

Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy

Translations and Commentary by Reiner Schürmann

Introduction by David Appelbaum

In continental philosophy, the work of Meister Eckhart is experiencing a renaissance of sorts. Most recently, John Caputo's excellent and well-received scholarship in studies of Heidegger and Derrida have drawn attention to the oft-forgotten influence of Eckhart upon contemporary thought. The exploration of similarities and differences between negative theology, negative dialectics and post-structuralism has proved to be a very fruitful endeavor for Caputo and others. Caputo's *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, for example, is easily one of the most lucid and engaging texts exploring the Heidegger-Eckhart connection. At the same time, theological writers such as Matthew Fox have drawn heavily upon Eckhart to make their case for a more ecological, post-nihilistic Christianity. In *Passion for Creation: The Earth-honoring Spirituality of Meister Eckhart*, Fox's "creation spirituality" springs to life in dialogue with Eckhart's sermons.

Meister Eckhart was born circa 1260 in Hockheim. After joining the Dominicans at Erfurt, he lectured and attained degrees in Paris. Returning to Erfurt in 1304, he was eventually appointed as teacher of Paris in 1311. Later in life, having ventured to Cologne to teach, Eckhart was accused of heresy by Hermann von Virneburg, the archbishop. However, he was later exonerated by Nicholas of Strasburg, charge of the Dominican monasteries in Germany. Nevertheless, von Virneburg continued to press the charges of heresy against him, provoking Eckhart to declare that if his writings contained any traces of heresy, he would retract them. Several of his writings were declared heretical, upon which he kept his word. Shortly thereafter, circa 1328, he died. Eckhart's work continued to survive in the work of his students, despite cautionary measures undertaken by authorities at the time (the general chapter of the order at Toulouse). Forgotten after many years, Eckhart's writings were unearthed in the 19th century by Franz von Baader. He has continued to be read and enjoyed by those fortunate enough to come upon his works. As Schürmann writes:

Each generation has produced its own interpretation of Eckhart's works in accordance with its own ideological movements. German philosophy of the nineteenth century adopted Eckhart as an ancestor and called him the "father of German speculation." Hegel regarded Eckhart as the reconciler of faith and science; Schopenhauer saw him as the founder of transcendental idealism; and Schelling found in Eckhart's works a close similarity to his own philosophy of Revelation. Schelling and Franz von Baader undoubtedly reflect most accurately the thought of Meister Eckhart. (p. xvii).

Yet as of late, Eckhart's works are being recovered and interpreted in new ways, consistent with the trend, and now in light of post-structuralist theory. In the context of an Eckhart renaissance, the reappearance of Reiner Schürmann's *Wandering Joy* is indeed a joy to behold.

Schürmann was born of German parents in Amsterdam in 1941. He received his doctorate at the Sorbonne in 1981 and was Professor of Philosophy at Duquesne University and then at the New School for Social Research. Among many other awards for his scholarship and

writing, he received the Distinguished University Teacher Award in 1989. Just before his death in 1993 he completed the two-volume *Broken Hegemonies*. During his lifetime, Schürmann lectured on a wide variety of philosophers and thinkers, including Plotinus, Augustine, Marx, Nietzsche, Jaspers, and Luther. But most especially, Schürmann's focus was upon the work of Heidegger, and his interest in Eckhart stems both from his vast knowledge in Medieval Philosophy and his expertise in hermeneutic-phenomenology.

In the careful hands of Schürmann, Eckhart's text comes alive in a way that speaks directly to the most urgent concerns of contemporary thought. For anyone remotely interested in Eckhart studies, Heidegger, or contemporary continental thought, one could hardly do better than to enthusiastically engage Schürmann's lucid exegesis of Eckhart's sermons. Combining the method of modern hermeneutics with the vast background knowledge of Eckhart's 14th century context and theological influences (from Plato to Augustine), *Wandering Joy* is a classic in the field.

Schürmann can be credited with being one of a handful of scholars who took great care to rescue Eckhart from a long history of misreadings, including National Socialist interpretations of Aryan man as "Eckhartian man." He did so by carefully and closely reading Eckhart's sermons in the German and understanding these texts within the historical context within which they were written. Then by translating the sermons and delicately interpreting the theologian's speeches line by line, he was able to introduce to an English-speaking audience an Eckhart previously unknown to them. He concentrates on Eckhart's German works rather than his Latin works in order to focus predominately on his masterful use of language in his native-tongue, just as it would unfold in his sermons.

In *Wandering Joy*, Schürmann specifically examines three sermons: "Jesus Entered," "Woman, the Hour is Coming," and "See What Love." In his examination of "Jesus Entered," Schürmann interprets the text in light of sources Eckhart cited as well as testimony from his Inquisition. For "Woman, the Hour is Coming," he switches orientation and focused predominately upon the philosophical implications of the sermon. In particular, Eckhart's "way" toward the *Godhead* is traced through the fourfold pathway of *Dissimilarity*, *Similarity*, *Identity* and *Dihiscence*. Finally, in "See What Love," Schürmann attempts to elucidate the whole of Eckhart's philosophy as centered around the question of being. In order to accomplish this task, he examines the text in light of two other philosophies, Aristotle's theory of analogy and Heidegger's ontological difference.

With a thorough examination of the three sermons, Schürmann masterfully discloses the central theme of Eckhart's work, *releasement*. Releasement, sometimes translated as "detachment," is understood to appear in Eckhart under two aspects: both a law and a state. As the demand of a law, it is "voluntary disappropriation and impoverishment." As the description of a state, it is "the original liberty which man has never lost at the basis of his being." To enter into releasement as law and state is both to give up everything and to become perfectly identical with God. Together, in both its aspects, releasement designate the "wandering identity." As Schürmann writes:

When this dialectic is transferred onto the daily plane on which existence is carried out, it will be expressed differently. A detached man, Eckhart says, experiences such a joy that no one would be able to tear it away from him. But such a man remains unsettled. He who has let himself be, and who has let God be, lived in wandering joy, or joy without a cause.

Hence, the title of Schürmann's analysis: *Wandering Joy*. The notion is less a theoretical notion than an invitation into a way of living. With Schürmann's steady guidance, the reader comes to fully understand and appreciate the brilliance of Eckhart, philosopher of joy.

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