

Relating to ourselves without a self: Eckhart and Neuroscience

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This paper is not going to be about the neuroscience of mystical states and meditation practices. I'm going to focus instead on parallels between Eckhart's texts, particularly the German sermons, and some of the findings of recent research into 'social cognition'—that's to say research into brain processes underpinning the way we relate to others and to ourselves. Both Eckhart's texts and recent papers on social neuroscience question models of identity that take individual consciousness as a focus, and both, as a consequence, promote humility and honesty in the way we relate to ourselves and others. However, to set out the terms of the argument to follow, I want to start with a few comments on the material that otherwise won't be the main focus—namely, research into the psychological and bodily effects of meditation, mindfulness and mystical states.

I. Questioning the purposes of meditation research

Now that it's possible to monitor what's happening in somebody's brain without opening their skull, or sticking needles into their head, there has been a good deal of investigation into the neural activity that accompanies forms of spiritual experience. For instance, there have been studies which seek to locate the parts of the brain that are active when Carmelite nuns are 'subjectively in a state of union with God,' or to be more exact when they are recollecting the state of union, since that in fact makes

the same neurons fire (Beauregard and Paquette, 2006). Similarly, there are studies of the blood flow rate in different regions of the brain of Franciscan nuns meditating for a period of 50 minutes (Newberg et al., 2003). Studies have not been confined to the Christian tradition. The same group from the University of Pennsylvania that studied the Franciscan nuns, also investigated the blood flow rate of a group of people with experience meditating in the Buddhist tradition, and saw that comparable effects could be observed despite the fact that the Franciscan meditative practices focused on words where the Buddhist ones consisted in visualization exercises (Newberg et al., 2010). There have also been studies showing that people who meditate regularly have more grey matter in their lower brain stem than those who don't. The lower stem controls aspects of the cardio-respiratory system—heart beat and breathing—so this difference could account for some of the other distinguishing characteristics which have been observed in the bodily lives of those who meditate when compared with those who don't (Vestergaard-Poulsen et al., 2009). Such differences include lower levels of disruption to the immune system in stressful situations (Pace et al., 2009). A link has also been established between regular meditation and the ability to process emotionally ambiguous information (Nielsen and Kaszniak, 2006). Indeed, long-term meditation has been supposed to foster the capacity to react flexibly in different situations since it 'decreased rumination, decreased fear of emotion, and increased behavioural self-regulation' (Lykins and Baer, 2009). In a word, it helped to make you decisive. Such studies prompt the author of a survey of recent developments in the field published in the journal *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* to suggest: 'Meditation is now widely accepted as a mind-body technique for maintaining holistic health and wellness' (Horowitz, 2010).

Not all the research has been positive. One critical study offers a window onto

the varieties of human self-deception in showing that meditation doesn't increase your actual awareness of your heart beat, it only makes you report your erroneous convictions with more confidence (Khalsa et al., 2008). Other researchers have similarly questioned how reliably people can give information about the quality and magnitude of their mindfulness (Davidson, 2010). The difficulty of pinning down what causes what has been pointed out, too: do people have particular brains because they meditate regularly, or do they meditate regularly because they have the sort of brains that dispose them towards such habits (Newberg et al., 2010)? Finally, Uffe Schjoedt has observed the cultural limitations of studies which portray spirituality in an artificially uniform fashion by focusing on Christian forms of religious experience and Buddhist practices of meditation, when much of the population of the world lives in cultures with no direct equivalents of these states and practices (Schjoedt, 2009).

Critics have thus pointed out the gap between what people who meditate say about their experience and what can be measured and observed. They have drawn attention to the problem of establishing what causes what, and pointed out that the range of religious practices to be found in the world is wider than is suggested by the relatively narrow focus on Christian and Buddhist traditions characteristic of existing research programmes. My own worries about this research focus on the question of purpose, that is to say, on the reasons we might have for praying, meditating or being mindful. The existing studies betray a tendency to treat meditation instrumentally. This can occur either because the research is used as a way of providing testable evidence for spiritual experience, or because meditative practices are thought to promote health and well-being. A book on *The Mindful Brain* by Daniel Siegel, who is Co-Director of the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center in Southern California, is a case in point. On the page that gives the Library of Congress

publication data for the book there's also a note that says: 'The Mindful Brain is a trademark of Mind Your Brain, Inc' (Siegel, 2007). Siegel's interest in mindfulness is also an interest in a programme of seminars, books, cds and dvds that help people improve their sense of well-being, and adapt to the stress of their busy lives. As the title of an hour-long interview available in mp3 format puts it, it allows them to become: 'Better Parents, Better Spouses, Better People.' He is thus harnessing an interest in the moments of pure being and pure seeing cultivated by quasi-Buddhist techniques of self-monitoring to an agenda that is ultimately instrumental: promoting a Southern Californian form of 'wellness' or social adaptability. He explicitly acknowledges that it is a paradoxical undertaking to have as one's goal a suspension of goal-oriented responses (Siegel, 2007). But this self-questioning does not encourage him to reformulate the project as a whole, which remains that of promoting 'wellness.' The question remains as to why 'wellness' should be something we should want to pursue in the first place.

To clarify: the problem with Siegel's approach, or with a similar interest in health and happiness to be found in comparable studies is not the instrumental approach in itself, but the particular model of the good life that it promotes. I'm happy to follow the sort of instrumental argument made about religion by the American pragmatist philosopher William James at the turn of the twentieth century. In James's view, religion is valuable and indeed true to the extent that it has a practical effect in people's everyday lives. For the pragmatist James, the 'only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted. If theological ideas should do this, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was

pragmatically so successful' (James, 1991). James's approach will seem especially helpful if we can give up the idea that concepts describe a world that is 'out there' in some way entirely independent of us, and suppose instead that they are tools that we have developed for doing things in the world. Concepts reflect a shared culture, and its particular way of relating to the world and to other people. They work, like the rituals of promising or threatening or of naming a ship because, as Austin, the philosopher of ordinary language pointed out, they are used by the right person, at the right time in the right way (Austin, 1975). They depend on habits and expectations that we have in common as we together produce the world we live in. The limitation of Siegel's approach to mindfulness, or the approach of other researchers to the spiritual practices they investigate, is not the fact that they put it to use—how could they not?—but the way they know too well in advance what would count as useful, namely what Siegel calls: 'deeper capacities for self-regulation, empathy, and compassion: a flexible and friendly mind' (Siegel, 2007). The result is the pursuit of a laudable but ultimately managerial agenda. This is in stark contrast to the non-agenda proposed by Eckhart in his model of people who are, as he puts it, free 'to wait on God in the here and now, and to follow Him alone in the light wherein He would show you what to do and what not to do, every moment freely and new, as if you had nothing else and neither would nor could do otherwise' (Vol. 1 72-73) (Eckhart, 1979).

There appears to be no equivalent relinquishing of control when Siegel or other researchers study practices of self-abandonment. In contrast, to be true to the tradition of self-abandonment of which Eckhart is a representative, it is necessary not to have a view of where we're trying to get to. As Eckhart suggests in the sermon on spiritual poverty (Q52/Pfeiffer-Walshe 87), this can even entail giving up the very

idea of God if it gets in the way of whatever it is that we can feel unfolding through us. Similarly, the cleric in the anonymous 'Sister Catherine' treatise, which was written in the Strasbourg of the 1310s in which Eckhart was also active, observes that one of the obstacles inhibiting the development of the beguine who is his spiritual charge is that she has too fixed an idea of what she wants, namely God (Schweitzer, 1981). A spiritual pragmatism does not adopt conceptual tools because they promote well-being or a belief in God, but because they help to surprise us out of our attachments, and enable us to stop getting in the way of whatever it is that moves through us and to which we feel a connection. Both Eckhart and recent empirical work on the forms and mechanisms of social cognition can help to surprise us out of our preconceptions and take us beyond our plans and self-image. In the rest of this talk, I want to set out this parallel in more detail. As an example of Eckhart's thought, I will focus on his sermon on John 16.16 (Q69/Pfeiffer-Walshe 42) in which he reflects on what it is that inhibits us as we try to see God. After a detailed reading of this sermon, I will turn to recent research into aspects of human behaviour for which there cannot be said to be an conscious agent: on the one hand, responses which occur without our explicit knowledge, of the sort studied by John Bargh working in Yale on forms of automaticity; on the other hand, forms of shared activity brought about by the mirror neurons serendipitously discovered at the University of Parma in the mid-1990s. Scientific research into the way the mind works doesn't give us certainty about what meditation or the experience of God is. It rather helps to strip away our sense of what it is we're looking for, to deliver us up to the process of life's unfolding through us. Eckhart and scientific investigation can alike challenge us to let go of ourselves.

II. The person without foundations: Eckhart's Sermon Q69/Walshe 42

The sermon that I want to focus on takes as its text an excerpt from the farewell discourses that Jesus delivers to his disciples in John's gospel at the Last Supper after he has told Judas to 'Go ahead and do what you're going to do [*ὁ ποιεῖς ποίησον τάχιστα*]' (Funk et al., 1997). As Robert Funk has pointed out, the discourses resemble a patriarchal testament: the final instructions of a dying father or religious leader (Funk et al., 1997). They include the admonition that there will be a time, in the interim before the arrival of the Holy Spirit, when the disciples don't see Jesus: 'After a time you won't see me anymore [*Μικρὸν καὶ οὐκέτι θεωρεῖτε με*].' In the Latin translation Eckhart used, this is rendered as: *Modicum et iam non videbitis me*, and it's the 'modicum' that might inhibit our vision of or access to God that, as we shall see, is the starting point of Eckhart's preaching.

The sermon is dated from the early 1300s, the period when Eckhart returned to Germany after his first term as a Master in Paris from 1302-1303, because it is thematically so close to the *Parisian Questions* (Largier and Quint, 1993). Eckhart appeals to a power in the soul he calls 'intellect' [*vernünfticheit*]. Towards the end of the sermon, he explicitly contrasts intellect with the will and with love. This apparent repudiation of the will, and the academic setting to which the sermon has been linked suggest disagreements between Franciscans and Dominicans over the relative merits of the will and the intellect as a possible context for the sermon (Ruh, 1985). The things that Eckhart says about the intellect, however, are quite hard to square with what we might now think we understand by the word, when we say of someone they have a 'powerful intellect', or rebuke someone to 'use their intellect.' In our everyday usage, the word suggests habits of analysis and scrutiny combined with creativity. But

that's not quite how the term functions in Eckhart's sermon, as I'll be showing. So rather than explain the sermon in terms of institutional rivalries, and the contrast between the intellect and the will, it's worth looking in detail at the progress of the argument, and reconstructing what happens during the sermon itself. Where does Eckhart take us, and what are the tools he uses along the way?

The sermon starts with the idea that the slightest thing attached to our soul could block our relation to God: 'Anything, however small, adhering to the soul, prevents us from seeing God' (p. 293). It finishes with the idea of intellect breaking through to the Godhead where the attributes otherwise associated with God of goodness, wisdom, truth and evening God himself have been abandoned: 'In very truth, [intellect] is as little satisfied with God as with a stone or tree' (p. 298). The overall movement of the sermon thus takes us from the hope of an unimpeded vision of God to a unity with, or breakthrough to, the divinity that no longer needs the idea of God. What's interesting is the way this break through has a physical and rhetorical side, even as it seems to abandon all physical attachments. At the beginning of the sermon it might seem that Eckhart counsels us to leave the world behind. To find God, we are told, the soul 'must leap over and pass beyond all creatures [Diu sêle, diu got vinden sol, diu muoz überhüpfen und überspringen alle crêatûren]' (Walshe, p. 294; Largier, II, p. 44). However, the same creatures that are here being hopped over return later in the text in a very different guise. If at the beginning of the text they are to be transcended, in their subsequent appearance they are themselves striving and working to become like God (p. 296). Indeed, Eckhart warns his listeners that this process of striving towards God occurs whether or not they condone or take cognisance of it: 'whether you like it or not, and whether you know it or not, nature secretly and in her inmost parts seeks and aims at God ['wan, ez sî dir liep oder leit,

dû wizzest ez oder dû enwizzest ez niht: doch heimlîche in dem innigsten suochet oder meinet diu natûre got]' (Walshe, p. 297; Largier, II, p. 48). Thus, an argument that seems to encourage detachment from the world, becomes an affirmation of the life of the body: 'nature seeks neither eating nor drinking, not clothes, nor anything whatsoever, unless God were in it; she seeks privily, struggling and striving ever more to find God in it [Diu nature enmeinet weder ezzen noch trinken noch kleider noch gemach noch nihtes an allen dingen, enwære gotes dar ine niht; si suochet heimliche und jaget und krieget iermêr nâch dem, daz si gotes dar inne vindet]' (Walshe, p. 297; Largier, II, pp. 48-50).

As the sermon progresses, therefore, the exhortation to leap over creaturely existence is changed into a new vision of the life we appeared to leave behind, so that even 'comfort' reappears, or the Middle High German word *gemach*, which produces the term *gemächlich* in Modern German, an adjective which might be used to describe unhurried stroll. This reappearance has been prepared for by a number of Eckhartian surprises. The first is the change of narrative perspective that immediately follows the exhortation to leap: 'Know then that God loves the soul so mightily, it is a wonder' (Walshe, p. 294). If, at the beginning of the sermon, the soul strives towards God, we find in the next move that God equally strives towards the soul. Indeed, if we were to rob God of his love of the soul, Eckhart says, we would kill him. He concludes: 'Since Got loves the soul so mightily, the soul must be a very important thing [Sît got die sêle alsô krefticlîche minnet, sô muoz diu sêle ein alsô grôz dinc sîn]' (Walshe, p. 294; Largier, II, p. 44). This change of tack shows Eckhart altering what could be called the topography charted by the sermon. We start aspiring to something beyond us. But then the direction is changed back towards us. Our position as listeners is shaken up by this reversal.

Eckhart immediately follows this disruption with another reversal, this time more explicit: one master, Democritus, says that without an interfering medium, we could see the smallest ant or midge in the heavens, whilst Aristotle says that without the help of the medium or mediating term we could see nothing at all. Eckhart says both are right. On the one hand, he says: ‘If the soul were wholly stripped and denuded of all means, God would appear stripped and bare before her and would give Himself wholly to her [Wære diu sêle alzemâle entblœzet und entdecket von allem mittel, sô wære ir got entblœzet und entdecket und gæbe sich ir alzemâle]’ (Walshe, p. 294-95; Largier, II, p. 44). On the other hand, we see because of the mediating image in the mind’s eye. Think of a mirror, Eckhart says. ‘If you hold it before you, your own image appears in the mirror’ (Walshe, p. 295). Similarly, our eye and our soul act as mirrors of what we see: a stone or our own hand. This comment could potentially open up an infinite where our mind’s eye sees the image of what we’re seeing, and we ask ourselves whether the mind’s eye has an eye in its mind, too. But Eckhart adds that the image in the eye or the image in the soul is itself the means by which we see thing, it *is* the knowledge, an adjustment which forestalls arguments that would tangle up post-Cartesian philosophy for four centuries. Daniel Dennett, in his book *Consciousness Explained*, challenges the model of the mind as a theatre in which someone or something—a homunculus or the pineal gland—sits and watches what we watch (Dennett, 1991). This is the same move that Eckhart is making 700 years earlier. The image is itself the means by which we see something.

To sum up Eckhart’s paradoxical thoughts about mediated and unmediated vision: he starts by saying we see both without means and with means. Then he finds something—the image—that is itself both means and not means. This in turns prepares the way for the peroration of the sermon, which, as we have already seen,

takes us, as listeners, beyond God to the very source of the Trinity. Eckhart's sermon as a whole thus moves from a transcending of creaturely life to a breakthrough beyond God to the very source of the God via a series of rhetorical moves that reinstate the creaturely life along the way. The point of this style of argument is to stop us focusing on a particular habit (for instance renunciation) and to cultivate a certain sort of attitude to ourselves and to the God moving through us, whether we like it or not, whatever we're doing. Of course, changing attitude could just leave everything as it was. So Eckhart's sermon needs to keep shaking the securities we might otherwise fall back on. We've seen the first such destabilization in the shift of narrative perspective—from our longing for God, to God's longing for us—that occurs early in the sermon. We see it again in the apparent paradox that the conflicting views of Democritus and Aristotle are both right. The account of the intellect with which Eckhart closes the sermon continues these disruptions. We are told that the intellect is beyond both the 'here' and the 'now.' If it weren't clear already, it becomes clear at this point that what Eckhart is discussing with his idea of the intellect is not the learned habits by which we master the art of thinking a problem through. Admittedly, thinking about a problem will require a certain form of detachment, a certain ability to abstract from circumstances. But it doesn't require us to leave behind the very notions of time and place. It could thus be said that what Eckhart means by intellect, if we look at the way the term functions in his text, is something like pure surprise: the overcoming of intellectual habits.

The discussion of the intellect could be read as a critique of Daniel Siegel's idea of 'mindfulness' or being in the present—as indeed could Eckhart's famous valorization of the active Martha over the contemplative Mary in the sermon on the text *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum* (Luke 10:38-40) (Q86/Pfeiffer-Walshe 9).

Transcending time and place, for Eckhart, entails giving up an attachment to being in the present. For the very idea of now is intelligible only as part of a larger temporal structure ('now' as opposed to 'then'). It can't be isolated as a pure moment, so we must imagine not even being attached to that. This step has been prepared by Eckhart's comments on anticipation or expectation a few moments before. When he was giving examples of the kinds of medium or means that might interfere with the soul's being close God he listed: joy, pain, fear and expectation or anticipation: the Middle High German *zuoversiht* (Walshe, p. 295). These are all what Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, calls 'ways of finding ourselves in the world' or *Befindlichkeiten* (which gets misleading translated as 'states of mind'—'moods' would be better) (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger is registering the fact that we're always in a mood of one sort or another, and we meet the world in this frame of mind, indeed, the frame of mind is the way the world is disclosed to us. For Heidegger, we are not able to avoid having a stance on whatever it is we happen to be part of. Indifference and neutrality are themselves stances, habits that we come to acquire more or less successfully in the course of growing up (Heidegger, 1962). Eckhart is suggesting we can relate to our moods, or to the stance we take on the world, as if it were contingent. Indeed, he's suggesting that the engrained habit of expecting something good, bad or indifferent could be put aside. We could endeavour to live without expectation: or rather, without being attached to our expectation. For Eckhart's final comment on moods shows that the problem is not the moods themselves, but a certain circularity that can arise if we pay attention to them rather than what they disclose to us. If we focus on the joy, pain, fear or expectation that discloses God to us, we won't be able to see God, only the expectation. Don't focus on the means, Eckhart says: 'As long as you regard it, and it regards you, you cannot see God [Die wile sô dû ez anesihet und ez dich wider

anesihet, sô ensihet dû gotes nîht] ‘ (Walshe, p. 295 translation amended; Largier, II, p. 46). Underpinning this advice is the simple observation that you can’t look at two things at the same time.

The subsequent comments edging us beyond ideas of the here and the now work in a similar way. Eckhart wants us not to be attached to our point of view. When eating, drinking, clothes and comfort are re-introduced to the argument, our relation to them has been transformed, because the stable take on the world, the me from whose perspective God could be loved or creaturely life could be transcended, has been called in question. For a modern reader it’s hard to imagine how this take on the world could be questioned, since we’re encouraged to identify with our conscious thoughts. It’s not just that, with Descartes, we think therefore we are, or with Kant we believe that all our perceptions and sensations must be accompaniable by the tag ‘I think.’ We have learned that habits of self-monitoring and self-regulation described by Norbert Elias as part of the civilizing process which spread through Europe from the late medieval period onwards, and by Weber as part of the legacy of everyday practices of self-management bequeathed by forms of Protestantism to the industrial West (Elias, 1969) (Weber, 1958). In Eckhart’s case, the first person perspective is not so fixed (Morgan, 1999) (Morgan, 2012). Indeed, as I’ll go on to argue in the last part of my talk, it’s not so fixed for us in the twenty-first century either. We’re just very good at ignoring, in academic discussion at least, the many ways in which we’re not the subject and author of our thoughts. For Eckhart, our intellect can be without a first person perspective: it can be beyond time and place, that is to say, a view that is really from nowhere, and to that extent not a view at all. Or, it can at least be without such a position when Eckhart is speaking in the subjunctive: ‘If a man were to rest on nothing, and cling to nothing, then, if heaven and earth were overturned, he would

remain unmoved, since he would cling to nothing, and nothing would cling to him [Der mensche, der nieren ûf gebûwet enwaere noch an nihte enhaftete, der danne mbekêrte himel und erde, er blibe unbeweghet, wan er enhaftete an nihte, noch niht enhaftete an im]’ (Walshe, p. 297; Largier, II, p. 48). Interestingly, the subject of this thought experiment is not the intellect but a person: *der mensche*. This is a further example of the way Eckhart relates to his audience, and keeps them involved in the process of stepping imaginatively beyond themselves. To conceive of an abstract concept not built on anything is easy, but to think of a person without foundation is at once more engaging, because we, as his listeners, are people, and more of a challenge. Eckhart, as usual, chooses the more challenging alternative.

If Eckhart takes us beyond our normal stance in relation to the world we live in, Sermon 69 nevertheless retains a dynamism or aspiration without which the argument would be pointless: our rush towards God, or the Godhead, or towards whatever it is that we’re rushing towards. The list of the five properties of the intellect that Eckhart works through as he finishes off his argument are an invitation for us imaginatively to be unified with God. We move beyond the here and the now; having done so we can learn that all of creation strives towards God, and be given the image of the person without foundations. We are ourselves again—people, living in a world of clothes and comfort—but at the same time, we’ve become something like pure aspiration, which Eckhart glosses by differentiating it from friendship. Our aspiration is not turned outwards, or turned towards something. It is intransitive. In this intransitivity, we come closer to God, because in fact we become part of God, as the subject-verb-object structure breaks down and we are left with a reflexive verb: ‘I can never see God except in that in which God sees Himself [Niemermê enmac ich got gesehen wan in dem selben, dâ got sich selben inne sihet]’ (Walshe, p. 298; Largier,

II, p. 50). At this point, Eckhart is coming close to an idea of divinization that has a long and varied tradition. Plotinus's dying words, as they are reported by his student Porphyry in the third century CE were: 'Try to bring back the god in us to the divine in the All [πειρᾶσθε τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν θεὸν ἀνάγειν πρὸς τὸ ἐν τῷ παντὶ θεῖον]' (Plotinus, 1989). The aspiration to be divine is found in the tradition of Islamic mysticism, most famously in the statement attributed to the 10th century Sufi Al-Hallaj that he was the Real or the Divine (Massignon, 1982) (Karamustafa, 2007). Closer to Eckhart, in the 'Sister Catherine' treatise that I have already mentioned, the beguine wakes from a mystical trance to ask her confessor to rejoice with her since she has become God (Schweitzer, 1981). Like the Neo-Platonic and Sufi traditions, therefore, and like some of his radical contemporaries, Eckhart is preparing for the thought that we are in some sense God. This can set alarm bells ringing for more cautious theologians who wish to follow Aquinas or Luther in insisting on the incommensurability of the human and the divine. Indeed, the bull condemning Eckhart's teachings specifically proscribes a statement that the individual can become identical with God or Christ ('Nos transformamur totaliter in Deum et convertimur in eum') (Clark, 1957, Laurent, 1936). In the sermon we've been discussing, Eckhart is clearly aware of the potential for aggravation, and deals with the problem in a typically non-confrontational manner. He approaches the question of a human's separation from God as something which might make one miserable, as opposed to something about which there might be a theological rule: 'St Paul says: "God dwells in a light which is inaccessible". Let none despair on that account! One can dwell on the way or in the approaches, and that is good, and yet it is far from the truth, for it is not God [Dâ von sprichet Sant *Paulus*: ›got wonet in einem liechte, dâ niht zuoganges enist‹. Nieman verzage her umbe! Man

wonet wol in dem wege oder in einem zuogange, und ez ist guot; ez ist aber der wârheit verre, wan ez enist got niht]’ (Walshe, p. 298; Largier, II, pp. 50-52). God is here identified with the truth, and made spatial (despite the fact that, a few paragraphs before, Eckhart has said we should be beyond the here and the now). We can live along the way to God, which is fine: Eckhart doesn’t want to establish a spiritual hierarchy, or tell people off for not being spiritually athletic enough to go the whole distance. At the same time, an alternative is possible. We can breakthrough to God and beyond.

To sum up the developments that I’ve traced in the sermon: on the one hand, there’s the aspiration to leave the world behind; to see God directly, a movement which actually takes us beyond God. On the other hand, there are a number of complicating features. Eckhart reintroduces the creaturely life he seems initially to leave behind. Consistent with this, he keeps contact with his audience, destabilizing their preconceptions, but at the same time using similes and images from their everyday life, like the mirror, or the fact that the intellect can ‘taste’ God (Walshe, p. 296); he remains concrete rather than abstract, as when a person substitutes for the concept of the intellect. Eckhart also addresses throughout a sense of longing, without telling his audience off if their longing doesn’t go quite as far as his argument. The movement of transcendence is thus part of the larger context of Eckhart’s preaching a sermon and engaging with people. He transcends *with* his audience. Indeed, the address to the audience intensifies as the sermon finishes, and the intellect breaks beyond God to the very source of everything: ‘Mark this well and remember it [. . .],’ Eckhart says, and: ‘I will say one word — or two or three! Now mark me well [. . .]’ (Walshe, p. 298). If Eckhart’s sermon is concrete and human, however, it is not addressed to an individual. Nor does it appeal to a sense of agency. Nature aspires to

God whether we like it or no. The person has no foundation, and anticipates nothing. Similarly, we feature as interlocutors, but only to be surprised, not to be in control of the conversation or train of thought. That raises the question of whether Eckhart, as the director of our surprise becomes himself something like a subject, or at the very least the person who can always ‘say more’: *Ich spriche mê* (Largier, II, p. 52) is a familiar refrain from his sermons. The prayer that ends the sermon suggests not. Eckhart does not think his sermon will have done all the work. Our intellect may have got to the place where it thinks as little of God as it does of a stone or a tree, but we have yet to catch up with it: ‘That we may understand this and may become eternally blessed, may the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit help us [Daz wir diz begreifen und êwiclîche sælic werden, des helfe uns der vater und der sun und der heilige geist]’ (Walshe, p. 299 translation amended; Largier, II, p. 54). Eckhart is facilitating a situation which he doesn’t himself control.

What my exposition of the sermon has shown, therefore, is the following: driving Eckhart’s argument is the assumption that unity with the Godhead is a place that we can get to. But this process is not abstract: it requires Eckhart to engage with people. The sermon doesn’t move beyond the human situation, it rather suggests that being with God is a way of being human; that it’s a process that we can undertake together. We’re not the agents of the process, but it requires nevertheless an attention to the situation, a critical scrutiny, which is directed at the things we might take for granted, or the assumptions we might get stuck with: the assumption of renunciation, the assumption of there being a place from which we can securely launch ourselves, the idea that we can anticipate what will happen and have a plan. In a word, Eckhart suggests that we intelligently embrace insecurity.

III. On not putting Humpty Dumpty together again

So what has all of this got to do with neuroscience? I want now to draw things together with some brief comments on current research into two areas of social cognition: automaticity and mirror neurons. To start with automaticity: the work I'm particularly interested in is that being done in the field of social psychology and in particular by John Bargh and his colleagues at the Automaticity in Cognition, Motivation and Evaluation (ACME) Lab in Yale. This approach studies the intelligent, adaptive filtering processes by which we relate to the world without consciously being aware of it. To give a striking example of the sort of behaviour they are discussing: an experiment was done in which subjects were asked to do a linguistic test that was related to the experiment only in so far as some of the tests contained words associated, for North Americans, with old age: Florida, bingo and forgetful. The subjects primed with these words walked away from the experiment at a pace that was slower to a statistically significant degree than those who hadn't been, suggesting that the words activated a template of behaviour that the individuals concerned then followed even though their self-report of what had happened suggested no conscious awareness of how they had been behaving (Bargh, 1997). Experiments such as this one point to 'sophisticated, flexible, and adaptive unconscious behavior guidance systems' (Bargh and Morsella, 2008), suggesting that our behaviour can be intelligent and purposive without our needing to be aware of it, and raise interesting questions about how involved we actually can be in the unfolding of our own actions. We do things that we don't need to know about and indeed probably can't because they occur at a level of cognitive processing below the threshold of conscious awareness. Nevertheless, these non-conscious actions don't

quite fit the Freudian model of an alien unconscious, following its own condensed, contradictory logic and indifferent to time, because they are smart, flexible and goal-oriented patterns of behaviour which are essential to my life, but not 'mine' in the way my conscious awareness is thought to be.

Experiments into mirror neurons similarly question our sense of self-control. Mirror neurons were discovered by accident in a laboratory at the University of Parma, when the machines were left on between experiments that were hoping to localize the part of the Macaque monkey brain involved in different actions. In fact the group discovered much more. They realized that the same neuron groups fired when the monkeys watched experimenters reaching for food as were activated when the monkeys reached for food themselves (Rizzolatti et al., 1996). Since these first experiments in the mid-1990s, mirror neurons have been found that resonate not just with hand movements, but facial expressions and other form of emotional interaction so that it seems that we are constantly participating in the lives of others. To some of the scientists and philosophers reflecting on the implications of these discoveries, the findings confirm a position which has been dubbed the 'simulation theory' of how human understand each other. For this approach, I know what you're thinking because I reconstruct more or less consciously what might be going on inside you. Mirror neurons can then seem to explain this process: I understand you, because when I see what you're doing and hear what you're saying my own neurons give me an internal replica. But as Shaun Gallagher has pointed out, it's not really clear how these processes can be described as simulation. They occur below the threshold of consciousness at a sub-personal level before any conscious processing of what's happening (Gallagher, 2007). They occur, in other words, before we could be said to be aware of anything to simulate. The processes are immediate and participatory: we

resonate together, and it's not clear until the processing has finished who started the reaction. Indeed, we can imagine situation in which I resonate with you as you start something because you're resonating with me. There are studies by Jean Decety and his group at the University of Chicago that indicate that empathy arises in two steps: the resonance produced by the shared neural architecture, and then other components monitoring and regulating the cognitive and emotional processes to 'prevent confusion between self and other' (Decety and Jackson, 2006). The investigations of mirror neurons suggest that we are with other people at a level before and below individual identity. If we feel isolated nevertheless, that's in the most cases because of the way we have learned to monitor, regulate and collectively distance ourselves from the shared experience of living in the world. Togetherness comes first. Isolation is a more or less deficient way of doing togetherness.

Both these lines of inquiry can be related to the Eckhartian project of intelligently embracing insecurity. Research in automaticity and mirror neurons alike emphasize togetherness and limit the degree to which we can be thought to be in control. The automaticity research suggests we are part of a set of shared habits which intelligently guide us and produce our sense of reality. The mirror neurons show us be always already tuned in to people and learning how to tune out to differing degrees as we are socialized, but not to the extent of excluding involuntary mirroring responses altogether. Since they show an involvement that we are aware of to varying degrees, these lines of research both raise two questions: can we recall and acknowledge the way we are tuned into a shared existence, and is it possible to do more than live out the intelligent but automated patterns of our culture? It's theoretically conceivable that the answer to these questions is that we can neither be aware nor in control: our involvement may stay necessarily below the threshold of conscious awareness, or,

even if it doesn't, being aware may not help us alter how we behave. Eckhart, as we have seen, questions the importance of consciousness and control in a comparable way in his sermon on John 16.16 (Q69/Pfeiffer-Walshe 42) when he suggests that everything is striving towards God whether we like it or not. If we are going intelligently to accept insecurity, we need to allow both options to be possible. It may be possible, by being circumspect, humble and self-critical, to get a handle on the habit which reproduce themselves through us; to get control of the 'memes' of which we are the bearers. But it may also not be possible. Both alternatives need to be entertained, both are useful as guiding hypotheses in different situations, depending on whether we are prone in a particular case to over- or underestimate the potential for intervention. The test, in each case, will be an honest, if provisional assessment of which course of action or inaction will allow life or God to flourish and grow through us. This assessment needn't be reached alone. We will discover what works with others, and by engaging with the world. We surprise ourselves by attending with others to the unfolding situation. We have seen this in Eckhart's sermon, where the attempts to shake us beyond our habits, to take us beyond even time and place, are at the same time specifically situated in the context of Eckhart talking to and involving an audience. The same is true of recent empirical research that takes us beyond our self-understanding as individual agents in control of our lives only to give us a fuller picture of our day-to-day involvements. Self-overcoming is an everyday event in Eckhart and neuroscience alike.

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