

“MY SUFFERING IS GOD”:
MEISTER ECKHART’S *BOOK OF DIVINE
CONSOLATION**

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PERHAPS NOTHING is both more ancient and more current than human misery. From Gilgamesh and Job to the contemporary furor over death and dying, suffering has marked human life and posed questions which demand our deepest responses. Because misfortune, pain, and death inevitably provoke questions of meaning, they are a central concern for philosophy, religion, and culture as a whole. As Max Scheler remarks,

A doctrine on *the meaning of pain and suffering* was, in all lands, at all times, in the whole world, at the core of the teachings and directives which the great religious and philosophical thinkers gave to men. On this meaning was built an instruction and an invitation to encounter suffering correctly, to suffer *properly* (or, to eliminate suffering).¹

Here Scheler emphasizes two related features in the response to misery: its interpretation, and an art of suffering. Interpretation offers the sufferer both traditional explanations for his misery and models for suffering “well” (e.g., the Stoic sage, Christ, or the Buddha). The radical disorientation of pain and suffering is modified and perhaps overcome as these experiences are integrated into a shared mythic, religious, or speculative pattern. Interpretation not only explains misery but also tells “how one should *conduct* himself in the face of pain and suffering.”² It prescribes models, normative attitudes, specific techniques and rituals—in short, an art of suffering. We may suffer and die well or badly, with dignity or without. Either way, our performance takes place and is judged within a tradition of interpretation and an art of suffering.

Meister Eckhart’s *Book of Divine Consolation* vividly illustrates these themes. In this, the longest and best authenticated of his German works, Eckhart takes up the genre of consolation literature and addresses the issue of suffering within a boldly speculative Christian theology. To establish the context for Eckhart’s work, I shall first discuss the conso-

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¹ M. Scheler, “The Meaning of Suffering,” in *Max Scheler (1874–1928): Centennial Essays*, ed. M. S. Frings (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974) 121. See also I. Illich, *Medical Nemesis* (New York: Bantam, 1977) 129–50.

² Scheler, “Meaning of Suffering” 141.

lation tradition's distinguishing features and the *Book's* place within it. I shall then analyze the work in detail, focusing on three key elements of Eckhart's teaching: the power of altered perspectives to transform suffering into consolation; the speculative categories of unity and intellect, whereby Eckhart strives to view suffering from within God Himself; and the symbols of divine sonship and the cross, which give richer, more experiential shape to Eckhart's intellectual dialectic. The aim throughout this exposition will be to read the *Book* as a consolatory work which confers meaning on suffering and offers guidance for suffering well. Hence the essay's conclusion will evaluate the *Book's* achievement as a work of consolation.

CONSOLATION LITERATURE AND ECKHART'S *BOOK*

In the late ancient and medieval world, consolation literature offered an influential interpretation and art of suffering. This literature includes letters, treatises, and funeral orations, and counts among its major authors Cicero, Seneca, Ambrose, Jerome, and Boethius. They address anxiety and grief in the face of misfortune, illness, and especially death. The genre seeks "to show the folly of exaggerated sorrow and to set forth appropriate reasons to moderate it."³ At its most personal, consolation often takes the form of letters which expose the intimate texture of lives and relationships, as when Seneca comforts his mother Helvia concerning his own exile, or Jerome consoles his friend Paula for the death of her daughter Blesilla.⁴ The comfort offered also includes more impersonal, formal elements which temper grief by setting it within a larger intellectual or religious context. For example, Cicero and Seneca offer stock arguments concerning death as universal and a liberation from life's ills, and in Christian literature the promise of resurrection and eternal life further weakens death's sting.⁵ Such general claims lend themselves to more systematic treatment in works like Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (524). Widely commented upon and translated throughout the Middle Ages, this work is the single most important document of the entire consolation tradition and profoundly influenced such later works as Jean Gerson's *Consolatio theologiae* and Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation*. Boethius' work will therefore provide a useful point of reference for understanding Eckhart's doctrine of suffering and comfort.

Both its immediate audience and its content place Eckhart's *Book* within the tradition of consolation literature. In the condemnation pro-

³ C. Favez, *La consolation latine chrétienne* (Paris: Vrin, 1937) 63. See also M. Viller, "Consolation chrétienne," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 2, 1611-17.

⁴ Seneca, *De consolatione ad Helviam matrem*, in *Moral Essays* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1965) 2, 416-89; and Jerome, *Ep. 39, Ad Paulam de morte Blesillae*, in *Lettres* (Paris: "Belles Lettres," 1951) 2, 71-85.

⁵ Favez, *Consolation latine* 66-67, 152-57.

ceedings of 1326, his accusers list fifteen articles which are "taken from a book which Meister Eckhart sent to the queen of Hungary, written in German. The book begins thus: *Benedictus deus et pater domini nostri Ihesu Christi*."⁶ In virtue of the opening verse and the suspect articles, this work is unmistakably the *Book of Divine Consolation*. More than a century later, John Wenck confirms the address to "the queen of Hungary" and adds that she was also "sister of the dukes of Austria."⁷ G. Théry has demonstrated that Eckhart composed the work for Agnes, queen of Hungary (d. 1364).⁸ Agnes provided an appropriate audience for this consolatory work, because she suffered a devastating series of family deaths, the most cataclysmic of which was the assassination of her father, Albert I of Hapsburg, in 1308. Agnes was also receptive to the *Book's* counsels of detachment and single-minded devotion to God, since she entered a convent at Königsfeld and "became well known in the mystical circles of the fourteenth century."⁹ Eckhart's address of the treatise to this aristocratic, troubled, and pious woman specifies the pastoral, consolatory nature of the work.

More fundamentally, the *Book's* sources and themes reflect its place in the consolation tradition. For instance, Eckhart cites Seneca's advice to those suffering misfortune: "It is for a man to accept everything as if he had wished for it and had asked for it; for you would have wished for it, if you had known that everything happens by God's will, with His will and in His will."¹⁰ A more pervasive influence is Boethius' *Consolation of*

⁶ G. Théry, "Edition critique des pièces relatives au procès d'Eckhart," *Archives d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale du moyen âge* 1 (1926) 156; see *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, tr. R. Blakney (New York: Harper & Row, 1941) 272. The biblical verses are 2 Cor 1:3-4: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sorrows"; the *Book* can be seen as an extended gloss or sermon on this text. The *Book's* prominence in the condemnation proceedings places it among the best authenticated of Eckhart's German works.

⁷ John Wenck, "De ignota litteratura," in *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenck*, ed. and tr. J. Hopkins (Minneapolis: Banning, 1981) 26, 102.

⁸ G. Théry, "Le *Benedictus Deus* de Maître Eckhart," in *Mélanges Joseph Ghellinck* 2 (Gembloux: Duculot, 1951) 912-17.

⁹ *Ibid.* 914. Théry dates the *Book* to 1308-11, in the wake of Albert's death, but H. Roos ("Zur Abfassungszeit von Meister Eckharts 'Trostbuch,'" *Orbis litterarum* 9 [1954] 45-59) challenges this dating and favors 1314 or later. In his modern German edition of Eckhart's *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1963; reprinted, n.p.: Diogenes, 1979) 464, Josef Quint suggests that the exact date of the work cannot be decided.

¹⁰ Seneca, *Naturales quaestiones* 3, praef. 12 (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1971) 1, 201. Citations from the *Book of Divine Consolation* will be from *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, ed. and tr. E. Colledge and B. McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981), followed in italics by the pagination of J. Quint's critical edition in *Meister Eckhart's Deutsche Werke* 5 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963), thus: 215, 20. Citations will generally be in parentheses within the text. The Kohlhammer edition of Eckhart's *Deutsche Werke* will be cited as *DW*, and the *Lateinische Werke* as *LW*.

Philosophy, which criticizes attachment to “false goods” and moves toward a divine, intellectual vision of misfortune and suffering. And by its insistent use of biblical and patristic texts the *Book* belongs to the genre of specifically Christian consolation literature. Moreover, later in the fourteenth century, John of Dambach (d. 1372) in turn uses excerpts from Eckhart’s *Book* in composing his own *Consolatio theologiae*. While the *Book*’s place in this consolatory tradition has generally been recognized, commentators have rarely attempted to examine its themes of suffering and consolation in detail.¹¹ Yet the work’s very title proclaims its message of consolation, which Eckhart correlates with a doctrine and art of suffering. Throughout the *Book* suffering (*leit, liden*) and comfort or consolation (*troestung, trôst, trosten*) form a dialectical pair. We shall approach Eckhart’s *Book* in terms of this dialectic.

The *Book* is divided into three sections. The first sketches basic doctrines concerning the transcendentals, divine sonship, the natural “bitterness” of creation, and the single-minded turn to God. Here Eckhart writes: “If you want to be free of all affliction and suffering, hold fast to God, and turn wholly to Him, and to no one else” (211, 12). In the second and longest portion of the work Eckhart argues like a lawyer and presents “some thirty topics, each single one of which ought readily to console a rational man in his sorrow” (213, 15). Here the correlation of suffering and consolation varies widely, as Eckhart mixes commonplace counsels, scholastic speculation, and mystical theology. Just this mix, however, expresses Eckhart’s pastoral and speculative concerns as he develops an art of suffering and consolation. While his presentation is diffuse, even scattershot, Eckhart nevertheless grounds this art in his distinctive doctrines of divine unity, principial knowledge, and the Son’s birth in the soul. This second section will therefore provide the main focus for our analysis. The *Book*’s brief third part cites exemplary instances of the art of suffering and concludes with an apologia for Eckhart’s teaching.

PERSPECTIVE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SUFFERING

To indicate Eckhart’s varied correlation of suffering and consolation, let us first note his simpler, more mundane counsels. He writes, “There is no affliction and harm that is without consolation,” and illustrates this maxim with

an example: A man has a hundred marks, of which he loses forty and retains sixty. If he is going to think day and night about the forty he has lost, he will never stop feeling aggrieved and sorry for himself But if he would just turn his mind to the sixty marks he still has, and turn his back on the forty that are lost, and think of what the sixty are to him, and if he would look at them face to

¹¹ A major exception is Erwin Waldschütz, *Meister Eckhart: Eine philosophische Interpretation der Traktate* (Bonn: Grundmann, 1978) 80–149.

face and chat with them, he would certainly find consolation. (213, 15–16)

In another example Eckhart raises the stakes considerably. He says:

If you have lost a thousand marks, you ought not to lament the thousand marks that are lost. You should thank God who gave you a thousand marks to lose, and who permits you to exercise the virtue of patience and so to gain that eternal life which many thousands of men will not possess. (223–24, 36)

Other comforts amount to little more than saying that things could be worse. For instance, a sick man is urged to be thankful for his home, medicine, and family's care in contrast to the poor who, whatever their discomfort, "have to go out begging a crust of bread in the rain and the snow and the cold from house to house"; here Eckhart advises us to "forget those who are better off and think of all those for whom things are worse" (214, 17). These consolations are the stuff of proverbs and folklore. As a kind of psychological chicken soup, they exhibit Eckhart's pastoral concern to use familiar experiences and easily accessible arguments to temper sorrow. Here, as in his theology and mysticism generally, Eckhart aims not at producing extraordinary experiences or revelations but at seeing our lived reality in a new way.¹² Hence, even these commonplace maxims and examples illustrate a basic pattern in the *Book*: a change of perspective brings consolation in suffering. Because our attitudes and affections are so deeply involved in our misfortunes and pains, a perspective which changes our perception and feeling thereby alters the experience of suffering itself. In the previous instances the shifts of perspective are minor: think of the sixty marks you still have, or of those whose misery is greater than yours. But as Eckhart moves into divine knowledge, the perspectival shifts become increasingly radical and their healing power progressively stronger; chicken soup then gives way to veritable psychosurgery.

In the *Book* Eckhart aims to see and experience suffering from the standpoint of God Himself. To move beyond finite perspectives on human pain requires a fundamental reorientation of will and intellect. Eckhart expresses this reorientation in paradoxes which intensify the dialectic of suffering and consolation and finally carry it into the Godhead itself. He uses familiar scriptural passages to produce some startling interpretations. For example, a key text for the entire work is Mt 5:10, "Blessed are they who suffer for the sake of justice." At one point Eckhart's gloss on this passage glorifies *present* suffering: the Lord

does not say "who have suffered." Such a man hates "having-suffered," for having-suffered is not the [present] suffering he loves; it is a release from and a

¹² See B. McGinn, "The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart," *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981) 18–19.

loss of suffering that he alone loves for the sake of God. And therefore I say that such a man also hates "shall-suffer," for that also is not [present] suffering.¹³

The blessed nevertheless prefer future to past suffering, because it holds the promise of actual pain instead of the mere memory of suffering already endured. Whatever masochistic tendencies we may suspect here, Eckhart's point is less to encourage extreme penitential practices—which receive no mention in the treatise—than to confer new meaning and direction on the inevitable experience of suffering. He does not counsel the good to seek suffering but to bear it correctly, "for the sake of justice." This emphasis becomes clear in his discussion of the equanimity which "suffering for the sake of God" brings. Pain, misfortune, and even sin and remorse for sin are transformed when "I take and draw the suffering in God's will and from God's will. Only such sorrow is perfect sorrow, because it proceeds from a pure love of God's purest goodness and joy" (217, 22). Suffering then yields exaltation and deification, since "the good man, insofar as he is good, becomes possessed of all the properties of goodness itself, which God is in Himself."¹⁴ From this metaphysical axiom Eckhart concludes that this man lives "on earth" as God does "in heaven," that is, in equanimity and peace. He will be "completely consoled and joyful, at all times and under all circumstances"; therefore "misfortune serves him as if it were good fortune, and sorrow as much as joy."¹⁵ In these passages the dialectic of suffering and consolation assumes new psychological intensity and depth. In the commonplace counsels cited above, consolation and suffering are related as opposites, and comfort arises from countering sorrow and directing attention elsewhere. Here, however, suffering bears consolation *within itself* insofar as it is centered upon God. Suffering and comfort coincide when "suffering for the sake of justice" itself consoles the good.

UNITY AND INTELLECT: "MY SUFFERING IS GOD"

Eckhart takes the coincidence of comfort and suffering still further, into God Himself. He comments in detail on the Psalmist's declaration that God is with us in suffering and suffers with (*mitlidet*) us.¹⁶ Conclud-

¹³ 226, 39–40. In this difficult passage Eckhart contrasts the grammatical tenses of present "suffering" (*liden*), past "having-suffered" (*geleiten-hân*), and future "shall-suffer" (*noch-liden-suln*). To emphasize this contrast, I have modified the translation by inserting "present" within brackets.

¹⁴ 217, 22. Eckhart's accusers challenged this controversial doctrine; see Théry, "Pièces relatives" 162, 189.

¹⁵ 217, 22–23. See *Predigt* 4 (*DW* 1, 62–64); and *Sermo* 4, 4, 69 (*LW* 4, 67). Hereafter "*Predigt*" will be cited as *Pr.* Citations of Eckhart's Latin sermons will include the *Sermo*'s number(s), followed by the section number of the text and reference to *LW* 4. Similarly, citations of Eckhart's biblical commentaries will include the section number and reference to the appropriate *LW* volume and page.

¹⁶ 232–35, 49–54. See Ps 33(34):19; and Ps 90(91):15, which Eckhart cites at 233, 51.

ing his commentary, Eckhart says: "My suffering is in God, and my suffering is God."¹⁷ God is not only our fellow sufferer but our very suffering somehow becomes divine. This paradox places Eckhart's art of suffering and consolation squarely within his metaphysics and mystical theology; for Eckhart frames this declaration in terms of divine unity. He refers to "God's attribute, that He is the purely one, without any accidental admixture of distinction, even in thought; that everything that is in Him is God Himself."¹⁸ Therefore, since I suffer "in" God, Eckhart says, "my suffering is God. Truly, as God is Truth and as I find the Truth, I find my God, the Truth, there; and too, neither more nor less, as I find pure suffering for the love of God and in God, I find God my suffering" (235, 54). Divine unity is among Eckhart's most pervasive themes. In the tradition of Neoplatonism he conceives divine unity as prior to all distinction and opposition, and as enfolding all multiplicity in its simplicity. In virtue of this ontological priority "God is one in Himself and separated from everything else,"¹⁹ radically other than finite, distinct beings; yet this very difference simultaneously renders the one God "indistinct" from all things, because all opposites so coincide in divine unity that "everything that is in God is God Himself."²⁰ The *Book* brings this unity metaphysics to bear upon the pastoral work of consolation. Eckhart claims that the sons of God

are strangers to goodness, truth, and everything that tolerates any distinction, be it in a thought or a name, in a notion or just a shadow of a distinction. They are intimates of the One that is bare of every kind of multiplicity and distinction. In the One, "God-Father-Son-and-Holy-Spirit" are stripped of every distinction and property, and are one. And the One makes us blessed. . . . The closer we are to the One, the more truly are we God's sons and His Son, and also the more truly does God the Holy Spirit flow from us. (227, 41-42)

In this drive toward the radical unity prior to the Trinity itself, all distinctions are overcome. Here suffering and consolation, pain and joy coincide; for

since God suffers so willingly with us and for our sake, if we suffer only for the love of Him, He suffers without suffering (*lidet sunder liden*). Suffering is for

¹⁷ 235, 54. For consistency of terminology, I have changed Colledge's translation of *leit* as "sorrow" to "suffering."

¹⁸ 234-35, 53. See *Pr* 3 (*DW* 1, 56-57).

¹⁹ *Pr* 21 (*DW* 1, 357; tr. in M. Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1980] 188).

²⁰ 234-35, 53. See *Sermo* 4, 1, 28 (*LW* 4, 27-28); *Sermo* 29, 298 (*LW* 4, 265); *In Ex.* 106-7 and 113-17 (*LW* 2, 106-7 and 110-12); *In Sap.* 151-55 (*LW* 2, 488-91); V. Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin, 1973) 261-65; and B. McGinn, "Meister Eckhart on God as Absolute Unity," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. D. J. O'Meara (Albany: S.U.N.Y., 1982) 128-39.

Him so joyful that it is for Him not suffering. And therefore, if we thought rightly, suffering would not be suffering for us; it would be our joy and our consolation.²¹

Divine unity thus underlies the psychological coincidence of suffering and comfort. Because delight and suffering are one in God, we too "suffer without suffering" as we penetrate to divine unity.

How, then, are we to attain this unity? Here Eckhart's mystical noetic or theory of knowledge comes into play, as he first conceives unity in terms of intellect and then specifies intellect as the primary locus for mystical union. The Latin sermon on the text "Deus unus est" (Gal 3:20) effectively summarizes these themes. Because "unity or the one seems to be proper to or the property of intellect alone," Eckhart says that "God alone is in the true sense of the word, that He is intellect or understanding, and that He is understanding alone, purely and simply, apart from any other being."²² Eckhart then draws the analogical conclusion that union with God occurs in the intellect. Citing the authority of Augustine, he says: "To ascend to the intellect . . . and to be subjected to it is to be united with God."²³ In terms of the *Book*, intellect is thus that "highest power (*kraft*) of the soul, bare of all things and having nothing in common with anything, [which] receives into itself nothing less than God Himself, in all the vastness and fulness of His being."²⁴ Empty of all finite distinctions, even of space and time, intellect is exalted beyond being.²⁵

Recent commentators have noted Eckhart's exaltation of intellect. C. F. Kelley, for example, argues that Eckhart consistently strives for "principial knowledge," which he defines as "the consideration of all things and all manifestation as it were from *within* the Godhead, the unconditioned Principle, or *tamquam in principio infinito*."²⁶ Rooted in the divine intellect's revelation in the incarnate Word, this mode of knowledge requires an astonishing reversal of perspective: "nothing less than the transposition of our natural consideration from the standpoint

²¹ 233, 51. See also 217, 22; and Augustine, *De patientia* 1, 1 (PL 40, 611), which Eckhart cites in *Sermo* 12, 2, 136 (LW 4, 128).

²² *Sermo* 29, 300–301 (LW 4, 266–68; tr. in J. M. Clark and J. V. Skinner, *Treatises and Sermons of Meister Eckhart* [New York: Harper, 1958] 210–11). See also Eckhart, *Quaestio parisiensis* 1 (LW 5, 37–48); and for a detailed discussion of this theme in Thomas Aquinas and Eckhart, see R. Imbrach, *Deus est Intelligere* (Freiburg, Switz.: Universitätsverlag, 1976).

²³ *Sermo* 29, 304 (LW 4, 270; Clark and Skinner, *Treatises and Sermons* 212). See also *In Ex.* 277 (LW 2, 223); and Augustine, *Confessiones* 10, 24, 35 (PL 32, 794).

²⁴ 220, 29. See *Pr* 11 (DW 1, 182); and *In Ioh.* 38 (LW 3, 32).

²⁵ See Eckhart, *Quaestiones parisienses* 1 and 2 (LW 5, 37–54; tr. A. Maurer, *Parisian Questions and Prologues* [Toronto: P. I. M. S., 1974] 43–54); and J. Caputo, "The Nothingness of the Intellect in Meister Eckhart's 'Parisian Questions,'" *Thomist* 39 (1975) 85–115.

²⁶ C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University, 1978) 250.

of time and limitation to one of God in his Godhead."²⁷ When achieved, this transposition effectively abolishes perspective; for whereas perspective involves distinct and mutually exclusive standpoints (e.g., "here" and "there"), principial knowledge sees all at once in an inclusive simplicity; it sees all things *in principio*, that is, "in" and "as" the divine intellect itself. This knowledge characterizes the life of the blessed man, who possesses "the everlasting vision of God in his divine light, seeing, in God, himself and all created things."²⁸ Eckhart does not, however, wait for this eternal vision after death but seeks to express it here and now in terms of his mystical noetic. This attempt leads him into extreme statements and paradoxes. More precisely, Eckhart's language involves a dialectical play between finite perspectives and principial knowledge, as when he says that "If one takes a flea in God, then it is nobler in God than is the highest angel in itself. Now all things in God are equal and are God Himself."²⁹ Considered in themselves, the angel is surely nobler than the flea; but considered principially, in the divine intellect, they are one and equal.

Here we may seem far removed from the *Book's* themes of suffering and comfort. Yet the *Book* offers its deepest consolation in directing us toward a "principial" view and experience of suffering. Comparison with Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* clarifies this issue. In Book 5 Boethius distinguishes between reason and intelligence (*intelligentia*). Reason characterizes "the human race alone, just as intelligence belongs to God alone."³⁰ While reason's vision is partial and temporal—and hence subject to perspective—intelligence "sees all things actually (*formaliter*), so to speak, in a single glance of the mind."³¹ In short, intelligence is divine knowledge which embraces all things in its eternally simple and unrestricted vision. To resolve the final problems of the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy urges Boethius toward this divine knowledge: "Let us rise, if we can, to the summit of highest intelligence; for there reason will see what in itself it cannot see."³² As the *Consolation* concludes by moving into divine intelligence, Boethius' therapy ultimately consists in viewing human misfortune and suffering quite literally *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, from the standpoint of God's eternal vision.³³ In his *Book* Eckhart begins where Boethius leaves off. Boethius and Eckhart agree that when

²⁷ *Ibid.* 38; see 61–69.

²⁸ 219, 26. See 216, 21; and Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.* 1, q. 12, a. 9.

²⁹ *Pr* 12 (*DW* 1, 199; in Quint, *Deutsche Predigten* 215; my English translation).

³⁰ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* 5, prose 5, tr. R. Green (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962) 113.

³¹ *Ibid.* 5, prose 4 (Green 111, translation modified).

³² *Ibid.* 5, prose 5 (Green 114).

³³ See D. Duclow, "Perspective and Therapy in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4 (1979) 334–43.

pain and misfortune are seen from finite and worldly perspectives, they yield suffering. As Boethius finds only sorrow in subjection to Fortune and her goods, Eckhart notes how "impossible" it is "for a man to find true consolation who seeks his consolation in created things" (213, 15). Further, by emphasizing intellect and principial knowledge, Eckhart too strives to view suffering *sub specie aeternitatis*, but in a more radical fashion than Boethius. Whereas Boethius laboriously strives toward this vision, Eckhart proclaims it from the start and draws overtly mystical conclusions from it. For Eckhart, in knowing as God knows, we come to suffer as God suffers—happily, with serene equanimity and "without suffering." In divine knowledge, suffering and delight are as "equal" as fleas and angels, since they too coincide in God's unifying knowledge. Eckhart thus speaks principially in saying, "My suffering is in God, and my suffering is God."

DIVINE SONSHIP AND THE CROSS

The dialectic of suffering and consolation finds symbolic expression as Eckhart links principial knowledge with the traditional Christian themes of divine sonship and the cross. Suffering and crucifixion are the way into divine knowledge and sonship. Citing the Pauline claim that "God chastises all those whom he receives and accepts as His sons" (Heb 12:6), Eckhart writes:

It is part of our being a son for us to suffer. Because God's Son could not suffer in His divinity and in eternity, the heavenly Father therefore sent Him into time, to become man and to be able to suffer. So if you want to be son of God and you do not want to suffer, you are all wrong. (231, 48)

Here Eckhart's teaching once again appears conventional. The incarnate Christ offers both the paradigm for human suffering and the ultimate consolation, because his passion and death heal and save. Our sufferings are "trials" whereby we participate in Christ's passion and become sons of God. Nevertheless, Eckhart's treatment of so conventional a theme is noteworthy; for in contrast to much medieval piety after Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux, he does not dwell on images of Jesus' passion and death. Eckhart's concern is not the imaginative contemplation of historical events but intellectual vision and the timeless process of becoming sons of God. He therefore abruptly places Jesus' historicity in principial perspective, as he uses it to connect the themes of suffering and sonship. He here comments at length on God as the fellow sufferer whose pain is delight and who takes our suffering into His very being (232-35, 49-54).

Eckhart's discussion of the cross similarly emphasizes the transposition of suffering into divine sonship. He comments on Jesus' statement, "If any man will come to me, he should forsake and deny himself and

take up his cross" (Mt 16:24). In this passage the cross brings together the themes of detachment and "coming to" the Son. By emptying oneself, detachment yields equanimity and delight in suffering.

For truly, if anyone had denied himself and had wholly forsaken himself, nothing could be for him a cross or sorrow or suffering; it would all be delight to him, a happiness, a joy to his heart, and he would truly be coming to God and following Him. For just as nothing can grieve or afflict God, so nothing can make such a man rueful or sad. (230, 45)

Here the cross becomes the symbolic focus for the dialectic of suffering and consolation, as this crucifixion promises divine sonship. Eckhart writes that

When our Lord, the Son, says, "Let him deny himself and lift up his cross and come to me," that means: Let him become a Son, as I am Son (*werde sun, als ich sun bin*), God-begotten, and let him become that same one which I am, which I, being and remaining in the bosom and the heart of the Father, create.³⁴

Becoming a son of God demands suffering, yet the cross transposes this suffering into delight as it leads us into the deity itself; for Eckhart does not rest with a moral interpretation of this sonship but proclaims the soul's entry into the very life of the triune God. He says: "No one truly comes to the Son as He is Son except the one who becomes son, and no one is where the Son is, who is in the One in the Father's bosom and heart, except him who is son."³⁵

Here we face one of Eckhart's most typical and controversial themes: as the Son is born in the soul, the soul becomes the Son Himself and thereby breaks through to the unity of the Father. Since other commentators have discussed this theme at length,³⁶ here it will suffice to note that divine sonship completes Eckhart's dialectic of suffering and consolation. When Eckhart paraphrases Christ as saying, "Let him become a Son, as I am Son," he contrasts the project of *becoming* sons of God with the *being* of the eternally begotten Son. Waldschütz suggests that becoming sons of God is the main theme of the *Book* and embraces both suffering and consolation: we suffer insofar as we are not yet sons of

³⁴ 230, 46. See *In Ioh.* 197 (LW 3, 166).

³⁵ 230, 46. See *In Ioh.* 223 (LW 3, 187).

³⁶ See, *inter alia*, Fox, *Breakthrough* passim; J. Loeschen, "The God Who Becomes," *Thomist* 35 (1971) 405-22; K. G. Kertz, "Meister Eckhart's Teaching on the Birth of the Divine Word in the Soul," *Traditio* 15 (1959) 327-63; and H. Rahner, "Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi aus dem Herzen der Kirche und der Gläubigen," in *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1964) 13-87. Among Eckhart's most concise and controversial statements of this theme is *Pr 6* (DW 1, 99-115; tr. in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart* 185-89).

God, and are consoled as we indeed become one with the divine Son.³⁷ This becoming involves the pain of de-cathexis as we “empty” ourselves of created being with its differences and multiplicity. Yet this pain in fact sets aside the natural “bitterness” and nothingness of creatures in themselves and thereby leads into divine unity and fulness, because as the soul “possesses less of created things, and is emptier of all things that are not God, it receives God more purely, and is more totally in Him, and it truly becomes one with God” (222, 32). Here the soul finds consolation and delight; for as it becomes God’s son, the soul takes on the very “attributes” (*eigenschaft*) of God (229, 44); it knows, loves, and acts in and as the Son Himself. Divine sonship is thus the foundation for Eckhart’s mystical noetics and art of suffering; for only as the soul’s “highest powers” are so transformed as to become “the sons of God and God’s Only-Begotten Son” (211, 11) does the human intellect attain the principial knowledge which views suffering *sub specie aeternitatis*. A similar transformation affects love and will. Because “God loves for His own sake and performs all things for His own sake,” Eckhart concludes that “whoever, born of God, is God’s son loves God for His sake alone. That is, he loves God for the sake of loving God, and performs all his works for the sake of working.”³⁸ This single-minded love yields the paradoxical desire for present suffering that we noted above; for

a good man wants and would always want to suffer for God’s sake, not to have suffered; for suffering, he has what he loves. He loves suffering for God’s sake, and he suffers for the sake of God. Therefore and thereby is he God’s son, formed in God’s likeness and in God, who loves for His own sake.³⁹

In its transforming power this suffering simultaneously effects and exemplifies the process of becoming sons of God. Conversely, in His incarnation and passion the divine Son discloses the God who “suffers so willingly with us and for our sake . . . [but] without suffering” (233, 51). As we become sons of God, we suffer as God suffers—in detachment, principial knowledge, and concentrated love. This art of suffering then coincides with divine consolation, because “My suffering is in God, and my suffering is God.”

To summarize, Eckhart’s *Book of Divine Consolation* develops a complex dialectic of suffering and consolation which engages the most fundamental themes of his thought: detachment, principial knowledge, di-

³⁷ Waldschütz, *Meister Eckhart* 136–38, 150–55.

³⁸ 228–29, 43–44. See *Pr* 1 (*DW* 1, 9); and *In Sap.* 99 (*LW* 2, 434–35).

³⁹ 229, 44. See *Pr* 2 (*DW* 1, 36–38); *Pr* 76 (*DW* 3, 324); and Scheler, “Meaning of Suffering” 160: “The invitation to *suffer* with Christ and in Christ in the community of the cross is rooted in the more crucial invitation to *love* like Christ and in Christ.”

vine unity, and sonship. The work is not a theodicy in the conventional sense of "justifying the ways of God to man," which often amounts to explaining away human misery and anguish. Rather, it is a work of pastoral care and consolation which aims to transform the experience of suffering from within. Eckhart counsels detachment, an "emptying" of the self, and a paradoxical will to suffer "for the sake of justice." This moral and affective conversion requires a radical change of perspective. Here Eckhart's unity metaphysics and exaltation of intellect come into play, as he seeks a principial vision of suffering. Both the condition and the promise of this renewed vision lie in the anagogical process of becoming God's son.

CONCLUSION: MEANING AND CONSOLATION

With our analysis of Eckhart's *Book of Divine Consolation* now complete, we may briefly assess its consoling power. For Eckhart, of course, the value and efficacy of his consolations derive from their speculative and mystical truth. As he remarks at the work's conclusion, "It is enough for me that what I say and write be true in man and in God" (239, 60). On this basis he teaches, and prays that he and his readers "may find the truth within ourselves and come to know it" (239, 61). While we may share this hope, we may nevertheless require a more critical evaluation of Eckhart's achievement; for what Eckhart found true in himself and God was intensely disputed in Cologne and Avignon, and his trial for heresy and subsequent condemnation have clouded the issue of the orthodoxy and truth of his theology. In his extensive *Defense* Eckhart challenged his accusers, questioning their methods and presenting fuller interpretations of the suspect articles. Nevertheless, shortly after the Dominican's death, Pope John XXII issued the bull *In agro dominico*, condemning seventeen articles as heretical and finding eleven others "suspect of heresy."⁴⁰ Several of the articles touch upon issues that are basic to the *Book*—particularly the apparent identification of the soul with Christ and God. Yet even on this question the bull is ambivalent, as it condemns some articles outright but says of others that they are "quite evil-sounding and very rash and suspect of heresy, though with many explanations and additions they might take on or possess a Catholic meaning."⁴¹ It is not clear, however, why one of two articles (no. 22) proclaiming the Father's conferral of identity on the soul and Son may assume "a Catholic meaning," but another (no. 11) cannot. While commentators have presented orthodox interpretations of Eckhart's doc-

⁴⁰ Pope John XXII, *In agro dominico*, March 27, 1329 (ed. M.-H. Laurent, "Autour du procès de Maître Eckhart: Les documents des Archives Vaticanes," *Divus Thomas* [Piacenza] series 3, 13 [1936] 435-44).

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 443 (tr. Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart* 80).

trine,⁴² the issue remains vexed and perhaps insoluble; for, as McGinn and Schürmann suggest, we witness “a radical clash of theological styles” at work in Eckhart’s trial and condemnation.⁴³ The isolated “articles” preclude a broader interpretive context and thereby conceal deeper misunderstandings. For example, where Eckhart preaches “the imperative of an identity to be accomplished,” his accusers and John XXII see only a substantial identity between God and the intellect.⁴⁴ So radical a conflict of method and teaching rendered mutual understanding impossible and virtually assured Eckhart’s condemnation. For these reasons it may be prudent to leave open the question of the Dominican’s doctrinal orthodoxy and to note more precisely the aims and contexts of his works. This approach allows a fuller, more nuanced assessment of Eckhart’s theological and religious insight.

Because the *Book* seeks to comfort those in sorrow, we may ask which of its features lend it credibility precisely as a work of consolation. On this question the psychology of Viktor Frankl is especially suggestive. Frankl has developed what he calls “logotherapy” because of his concern with the centrality of logos or meaning in human experience. He searches for this meaning in his patients’ suffering, as well as in their work and pleasures. Logotherapy does not seek to eliminate suffering by reducing it to psychogenic conflict, as does Freudian analysis, but rather inquires into the meaning of suffering itself. As a survivor of Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps, Frankl has had ample opportunity to test his

⁴² Among the numerous commentaries suggesting Eckhart’s orthodoxy, we may note the following: Kertz, “Meister Eckhart’s Teaching”; Rahner, “Die Gottesgeburt,” which surveys the patristic antecedents for Eckhart’s teaching on the birth of the Word in the soul; Lossky, *Théologie négative*, which links Eckhart to both the tradition of the *via negativa* and the Eastern Church’s doctrine of *theōsis* or deification (see esp. 358–69); B. McGinn, “Theological Summary,” in Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart* 24–61; E. Cousins, “Fullness and Emptiness in Bonaventure and Eckhart,” *Journal of Dharma* 6 (1981) 59–68; and, of course, Eckhart’s own defense, ed. Théry, “Pièces relatives au procès d’Eckhart.”

⁴³ B. McGinn, “Meister Eckhart’s Condemnation Reconsidered,” *Thomist* 44 (1980) 413. The complete article (390–414) presents a useful, judicious review of Eckhart’s trial and condemnation, and of the literature concerning them. Eckhart’s defense distinguishes intellectual error from heresy or the wilful adherence to error (Théry, “Pièces relatives” 189, 191). Professing no intention to err obstinately, Eckhart defended himself against theological error; but while he was defending the “sense” of the articles, his accusers were attacking them “as they sounded objectively” (McGinn, “Eckhart’s Condemnation” 400–403, 412). *In agro dominico* reflects this tension by condemning some articles and allowing others a “Catholic meaning.”

⁴⁴ R. Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1978) 29. Schürmann assesses Eckhart’s trial and defense as follows: “Two great families of language confront each other: the ecclesiastical institution at the end of a great period stiffens within an already curdled terminology, which can only lead to the condemnation of the one who breathes a new form of thought into the old body of metaphysical dogmata” (30–31).

claim that "What matters above all is the attitude we take toward suffering, the attitude in which we take suffering upon ourselves. . . . Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of sacrifice."⁴⁵ For us, Frankl's assertion that suffering with meaning "in some ways ceases to be suffering" may echo Eckhart's paradox about "suffering without suffering." For the *Book* consistently proclaims "attitudes" which transform the experience of suffering by conferring meanings upon it. Even the work's lighter, commonplace comforts modify the perspective within which we suffer, while Eckhart's "principal" viewpoint marks a profound reorientation in our attitudes toward suffering.

Eckhart's altered perspective on suffering requires an acknowledgment of its meaning. Hence throughout the *Book* consolation consists in an interpretation of suffering which assimilates it to traditional categories, themes, and symbols; for the meanings which Eckhart proposes for suffering are not private and unique but embedded in the common, public world of medieval Christendom. Eckhart's scriptural and patristic texts, and the themes of crucifixion and sonship, are hardly esoteric materials in the fourteenth century. Indeed, the consoling, healing power of the *Book* derives in large measure from the very familiarity of these materials; for Eckhart proclaims a traditional language which expresses and organizes the otherwise chaotic and inexpressible experiences of pain, suffering, and dying.⁴⁶ This language overcomes the isolating privacy of suffering by drawing it into a widely-shared cultural tradition. Eckhart summons those suffering to conform their experience to a Christian interpretation and art of suffering. He invites them into what Scheler calls "blessed suffering":

The Christian doctrine of suffering asks *more* than a patient tolerance of suffering. It asks—better: it points to *blessed suffering*. It believes, in its very core, that only blessed man, i.e. man depending on God, tolerates pain and suffering in a correct manner, loves suffering, and, when necessary, can seek it out.⁴⁷

In light of Christ's passion and exaltation, suffering becomes sacrifice and purification,⁴⁸ which lead into divine unity and sonship. Eckhart

⁴⁵ V. E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963) 178–79. See also Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 44.

⁴⁶ See C. Lévi-Strauss, "The Effectiveness of Symbols," in *Structural Anthropology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1967) 180–201, esp. 193. Although this essay focuses on a Cuna Indian ceremony for difficult childbirth, Lévi-Strauss's comparison between primitive healing and psychoanalysis has broad implications for understanding healing and culture.

⁴⁷ Scheler, "Meaning of Suffering" 161.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 159–63. See also J. Ferguson, *The Place of Suffering* (London: Clarke, 1972) 80–99; and P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 45–68.

reminds his readers, from Queen Agnes to ourselves, of the central place of suffering in Christian tradition and practice.

Eckhart develops these themes with extraordinary rhetorical intensity and dialectical power; for his interpretations filter Christendom's *lingua franca* through the speculative categories of a Platonizing scholasticism. One consequence of this process is the austere intellectualism of the *Book*, as Eckhart ignores imaginative, affective contemplation of Christ's passion in favor of principial knowledge. In this respect the *Book* resembles Boethius' serene *Consolation of Philosophy* more than the heated devotion to Christ's passion found in Henry Suso, Eckhart's own disciple.⁴⁹ Another consequence is that Eckhart's assimilation of suffering to traditional language and categories transforms the tradition itself. Whereas medieval thought generally distinguished sharply between divine impassibility and the suffering humanity of Christ, Eckhart's principial vision transposes the cross into the divine life. Divine impassibility then does not exclude suffering but binds it to joy in a simple unity where God "suffers without suffering." Along with the Son's birth, his suffering and death become timeless events in which we are called to participate because they alone initiate us into divine joy and life. In this way Eckhart's dialectic of suffering and consolation points toward a "theology of the pain of God"⁵⁰ and a mystical participation in that consoling pain. Eckhart's handling of this dialectic exemplifies a basic pattern in his thinking, as he consistently radicalizes traditional themes: Boethius' striving for intellectual vision becomes principial knowledge; *contemptus mundi* becomes detachment not only from the paltriness and misery of creatures but from their nothingness; divine sonship becomes the deification of the soul; and crucifixion becomes the suffering of God Himself. As de Gandillac has commented, a dialectical impulse drives Eckhart to take traditional texts and themes to their most extreme conclusions.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See Henry Suso, *The Exemplar*, tr. A. Edward (Dubuque: Priory, 1962); esp. Suso's *Life* 13 and 16, *Exemplar* 1, 32-35 and 39-41; and *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* 2-5 and 25, *Exemplar* 2, 9-21 and 117-27.

⁵⁰ See K. Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond: John Knox, 1965) 45: "The cross is in no sense an external act of God, but an act within himself. 'The cross was the reflection . . . of an act within the Godhead.' Luther insists that the premise is that 'the absolute necessity for the sacrifice of the Son is grounded in God himself.'" For Kitamori and Luther, God's pain consists in the conflict between "God in his will of wrath and God in his will of love" (*ibid.*) For Eckhart, the cross similarly points toward divine suffering, but for reasons stemming from his metaphysics of unity and intellect. If Eckhart here looks forward to Luther and Kitamori, he also looks back to the Theopaschite controversy of the patristic era; on this see J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 177-82. One of the few traces of this controversy in the medieval West occurs in Boethius, *Contra Eutychem et Nestorium* 7, in *The Theological Tractates and Consolation of Philosophy* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973) 118-119.

⁵¹ M. de Gandillac, "La 'dialectique' de Maître Eckhart," in *La mystique rhénane* (Paris:

While Eckhart's accusers and Pope John XXII noted the results of this tendency with alarm, they overlooked the *Book's* radical doctrine of suffering and consolation.⁵² They never challenged Eckhart's claim, "My suffering is in God, and my suffering is God." Nor have Eckhart commentators accorded it much attention. Yet this bold claim lies at the heart of Eckhart's art of suffering, and places the *Book of Divine Consolation* among the most remarkable documents in the tradition of consolation literature.

Presses Universitaires de France, 1963) 60.

⁵² One of the articles in the indictment cites the *Book* 229, 44: "A good man wants and would always want to suffer for God's sake . . ." (Théry, "Pièces relatives" 165-66). Yet the objection is directed not against Eckhart's doctrine of suffering but against his claims concerning sonship and the good man's transformation into God—themes also challenged in the surrounding articles taken from the *Book*.