

## Article

# Transcendence as Indistinction in Eckhart and Heidegger

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**Abstract:** I examine what I call Eckhart's doctrine of indistinction as a precursor to Heidegger's approach to the worldhood of the world. Taking cues from textual evidence in various sections of Heidegger's texts and lecture courses, I demonstrate that Heidegger's ontology is at least partially inherited from Eckhart's henology. As a result, there is an analogous logic of indistinction operative in Eckhart's understanding of the relationship between God and creation, and the inseparability of Dasein and the world in Heidegger's phenomenology. I conclude by suggesting that Heidegger's reading of Eckhart is a microcosm of the relationship between continental philosophy and religion, because it demonstrates that turning one's eyes to the logics of a different cosmology, anthropology, or ontology, may permit the eyes to see more fully what is at play in one's own approach to the human, the world, and the relationship between them. In other words, the secular often illuminates theological blind spots, just as the theological has the power to transform, enlarge, or supplement the secular view of the consciously secular thinker, without converting philosophy to theology or vice versa.

**Keywords:** Heidegger; Eckhart; indistinction; philosophy of religion; phenomenology; henology; worldhood of the world; ontotheology

## 1. Introduction

Diverging from a long list of theological predecessors, including his fellow Dominican, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart understands creatures as pure nothing. For Eckhart, creatures are not beings that participate poorly in Being, nor is their final cause to fully accord themselves to Being. Rather, the final cause of creatures is to-be as beings. God enables their existence by perpetually conferring existence upon them—by giving birth to their possibility in each instant. Their perpetual reception of the loan of Being is the reception of the possibility of their possibilities. Thus, Eckhart does not understand existence on the basis of a final telos toward which all things move. Instead, his ontology posits the perpetual birth of the possibility of creatures through the immediate givenness of God.

In a manner that echoes of Eckhart's henology, through his sweeping analysis of time and temporality, Heidegger posits that in relation to Being, Dasein is nothing in-itself. For Heidegger, temporality enables the birth of the possibility of Dasein's possibilities, its world. Hence, Dasein, like the Eckhartian creature, is a nullity that is given Being without ever having it in-itself. According to Eckhart, God is the Always Moving Immovable, who is the condition and constitution of existence. God "is" God by giving Himself to creatures as the possibility of their possibilities. According to Heidegger, temporality is the "original outside-itself itself" that gives birth to Dasein's world as its condition and constitution. Temporality gives birth to Dasein's possibility by enabling the worlding of its world. Thus, along Eckhartian lines, in conjunction with his own reading of temporality as the transcendental-horizon of Dasein's world, Heidegger concludes that Dasein's mode of Being is never to have its Being. Dasein's mode of "presence," both to itself and to other beings, is to never-be-present.

In what follows, I examine what I call Eckhart's doctrine of indistinction as a precursor to Heidegger's approach to the worldhood of the world. Taking cues from textual evidence in various sections of Heidegger's texts and lecture courses, I demonstrate that Heidegger's ontology is at least partially inherited from Eckhart's henology. As a result, there is an analogous logic of indistinction operative in Eckhart's understanding of the relationship between God and creation, and the inseparability of Dasein and the world in Heidegger's phenomenology.

## 2. Meister Eckhart's Doctrine of Indistinction: From "God is Being" to "Existence itself is God"

For Thomas Aquinas, Eckhart's Dominican brother and predecessor, all creatures share in Being, since nothing is more formal or simple than Being. God's Being is identical to his essence, because God has the whole power of Being, and thus God is Being itself. Consequently, Thomas's metaphysics is predicated on the notion that "God is Being."

In his commentary on *Exodus*, Eckhart changes God is Being to "*Esse autem ipsum deus est*" ["Existence itself is God"] (Eckhart 1936, p. 36; Eckhart 1986a, p. 51).<sup>1</sup> The change is subtle, but fundamental. According to Thomas's "God is Being," God is everything included in Being, and more. Despite his ontological otherness from creatures as "proper Being," in terms of his relation to creatures, He is perfect because He contains all the perfections of Being. Finite Being is a dim share of the fullness of God's infinite Being. In contrast, Eckhart's "Existence itself is God", seemingly reduces God to the common Being of creatures. Here, Existence is the subject of the sentence, and God stands in the appositive as an adjectival noun. According to Eckhart, Being is not how one describes God; God is how one describes Existence. Yet, in Eckhart's reading, far from degrading God by reducing him to the level of creaturely existence, this change illuminates the absolute difference between God and creatures.

In his commentary on the *Book of Wisdom*, Eckhart makes sure that his readers understand that "is" and "existence" "signify the same thing, though as different parts of speech."<sup>2</sup> Thus, strictly speaking, God is the "is" in every existential statement. Every predication of any creature contains within it a reference to the God who is Existence, as Robert Dobie states in an analysis of Eckhart's philosophy of religion: "But if we understand the true existential import of the copula 'is', we must assert that 'is' refers properly to God. For 'is' refers to what is beyond and prior to every 'this or that'—that is, every finite being or creature." (Dobie 2002, p. 575) In contrast to Aquinas, Eckhart highlights that, when one makes a statement about a created substance, such as "Socrates is a human," the "is" in the predicate-copula does not refer to the Being of Socrates. The "is" of this sentence refers to God, who is the very possibility of not only Socrates in particular and the idea of humanity in general, but also the predication between them. Neither the idea of humanity, nor Socrates, participate in the Being of God, but instead, they both exist because God is the "is" that enables existence, prior to all predication of one creature to another.

In this way, Eckhart's reversal of "God is Being" to "Existence itself is God" transforms God from the Being who is pure actuality without potency, into what Bernard McGinn calls "pure possibility" (McGinn 2005, p. 131). According to Thomas Aquinas, because God's essence is His existence, there is no potency for change in God. God's actuality is his existential reality. Further, the identity of God's actual Being with his existential Being forms the foundation of the final cause of all creatures, which strives to unify their existence with their prototypical image—their reality—as produced by God, before the creation of the world. By contrast, Eckhart says that God's very essence is existence: "*Esse est deus per essentiam*" ["Existence is the very essence of God"] (Eckhart 1936, p. 37; Eckhart 1974, p. 91). Eckhart's reversal of the fundamental principle of Thomistic metaphysics means that God is the

<sup>1</sup> All references to Eckhart's work include reference to the original Latin or German text, followed reference to the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 340); "Commentary on the Book of Wisdom 1:14," in (McGinn 1986, p. 147).

possibility of the possibility of all creatures, rather than the act of Being, that by definition, excludes all potency.

Through this reversal, Eckhart has laid the basis for transforming Thomas's doctrine of participation into a doctrine of indistinction. Thomas understands that all beings participate in Being. Created substances have Being in varying degrees, and thus poorly imitate the perfections of God, who has the whole power of Being. In Eckhart's reading, God is not present in beings through a hierarchy of created substances that more or less participate in the Divine Substance: "With his whole being God is present whole and entire as much in the least thing as in the greatest." (Eckhart 1936, p. 94; Eckhart 1986a, p. 75) According to Eckhart, Existence is foreign to no being because it is the condition for existence—the *esse* enables the *ens*. Consequently, if Existence is God, God gives himself to all creatures equally: "All things possess existence immediately and equally from God alone." (Eckhart 1936, p. 77; Eckhart 1991, p. 90) In terms of intimacy with God, there is no distinction between lower and higher, noble and common. All beings receive their existence immediately and equally from God. This accords with what Eckhart says in his German sermon *Omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum desursum est*: "The nobler things are, the more widespread and common they are." (Eckhart 1986b, p. 249) Eckhart maintains that God's Oneness logically means that God is "united and is in all things under the covering of the One, and vice versa under the One's covering and property each thing grasps God."<sup>3</sup> Eckhart's shift from participation to indistinct immediacy means that, unlike Thomas, he does not believe that there are created substances that have Being in themselves. Every being, from the smallest gnat to the human intellect, receives existence totally from God, which means that "Existence always stands in the One; multiplicity as such does not exist."<sup>4</sup> God confers existence upon creatures immediately, without an intermediary stage, which means that in strict ontological terms, there can be no ontological multiplicity.

In Eckhart's view, the Oneness of God signifies His perfection because, as the Indistinct, God is wholly united to every creature as the possibility of its existence and yet wholly dissimilar from every creature as distinctly indistinct. God's perfection is posited through a collapse of the distance between Creator and creatures, that ultimately reveals the ontological gap between them. An analysis of the three paradoxical theses of the doctrine of indistinction highlights this point: "You should know that nothing is as dissimilar as the Creator and any creature. In the second place, nothing is as similar as the Creator and any creature. And in the third place, nothing is as equally dissimilar and similar to anything else as God and the creature are dissimilar and similar in the same degree." (Eckhart 1936, p. 110; Eckhart 1986a, p. 81).

In the first thesis, Eckhart asserts that Creator and creature are separated by the widest possible ontological gap. Despite his daring formulation of God as indistinct from creation, he is clear that God and creatures are somehow differentiated by their mode of Being. God is infinite and thus "not determined by the confines or limits of any genera or beings."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, creatures are precisely determined and finite because they are created: "By the fact that something is created, it is distinct and is unequal and many. By its descent from the One and the Indistinct the created thing falls from this One into indistinction and hence into inequality."<sup>6</sup> Thus, God and creature are distinguished by the very fact that created beings are themselves distinct: "But God is indistinct from every being, just as Existence Itself is indistinct from any being, as said above. But everything created, by the very fact that it is created, is distinct." (Eckhart 1936, p. 110; Eckhart 1986a, p. 81) If to be One is to be infinitely and limitlessly united to all things, to be created is to be limited and finite, and therefore, distinct from other beings and from the Indistinct itself. The dissimilarity of God and creatures is rooted in God's indistinction from creation, since "the indistinct is more distinguished from the distinct than

<sup>3</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 443); *Wisdom 7:11*, (McGinn 1986, p. 160).

<sup>4</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 443); *Wisdom 7:11*, (McGinn 1986, p. 160–61).

<sup>5</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 482); *Wisdom 7:27a*, (McGinn 1986, p. 166).

<sup>6</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 359); *Wisdom 1:14*, (McGinn 1986, p. 154).

any two distinct two things are from each other...But indistinction belongs to God's nature; distinction to the created thing's nature and idea, as we said above. Therefore, God is more distinct from each and every created thing."<sup>7</sup> God is more distinct from any being, precisely because He is indistinct from all things. Nothing is more dissimilar to a being than that which is not a being, precisely because it is indistinguishable from all beings. In contrast to Thomas, Eckhart understands the utter lack of distinction between God and creature to signify the ontological *difference* between them. Indistinction distinguishes God as wholly other to the creature.

According to the second thesis, nothing is more similar than God is to creatures. Is this not a direct contradiction of the first thesis? How does Eckhart explain this paradox? According to the first thesis, God is distinct from all creatures through his indistinction; God is distinct because He is indistinct. According to the second thesis, nothing is as similar than God and creatures, because outside of the One, there is nothing. Thus, outside of God, a being is not a being; it is nothing: "Every created being taken or conceived apart as distinct in itself from God is not a being, but is nothing. What is separate and distinct from God is separate and distinct from existence." (Eckhart 1936, p. 45; Eckhart 1986a, p. 55) If the first thesis of the doctrine of indistinction reveals the ontological difference between creature and Creator by eradicating their distinction, the second thesis posits the radical nothingness of all creatures outside of God. By contrast to Thomas's doctrine of participation, the doctrine of indistinction posits that created things have no Being in themselves whatsoever: "Nothing is as similar as God and the creature. What is as similar to something else as that which possesses and receives its total existence from the order and relation it has to something else, a thing whose total act of existence is drawn from this other and has this as an exemplar? But this is the way the creature is related to God..." (Eckhart 1936, p. 111; Eckhart 1986a, p. 82) Eckhart follows both Augustine and Boethius by positing the radical nothingness of creatures in themselves. Apart from Existence, all things are nothing: "It is evident that everything created is nothing of itself. 'He created them that they might be,' and prior to existence there is nothing. Therefore, whoever loves a creature loves nothing and becomes nothing, because love transforms the lover into the beloved."<sup>8</sup> In Eckhart's mind, God and creature are more similar than any creature is to another creature, because every creature receives its existence totally and perpetually from God. Creatures "are", only because they receive Existence. Every creature is more similar to God than any other creature, since it exists only through God.

The third and final thesis is the synthesis of the first two: "nothing is both as dissimilar and similar to anything else as God and the creature." According to the second thesis, creatures are more similar to God than anything else, because they are totally dependent upon Him for their Being. Beings have no degree of Being in themselves, and thus apart from the perpetual reception of existence, they are nothing. Yet according to the first thesis, nothing is more dissimilar than God and creatures, because God is ontologically distinguished from any creature by his indistinction from all things. It seems that, for Eckhart, when it comes to God and creatures, similarity is always dissimilarity: "to be similar to God is also to be more dissimilar...The more ways that something is like God, the more it is unlike him." (Eckhart 1936, pp. 112–13; Eckhart 1986a, pp. 82–83) Eckhart's henology apophatically strips the attributes of God so that it is impossible to represent God as an object of thought. God is not a sum total of perfections, a collection of divine attributes, or even the infinitely infinite other about whom human speech can only say what He is not.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Existence itself is God, the distinctly indistinct Unity of all things, outside of which there is nothing. Hence, to posit a creature as similar to God means to posit the indistinction of the creature from God. Yet, far from signifying an ontological

<sup>7</sup> (Eckhart 1936, pp. 489–90); *Wisdom* 7:27a, (McGinn 1986, p. 169).

<sup>8</sup> (Eckhart 1936, pp. 354–55); *Wisdom* 1:14, (McGinn 1986, p. 153).

<sup>9</sup> Dobie highlights this point helpfully, "As the presupposition of all thought, God is what is most known to us; but precisely because God never enters into our thought as an object of thought, God is also what is most hidden to us. It is analogous to human self-knowledge: there is nothing we know so well and so poorly as what is closest to us." (Dobie 2002, p. 573).

similarity between Creator and created, indistinction signifies the total ontological dissimilarity of God and creature:

Therefore, nothing is as indistinct as the one God or Unity and the numbered created thing... Nothing is as indistinct from anything as from that from which it is indistinguished by its own distinction. But everything that is numbered or created is indistinguished from God by its own distinction, as said above. Therefore, nothing is so indistinct and consequently one, for the indistinct and the One are the same.<sup>10</sup>

God is not perfect because He has the whole power of Being. God's perfection is strictly about his oneness. God is indistinctly distinguished and distinctly indistinguishable from all things, and is ontologically separated from creatures through a relation of absolute ontological dependence.

Instead of conceiving God as the Unmoved Mover who causes all things without being influenced by them, for Eckhart, God is the *Always Moving Immoveable* that gives Himself to all creatures, high and low (Eckhart 1936, p. 43; Eckhart 1986a, p. 54). The creature as an accident can only exist through the existence of the one Divine Substance, which itself, is the always moving pure possibility of existence: "Outside of existence, and without existence, everything is nothing, even what has been made." (Eckhart 1936, p. 53; Eckhart 1974, p. 102) There is no reality or perfection in creatures—they "are", only because of God's giving. The Being of beings is always received and in the process of being received as a loan.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. A Worldly Mystic: Heidegger's Early Engagement with Meister Eckhart

After finishing his dissertation on Duns Scotus in 1916, Heidegger developed his truly distinct philosophical voice by diverging from Neo-Kantian epistemology and ontology through a search for the transcendent ground of experience, as the Harvard historian Peter Gordon summarizes: "It is this theme above all—the rejection of ontological *pluralism* and the assertion of an ontological *unity* deeper than any particular object domains—that most reveals the early Heidegger's departure from the methodological consensus of Neo-Kantianism." (Gordon 2010, p. 63) During the years after his doctoral work (1917–1919), Heidegger recorded a number of notes on medieval mysticism, some of which were intended to be used in a course on the same topic in 1919. These notes mark the beginning of the shift in Heidegger's thinking, that would lead to his break with the notion that philosophy's goal is to construct a comprehensive worldview.

Despite the fact that the course was eventually canceled, the notes reflect a thinker who understood certain medieval mystics to be an invaluable resource for understanding the transcendent ground of factual life (see (Kisiel 2010, pp. 309–28)). More specifically, the notes reveal that medieval mysticism reflected, to Heidegger, how a primordial ontological *transcendent*—what he calls at times the Absolute, the ground of the soul, or the unrestricted unity—enables the stream of human experience to be experienced as a relational whole. Heidegger specifically engaged Meister Eckhart in order to understand how a transcendent ground grounds human experience, but not as a foundational First Principle. Rather, he developed the notion of "world," coupled with Dasein's mortal temporality, as the key to understanding the ontological unity of all beings. Overall, Heidegger's notes on mysticism are the earliest explorations of how a non-metaphysical and pre-cognitive ground governs the self's experience of other beings and itself.

Heidegger realizes that if experience is conditioned by a primordial ontological unity that gives the flow of the stream of experience, the formulation of this unity is intimately related to the formulation

<sup>10</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 491); *Wisdom 18:14–15*, (McGinn 1986, p. 170).

<sup>11</sup> (Eckhart 1936, p. 35); (Eckhart 1974, p. 89): "So God created all things not like other craftsmen, so that they stand outside of himself, or beside himself, or apart from himself. Rather he called them out of nothingness, that is from non-existence to existence, so that they might find and receive and have it in him; for he himself is existence."



of transcendence. Heidegger's concern with experience centers on that which transcends Dasein, so as to ground it. This is reflected in one of the notes inexplicably omitted from the *Gesamtausgabe*:

'Living experience' as the sphere of life as such is however not expanded and regarded fundamentally by way of an absolute primal science of experience, but rather proceeds to transcendences regarded as a formal ontological lawfulness—an *eidetic*—which somehow possesses the absolute givenness in-itself common to the absolute sphere of lived experience; a transcendent absolute theoretical science: world of ideas in God. (Cited in (Kiesel 2010, p. 317))

This "absolute givenness" is distinct from the epistemological categories formulated by Kant. Heidegger is not looking for a map of the categories that structure the self's experience of different kinds of objects. He is trying to understand the givenness of beings as a whole, according to their ontological ground.

Heidegger finds, in mystical ontologies such as Eckhart's, on whose theology he comments here, a means for understanding the self's pre-cognitive and pre-reflective experience of the world: "Elimination of all chance, multiplicity, time. Absoluteness of object and subject in the sense of radical unity and as such unity of both: I am it, and it is I."<sup>12</sup> It is not difficult to detect echoes of Eckhart's doctrine of indistinction in Heidegger's thought. His interest in the ontological unity of all beings has led him to notice how Eckhart posits the radical unity of the self with the transcendent absolute—Eckhart's indistinct God: "From this the namelessness of God and ground of the soul. In this sphere, no opposition—and therefore the problem of the precedence of *intellectus* [intellect] or *voluntas* [will] no longer belong to this sphere." (Heidegger 1975a, GA 60, p. 316; Heidegger 2010, p. 240) For Heidegger, Eckhart's henology frees epistemology from the endless debates about the nature of the categories and their relation to the rational *ego*. By contrast, the ontological ground is so radically immanent to the soul that it transcends the soul as the indeterminate Absolute: "Not the not-yet-determinable and not-yet-determined—rather, that which is essentially without determination in general is the primordial object, the absolute."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the absolute sphere of lived-experience—that is, the sphere of experience taken as a whole without regional demarcations that divide "life" into different epistemological or ontological domains—is governed by the indeterminable givenness of the Absolute.

Accordingly, Heidegger realizes that, within Eckhart's schema, the ontological primacy of the Absolute as the transcendentally immanent ground of experience prevented Eckhart from having to posit the ground of the soul in opposition to the intellect: "Eckhart is not in favor of theoretical reason as juxtaposed to the will, but rather of the primacy of the soul's ground, which is, mystical-theoretically, ranked above both." (Heidegger 1975a, GA 60, p. 318; Heidegger 2010, p. 241) The Absolute transcendent, which is radically unified with the "I," has ontological primacy over the intellect or the will. Even when the self is unaware of the ground or lacks understanding of it, the ground always already functions as that which enables the self's possibility.

In this light, it is not surprising that in the 1927 lecture course *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger singles out the Dominican as an exception to the logic of production, wherein beings must accord themselves with a *prima causa* being which is Being itself, endemic to the history of Western thought. He suggests that Meister Eckhart's ontology eschews the logic of knowing and seeing, because of the way in which he transforms the notion of a ground. That is, Eckhart does not understand God to be the being whose "essence is his existence," and thus the being who is

<sup>12</sup> (Heidegger 1975a, GA 60, p. 316); (Heidegger 2010, p. 240): "Ausschaltung jeder Veränderung, Vielheit, Ziet. Absolutheit von Objekt und Subjekt im Sinne radikaler Einheit und als solche Einheit beider: ich bin es, und es ist ich." All references to Heidegger's work list the standard Gesamtausgabe (GA) German edition, followed by reference to the English translation.

<sup>13</sup> (Heidegger 1975a, GA 60, p. 316); (Heidegger 2010, p. 240): "Nicht das Noch-nicht-Bestimmbare und Noch-nicht-Bestimmte, sondern das wesentlich überhaupt Bestimmungslose als solches ist Urgegenstand, Absolutes."

pure actuality without any possibility. In Heidegger's reading, Eckhart's mysticism transformed the idea of essence, and thus provides a peculiar understanding of the relation between Being and beings: "In this attempt mysticism arrives at a peculiar speculation, peculiar because it transforms the idea of essence in general, which is an ontological determination of a being...into a being and makes the ontological ground of a being, its possibility, its essence, into what is properly actual." (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 127; Heidegger 1982, p. 90) For Eckhart, the "ontological determination of a being" is understood as "its possibility." The ontological ground of a being is that which enables its possibilities, rather than that which produces an image of its actuality. Heidegger goes on to point out that, according to Eckhart's mysticism, God refuses "every existential determination" (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, pp. 127–28; Heidegger 1982, p. 90). In Heidegger's reading of Eckhart, God is not the supreme Being who founds all beings, because in strict terms, God does not "exist." The ground of all possibility is not the foundation of beings, but "the purest indeterminate possibility of everything possible, pure nothing. He is the nothing over against the concept of every creature, over against every determinate possible and actualized being." (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 128; Heidegger 1982, p. 91).<sup>14</sup>

According to Heidegger, Eckhart was not interested in God as the necessary and perfect First Being, but in Godhead, which is "the essence—the essence to which, as it were, every existential determination must still be refused."<sup>15</sup> As sketched out in the previous chapter, for Eckhart, God does not exist—God is the possibility of all possibility. According to Heidegger, Eckhart's interest in "Godhead" signifies that God is not the Highest Being that produces all beings, but "pure nothing," because He is "the most universal being, the purest indeterminate possibility of everything possible."<sup>16</sup> He reads in Eckhart an understanding of the ontological constitution of beings by a ground that is "pure possibility," instead of a ground of Being that is pure actuality without possibility.

Heidegger concludes that the experience of the world as a meaningful whole reflects the inherent religiosity of the self's experience of the world, as he expresses in a comment on Schleiermacher's approach to religion: "Religion is the specifically religiously intentional, emotional reference of each content of experience to an infinite whole as fundamental meaning." (Heidegger 1975a, GA 60, p. 321; Heidegger 2010, p. 243) His reference to an infinite whole as fundamental meaning is not meant to convey a metaphysical foundation for making sense of the self's experience of the world. Instead, he is interested in expressing how the "unrestricted unity" that shapes religious experience in the work of Meister Eckhart, Bernard of Clairvaux, and even Friedrich Schleiermacher, is analogous to the ground from which Dasein is held, even when it has no cognitive understanding or recognition of it. He was struck by how the "immediacy of religious experience" reveals covered-over elements of "the vivacity of experience [*Erlebnislebendigkeit*]" (Heidegger 1975a, GA 60, p. 315; Heidegger 2010, p. 239). This ground constitutes a primordial unity to the self's experience of the world.

#### 4. Indistinction as Transcendence: The Worlding of the World

Heidegger develops the insight gleaned from Eckhart and other religious figures in his 1929 essay "On the Essence of Ground," in order to phenomenologically reformulate the theme of transcendence. In this essay, Heidegger is clear that transcendence means "surpassing": "as a 'relation' that passes 'from' something 'to' something" (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 137; Heidegger 1998, p. 107). This includes three basic elements: a "toward which," which is the goal of the surpassing; something that is surpassed; and that which does the surpassing. Heidegger had already elucidated this basic tripartite structure in his understanding of transcendence in the history of Western philosophy and

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger's observation that in Eckhart God is "pure nothing" is significant for the way that in "What is Metaphysics?" Heidegger posits the transcendence of Dasein as "being held out into the nothing."

<sup>15</sup> (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, pp. 127–28); (Heidegger 1982, p. 90): "das Wesen, dem man noch gleichsam jede Existenzbestimmung absprechen."

<sup>16</sup> (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 128; Heidegger 1982, p. 91): "das allgemeinste Wesen, als die reinste noch unbestimmte Möglichkeit alles Möglichen."

the determination of transcendence in relation to how the ground of Being is conceived in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*:

In the popular philosophical sense of the word, the transcendent is the being that lies beyond, the otherworldly being. Frequently the term is used to designate God. In the theory of knowledge the transcendent is understood as what lies beyond the subject's sphere [*Subjekt-Sphäre*], things in themselves, objects [*Objekte*]. In this sense the transcendent is that which lies outside the subject. It is, then, that which steps beyond or has already stepped beyond the boundaries of the subject—as if it had ever been inside them—as if the Dasein steps beyond itself only when it comports itself toward a thing. (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 424; Heidegger 1982, pp. 298–99)

He argues, in both the 1927 lectures and the 1929 essay, that the human Dasein, because of its understanding of Being, is the transcendent—that which lies beyond. Dasein does not transcend itself and other beings toward an extra-worldly being or “thing,” nor does it transcend itself toward beings that appear in its purview. As a result of its inherent understanding of Being, Dasein is always already beyond itself. Dasein is as transcendence: “We name world that toward which Dasein as such transcends, and shall now determine transcendence as Being-in-the-world.”<sup>17</sup> In terms of the ontological difference between beings and Being, Dasein surpasses being toward the world by way of its understanding of Being. Dasein's understanding of Being is the worldhood of the world. Dasein's world is not beyond or outside of beings in a sense of transcendent separation. World is the unity and totality of beings that enables Dasein's spatial awareness of itself and other beings: “Whatever the beings that have on each particular occasion been surpassed in any Dasein, they are not simply a random aggregate [*zusammengefunden*]; rather, beings, however they may be individually determined and structured, are surpassed in advance as a whole [*Ganzheit*].” (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 139; Heidegger 1998) According to Heidegger, Dasein always already transcends all beings, due to Dasein's ontological understanding of Being. In this way, it's primordial transcendence of beings enables its ontic orientation toward itself and all other beings.

Heidegger attends to this in the third major section of the 1927 *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, which is dedicated to exploring the possibility of the unity of the concept of Being, in light of the multiplicity of ways of Being that are manifested by different beings. This section is a response to the question he first asked during the early Freiburg period, that takes into account the fundamental principle of Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*: How can philosophy understand the ontological unity of beings without conflating Being with beings? He sets up his investigation as follows: “How do the beings with which we dwell show themselves to us primarily and for the most part?” (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 231; Heidegger 1982, p. 163) Heidegger explains that Dasein's primary mode of Being-with things is not to apprehend them or to reflect upon them. To consider cognition as primary is to ignore the ontological difference. Reflection is derivative and secondary: “What is primarily given instead—even if not in explicit and express consciousness—is a thing-contexture [*ein Dingzusammenhang*].” (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 232; Heidegger 1982, p. 163) This thing-contexture is comprised of beings taken as equipment—beings that each have a “specific functionality [*Zeug-zum*]” within the relational whole (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 233; Heidegger 1982, p. 164). Thus, beings are first encountered in terms of an “in-order-to”, related to the work to be done or issue with which Dasein is reckoning (Heidegger 1975d, GA 2, p. 69; Heidegger 1962, p. 98). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains that the thing-contexture is comprised of beings that appear to Dasein as “ready-to-hand [*Zuhanden*],” because they display a specific functionality within the “referential totality within which the equipment is encountered” (Heidegger 1975d, GA 2, p. 70; Heidegger 1962, p. 99). Beings ready-to-hand, display an “immanent reference” for Dasein, related to a “for-which” and

<sup>17</sup> (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 139); (Heidegger 1998, p. 109): “Wir nennen das, woraufhin das Dasein als solches transzendiert, die Welt und bestimmen jetzt die Transzendenz als In-der-Welt-sein.”



“in-order-to.” Dasein does not cognitively apprehend the relational unity of equipment, but instead, “circumspectively” finds its bearing in regard to them. Everyday circumspection is not concerned with the essence or nature of individual beings. It is the non-cognitive, pre-reflective enactment of the “in-order-to” of beings within a referential whole, for the sake of the “towards-which” of countless everyday spatial tasks and linguistic issues. In its everyday comportment toward the world, Dasein finds itself amidst a relational totality of beings through which and for which it orients itself in the environment in which it finds itself.

As such, it is not necessary for world to be conceptually grasped in order for Dasein to surpass beings toward Being, as he outlines in the 1929 essay:

Here it is not necessary that this wholeness be expressly conceptualized, its belonging to Dasein can be veiled, the expanse of this whole is changeable. This wholeness is understood without the whole of those beings that are manifest being explicitly grasped [*erfaßt*] or indeed ‘completely’ investigated [*durchforscht*] in their specific connections, domains, and layers. Yet the understanding of this wholeness, an understanding that in each case reaches ahead and embraces, is a surpassing in the direction of world [*Übersteig zur Welt*]. (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 156; Heidegger 1998, p. 121)

Accordingly, world signifies the originary unveiling of beings, according to Dasein’s apprehension of the unveiling of Being. Beings appear according to Dasein’s understanding of Being. The surpassing of individual beings for the referential whole of world does not occur at certain times, when Dasein wills itself to intentionally apprehend certain beings or to pass over beings toward Being. For Dasein, the surpassing of beings toward world is the constitution of its existence: “Surpassing occurs as a whole [*Ganzheit*] and never merely at certain times and not at other times. It does not, for instance, occur merely or in the first place as a theoretical grasping of objects. Rather, with the fact of Dasein, such surpassing is there.” (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 139; Heidegger 1998, p. 109)

According to Heidegger, Dasein passes over particular beings toward world because world is the totality of involvements that form a relational totality for the sake of Dasein’s Being. Dasein confers such a significance to beings via world, according to its very Being, that is, as a being whose Being is always an issue. Thus, Heidegger signals that the transcendence of Dasein is Being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 139; Heidegger 1998, p. 109), and Being-in-the-world is “a non-thematic circumspective absorption in references or assignments constitutive for the readiness-to-hand of a totality of equipment. Any concern is already as it is, because of some familiarity with the world.” (Heidegger 1975d, GA 2, p. 77; Heidegger 1962, p. 107) The world, as the relational whole of beings, is that toward-which Dasein surpasses itself—or more precisely, that into which Dasein is always already beyond itself. This leads to the question of the nature of world and Dasein’s relationship to it. How is world related to Being? How does Dasein surpass beings for Being by its inherent submission to the world in which it always already finds itself?

In attempting to answer these questions, Heidegger is determined to “philosophize”, by refusing to ontically explain the ground of Dasein’s lived experience. Accordingly, he is clear that world is not a “being” toward-which Dasein transcends itself: “It is not extant [*Vorhanden*] like things.” (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 237; Heidegger 1982, p. 166) Furthermore, world is not the sum of the parts that comprise the totality of beings in the cosmos: “The world is not the sum total of extant entities. It is, quite generally, not extant at all.” (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 237; Heidegger 1982, p. 166) In the same way that Heidegger read Eckhart’s “Godhead” to signify that which does not exist, but which confers the pure possibility of existence to beings, Heidegger’s notion of world signifies that which enables Dasein to comport itself toward beings and thus enables Dasein’s possibilities for existence, even though world itself does not “exist” in the ontic sense. Thus, Dasein’s transcendence is a surpassing toward world and a world from which it is inseparable. Dasein’s mode of Being is a matter of transcendence toward that which is not a being, but instead, is distinctly indistinct from Dasein.

World signifies the relational totality of Dasein's lived experience, which is enabled by its apprehension of Being. This allows beings to appear, for Dasein, as a unified whole, precisely because it holds Dasein beyond beings toward Being. Thus, Dasein "ex-ists" in the sense that its mode of Being is a surpassing toward world, taken as the relational whole of beings:

The structure of Being-in-the-world makes manifest the essential peculiarity of the Dasein, that it projects a world for itself, and it does this not subsequently and occasionally but, rather, the projecting [*Vorwurf*] of the world belongs to the Dasein's Being. In this projection the Dasein has always already *stepped out beyond itself*, ex-sistere, *it is in a world*. (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, pp. 241–42; Heidegger 1982, p. 299)

In this sense, Dasein does not truly surpass itself for world, a separate entity, or being that exists outside of or beyond Dasein. World is that toward-which Dasein transcends, but Dasein does not exist apart from a world. Thus, for Heidegger, Dasein is indistinct from world—indistinct from existence: "Self and world belong together in the single entity, the Dasein. Self and world are not two beings, like subject and object, I and thou, but self and world are the basic determination of the Dasein itself in the unity of the structure of the Being-in-the-world."<sup>18</sup> In its indistinction from world, Dasein is the transcendent. It is simultaneously that which is beyond itself into the world that worlds for it, and the world itself.

Therefore, the formulation of worldhood signifies the ontological formulation of the transcendence of Dasein:

If the world is the transcendent, then what is *truly transcendent* is the Dasein. With this we first arrive at *genuine ontological sense of transcendence*... The world is transcendent because, belonging to the structure of Being-in-the-world, it constitutes stepping-over-to...as such... Because the Dasein is constituted by Being-in-the-world, it is a being which in its Being is out *beyond itself*. (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, pp. 424–25; Heidegger 1982, p. 299)

Each being in Dasein's world has a "specific functionality" which signifies a "what-for" or "for-the-sake-of which", related to Dasein's possibilities of Being: "As the respective wholeness of that for the sake of which Dasein exists in each case, world is brought before Dasein through Dasein itself. This bringing world before itself is the originary projection of the possibilities of Dasein, insofar as, in the midst of beings, it is to be able to comport itself toward such beings."<sup>19</sup> World is the projection of possibilities for Dasein. World "worlds" according to Dasein's potentiality for Being, but not according to Dasein's will or cognition. The relational totality of world is projected over beings so that they only appear in relation to the potentiality for Dasein's Being. As a result, Dasein's implicit understanding of the ontological difference is projected over beings so as to both surpass them and allow them to appear for Dasein: "Yet just as it does not explicitly grasp that which has been projected, this projection of world also always casts [*Überwurf*] the projected world [*entworfen welt*] over beings. This prior casting-over [*Überwurf*] first makes it possible for beings as such to manifest themselves." (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 158; Heidegger 1998, p. 123) Dasein is perpetually given Being in the form of the possibilities cast over it in the form of the indistinct world. Dasein's transcendence means that world is indistinct from Dasein, but world is distinct from all beings, even though world includes all beings. In this way, world is distinctly indistinct.

Therefore, Dasein exists indistinctly from world, because it is only in and through the worlding of the world that Dasein can reckon with its inherent and incessant having-to-be. World is the possibility

<sup>18</sup> (Heidegger 1975b, GA 24, p. 422); (Heidegger 1982, p. 297): "Selbst und Welt sind nicht zwei Seiende wie Subjekt und Objekt, auch nicht wie Ich und Du, sondern Selbst und Welt sind ein der Einheit der Struktur des In-der-welt-seins die Grundbestimmung des Daseins selbst."

<sup>19</sup> (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 158); (Heidegger 1998, pp. 122–23): "Die Welt wird als die jeweilige Ganzheit des Umwillen eines Daseins durch dieses selbst vor es selbst gebracht. Dieses Vor-sich-selbst-bringen von Welt ist der ursprüngliche Entwurf der Möglichkeiten des Daseins, sofern es inmitten von Seiendem zu diesem sich soll verhalten können."

of Dasein's possibilities. Dasein has thus always already submitted to the worldhood of the world as the condition of its own existence: "If, however, it is a surpassing in the direction of world that first gives rise to selfhood, then world shows itself to be that for the sake of which Dasein exists." (Heidegger 1975c, GA 9, p. 156; Heidegger 1998, p. 121) If Eckhart posits Existence as God, then in terms of Dasein, Heidegger formulates Existence as world. Further, if for Eckhart, creatures are united to God as indistinct, but God is not united to creatures indistinctly, then for Heidegger, Dasein is indistinct from world. World is given to Dasein as the possibility of Dasein, and this is Dasein's transcendence.

In this reading, it is possible to read the notion of world as resonant with Eckhart's doctrine of indistinction. Heidegger read in Eckhart, a unity between God and creature that meant they are indistinguishable. For Heidegger's Eckhart, the ground of the soul was not a being, but that which enabled the possibility of all beings. Heidegger transposed this formulation into a phenomenological register by explicating Dasein as simultaneously transcendent toward the world for which it exists and Dasein as world. Dasein is indistinguishable from the world toward which it transcends itself. In a similar manner to Eckhart's God, world is always already so immanent to Dasein that Dasein is indistinguishable from it and always so transcendent from Dasein and all other beings that it cannot be located, grasped, or represented as a being. The possibility of Dasein's "da" is enabled by the projection of possibilities in its world, through its world, and as world.

## 5. Conclusions

While some attention has been paid to Heidegger's reading of Eckhart (Schürmann 1997), Heidegger's commentators have focused much of their attention on his readings of Paul, Augustine, and other religious figures. This has meant overlooking the textual cues in his early Freiburg lectures and other lecture courses concerning Eckhart's influence on his approach to worldhood and the Being of Dasein. While there is not enough evidence to draw a straight line from Eckhart's henology to Heidegger's understanding of the worldhood of the world, the foregoing analysis has sought to demonstrate that the existing evidence points to similarities in their peculiar iterations of transcendence as indistinction, which leads to a larger point about the relationship between secular philosophy and theology.

Just as young students of mathematics often first comprehend the logic of geometric scale by learning about artistic perspective—without reducing art to maths, or maths to art—the philosopher may comprehend the contours of the human's relationship to the world through an engagement with religious cosmologies. Therefore, even if Heidegger does not ascribe to Eckhart's theological vision of creation, and even if Heidegger himself might resist this reading, I would argue that Heidegger was able to more fully and vibrantly articulate his understanding of Dasein's transcendence as a result of his engagement with Eckhart's mysticism. In this way, Heidegger's reading of Eckhart demonstrates how philosophers—who maintain a methodological atheism and perhaps even a personal atheism—can philosophize *with* theology, rather than despite or against it.

In this sense, Heidegger's reading of Eckhart provides a lens through which scholars might understand the surprising, yet enduring, relationship between the atheist traditions of continental philosophy and theology that has developed in the twentieth-century. Are philosophy's "turn to religion" and the "theological turn in French phenomenology" indicative of the radical theological impulses in twentieth-century Continental thought, or of philosophy's secularization of theology? In other words, is philosophy always theology, as John Milbank claims? Or has philosophy simply smuggled theology back into its fold, as Dominique Janicaud maintains? The foregoing analysis suggests that the answer is neither. Analogy is predicated on difference. It is the recognition of difference that enables the exploration of similarity. Yet, the discovery of parallel logics does not, and should not, result in the reduction of one discourse to the other—in this case, theology to philosophy, or vice versa. Rather, as the case of Heidegger's reading of Eckhart demonstrates, turning one's eyes to the logics of a different cosmology, anthropology, or ontology, may provide the eyes to see more fully what is at play in one's own approach to the human, the world, and the relationship between

them. Viewed through this lens, it's not surprising, nor problematic, that the henology of a radical medieval Dominican might help a modern phenomenologist to see how the world really works.

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