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ECKHART, FÉNELON & THE QUESTION OF THE SUBJECT

On Self and Selflessness in Early Modern Mysticism

‘And then again I said to Him that if it were possible that He could give me as great torments as He is great in power to avenge Himself of me and of my sin, if it would please Him, it would be pleasing to me’.
Marguerite Porete¹

‘Modern mysticism relates to the Ego.
We cannot get away from it.
We are sick or have to defend ourselves’.
Hugo Ball²

SUMMARY – On the inner journey of a mystic, everything revolves around a fight against his own self. In order to become one with God, the mystic has to eliminate that very self. Yet, as is obvious in so many spiritual oeuvres, this struggle invariably shows the particularly strong self that concerns it. The Ego is the mystic’s biggest obstacle, but who else but the Ego is able to clear this obstacle?

This paper offers a close reading of some fragments from the work of two mystical authors, Meister Eckhart and François de Fénelon, the one premodern, the other modern. It will become clear how each has a different experience of the paradox of mysticism. That difference, it will turn out, is precisely due to the paradigm each of these mysticisms presupposes.

¹ Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, transl. & introd. Ellen L. Babinsky, pref. Robert E. Lerner, New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993, 212. Original text: ‘Après encore dis je que, se il pouvoit estre que je retourasse a nient, auis comme je fins de nient, affin qu’il fust vengé de moy; il luy plaisoit, ce seroit ma plaisance’; Marguerite Porete, *Le miroir des simples ames anienties et qui seulement demourent en vouloir et desir d’amour*, ed. Romana Guarnieri, Roma: Instituto Grafico Tiberino, 1961, 107. See also: Marguerite Porete, *Le miroir des simples âmes anéanties*, transl. Claude Louis-Combet, ed. & notes Emilie Zum Brunn, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1991, 250; Elizabeth Spearing (Ed.), *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*, New York/ London: Penguin Books, 2002, 141.

² Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*, transl. Ann Raimés, ed., introd. & notes John Elderfield, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 113.

The slowness and patience that comes with a close reading also allow the reader to penetrate the sharp line of reasoning that characterizes many mystical texts. Despite the reputation that precedes these texts, the rationality they demonstrate is often just as unfathomable as it is sharp-witted.

Of all the obstacles characterizing the path of the mystic, the own Ego is by far the largest. It is a given in all mystical literature. In the yearning for the divine, it comes down to eliminating every semblance of egoism. In fact: also the Ego that, with the best intentions, steers the sanitized yearning needs to be conquered. The mystical experience is selfless, or is not. And yet it is difficult to imagine that someone walking the path to radical selflessness has no strong self-awareness. How would a weak Ego be able to walk this difficult path at all? The *corpus mysticum* of the Christian tradition is a big incentive to – a celebration of and exercise in – radical selflessness, but that does not prevent it being written by authors who were all big personalities with clear willpower.

What is evident here is the core as well as the paradox of mysticism. Everything revolves around a fight against the self, but this struggle invariably shows the particularly strong self that concerns it. The Ego is the biggest obstacle, but who else but the Ego is able to clear this obstacle?

This paper offers a close reading of some fragments from the work of two mystical authors, the one premodern, the other modern. It will become clear how each has a different experience of the paradox of mysticism. That difference, it will turn out, is precisely due to the paradigm each of these mysticisms presupposes. The slowness and patience that comes with a close reading also allow the reader to penetrate the sharp line of reasoning that characterizes many mystical texts. Despite the reputation that precedes these texts, the rationality they demonstrate is often just as unfathomable as it is sharp-witted.

1. ECKHARTIAN SELFLESSNESS ...

No one except the self can walk the path of selflessness. This enigma can be read on almost every page of one of the most fascinating oeuvres from the mystical tradition, that of Meister Eckhart (1260-1328). Sometimes the paradox is laid bare and relentlessly commented on and questioned. This is the case in the well-known sermon *Beati pauperes spiritu*, about a verse from the gospel of Matthew (5:3): 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.³

³ Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, transl. Edmund Colledge & Bernard McGinn, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981, 8-15.

Eckhart indicates that he will only speak about ‘inner poverty’. In a typically scholastic way, he defines this concept from three perspectives that he will successively deal with. ‘They are poor’, we read, ‘who [1] want nothing and [2] know nothing and [3] have nothing’. It is in the treatment of the first element – poverty as ‘not wanting anything’ – that the Ego is already targeted as the biggest obstacle to be overcome. And Eckhart would not be Eckhart if it were not all a bit more complicated than the already punchy first few sentences of his sermon suggest; that many people do not quite understand poverty as not-wanting still seems a conceivable thought.

First let us discuss a poor man as one who wants nothing. There are some people who do not understand this well. They are those who are attached to their own penances and external exercises [*die sich behaltent mit eigenschaft in pênitencie und úzwendiger üebunge*],⁴ which seem important to people. God help those who hold divine truth in such low esteem! Such people present an outward picture that gives them the name of saints; They have great esteem in the sight of men who know no better, but inside they are donkeys [*von innen sint si esel*], for they cannot distinguish divine truth.⁵

For the listener – and thus also for the reader – it is clear: the Master turns from the outward display of those who pretend to be holy, while they are anything but inside. Rather, they are still too attached to their own Ego, to what is their own (‘eigenschaft’) and not to what refers to God and what is God’s own. But what does Eckhart want the listener/reader to understand? About the would-be saints, the ‘donkeys’, he writes:

These people say that a man is poor who wants nothing; but they interpret it in this way, that a man ought to live so that he never fulfills his own will in anything, but that he ought to comport himself so that he may fulfill God’s dearest will.⁶

Poverty – defined as ‘wanting nothing’ – characterizes those who do not aim their will on anything or anybody but God; who want nothing more for themselves but make every effort to exclusively ‘fulfill God’s (...) will’. Note, this is according to the ‘donkeys’ who ‘do not understand this’. But what is wrong with that? What these ‘donkeys’ claim about spiritual poverty is surely not so superficial, so ‘outward’? Is it not simply an unadulterated version of the Christian ideal – including its mystical version? Eckhart is incidentally all too aware of this. This is already evident from the next sentence. Those who live like this, he writes, deserve his (Eckhart’s) praise and, God-willing, even a place in the

⁴ The original Middle High German text is cited from: Meister Eckhart, *Werke I*. Texts & transl.. Joseph Quint, ed. Niklaus Largier, Frankfurt a.M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993, 552.

⁵ Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons*, 199.

⁶ Ibidem.

kingdom of heaven; but it does not prevent Eckhart from immediately adding that such a person has not understood a thing about spiritual poverty.

Such people [the donkeys] are in the right, for their intention is good. For this let us commend them. May God in his mercy grant them the kingdom of heaven. But I speak in the divine truth when I say that they are not poor men, nor do they resemble poor men. They have great esteem in the sight of men who know no better, but I say that they are donkeys who have no understanding of the divine truth. They deserve the kingdom of heaven for their good intention, but of the poverty of which we want to talk they know nothing.⁷

The ‘donkeys’ are right, yet they do not know what spiritual poverty is, and if they deserve divine bliss on this basis, it is because God is indeed all ‘mercy’. Of the truth coming from this same Merciful One, they would equally not have understood anything, despite themselves.

And Eckhart says this because he has understood it; because he speaks in no other name than that of the divine truth and wisdom itself. He already warned his listener in the first few lines when he said that he had heard the beatification he was going to discuss from ‘blessedness’ and from ‘wisdom’ itself (‘Blessedness opened its mouth to wisdom and said: Blessed...’). And he added that in the face of the truth spoken here, all the wisdom of people, saints and angels together sinks into nothing:

All angels and all saints and all who were ever born must keep silent when the Wisdom of the Father speaks, for all the Wisdom of the angels and of all created beings is more folly before the unfathomable Wisdom of God. It has said that the poor are blessed.⁸

Not only have the listeners/readers been warned, they are moreover also forgiven in advance should they not understand the divine truth (thus belonging to the ‘donkeys’ against whom they hear the Master ranting). Right before Eckhart starts his exposé about his threefold poverty theory, we read:

Let us now talk about these three points; and I beg you for the sake of God’s love that you understand this truth, if you can, and if you do not understand it, do not burden yourself with it, for the truth I want to expound is such that there will be few good people to understand it.⁹

The listeners/readers, who felt comfortable in having understood the Master’s argument, now know where they are up to. What they considered to be at the heart of the Christian message – no longer thinking about yourself and only

⁷ Ibid., 199-200.

⁸ Ibid., 199.

⁹ Ibidem.

seeking to fulfill God's will – is not at all what 'poor in spirit' is about. But what, then, is it about? Eckhart:

If someone asks me now what kind of poor man he is who wants nothing, I reply in this way. So long as a man has this as his will, that he wants to fulfill God's dearest will, he has not the poverty about which we want to talk. Such a person has a will with which he wants to fulfill God's will, and that is not true poverty. For if a person wants really to have poverty, he ought to be as free of his own created will as he was when he did not exist. For I tell you by the truth that is eternal, so long as you have a will to fulfill God's will, and a longing for God and eternity, then you are not poor; for a poor man is one who has a will and longing for nothing.¹⁰

Who is poor in spirit? Who has the right attitude and way of living that is expected from a Christian? Not they who fully direct their will at God (even if this is in accordance with Christian teachings and can ensure eternal bliss granted by God) but the person 'who has a will and longing for nothing'. You can best take Eckhart's words here in all their radicality. Poor in spirit is not the one who wants nothing. Neither is it the one who wants *the* nothing and/or wants nothing more and wants to erase every form of Ego in the self. Poor in spirit is the one who wants *not*; one who, for example, does *not* want to erase the own Ego. Not because they want something else, but because they do *not* want to. The poor in spirit no longer has any will, not even the will to have none.

Here Eckhart touches on the paradox of mysticism as mentioned above. Because how does the 'poor' ever get that far? How else but by *wanting* to no longer want? However, how to eliminate your will without *willing* to eliminate it? If you are going down the mystical path and want to end up in a state where there is no longer any Ego or will, you still just need a strong Ego and a strong will. And, once more, how exactly to overcome that which makes it possible for the 'poor in spirit' to finally be what, who and where they must be? Or, to formulate it more abstractly but perhaps more clearly: the mystical paradox touches on the *subject* of the mystical experience – and, if it is up to Eckhart, at the same time on the *subject* of being human on the whole.

The term *subject* must be understood in terms of its abstract, formal meaning: that which is cast (*iectum* > *icere*) under (*sub-*) something: in Latin: 'subiectum', which is a literal translation of the Greek 'hupokeimenon'. The term is derived from Aristotelian logic, where it represents 'bearer', to which 'attributes' are then ascribed. Translated by the Latin *subiectum*, the term acquired an ontological meaning in late antiquity: bearer/support/ground of *reality*. Subject

¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

becomes the term for being as such or, in Christian philosophy, for God, bearer-because-creator of being.¹¹

In the mystical experience, where I touch the ground and support of my existence, *I* am no longer ground and support – ‘subiectum’ in other words – of that ‘touching’ or that ‘being’ – or of anything that happens or is there. But where then does this experience have its ‘bearer’, its ‘subject’?

2. ... AS ‘SUBJECT’

The concept of ‘subject’ can indeed cast an illuminating light on the mystical paradox that is a theme here. In the following paragraphs of his sermon, Eckhart puts into position his whole theology and philosophy, and hidden therein lies (albeit not mentioned as such) a subject theory that makes the mystical paradox indicated here somewhat more comprehensible and at the same time also somewhat less paradoxical. Eckhart’s sermon continues:

While I yet stood in my first cause, I then had no ‘God’ [*dô ich stuont in mîner êrsten sache, dô enhâte ich keinen got*], and then I was my own cause. I wanted nothing, I longed for nothing, for I was an empty being, and the only truth in which I rejoiced was in the knowledge of myself [*wan ich was ein ledic sîn und ein bekennere mîn selbes nâch gebrûchlicher wârheit*]. Then it was myself I wanted and nothing else. What I wanted I was, and what I was I wanted; and so I stood, empty of God and of everything. But when I went out from my own free will and received my created being [*Aber dô ich ûzginc von mînen vrîen willen und ich empfienc mîn geschaffen wezen*], then I had a ‘God’, for before there were any creatures, God was not ‘God’, but he was what he was. But when creatures came to be and received their created being, then God was not ‘God’ in himself, but he was ‘God’ in the creatures.¹²

It is impossible to explain all the facets of Eckhart’s sophisticated theological system hidden behind these few sentences, but a number of general lines are nevertheless essential. The reader immediately comes across the bold claim that ‘I (...) had no “God”’ and – in the same breath – that this I ‘was my own cause’. ‘Being the cause of oneself’ thus seems to define the state Eckhart focuses on here, the state where the Ego ‘longs for nothing’, where it is completely ‘empty’, empty of all will, even empty of ‘being’. Is it not exactly the other way around? Is not the Ego here actually completely full, full of itself and possessed by a will so strong that it allows the Ego to be its own cause?

¹¹ See the lemma ‘Sujet’, by Étienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin and Alain de Libera, in: Barbara Cassin (Ed.), *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Paris: Le Robert & Seuil, 2004, 1233-1253.

¹² Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons*, 200; *Werke*, 554.

Eckhart's logic here is more consistent than it appears on first glance. In these sentences, all elements refer to a pre-creation state, a state in which everything already existed in the wisdom of God, but not yet created. Everything existed, albeit not caused *by*, but still residing *in* the 'first cause'. In this respect, there was as little distinction between everything that existed and the divine, as between beings themselves. It is in this sense that Eckhart can write that 'I (...) had no "God"'. God as such arises only *after* the first cause has come into effect – therefore *after* creation. Before creation there was no distinction, no God and also no Ego. Or, what amounts to the same, the Ego was empty, 'an empty being' and not yet characterized by a difference with something else. In that sense, Eckhart can write that it was entirely 'cause of itself', with the understanding that there was neither a 'self' that was distinct from another 'self' nor from the divine Self.

In this state 'I wanted what I was, I was what I wanted'. This is as good as saying that I was not characterized by will or desire at all, because these would imply that there were difference and time at play. So, in this state God was also not God, but 'he was what he was'. Numerous are Eckhart's reflections about the dictum that Exodus 3:14 puts in the mouth of Jahwe-God: 'I am who I am'. God is a being before there are any distinct beings, a being that, seen from our post-creation point of view, could be defined as much as a non-being as – what amounts to the same thing in negative theology – a more-than-being. Only with creation did beings come into existence, including my Ego and also God. Then, everything that previously existed undifferentiatedly in the divine became a universe full of separate beings, each of whom were therefore able to receive their being from God's hand. For the human being, that receiving implies that they were free, or as Eckhart writes (in a sentence that perhaps contains the most enigmatic node of his entire theology) that they 'went out from [their] own free will and received [their] created being' [*dô ich ûzginç von mînen vrîen willen und ich empfienc mîn geschafften wezen*].

It is, in other words, from *free will* that I was created – that means that I have received my created being from God's hand. When the creature that I am – a creature that is prepared to be 'poor in spirit', according to God's word – looks to a state that fully brings me back to God, then I must move my Ego past this God, *beyond* this state of difference. There it will arrive at what it was before creation. And therefore, the Ego must renounce its 'free will'. In itself, 'free will' is good, noble and holy, because it makes it possible for me to receive my created being from God's hand. But should I want to return to a not-created state, this same 'free will' is the ultimate obstacle, and for the 'poor in spirit', which I am in essence, it comes down to being without 'will' and without 'ego' and even without 'God'.

This is repeated in the paragraph with which he concludes his first point – poor in spirit, defined as not wanting to:

Now I say that God, so far as he is ‘God’, is not the perfect end of created beings. The least of these beings possesses in God as much as he possesses.

How great is what ‘the least of these beings possess (...) in God’? Greater than God, greater than the image or ‘non-image’ that is called ‘God’ in the human word could contain. That ‘God’ cannot fulfill the human being’s desire (for God). And even with the desire of the least of these beings – of flies, for instance – he would not be able to. Here Eckhart’s discourse becomes quite plastic:

If it could be that a fly had reason and could with its reason seek out the eternal depths of the divine being from which it issued, I say that God, with all that he has as he is ‘God’, could not fulfill or satisfy the fly.¹³

And he concludes his first argument:

So therefore, let us pray to God that we may be free of ‘God’, and that we may apprehend and rejoice in that everlasting truth in which the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal – there where I was established, where I wanted what I was and was what I wanted. So I say: If a man is to become poor in his will, he must want and desire as little as he wanted and desired when he did not exist. And in this way a man is poor who wants nothing.¹⁴

The human being must ‘want and desire as little as he wanted and desired when he did not exist’. That is, in a nutshell, Eckhart’s ‘solution’ for the mystical paradox. The Ego can handle its destruction because it is in this way returned to when it ‘did not exist’, when it was ‘there where I was established, where I wanted what I was and was what I wanted’. ‘There’, which means in the state before creation, the state before difference, before there was difference – difference among creatures, difference between God and beings, difference between me and myself (where ‘ego’ was, in other words, not yet delineated by lack, desire or will or, what amounts to the same, coincided with my fulfilled desire or will).

‘There’, in this place, the ‘subject’ – which means that which lies at the basis of everything that is, including myself and what I call God – positions itself. This absence of difference from every preceding origin is for Eckhart the *bearer* (‘subiectum’, ‘hupokeimeinon’) of everything that is. Our entire existence should in other words be considered as grounded in this differencelessness. From the sublime ‘nothing’ of this differencelessness, the infinite range of differentiated beings was created (or ‘emanated’, as Neoplatonism calls it). And all

¹³ *The Essential Sermons*, 200; *Werke*, 554.

¹⁴ *The Essential Sermons*, 200.

things, longing to be what they are, want to return to this state, to what Eckhart calls 'the eternal abyss of the divine being' [*den ewigen abgrunt götliches wesens*].

The ground is an 'abyss'. Also, ground for the Ego. Within this (in this case Neoplatonic, negative theological) conceptual framework, it is not entirely illogical or paradoxical to argue that the hankering of the Ego for its ground of being is a hankering for self-destruction, for the disappearance into this ground that, from the created position from which one considers things, could be conceived of as nothing but an abyss.

The paradoxes and contradictions of which every page in Eckhart's oeuvre testifies are no break with rational logic, no leap from the straitjacket of the narrow boundaries of thought. On the contrary, they are only staged to impel us to follow the trail of true logic and correct thought, a logic and thought that only becomes clear when we reach the trail's end, where everything becomes clear, in other words when we find the true *subject* from which we have to approach everything and in which we find the true ground of thought as well as of being. This ground is the divine, the pre-creation undifferentiated, the abyss into which all the differentiated, in its desire to be what it is, wants to disappear and annul itself. The real (divine) Self to which each self returns is this radical selflessness. There lies the subject, the 'bearer' of ourselves and of everything that is.

3. MODERNITY – A CHANGE OF SUBJECT

What we humans ultimately seek and what a mystical experience confronts us with in an eminent way is an unfathomable abyss. Only now is it clear that this abyss concerns nothing less than the ground of both ourselves and reality in general. That we see it as an abyss can be fully attributed to our created state, delineated by sin and finitude. But those who think and believe (and for Eckhart and medieval thought generally, these are in line with each other) know that truth cannot be taken from this finite position but should be considered from the true ground that is the divine. That ground is indeed dark, mysterious and 'mystical', but nevertheless we know that it concerns ground and no abyss; and, what is more, that it is all goodness and grace. For the medieval understanding, that 'ground' or 'subject' is God. As obscure and unfathomable and groundless as he might be, God is the name for the 'base' of everything that is. Moreover, he is the point from which we can say something truthfully about everything that is. We can say something about reality because we speak from the ground of reality – ground that is at the same time ours. The subject/support/ground of our relationship to the world is at the same time the subject/support/ground of the world itself.

Modernity can be defined as the demise of this 'subject'.¹⁵ That is what is behind the famous dictum of 'the death of God'. What disappears is not the Godhead as such but the function it holds in self-understanding in Western thought. Previously, the self was understood *from* God. God was the creator of reality and of us. We and the reality confronting us were all tied up with each other since we were given to each other by the same Giver named God. That is the realism of medieval thought: human knowledge was understood to be founded on the fact of everything that is. Everything is 'given' because created by the same *creator*, just as we ourselves are 'given' to reality because created by its *creator*. Hence our ability to know reality in its essence, an essence that we share with each other because ours as well as that of things is the work of the same creator. And this knowledge knows its subject/bearer/ground in God. Knowledge is fundamentally 'theo-logy'. Not in the sense of knowledge *of/by* God but of (human) knowledge that has God as subject. Human knowledge is basically theology because it has its premise/subject in God. Human knowing is a *Logos* whose bearer – subject – exists in the equality between the essence of *those who* know and the essence of *what* they know, an essence that for both acknowledges its foundation – in other words, its subject – in God.

The demise of the medieval subject – or in more dramatic terms, the 'death of God' – took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The Reformation and the holy wars have everything to do with this. During that 150-year battle, the basic assumption from which people had, until then, understood themselves and the world and had therefore also waged wars and experienced peace, became undermined. Indeed, as strange as it may sound to modern ears: in the Middle Ages, God made even war possible, He provided the framework for it, and in the end the parties could find themselves under a seal subjecting them both to the same God. For this reason, a critique of God *as such*, although never completely absent, never dominated during the Middle Ages. The binding principle – the collective basic assumption, supposition, *subiectum* – survived any criticism and succeeded in maintaining its binding role.

With the Reformation, radical criticism of God and religion suddenly obtained free reign, not least because it became politically valorized. After Luther's protest against the pope's indulgence policy in 1517, Frederick the Wise quickly realized that he could deploy the Lutheran reformatory God to loosen the ties between his Principality and Holy Roman Empire with his

¹⁵ This thesis that specifically emphasizes the break with medieval self-understanding in modernity strongly inspired by the work of Alexandre Koyré; see for instance his *From the Closed World to the Open Universe*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957. See also Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago/ London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008, 1-18.

Emperor Charles V. In this way, the long-slumbering criticism of the ruling religion received a strong political support. It made in fact God *as such* the object of massive criticism, of strife, and soon also of outright war.

The fact that that religious wars lasted 150 years – culminating in the unprecedentedly cruel Thirty Years' War that only came to an end in 1648 – accounts for God no longer being able to be 'subject'. No culture can fight about its own *subiectum* (basis, foundation, basic assumption, starting point) for a century-and-a-half and keep that *subiectum* (i.e. as common 'ground' and 'support') in function. This is the backdrop to the so-called 'skepticism' that characterized the second half of the sixteenth century. The *Essays* of Montaigne provide one of the most stylized reflections thereof.¹⁶ An even stronger display of the prevailing skepticism of the time comes from Montaigne's contemporary, Francisco Sánchez. Already the title of his book speaks for itself: 'Quod nihil scitur': that nothing can be known, that knowledge is impossible.¹⁷ Impossible since its basis and starting point have fallen away, because 'God is dead', because there is no more such thing as a *subiectum*.

From this perspective, the importance of Descartes' intervention cannot be overestimated. It is precisely by taking skepticism fully seriously, by systematizing prevailing doubt and transforming it into the sole way of thinking that he managed to discern a new *subiectum*. That nothing is certain anymore, that I can doubt whether God is indeed God and the world is the world I see, that nothing escapes doubt: that is precisely where the new certainty lies. Because the fact *that* there is doubt and that there must consequently be a foundation or subject underlying this doubt: that is indisputable. Along these lines, doubt itself proves its 'self', its 'subject'.

That new subject forms the basic assumption for what would soon become a new culture that would go down in history as 'modernity'. The 'modern' person no longer defines her 'self' from her being 'given' to reality – created, as both she and reality are, by the same 'giving' ground of being. From now on, the modern person defines herself as *free*, free in the sense of independent from reality, free to doubt it. And she finds the foundation and starting point precisely in this doubt, precisely in the certainty of the *cogito* that proves itself in and through this doubt.

Is the *cogito* the *subiectum* of reality? Does it replace the medieval God *in that sense*? Not at all. For Descartes, it remained clear that God is the basis of all that exists; He is and remains the creator. But the creator is subject no more in the sense that he is no longer the point from which the human being relates

¹⁶ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, transl. M.A. Screech, London: Penguin, 1993.

¹⁷ Francesco Sánchez, *Daß nichts gewußt wird – Quod nihil scitur*. Lateinisch-Deutsch, introd. & notes Kaspar Howald, Hamburg: Meiner, 2007; Idem, *That Nothing is Known*, ed. & transl. Elaine Limbrick & Douglas F.S. Thomson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

to the world. This role now goes to the *cogito*, which in this sense – and *only* in this sense – becomes the subject of modernity. Descartes ascribes an ontological status to this *cogito*/subject: for him it is a ‘*res*’, a being. Only thing is that the being of *cogito*, as free as it has positioned itself through methodical doubt, is so separated from reality that it no longer shares being with the latter. The free *res cogitans* has nothing in common with the law-determined *res extensa*. After Descartes, the being of this *cogito*/subject will increasingly be questioned, until Kant explains it as a simple hypothesis.¹⁸ But as point of departure from which we relate to the world, that subject continues to function to the current day. We relate ‘freely’ to reality, which means from a place that has nothing to do in principle with that reality. Where this place still had the substance of a being for Descartes, it has gradually lost every substance. As ‘basis’ from which we relate to reality, it is itself ‘abysmal’, without grounds.

4. MYSTICISM AND MODERNITY

Before the Ego installed itself as a new subject with Descartes, it fully shares in the crisis in which the ruling (divine) *subiectum* finds itself. In the Middle Ages, under the regime of the divine subject, the Ego experienced itself as groundless, but it could relate that groundlessness to that of reality itself. No matter how painful that experience for the people in question, they still knew they were being carried by – and grounded in – that very groundlessness. Groundlessness was for the finite human being after all the ultimate sign of the true ground upon which reality rests, ground as provided by the infinite God.

However, in the sixteenth century, that ‘ground’ ends up to be the issue of a hopeless battle. For the sake of that God, war after war is waged, and gradually, less and less of the visible reality shows the presence of that God and, which amounts to the same thing, the connection with the groundless goodness that lies at the basis of all that exists. No wonder the faithful falls back on the interiority of his own ‘self’. Long before Descartes moved the human being as subject to the fore, the Reformation had already done something similar in its own way. The ‘*sola fide*’ it preached simultaneously pushed forward a strong

¹⁸ Kant’s philosophy amounts to a legitimization of Newtonian physics where, like with Descartes, the physical is a ‘*res extensa*’, a soulless mechanical universe that purely follows external laws. But unlike Descartes, Kant argues that our knowledge of reality is not based on a standalone, substantial subject (Descartes’ *cogito*) but on empirical observation and the way in which it is processed through the ‘knowledge apparatus’. ‘Cogito’ (in Kant’s terms, the ‘Ich denke’) is a function in that apparatus that bundles observations. It stands for the ‘*ursprünglich-synthetischen Einheit der Apperzeption*’, as he formulates in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Transzendente Elementallehre, § 16).

Ego. I, and not the Church or any other intermediary, am the basis for my relationship with God, thus rang the new Protestant credo.

It is remarkable that alongside the promotion of this strong religious Ego, the Ego at the same time becomes the object of critical investigation. The Ego was after all no subject of our relation to God; that was God Himself. How could the Ego then fall back on itself? More exactly: How could I find God in myself, in my Ego? It is in this context that we, in the course of the sixteenth century, should situate the lasting and ever-growing interest in mystics from the Low Countries and the Rhineland as well as in new mystical movements that emerged all over and reached new heights with the Spanish mysticism of Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross among others.

It is already the end of the century when the mystical wave reaches France. Only then French religious culture becomes interested in the mystical traditions from the North and the South. From the outset, that interest can count on the skeptical gaze of church and other authorities, if only because that mystical wave arrives in the country together with Protestantism. This movement, soon baptized as '*spiritualité*', will therefore – also because of its clear success – never quite escape the suspicions of official institutions.

It is in the spirit of this *spiritualité* that mysticism will see its first *modern* bloom. The *modern* will be expressed in the specific way in which the mystical focuses on the own Ego in order to overcome the obstacle it presents. But the battle the seventeenth-century mystics wages against their own Ego will mainly betray the grammar of the *modern* in which these mystics moves. Even though there will be strong resistance against a time that no longer acknowledges God as the *subiectum* of our relationship with reality, the early modern mystic, without saying it in so many words, will often come close to the new, modern subject position. As so many contemporaries, these mystics will also often be more Cartesian than they realize. But the inner struggle while going down their 'mystical path', bring the anomalies of the new, modern subject into sharper focus than Descartes himself would be able to do – anomalies that, for instance, within the religious-intellectual universe in which Eckhart lived, always had found elegant solutions.

For this reason, we zoom in on Fénelon again. In a number of texts from his pen, this problem surfaces particularly sharply. The effort is worth it in order to observe how, in the very attempt to rigorously consider the mystical ideal of mystical selflessness, the Ego or the self surfaces as an untouchable, foundational certainty.

5. 'ON THE RENUNCIATION OF THE SELF'

In my hankering for God it is not about me but about God; every form of Ego-involvement or self-love stands in the way and should be eliminated. That is

what Eckhart's sermon about poverty amounts to. It is no different in the writing of Fénelon. Drawn by the attitude of Madame Guyon, the young court prelate becomes completely captivated by the mystical movement engulfing France during the seventeenth century under the term *spiritualité*. His oeuvre reads like an intermittent attempt to show that this relatively new and in many ways suspected *spiritualité* is perfectly in line with Christian orthodoxy.¹⁹ The fact that Fénelon's attempt will meet a condemnation by the Vatican in 1699 does not prevent him from continuing to write, and thousands of pages of in-depth reflections on the mystic way have been published posthumously.

One of his countless smaller 'spiritual writings and letters' is entitled *Sur le renoncement à soi-même* ('On the renunciation of oneself').²⁰ In sharpness, Fénelon's analysis is not inferior to Eckhart's *Beati pauperi spiritu*. For Fénelon, too, it is clear that self-renunciation could in many cases be a hidden way to still satisfy one's egoism. The most selfless of dedication could lead to extreme satisfaction and the stroking of the ego. As early as the first page of this letter (which is in fact addressed to Madame de Maintenon, the 'unofficial' spouse of Louis XIV),²¹ he writes:

The origin of our trouble is, that we love ourselves with a blind passion that amounts to idolatry. If we love anything beyond, it is only for our own sakes. We must be undeceived respecting all those generous friendships, in which it appears as though we so far forgot ourselves as to think only of the interests of our friend. If the motive of our friendship be not low and gross, it is nevertheless still selfish; and the more delicate, the more concealed, and the more proper in the eyes of the world it is, the more dangerous does it become, and the more likely to poison us by feeding our self-love (...)

[Such a person] does not indeed accept payment in as gross coin as others; it does not desire insipid praise, or money, or that good fortune (...) It must be paid, nevertheless; it is greedy of the esteem of good people; it loves that it may be loved again and be admired for its disinterestedness; it seems to forget self, that by that means, it may draw the attention of the whole world upon self alone.²²

¹⁹ Michel Terestchenko, *Amour et désespoir: De François de Sales à Fénelon*, Paris: Seuil, 2000; Jacques Lebrun, *Le pur amour: De Platon à Lacan*, Paris: Seuil, 2002.

²⁰ Catalogued by Jacques Lebrun in the 'Lettres et opuscules spirituelles' as number XIII, see: François de Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, ed. Jacques Lebrun, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1983, 613-623.

²¹ This is at least what Jacques Lebrun claims in Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 1434. Madame de Maintenon was the 'morganatic' (or 'left-handed') wife of Louis XIV, which implies that she had not the title of queen, could not inherit from the king and neither could the children she has with the king. See Madame de Maintenon, *Dialogues and Addresses*, ed. & transl. John J. Conley, Chicago/ London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, 5.

²² François de Fénelon & Madame de Guyon, *Spiritual Progress or Instructions in the Divine Life of the Soul*, ed. James W. Metcalf, New York: M.W. Dodd, 1853, 61-63; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 613-614.

And where can we find a remedy for this malignant self-love that parasitizes our disinterested love? Not with ourselves, it appears. That would only serve to confirm our sense of self and our self-love. Where then do we find grounds or support to leave all egoism and self-love behind? That Fénelon and most of his Christian contemporaries find in what still serves as *subiectum* – in God. In the words of Fénelon:

We may be sure, then, that it is not the love of God only that can make us come out of self [*il n'y a que l'amour de Dieu qui puisse nous faire sortir de nous*]. If his powerful hand did not sustain us, we should not know how to take the first step in that direction.

There is no middle course [*Il n'y a point de milieu*]; we must refer everything either to God or to self; if to self, we have no other God than *self* [*moi*]; if to God, we are then in order, and regarding ourselves only as one among the other creatures of God, with selfish interests, and with a single eye to accomplish his will, we enter into that self-abandonment which you desire so earnestly to understand.²³

How does this kind of radical self-abandonment work? How can God be the ground from which our action to abandon ourself has chance on success? Beside God's overwhelming revelation, meant to enlighten our 'spirit', Fénelon mentions – moreover entirely in line with Augustine²⁴ – the 'miraculous' fact that God Himself has laid down in our 'heart' his desire for Him.

The second miracle which God works is, to operate in our hearts that which He pleases, after having enlightened our understanding. He is not satisfied with having displayed his own charms; He makes us love Him by producing, by his grace, his love in our hearts; and He thus himself performs within us, what He makes us see we owe to Him [*ainsi il exécute lui-même en nous ce qu'il nous fait voir que nous lui devons*].²⁵

'He thus performs within us, what He makes us see we owe to Him'. What are we owing Him? Everything we have and are, including our love for Him and thus also the radical 'renoncement de soi' (self-abandonment) that we do for His sake. The sentence says even more: we also owe Him that through which the 'renoncement' can be executed. A thoroughly abysmal line of reasoning announces itself here.

²³ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress or Instructions in the Divine Life of the Soul*, 64; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 615; emphasis added. Fénelon's letter to Madame de Maintenon was also an answer to her question about what it means to renounce the self. The first sentence notably rings: 'Si vous voulez, Madame, bien comprendre ce que c'est que se renoncer à soi-même...'; *Oeuvres I*, 613.

²⁴ See the first lines of Augustine's *Confessiones* (*The confessions of Saint Augustine*, ed. Hal M. Helms, foreword Mark Henninger, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010, 3).

²⁵ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 66; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 616.

This is what Fénelon must have been thinking while he was writing, because in the next sentence, he directly addresses the reader, in this case Madame de Maintenon and claims to clarify the matter.²⁶ He slows down, it seems, and explains that she, of course, must renounce evil, and with horror ('horreur'). She also needs to renounce what is good, it is argued straight away, but not with repugnance, not abruptly and hastily, but patiently, moderately, incrementally. Maintenon lives in the lap of luxury after all, and Fénelon is realistic enough not to demand her to break with all that 'good' overnight. But in the long run it is indeed what he – or rather, God – demands of her. On the very same page Fénelon cites Luke 14:33: 'So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions'.²⁷ And soon the tone sharpens again and the earlier abysmal reasoning re-appears.

'Each Christian', he writes, has to renounce the care s/he has for loved ones, family, own reputation. 'He must give up those whom he loves best',

and his renouncement of them consists in this: that he is to love them for God only; to make use of the consolation of their friendship soberly, and for the supply of his wants; to be ready to part with them whenever God wills it, and never to seek in them the true repose of his heart. This is that chastity of true Christian friendship which seeks in the mortal and earthly friend, only the heavenly spouse. It is thus that we *use the world and the creature as not abusing them*, according to Saint Paul. (1 Cor. vii. 31.) We do not desire to take pleasure in them; we only use what God gives us, what He wills that we should love, and what we accept with the reserve of a heart, receiving it only for necessity's sake, and keeping itself for a more worthy object. It is in this sense that Christ would have us *leave father and mother, brothers and sisters, and friends*, and that *he is come to bring a sword upon earth*.²⁸

And why should you be *reserved* in using what God gave you and not enjoy it fully? Because it is an amorously envious God, as we read in the following sentence:

God is a jealous God; if, in the recesses of your soul, you are attached to any creature, your heart is not worthy of Him: He must reject it as a spouse that divides her affections between her bridegroom and a stranger.²⁹

²⁶ 'Vous direz peut-être, Madame, que vous voudriez savoir d'une manière plus sensible et plus en détail ce que c'est que se renoncer: je vais tâcher de vous satisfaire', Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 617.

²⁷ Fénelon cites from the passage in which Christ demands to break with the world, including his own family. 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple (...) So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions' (Lk 14:26-27, 33 [New Revised Standard Version]). Fénelon cites again from the passage a few lines further).

²⁸ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 68; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 618; emphasis added.

²⁹ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 68-69; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 618.

God is jealous. Why? Because we have the tendency, no matter how well intended, to cling to what we received from God and not to God Himself. Therefore, as Fénelon explains in more detail in the following, we have to abandon all that is material, as well as – and this is more difficult – the spiritual. We even have to renounce our own spirit as such: ‘renoncer à son esprit’.³⁰ We must even renounce our renunciation, our asceticism as such:

We renounce with courageous moderation the most flattering temptations of the world, and content us with the satisfaction derived from a conviction of our self-control (...) You must renounce all satisfaction and all natural complacency in your own wisdom and virtue.³¹

You must therefore, and above all, renounce the positive feeling of having achieved something on the ‘spiritual path’ to selflessness. As such, *spiritual* satisfaction is evil. The following sentence directly addresses this warning to Madame de Maintenon:

Remember, the purer and more excellent the gifts of God, the more jealous He is of them (...) He would have us attached to nothing but Himself, and to regard his gifts, however excellent, as only the means of uniting us more easily and intimately to Him. Whoever contemplates the grace of God with a satisfaction and sort of pleasure of ownership, turns it into poison. Never appropriate exterior things to yourself then, such as favor or talents, nor even things the most interior. Your good will is no less a gift of God’s mercy, than the life and being which you receive direct from his hands. Live, as it were, on trust; all that is in you, and all that you are, is only loaned you; make use of it according to the will of Him who lends it, but never regard it for a moment as your own. Herein consists true self-abandonment; it is this spirit of *self-divesting*, this use of ourselves and of ours with a single eye to the movements of God, who alone is the true proprietor of his creatures.³²

Put in a more abstract way, Fénelon argues that you have to renounce the *false subject* of renunciation. Only then can you make space for the *true subject* and does your renunciation take you where you want to go: to a pure love for God that has renounced every bit of self-love. In your strongest attempts to give yourself to God and completely renounce yourself, God is envious as long as *you* still want it; in other words, as long as you do not allow Him to be the subject of your self-renunciation and your love for Him.

But how must I make God the subject of my love for Him and my self-renunciation? Everything I have and am, I have and am because I have received it from Him. To honor Him, to profess to Him my love, I must therefore

³⁰ Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 619.

³¹ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 70; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 619.

³² Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 70-71; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 619-620.

accept His gifts, but then – as it turns out – without actually accepting them. I should, writes Fénelon, see them as borrowed. But not so much in the sense of giving them back because God ever needed them or will ever have them. Even if, in my renunciation of the world and myself, I return to God everything He has given me, it is not what ultimately He is asking of me; He demands love from me – a love in which I acknowledge that in everything the *giving* lies completely on His side, also regarding ‘my’ love for Him.

In what still follows in this ‘letter’ to Madame de Maintenon, Fénelon sticks to a number of reminders: do not be too hasty and do not work entirely on your own but remain patient and let God do His work. The opening page of the ‘letter’ suggests that Maintenon had asked him the precise meaning of self-renunciation. In this ‘letter’, Fénelon only briefly touches on the abysmal of what it means to let God Himself be the subject of this renunciation. He is more explicit about it in a number of other ‘letters’ he writes to her. Some fragments of these letters are included in the *opuscule* ‘About the interior voice’, ‘De la parole intérieure’.³³

6. ‘THE INTERIOR VOICE’

This *opuscule* directly addresses the problematic abysmal that we are up against here. The subject of our self-renunciation does not correspond with our ‘self’. On the contrary. And yet it resides in us. It is the ‘interior voice’, according to Fénelon, that by way of which ‘the Spirit of God dwells within us’, or also, as Fénelon mentions further on, ‘the soul of our soul’.³⁴ That does not make the problem any smaller. Because this latter ‘soul’, that which inspires us here and now, is self-interest. That soul needs to die in herself, and no one else can do that act than the very soul herself: therein lies the challenge of the mystical path that she goes. And so, again: how can she do that? How can a ‘self’ actively let die its ‘self’, without performing that very ‘self’? How can itself make space for the selfless, true Self, for the Holy Spirit, for the ‘interior voice’?

We already know the answer. This is what God does. When someone who wants to love God obeys his interior voice, his Ego is ‘wrested away from the center of [his] love’. In that state, God takes care of everything necessary to detach the person from

³³ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 89-95; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 589-603. In the English edition of 1853, this ‘letter’ is entitled ‘On the Inward Teaching of the Spirit of God’. For this *opuscule*, reference was mostly made to a letter to Madame de Maintenon from January 1690; see François de Fénelon, *Correspondance*. Vol. II, ed. Jean Orcibal, Paris: Klincksieck, 1972, 141-148.

³⁴ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 89; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 589, 590.

his “self”.³⁵ Fénelon does not get tired of repeating this and providing new supporting arguments. But these arguments never quite succeed in being completely conclusive. For as God completes the work in which He tears the Ego from the center of the human soul, a similar Ego also seems to impose itself again and again, admittedly not as the subject of self-love but nevertheless as the subject of its own ‘deserving’, of its own renunciation. A little earlier in this same *opuscule* we read:

As to the external mortification [*mortification extérieure*] of the senses, He causes us to accomplish it be certain courageous efforts against ourselves. The more the senses are destroyed [*amortis*] by the courage of the soul, the more highly does the soul estimate its own virtue, and live by its own labor [*plus l'âme voit sa vertu, et se soutient par son travail*]. But in process of time, God reserves for his own hand the work of attacking the soul in its depths, and depriving it finally of the last vestige of the life of Self. It is no longer the strength of the soul that is then employed against the things without, but its weakness that is turned against itself. It looks at self; it is shocked at what it sees: it remains faithful, but it no longer beholds its own fidelity. Every defect in its previous history rises up to view, and often new faults, of which it had never before even suspected the existence. It no longer finds those supports of fervor and courage which formerly nourished it. It faints; like Jesus, it is heavy even unto death. All is taken away but the will to retain nothing, and to let God work without reservation.³⁶

In its yearning for God, the soul abandoned itself and left everything to God. But God does not fail to carefully hold it up to the soul once more: to confront it with the fact that it has lost all grip on itself and to force it to still be the bearer – the subject – of this loss and the existential inability that comes with it. Facing its successful loss of self, the soul is confronted with the fact that it consciously chooses it; that the soul, no longer wanting anything or anyone, *wants* this. ‘All is taken away but the will ...’. And what kind of ‘will’ is at play here?

It is no longer a perceptible, designed will [*volonté sensible et réfléchie*], but simple, without reflex acts [*volonté simple, sans retour sur elle-même*], and so much the more hidden, as it is deeper and more intimate in the soul. In such a state, God sees to everything that is necessary to detach the soul from self.³⁷

A will that is no longer ‘reflective’, no longer ‘reflexive’, but is – if you like – purely ‘flexive’: a ‘flexion’ (‘bend’, ‘fold’) without ‘re-’, without folding back on itself, and in this sense radically ‘simple’, unambiguous; a will that simply

³⁵ Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 595: ‘alors il nous arrache le moi qui était au centre de notre amour’; ‘En cet état, Dieu prend soin de tout ce qui est nécessaire pour détacher cette personne d’elle-même’: my translation; these quotes are taken from the part of the ‘letter’ that is not included in the English edition of 1853.

³⁶ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 121; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 595.

³⁷ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 121-122; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 595.

unfolds, away from itself, to God. The moment someone's will is in that state, God is able 'to detach it from itself'.

Is, then, God the *subject* of this mystical event? Does the point from which one relates to God here correspond to that God? The will, however 'simple', seems to contradict that. The will admittedly leaves everything to God and refuses to fold back on itself, but the will, therefore, is not yet without will; or more cryptic but perhaps more exact: its installed willlessness is in itself not altogether will-less. And this is exactly what God wants: the moment where one has completely surrendered to God and one's will is pointed one dimensionally in the direction of God, God still folds the human will back on itself. The moment the God-lover finally no longer see themselves but only God, God precisely reveals *this*. They *then watch* how they do not see themselves but God. And that subsequently means that *they* are the ones who see that and that the subject still lies with themselves and not with God. As if God in a way casts them back on a subject that is not Himself! As if the true subject (God) can only be discerned in the falling back on the 'false' human subject.

Fénelon of course does not come to this conclusion in such terms. And yet the reasoning in which his meandering discourse unfolds constantly rubs up against a similar conclusion.

In the course of this *opuscule* – to name another example – Fénelon describes in detail how the soul goes the 'inner path', effectively completely eliminating itself or, better still, allows God to eliminate every self-reference of the soul. Until God, as outlined above, confronts the soul therewith, thus bringing it into a profound crisis. Now it becomes clear to the soul that the courage it has to abandon all that is self is not even its own courage but goes back entirely to what God does with it. It is only at this moment that courage is *really* lost.

Our courage fails; frivolous excuses are suggested to flatter our feeble and tempted souls; then we hesitate and doubt whether it is our duty to obey; we do only the half of what God requires of us, and we mix with the divine influence a something of self [*un certain mouvement propre*], trying still to secure some nutriment for that corrupt interior which wills not to die [*pour conserver quelque ressource à ce fond corrompu, qui ne veut point mourir*]. A jealous God retires: the soul begins to shut its eyes, that it may not see that it has no longer the courage to act, and God leaves it to its weakness and corruption, because it will be so left. But think of the magnitude of its error! The more we have received of God, the more ought we to render. We have received prevenient love and singular grace: we have received the gift of pure and unselfish love, which so many pious souls have never tasted; God has spared nothing to possess us wholly; He has become the interior Bridegroom; He has taken pains to do everything for his bride – but He is infinitely jealous...³⁸

³⁸ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 128-129; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 600.

The selflessness to which the soul has surrendered now becomes – by God’s envious hand – the subject of fear and doubt. It once again forces the soul that has become selfless to a selfhood, to a subject or ‘ground’ that lies with itself, since it and no-one else feels this doubt. No, it is no longer itself, it has lost itself in God, but God lets it feel how that loss is not even its own and forces the mystic to be the bearer or subject of this doubled loss. This is what the mercy of God’s jealousy accomplishes – as Fénelon writes in the sentence that immediately succeeds the previous citation:

Do not wonder at the exacting nature of his jealousy! What is its object? Is it talents, illuminations, the regular practice of external virtues? Not at all; He is easy and condescending in such matters. Love is only jealous about love; the whole of his scrutiny falls upon the state of the will. He cannot share the heart of the spouse with any other; still less can He tolerate the excuses by which she would convince herself that her heart is justly divided.³⁹

God’s will is straightforward: He is fixed hundred percent on His spouse, that is the soul going the mystical path. Therefore, He demands the same from the latter: they must choose God. But unlike with God, for the soul it comes down to choosing against the self. And it does so, which finally results in eliminating the self. Once it feels it has come this far, God throws it back on itself, however, on the subject of this feeling, and it realizes that it also has to eliminate that subject. And then the will appears: it can nothing but want to eliminate that feeling. And in turn it seems impossible to eliminate that will – including the subject it implies – once more. That will is what the circular reasoning Fénelon employs to chart the logic of the path to selflessness, encounters time and again.

As soon as the state of selflessness is achieved, it remains in the last instance a matter of the will and thus of a subject that agrees with what happens to the mystic when they turn themselves in to God as ‘clay [that] must suffer itself to be shaped at the will of the potter!’⁴⁰ Ultimately the ‘clay’ must *want* it: this is what, in the end, the experience of mystical selflessness is all about in Fénelon.

Unlike with Eckhart, the liberating state of *theosis* (‘becoming God’,⁴¹ so typical of the mystic tradition) will leave behind a *willing* Ego, thus assuming a subject that does not, like in the Middle Ages, correspond with God. Further

³⁹ Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 128-129; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 600-601.

⁴⁰ So the last sentence of that *opuscule*; Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 133; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 603.

⁴¹ Ben Morgan, *On becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self*, Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2012.

down, when Fénelon is talking about the culmination of the mystic way, he writes:

O bridegroom of souls! even in this life, a foretaste of this felicity. They will all things and nothing. As it is things created which hem up the heart, these souls, being restrained by no attachment to the creature, and no reflections of self, enter as it were into thine immensity! Nothing stops them; they become continually more and more lost; but though their capacity should increase to an infinite extent, Thou wouldst fill it; they are always satisfied. They do not say that they are happy, but feel that they are so; they do not possess happiness, but their happiness possesses them. Let any one ask them at any moment, Do you will to suffer what you suffer? Would you have what you have not? They will answer without hesitation and without reflection, I will to suffer what I suffer, and to want that which I have not; I will everything which God wills; I will nothing else.⁴²

Here, too, the same paradox: the Ego is completely selfless, having disappeared in God; but in the final analysis a will – and consequently an Ego – emerges again. In the mystical apotheosis of disappearance Fénelon apparently has no alternative but to identify a will, because he still needs an endorsement that has its subject precisely not in God but in the human being itself. In this way, the radical selflessness with which his argument wants to conclude runs aground time and again.

The result is that selflessness is affirmed, not as much in a state *beyond* the self as in the infinitely continuous destruction of the self: in a never-ending *will* to be or remain destroyed: ‘I want to suffer what I suffer, and I do not want what I have not got; I want everything, I want nothing’.

7. ‘PURE LOVE’

The persistence of the will in Fénelon’s mystical theory links to the cruelty to which his ideal of *pur amour* could lead. Think for instance of the ‘holocaust’ to which Fénelon was used to encourage those he accompanied on the spiritual path.⁴³ For this reason, I zoom in on an *opuscule* entitled ‘Sur le pur amour’

⁴² Fénelon & Guyon, *Spiritual Progress*, 132; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 603.

⁴³ ‘Love the hand of God that beats and destroys us. The creature is only made to be destroyed as the one who has made it for himself sees fit [*au bon plaisir*]. What a prosperous use of our substance! [*O heureux usage de notre substance !*] Our nothing glorifies the eternal Being and the entire God. May that which our *amour-propre* likes to preserve get lost. Let us be the holocaust [*Soyons l’holocauste*] which love’s fire reduces to ashes’. François de Fénelon, *Oeuvres de Fénelon Archevêque-duc de Cambrai*, new ed. Vol. 5, Paris: Tenré et Boiste, 1822, 156-157 (*Lettre CLIX in Lettres Spirituelles*); my translation.

(‘On pure love’).⁴⁴ It concerns a short dissertation that, according to Jacques le Brun, dates back to the time of the *Querelle du Quiétisme*.⁴⁵ Here Fénelon meditates about a verse from Proverbs (16:4) that notes that God made everything for his own glory.⁴⁶ But what about the eternal beatitude that God promises us and which we as His creatures desire? Is this desire compatible with the glorification God demands of us? Fénelon writes:

It is not that the man who loves without interest does not care for the reward. He cares for it in so far as it is of God, and not in so far as it is his own interest. He wants it because God wants him to want it. It is the order, not his own interest, that he seeks in it. He cares for himself, but he only cares for himself for love of God, as a stranger would, and for the sake of loving what God has made.⁴⁷

We do not want our happiness because *we* want it, but because God wants us to want it. Note: human beings were made for happiness, and that we long for it is, for Fénelon, the ‘foundation’ of his being human. Yet this foundation is a question of mercy, of a gratuitous gift, which is based on God’s sovereign will.

The promise [of beatitude] itself, which is the foundation of all, is supported by the pure mercy of God, on his good pleasure, and on the good purpose of his will [*sur son bon plaisir et sur le bon propos de sa volonté*]. In this order of blessings, everything is plainly reduced to a supreme free will.⁴⁸

Here again Fénelon’s reasoning tips to the contrary. From the sentences following, it will become clear that not God’s will but that of the human being constitutes the basis of *pur amour*. It is here that he comes up with the ‘supposition’ that serves – certainly in the reception of his oeuvre – as hallmark for the Fénelonian *pur amour*:

Having presented these indisputable principles, I make a supposition. I suppose that God wants to annihilate my soul at the moment that it escapes from my body. This supposition is only impossible because of the entirely free promise. God could have excepted my particular soul from his general promise for others. Who will dare deny that God could not annihilate my soul following my supposition? (...) I suppose then a very possible thing, since I only suppose a simple

⁴⁴ Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 656-671.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1445.

⁴⁶ Fénelon has the Vulgate translation in mind (‘universa propter semet ipsum operatus est Dominus’), which allows for this interpretation of the Scripture. In fact, it is written that God has given everything a purpose, that He in other words imposed a principle of purposeful order in His creation.

⁴⁷ François de Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*, ed. & pref. Charles F. Winston, transl. Mildred Whitney Stillman, New York/ London: Harper & Brothers, 1947: <https://fullgospel.us/2019/02/06/christian-perfection/>; Fénelon, *Oeuvres I*, 659.

⁴⁸ Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*; *Oeuvres I*, 661.

exception to the purely free and arbitrary rule. I suppose that God, who makes all other souls immortal, will finish the duration of mine at the moment of my death. I suppose again that God has revealed: his design to me. No one would dare say that God could not do this.⁴⁹

What Fénelon holds up is a situation in which my every prospect of bliss has been denied in advance, and I also know this. I know that God, at the moment in which I lose myself in Him, will not admit me to Him. I know that when I will be radically selfless and 'liberated' from my false subject, no grounding subject awaits me (God's mercy) but the abysmal nothingness of a radical subjectlessness. What then? Fénelon brings out his sharpest rhetoric to bring the question down as hard as possible on the reader's head.

I suppose that I am about to die. Only one moment of life remains of a life, which is to be followed by fatal and eternal extinction. How shall I use this moment? I urge my reader to answer me with the most exact precision. In this last instant, shall I give up loving God, because of not being able to think of him as a reward? Shall I renounce him since he will no longer be my salvation? Shall I abandon the main true end of my creation? Could God, in excluding me from the joys of eternity, which he was under no obligation to give me, divest himself of what so essentially belongs to him? Has he ceased to work for his own glory? Has he lost the right of the Creator in creating me? Has he freed me from the obligations of the creature, which owes necessarily all its existence to him by whom it exists? Is it not evident that in this very possible supposition I ought to love God for himself alone, without expecting any reward for my love, and with a certain exclusion from all beatitude, so that this last moment of my life, which will be followed by eternal annihilation, ought to be necessarily filled by an act of love, pure and completely disinterested?

I am going to be annihilated right now. Never shall I see God. He refuses me his kingdom which he gives to others. He does not want either to love me or to be loved by me forever. I am obliged, nevertheless, in dying, still to love him with all my heart and all my strength. If I fail him in this, I am a monster and an unnatural creature.⁵⁰

Is what Fénelon's 'supposition' describes the last step on the mystical path? Or is it already interpreting the state one is in after having ended this path? Fénelon himself does not pose that question, not in those terms. Someone who has assumed this hypothetical position would not pose that question either. For whoever arrived at that point, it no longer matters whether there is a step that follows. In that sense, Fénelon's 'supposition' fully describes the point where the mystical longing knows its end. Those walking the path are now where

⁴⁹ Fénelon, *Christian Perfection; Oeuvres I*, 661.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 662.

their yearning led them: pure love. A love that is pure, also in the sense that yearning and satisfaction are no longer distinguished from each other.⁵¹ That God does *not* satisfy my desire is experienced as satisfaction itself, as ultimate selflessness.

But is it a coincidence that Fénelon's 'hypothesis' is bathed in an atmosphere of extreme suffering? After all, it appears as if only a state of direct pain can keep a love pure in the sense that Fénelon envisages. Pain and suffering, in any case, offer the structure in which selflessness manages to chime with a *will* to selflessness.

Let us briefly list the steps of reasoning. My amorous longing for God makes me, after the long mystical path I have trodden, endlessly selfless. But precisely for the sake of keeping my love that way, God once again explicitly confronts me with that selflessness. Therefore, the latter finds itself under pressure. How can I keep it intact at all? Fénelon's answer: by expressly affirming – by *willingly wanting* – that selflessness and the deplorable, utterly deprived state to which it brings me. But – here the same question that has its cadence in the entire mystical tradition emerges again – does this not precisely presuppose the recycling of a self? In order to maintain my selflessness, according to Fénelon, I have no other choice but to actively long for my complete destruction. I do know that God does not allow me that (the desire for beatitude is after all my foundation), but how else can I keep my love selfless, now that it still finds its ground in the self of a will? The only way out is no longer actively and willingly wanting a self: consciously and with all inner strength that I have left willing my powers and my entire self unceasingly and actively be destroyed. Only then can my will find space in a selflessness that God demands that I consciously view.

Even though I am selfless, God does not allow me as mortal creature to disappear into the beatitude of selflessness. He forces me to face my beatitude as that into which I have disappeared. He forces me to continue looking at my disappearance – not at my being gone but in the act of my disappearing *as such*, in other words as an act that never reaches completion.

I can only do so by continuously and actively willing my disappearance. Which is concretely only possible by actively and continuously willingly wanting to suffer. Not for the sake of suffering itself but precisely to prove that it

⁵¹ It is incidentally a constant in mystical literature: the end to which mystical desire aspires does not extinguish this yearning when it is reached. On the contrary, it stokes it even more. It can already be traced in one of the founding fathers of Christian mysticism, Gregory of Nyssa (4th century): 'Moses' desire is fulfilled in the very fact that that desire remains unfulfilled'; 'This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him' (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, transl., introd. & notes Abraham J. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson, pref. John Meyendorff, New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978, 115).

does not affect me, that I nevertheless love God – that *despite* my disappearance into a state that I cannot assume to be blissful, I still love God.

I need this ‘despite’ – and therefore this suffering; it allows me to see that I no longer belong to the world, even though I am still in it. The world – even though it is pure pain and precisely *now* that it is pure pain – no longer concerns me, because I am already elsewhere, in the divine. But already enjoying the divine here would destroy the victory over my self-love – and therefore my pure love. For this reason, I embrace this pain, as it gives me the opportunity to still experience my achieved selfless disinterestedness here, in the world of amour-propre. I testify to my state of beatitude, which I will not feel in heaven, by showing, in the midst of the pool of pain that urges me to self-love, that I am not affected by it.

8. THE PAIN OF THE MODERN MARTYRIUM

Embracing pain on the mystic way: it is also not unheard of for Eckhart. In the sermon *Mulier, venit hora et nunc est*, we read:

A master says, ‘He who has once been touched by truth, justice, and goodness, though it entailed all the pangs of hell, that man could never turn from them even for an instant’.⁵²

Even if ‘it entailed all the pangs of hell’, those who were touched by God’s truth would take it. What Eckhart takes from the mouth of a teacher and presents to his reader/listener, seems to echo the bath of pain in which Fénelon pre-eminently sees *pur amour* being present. And yet there is a difference.

With Eckhart the context is radical selflessness as well. The sermon concerns what it means ‘when true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth’.⁵³ And this truth implies that you worship God for no other motive than for God Himself and that you therefore have to abandon every focus on yourself. ‘I have sometimes said’, Eckhart writes, ‘whoever seeks God and seeks anything with God, does not find God; (...) If you seek God and seek Him for your own profit and bliss, then in truth you are not seeking God’.⁵⁴

⁵² Eckhart (Meister), *The Complete Works of Meister Eckhart*, transl. & ed. Maurice O’C. Walshe; rev. ed. & foreword Bernard McGinn, New York: Crossroad, 2009, 96.

⁵³ As with each sermon, this one too is a comment on a verse from the Bible, this time from the gospel of John (4:23): ‘Woman a time shall come and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, and such the Father seeks’. Eckhart, *Complete Works*, 95.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

So here, just as with Fénelon, beatitude in itself cannot be the motive to love God. That this love brings pain, does not matter. I love God because of God, because of a why that is its own answer. Eckhart writes:

All things that are in time have a 'Why?' Ask a man why he eats: 'For strength' – 'Why do you sleep?' – 'For the same reason'. And so on with all things that are in time. But if you should ask a good man, 'Why do you love God?' – 'I don't know – for God's sake'. 'Why do you love truth?' – 'For truth's sake'. – 'Why do you love righteousness?' – 'For righteousness' sake'. 'Why do you live?' – 'Indeed I don't know – I like living!'⁵⁵

You will not find anything like the latter with Fénelon and his contemporaries. They love God because of God Himself, but that that equals lust for life, with love for life because of life itself: that idea was no longer well received in seventeenth-century France. Malebranche is the only one to come close, but he has to mobilize all the registers of his theoretical apparatus to ensure that the idea is not immediately rejected. 'Why do you live? I do not know, I like to live' and therefore I also love God: Eckhart could dish up something like this for his listener/reader as if it were evidence itself.

And that is, strictly speaking, also what it is in the fourteenth century. Also, with Eckhart, the idea assumes a heavy theoretical apparatus, but then precisely to explain that this idea is fundamentally evident. The truth itself is without why or, what amounts to the same, it has its why in God, in God's love – that is, in turn, also without why and is therefore divine, pure love.⁵⁶ By analogy, my love for God also does not need a single why. The pain that could theoretically come with it would not make it less sovereign and without-why. Of course, it is painful if I have to abandon or completely empty the temporary, including my own self. But such an attitude towards God, stripped of any self-centred rationality, is nothing other than a reconnection with the ground of the creation, with the why-less (and in this sense abysmal) ground in which reality rests. And if the latter has something to do with pain, it is because pain, after all, belongs to life and its zest for life.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ In another sermon we read: 'Here God's ground is my ground and my ground is God's ground. Here I live from my own as God lives from His own. For the man who has once for an instant looked into this ground, a thousand marks of red minted gold are the same as a brass farthing. Out of this inmost ground, all your works should be wrought without Why. I say truly, as long as you do works for the sake of heaven or God or eternal bliss, from without, you are at fault. (...) If a man asked life for a thousand years, "Why do you live?" if it could answer it would only say, "I live because I live". That is because life lives from its own ground, and gushes forth from its own. Therefore it lives without Why, because it lives for itself. And so, if you were to ask a genuine man who acted from his own ground, "Why do you act?" if he were to answer properly he would simply say, "I act because I act"' (Eckhart, *Complete Works*, 109-110).

Fénelon too loves God only for the sake of God Himself, but his love is no longer of such a nature that it can be expressed as the spontaneous love for life that is innate in all creatures. For Eckhart there is admittedly an abyss between creation and God, but that abyss is simultaneously the true ground, the ground in as far as it speaks from every fibre of creation – if only we were willing to listen carefully, in other words, listen *beyond* the vanity characterizing our mortality, to the eternity of which that creation testifies. For Fénelon too there is an abyss between creation and God, and he too believes that is the ground of reality, but unlike Eckhart, he can no longer assume that for everyone the abysmal ground merely speaks out of creation. And this because he himself no longer speaks *from* that ground. He would like that, but modernity prevents him. Not his modern *ideas* prevent him (because modern they are not), but indeed the *point* from which he holds ideas, the point from which he relates to creation. That point – the modern, Cartesian subject – has been separated from creation.

On the level of content, everything in Fénelon's thinking resists this modern proposition. On the contrary, the mystic way he propagates with his *vie intérieure* wants to indicate that human beings, like other creatures, live from their creator. But he in fact repeatedly clashes with himself as the ultimate obstacle to reaching that point. Time and again he is thrown back on a modern self or subject and, and the true *subiectum*, God, lies beyond. But unlike with Eckhart, this 'beyond' does not assume the incorporation of the finite subject into its infinite ground. Instead of such an incorporation, the modern subject can ultimately only see its love for God realized in its own destruction. No creature can absorb it in its selflessness, or, to use Ruusbroec's terms: there is no 'sparkling stone' whose glow and lustre gives it the assurance that it selflessly shares in the sovereign, 'why-less' selflessness on which the whole creation rests. The only certainty the human being has is its destruction as modern, Cartesian subject. Or, expressed in the religious narrative: the distance that separates the sinner from the Creator is so insurmountable that, ultimately, only the voluntarily taken punishment and the enduring love therein gives the Creator the honour He deserves because of that sinner. Only the 'martyrium' of pain and suffering can bear witness to the fact that humankind and the world are grounded in a God who has been separated from them since modernity.

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