

WHEN YOU CALL MY NAME

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At the opening of his sermon on Acts 9:8, “Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes he saw nothing,” Meister Eckhart tells us that the cited line has four meanings.

First, when he rose up from the ground, with his eyes open he saw nothingness, and this nothingness was God. Indeed he saw God, and that is what he calls a nothingness. Second, when he rose up, he saw nothing but God. Third, in all things, he saw nothing but God. Fourth, when he saw God, he saw all things as nothingness.¹

Anyone who has ever read Eckhart will be familiar with the dizziness that increases the more we consider these options together. God seems to be all things and nothing, and every thing is no thing, at least insofar as it is God—though not otherwise. God is no thing, and in being no thing is alone in being indistinct from each thing (all things are distinct from one another). This is what Paul’s conversion illuminates for him, shows him when his eyes are opened: the “nothing” of the vision beheld by closed eyes, yet a nothing that is everything, now. Much of the sermon that follows dwells on the nature of that illumination, of light and especially of the divine light of what we would call knowing, were knowing not so very strange in Eckhart’s thought—and were Paul’s knowing not, so importantly, a knowing of nothing, the illumination of—and by—what we cannot see, strangely indistinct from the dark.

But after these considerations, Eckhart suddenly turns to commentary upon a text that he considers to be related, though the relation is not so immediately obvious. “In the Book of Love,” he

¹ In Reiner Schürmann, ed., *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy*, 119-126, at 119.

declares—we would say, in the Song of Songs— “the soul speaks the following words: ‘In my bed, all through the night, I sought him whom my soul loves, and I found him not’” (3:1). Eckhart considers what it means to seek at night, when the light by which Paul saw nothing is hidden from the soul. And he goes on to provide exegesis of several more lines, all of it fascinating. I want to focus, though, on his further consideration of this line about nighttime seeking, and on his curious commentary on the name that the soul gives to the one she loves. More specifically, I would draw our attention to this passage:

But she, why does she say: ‘he whom my soul loves?’ . . . she did not name her love. There are four reasons why she did not name him. The first reason is that God is nameless. Were she to give him a name, one would have to imagine [a content] to it. But since God is above all names, no one will be able to pronounce God.

[God, Paul saw, is nothingness; how would we name what is nothing, above all things?]

The second reason why she did not name him, is this: when the soul dissolves entirely by love into God, it knows about nothing any longer except love. It believes that everyone knows him as itself does. It is surprised when someone knows still another thing rather than God alone.

[There is, as Paul saw, nothing but God; how would we then know what is not God? How would we name divergent things in their distinction from him?]

The third reason is that it does not have enough time to name him. It cannot turn away long enough from love. It can pronounce no other word than love.

[In all things, the soul says only love, a word that takes up all the time there is for speaking; as in all things, Paul saw only God, taking up all the space that there is for sight.]

The fourth reason is that [the soul] supposes perhaps that he has no other name than ‘love.’ Saying ‘love,’ it pronounces at the same time all names.

[And Paul, seeing God, sees all things—as nothing. No thing can be all things; no name can be the pronunciation of every name at once. Unless that thing is not a thing, that name not a proper name, after all. In this all and no names, the four meanings of the phrase are drawn together.]

We find here Eckhart’s typical structural precision: four ways of seeing line up with four senses of naming. The no-thing of Paul’s vision lines up with the all-names of the soul’s saying. But Paul sees nothing—*because* his eyes are open, or opened. And the soul *does not name* her love—*because* this is the only way to name him (I use Eckhart’s pronouns here for convenience and to retain as best I can clarity in connection to his text). Eckhart moves from his consideration of this un-name straight back into a reconsideration of light and knowing. Let us, however, digress from his sermon to dwell on the names for a bit.

To make that dwelling possible, I need to make some more general observations about names, and especially about the strangeness of (the) divine name(s). I will hardly be saying anything new if I note that names—proper names, and not just nouns that name in the sense that we might ask, “what is the name of that strange looking plant?”—occupy an odd position in language. I suspect that this position is somewhat archaic; that is, that names continue to perform some of the functions that the rest of language loses as it loses its tight connections to theology and becomes in various ways more practical and productive, even in literature. This is a move upon which Andrew Cowell remarks in *At Play in the Tavern*, where he notes that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries we begin to see “a new model of the essential nature and social function of literature, a model that posits not theosis but semiotic play and overproductivity – profit – as the central feature of literature.”² This shift takes language away from the pronounced theological focus of late ancient semiotics, in which the world is, and is filled with, the sign of its creator, from whom meaning comes, to whom meaning returns – a complex notion

² Andrew Cowell, *At Play in the Tavern: Signs, Coins, Bodies in the Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 4.

rendered more so by the strange priority of call over designation, as the return must return the calling. That move has already occurred a few centuries before Eckhart begins to preach and to write, but it is worth remarking upon for the light it may shed on the strangeness of names.

On the older model, meaning, and all our ways of speaking it, lead (back) to God – a notion that becomes wonderfully disconcerting if we link it with theologies of a God beyond being. When Eckhart delivers his sermon early in the fourteenth century, he suggests that at least one feature of language, the name called out by the soul in the night, is not concerned to produce, not intended to finalize and move on, but moves archaically toward the undesignatable God beyond being: named with all names by the “love” that there is no time to call out, and that is called out in all speaking.

Some, and not just the dogmatically Christian, are suspicious about this God said beyond saying. In *Sauf le nom*, Jacques Derrida voices his suspicion that even in aphophatic or negative theology, some trace of a god-being lingers – that it is not quite negative enough. But a name is not a being, and even Derrida is intrigued by the particular sign of the name itself as a trace, all that is left of God in apophasis after its language is emptied of everything that might hold still.³ He wonders, not only of “God,” whether the name is even *in* language, and what that could mean.⁴ Certainly the nameless name in Eckhart’s sermon seems strangely out of place and even strangely displacing – as if we could *say* nothing, put into words what we see in the dark. The name of the beloved is what we call out not to designate, but in place of designating. This name is a sign of the divine, we might say, but one that fails to provide us with a referent.

Aren’t we then running the risk of talking about nothing in another sense, as if we were making small talk or reifying a fiction – ultimately admitting that to speak of God is nonsense? If we are, it is a risk worth running, as it is one that thought must run when it stretches toward its own limits. As Denys Turner points out, “In the sense in which atheists . . . say God ‘does not exist,’ the atheist has merely arrived at the theological starting point,” the place, Turner

³ See Derrida, “Sauf le nom,” in *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 35-85, at 55-56.

⁴ Derrida, “Sauf le nom,” 58.

says, from which theologians such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, or Meister Eckhart begin.⁵ In naming God, the soul – or Paul, or the theologian – names nothing. Or, rather, it names no thing – at least in the sense of the name as designation. But, assuming the soul is not calling out nonsense, there must be other ways to think of names.

So let us look again at that name of God. Nancy writes, “*I am God*”: it is perhaps impossible to avoid this answer, if the question ‘what is God?’ presupposes that God is a Subject. And either it does presuppose that – or else it must take the extreme risk . . . of giving no meaning to the word ‘God’ and taking it as the pure proper name of an unknown.”⁶ Let us suppose with him that this risk too is worth taking. Then we find that “‘God’ signifies: something other than a subject. It is another sort of thought.”⁷ This is a start, at least. A name for what does not exist, not a subject, not an object, “God” must then occupy an improper place in any sentence. Yet this is the improper place of a proper name: “What is a proper name? Is it part of language? This is not certain, or at least it is not certain that it is a part in the way a common noun is. It does not behave like a sign. Perhaps its nature is that of a *Wink*, of a gesture that invites or calls.”⁸ *It does not behave like a sign* – not insofar as a sign is that which designates something. The wink is a distinct yet indirect invitation. It does not indicate, but invites – or invokes. Holy names are lacking, says the poet Friedrich Hölderlin; he links this lack to the inadequacy of our joy in the face of divine delightfulness.⁹ Nancy plays on this notion: “‘God’ is that common noun (that metaphor, proper/improper by definition) that *becomes* a proper name only when it is *addressed* to that singular existent who lacks a name. It is thus

⁵ Denys Turner, “How to be an Atheist,” in *Faith Seeking* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 3-22, at 8.

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Of Divine Places,” trans. Michael Holland, in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 110-150, at 145.

⁷ Nancy, “Of Divine Places,” 145: “But I cannot answer the question ‘what is a god?’ by saying I am he. ‘A god’ signifies: something other than a subject. It is another sort of thought, which can no longer think itself identical or consubstantial with the divine that it questions, or that questions it.”

⁸ Nancy, “Of Divine Places,” 119.

⁹ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Heimkunft” (“Homecoming”) in *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 164-65: “Schweigen müssen wir oft / Es fehlen heilige Nahmen.” “Silence often behoves us/ deficient in names that are holy...”

prayer, invocation, supplication or whatever – addressed to the lack of a name.”¹⁰ God is the name that calls out to the lack of a name that would fix a designation (“she did not name her love”). It is properly an address, but an address deprived of a designated object becomes rather improper again. The name does not quite fit within language; it is language as it breaks with its own systematic structure.¹¹

Not precisely a proper name, the divine name (whatever, however we call it) is perhaps a sort of improper name, a name that does not stay within the constraints of propriety—of clarity, singularity, or accepted use. In fact, says Nancy, “*God*’ – what we call ‘God,’ and not the name *Deus/Theos* and all its metaphors – is is the very name for the impropriety of the name.”¹² We have no proper labels, no fixable meaning or singular sense, but even as we remain without possession, we call, and we respond to a calling to which our own return call is sometimes an answer. We have no thing, but we desire.

It is clear from Eckhart – clear, at any rate, in that distinctive Eckhartian way – that there is something about the divine that perfectly suits the improper name. Often edgy about naming God at all, in this sermon – in this odd digression within a sermon, a sermonized commentary on a line that has called to him beyond his ability to resist – Eckhart is willing to allow a strange kind of naming, a naming that is without names, or is all names, or is the quasi-name tossed out by one who cannot be distracted from love long enough to be bothered with naming as such. And it fits rather elegantly with a sense of divine name as a name that calls without designation, to such an extent that what the name “designates” is only calling, questioning, mystery in its seductive or drawing sense—a mystery not separated from intimacy, linking us to the premodern God of infinite distance who is nonetheless found in an inward turn.

This is not quite so bizarre a view of names as it might at first seem. Proper names, in their odd positioning, generally serve two

¹⁰ Nancy, “Of Divine Places,” 117.

¹¹ Though it is beyond the scope of the present paper, it might be interesting to consider the function of language, and of the vocative name, as a mediation or correlation in the sense in which Eugene Thacker develops it in “The Wayless Abyss: Mysticism and Mediation,” *Postmedieval* 3:1, especially paragraph 43 and following. A name does not precisely correlate to its object, but neither does it altogether fail to do so.

¹² Nancy, “Of Divine Places,” 116-117.

functions much more strongly than do other nouns. The first, oddly enough, is designation. Most nouns designate generally; “cat” does not tell you which of the world’s many felines is intended. We can add articles or other indications—the cat, your cat—but even here we must sometimes recognize substitutability; you might in your life own many such animals. A proper name, though, seems to be as close as ordinary language gets to the marvelous “rigid designator” of possible-worlds philosophy: wherever and whenever that name is used, it picks out just that entity.¹³ Google has taught us, of course, that we have to qualify such a claim; when I search for an author with a common proper name, for instance, I find that the designator picks out a great many people in whom I have no interest. When that happens, we try to make the proper name more proper – including a middle name, for example, to specify a person; or a state or country, to specify a city. But insofar as any word or phrase picks out its signified with true precision, that word or phrase will be a proper name (or a definite description, but let us leave that point aside as not, I promise, quite relevant to our purposes).

The second function particularly pronounced in names is one that links them to that ancient and late ancient sense of language’s theological ground: they call. They are words we use when we want to draw something or someone toward us. Like theology, they reach toward, they draw, they exclaim.

To then hear that a name may in fact be a kind of word characterized by its refusal (or failure) to designate must be strange indeed, and of course it is not true that *all* names, or all senses of naming, so refuse. Most names both designate and call; when we ask “what are you called?” – a query admittedly more idiomatic in many other languages than it is in English – we ask for a designator as much as for a means of summoning. Nor do we summon all named things; one does not try to entice a city to be closer, however much one might wish to be closer to that city. For a name to refuse to designate at all, or for it to designate only in a strange and apophatic manner, it must not be the name of a being. Beings may be designated, pointed out. And that, of course, narrows down our list of such names considerably.

Why bother to name what is not? Obviously, we might use a name in error, thinking that it designates some existing thing or

¹³ See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

person that does not, it turns out, in fact exist after all. But we would use such a name deliberately and correctly only if we were naming what is not simply inexistent any more than it is a being, and this, of course, puts us squarely back into classic apophasis, there at Turner's starting point for theology. What I want to ask is a variation on the very old negative theological puzzles about divine names, but it is also a variant on Augustine's musing in the *Confessions*, as he tries to work out what he loves when he loves his God. Augustine will go through his senses and declare God at once in excess of each and fully both enticing and satisfying: "Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God: a light, voice, odour, food, embrace . . . where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food that no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part."¹⁴ Standard interpretation assures us that Augustine intends here to get beyond the sensual and into the love of a God of pure abstraction, through the superior "spiritual" senses. I would argue instead that he is intensifying the sensual beyond any possibility of reduction to either abstraction or matter. But whichever turns out to be true, we may also notice something a little bit odd: he talks about each sensory pleasure, but he doesn't really describe some being that gives them all, only the pleasures themselves. What he loves is this infinite enticement, these pleasures that continue to call him long after an ordinary pleasure of the senses would have led to satiation. What then does he love when he loves his God? A sight, a sound, an embrace. What then does the poet name, for Eckhart, when he names the love of his soul?

That name names nothing, designates no content; the soul names no thing, having no distinction from love by which to have a voice; she cannot take the time to name the love she is too busy experiencing, because there is no time outside the love itself, and even a single word takes time for the speaking. And, perhaps most interestingly of all, she need name no other name, because "love" names with all names. Surely, however, all names cannot at the same time name nothing, unless by a very peculiar twist of logic. So it is not the case that all names are rendered indifferently the same here.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 10.6.8.

Love cannot name with all names if by that we simply mean to identify every existing object with love – and this despite the fact that it is sometimes (not always) a little tricky to absolve Eckhart of pantheism. If “God” is “love,” then no given object is God. The name that is all names is not all-designating; indeed, there are no things picked out by its designation. But it is all-calling: that is what naming in love does.

Here I would like to digress with a promise of return. Like Eckhart’s, my digression will at first seem deeply peculiar, and maybe not only at first. I want to compare Eckhart’s name that calls all names and yet has no time to be called to the names used in both essay and fiction by the French philosopher, translator and pornographer Pierre Klossowski. In both fictive and philosophical work, Klossowski is drawn to desire, particularly to desires of unusual intensity. Philosophically, he writes about Sade, for example, not as an incomprehensibly distant figure but as “my neighbor;” about Nietzsche, not as the last metaphysician but as the thinker of recurrence as a consequence of the astonishing experience of pure affirmation. He acknowledges the influence of “Gnostic thinkers” – he seems to have the Carpocratians especially in mind – on his own thought and writing, and some of that influence seems to have to do with his valuations of desire. In his fiction we find a similarly strange sort of repetition and recurrence. Under the repetition of the same names, we find *not* the same subjects, appearing stably across time, but the same intensities of desire, which re-emerge as the stories almost repeat themselves, but not quite, and as we gradually realize that the same name is not calling quite the same character.¹⁵ The exemplar in Klossowski’s fiction is probably the name of Roberte, who (or which) recurs in the trilogy *The Law of Hospitality* as a figure of desire, primarily masochistic desire, but not as the same *person*. A still more bewildering example occurs in *The Baphomet*, in which in which the very narrator’s name “registers repetitive embodiment.”¹⁶ As Ian James writes, “Klossowski’s work bears witness to a

¹⁵ It is thus unsurprising to note that Gilles Deleuze, with his emphasis on difference in repetition, is among those influenced by Klossowski’s account of return. Really, though, you can’t be a French Nietzschean and not be influenced by Klossowski somewhere.

¹⁶ Mark D. Jordan, “Liturgies of Repetition: A Preface to the Prologue of the *Baphomet*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 41.2 (2009): 63-82, at 64.

proliferation of names, both historical and fictional, all of which become the object of repeated questioning or obsessive fascination.”¹⁷

These names, like “God” or “whom my soul loves,” name some sort of mystery, some perpetually fascinating unanswerable, infinitely replied-to query. James adds, “Throughout Klossowski’s oeuvre the proper name articulates a double and paradoxical movement; it both designates a figure with an apparent history, identity and coherence . . . yet at the very same time it marks the abolition or suspension of identity, history, and coherence.”¹⁸ The *name* reembodies – not the subject, not even the *I*. Like the Nancyan proper name, the name for Klossowski is a very strange, and very inviting, sort of sign. It is as if, compelled by a sufficient force of desire, the name could become the very inverse of a rigid designator¹⁹ – it does not point out at only one, but beckons toward to every one. But it does not summon indifferently, nor does every name persistently appear. As Mark Jordan writes, “The form of Klossowski’s work may not be obsession so much as anamnesis. His capacity for fixing desire on a singular sign, on a name above all other names, may be diagnosed as monomania or fostered as liturgical citation.”²⁰ We might consider Klossowski’s obsessiveness, then, not as pathology but as that particular form of the linguistic that we call liturgical. The name is prayed: called out by the love of the soul. It is sought in the night in which those who love can see nothing.

Only the name as liturgical citation, the divine name desired with all the desire in language, can name with all names. That is: only such a name can call out all names, all loves, all desires, the pleasures of all the senses. When names fail in designation, they may intensify in evocation: they keep calling. They call what cannot be designated because it does not belong to the realm of knowledge; cannot be known, both because it is no thing and because we call in the dark, when there is nothing to be seen. They call in desire. The desires that call by these recurring names share the peculiarity of being unfulfillable, or self-renewing. They do not work in the manner of the appetite for food, but in that of the Augustinian, and indeed more

¹⁷ Ian James, *Pierre Klossowski: The Persistence of the Name* (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 1.

¹⁸ James, 1.

¹⁹ I do not intend by this a Kripkean “flaccid designator,” but rather a non-designating, purely vocative name.

²⁰ Jordan, 79.

widely premodern, appetite for God, in which desire is not consumed by its own satisfaction but rendered infinite in its very delight.

The deeply strange, utterly beloved divine name is lacking, but it lacks nothing: only the object to which it might point, only designation, and it designates nothing. In saying love, the soul names with all names: it calls out in perfect desire to every and no thing. In calling in the night, it knows nothing, and thus, like Paul, it knows God: it wants everything, it is everything it wants; it wants no thing, and it knows nothing at all. It is to that nameless name that it reiterates its prayers, to that love that it calls out.

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