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Interior Poverty in the Thought of Meister Eckhart as an Inspiration for Contemporary Sustainable Consumption

Wewnętrzne ubóstwo w myśli Mistrza Eckharta
jako inspiracja dla współczesnej zrównoważonej konsumpcji

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Abstract: This article aims at presenting Meister Eckhart's category of interior poverty as a contemporary proposal for the issue of sustainable consumption. Attempts to appropriate the discourse almost exclusively by means of economic optics seem unfounded in this context. Indeed, the issue of sustainable consumption is multifaceted, hence the idea to look at it from the perspective of the original thought of Meister Eckhart, who remains remarkably contemporary in his views on interior poverty. Renunciation in the form of depriving man of desires above all and not of things themselves remains a challenge to the intemperance and excesses of our everyday choices; moreover, the positioning of duty in being rather than action, in other words, by Meister Eckhart, is closer to our times than we used to think and remains an inspiring factor for contemporary searches for the core of personal interior preparation within a context of intemperate consumption.

Keywords: internal poverty, Meister Eckhart, duty, consumption, moderation

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie kategorii wewnętrznego ubóstwa Mistrza Eckharta jako współczesnej konsumpcji zrównoważonej. Próby zawłaszczania dyskursu niemal wyłącznie przez ekonomiczną optykę wydają się w tym kontekście nieuzasadnione. Zagadnienie zrównoważonej konsumpcji jest bowiem wieloaspektowe, stąd pomysł, by spojrzeć na nie z perspektywy oryginalnej myśli Mistrza Eckharta, który pozostaje niezwykle współczesny w swoich poglądach na wewnętrzne ubóstwo. Wyrzeczenie o charakterze ogołocenia człowieka z pragnień przede wszystkim, a nie z samych rzeczy, pozostaje wyzwaniem dla nieumiarkowania i przesytu naszych codziennych wyborów; poza tym usytuowanie powinności w bycie a nie działaniu Mistrza Eckharta bliższym naszych czasów, niż zwykliśmy sądzić i pozostaje inspirujące dla współczesnych poszukiwań osobistego przygotowania wewnętrznego w kontekście nieumiarkowanej konsumpcji.

Słowa kluczowe: wewnętrzne ubóstwo, Mistrz Eckhart, powinność, konsumpcja, umiar

Introduction

“Modern man, living in the ever-changing world, in order to continue to exist and have a sense of wellbeing has to make many re-orientations” (Pikus 1997, 5). One of them is the attitude to multiplicity, to opportunities, to sufficiency and an attempt to explain moderation ethically. Insatiability is part of contemporary culture, and our reality is obscured by things, especially in Western culture. This is largely due to the peculiar axiological surplus that accompanies the valuation process. This surplus consists of fashion, novelty, prestige and whim. For these reasons, we define something as valuable with “excess,” i.e., not because of an axiological sense, but because of our predilection for surplus and excess; the potential usefulness of a value is thus considered from the perspective of this axiological surplus, which is often the only argument for a particular choice. Thus, if something is not valuable, but can become so because of its novelty, a sense of prestige, our whim or the fad of fashion, the sense begins to reside in excess, which we express by flattering collectively our insatiability and intensifying intemperance. However, this is not the only problem – since the common discourse on the issue has been dominated by an economic mannerism: “we are taught to avoid normative judgements and opinions, suggesting that something is good and something is bad. However, (...) [even] economics is the lion’s share of a normative field. It doesn’t just describe the world, but often tells how the world should look like” (Sedláček 2011, 19).

Indifference to ethics, in its fundamental questions about humanity, is a fairly common and contagious disease, but it is a hopeless indifference: it is impossible to function without questions of duty, even in a world infected solely by economics. Even if we agree that financialisation¹ is

a widespread phenomenon, one can still venture to say that “even economics is fundamentally about right and wrong (...). Even the most complex mathematical models are in fact tales about our quest for a rational comprehension of the world surrounding us” (Sedláček 2011, 18), which is an increasingly difficult task. Consumption itself is a relatively complex phenomenon and certainly goes beyond the purely economic aspect (Niedek 2022).

Nevertheless, it is now, more than ever, that we need a sound discussion about the category of moderation, the ethics of renunciation; more than that, just as the critique of anthropocentrism makes little difference to our everyday lives, moderation may already be a bit too lenient a term at times. We need poverty in thinking because there is too much of it in reality; we need an internal constitution empowering the omission of negligence in the sphere of moral responsibility for excess and proliferation of want. To want less becomes an inalienable urge, capable of taking the shape of an interior renunciation. Getting rid of the object of our desire does not change anything; wanting things we do not need and waste, as a remnant of wanting them, make our attitude towards consumerism values certainly not neutral morally. We are faced with changing fashions and trends, while balance and equilibrium rarely remain undisturbed. Aristotle’s golden mean remains a valuable currency, only it is rarely in circulation and, in addition, is

the Collapse. From financial euphoria to economic order. Epstein defines financialisation as the increasing role of financial incentives, markets and institutions in economic operations. Dembinski’s thesis in his book is that on the onset of 21st century we are not only dealing with financialisation in the classical sense, but this process has now taken on a specific shape. In his diagnosis, he identifies several key elements of financialisation: «the first is the primacy of transactions over relationships, the second is the overcoming of moral resistance and the establishment of an efficiency ethos as the ultimate criterion for judgements, which leads to increasingly brutal manifestations of greed» (Kucz 2019, 61).

1 “The term was popularised in the 21st century by Gerald Epstein in his 2005 book *Financialisation and the World Economy* and by Paul H. Dembinski in his 2009 (in Poland in 2011) published book *Finance After*

only exchangeable for virtue – i.e., aspirations to personal excellence.² Perhaps it is time for moderation rooted in goodness instead of fashion; rooted in duty embedded in being, not just action? In my opinion, Meister Eckhart³ is surprisingly contemporary in this challenge, remarkably factual and concrete in his description of interior poverty as a path to freedom from the many clichés we more or less consciously reproduce today. It is not a truism or naivety to state that we should begin any change from ourselves and, coming from Eckhart, this call rather than sounding as admonition, provides some prospects of opportunities. It is also an opportunity in relation to the ethics of moderation, sustainable consumption or ecoethics – after all, “Without the battle for ethical standards life would be lifelessness, reduced to pure mechanics of desires and actions, aridity, nakedness, worse than «prosaic»; we would lose everything that makes us different from an automaton by this capitulation” (Elzenberg 2002, 188).

Perhaps, then, an effective way of fighting for this ethical level is precisely to work internally in the first place, to take care to prepare the ground for change in the right order, starting with ourselves. I claim that we no longer have time for micro-requirements, we need the biggest ones, internally constituted, able to meet global challenges; “in the size of the requirements is expressed the degree of love of the idea” (Elzenberg 2002, 59), so if we really care about a different shape of the world, about balancing

extremes and absurdities, about moderation in excess and exaggeration, perhaps a grand challenge is what we need? “True poverty is poverty of spirit” (Piórczynski 1997, 174), the emptying of oneself of excess and, by this means, not providing the world with more concerns. “Direct your gaze at yourself, and wherever you perceive yourself, there renounce yourself. There is nothing better than this” – argues Eckhart (Meister Eckhart 2001, 77). A difficult task certainly, but not impossible, and perhaps just necessary? Since there is nothing better, according to Eckhart, let us try to start with ourselves, so that we can finally end the widespread lamentation about the condition of the world.

1. Being and duty

Behavioural change not rooted in man is of little use. We can do a lot of good things, which does not yet imply that we have changed for good. The radicalism of this postulate is really an attempt to distinguish the duty embedded in action from that rooted in being. “The exchange postulated in the interior life (...) forms for Eckhart the basis of his ontic ethics (Seinsethik) contrasted with the ethics of duty (Sollensethik)” (Szymona 1987, 13). Eckhart appeals: “Let us not try to base holiness on action, let us rather build it on being, for it is not our works that sanctify us, but we who sanctify our works. The holiest works will not even sanctify us in the least, taken only as works. However holy our works may be, they do not in any way make us holy in so far as they are works, but it is we, in so far as we are holy and possess fullness of being, who sanctify all our works, whether these be eating, sleeping, waking, or anything at all. Little comes from the works of those whose being is slight” (Eckhart 1987, 22).

Minimalism, moderation, reasonableness, sustainability and the need for harmony sound nice, but if they remain deeds only, they are not sustainable enough from a moral point of view to make a real difference to us. “The experience of the last more

² “The arethological perspective of consumer ethics is to undertake a reflection on the use of consumption in the realisation of the postulate of the good life, on the formation of such character traits that will make it possible to master the world of consumer goods” (Lewicka-Strzałecka 2018, 101).

³ Meister Eckhart was born around 1260 in Hochheim, Thuringia. He was a monk, a theologian, one of the greatest mystics in history. His acuteness in speculation and originality of thought remain astonishing to this day. In his works (*Treatises* and *Sermons*), he provided extremely insightful analyzes of the inner experiences of man in the context of his gradual approach to God.

than thirty years shows that it is not possible to overcome the crisis when humanity clings exclusively to an anthropocentric worldview and stays with traditional economics” (Ganowicz-Bączyk 2022, 263). On the grounds of duty embedded in being, it is clear that the superficiality of doing remains in us constantly, we lack ontic change for good. “If there is too much of something, we stop noticing it” (Sedláček 2011, 243), while if there is something missing, we see only that; therefore, the constant longing for balance and tranquillity obscures the intrusive and at the same time increasingly indistinct profusion of exaggeration in our consumer life. Focused on action, being is postponed; whereas the change we need in this overshoot should be proportionately significant and tangible. Eckhart emphasizes repeatedly that “what matters is what man is like, his being founded in his own interior” (Piórczyński 1997, 248).

In being a man inwardly capable of separation, a willingness to distance himself, lies the sense of emerging duty. The ability to be in a certain way is more important than a particular, single moral act. The power of interior resolutions is the motor for action because it is the being of man that permanently and reliably determines the duty, the deed is changeable and dependent; for we can easily deceive ourselves in our own action, in being no longer. Therefore, “going out of oneself, which is the opposite of one’s own selfish will, leads man to achieve freedom of heart or, as we most often read in the Sermons, freedom of depth” (Szymona 1987, 12). To overcome anthropocentrism and greedily uncompromising consumption, we need solutions that are genuinely profound – duty needs the whole man, not just his actions, because only then can we speak of a lasting perspective of change to take place in the human will. She is not only free, but should be good, just as moral responsibility is the other side of freedom. “The following lesson flows from this (...): you are to devote all your zeal to making yourself good, and therefore not to what

you do and what your deeds are, but rather to what they are based on” (Meister Eckhart 1987, 22). This basis is man himself and his essence, because only radically changed can still make a difference in the world.

2. The brightness of consumption

“Sustainable consumption patterns, if they are to be effectively implemented in social practice, should not be seen in a narrow economic perspective, but in the context of a range of social, psychological, axiological and educational determinants” (Niedek, Krajewski 2021, 40). Sustainable consumption can be defined as “the use of goods and services that meet basic needs, contributing to increasing the quality of life while minimising the consumption of natural resources, harmful emissions and waste (...), without endangering the satisfaction of the life needs of future generations” (Coenen 2002, 1-2).

The subjective nature of consumption, however, is largely concerned with the ethical demands on human beings themselves because it is the moral nature of individual people and their value systems that determine whether or not they are inclined to unreflective over-consumption and waste of resources and things. “Consumption should therefore not be considered solely as an economic activity, but as part of a broader whole, which encompasses the functioning and dominant patterns (including cultural patterns), norms, values, fashions and trends in the society” (Niedek and Krajewski 2021, 44). The way in which we are able to address consumption as such is not morally neutral and can be considered from a normative angle. A person’s relationship to things says more about him than he himself would probably want to say directly. Inspired by Meister Eckhart’s thought, I believe that the way he builds an understanding of interior poverty is crucial to explaining why “responsibility can also manifest itself in limited buying” (Lewicka-Strzałecka 2018, 93).

For nowadays, “buying is not only an economic act, but it also represents a stand for these values and not others, and

causes certain consequences not only for the buyer, but at the same time says a lot about that buyer” (Lewicka-Strzałecka 2018, 93) and his attitude to values such as moderation, reason, wisdom, equilibrium. If we assume that changes “in lifestyles to a more environmentally friendly one can occur through individual decisions by a community’s proliferation of values, grassroots development of fashions and trends” (Niedek and Krajewski 2021, 40), then everything we cling to and everything we refrain from can be considered in terms of human moral responsibility.

The mere “inclination to sin is not sin, it is only acquiescence to sin that is sinful” says Eckhart in *Spiritual Teachings* (Meister Eckhart 1987, 31). The fact that we tend to buy and collect objects whose purpose is no longer simply to serve humanity does not yet imply ill will. The problem, however, is acquiescence, informed consent to such a state of affairs. Especially as we still “think that satisfying desires leads to their satisfaction. Unfortunately, as we can see from our excessively rich and over-indebted society, this is a serious mistake. Demand stimulates new demand. Supply does not satisfy it; it merely reproduces it anew. Moreover, the demand (desire, craving, lust) grows with each satisfaction” (Sedláček 2011), so the responsibility is all the greater when we are aware of this constant pursuit that we allow, despite its vanity. Hardly: “in many respects, material progress has become a secular religion and the greatest source of hope” (Sedláček 2011, 247), including the hope that things will satiate us.

Therefore, it is not possible to live without self-limitation today, whereas exercises of an ascetic nature are a key skill, and the capacity for internal poverty sustains at the same time a reticence towards the external manifestations of this poverty only, since it is the being that is supposed to be the source of duty, not action. The acts themselves may have a sacrificial nature, but only in their external form. There are people who try to ransom a separate

lifestyle with loneliness, and they constantly contest the situation being in an adversarial relationship. In the meantime, it is “consumption that is a supremely solitary activity (perhaps even the archetype of solitude)” (Bauman 2009, 86), and this is how it differs from seclusion. Seclusion⁴ is a category that is an outstanding inheritance from the Meister Eckhart: for “it is of little use (...) to flee to a hermitage if one does not learn to find it in oneself. Seclusion (*Abgeschiedenheit*) is of decisive importance for Eckhart, but it is understood not as an external distance from people, but as a separation from all creatures. So, it is possible to remain in the world, but one must forge a new attitude towards it” (Szymona 1987, 13).

This is a prelude to understanding interior poverty; seclusion makes a person spiritually free, whereas external poverty empties only superficially. In fact, it is over-consumption, lack of restraint that separates people from the world, makes us detached, left to our own devices, and this is partly due to our own choice.

3. Development

The growing mindlessness hardly surprises anyone anymore, we have become used to it; what is needed is a truly profound awakening from this stagnant coma. Admittedly, we are effectively “intoxicated by the idea of progress, but at the dawn of time it was completely non-existent. Time was cyclical and no one expected any historical progress from man. Later, the Hebrews introduced the concept of time and the Christians

4 “The term «*Abgeschiedenheit*» expresses, as it were, the Master’s testament addressed to those who aspire to perfection. Its content encompasses all the phases through which man approaches God, and their fulfilment takes place in the eschatological dimensions. In his programme-related arguments, discussed in his sermons, Eckhart proclaims: “I am in the habit of talking about detachment – namely, that man should be detached from himself and from all things.” (Urbański 1991, 126; cf. Meister Eckhart 1986, 326).

passed it on (expanding the Hebrews' concept) to us. Later, progress was secularised by classical economists. But how come that have we arrived at today's progress and growth for the growth's sake alone?" (Sedláček 2011, 25).

Consequently, we achieve growth without actually achieving any progress because we recklessly overemphasize everything without paying due attention to thought: thoughtlessness is capable of calling everything into being, of pushing everything into non-existence, according to the circumstances. The radical inner transformation advocated by Eckhart cannot therefore follow this line and allow for thoughtless detachment from reality; "once I was asked the following question: there are those who would gladly abandon the company of people and choose permanent solitude, or who would not leave the church and only find peace in this manner; is this really the best? To which I replied: No! – Listen why. The man who is genuinely good, is like that in all places and in all company" (Meister Eckhart 1987, 23).

We take ourselves everywhere with all the moral "equipment", with the whole package of qualities characterizing us. It is not about escapism as a remedy for the fear of blatant consumption and escaping from the world that is not conducive to the depth of transformations. We take ourselves with us everywhere we go, so it is up to us to determine our surroundings that we complain about. "With progress we automatically associate not only hopes for material wealth, but such social and ethical dreams about greed coming to an end. The view that progress will save the world has taken the form of social hope par excellence..." (Sedláček 2011, 248), meanwhile Eckhart does not stop at hope, he wants freedom. Moderation is freedom, true freedom of the will, which is completely released from all dependence. "Whoever wishes to achieve this freedom, and the interior peace that accompanies it, must first renounce himself. If man renounces his own will, by the same token abandons

everything else. This abandonment of all things (Lassen) does not mean, as Eckhart repeatedly stipulates, getting rid of all external things. He does not spread the word of total abnegation, nor does he constantly talk about combating the evil sensual nature – a topic so common in the literature of the time. Eckhart is all about overcoming one's own self. To achieve this, man must know himself well – hence the repeated, uncompromising postulate: know thyself! «Direct your gaze to yourself!» (Szymona 1987, 12).

Who I am is so incomparably important that only from this can one start to exercise the will heading for freedom; to renounce the will is to gain awareness of it. Without self-consciousness, renouncing anything will only be an external deed, an unsupported human existence. Interior poverty is a turn to the goodness, not just a turn to change.

4. Interior poverty

Our attitude to consumption is also governed by trends, which is why even the call for moderation and self-restraint can end up in a trendy minimalism that has nothing revealing to offer, but is only a superficial temptation. Therefore, I can see no reason why we should not make use of the ethical value of the Eckhartian concept of interior poverty, which apart does not focus only on deeds, but also on the person. Interior poverty is about freedom, not subordination; such elaborate renunciation takes nothing away, but gives freedom and empties only what is wanted above and beyond. The situation is thus similar to that of loneliness in consumption – it is "the immoderate man who is a slave, all the more enslaved because he brings his master everywhere along with him. He is a prisoner in his own body, a prisoner of his lusts and habits, a prisoner of their strength or his weakness. Epicurus was right, when instead of speaking of moderation he preferred to speak of independence" (Sponville 2000, 42).

It is the lack of moderation that overpowers and enslaves, that takes control over,

that gives permission to the will to know its own inclination while expressing consent to it." Sponville (2000, 45) believes that moderation is close to humility, which fairly assesses our inclinations and talents as well as regulates properly and voluntarily life's drive. Following moderation also optimises interpersonal relationships – a moderate person is fair to others. Moderation comes hand in hand with self-control, temperance, self-control, while in a causal relationship remains a sense of dignity and a feeling of shame" (Smółka 2020, 27), i.e. a series of values with the status that can be described as absolute, objective, non-relativised. Thus, moderation would also offer a chance to get in touch with unmediated values, the carriers of axiological meaning.

Whoever is able inwardly not to want is separated from the compelling colloquiality. It is a question of will – of choice, of what I prefer myself, what I choose consciously, what I opt for; Eckhart says that "the wealth, poverty and happiness of everybody take place in the will. It is free and noble to such an extent that it does not accept raising the topic of material things, but acts based on its own freedom" (Meister Eckhart 2001, 93). "The man who can do without everything and needs nothing is much happier than he who has all things but needs them" (Meister Eckhart 1987, 67). So even eudaimonia is reconcilable with Eckhart's conception; for everything starts with poverty, but poverty in the interior; if we do not understand this, we end up taking care only for external attitudes alluding to moderation, that perhaps reduces the quantity but not the quality of our desires for things. What Eckhart calls interior poverty is more difficult, but it is based on the person, not the deeds: "Renunciation of the world, that is, freedom from it, is good, but only if it entails interior loneliness, spiritual emptiness (...). The interior desert, the desert of the soul (...) is that most perfect state and goal of human existence" (Piórczyński 1997, 174).

Man can make any place, secluded, peaceful or "deserted" in Erkhartian sense, provided that his moderate lifestyle is driven by an inner need, a spiritual approach, a personal moral potential. Furthermore, "perfect seclusion is silent. The man who boasts of it reduces his value (...)" (Piórczynski 1997, 176). "Consequently, a question arises to what extent can we surrender our inborn meta human poverty and how should we impose limits on ourselves? We must not want everything we can want" (Sedláček 2011, 235), just that. Meister Eckhart states: "The best is the man who can do without the superfluous" (Meister Eckhart 1987, 67), because in fact, it is the superfluousness, rather than consumption itself, that is the problem.

Like the apparent activity is artificial when it is not grounded in a person's being, or as an outward renunciation that is not accompanied by a deeper personal conviction of the need for true poverty in spirit, in the silence of the interior, without unnecessary manifestation. "Do you want to know who the poor really is? He is truly poor in spirit who is able to do without everything superfluous" (Master Eckhart 1987, 67) – poor in spirit – i.e., prepared for an inward, poverty remaining in spirit; inwardly capable of giving up voluntarily the desire for unnecessary, superfluous, extra things. One can have and not want more, due to the sufficiency of what is already there. Spiritual poverty – it is like an interior renunciation – needs no superficial demonstration to exist. It is invisible, focused on the realisation of an attitude rather than the actuality of getting rid of possessions. Just as one can be lonely amidst a crowd and one does not need to seek solitude and hermitage in order to be capable of interior solitude, one is poor not by what one gives up, but for what reason one is willing to give up and need no more.

"Man must learn interior solitude. One must not give up to the maelstrom of the external events, lose the interior

nucleus that unites its being; one should develop a depth within oneself that gives constancy and permanence, a uniform temper, purity of reason and will. This order of heart and internal discipline constitute the quality of human being. For Eckhart, what matters is what man is like, his being founded in his own interior” (Piórczynski 1997, 247-248).

This foundation is measured by the quality of the duty of being, not by the number of actions taken. We do a lot these days to find peace, harmony, tranquillity. According to Eckhart, very little is needed to lead to the situation where this simplicity is brought to the point of intimidation and embarrassment; “... the outer man may be immersed in various activities, and yet the inner man remains completely free from them and unmoved by them” (Meister Eckhart 1987, 161). It is enough to start by being, not by doing. It is for us to be moderate, only then moderation will become a real phenomenon; it is for us to be prudent, only then the prudence will be visible in the world. “From this perspective, the truly, “rich” is the one who does not want anything (anymore), and the one who has a lot of needs – is a poor person” (Sedláček 2011, 234).

It is a question of poverty in wanting, the inner simplicity of desires and their non-intrusiveness. “St. Paul says in a similar vein: «While we possess all things, let us possess as though we had not» (2 Corinthians 6:10). ‘He has no property who desires nothing’” (Szymona 1987, 66), not he who possesses nothing; to possess as if one did not have – this is the essence of interior renunciation, spiritual poverty – I have, but this does not mean that I cannot feel true renunciation; I do not have, but this does not mean that I long secretly and desire change. Just as I do not have to get rid of everything to find the meaning of not having: it is possible to have and be as if you do not have. This is the phenomenon of renouncing oneself: “from «renounce yourself» one can get to «renounce word», «renounce self»,

i.e., «express oneself» ‘By renouncing something – I am expressing myself’” (Grzywocz 2001, 70), it is a form of lifelong freedom, independence, separation and, ultimately, seclusion. Renounce yourself like a word! Where you can, “renounce yourself there. There is nothing better than this” (Meister Eckhart 2001, 77).

Renounce yourself, express your humanity: for where there are traces of you, it is also possible to remain human. This is the only chance for any confidence, the confidence of a man renouncing himself. Poverty in the depths of the soul allows for a constancy that is in vain to be found in the excesses and excesses of even the most commonly understood reality of modern man. “Today, it is not moderation but rather acquisition that is the virtue which, as claimed by economists, keeps production growing steadily by translating into the growth of people’s welfare, an improvement in their well-being, an expansion of their prospects in every area of their lives” (Smółka 2020, 39) – meanwhile, the ethic of interior poverty is not radicalism, it is not even maximalism or perfectionism, it is tailor-made for our absurd times from time to time; it is consumption that is radical today, and Meister Eckhart proposes a programme so simple in humility as to be sufficient in an embarrassing manner.

“Let us use the following comparison here: the door moves on its hinges. I will compare the door’s outer boards to the outer man, and the door’s hinges to the inner man. When the door opens and closes, the boards move back and forth, while the hinges remain intact at the same place, and never change position. The same is true in our case (...)” (Meister Eckhart 1987, 161-162). The only constancy of moderation is the balance of ourselves, the unshakeable and unyielding will that does not want everything, although theoretically it could. There is no compulsion here, it is wisdom expressed by a few words: “«Blessed are the poor in spirit» (Mt 5:3) – that is: poor in will” (Szymona 1987, 21), the one wanting

repeatedly or persistently. All you need to do is learn how to want less instead of having none at all. Emptying oneself is a question of interior strength, not pressure or fashion for minimalism, voluntary simplicity or moderation of desires. The mystical writings seem less hermetic than one might think and, from an ethical point of view, help one to understand more than the observation that it is simply the case today that “progress and knowledge come at the expense of happiness, peace and harmony” (Sedláček 2011, 246).

“Eckhart’s ethical programme is thoroughly positive” (Simon 1987, 12), emphasising the need for change beginning with knowing oneself in order to then be able to “renounce oneself,” thus making free space for authentic freedom, in which the will can do more the less it wants.

Conclusions

As Barbara Skarga argues, what is intriguing is “the variability of meanings and the variability of thought as such, and also what remains permanent in it. When one examines human thought from this point of view, one discovers certain problems in it that recur in various variations. One of these problems is the search for truth, also the search for value, for the goodness” (Skarga 2015, 140), in a word, sustainability, which actually means change and human development. Let us not forget that we have also been shaped by the concept of voluntary renunciation, which does not imply necessity, but free will. It is not crises that lead to wars (Ferguson 2006, 37-38), it is excess, exaggeration and going to extremes. Perhaps it is excess, redundancy, oversight that represent the highest hazard to man? When we do not accept any limits, including self-restraint, asceticism, moderation, it ends fatally for humanity, the same blood-curdling story repeats itself again and again. Therefore, “one must search for the truth, and the truth spelled with a capital T, but at the same time constantly validate the alleged achievements. Exploration and criticism

are the strength of our culture, the strength of its knowledge, the strength of great intellectual structures, the strength of art, literature...” (Skarga 2015, 139).

Our contemporary “entanglement caused by haste and excess is not only a loss of quality due to excessive quantity, it is first and foremost a loss of contact with oneself, and therefore also a loss of an option of self-regulation” (Sokół-Jedlińska 2004, 27). This is why Eckhart’s exhortations are so astonishingly contemporary: “strive for nothing through the works” (Meister Eckhart 2001 93), for it is we who are to make them good, rather than the works should make us good. The simplicity, moderation, prudence and reason that we seek in the world can really only be brought into it through ourselves: “to the extent that something is brought into commonness, to that extent it will merge with its simplicity and become simpler by itself” (Meister Eckhart 2001, 121). There is no other way; in the face of consumption, we are not only customers but also co-creators of its sustainability.

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