was not a being and he was above being, I did not deny being to him, on the contrary : I raised being in him ».

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