

## Ego Sum Qui Sum

### Revelation of the Unique Being

We have seen that in his commentary on Exodus, Meister Eckhart deals at great length with the question of the predicable divine names which are based on created effects, which he does by complementing the negative principles of the ‘Arab and Hebrew sages’ with the positive teachings of the ‘saints and doctors’ of the Church. However, the Book of Exodus itself shows us the Lord saying to Moses, ‘I am who I am’ (3:14). This sacred text obliges the Christian interpreter to delve into and confront the mystery of the name which God attributes to Himself. Here, the initiative for naming no longer belongs to the human intellect, gathering together the various perfections that have been spread out amongst creatures to then attribute them to the omnipotent Monad who reunites them all in its singular perfection. Now, it is the Monad itself who names itself, thus affirming its identity in a ‘complete return’. We have been able to establish that this reflection into Himself, in this double affirmation of *Ego sum qui sum*, was compared by Eckhart with his obscure maxim on the monad generating the monad and returning its ardour back to itself. The text of Exodus was thus given a trinitarian meaning<sup>1</sup> which it could not have had for Rabbi Moses. However, the Dominican Master agrees with the Jewish theologian in seeing in this affirmation which

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1. See above, Chapter 2, section headed ‘Puritas et Plenitudo Essendi’.

reproduces the subject in the predicate a unique name by which God would designate Himself, while revealing Himself as Being. In agreement with Maimonides, Eckhart will see in Moses' act of veiling his face before the burning bush (3:6) the attitude of the human intellect with respect to divine revelation. He will add, referring to St Paul (2 Corinthians 10:5), that it is necessary to reduce the intellect, or natural reason, to a state of captivity before the hidden depths of God, which are termed 'supernatural', if one wishes to see those in the light of grace, that is to say, in the Spirit. These *abditia Dei* are indicated by the scriptural phrase 'the darkness on the face of the deep' (Genesis 1:2), as they surpass created understanding, which is incapable of coming to know them without the inspiration of grace which lifts up nature, in exercising upon the cognitive faculties an action analogous to the influx of virtue that a superior agent communicates to its inferior.<sup>2</sup>

How can man learn, by his own means, that the name 'Being' belongs uniquely to God, when it is precisely 'under the reason of Being' that God dwells unmanifested, inactive, concealed within Himself? This name, then, must come from God, as His own revelatory affirmation in His interior action. As we have seen,<sup>3</sup> the manifestation of Being which is indeterminable and indistinct in itself, is not possible except in the *suppositum* of the Father, in the One, in which the emanation of Persons finds both its principle and its end, in demonstrating the identity of the Essence by the return of the Monad upon itself. If the *Ego sum qui sum* of Exodus is a revelation of Being, the Being which reveals itself here appears as an essential Unity while the modalities of its revelation appear as a Trinity of persons. God reveals Himself as Being in a trinitarian process and, since this interior action has as its principle the One which is attributed to the Father the first name which most properly designates God, the 'name above all names', will be equally Being and the One, which distinguishes it by the very fact that it points to its own 'indistinction'.<sup>4</sup> In saying *Ego sum qui*

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2. *Exp. in Ex.*, LW II, pp. 18-19, n. 13.

3. See above, Chapter 2, section headed 'The First Determination of Being'.

4. *Exp. in Io.*, C., f. 122ra, ll. 25-28: *ipsum vero unum ex sui proprietate distinctionem indicat; est enim unum in se indistinctum, distinctum ab aliis. Et propter hoc personale est et ad suppositum pertinet, cuius est agere.* See the dialectical development of indistinction and distinction

*sum*, God manifests Himself as true Being. This revelation renders ambiguous and inappropriate any other understanding of the words *esse* and *ens*.<sup>5</sup> For Meister Eckhart the revelation offered in Exodus emphasises not only the unity, but also the unicity, of the Being which is God: *solus Deus proprie est ens*. He will recall, with regard to this issue, that Parmenides and Melissus permitted only one, single Being (*ponebant tantum unum ens*). Since God alone *is*, it suffices to respond to the question ‘What is God?’ with the answer: Being.<sup>6</sup>

## Quidditas et Anitas

In the proposition ‘I am’, the verb ‘to be’ is a *secundum adiacens*, the very predicate which attributes real being to the subject. The *is*, which is not a copula, thus bears a ‘formal and substantive’ meaning;<sup>7</sup> it highlights, in the subject, nothing other than ‘pure and naked being’. In the present instance, since it is God who affirms *Ego sum*, this proposition *de secundo adiacente* has the additional meaning that the pure formality of being is the subject itself, that is to say, its essence is identical with its *esse*. This statement could only be made of God alone, whose quiddity, according to Avicenna, is nothing other

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of the Being-One in the *Exp in Sap.*, in *Archives*, IV, pp. 253-56); cf. *Exp. in Ex.*, C., f. 48vb, ll. 3-12 and 40-47.

5. *Exp. in Ex.*, LW II, pp. 24-25, n. 18. Here Meister Eckhart is quoting St Bernard, *De consideratione*, I.V.6 (PL 182, col. 796): ‘*hoc tam singulare, tam summum esse: nonne in comparatione huius, quidquid hoc non est, iudicas potius non esse quam esse? Hoc est ergo quod ait: Ego sum qui sum.*’ Further down (*ibid.*, pp. 28-29, n. 22), he gives the continuation of this passage (with an erroneous reference to Boethius in the three manuscripts E, C and T: Boethius, *De consolatione*, V): ‘*Quid est Deus? Sine quo nihil est. Tam nihil est sine ipso quam nec ipse sine se esse potest. Ipse sibi, ipse omnibus est, ac per hoc quodammodo solus ipse est, qui suum ipsius est et omnium esse.*’
6. *Prol. in Op. propos.*, LW I, p. 42, n. 5 (only in Ms. E); OL II, pp. 21-22. Meister Eckhart most likely takes his information on the Eleatics from these two passages from Aristotle (*Physics*, I.2.184b, and *Metaphysics*, A.5.986b) but, in this instance, he refers instead to Avicenna on the Eleatics, as he had devoted a chapter of his *Physics* to their teachings (= *Sufficientia*, I.4), which was entitled *De improbatione eorum que dixerunt Parmenides et Melissus de principiis essendi* (Venice, 1508, f. 16ra, l. 36-16va, l. 4).
7. *Prol. in Op. propos.*, *ibid.*, n. 3; OL II, p. 20, ll. 19-22.

than His 'anity'. Meister Eckhart will even add, along with the Arab philosopher: *nec habet quidditatem praeter solam anitatem quam esse signal*.<sup>8</sup> Without wondering, for the moment, if the *esse* which, in God, must be the equivalent of essence, has the same meaning for Eckhart as the act of existing had for Aquinas, let us state that, for Eckhart, the term *anitas*, equated here with *esse*, indicates something which is not included in the quiddity or in the essence of a created being, but rather, erupts, as it were, from the exterior, *ab alio*, in order to constitute an essence within the being.

We must take note that for Avicenna, the external source of existence points to its accidentality in relation to essence: being the accessory of essence or quiddity, which by itself is only an intellection of something whose definition involves nothing contradictory, existence is added in order to render real that which, previously, had been only possible. It is from here that we arrive at two metaphysical positions which reciprocally condition each other: 'all that possesses quiddity is caused'; and 'the First One has no quiddity'. If He had an essence, Avicenna's God would have only the possibility of being and would not be the Necessary Being – *Necesse Esse*.<sup>9</sup> Existing

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8. *Exp. in Ex.*, LW II, p. 21, n. 15 (See I, p. 99, according to manuscript E): *Secundo notandum quod li 'sum' est praedicatum propositionis, cum ait: 'ego sum.' Et est secundum adiacens. Quod quotiens fit, purum esse et nudum esse significat in subiecto et de subiecto et ipsum esse subiectum, id est essentiam subiecti, idem scilicet essentiam et esse, quod soli deo convenit, cuius quidditas est sua anitas, ut ait Avicenna, nec habet quidditatem praeter solam anitatem, quam esse significat.* Concerning God without quiddity in Avicenna, see the references in the following note.

9. Avicenna, *Metaphysics* (= *De philosophia prima sive scientia divina*), especially tr. 8.4: *De proprietatibus primi principii quod est necesse esse* (Venice, 1508, ff. 98vb-99rb), from which we get these two characteristic passages: *Dico enim quod necesse esse non potest habere quidditatem quam comitetur necessitas essendi* [f. 99ra, ll. 19-20] ... *Omne habens quidditatem causatum est; et cetera alia excepto necesse esse habent quidditates, que sunt per se possibles esse, quibus non accidit ei [sic] esse nisi extrinsecus. Primus igitur non habet quidditatem, sed super habentia quidditates fluit esse ab eo. Igitur ipse est esse expoliatum, conditione negandi privationes et ceteras proprietates ab eo* (f. 99rb, ll. 7-12). Compare ch. 5 (f. 99vb, ll. 43-45): *Iam igitur manifestum est quod primus non habet genus nec quidditatem nec qualitatem.* ... Meister Eckhart uses Avicenna's expression *necesse esse* while reconciling it

necessarily, by the very fact that He does not have an essence, this God-Being establishes in actual being, with the same necessity, all conceivable quiddities, that is to say, which are capable of receiving the *esse* bestowed by a necessary Efficient Cause. Their dependence upon the Efficient Cause, proper to all that is not the necessary Being, is expressed in a definition which summarises Avicenna's doctrine of caused being or realised essence, a definition which Meister Eckhart reproduced each time that he stated: *in omni creato aliud est esse et ab alio, aliud essentia et non ab alio*.<sup>10</sup>

In its lapidary form, this sentence, which claims its support from Avicenna, who is himself somewhat ambiguous in matters concerning the essence *non ab alio*, will be found to be acceptable to Christian theologians, who all accept that the Creative Cause must be extrinsic and that the conceptual content of a finite essence does not necessarily imply the fact of its actual existence. At the beginning of his career St Thomas himself was not far from Avicenna's views, when, in his *De ente et essentia*, he stated:<sup>11</sup>

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with *Ego sum qui sum*, as Moses Maimonides had done in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (I.63): *Exp. in Ex.*, LW II, p. 27, n. 21. Compare *ibid.*, pp. 38-39, nn. 32 and 33, in which the non-contradictory conceptual contents are considered as 'possibilities' submitted to the omnipotent efficiency of God.

10. This formula is often encountered in Meister Eckhart's Latin works and figures in the first act of accusation, *Archives*, I., p. 176, n. 11. See Eckhart's response, in which he refers to Avicenna and Albert the Great, *ibid.*, p. 195. The sentence *aliud est esse et ab alio, aliud essentia et non ab alio* is certainly inspired by Avicenna. It summarises very well the passage from *Metaphysics*, tr. V.1 (f. 87ra, ll. 11-24), in which we read, among other things, the following: *Ergo essentia eius est ipsi per se. Ipsum vero esse cum alio a se est quiddam quod accidit ei vel aliquid quod comitatur naturam suam*.
11. We here quote this 'Avicennised' passage of *De ente et essentia* in Gilson's translation (*Le Thomisme*, p. 57). The original text can be found on p. 34 in Roland-Gosselin's edition. Guillaume d'Auvergne very closely follows Avicenna's thought, as can be seen in this passage of his treatise *De trinitate*, 7: *Quoniam autem ens potentiale est, non ens per essentiam, tunc ipsum et eius esse, quod non est ei per essentiam, duo sunt revera et alterum accidit alteri, nec cadit in rationem nec quidditatem ipsius. Ens igitur, secundum hunc modum, compositum est et resolvable in suam possibilitatem sive quidditatem et suum esse. Ex quo manifestum est ipsum esse causatum ab educante possibilitatem*

All that is not from the concept of the essence then comes to it externally and forms a compound with it. Truly, no essence can be conceived of without that which comprises essence; every essence, or quiddity, can be conceived of without conceiving of anything with respect to its existence. For example, I can *conceive* of a man or of a phoenix without bearing in mind whether they actually exist in nature. Thus, it is quite obvious that existence (*esse*) is another thing entirely (*aliud*) from essence or quiddity.

Similar texts, however much they may demonstrate the very broad influence of Avicenna on Western thought, do not reflect any of the meanings that the distinction between the *quidditas* and the *anitas* could assume in the works of various thinkers. The first of these, *quidditas*, responds to the question '*quid sit*' with the conceptual definition of a thing, while the second, *anitas*, has to respond to the question '*an sit*'<sup>12</sup> with the affirmation or negation of the actual being

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*eius in effectum essendi et a coniungente ipsum esse cum potestate ipsius* (Guilielmi Alverni, *Opera omnia* [Paris, 1674], vol. 2, p. 8). On this subject, see ed. Roland-Gosselin (pp. 160-6) and Gilson's article, 'La Notion d'existence chez Guillaume d'Auvergne', *Archives* 15 (1946), pp. 55-91. We must also cite the *De causis et processu universitatis* (I.I.1.8) by Albert the Great, which Meister Eckhart specifically refers to (see previous note): *Omne enim quod ex alio est aliud habet esse et hoc quod est ... ab alio ergo habet esse, a se autem ipso quod sit hoc quod est* (Alberti Magni *Opera Omnia*, ed. Borgnet, vol. 10, p. 377).

12. Concerning the origin of the Latin term *anitas*, see M.-Th. d'Alverny, 'Notes sur les traductions médiévales des oeuvres philosophiques d'Avicenne', *Archives* XIX (1952), p. 346: 'One finds in the translation of both Avicenna's *Metaphysics* and Algazel's *Philosophia* a quite remarkable neologism: *anitas*, which has been coined in order to translate and fully express a particularly difficult Arabic term, which at one and the same time conveys an interrogation and an affirmation: "*anniya*", the "if it is" which marks the arrival into existence of an individual essence.' According to Miss A.-M. Goichon's *Lexique de la langue philosophique d'Ibn Sina* (Avicenne) (Paris, 1938), pp. 9-12, "*Anniya*", in Avicenna, would correspond to the "haec-ity" of a thing.' Compare the same author, in her work, *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sina* (Paris, 1937), p. 345 and ff. Miss d'Alverny (loc. cit.) points out the presence of the Latin neologism *anitas* in the *Liber de Diffinitionibus* by Isaac Israeli, translated by Gerard of

of a thing. The same must also be said of the distinction between the *quod est* and the *quo est* that has been known since Boethius, as well as the double function of the verb ‘to be’, in the propositions *de tertio* or *de secundo adiacente*: the usage of these principles, in themselves alone, still teaches us nothing of the value of the term *esse* in a doctrine of being.

Referring to Avicenna at the beginning of his ‘exposition’ on *Ego sum qui sum*, Meister Eckhart declared that God has no quiddity or essence but only *anitas* or *esse*. In his Latin sermon on *Gratia Dei sum id quod sum* (1 Corinthians 15:10), he maintains, going in the same direction of thought, that God is always the *Quo est*, always the predicate, and never the *quod est* or the subject, claiming support from Boethius: *forma simplex subiectum esse non potest*.<sup>13</sup> Before comparing these passages to others in Meister Eckhart, in which he affirms quite the contrary,<sup>14</sup> it would be important to state that, here, he is speaking of grace or, more precisely, of God as the grace by

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Cremona. We shall quote here this curious passage (ed. J.T. Muckle, *Archives* 11 [1938], p. 300), in which the subject matter comprises four questions on the different aspects of being: *quarum una est anitas, sicut si dicas an est hoc et hoc; et secunda est quidditas, ac si dicas quid est hoc et hoc; et tertia est qualitas, sicut si dicas quale est hoc et hoc; et quarta est quaritas, sicut si dicas quare est hoc et hoc*. Compare the parallel passage in Ibn Gebirol, in *Fons vitae*, V.24, (ed. Bäumker, *Beiträge*, I.2-4, pp. 301-2), in which the same four questions appear without the corresponding abstract terms ending in *-itas*. If the Arabic word ‘*anniya*’ in Avicenna has a meaning that the Latin *anitas* could not fully convey, we nevertheless know what the latter term, invented by the translators, was intended to express in the minds of Gerard of Cremona and Gundissalinus, who collaborated in Toledo. In the Latin text of Avicenna’s *Metaphysics*, printed in Venice in 1508, *anitas* has been completely replaced by the term *unitas*. Thus, for example, in f. 99ra, ll. 18-19, we find: ‘Redibo igitur et dicam, quod primum non habet quidditatem nisi unitatem que sit discreta ab ipsa’, and further down, *ibid.*, ll. 62-63: ‘Item dico quod quicquid habet quidditatem preter unitatem causatum est.’

13. *Serm. lat.* 25.1, LW IV, p. 230, n. 251. Compare *Exp. in Ex.*, C., f. 47rb, ll. 4-6: *Sed ‘quo est’ Deo est proprium, ‘quod quid est’ proprium creature, ut patet tractatu de ‘quo est’*. Boethius’ text, which Eckhart often cites, is found in *De trinitate*, 2 (PL 64, col. 1250cd).

14. In saying, for example, along with St John Damascene, that the first divine name is *Quod est* and that, as a result, *solus Deus proprie*

which the created subject 'is what it is'. Grace is 'from God alone', *pari ratione sicut et ipsum esse*. As with being and all perfections, above all those which are common and are not determined specifically *ad hoc et hoc*, grace presupposes an immediateness in the created subject's relationship to God, comparable to the immediate relationship which the air, as something 'illuminable', must have with the sun.<sup>15</sup> This example then allows us to place Avicenna's perspective of a God without quiddity or essence into the complex thought of Meister Eckhart. Every time that he speaks of the immediate relationship of creatures to God, of effects to the First Cause, of the *omnia* to the *Unum*, of the *entia* to the *Esse*, God is not considered in Himself, as the Essence or the *Quod est*. In this perspective of causality, He would appear solely as *Esse omnium*, as a pure *Quo est*. By making use of our example of the air being illuminated by the sun, we can say that, with respect to luminosity, the sun is only a light, a pure illuminating activity which one conceives of without reference to any kind of idea of a solar disc, since the disc is never participated in by the illuminated sphere surrounding it.<sup>16</sup> In the sense in which He is *Esse omnium*, the principle of the created *entia*, Meister Eckhart's God cannot be envisaged as a *quod est* or as quiddity, which, in this regard then, comes close to the 'First' as conceived by Avicenna. However, we are no longer in the same perspective as provided by the revelation of Exodus, when God Himself takes on the name of Being in order to express His absolute identity. When God-*Esse* is considered in

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*est ens*. See above, Chapter 3, section headed 'Revelation of the Unique Being', note 5 and note 6.

15. *Serm. lat.* 25.2, LW IV, pp. 239-40, n. 264: ... *sicut aer totus se habet immediate ad solem in ratione illuminabilis, quamvis sit ordo partium aeris in situ, sic omnis creatura immediate se habet ad Geum quantum ad esse, quantum ad gratiam et quantum ad omnes perfectiones, maxime communes, indeterminatas ad hoc et hoc.*

16. See the analogous usage of this example in St Gregory Palamas, in the *Capita physica, theologica, moralia et practica* (92 and 94) (PG 150, cols 1185d and 1188cd). The two aspects under which Eckhart considers God, in His own nature and in *ad extra* relationships, do not give a place in his teachings for an elaborate distinction between the divine *Ens* in Itself and the *Esse omnium* as divine action. However, the field of problems which led Byzantine theologians of the fourteenth century to distinguish between οὐσία and ἐνέργεια is not foreign to Meister Eckhart's thought.