Contemporary Theological Explorations in Mysticism

MYSTICISM AND MATERIALISM IN THE WAKE OF GERMAN IDEALISM

W. Ezekiel Goggin and Sean Hannan

Mysticism and Materialism in the Wake of German Idealism

This book argues that the rediscovery of mystical theology in nineteenth-century Germany not only helped inspire idealism and romanticism, but also planted the seeds of their overcoming by way of critical materialism. Thanks in part to the Neoplatonic turn in the works of J. G. Fichte, as well as the enthusiasm of mining engineer Franz X. von Baader, mystical themes gained a critical currency, and mystical texts returned to circulation. This reawakening of the mystical tradition influenced romantic and idealist thinkers such as Novalis and Hegel, and also shaped later critical interventions by Marx, Benjamin, and Bataille. Rather than rehearsing well-known connections to Swedenborg or Böhme, this study goes back further to the works of Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Catherine of Siena, and Angela of Foligno. The book offers a new perspective on the reception of mystical self-interrogation in nineteenth-century German thought and will appeal to scholars of philosophy, history, theology, and religious studies.

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Introduction

"Oh, if every I can be its own father and creator," wrote the Romantic author Jean Paul Richter, "then why can't it also be its own Exterminating Angel?" (Safranski, 2014, pp. 51–52).[1] The poet Clemens Brentano echoed these sentiments (albeit more pithily) in his letter to Achim von Arnim: "Point me to myself and you kill me" (Safranski, 2014, p. 52). Writing in the wake of Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, these Romantics were at once intoxicated and disturbed by the new ways of thinking about the human subject that German Idealism had forced them to confront. It was as if, as soon as they were awakened to the expansiveness of their own subjectivity, the porous boundaries of "the self" threatened to collapse back in upon them. And the deeper they went into the subterranean corridors of their own selves, the greater the risk of a cave-in seemed to become.

This experience of elevating the subject to a godlike status while simultaneously draining it of any individuating identity finds its antecedent in the writings of certain medieval mystics. In their pursuit of *unio mystica* with the divine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Angela of Foligno, Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, and Nicholas of Cusa also wrote of this odd feeling of upward ascent combined with a self-abnegation bordering on dereliction. They articulated their experiences in terms of self-emptying (kenosis) and self-annihilation, which became necessary steps on the mystic's path. In this, too, they anticipated the era of Romanticism and German Idealism. "Self-emptying [*Selbstentäußerung*] is the source of all humiliation," wrote Friedrich von Hardenberg (also called Novalis), "as also on the contrary it is the foundation of all true exaltation" (Novalis, 1997, p. 27; 1960a, p. 423).[2] By way of Novalis, Franz Xaver von Baader, and G.W.F. Hegel, the mystical language of kenosis would ultimately even find its way into the historical materialism of Karl Marx and the post-dialectical materialism of Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille. In order to make sense of these correlations between medieval mysticism and the nineteenth century, we will need to connect specific moments in modern philosophy back to their forerunners in the Middle Ages. Sometimes, this will mean attending to the active revival of mystics like Eckhart and Angela. At other times, it will mean calling attention to the fact that other mystics, such as Catherine of Siena, should have been revived in radically different ways than they were.

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Yet "mystics" and "mysticism" can be said in many ways. What are we trying to get at when we use these terms? We can provisionally orient ourselves by relying upon Bernard McGinn's discipline-defining approach. According to McGinn (1991, p. xvii), we can use the term "mysticism" to describe attempts to commune with the presence of the divine, which are usually accompanied by ascetic or meditative practices and speculative reflections on themes like spiritual marriage and deification. Such attempts have been made across and beyond the Abrahamic traditions, from antiquity into the modern era, although scholars tend to focus their lens at the cusp of the high and late Middle Ages. Building on the earlier insights of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, medieval authors were able to weave negative theology and Neoplatonic notions of ascent together as they encroached upon the limit between the determinate and the indeterminate or the finite and the infinite.

McGinn is quick to add that most mystics mark out an experience of the absence of God as a key stage in their quest for divine presence. The warm light of *unio mystica* had to be accompanied by the long, dark night of the soul; otherwise, the mere appearance of light could scarcely be trusted. The mystics' embrace of the darkness went hand in hand with their theological emphasis on apophasis and the *via negativa*. Insofar as the deity was infinite, to know God as "being" or as "good" or as "just" could only serve as a constraint upon the divine. God must then be not-being, not-good, not-just, with the caveat that negativity equates to hyper-essentiality. In other words: to say that God is not-being means that God is more-than-being; to say that God is not-good means that God is more than good; and to say that God is not-just means that God is more than just. The point is that the old dichotomies—between being and nonbeing, good and evil, justice and injustice—no longer pertain. A more dialectical approach to God is needed (Duclow, 2006).

Not every negative theologian was a mystic, however. The key to unlocking the potential of mysticism was to apply the *via negativa* to oneself. Apophatic theology is one thing; apophatic anthropology appears to go further, opening up distinct (if essentially related) horizons (Carlson, 1999). One does not need to be a mystic to see the wisdom of negating the attributes of God in the name of piety. The strange beauty of the mystic resides in going a step further and wrestling with the necessity of negating one's own attributes and—if necessary—annihilating one's own sense of self completely.

It is arguably the case that the sermons of Eckhart demonstrate these dimensions of mysticism more effectively than any other source from the Middle Ages. Many of his sermons were preached in the vernacular. They stand at the juncture between the rarefied realm of the cleric and the everyday sphere of the layperson or labourer. As we shall see, this intersection between speculative theology and economic reality represents the locus around which we must reorient our approach to the philosophical and political potential of mysticism, at least if we wish to participate in what Niklaus Largier (2009, p. 41) once called a "modern poetic elaboration of possibilities and possible worlds" rooted in the reception of the mystics.

As Thomas F. O'Meara (1978, p. 171) once wrote, Eckhart's "ideas resemble at times those of the German idealists, while his language can be existentialist," despite the fact that he operated primarily within a scholastic framework. This quotation alone is indicative of the plasticity of medieval mysticism's reception, which led equally to idealist, existentialist, or Neo-Scholastic borrowings (Quero-Sánchez, 2004). Going beyond the implications of O'Meara, we would add that Eckhart can be brought into fruitful conversation with Romanticism, historical materialism, and post-dialectical materialism. Likewise, stretching ourselves out beyond the confines of Eckhart's corpus, we will have to build more ambitious bridges between nineteenth-century German-language authors and a wider variety of medieval mystics, from Bernard and Angela to Catherine and Cusanus.

The connective tissues that unite Eckhart and idealism in particular have already been subject to ever-deepening dissection thanks to Werner Beierwaltes, Kurt Flasch, and Cyril O'Regan, among others. One oft-repeated anecdote tells of the eccentric mining magnate and philosopher Baader sharing the works of Eckhart with Hegel, who responded with rapturous praise (Largier, 2009, p. 38). Beierwaltes (1967, 1985) would frame moments like these as part of a general inheritance bestowed upon modern philosophy by the Neoplatonic tradition writ large (Moore, 2019, pp. 3, 25, 230). As the writings of Willemien Otten (2020) and Dermot Moran (2004) on John Scotus Eriugena indicate, there is still promise to be found in scholarship that seeks to draw out transcendental implications from the masterpieces of medieval philosophy. Douglas Hedley (2008) and Torrance Kirby (2005), meanwhile, have done much to fill in the early modern gaps between Renaissance Neoplatonism and the nineteenth century. In fact, Hedley (2008, pp. 269–270) has gone further than that, demonstrating concrete links between Eckhart's account of the image (*Bild*) and Romantic notions of *Bildung*. More recently, Alexander Hampton (2019) has shown that the interplay between German Idealism and Romanticism hearkens back not just to Neoplatonic mysticism in the narrow sense, but to the entire complex of classical philosophical positions he calls "Platonic realism."

The limits of the present study have prevented us from lingering too long on the contributions of Jakob Böhme or Angelus Silesius or the Cambridge Platonists, not to mention the French spiritual writers who gave rise to debates about "*le pur amour*" in the seventeenth century (Le Brun, 2002, 2019), though we are heartened by the fact that robust scholarship on these figures has already been conducted. For similar reasons, we have been forced to give short shrift to later philosophical luminaries whose writings shed added light on the reception of medieval ideas about transcendence and the subsequent pivot towards immanence. Schelling and Spinoza deserve extended comment, as do the early modern reception of the Kabbalah, the modified view of God in Kant's *Opus Postumum*, and Fichte's identification of God with the moral world order in the course of the *Atheismusstreit*. In the end, we opted to emphasise marginalised figures like Novalis and Bataille, as well as women like Catherine and Angela who are too often omitted from the history of philosophy. Furthermore, we

focus almost exclusively on figures from Christian traditions. This should not be taken as a tacit suggestion that Christianity is of unique value for those who would chart intersections of mysticism and materialism. It reflects instead a clear-eyed recognition of the limits of our own research backgrounds. It remains for researchers who specialise in other religious constellations, and who are thus positioned to do justice to the depth and richness of those traditions, to take up research adjacent to our own should they see fit. It is our sincere hope that they will.

Having clarified what our book is not, we should now turn from the apophatic to the kataphatic, sketching out what our book actually is (or what it could be). Perhaps closest to our own approach is that of Alex Dubilet (2018, p. 16), who has argued that contemporary debate about "the problematic of immanence" and transcendence "can only be properly comprehended when it is brought together with the question of the self-emptying of the subject." Dubilet (2018, p. 8) gestures to Eckhart, Hegel, and Bataille as his guides into kenosis, since all three "elaborate the self-emptying of the subject as a way of affirming immanence, and not as a way of opening onto transcendence, whether that transcendence is taken to be divine or human, theological or ethical." Our project, too, seeks to bring the mystical tradition to bear upon the material world of labour and lived experience.

In no way, however, does all of this groundwork suggest that classical German thought and its reception are only rehearsals of old notes first sounded in the Middle Ages. As we will show in the chapters to follow, the contributions of Kant, Fichte, Novalis, Baader, Hegel, Marx, Benjamin, and Bataille do stand out as something new within intellectual history. Critical philosophy, transcendental idealism, naturalistic and poetic Romanticism, and historical materialism cannot simply be projected back onto the high or late Middle Ages, even if it would be impossible to erase the family resemblance between Neoplatonic and post-Kantian system-building. Moreover, what makes the bond between the mystics and the moderns so compelling is not a general fondness for pursuing the heights of speculative theorisation, but a precise series of parallels concerning the subject's self-overcoming through processes of kenosis or annihilation. The mystics cannot be far off whenever we encounter remarks like those of Jean Paul and Brentano and Novalis.

"Mysticism points beyond itself," as Adolf von Harnack (1899, p. 98) once wrote. In this case, the movements of mystical self-annihilation seem to point beyond themselves to the self-critique of the subject undertaken by the Romantics and German Idealists who wrote in response to Kant. Beyond our focus on subjectivity proper, we also find dialectical appropriations of kenoticism in Hegel and, more distantly, Marx. But if kenosis provided a mystico-theological model for modern theories of alienation, it also facilitated challenges to the dialectical reading of kenosis in adjacent figures. Novalis, the paradigmatic Romantic poet who plays a central role in our book, interpreted kenosis as a figure of a systemless, poetic activity from which arises a peculiar form of political critique. Bataille's reading of Angela of Foligno, meanwhile,

allowed him to develop a form of mystical meditation that resisted any dialectical recuperation modelled on Eckhartian kenosis and pointed the way to new forms of community. Kenotic mysticism could live on in more ways than one.

Despite the many different paths that kenoticism took after Kant and Hegel, the spectre of Eckhart would prove hard to shake. Flasch (1986, p. 466) once remarked that Eckhart's revision of scholastic theology amounts to the "prehistory of modern subjectivity" (Moore, 2019, p. 245). This fundamental insight remains true in several important respects, even if our goal will be to bring out some of the unforeseen consequences of its truth. Some have criticised Flasch for rushing too quickly from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth, thereby sacrificing the fine-grained detail that could be achieved by a close and careful sifting-out of the finer grains of scholastic and post-scholastic theology (Blankenhorn, 2016). Such a criticism has its place, though it would be hard to deny that Flasch himself always paid careful attention to matters of context. The virtue of his work remains the fact that, while it roots Eckhart and similar figures in their proper segments of intellectual history, it nevertheless keeps alive the possibility that the mystics can continue to speak to modern concerns. Mystical voices are not required to fall silent at the behest of the historical pedant.

As Ian Alexander Moore (2019, p. 39) has demonstrated, some interpreters went further than Flasch by making Eckhart the forerunner of "atheist materialism." Moore refers to Hermann Ley, whose *Studie zur Geschichte des Materialismus im Mittelalter* (1957) mounted a restoration of the mystical legacy on squarely Leftist grounds. Ley was pushing back against earlier fascist attempts to appropriate the Rhineland mystics for the sake of the Third Reich (Friedlander, 1994). The Nazis thought they could find a *völkisch* voice in the vernacular theology of Eckhart's Middle High German sermons. What Ley showed, in a resolutely anti-fascist spirit, was that the writings of the mystics lent themselves just as well to appropriation in the name of dialectical materialism.

Writing in the decades following these Neoplatonising, idealising, and even Marxian engagements with mysticism, O'Regan (2001) occupied a more critical vantage point. He argued that a certain "narrative grammar," dubbed "gnostic," infected nineteenth-century philosophy by way of early modern carriers like Böhme and Silesius. O'Regan is cautious when levelling accusations of gnosticism. He quotes Ioan Culianu (1984, p. 290), who opined that, if "Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic," then "all things and their opposite are equally gnostic." Still, he found it hard to resist the allure of critiquing the moderns using Irenaeus' *Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-Called* as his model. O'Regan (2001, p. 62) was happy to call Novalis a "Marcionite," for example. Our purpose, however, is not to undermine nineteenth-century authors on the basis of their supposed gnosticism, but to lean into the materialist tendencies found in the modern reception of mysticism, not least of all in Novalis.

In what follows, then, we will track these tendencies in their manifold variants, with an eye to the question of what can be done in the twenty-first century on the basis of a mystical materialism, as opposed to a "crass materialism" that would reduce religion to a mere expression of presently existing material conditions,

thereby suppressing its radical possibilities. To that end, we will be led to engage with twentieth-century authors, as well, so that we can connect the narrative grammar of nineteenth-century idealism and Romanticism to our own context. This is why our narration draws upon the messianism of Benjamin and reaches its crescendo with the anti-fascist, non-dialectical materialism of Bataille, with its mystically sacrificial logic and all the challenges it poses to the intersecting traditions of idealism, materialism, and mysticism. The consequences of building a bridge between an earlier reception of mysticism and our own reception of that reception must be simultaneously philosophical and political in character. As Terry Eagleton wrote in *Radical Sacrifice* (2018, p. 8), there is still a "radical kernel to be extracted" from the "mystical shell" of the history of Christian thought. It is tempting to respond to Eagleton's exhortation with all the hubris of modernity, taking upon oneself the task of "clarifying" ancient confusions and medieval intuitions. Eagleton was correct in his estimation, though perhaps not in the way he supposed, given that he seems to be using the term "mystical" semi-scornfully here. If we read their works in light of their openness to a materialist reception, it is not clear that the radical legacy of Angela of Foligno, Meister Eckhart, and Catherine of Siena needs to be prised out of any shell. Indeed, it may be that the "mystical" elements of these thinkers harbour some of the most radical possibilities of their writings and thought. If anything, it is we moderns who find ourselves enclosed within a prematurely circumscribed set of philosophical and political possibilities.

To step beyond these limits, however, it is not enough to observe continuities between the present and the past. Instead, we must consider the future by learning to think through the temporality of the missed encounters that arise in any materialist appropriation of the mystics (perhaps even including our own). Following Bataille, we will demonstrate how certain traces of medieval mysticism simultaneously grounded and contested the idealist and materialist traditions that followed. And in the footsteps of Novalis and Benjamin, we can interpret these traces as unactualised dreams of the past, thereby freeing them to exert critical force upon the present in the name of the future.

Notes

1 Safranski quotes from "The Speech of the Dead Christ" in Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs* (1796–1797): "Ach, wenn jedes Ich sein eigener Vater und Schöpfer ist, warum kann es nicht auch sein eigener Würgengel sein?" The original passage can be found in Jean Paul's *Sämmtliche Werke*, 1.274.

2 Translation modified.

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1 The Spark and the Counterfeit

Kant, Fichte, and the Transcendental Critique of Mysticism

Immanuel Kant had no patience for mysticism. From his withering attack on Swedenborgian spiritualism in *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* (1766) to his denunciations of mysticism as counterfeit philosophy (*Afterphilosophie*) toward the end of his life (1800), he was remarkably consistent in this. Whether unitive, affective, esoteric, or otherwise, mysticisms amounted to peculiar forms of metaphysical dogmatism with a popular and potentially dangerous appeal. In addition to encouraging intellectual laziness and obfuscation, mysticism was not compatible with the public role of religious life, Kant believed. Kant's early remarks on mysticism serve as *prolegomenon* to the transcendental circumscription of metaphysics undertaken in the critical trilogy. Much like the "spirit-seer" who mistakes figments of the imagination as independently subsisting, spiritual beings, the dogmatic metaphysician is a "waking dreamer" who mistakes the products of thought as establishing the character of "things in themselves."

Kant's so-called critical works carried this momentum forward. By restricting the reach of pure reason from such dogmatic claims, Kant claimed to have saved human knowledge from scepticism and fruitless metaphysical debate. Such a restriction did not spell the end of "religious" claims about a supersensible world, however. Quite the opposite. According to Kant, restricting theoretical access to "things in themselves" opened a space for a narrow conception of moral faith constituted through *a priori* determination of the will. Kant thus offers a normative redescription of religion as an expression of humanity's aspiration to rational freedom, rather than accession to heteronomy. While the systems of theoretical and practical reason could never be fully synthesised, they could be held together in a tentative way through the heuristic or "regulative" use of rational principles. The ideas of a purely rational religion—the highest Good, God, the immortal soul—are among these. These ideas are postulated to reconcile freedom and nature. They cannot be known through theoretical speculation. Nor are they experienced through rapturous visions, unitive intuitions, profound feelings, or ecstasy. At best, claims to such experiences amount to a mystification of transcendental philosophy, in Kant's view. At worst, they are mere delusion.

It is something of a truism that for the tradition of classical German philosophy—the reveries of the romantics, the audacious systems of the idealists, and

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