

Nomen Innominabile

The Search for the Ineffable

The refusal to find the name to properly designate a God who cannot be known without a margin of ignorance intervening in the knowledge itself is common to all theognoses that accept apophaticism, whether to immediately overcome it [i.e., ‘apophaticism’] in a theological epistemology or to make it the path to a “beyond all knowledge”. However, while an ‘ineffable’ God would seem to exist as a common ground between those who have, to varying degrees, reserved a space for the ‘way of negations’ in their religious thought, one could also say that there are, in fact, as many ‘ineffabilities’ as there are negative theologies. Truly, Plotinus’ ineffable is not the same as Pseudo-Dionysius’, which, in its own right, is quite different from the ineffable of St Augustine. Here again, of course, we must distinguish St Augustine’s ineffable from that of St Thomas Aquinas. Rather, it would seem that it is the concept that a theologian creates out of the ineffability of God that determines the role which the apophatic moment will play in his thinking. It is for this reason that we wished to begin our study of the idea of God in the works of Meister Eckhart, and, in particular, of his negative theology, with the topic of the search for the ineffable.

This search involves a region which entails negation. What then, is a negative path, if not a search in which one is obliged successively to reject all that can be found and named, finally even requiring the denial of the search itself, since the entire concept of searching implies an idea of that which is sought after?

It is not useful for us to stop for too long at the innumerable passages in the German and Latin works of Meister Eckhart in which he insists on divine ineffability, declaring that God is 'unutterable' (*unsprechlich*), that no one can begin to speak of Him, for He is 'above all names' (*über alle namen*), He is without a name (*sunder namen*, *namelôs*). We are not capable of finding a name that fits Him, and to desire to assign a name to Him would be to debase God Himself. God is a 'negation of all names' (*ain logenung aller namen*).¹ In a German sermon attributed to Eckhart by the manuscript tradition,² it is stated that the mind (*vernünffticheit*) will not content itself with a God who permits Himself to be given a name, 'even if there were a thousand Gods who could have a name, it [the mind] would still break through any such distinctions, for it wishes to enter into the place where He has no name, it desires something more noble, something better than a God who could have a name'. When contemplating God, whatever can still be given a name is not God.³ The concept of the ineffable is to be taken to its most extreme limits. The rejection of any kind of divine name could not be more categorical. However, insofar as one is searching for the ineffable, one is still looking for a name, even if only to designate God by the ineffability which sets Him apart from all that can be named.

If God cannot be named, then would it not be absurd to seek a name that would designate that which He is? *Cur quaeris nomen meum?* These words were spoken to Jacob when he asked God to reveal His name to him (Genesis 32:29). In his commentary on this passage of Genesis, Eckhart substitutes the response that God gave to Jacob with a similar, but more ample, one from the Book of Judges (13:18): *Cur quaeris nomen meum, quod est mirabile?* Being faithful to the hermeneutical procedures of his time, Eckhart submits the text to various grammatical operations in order to extract from it all possible interpretations.⁴ Firstly, this text could be read in the following

1. DW I, p. 253. See *ibid.*, notes 2 and 4, the references for the other expressions are cited below.

2. See *Serm.* 11, p. 59, 16-21.

3. See *Serm.* 22, p. 92, 24-25.

4. We cite this passage from *Exp. in Gen.* according to Cod. Cus. 21, f. 23rb, 1. 47va, 1. 15, while checking it against Amplon. Fol. 181|E], coll. 48-49 (the text is published in LW I, pp. 95-96), nn. 298-300): *cur quaeris nomen meum, quod est mirabile? Primo sic: 'nomen meum est*

manner: why do you seek after my name, as it is 'Wonderful'? Thus, a link is established with the *admirabile* of Psalm 8:2, 10 and of Isaiah 9:6. Secondly, one could read it as: why do you seek after my wondrous name, 'which is', that is to say, 'that which is' or 'He who is'? Thus, Eckhart ties *quod est* with the passage from Exodus 3:14, *Ego sum qui sum*. However, without stopping at an interpretation of the 'wondrous name' that would infuse it with all the fullness of Being, Eckhart prefers to remain in the realms of a negative exaltation. The third way of reading this *auctoritas* places a paradox before us: the name being sought after is astonishing (*mirabile*) because, while still being a name, it is no longer 'above every name' (compare with Philippians 2:9). It therefore suggests a name which by its very sublime character is rendered ineffable. It could not be designated by anything but an oxymoron, by a joining together of contradictory terms, an 'unnameable name'.

St Augustine highlights the paradox of the ineffable as an aporia; if the ineffable is that which cannot be spoken of, then it ceases to be ineffable because if something is said about it, then it is also given a

mirabile, Psalmus 8:2: *quam admirabile est nomen tuum*; Ysa. 9:6: *vocabitur admirabilis*. Secundo sic: 'nomen meum admirabile – quod est', quasi dicat 'hoc quod est' sive 'qui est', ipsum est nomen meum *mirabile*, Exo. 3:14: *ego sum qui sum*; *qui est misit me*; *hoc nomen meum*. Tertio sic: 'cur quaeris nomen meum, quod est mirabile?' *Mirabile quidem primo, quia nomen et tamen super omne nomen*, Philippens. 2:9: *donavit illi nomen, quod est super omne nomen*. Secundo *nomen est mirabile, quia nomen est innominabile, nomen indicibile et nomen ineffabile*. Augustinus, primo De doctrina christiana, locutus de Deo, sic ait: 'diximusne aliquot et sonuimus dignum Deo? Si dixi, non est hoc quod dicere volui. Hoc unde scio, nisi quia Deus ineffabilis est: quod autem a me dictum est, si ineffabile esset, dictum non esset? Et sic nescio que pugna verborum, quoniam si illud est ineffabile, quod dici non potest, non est ineffabile, quod vel ineffabile potest dici. Que pugna verborum silencio cavenda potius quam voce pacanda [C: petenda] est. Quarto: 'cur quaeris nomen meum? Quod est mirabile' – scilicet te querere nomen meum, cum sim innominabilis; mirabile certe est querere nomen rei innominabilis. Secundo mirabile querere nomen eius, cuius natura est esse absconditum, Ysa. 45:15: *vere tu es Deus absconditus*. Tertio mirabile querere foris nomen eius, qui non extra sed intimus est. Augustinus, De vera religione: 'Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi, in interior homine habitat Deus, veritas, ad quam nulle modo perveniunt qui foris eam [E: eum] querunt'.

name. It is thus better to avoid this 'verbal battle' with silence than to try to make peace with it by using words. In quoting this passage from Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*,⁵ Meister Eckhart remains a stranger to its author's true intention. Actually, the Bishop of Hippo wished to reduce *ad absurdum* the concept of the ineffability of God, when the term is understood in its absolute sense. In resolutely renouncing this false conception of the word 'ineffable', which allows too much room for sterile and wearisome verbiage, St Augustine holds to a relativised meaning of the word: this conventional expression is to remind us that nothing that we can say about God will be able fully to correspond to the excellence of His nature. This is a wise limitation of apophaticism, which leads towards the *via eminentiae*, where negations, instead of excluding all positive conceptions from divine nature, only serve to drive away from God all the imperfections which arise from our human means of understanding. This way of making use of the 'way of negations', which has its most classic expression in the works of St Thomas Aquinas, was not at all considered by Meister Eckhart to be something improper. However, while the Thuringian Dominican approved of this method and made use of it, it would seem that he never wanted to content himself and simply 'make do' with this conception of apophaticism because, at the same time, he accepted a totally different type of negative theology in which the ineffability of God is maintained in its absolute sense. Thus, in the text which we are analysing, Eckhart is not at all attempting to narrow the scope of the word 'ineffable'. This truncated quotation of Augustine⁶ was made here solely to underline the paradox of ineffability and not in order to renounce the *pugna verborum*. The aporia that Augustine is pointing out thus does not frighten the German theologian, who elsewhere expresses his taste for paradoxical expressions.⁷ Rather than avoiding this 'verbal battle', he places it in a contradictory definition, namely, that of the *nomen innominabile*.

The fourth way which Meister Eckhart proposes for reading the *auctoritas* on which he is commenting seems to accentuate the

5. *De doctrina christiana*, I.6 (PL 34, col. 21).

6. Eckhart drops the phrase, *ac per hoc ne ineffabilis quidem dicendus est Deus, quia et hoc cum dicitur, aliquid dicitur*. C also leaves out the phrase *non est ineffabile, quod vel ineffabile dici potest*, but here it would seem to be an omission on the part of the copyist.

7. *Prol. gener. in Op. tripart.*, LW I, p. 152, n. 7.

objective character of the ineffability of God; it is shocking that you seek my name, for I am unnameable. One would not know how to seek the name of a reality which cannot be named, the name of Him *cuius natura est esse absconditum*. Isaiah put it well, saying, *vere tu es Deus absconditus* (Isaiah 45:15). The ambiguity of the ‘unnameable name’ appears in a new light and becomes just as puzzling as Eckhart’s formula – *nomen eius, cuius natura est esse absconditum*. This can be translated in two ways, either according to the verb or to the noun which would be attributed to the word *esse*. In the first case, it would be read as, ‘the name of Him whose nature is hidden’. The *Deus absconditus* would be such by His very nature and as such would have to remain utterly unapparent. We are thus still within an apophaticism which rejects all positive expressions concerning that which is absolutely ineffable. However, in the second sense, where *esse* is to be understood as a noun, the sentence would be translated as, ‘the name of Him whose nature is the hidden Being’. This, without taking away from the paradox of the unnameable name, leads us towards Eckhart’s own teachings, in which it is necessary to seek the foundation of ineffability of this God who is, by His nature, the *Esse absconditum*. Would it not, then, be necessary to return to the second reading of the text proposed by Eckhart, in which the ‘wondrous name’ is given the sense of *quod est*, as identified with *Ego sum qui sum*? This reconciliation with the second reading of the sacred text does not, however, hand over to us the secret of the ‘unnameable name’ but, all the same, it gives us the right to say: if God could be named *Esse*, it is precisely because in His Being, He is a *Deus absconditus*, whose true name escapes us. This is exactly what Meister Eckhart says quite clearly elsewhere, *Deus sub ratione esse et essentiae est quasi dormiens et latens absconditus in se ipso*.⁸ As He is *Esse*, God cannot be named.

Eckhart’s apophatic élan does not, however, arrive here at an insurmountable impasse in its greater quest for the *nomen innominabile*, but this search is henceforth to be guided by the notion of *esse* – a condition of divine ineffability. The path towards the unknown God takes on a new direction, then, one which requires the seeker to go within himself, for the God who *sub ratione esse* is not exterior to the one who seeks His name. It is from this that the

8. *Exp. in Io.*, C., f. 122rb, ll. 51-52. In the same commentary, we notice another very curious passage: *ubi et quando Deus non queritur, dicitur Deus dormire* (C., f. 118vb, ll. 61-62).

last phrase given in the fourth reading of the *auctoritas* comes: it is surprising that a person seeks from without the name of Him who is not to be found on the outside, but in the most intimate depths. Meister Eckhart cites the *noli foras ire, in teipsum redi* of St Augustine,⁹ 'Do not go outside, go back within yourself; God lives within the inner man.'¹⁰ The truth cannot be found by those who seek it on the outside.'¹¹ The God of *Esse* remains ineffable, then, yet this *Esse absconditum* is not external to the one who seeks Him. Thus, it is not a going-out of oneself, but rather, an entry into oneself, towards the intimacy of the *esse*, more of an *enstasy* than an *ecstasy*, which will lead to the mystery of the unnameable name.

The Source of the 'Nomen Innominabile'

In the passage of the first commentary on Genesis that we have just analysed, the only theological authority invoked by Eckhart is St Augustine, in two places: the first time, this is done in order to maintain the paradox of the ineffable, even though this is contrary

9. *De vera religione*, I.I.39 (n. 72) (PL 34, col. 154). Here we cite in its entirety the passage of St Augustine which Eckhart would use so often. Galvano della Volpe chose it for the epigraph in his book on Meister Eckhart's speculative mysticism (*Il misticismo speculativo di Maestro Eckhart nei suoi rapporti storici* [Bologna: Licinio Cappelli, 1930]). As they were taken from memory, Eckhart's quotations themselves give only an approximation of the original text from Augustine: *Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interior homine habitat veritas; et si tuam naturam mutabilem inveneris, transcede et teipsim. Sed memento cum te transcendis, ratiocinantem animam te transcendere. Illuc ergo tende, unde ipsum lumen rationis accenditur. Quo enim pervenit omnis bonus ratiocinator, nisi ad veritatem? Cum ad seipsam veritas non utique ratiocinando perveniat, sed quod ratiocinantes appetunt, ipsa sit. Vide ibi convenientiam qua superior esse non possit, et ipse conveni cum ea. Confitere te non esse quod ipsa est: siquidem se ipsa non quaerit; tu autem ad ipsam quarendo venisti, non locorum spatio, sed mentis affectu, ut ipse interior homo cum suo inhabitatore, non infima et carnali, sed summa spirituali voluptate (alias voluntate) conveniat.*

10. The word *Deus* was added by Eckhart. The same particularity exists in *Op. serm.*, C., f. 164va, l. 54; *ibid.*, f. 140va, l. 12: *veritas et Deus*.

11. The last phrase – *ad quam nullo modo perveniunt qui foris eam quaerunt* – does not exist in Augustine's text. However, it is also to be found in several other places where Eckhart cites the same text. Cf. *Exp. in Sap.*, in *Archives*, III, p. 409; *Exp. in Io.*, C., f. 123rb, ll. 28-29.

to Augustine's original intention of finding a path towards positive knowledge of God; the second time, it was to interiorise the apophatic journey towards the *Deus absconditus*. Here, again, it is necessary to state that Augustine's intention is quite different from Eckhart's. In fact, the Father of western theology, in his recommendation to go within oneself, intends to lead human reason towards the immutable God of Truth, the source of intellectual illumination, while Meister Eckhart, in his prohibition on seeking from without the name of Him, *qui non extra, sed intimus est*, seems then to wish to find God on the plane of being, such as the *Esse absconditum*, above all that pertains to the previous context. By entering into the depths of the interior man, St Augustine wishes for a person to transcend himself (*transcende et teipsum*) in order to find the truth 'from which the light of the mind is lit', and that, once the truth is arrived at, one knows how to distinguish it from oneself: *Confitere te non esse quod ipsa est*. Meister Eckhart is confined to noting the interior (*intimus*) character of the presence of God which the subject cannot find outside himself. Even if he makes use of St Augustine in order to support the necessity of an inward turn into oneself, by interiorising the search for the 'unnameable name', the Thuringian mystic does not remain long on this path without any promise of an outcome, always on the lookout for the ineffable, for the *absconditum*, while the Doctor of Hippo's quest is more oriented towards a precise end. Thus, it is not St Augustine, quoted by Eckhart, who will give us the key to understanding the problem that preoccupied the Dominican Master when he commented on the text from Genesis, *Cur quaeris nomen meum?*

Another patristic authority, whom Eckhart did not quote, is nonetheless easily recognised behind this passage of his biblical commentary. Eckhart did not invent the oxymoron *nomen innominabile* by himself; rather, he found it in the first chapter of *On the Divine Names*, in which Dionysius says the following: τὸ θαυμαστὸν ὄνομα, τὸ ὑπὲρ παν ὄνομα, τὸ ἀνώνυμον.¹² John Scotus Eriugena¹³ and John Sarrazin¹⁴ [Johannes Sarracenus] give the same version in Latin, *mirabile nomen, quod est super omne nomen, quod*

12. *De div. nom.*, I.6 (PG 3, col. 596). French translation by de Gandillac, p. 74.

13. PL 122, col. 1117.

14. Jean Sarrazin's translation is published in *Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia*, vol. 16 (Tournai: Typis Cartusiae S.M. de Pratis, 1902). The relevant passage is on page 354.

est innominabile. Thomas Gallus omits the words 'unnameable name' but, like Eckhart, he adds to his transposition of *De divinis nominibus* the biblical reference, 'the name above all names': *Vere autem est nomen mirabile quod, sicut dicit Apostolus ad Philippenses, est super omne nomen*.¹⁵ The arrangement of scriptural references is almost identical in both the works of Dionysius and Meister Eckhart. If the latter, when commenting on a section from Genesis 32:29, replaces it with a text from Judges 13:18, it is because the author of *On the Divine Names*, when he spoke of the 'nameless name', used these exact words addressed to Manoah, rather than the reprimand that God gave to Jacob. The confusion caused by Eckhart is thus explained by the fact that these reflections on the paradox of the *nomen innominabile* were inspired by a passage from Dionysius. Thus, Eckhart is commenting on a passage from *On the Divine Names* rather than on the Bible.

Namelessness and Polynymy

Dionysius introduces the theme of the 'unnameable name' during his discussion of the two different paths of theology. Although the 'supra-essential thearchy' is above all that exists, it can, however, be praised based on its *effects*, for as 'Subsistent Goodness' it is the Cause of all being, to which the supra-essential thearchy grants existence by virtue of the fact that it exists:¹⁶

Knowing this, the sacred authors exalt Him as not having any name at all, but also as being capable of being praised by all names. They exalt Him as unnameable when, in one of the mystical visions where God symbolically manifests Himself, they show us the Thearchy reprimanding the one who asked, 'What is Thy Name?' Indeed, the Thearchy then responds to him as though it wished to cast away from him all notions of God that concern names, 'Why do you ask My Name? It is wondrous.' Is it not truly wondrous, this 'name above all names' (Philippians 2:9), the name without a name, the name that is exalted above

15. For Thomas Gallus' paraphrase, see *ibid.*, p. 42.

16. *De div. nom.*, I§5 (PG 3, col. 593c): Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ὡς ἀγαθότητος ὑπαρξίς, αὐτῷ τῷ εἶναι, πάντων ἐστὶ τῶν ὄντων αἰτία, τὴν ἀγαθαρχικὴν πρόνοιαν, ἐκ πάντων τῶν αἰτιατῶν ὑψηλότερον.

‘every name that could be named in this age or in the age to come’ (Ephesians 1:21)?¹⁷

These same theologians (whom Dionysius refers to as ‘the sacred writers’) celebrate God as having multiple names (πολυώνυμον) since, in several places in Holy Scripture, they show Him saying, ‘I am That I am’ (Exodus 3:14), ‘the Life’ (John 11:25, 14:6), ‘the Light’ (John 8:12, 12:46), ‘God’ (Genesis 17:1, Exodus 3:6, Deuteronomy 5:6), ‘the Truth’ (John 14:6). They also ascribe to Him other names, taken from all that which is produced by the Divine Cause and praise God according to His effects as Good, Beautiful, Wise, Beloved, as God of gods, Lord of lords, Holy of holies etc. Dionysius enumerates the various names that the Scriptures bestow upon God, in the end concluding that He can be called ‘all that is and nothing that is’.¹⁸

The opposition between πολυώνυμον and ἀνώνυμον corresponds in Dionysius to the two contrary paths of theology – that of propositions and that of negations.¹⁹ If the negative path is the most perfect,²⁰ it is because it aims for an ineffable and unknowable nature, ‘unions’ which prevail over ‘distinctions’²¹ or ‘processions’ which manifest Divinity for its ‘virtues’ (δυνάμεις),²² thanks to which the positive path becomes possible, with its multiplicity of divine names. Thomas Gallus was not wrong when he wished to develop Dionysius’ lapidary phrase – Πάντα τὰ ὄντα, καὶ οὐδὲν τῶν ὄντων – by saying: *omnia existentia causaliter, nihil existentium per substantiae proprietatem*.²³ Perhaps he would have been more faithful to the author of *On the*

17. Idem, I.§6 (col. 596a): Τοῦτο γοῦν εἰδότες οἱ θεολόγοι, καὶ ὡς ἀνώνυμον αὐτὴν ὑμνοῦσι καὶ ἐκ παντὸς ὀνόματος. Ἀνώνυμον μὲν ὡς ὅταν φασι, τὴν θεαρχίαν αὐτὴν ἐν μιᾷ τῶν μυστικῶν τῆς συμβολικῆς θεοφανείας ὀράσεων ἐπιπλήξαι τῷ φήσαντι «Τί τὸ ὄνομα σου» καὶ ὥσπερ ἀπὸ πάσης αὐτὸν θεωνυμικῆς γνώσεως ἀπάγουσαν, φάναι τό «Καὶ ἵνατί ἐρωτᾷς τὸ ὄνομα μου; Καὶ τοῦτ’ ἔστι θαυμαστόν». Ἡ οὐχὶ τοῦτο ὄντως ὀνόματος ὀνομαζομένου, εἴτε ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ, εἴτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

18. Ibid. (col. 596c): Πάντα τὰ ὄντα, καὶ οὐδὲν τῶν ὄντων.

19. Idem, VII (cols 869-72); *De myst. theol.*, I.§2 and §3 (col. 1000) (noting the opposition between πολύλογος and ἄλογος); II (col. 1025).

20. *De coel. hier.*, II.§3 (col. 141).

21. *De div. nom.*, II.4 (col. 640), and II (col. 652).

22. Idem, II.§7 (col. 645a).

23. See vol. 16 of *Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia*.