CONTEMPLATIVE LISTENING

I develop a technique for contemplative listening, prompted by mutual themes and failings found in contemporary tracts on the subject. I use Meister Eckhart as a foundation towards an areligious technique, spurred by the similarities between grief and apophasis, his metaphor for receptivity of the Other, and his tracts regarding the correct mode of attention while listening. I develop the technique further using contemporary bereavement research, and make suggestions for how a technique could be implemented.

Master Thesis of the Master's program at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies of Radboud University, Nijmegen

Student: Andrea Reeve (1045380)
Supervisor: Dr. R. van den Brandt
Completed: August, 2022

I, **Andrea F. Reeve**, hereby declare and guarantee that this thesis entitled **Contemplative Listening**, has been independently drawn up by me, that no sources and resources other than those stated by me are used, and that the passages in the work whose verbal content or meaning derive from other works - including electronic media - is taken by citing the source if borrowing is made known.

Nijmegen, August 28, 2022

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

'Listening' is a term for which a definition is often taken for granted. Humans are, by necessity, an incredibly social species, and communication is seen as the hallmark of successful relationships, whether interpersonal or professional. Yet, there is a wide range of what 'listening' refers to; listening deeply, to the exclusion of all else, or listening superficially, to only take in the necessary gist; to listen to someone can simply mean to 'hear' them, or to strictly 'obey' them. Sometimes a Speaker knows a Listener takes in the words which are said, but they remain fundamentally unheard; and sometimes a Listener extracts information from a Speaker which went unsaid by 'reading between the lines,' or betrayed by body language, tone of voice, or an array of other subtleties.

The subject of this thesis considers contemplative listening, assuming the Listener takes on the position of a 'spiritual support person' who aids others in their dealings with loss, grief, or other major identity shifts. The proposed setting does not assume one particular religious tradition, but instead predicts a wide variety of faith backgrounds – or none at all. Given this context, I aim to research a mode of contemplative listening which allows one to encounter an Other wholly where they are, without assumptions or expectations.

This requires a technique of listening which at once has a strong foundation, but is also characterized by enough flexibility to not depend upon a particular religious fundament. One dichotomy, then, is employed in this thesis: that between the Speaker, or Other – and the Listener, whom this work assumes is its audience. This being the case, the **main question** this thesis focuses on, is **what kind of attitude should a Listener don when interacting with a Speaker in order to best precipitate authentic communication?** This question lays the foundation for many sub-questions regarding appropriate listening techniques, appropriate responses, the limitations of language, and to what degree a Listener should identify with the Speaker.

To address these questions, I will first need to examine contemporary thought on the matter using 'contemplative listening' as a key term. There are two main authors I will compare who have written treatises on the subject: R. Sardello, and H. Evers both discuss contemplative listening

while simultaneously avoiding assumptions regarding the Speaker's faith. I will examine the disagreements and similarities between these two authors; what is common, what is different, and the instances of mutual failure.

To account for these latter discrepancies, I will then turn to Meister Eckhart, using his *Sermons*, and the *Talks of Instruction*. This will be prefaced by a detailed argument as to why this is relevant to the issue at hand, including acknowledgement of its Christian background in the face of aiming to develop an areligious technique; this will include his model of the soul, and a small treatise on apophasis. I will then examine his works which are relevant to the themes I identified during my research of contemporary tracts on contemplative listening.

After using Eckhart to inform a solid foundation and theoretical basis for a technique of contemplative listening, I will then turn to contemporary thanatological tracts which address how best to help those dealing with profound loss. This will be informed by different strands of bereavement research, notably including a collection of essays centered around the theme of *presence within absence*, which strongly relates to the apophatic themes in the preceding sections. The remaining interpersonal questions will largely be informed by W. Willem's *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner.* These sources should aid in the exploration of the ideal attitude and mode of attention with which a Listener should interact with a Speaker in a contemplative listening context.

Once this theory is compiled in accordance with the defined categories, I will briefly design its application to a multi-faith setting using both the theory of Eckhart, and the techniques suggested in contemporary literature. While the context of meetings between strangers, each with their individual needs and capabilities, does not allow for a rigid framework upon which their communications depends, some elements of this research yield a few suggestions which help to inject flexibility in communication styles, and how certain techniques might be used in a practical sense which aids in the Speaker's authentic expression. After these suggestions, I will then conclude with a recapitulation of my findings, and some questions for further research.

2. The Current State

Using 'contemplative listening' as a key term, two interesting figures arise who have recently been writing on the subject. The first is Robert Sardello, who kindly provided his presently-unpublished manuscript upon my contacting him to request it. I will summarize this text, and draw attention to the aspects I found to be clarifying or problematic. I will then give a similar treatment to an article by Hans Evers on the same subject, followed by insights on their mutual themes and failings.

2.1 Contemplative Listening, R. Sardello

After correspondence with Sardello and reading his short *Contemplative Listening* manuscript, I have the following impressions concerning its practical usage, and its potential to serve as an academic focus in research.

There are certainly valuable ways in which Sardello discusses listening. He is critical of a superficial interaction in which the 'Listener' is in fact just waiting for their turn to speak. However, most of the value in terms of methodology must be read between the lines of his work. The pamphlet implies that *holding space* for the speaker is paramount, although it is not expressed in such terms. He hopes to achieve a level of communication that is deeper than linguistics, suggesting, but not explicitly stating that, such things as body language, tone of voice, connotations of language etc. are more important than the precise contents of the words spoken. In these modes, he promotes a *union* between Speaker and Listener, at times to the point of enmeshment (read: a problematic psychological category in which identities are no longer distinct).

He discusses contemporary techniques of listening such as mirroring, and states that this is insufficient to establish real connection. Instead, he promotes an 'attunement to Wisdom', which realizes a deeper state of listening that receives not only messages from fellow humans, but the 'Earth herself'. Further, the superficiality of standard modes of 'listening' tends to leave Speakers feeling alienated and profoundly isolated; conversely the Listener is over-confident that they

received the message, even though they have done so with problematic simplicity.[1] In response to this, he engages with (though again does not use such vocabulary) apophatic notions, in that one must embrace *unknowing*, especially considering that even if the most accurate vocabulary is used, it is insufficient to truly convey human experience. This, I infer, means that humility is a core foundation of good listening; both as an admission of ignorance, and in leaving one's ego out of the encounter.

In continuance with apophatic themes, he suggests that connection between Speaker and Listener can only be achieved by encountering the void of the impossibility of true communication. This must be freely acknowledged, and a leap of faith occurs; not *over* the abyss of insufficient communication, but *into* it, since it cannot be truly resolved.[2] He also encourages comfort with, and use of, silence, though again this is danced around rather than expressly discussed. He makes the point that not all spoken communication requires a response, but instead, an open invitation to the Speaker, and the rapt presence and attention of the Listener.

The belief that one truly understands something, including that one has correctly heard the Speaker, revokes the ability to take in new insights. This being the case, instead of listening to the Speaker's words, one listens *through* the words to understand the particular thing they are hoping to convey.

2.11 Criticisms

It is here that Sardello's proposals become particularly questionable. He suggests that a Listener must not see themselves as a witness/observer, but instead must completely identify as the Speaker in order to be integrated into a greater whole; this integration seems to be categorized as assimilation into the Earth/mother nature's creation. While this is somewhat understandable considering the goal of connection, overidentification with other people is currently considered pathological, therefore I would suggest this be taken with caution.[3] I realise Sardello is primarily focused on creating a mode of interaction with the world characterized by profound connection

---

[1] Robert Sardello, *Contemplative Listening - Unpublished Manuscript*, 2022, 5.
[2] Sardello, 8.
[3] Ingrid Bacon and Jeff Conway, "Co-Dependency and Enmeshment — a Fusion of Concepts," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, April 11, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00810-4.

within a radical wholeness; it is a beautiful ideal, but quite ideological. Where does this ideology stem from?

The spiritual framework Sardello works from is not clearly defined, but there are profound traces of Jungian thought and theosophical discourse. For example, he speaks of the collective consciousness,[4] has a treatise on ego-negation and the impossibility of surrendering it consciously,[5] and prescribes mantras,[6] which is very Jungian. Likewise, he insists on the presence of 'alchemical reactions' during encounters between Speaker/Listener which is provided without context,[7] but I suspect likewise harkens back to Jung, for he considered himself to be an alchemist and many of his works and theories contain references to this self-conception.

In a similar vein, it is apparent that Sardello is influenced by *spiritual psychology*. This is a school which seeks to heavily incorporate matters typically divorced from psychology and includes phenomena such as altered states of consciousness, and is informed by mysticism from a patchwork of different traditions, particularly those believed, or construed to appear to be ancient.[8] Jung indeed is one of the founding thinkers upon which this field was based, which brings to it problematic instances of misinformation regarding such 'ancient practices' which turn out to be groomed for Western audiences during only the last couple of centuries. Because of these themes, I suspect theosophical influence because there is an odd bleeding of different frameworks, without explanation of how they fit together. For example, Sardello takes elements of Christianity (Wisdom (female), holy spirit), Tibetan Buddhism (shining reality bodies) and a neo-Pagan love of nature, and asserts the metaphysical and literal unity of the Earth/spirit/body.[9] For this he later focuses on American-indigenous notions of spirit-material unification.[10]

Hence, I have concerns about the romanticization and radical claims asserted within this manuscript.

---

[4] Sardello, *Contemplative Listening - Unpublished Manuscript*, 4.
[5] Sardello, 18.
[6] Sardello, 18.
[7] Sardello, 28.
[8] John Davis, "An Overview of Transpersonal Psychology.," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 31, no. 2–3 (2003): 6–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2003.9986924.
[9] Sardello, *Contemplative Listening - Unpublished Manuscript*, 20–22.
[10] Sardello, 41–43.

> *Listening-presence with others and with the world in this way lingers on after the experience. The nature of this lingering is important, for the lingering—felt bodily—softly tingles and is not just the memory of registering something that happened but rather a process in which the body itself undergoes cellular alteration. Such change of our own physical nature, in turn, alters the other person and also alters Earth.*[11]

It is utterly beyond the capacity of the spiritual to assert such radical, physical manifestations. I suspect, reading between the lines, that Sardello here is emphasizing the profundity and reality of the changes which occur in proper listening interaction. However, the assertion of physical, cellular changes by means of a spiritual endeavour is suited for an emic and 'primary source', perhaps, but makes me doubt its applicability to a technique which is not dependent upon a specific religious fundament.

I do very much agree with his recommendations of humility, silence at appropriate moments, and non-assumption, however I find these exact things to be lacking in his work. Most of the value I derived from the manuscript was inferred rather than explicitly stated, therefore I hope to perhaps find somewhere that states these things either more fully, or with a more solid theological background.

2.2 Contemplative Listening: A Rhetorical-Critical Approach To Facilitate Internal Dialog, H. Evers

N.B. This article refers to contemplative listening as a technique originating from Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca.[12] This is an extensive volume on rhetoric, permitting the dissection of language and connotations of how a speaker sees themselves in a particular narrative.

This article has a rather oppositional take than Sardello's. Evers discusses contemplative listening as a pastoral practice which is compatible with any faith background, and considers it a means by which to help a client who is going through any kind of major transition, but particularly ones that impacts one's identity (such as loss, learning one's child will not be capable of supporting

---

[11] Sardello, 26.

[12] Chaim Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Chaim Perelman, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, Reprinted (Notre Dame, Ind: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

themselves later in life, switching careers, becoming disabled etc.). However, where Sardello looks completely beyond language, Evers dissects it.

In the proposed method, the Listener is to be as inobtrusive as possible as the Speaker speaks; there is to be no interpretation or questioning of the Speaker. They are not to be diverted from their self-directed discussion, but must be able to talk with utter freedom, and no influence from the Listener. Instead, the Listener holds space for the Speaker, providing support and solidarity. The client must remain undisputed, while the auditor sticks to four main types of response: reflection, acknowledgement, confirmation, and edification.[13]

Meanwhile, the Listener observes how the Speaker sees themselves in their narrative through rhetorical nuance. In this 'supervised internal dialog', the content of speech is unimportant, but the ways in which the person talks about themselves and their situation is paramount. "As clients speak, they test whether the words and experience match. They speak as a painter paints: they look, add a brushstroke, step back, check to see whether it's right, and continue."[14] Repetition is ignored, and speech is instead perceived as a creative process; the focus becomes nuances of the ways in which things are said, at what point in the narrative, the framework it fits within, and the choice of metaphor used by the client.[15] Likewise, subtle variations of language are considered in truly understanding what a person means; do they speak of themselves with a singular-I, a familiar-collective-we, or through the lens of broad-human-condition? This connotates how connected someone feels to the issues at hand, or the other people within the problematic situation.

This type of selfless listening has its historical place not only within pastoral counselling, but also in the monastic tradition.[16] It can be used alongside a kerygmatic and therapeutic approach, but is highly distinct from these, since the Listener does not offer anything other than their rapt

---

[13] Hans Evers, "Contemplative Listening: A Rhetorical-Critical Approach To Facilitate Internal Dialog," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 71, no. 2 (June 2017): 119, https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305017708154.

[14] Evers, 116.

[15] Evers, 117.

[16] Evers, 120.

attention.[17] A major point driven home by Evers, is that "These outcomes are not connected with welfare, well-being or coping."[18] – This form of contemplative listening does not aim for happiness; more so acceptance of the new normal and being able to function within it. The crisis it not answered for the client, merely company is offered during the difficult time in which they experience the problem; the Speaker is the sole expert on themselves and their needs, so it is vital that they not be disturbed, and they must agree beforehand not to solicit advice or interpretation from the Listener. Similarly, they may withhold any information they wish, while the Listener acknowledges what *is* said.

2.21 Criticisms

This method puts more emphasis on the power of language, which certainly has its place in an atmosphere of hoping to support Speakers. By dismissing the content of the things said in favour of the greater way in which it is said there are similarities to linguistic apophasis, even while it simultaneously denotes a meticulous process of analyzing what language is used. I suspect it is possible to get too focused on language using this method, making one subject to its limitations.

A distant, but engaged companion indeed has its use in some cases, however I get the sense that this method has the potential to fail on the opposite pole of Sardello. What I mean, is it sounds more like *silent* listening than contemplative; the contemplation emphasis is solely on language and never reaches the Speaker owing to the Listener's distance. I prefer the implications of considering the greater presentation: instead of Evers solely 'contemplating' the language used, I think the inferred points of Sardello regarding body language and tone of voice would also be beneficial.

Lastly, I would think that the questions and interpretation forbidden by this method may be valuable in some situations (of course subject to one's judgement during these sensitive encounters). If someone is facing major changes in their life to the point of distress, the possibility of 'tunnel vision' is very real, and a gentle nudge towards the things left unconsidered may be

---

[17] Evers, 114.
[18] Evers, 115.

useful. To be sure, avoiding coercion of the client is an excellent goal, but I wonder how supported one would truly feel if the Listener was not holding a satisfying resolution as a goal of their work together. Likewise, I find the method unclear in that it promotes complete non-identification (the utter opposite of Sardello, who becomes problematically attached to the Speaker), yet despite their distance and lack of providing new information, 'reflection' and 'edification' are seen as appropriate ways in which to respond to the client. These types of responses must influence the Speaker since they provide new information, and thus seem ill at ease with Evers' greater proposed theory of listening. In addition to this, responses are necessary from a Listener to indicate their presence; and a middle ground between utter enmeshment and distant silence should be reached, within reasonable confines of the individuals in question and the content and context of their meetings and discussions.

2.3 Mutual Themes and Failings

While the contrast between these two tracts on contemplative listening is surprising, the polarity between Sardello and Evers is both fascinating and enormously helpful in further developing an appropriate, moderated technique which ensures the safety of both Speaker and Listener. Some common themes, disagreements, and failures reveal themselves in this comparison which will be carried forward for further analysis, clarification, and hopefully, a resolution.

However, first it must be acknowledged that Sardello and Evers approach contemplative listening from very different perspectives. Sardello is profoundly metaphysical in his tract; it is very abstract, and while it is interspersed with practical suggestions, the reader must be guided to understand why these advices are relevant to the juxtaposed concepts. Evers, contrastingly, assumes a very analytical approach which focuses on 'what is steadfastly there' rather than what is intuited at an emotional level by the Listener. The purpose of this study is not to express preference for one approach over the other, but consideration of the agendas of both Sardello and Evers is helpful in contextualizing their relevance to the questions precipitated by this thesis. These differences mean that although Sardello and Evers do not agree on some instances, they may still both be used to inform instances, even (especially) where they disagree.

Concerning the use of Eckhart which begins in the next section, I must also mention that Sardello's approach runs parallel to Eckhart to a greater degree than Evers. In Sardello's manuscript there is no express mention of Eckhart, but one might suspect Eckhart's influence considering the amalgamation of various sources and mystical overtones in Sardello's writing. This influence could easily have come through theosophical ties, if my suspicions noted above are correct; theosophical treatises include many instances where Eckhart is appropriated, especially in fusing his views very creatively with those of select Eastern traditions.[19] Such potential influence is most evident in the enigmatic nature of the Other and the sensed need to identify with It, as well as long tracts concerning ego-negation and the insinuated importance of humility. This may result in an initial preferential treatment of Sardello, but then of Evers when contemporary bereavement research is the primary mediator, since such studies tend to be more empirical.

The proceeding list of terms is hence derived and ordered in a tripartite manner: they are first selected according to Sardello and Evers' comparison, and then by relevance to Eckhart's terminology where applicable. I will list the major themes, agreements, disagreements and failings in an order delineated by relevance to Eckhart's elucidation; this permits the next section's (Ch. 3), dedication to Eckhart and the subsequent section (Ch. 4) will explore the remaining issues utilizing contemporary bereavement research.

2.31 The Listener's Identity

The identity held by the Listener is strongly in question; this is a major point of contention between the methods described by Sardello and Evers: Sardello pushes towards an intense identification with the Speaker, which dissolves the identity of the Listener to the point of annihilation. Evers, on the other hand, prescribes profound distance from the Speaker, becoming a mere witness to the Speaker's conversation (essentially with themselves).

This is the most strongly contested point, and yet the one which is most important in establishing a safe environment for both Speaker and Listener. How should a Listener *be* in conversation? This is a question which concerns one's attitude and character of presence, and

---

[19] Christopher Partridge, *Understanding the Dark Side: Western Demonology, Satanic Panics and Alien Abduction* (University of Chester, 2006), 3.

requires a foundation that is not polarized between Sardello's suggestion of assuming the identity of the Speaker, and Evers' prescription of being utterly disengaged and detached from the Speaker. How distinct should the Listener be from the Speaker when listening? Perhaps a more clarifying question is, how emotionally attached should the Listener allow themselves to get while listening to the Speaker? This is central to how a Listener behaves in an encounter, for it asks what their intentions are relative to the Speaker and the greater context of the meeting.

2.32 Ego-negation

This is highly related to issues of identity, but deserves attention as an element in itself due to its relevance to the topic at hand, especially concerning the safety of the Listener. Sardello wants the Listener to become unified to the Speaker, and Evers wants the Listener to radically prevent themselves from influencing the Speaker. Both imply the need of *holding space* for the Other without influencing them through judgements, assumptions, or other interruptions made by the Listener for their own sake. The focus must always be on the Speaker, and the Listener does not interrupt with self-serving tangents. Sardello's *becoming* the Speaker, and Evans' *radical separation* from the Speaker both accomplish the negation of the Listener's Self in the listening encounter. This suggests that ego negation is an important element of allowing authentic communication, but the way in which it is established and maintained is highly contested.

2.33 The Unknown

There is a distinct admission by both Sardello and Evers that the Other is inherently unknowable to the Listener. Even if the use of language was perfect, there is a necessary gap of knowledge in that one never truly knows what another goes through; one cannot wholly *know* what the experience of the Other is. It is of great importance that Listeners recognize this fundamental and irrevocable ignorance in order to prevent assumptions from giving the impression of understanding when they have failed to do so, or done so in a limited way.

2.34 Silence

The function of silence is the same in both accounts: a blank canvas allows the Speaker to express themselves authentically, and to the fullest extent they are comfortable with. For Sardello

this is implied by the radical union with the Speaker who gets to choose how to use this silence; for Evers this means a distant silence by which to avoid influencing the Speaker. This results in some confusion: when is silence appropriate, and when should it be broken? How can silence be best upheld vis-à-vis an appropriate response?

2.35 Hearing

Heavily related to the previous point, one must decide what most to 'listen *for*'. The focus on nuance vs. greater narrative dramatically changes the things one hopes to pick out during an encounter limited by stressful schedules and the busy buildings in which people meet. Likewise, perhaps one should focus on *hearing* body language and tone of voice more so than the contents of speech.

Which are the most effective pathways by which to take in information? If these may be different per individual, how does a Listener decide? How might techniques of contemplative listening help develop the ability to truly *Hear* someone?

2.36 Language

Both authors agree that the content of speech is not the important element of these discussions. Sardello hopes to go *beyond* language, assess the greater presentation and assimilate into the Speaker in order to achieve radical communication. Evers wants to dissect all the tiny linguistic nuances to infer the Speaker's place within their own narrative. This is a major disagreement in method, based upon a fundamental agreement stating that language is inherently limited. This harkens back to Neoplatonic thought, which states that language can only gesture towards that which is hoped to be conveyed; there is a leap between what is said and comprehension, which by necessity denotes the innate imperfection of the use of language.

Does the content of speech have significance to contemplative listening? Should the Listener zoom in on tiny rhetorical nuances, or zoom out to absorb the greater narrative?

2.37 Response

What one says in response to a person in crisis is obviously of enormous significance, yet there seems to be a vast disagreement here. Sardello suggests a radical mirroring which could easily fail as saying that which the Speaker is most likely to want to hear; Evers, in contrast, heavily limits responses and refuses to say anything which might influence the Speaker. Hence this is one of the areas most crucially needing elucidation.

When are responses appropriate, and of what type of information should they consist? How does one know when to respond to the Speaker? How responsible is the Listener for providing new information to, or influencing the Speaker?

2.38 The Ultimate Goal

The goals of both methods are unclear. What is the purpose of contemplative listening? Evers shies away from holding the resolution of the Speaker's problem as the goal of contemplative listening; not even their welfare or healthy coping is his goal. The Listener should listen, but how supported can a Speaker feel if the Listener is not in some way invested in their well-being and keeping some goal of theirs in mind during the meetings? So, should there be a resolution in mind or not?

Surely both Sardello and Evers hope to make a Speaker feel heard, but one method is so intrusive a Speaker might feel invaded; the other so distant they might feel alone. This being the case, moderation is needed to ensure the safety of all parties involved. In consideration of what turns out to be of astonishing relevance to this, I seek my spiritual foundations as presented in the theological corpus of Meister Eckhart.

3.   Eckhart's Model

Why should a medieval, German mystic inform contemporary methods of contemplative listening? A search for key terms of 'contemplation', 'listening', and related derivatives results in few occasions on which Eckhart uses such terms in his translated texts. However, a deeper dive into his works and the framework betrayed by them, in fact yields a system which offers nuanced moderation of some of the most significant questions I have just outlined.

Much of Meister Eckhart's life is shrouded in a degree of mystery owing to a lack of sources regarding his earlier life; however he is thought to have been born in the years preceding 1260 near Gotha in present-day Germany, and he would become a priest in the Dominican Order.[20] Around the age of 18 he joined a Dominican convent near Erfurt, where he focused on the instruction of clergy.[21] He was highly learned as a theologian, and would teach a significant amount, especially later in his life.[22] His focus, both academically and in his ministering role, concerned spiritual direction; this would influence his famous *Sermons* which were frequently targeted towards nuns or other clergy in the Dominican Order.[23]

His teachings focused primarily on detachment and the cultivation of equanimity, and he discussed at length the ideal attitudes in which one should consider and seek closeness with God. He is also famous for the notion of *the Spark* within the human soul, which refers to a power akin to the divine nature, which serves to facilitate human proximity to God.[24] Related to this, Eckhart faced heresy charges around 1325 after concerns were raised regarding the orthodoxy of his teachings, spurring an inquisition.[25] However, he would die around 1328 before the inquisitions had reached any conclusion; yet they did decide that the originally cited 150 problematic instances

---

[20] Jeremiah Hackett, ed., *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 1871-6377, v. 36 (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2012), 7–10.
[21] Hackett, 12.
[22] Hackett, 14.
[23] Eckhart, Edmund Colledge, and Bernard McGinn, *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 10.
[24] Hackett, *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, xxiii.
[25] Eckhart and Maurice O'C Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2009), 14.

of his teachings could be dropped to only 28. Before his death he claimed to recant all that may be deemed wrong, expressing deference to the Apostolic See.[26]

In Eckhart's corpus, he begins his mystical encounter from a place of radical unknowing in his Christian, yet apophatic, framework. This *via negativa* approach, inherited through Neoplatonic figures, is prominent among mystics beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius, and was picked up by an array of people, such as Bonaventure, the unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing,* Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and many more. The core use these figures put negative methods to was a means by which to achieve closeness to God to the fullest extent possible. This is accomplished by acknowledging one's limitations in the attempt to understand God, who is by definition beyond our ability to comprehend; one can precipitate the most *authentic* encounter with God possible using this method, since one is uninfluenced by false beliefs. This becomes possible once one renounces assumptions and expectations of the divine, and allows It to simply be as It is with complete freedom. As in the case with another person – we can never *truly* know the Other on account of these same limitations. It is only through embracing that we do not, indeed, cannot, know the Other, that we allow a genuine connection with them, since we are not clinging to projections or falsehoods.

Some important caveats are necessary in this application of these theories. My highly creative use of Eckhart aims to use his metaphors and teachings to describe the ideal attitude one should adopt when *being with* and *hearing an Other-person.* This is not to suggest that one should speak to, or treat a person, as though they are God; one should cultivate a strong sense of where boundaries lie. For example, you could not question God with expectation of any answer, but a person may feel invaded or coerced to respond. Eckhart, in his framework of communication, is essentially forming a *prayer* to God, and I do not mean to suggest that we should deify the Speaker. The usefulness of this framework lies precisely in that Eckhart seeks to approach and address a fundamentally Unknowable Other in a way which precipitates the most authentic mode of listening and receptivity that is possible given the circumstances. So this appropriation of Eckhart is not to inappropriately exalt the Speaker, but instead to pave a way by which to communicate with them

---

[26] Eckhart and Walshe, 17.

that does honour to their values, personal narrative, and the things in their lives from which they derive ultimate meaning.

Likewise, his role as a spiritual counsellor and theologian are the primary factor in his ability to provide a foundation for contemplative listening; however, I would be negligent not to point out that while this is true, he was most certainly not a therapist. This exploration of Eckhart is aimed to serve as insight which may resolve the problems outlined above, and I do not suggest that the practices or techniques he purports should be adopted before careful incorporation of contemporary scholarship as advocated by qualified professionals. In this way, Eckhart serves as a bridge; first to span the gap between Sardello and Evers, and secondly to provide a theoretical basis upon which concretized techniques can be developed. I shall therefore be donning an agnostic spirit, aiming for non-assumption and an openness to what may be gleaned and put towards a foundation for contemplative listening techniques.

> For before there were creatures, God was not 'God': He was That which
> He was. But when creatures came into existence and received their created
> being, then God was not 'God' in Himself – He was 'God' in creatures.[27]

Lastly, I would be remiss not to clearly state that Eckhart insisted that unity *with God* was his only goal. He did not suggest seeking union with anything 'created', which would apply to a (majority of a) person in the case of interactions between humans.[28] This being the case I do not claim that Eckhart would have been pleased with this particular use of his work; that being said, I have been deliberate in avoiding the use of passages which would unjustly glorify the Speaker – likewise, I have already explained why seeking 'union' with another person may be a problematic goal in accordance with contemporary psychological theories. Owing to this, my appropriation has been cautious, and many passages which may have been otherwise relevant were discarded since the context was either too 'charged' or too distant from my appropriate usage.

The main texts I use are Eckhart's *Sermons* and his *Talks of Instruction*. My appropriation of Eckhart in these cases is primarily that of a source of inspiration; the relevance of his work

---

[27] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 87, BEATI PAUPERES SPIRITU QUIA IPSORUM EST REGNUM CAELORUM, 422.
[28] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 36, ADOLESCENS, TIBI DICO: SURGE, 212.

largely derives from his writings concerning one's identity as juxtaposed to the Other, and the themes of the Unknown and the apophatic method by which to approach it. Therefore I have been cautious but highly creative in my use of Eckhart, at once considering its context carefully to ensure correct understanding of the passages, yet also decontextualizing it towards developing a method allowing enhanced connection with other people rather than explicitly God. This is possible since the proceeding discussion focuses on the ideal mindset one should assume in encounters with an Other, rather than overconcern with the ontology of the Other in and of themself. With moderation, then, I will elaborate on how Eckhart's work may inform how to authentically listen to someone who we hope to, but cannot ever fully, understand.

3.1 The Listener's Identity: A Transient Vessel

But if I am to know [the Other] without means, then I must really become He and He I.[29]

The question of the Listener's identity relative to the Speaker is the most prominent and axiomatic point of contention between the contemporary authors considered. This is a highly sensitive point to which great care must be accorded; to this end I approached my reading of Eckhart with particular caution, for a wrong interpretation, or interpreting something meant for a human-divine relationship and erroneously applying it to human interactions could be unsafe for both Listener and Speaker.

I was especially aware of the Christian mystical tradition and its focus on ego dissolution, which I believe to be problematic in that it does not afford the Listener the ability to judge the situation appropriately, nor does it aid in the creation or maintenance of healthy boundaries between humans; for this was not its intended application. Instead, this tradition often aims for utter union (similar to enmeshment as a psychological category) with God. This is not the most prominent way in which Eckhart uses it though, so I will proceed according to my judgement and with corresponding explanations where I feel they are needed.

---

[29] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 96, RENOVAMINI SPJRJTU MENTIS VESTRAE, 464.

To address the issue of identity in an encounter with the divine, Meister Eckhart uses the following metaphor: the sun (God) is shining into a bowl of water with a mirror (the devotee) in it. For the duration of this particular moment, the mirror assumes the likeness of the sun and illuminates as the sun does, yet it remains a distinct entity from the sun.[30] This speaks to a donning of attributes which is best moderated by enough humility to understand the borders where one entity ends and the other begins (read: the bowl of water vs. the sun). Likewise, the assuming of the Other's characteristics is a discrete event; it is a temporary state which does not impact the nature of the bowl of water. In addition, the likeness generated by the mirror does not *belong to* the mirror, but only to that which initially caused the image, and only during this specific moment in time.[31]

This metaphor, then, provides a model for the Listener's receptivity to the Speaker; the Listener is utterly distinct from, but simultaneously a 'holding space' or vessel for the Speaker. This speaks well to Sardello's ontology problematics, where he wants to wholly *become* the Other without retention of one's distinct identity;[32] because of this radical union he outright states that mirroring is insufficient. This can be adjusted using Eckhart's posture of radical receptivity, where one's mindset aims to serve as a **'mirroring vessel, temporarily containing the Speaker'** (as opposed to a more superficial empathic-emotive dynamic typically referred to by 'mirroring', which is what Sardello seems to criticize) thus providing a systematic approach to resolve these issues of contention surrounding Listener-versus-Speaker identities.

The attitude one dons, then, can be equated to 'the water in the bowl'. The more self-concerned or judgemental or impatient one is, the murkier the water in the metaphor. Clarity of water in this case permits the most authentic expression of the Other, since the water is not tainting transmission owing to its own characteristics. Indeed, Eckhart acknowledges that the more one

---

[30] Out of curiosity I tried this as an experiment using differing types of bowls and reflective surfaces. The more simple and smooth the bowl, and the more flawless the mirroring surface, the more the water took on the illuminating qualities. However with less than perfect items, this quality diminished quickly.

[31] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 56, NOLITE TIMERE EOS QUI CORPUS OCCIDUNT, ANIMAM AUTEM OCCIDERE NON POSSUNT, 293.

[32] There is a distinction I am trying to make between *ontology* where Sardello emphasises *what* the Listener is (read: the Speaker), and Eckhart's discussion of *attitudes of receptivity* which promotes connection without utter identification. This means Eckhart's thought does not interfere at the ontological level as Sardello's does.

relinquishes their selfhood, the more the Other can bear influence on them;[33] this is beneficial in the case of God, but problematic in the case of listening to a Speaker. Instead of becoming 'nothing', a Listener instead aims to temporarily put themselves aside in order to avoid being distracted by self-interest or their own agenda. Then they can offer their rapt attention to the Other and facilitate a more thorough understanding of them.[34] Moderate use of Eckhart's metaphor can be helpful to illustrate this: in spiritual matters, a vessel receives and contains, taking on the attributes of that with which it is infused, but in a limited way. By necessity this is a temporary state, during which the vessel holds the nature of the Other only while it is able, receptive, and willing to do so.[35]

3.2 Ego-negation: Non-assumption and Humility

This concern of not 'muddying the water' and maintaining the attitude of 'vessel' for a discrete moment in time by necessity requires the ability to put one's self aside. This also speaks to a notable similarity in the contemporary approaches of both Sardello and Evers: the agreement that ego-dissolution is a vital aspect of a contemplative listening encounter. This can be nuanced by Eckhart; from his Christian lens, he naturally believes that all good in the world is ultimately derived from the divine, and is thus divine itself. We can wield goodness, but we cannot take credit for, for example works of charity, when it was inspired by divine goodness within us.[36] The point in bringing attention to this is to highlight the fundamental agreement that one's own assumptions and ego must be radically removed from an encounter with the Other if we are to see Them in Their entirety, without being distracted by, or judging from, our own character. Eckhart emphasises in a discussion on obedience that one's personal agenda and desires are enormously problematic and distracting from the overarching goal of authentic communication.[37] Owing to this, one must quell any internal response of "I do not want/like this" in a Listening encounter.

---

[33] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 489.
[34] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 13 (b), IN HOC APPARUIT CARITAS DEI IN NOBIS, 110.
[35] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 14 (b), QUASI VAS AUREUM SOLIDUM ORNATUM OMNI LAPIDE PRETIOSO, 114.
[36] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 3, IN HIS QUAE PATRIS MEI SUNT, OPORTET ME ESSE, 51.
[37] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 487.

Eckhart sees self-interest as the greatest hurdle in achieving genuine communication: having no concerns with one's self yields the best understanding of the Other, and of course improves the quality of attention and care one might bring to the other person. Once our agenda is abandoned, a greater picture becomes clearer, including our, and the Other's place in it. He likewise cautions against being consumed with thoughts of virtues, i.e. how excellent one is for taking up a supportive position, and constantly recounting how virtuous one is for their works. Concern with the Self prevents a fruitful connection; instead one should be focused on their intensive attention on the Other, and seek to understand them in the limited ways available to us.[38]

3.3 The Unknown: Apophasis

> *… God is above all understanding… If you understand anything of Him, that is not He, and by understanding anything of Him, you fall into misunderstanding…*[39]

There are two main threads of apophasis which are present in Eckhart's work which both seek to guide a devotee closer to God by not only acknowledging, but indeed embracing one's own limitations. The first method is more specific; that of linguistic apophasis. This is the use of language to describe God in a way which wholly acknowledges its own failure (such as an 'illuminating darkness'). There are similarities here to Evers' methods, which emphasis the use of language while wholly anticipating its failure; thus, instead of listening *to* what is spoken, you listen *through* what is spoken to open yourself to greater connotations than language can truly provide. Of course Sardello also emphasizes the latter, but he abhors language rather than utilizes it. In the apophatic tradition, this deliberate use of paradoxical language hopes to stall the intellect but also provoke an understanding on an experiential, or spiritual level.

> *Where understanding and desire end, there is darkness, and there God shines.*[40]

---

[38] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 17, EGO ELEGI VOS D E MUNDO, 129-32.
[39] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 96, RENOVAMINI SPJRJTU MENTIS VESTRAE, 463.
[40] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 80, ADOLESCENS, TIBI DICO: SURGE, 398.

The other form of apophasis exists as a radical claim to unknowing, as was delineated above. The Other is allowed to be completely as It is without our seeking to possess concrete knowledge of It. It is not judged, categorized, assigned attributes, nor are assumptions or expectations made about Its ontology, behaviour or agenda. This is expressed most frequently in Eckhart's work through his criticisms of overattachment to images and likenesses. This spawns from Neoplatonic concepts which are generally understood as foundational to the greater Christian mystical tradition: God can never be fully known – we may create an image of the Other with what information we can glean of them, but this can never be identical to the Other in question. This is because holding a specific image of the Other in mind causes one to stop being able to learn about them; it does not do honour to a dynamic entity who can only communicate with us to a limited extent. Thus, the cleaner the slate; the more one admits to non-knowledge; the more authentic the experience and connection can be.[41]

In this way your unknowing is not a lack but your chief perfection…[42]

Eckhart prescribes a form of mental oblivion as a concept to hold in mind whenever approaching the Other. This involves a negation of both external activities, and internal thought. One's state of unknowing is constantly renewed: rejecting all judgements and assumptions afforded by previous experience, and the Other is allowed to be as It is, moment by moment, without expectations.[43] This also allows us to avoid getting caught up in images (false/misguided representations) of the Other since this will inevitably lead to profound failures in communication.[44]

One component of this is exceptionally relevant to the context of supporting someone experiencing loss. "Nothing is that which can receive nought from anything…"[45] – a defining factor in the loss of a loved one is grief in knowing that they are unable to receive anything from

---

[41] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 1, DUM MEDIUM SILENTIUM TENERENT OMNIA ET NOX IN SUO CURSU MEDIUM ITER HABERET, ETC, 31–33.
[42] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 2, UBI EST QUI NATUS EST REX JUDAEORUM?, 44.
[43] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 8, INTRAVIT JESUS IN QUODDAM CASTELLUM ET MULIER QUAEDAM EXCEPIT ILLUM ETC., 77.
[44] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 96, RENOVAMINI SPJRJTU MENTIS VESTRAE, 462.
[45] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 44, QUI MIHI MINISTRAT ME SEQUATUR, ET UBI EGO SUM, ILLIC ET MINISTER MEUS ERIT, 245.

us. Whether it be communication, comfort, or information, those grieving are left with an abyss where something once was. It is important to acknowledge not only that we cannot know the Speaker, but that the Speaker is in the selfsame position of being radically removed from their loved one in the case of death, or themselves in the case of a shift in identity. Not-knowing transcends both the human-divine, and human experience. Acknowledging this helps us achieve what authentic communication *is* possible.

3.4 Silence: Stillness and Coming to Rest

Every word that we can say of [Him] is more a denial of what God is not than a declaration of what He is. A great master saw that and it seemed to him that, whatever he could say in words about God, he could not really say anything which did not contain some falsehood. And so he was silent and would not say another word… Therefore it is a much greater thing to be silent about God than to speak.[46]

Especially Sardello is an advocate of the use of silence as an element which serves a functional role in interactions with the Other. To take a somewhat poetic turn, silence is needed to bring a canvas to the Speaker upon which they can illustrate what they wish to convey. More practically, sometimes speaking is simply not necessary; in fact at times it can be expressly harmful.[47] This is why it is a necessary element of apophasis – especially the type which revolves in any way around language. This is a functional, punctuative form of silence, which speaks, as it were, louder than words. In encounters with other humans, this is often (paradoxically) acknowledged verbally; being 'at a loss for words', or 'not knowing what to say' often come up in attempts to support a person having experienced a tragedy.

It seems Eckhart's use of silence relates to this at a fundamental level. He describes a person's attention as a highly unique resource: one can only attend to one thing at a time, and at the expense of paying attention to other things.[48] Owing to this, he prescribes the negation of

---

[46] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 39, VENIT JESUS ET STETIT IN MEDIO, 223.
[47] I refer here to platitudes or other meaningless phrases or statements which only serve as an attempt to achieve emotional distance from a distraught person.
[48] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 2, UBI EST QUI NATUS EST REX JUDAEORUM?, 41-2.

external activities and *internal thought*, focusing instead on the Other to the exclusion of all else.[49] This stillness allows us to receive what communication is possible with the utmost nuance.

> *...[one] should not let [one's]self be caught up by internal imagery, whether it be in the form of pictures or lofty thoughts, or outward impressions or whatever is present to his mind, nor be distracted nor dissipate himself in their multiplicity.[50]*

There are three reasons Eckhart prescribes silence: human incompetence to do justice to the truth; an inability to find, or misuse of metaphors which one likens to that which they hope to express; and the ineffability of that which is true.[51] Indeed, it is best to remain silent about God than to speak untruths of him, or to treat him as an entity to which speech may do justice. One must not force into speech things which are utterly beyond language because it does harm to the ineffable Truth.[52]

Instead of speaking that which must inevitably be untrue, Eckhart advocates *stillness*. This is an element of silence which is somewhat complicated without very close readings of his works. He defines absolute stillness and its benefits by stating that 'coming to rest' is the best way to make room for union with the Other. The general gist is that this profound act of letting go precipitates receptivity by which there is a potential to receive God, however this must be carefully nuanced.[53] Eckhart describes the state of the would-be Listener as aiming for the goal of a "bare mind" which is free of anxiety, self-concern, distractions, and attachments. This emptiness of mind makes one most receptive to authentic communication since it lessens internal 'noise' and broadens the potential for the Other to self-express. Failure here can cause restlessness, and is the result of over-concern with the Self, and the failure to shift one's attitude in a way that permits the productive use of silence.[54]

---

[49] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 1, DUM MEDIUM SILENTIUM TENERENT OMNIA ET NOX IN SUO CURSU MEDIUM ITER HABERET, ETC., 32-4; this passage largely references why images and activities are distracting from where ones attention should truly be.

[50] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 512.

[51] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 93, ERATIS ENIM ALIQUANDO TENEBRAE, NUNC AUTEM LUX IN DOMINO, 452.

[52] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 38, STETIT JESUS IN MEDIO DISCIPULORUM ET DIXIT: PAX ETC, 219–20.

[53] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 4, ET CUM FACTUS ESSET JESUS ANNORUM DUODECIM ETC., 58.

[54] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 487.

3.5 Hearing: Compassionate Detachment

There is another way in which Eckhart can inform the ideal mode of attention with respect to a context of contemplative listening, and the goal which is kept in mind during such an encounter. This is the preferred attitude discussed in his sermon on Martha and Mary, which allows speculation on the ideal attitudes in which to hear. This sermon recapitulates the story; Mary is sitting in fascination at the feet of Christ, while Martha remains active in her duty serving their esteemed guest. Martha asks Jesus to encourage Mary to get up and help her, but Jesus replies that Mary has already chosen 'the best thing'.[55] Here, Eckhart highlights Martha's concern: that Mary will not spiritually progress because she is idle and lost in the bliss of her encounter in listening to Jesus.[56] Out of care for the girl, Martha asks for Jesus' instruction for her to rise and learn to serve *while* listening, but she is gently told that Mary's attitude needs no adjustments.

Mary's attitude in listening is to forget distractions in favour of focusing on the most important thing, and becoming utterly transfixed on who is speaking. This is presented in contrast to Martha, who at least outwardly appears to be anxious and restless, and unwilling to come to a stop. This said, Martha is still, according to Eckhart, highly blessed and is hence praised by Jesus for being 'with things but not in them', meaning she can function in the world but wholly comprehends the superior nature of spiritual virtues; presumably this includes listening in a *vita contemplativa* sense, which is to say one's contemplative life, denoting careful, meditative attention.[57]

The concern underlaying Martha's fears of Mary not progressing seems to be that Mary is solely listening for pleasure, or to distract her from the chores which need tending to. If Mary were to get up and help, Martha would know that she is not only indulging her senses, but is also practicing outward virtues. However, Jesus' teaching seems to be that the spiritually correct thing *for Mary to do* was what Mary was already doing: indulging in the present and listening transfixed and undistracted on Jesus' words.[58]

---

[55] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 9, INTRAVIT JESUS IN QUODDAM CASTELLUM, ET MULIER QUAEDAM, MARTHA NOMINE, EXCEPIT ILLUM ETC. 83–90.

[56] Eckhart and Walshe, 84.

[57] Eckhart and Walshe, 85.

[58] Eckhart and Walshe, 87–89.

Yet, Eckhart acknowledges that Martha is likewise said to be blessed, and while Mary's attitude is acceptable, he does not condemn Martha for her business. In this sermon it seems that Martha is praised for her ability to have inner stillness while remaining outwardly active; this is the epitome of *vita activa*, which denotes the possibility of working in the world, hopefully while carrying a *contemplative attitude* with you into your activities, thus sanctifying them and their fruits. To carry this stillness within into outer works seems to *also* be a righteous way of instilling virtue into ones works; but as a caveat, I would be remiss not to explicitly state that this seems to be related to Martha's abundance of experience. Her maturity at once led to concerns about Mary's comportment, since it was unlike her own; but the same maturity is also what allows her to carry a correct attitude in her works, which in this case involves serving Christ in the most literal way possible.

This seems to suggest that we can assume that Martha must have had her own stint of *vita contemplative,* which was necessary to serve as the foundation of her progression towards *vita activa*. The contemplation, then is a necessary precursor to activity which is augmented by the former's insights. Metaphorically speaking, this seems to suggest that – with experience – it is possible to 'be with others' (though not in them!) in solidarity, denoting rapt attention even while engaging in activity with them by means of discussions; in the proposed setting of secular contemplative listening, this suggests the potential to eventually carry the contemplative focus (Listening to the Speaker) into a degree of activity. For the time being, however, and before one is experienced, the correct attitude seems to be one marked by *attentive detachment* so one first can learn how to truly listen; later one will be able to incorporate more 'action' into their role.

3.6 Language: the Ineffability of the Other

> *...the soul is ineffable and wordless: in her own ground she is wordless and nameless and without words, for there she is above all names and words.*[59]

---

[59] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 49, ECCE MITTO ANGELUM MEUM, 263.

Words fail. This is the reality which has been purported by all authors discussed in this thesis, however the function of language and subsequently how it is best used is highly up for debate. This is likewise ambiguous within a Christian mystical lens, for language fails, yet there is an understanding of God as 'the Word'. Eckhart says that language is used as a means to communicate by turning the self *into* words, however there is always something crucial left inward; one cannot drain themselves of all expression through language.[60]

This failure of words, which I suspect lurks in every Speaker's base awareness, means both Speaker and Listener must compensate and look beyond language: how is the Other demonstrating their experience, personal narrative and values? Both Sardello and Evers discuss this at length without much said in terms of defining a resolution, yet Eckhart offers the suggestion that this can be accomplished in allowing the Other to work through creative facets;[61] the more uninhibited and spontaneous the Other is allowed to be, the more authentic and natural their expressions.

Or, from a more typically Christian framework, one might take example from the various 'ladders of understanding' which denotes a hermeneutical process of considering different layers of meaning. For example, what is literally said, what is allegorically meant, the moral implications of these, and what this ultimately means in the life of the Speaker. Even using limited language, there can always be deeper senses read into that which is spoken.[62] This permits the use of metaphor, and picking up on what is said 'between the lines'. Considering the imperfections of any language, this is an important facet of communication.

Another point to consider, especially for those in a Catholic context, is the sacramentally significant use of language that is so frequently exercised within practices of confession (which arguably has become secularized today by psycho-therapeutical methods of myriad forms of 'talk-therapy'). This can be cathartic in a care setting, and having one's 'confession' heard is naturally prescribed by Eckhart if one wishes to relieve the discomfort of one's conscience.[63] He specifies,

---

[60] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 22, MISIT DOMINUS MANUM SUAM ET TETIGIT OS MEUM ET DIXIT MIHI ETC … ECCE CONSTITUI TE SUPER GENTES ET REGNA, 152.
[61] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 22, MISIT DOMINUS MANUM SUAM ET TETIGIT OS MEUM ET DIXIT MIHI ETC… ECCE CONSTITUI TE SUPER GENTES ET REGNA, 153–55.
[62] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 83, HAEC DICIT DOMINUS: HONORA PATREM TUUM, ETC, 408.
[63] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 511.

significantly for us, that hearing another speak of such intimate details must be done in a state of selflessness and love; a love completely void of conditions, while holding the best interests of the Other in mind.

3.7 Response: A Catered Reflection

When the time comes that the Listener is expected to respond to the Speaker, a blank space opens up, its bareness further exacerbated by aforementioned notions of ego-negation and rapt attention on the Other. The question becomes, what is our role when we respond to the Speaker? Do we wish to 'mirror' them, which Sardello insists is inadequate, but Eckhart seems to implicate as the mechanism which gives functionality to his metaphor of the bowl of light? Do we remain distant and refuse to provide new information or provoke a new lens with which to examine the problematic situation, as Evers suggests? Do we wish to comfort, teach, or inspire the Speaker? How can a response be mitigated by the fact that the Listener cannot wholly *know* the Speaker?

Indeed, one must admit that one's knowledge of the Other can never be perfected. Thus, we can only estimate how satisfying any particular response may be to the Speaker, and this is the essence of why humility has been promoted in addressing both the need to stand back from one's own agenda, and to acknowledge our lack of absolute comprehension of the Speaker. This encourages a response focused completely on the Speaker, carefully omitting any hint of self-serving intentions, or projections on the Listener's behalf. This humility grants the greatest possible room for the Other to authentically express themselves, and additionally permits our best quality of attention to offer them.[64]

To use Eckhart's language, the most effective and genuine encounter with the Other requires stripping Them of everything that is superficial; the Other is best experienced 'bare', naked, so that one does not get caught up in Their various attributes, but instead in the Other Themselves.[65] To translate this into our contexts, I would suggest this means that responses should cater to the Speaker's ability to see into the core issues *behind* or *hinted at* by *their own* claimed

---

[64] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 46, HAEC EST VITA AETERNA, UT COGNOSCANT TE, SOLUM DEUM VERUM, ET QUEM MISISTI, JESUM CHRISTUM, 251.
[65] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 72, POPULI EIUS QUI IN TE EST, MISEREBERIS, 367-8.

issues, the narrative within which it is placed, their place within this story, etc..[66] This should promote Listener-responses which are at once grounded and catered to the Other, while also considering their needs, as we strive to understand them as best we can, but necessarily through their own eyes.

To reintegrate these concepts into the metaphor of the vessel, then the mirror is the Spark, the thing that allows the potential of closeness; the Listener's attention should not be focused on themselves, or the water becomes cloudy and unable to transmit light; however if the water is clear through lack of self-concern, then illumination is instantaneous. This is to say that in a listening encounter one provides a holding space (read: the bowl) for the Speaker to express themselves. This indeed is very much like mirroring, which is necessary given the metaphor; however instead of the psychologically associated process of mirroring Sardello criticizes, it does not mean 'do that which the Other does': instead, it opens up the possibility of showing the other what they are *not aware* of what they are doing or thinking or ascribing false meanings to. This occurs when they can see themselves through the lens of the Listener; this third-party perspective then broadens the Speaker's self-knowledge, potentially allowing for them to realize and arrive at solutions for their own needs.

This means that all responses should be focused on the Speaker, and should be geared towards most fully understanding their experience. Personal comments of being able to relate to their situation *might* be helpful in some circumstances, but this should never be done in a leading way where attention is diverted to the Listener. This does permit Listener-questions, but with a preference towards questions the Speaker is unlikely to have asked themselves. The purpose of questions here is not to invade in the private life of the Speaker, nor to satisfy the intellect of the Listener, but instead for the Speaker to see themselves through the Listener's eyes in this radical mirroring process and come to their own realization of whatever it is they are resisting. In this way, responses hope to tease out repressed expression, discover gaps in their narrative, and discover why they might have certain confusions in their emotional or meaning-making processes.

---

[66] This is not to suggest all issues will be superficial; for example, a person who is oddly distraught by the death of someone they were not close to may indicate a surfacing encounter with their own mortality which they do not understand.

3.8 The Ultimate Goal

> *A physician who wants to cure a sick man has no 'mode' of health, of just how healthy he wants to make the sick man. He has modes of making him well, but as to how well he wants to make him, that is without 'mode' – as well as ever he can![67]*

In Eckhart's *the Talks of Instruction* he is markedly performing the role of a spiritual counsellor in discussion with his students; typically younger clergy. Owing to the varied nature of the different people he speaks to and of, some generalising statements come to light which point towards what might be described as his ultimate goal in his context of spiritual instruction. One of the most poignant remarks he makes to this end, is that there is no singular path or one goal; every healing and every path is individual.[68] The distinction between these potential goals is also nuanced by Eckhart: the grounding of meaning behind ones actions is more responsible for the action's value than the person who performs these actions: "Do not think to place holiness in doing; we should place holiness in being, for it is not the works that sanctify us, but we who should sanctify the works".[69] This encourages the individual to engage with their own meaning-making processes to define, redefine, and form action towards goals which are suited to them. The Speaker then is attached to the core essence of their own values (as opposed to some fleeting image of what one 'should' be) which yields more satisfying results from any course of action, regardless of how fruitful it turns out to be.

To clarify, I believe what this suggests is that a Listener should help a Speaker define what their *principles* are. The process and outcome is not so explicit as this, for it never reaches language or stated goals in such a direct way, which would be too laborious and 'heavy' for most to bear. However it seems that the role of Listener, and the ultimate aim in meetings, is to connect a Speaker with their values in a way which helps them in moving forward in ambiguous situations. Eckhart

---

[67] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 67, QUASI STELLA MATUTINA I N MEDIO NEBULAE ET QUASI LUNA PLENA IN DIEBUS SUIS LUCET ET QUASI SOL REFULGENS, SIC ISTE REFULSIT IN TEMPLO DEI, 342.

[68] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 505.

[69] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 489.

relates this to a clearer example: a thirsty person will remain thirsty even if they are distracted and their thoughts stray to other things; the thirst remains until it is properly addressed.[70] A Speaker in crisis needs orientation to who they are; any distractions from this only delays closure on the issue.

In the context of his spiritual counselling, Eckhart is thus a proponent of knowing oneself. This involves not only being aware of principles, but also one's weaknesses and where they (sometimes expressed as 'sins' in this religious context) most frequently express themselves. This highly intentional attitude towards oneself allows the ability to point out where further work needs to be done. He assuages his students' concerns about their seeming failures in this, which they believe to be hindering them from having an experience of God; but this misses the point (and illustrates the concern Martha had for Mary). The goal is not to get caught up in the ecstasy of a beautiful experience; after one establishes a foundation of principles, values, and a willingness to bring these into activity, the hope is to bring attention and intention of these ultra-meaningful standards *into* one's work, whether it be internal or external.

This dances around a core failure of most support- and counselling-goals, and is largely ignored in existing literature, which is why Evers' awareness of it lands so harshly: human satisfaction is not the goal (for, it can never be attained), and this is also purported by Eckhart.[71] One should always be open to growth, improving upon one's flaws and learning new things; presumably at an intellectual level as well as spiritual, the latter naturally being the context of Eckhart's citations in this section. If we are to be at peace, we must be so knowing that we cannot rely on our work being blissful, or catharsis always being accompanied by permanent relief. In any personal situation, or that of others, we can only aim for improvement. Goals indeed must be defined at the outset of meetings to guide in what direction the work is headed, but these are not the end-all of counselling. The aim, then, is to bring a Speaker a little forward from where they were, and offer them support through the ambiguities they face, while donning an attitude of *attentive detachment*.

---

[70] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 491.
[71] Eckhart and Walshe, The Talks of Instruction, 517.

3.81 With Respect to Contexts of Loss

Special consideration should be given to Speakers who face some sort of profound loss, whether it is a loved one, a state of normalcy in their life, or some founding part of their identity (such as loss of a limb, performative role in their life as spouse/parent/child, or something related to their career). Any type of loss can elicit profound confusion, and one's losing touch with what is helpful in times of distress, especially if they have not felt the need to seek help previously. It can be easy to forget who supports us or what helps us cope, making us disconnected from potential healing. Such disconnection can be exacerbated by new habits (or the sudden loss of old ones), for example after the loss of a job or a dependent, which provokes an existential crisis. Abrupt changes in situation can also cause *false* aspects of one's identity to be stripped away, for example coming to terms with our own mortality; this can lead to a sense of profound isolation, and thus a renewed need for connection. In some cases, these shifts keep one feeling disconnected except from those who have endured similar circumstances themselves.[72]

In addressing this, Eckhart reveals that he believes the motivating crux of all human behaviour to be a 'coming to rest'. This often manifests as either rejecting something which disables the ability to rest (problematic emotional states), or pulling something external inward which one (usually erroneously) believes will grant rest (hence addiction to substances, abusive relationships, etc.).[73] In this way, a large disruption related to loss can cause people to seek out a new normal, since one is distraught owing to the lack of rest available. It then stands to reason that coming to rest with the new situation (i.e., acceptance of the new normal) is the goal. This is paired with a danger of trying to rest in material things which only grant temporary reprieve, and instead Eckhart suggests remaining focused on spiritual matters. To this end he cites Anselm, saying that one should avoid excessive outward 'works', and not lend oneself to obsessive internal thinking which serves to disturb, rather than promote wellbeing.

---

[72] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 37, ADOLESCENS, TIBI DICO: SURGE, 214-7; this sermon uses the metaphor of a widow who lost her son in a treatise on the need for entwined understanding, intellect and love concerning one's closeness to the divine.

[73] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 45, IN OMNIBUS REQUIEM QUAESIVI, 247.

However, before covering too much ground regarding the best way in which to help bereaved Speakers, it would be appropriate to consider those acumens which lay beyond Meister Eckhart; for his legacy and insights serve as a foundation for the *contemplation* which undergirds this listening technique. To take it a step further and produce a well-informed technique, I will proceed in elaborating on the compliment of the *contemplativa* just offered. Hence, Eckhart has provided our *Mary*, and thus the bridge to fashion the appropriate, corresponding *Martha*. To inform how best to introduce *activa* into contemplative listening, then, it would behove this project to now be informed by relevant fields and more current and empirical research.

4. Contemporary Bereavement Research

Contemporary research concerning grief counseling stems mainly from the fields of psychology and thanatology; how the brain at a chemical and behavioural level deals with grief, and what meanings are ascribed to grief and its subsequent impact on the suffering or resiliency of the patient. Considering the distance between this and Eckhart's theological discourse, it must be stated that contemporary bereavement research does not operate using the same categories. Therefore some previously mentioned motifs, like 'silence', which is of such a poetic nature that it escapes an empirical approach, are omitted from the following assessment. Likewise, some which have been beautifully illustrated by Eckhart, such as 'identity' are further elaborated on here, even if the conclusions do not correspond with what was argued above. In the proceeding section I will culminate all the information together into a very brief practical guide that tries to resolve the differences between all parties explored in this thesis.

The research used to inform the current section is largely derived from two main sources, which each using a distinct angle: a collection of essays edited by Laurie Burke and Edward Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased: Exploring Presence within Absence*; and William Worden's *Grief counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. The former is somewhat more abstract, but deals very precisely in the concerns regarding contexts of loss which serve as the background to this proposed contemplative listening technique; it is apophatic in its envisioning the void left behind by the deceased, and the ways in which this absence actively influences the life of the Speaker. The latter text by Worden is more psychologically based and discusses trends of what is most helpful, based on a meta-analysis of several decades of empirical studies on the outcomes of grief counselling and therapy.

A necessary caveat: *contemplative listening* has been developed from a fundamentally spiritual basis, and thus it cannot ever serve as a replacement for the services of a trained therapist; yet bringing insights from therapy can help identify issues which are beyond the ability of the Listener to contend with, thus aiding the Speaker through informed listening, which may include

referrals to parties outside the *contemplative listening* encounter. The incorporation of Eckhart, then, should serve as a bridge to help to incorporate the *contemplative* foundations already explored into the *activity* of contemporary research; thus allowing *Mary* to progress towards *Martha.* This precipitates the identification and appropriate reconciliation of issues, and provides insight into what has been clinically proven to be effective, and thus best inform the ideal attitude to adopt in a listening encounter; this necessarily includes humility enough to recognize when a Speaker needs help beyond what one can provide.

4.1 Identity

The issues of identity are paramount in contemporary research, but the problematic is not framed as that of Listener-versus-Speaker. Instead, it tends to focus on the Speaker's express identity, which is going to need adjustment after the loss of someone close to them. This need to reforge one's identity increases along with the level of closeness denoted by the relationship had to the deceased.[74] Furthermore, the Speaker's previous identity and associated roles must be reconstructed not only with regards to the outside world (i.e., a widow needing to learn how to manage her finances which used to be done by her husband), but also regarding their relationship to the deceased person. This means that relationship dynamics are subject to radical change, but generally are not believed to dissipate as was previously thought to be the case.[75]

Therefore, a main task of a Listener in meeting a grieving Speaker, is to help them to maintain their own identity, encapsulate it, reify it, so they can cope in the world while still remembering the deceased.[76] This is often a complicated issue owing to the bereaved person assuming attributes, interests, or habits of the deceased as a way to try to absorb their identity instead of developing and reifying their own. This being the case, the careful deliberation above involving Eckhart's concept of holding another's identity without succumbing to it could be a skill a Speaker would also benefit from learning.

---

[74] J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, Fifth edition (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2018), 48.

[75] Laurie A. Burke and Edward K. Rynearson, eds., *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased: Exploring Presence within Absence*, The Series in Death, Dying, and Bereavement (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 71.

[76] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 51.

Addressing such identity issues require a lot of caution; enmeshment between the bereaved and deceased is not the goal, but instead the goal is to define a new relationship dynamic. This can be aided through various means of connection, especially using skills, common interests, and other bonding activities that they engaged in together as a means to reconnect and thus reforge the new mode of relationship.[77] For example, this can mean doing whatever was meaningful to both; gardening, charities, reading particular books, visiting special places etc. The important part of this identity maintenance is that it is a *restorative internalization* of the deceased and not a fixation. It should be adaptive, allowing the Speaker to integrate into the new circumstances of their life.

4.2 Ego-negation

The deliberate pushing-away of one's personal cares and concerns is not generally a major focus of contemporary bereavement research. However, it is implied by the importance placed on counsellors caring for themselves, which features in most tracts directed to psychological caregivers, in addition to those who provide spiritual care; this is required to ensure the Listener is able to put themselves aside without incurring personal risk, as well as to precipitate the best listening encounter possible. Having tended thoroughly to their needs beforehand, the Listener is then able to meet the Speaker in the present moment, and offer a place of stillness. Listeners must be able to attune themselves to the needs of the Speaker, and truly hear what they wish to discuss. It is the junction of those two functions (attention and a holding space) where healing is truly supported.[78] By necessity, this requires the intense presence, attention, and a lack of self-centeredness of the Listener.

4.3 Apophasis

By its nature, grief is an experience which resonates with apophatic elements, and taking stock of its negativity helps to define where precisely issues lie and how they can be addressed. At once, grief often confronts the bereaved with a vast unknown; even with solid religious convictions, it is common for some doubt to creep in during these times in life. It is likewise apophatic in that the bereaved, instead of encountering a person's presence in their life, now must

---

[77] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 49.
[78] Burke and Rynearson, 101.

confront the person's absence, which is sometimes felt profoundly, and can be an enormously confusing experience, especially in cases where it was the first major loss in the client's life.

An important step is to understand and attempt to invoke the *living* meaning of the person; what did the bereaved lose when the person died?[79] This can point to a huge range of potentials: their personality, humour, relational role as a mother, spouse, child, friend, and the practical roles performed in the bereaved's life. It is also important to acknowledge the future that is now lost and must be grieved along with the person, i.e., losing two decades of the role of a dependant when losing a child, which is to say nothing of a parents' expectation of having a lifelong relationship with their offspring.

Additionally, it has been noted that it is extremely common for people to feel an ongoing connection to the deceased, and in a very real, literal sense. This is called a 'phantom-relationship experience', where the bereaved cite feelings of the deceased's presence, and their performance of roles of solidarity and protection in their life.[80] This suggests that the relationship between the bereaved and deceased *changes* rather than dissipates; previously this sense of lasting connection had been considered pathological, however that judgement has been re-evaluated, particularly since the first edition of *Continuing Bonds* in 1996.[81] In practice, the implication is that the deceased can have an active role in adjusting the mourner's identity, and their relationship dynamic is reintegrated in an altered manner, so long as it is adaptive and restorative, rather than a point of fixation or severe distress. It also yields the potential to bring the deceased into the present conversation; for example, "If they were here, what would they say or do to help you?"

However, it is also possible to become problematically attached to grief, and to feel as though enjoying life were a betrayal to the deceased loved one.[82] If grief is the only bond, the connection with them only exists through the experience of pain. Ultimately, the dynamics

---

[79] Burke and Rynearson, 7.
[80] Burke and Rynearson, 90.
[81] Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, eds., *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, Series in Death Education, Aging, and Health Care (Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1996).
[82] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 100.

between the bereaved and the felt absence of their loved one needs to be oriented towards reintegration of the new normal.

4.4 Language

The concern of language in contemporary research addresses somewhat different issues than those previously outlined by Sardello, Evers and Eckhart. The difference mainly precipitates from the context of trying to help others in a therapeutic sense, and this is accomplished using a strong psychological background. Thus, these suggestions largely pertain to the function of language within counselling contexts, meaning they tend to be quite practical rather than abstract.

The language used by the Listener should be forthright, and easily understood.[83] Typical platitudes must be avoided at all costs, since they can be profoundly alienating or meaningless to someone who is in the midst of an intense crisis. Instead of meaningless chatter, all language used should be evocative and concrete, and aimed towards helping the Speaker face the reality of their loss. For example, it is suggested to use the past tense; saying that the deceased 'died' rather than passed away, helps to ease the Speaker to incorporate the full reality of their situation.[84]

There is a further sense in which speech gives reality to our experiences, especially those which are intense and typically experienced in profound solitude, or are otherwise alienating. Speech as a phenomenon is inherently social; this has been noted as being in sharp contrast to thinking, which is private; even writing can be private and does not tend to be so shaping to our perceptions as when we give reality to them in speech, thusly making them intensely, but temporarily, accessible to others.[85] This being the case, speech can be used to help synthesize information, and then lead to healthy integration of the new normal. It is also common for the Speaker to trigger new insights into their situations while talking, bringing awareness to new perspectives that were not accessible to them through the processes invoked by their private thoughts or writing.

---

[83] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 107.
[84] Worden, 108.
[85] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 118.

4.5 Response

The issues of when and how to respond to the Speaker have already been arising in the recent pages; of course this is within the context of grief counseling research, which at once supports 'ego-negation' to the extent that the Listener puts themselves aside and thus does not insert themselves unnecessarily into conversation. Naturally in this context, responses are still completely appropriate, and indeed necessary. I would like to elaborate, however, on the types of responses that are promoted and proven to be most effective.

To take an example, it is common that a Speaker is self-conscious about something that is in fact very normal. They may feel confused by feelings of guilt, or questioning their sanity when they can sense the presence of the deceased when triggered by an associated item or behaviour. In such a case, people need **reassurance** and indeed **education**, and these are very appropriate to offer, so long as it is relevant to making the Speaker feel heard, and aids in their learning how to cope with the loss in question.[86]

The true goal of the Listener in these encounters – which will be further elaborated on in the next section – centres around **validating** and **reinforcing the narrative building processes** of the Speaker. This is what secures them to their worldview; it aids in their adaptation, and has very high positive outcomes in previous studies concerning how to deal with grief.[87] As a small caveat, rumination or fixation is separate from this narrative building; it is where the Speaker is 'stuck' in their grief and not developing the needed skills to help them cope. This is associated with very poor outcomes, so the differences should be well-noted.

4.6 Ultimate Goal: Coping

In Worden's *Handbook of Grief Counseling*, he outlines ten guiding principles which serve well to outline the general process and the more specific goals associated with grief counselling. This is founded upon information yielded from many studies over approximately the last two decades.[88] I will list them, along with a brief description where needed.

---

[86] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 163.
[87] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 97.
[88] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 93–106.

1. **Help survivor actualize the loss.** This helps them to arrive at a real awareness of the fact of the death, and is achieved primarily through talking to them. It seems that verbalization heavily contributes to reifying the realities of one's situation. It is important here to allow repetition, statements of the obvious, and the ventilation of feelings.

> *In many families, when the widow talks about the death, the response is "Don't tell me what happened. I know what happened. Why are you torturing yourself by talking about it?" The family members do not realize that she needs to talk about it, that talking helps her to come to grips with the reality of the death. The counselor is not subject to the same impatience shown by the family and can facilitate the growing awareness of the loss and its impact by encouraging the patient to* **verbalize memories of the deceased,** *both current and past.*[89]

2. **Help the survivor to identify and experience feelings.** After the death of a loved one, many feelings can be repressed or stigmatized. The person needs permission to engage in their authentic emotions; especially 'negative' ones such as anger, resentment towards the deceased, anxiety and guilt. This seems to suggest **elaboration** as a key response posed by the Listener. It may also be helpful to ask what the Speaker misses about the deceased, in addition to what they *do not* miss. This is not to focus on negative feelings, but simply to allow them to surface, promoting a balanced view of the deceased, and any subsequent issues which arise after their death. Balancing emotions also includes ensuring that their target is correct; for example it is easy to fall into self-blame, especially if one was absent for the sudden death of their loved one, or to get angry at a family member, deflecting from the avoidance of one's grief.

3. **Assist the client's living without the deceased.** This is to encourage the bereaved to take up the roles necessary for independence, especially in dealing with affairs that the deceased used to tend to. This can also include changed family dynamics spurred by the death of a member, especially one who was the primary caregiver or provider.

---

[89] Worden, 94. Author's emphasis.

4. **Help the client to find meaning in the loss.** The process of finding meaning can be just as important as the eventual conclusions of the meaning. This entails a process of meaning conversion; previously distressing issues are considered from a perspective where positive ramifications are found and embraced. Often both the bereaved and deceased are involved in this new meaning, suggesting it is relevant to the former's shifting identity.

5. **Help the client to find ways to remember the deceased.** It is important to allow the continuation of the relationship, and allow it to evolve enough to accommodate death. Many clients are afraid of forgetting their loved ones, and a counsellor can help them to reify rituals, values, and other forms of meaning-making which serve to recall the deceased and honour them. This is also referred to as *emotional relocation*: the relationship with the deceased changes so that there is still meaning to them having lived, but also that the bereaved is capable of living in their absence.

6. **Provide time to grieve.** Time is required to make the adjustment to the absence of the deceased, and to develop new routines which fill the roles the deceased can no longer perform. This concept of time is frequently felt by the bereaved in waves; this means that often there are particular periods in which more time is needed for grief, such as around anniversary dates, even if there is otherwise normal functionality.

7. **Interpret *normal* behaviour.** Many grieving people suspect that their grieving process is abnormal, and reassurance is required. However, this must be nuanced by the proceeding point:

8. **Allow for individual differences.** It is expected that everyone will grieve in different ways. This includes differing intensities and durations. Additionally, grief is not always socially displayed, which may make others concerned that grieving is not occurring at all, when in fact the bereaved needs to do so privately.

9. **Examine the client's defenses and coping styles.** This is something that requires time and a trusting relationship with the bereaved, and involves helping them understand their coping mechanisms, and bringing to light those which may be unhealthy. The hope is to promote healthy

coping styles, which can include "humour, the ability to reframe or redefine a difficult situation, adequate emotional regulation skills, and the ability to accept social support".[90]

10. **Identify pathology and refer.** It is imperative that anyone in a counselling position knows their limits, and thus when a person's needs are beyond what they are able to provide. This denotes encouraging the bereaved to seek therapy or specialist care when their needs exceed one's capacity.

These categories all support the ultimate goal, according to contemporary bereavement research, of providing support to the client, ensuring they are cared for, suggesting ways in which to improve their acclimatization to the loss, and helping them to slowly move towards a new normal in which the deceased person retains meaning but is not the focal point of a ruminative fixation which prevents the bereaved from living the fullest life possible. Given this contemporary research and its supportive foundation in spiritual theories, one can see the role of contemplation and experience, and how this might inform potential strategies which support these goals just outlined. A few solid suggestions can be made towards the best techniques by which to aid the Speaker, which are supported by both the *contemplative* foundation, and the vehicle of *activity*. This last section will outline some of these ideal techniques, as informed by the research and insights presented in this thesis.

---

[90] Worden, 106.

5.   Suggested Techniques

The progression of *Mary* into *Martha* invokes much of the last two chapters: Eckhart provides a foundation from which our listening gains attributes of *contemplation*, but also highlights the need for *action* in the world, which is best informed by contemporary studies. By necessity, the foundational components will be presented in advance of the activities which they support: I refer here to the ideal attitude one dons as a Listener and how this can be acted on or practiced. Proceeding from this, certain activities present themselves as potentially helpful, and are supported by either Eckhart or contemporary bereavement research; surprisingly, some are in fact promoted by both. These activities generally seek to aid in discovering where resistance lies in the Speaker; what are they avoiding, and what realities have they not yet come to terms with? It appears that essentially all instances of complicated grief come down to resistance at some level, but sensitivity is needed to address this, as well as a good arsenal of techniques since some Speakers may respond favourably to a particular approach over others.

The suggestions will be summarized in accordance with main headings which generically describe the type of approach. Naturally, different approaches will be appropriate for different clients under different circumstances, and are subject to the judgement and consent of both parties involved.

5.1 Humility I: Admitting Non-knowledge

It is evident at this point that embracing the fact that there will always be elements of the Speaker unknown to us is a crucial step in understanding them. This is akin to 'knowing that there is something you do not know', rather than being unaware of a gap in knowledge. Limitations of language, or even a simple desire for privacy influences the quantity and quality of the Speaker's output of information, and it is important to realize that lack of knowledge substitutes for the fact that *something* is present but unaccounted for, rather than pretending there is simply nothing there.

In practice, this means not judging the Speaker for their actions or attitudes; nor should one categorize them, label them, or otherwise put them in a neatly-labeled box for the sake of simplicity or our convenience. It also means that humans are dynamic creatures; they grow, evolve, change

their minds, and assign new meanings to important things and events throughout their lives. This fluidity needs *space* to express itself, and this expression is paramount to authentic communication.

5.2 Humility II: Cultivating Attention and Attitude

To illustrate the best way in which to be present with the Speaker and hold space for them, I have suggested the appropriation of Eckhart's metaphor of the bowl of water with a mirror laying on the bottom, and the sun shining into it. This does not necessarily suggest the psychological technique of mirroring (as mimicry of the Other) but instead provides a vessel; a discrete container for the Speaker in which they may authentically express themselves without the attributes of the Listener contaminating this authenticity. This means that the Listener, having already cared for their needs previous to the meeting, sheds their own ego, agenda, and self concern; they shelve their thoughts of themselves for a temporary moment, and simply absorb what the Speaker is saying to their best ability. This includes the Speaker's entire performance; what is said, what they seem to feel, tone of voice, and how they place themselves within the narratives they relate.

The 'contemplation' in this technique uses this extensive attention to absorb all this information, and hopes to figure out what it means *to the Speaker*. There are many methods of cultivating mindfulness, which helps one to prioritize what is most worthy of attention. Attuning oneself to information provided by the Other in spoken word, and during an emotionally charged state, is a cultivated skill requiring practice. To support this, I would suggest, just as an example, to establish a private practice of this deep, meditative attention by listening to music. This can help to sensitise one to the expression of sound and its emotive qualities. The aim is to avoid getting taken in by the music, and instead to deeply listen for what it hopes to convey. Such pieces that do not use vocals are ideal in this practice for reasons which are apparent after the previous discussions on the limitations of language (or getting lost in distractions/ones own thoughts). Even more so, a piece is suited to this task if it does not particularly move you-as-Listener at an emotional level. The aim here is to practice the state of the Listener becoming a container which is distinct from that which it holds; yet it holds the contents of the emotive Other with compassionate, rapt, but detached attention.

5.3 Relationships between Listener and Speaker

Underlying whatever technique is used, the dynamics of the relationship between the Listener and Speaker must be considered. At the beginning of the relationship, it is appropriate for the Listener to be a bit more active and offer guidance, questioning the Speaker non-intrusively in order to build trust. As time goes on, the Speaker can be increasingly self-directing, since a rapport is developed and they become comfortable sharing more.[91]

The role of the Listener is primarily that of a provider of solidarity and support, but it is also important that they establish and maintain their own distinct identity. How this influences responses has been discussed at length, but strengthening the connections and tying them to a technique would be helpful. This cultivation of intention and attitude should be supported by the Listener's responses. I would therefore suggest responses which indicate the Listener's complete attention on the Speaker. **Clarification** is indeed helpful, and permits the **asking of questions**, so long as the Speaker is aware that they may withhold whatever information they wish. If the Listener is posed with direct questions or a request for opinion, I hold that the Listener may provide these things paired with a healthy dose of humility: they should avoid bringing themselves to the light of attention, but a simple "in my experience" without providing more details than are necessary – and certainly no details which lead the Speaker into shifting attention to the Listener. Likewise, **reassurance** and **validation** are important to encourage the Speaker and make it known that they are speaking in confidence, within a safe environment. It can also be acceptable to prompt the Speaker to **think about a situation from other perspectives**; along the lines of "How do you think [this person] perceived the situation?", or "What do you think [the deceased] would want for you right now?". These latter points, however, are subject to more caution, especially if the Listener is inexperienced.

I would also consider the use of silence to be a powerful tool in meetings. If both parties are not made radically uncomfortable by silence, it can be a beautiful form of expression and solidarity. In many instances where loss is at the crux of a crisis, silence is the very thing one hopes to learn to deal with. The loss of a person, job, limb, or home, indicates a lack where once there

---

[91] Worden, 116.

was something – it is possible, depending on the individuals in question, that facing that silence as it simply exists is what is needed. Sometimes there are no words; by necessity there often *cannot* be words, which are profoundly insufficient for much of the human experience; and what someone truly needs is solidarity *within* the silence, so they do not have to face their lackings in solitude.

It is also important in these meetings that the Speaker feels safe and that their issues genuinely matter to the person listening; oftentimes someone will seek a Listener because they feel uncared for or unsupported in their greater circumstances (i.e., an unsupportive family situation). This means it is important for a Listener to avoid moralizing situations or judging.[92] It is also highly important to give the Speaker room to have experiences and feelings that lie outside of the socially accepted norm, and likewise to explore their *own* moral feelings on the matters at hand, rather than be influenced by feelings of judgement or stigmatization imposed on them by the Listener.

By necessity, any suggestions pertaining to techniques can only be made in a very general way, considering the profound variety of potential meeting contexts. Depending on the individuals in question a Listener will speak more or less. They should also keep an eye out for the Speaker getting 'cagey',[93] especially after a question. Ensure that no one is pressured to say something more than they are comfortable with; and ensure that the Speaker is given permission to repeat themselves if necessary. Ultimately, however, such meetings will be informed by practice – Eckhart would say that we should see our mistakes ('sins') as a way to outline where we need improvement and how to drive our growth there.[94]

5.4 Talking: Structuring Narratives and Meanings

> *Translating experiences into language and constructing a coherent narrative of the event enables thoughts and feelings to be integrated, sometimes leading to a sense of resolution and fewer negative feelings associated with the experience.[95]*

---

[92] Worden, 117.
[93] 'Cagey' refers to acting like an animal in a cage, simultaneously withdrawn, suspicious, restless and guarded.
[94] Eckhart and Walshe, *The Talks of Instruction,* 500.
[95] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 108.

In the context of meetings in which a Speaker seeks spiritual or emotional support, the typical methods used are akin to talk-therapy. The Listener encourages the Speaker to discuss issues which weigh on them, and hopes to bring to light the root of the issues, potentially helping to discover ways in which to address them. It is my wish here to steer towards techniques which have been declared useful by contemporary research, and thus I defer to scholars with appropriate training, in addition to empirical studies which serve to highlight the most beneficial forms of expression for those undergoing a major crisis related to grief or loss.

A Speaker's self expression using language is generally associated with better outcomes than non-expression. In a counselling-style meeting, a Listener can help the bereaved question problematic thoughts or meanings associated with their feelings, and amend their internal narrative towards something that facilitates coping and meaning-transference; this serves to allow the deceased to potentially have a beneficial impact on the bereaved's life.[96] This does not necessarily assume, however, that the deceased represented a beneficial relationship in the client's life; it is often the case that those seeking a Listener for reasons pertaining to grief had a complicated, sometimes dysphoric relationship with the dead person. Regardless of their quality of lived relationship, it is often helpful to use language by writing letters to address unfinished business of any type with the deceased.[97]

Often, even better outcomes are achieved by getting the Speaker to visualize the deceased person and speak to them directly. In fact, in the majority of cases it is more powerful to talk *to* the deceased rather than about them.[98] This is often presented as the aim of the very popular *empty chair* method, where the bereaved switches between two chairs, alternatively speaking as themselves and the deceased, while supervised by the therapist. Similarly, methods of roleplaying or therapy-theatre use other people as stand-ins for the parties in the severed relationship.[99] This helps the Speaker to integrate the perception of other people into their narrative, and then concretize this narrative to be amended and compensate where needed, and eventually reflect a

---

[96] Worden, 109.
[97] Worden, 108.
[98] Worden, 110; 173.
[99] Worden, 173–74.

better likeness of reality. It is in this way that language can be a highly useful tool in letting the Speaker express themselves and assign meanings to the narratives in which they live.

5.5 Activities: Expression of the Wordless

One of the most prominent and surprising insights of contemporary bereavement research indicates an increasing number of studies which point to a profound benefit derived from activities which serve to express grief, rather than simply talking about issues with a professional. Various types of activities are explored, including art, drama, music, writing, and dance. These have been shown to help ease transitionary periods, especially when the activity was important to both the bereaved and the deceased.[100,101] An important caveat exists though: this should not be an attempt at the recovery of the previous relationship; the form of expression may be similar to a connective force within the previous relationship with the deceased, but it is crucial to distinguish between the previous versus the modified dynamic which occurs after a death.[102]

Eckhart likewise concurs with this. This is already hinted at by his praise of Martha for bringing her contemplation into her active life, and in this way sanctifying her activities in the world. However he also promotes *intentionality* and its importance in taking on activities; indeed this is how Martha's works are sanctified, since her activities in the world are imbued with the intention precipitated by contemplation. This gives rise to the potential that listening to the Other can be best achieved during moments of creativity; indeed, he suggests that the more one can create in line with their natural aptitudes and inclinations, the more authentic and natural their expression can be.[103] A witness to a Speaker in the midst of a creative act, then, can be helpful in making them feel 'heard', and likewise allows expression through outlets that might be more comfortable and meaningful for the Speaker. This being the case, perhaps the ideal meeting room contains good soundproofing, musical instruments, crafting supplies, and paint.[104]

---

[100] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 89.
[101] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 109.
[102] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 90.
[103] Eckhart and Walshe, Sermon 23, SPIRITUS DOMINI REPLEVIT ORBEM TERRARUM ETC, 155.
[104] The current room my support group runs out of has a punching bag which has garnered widespread appeal.

These activities as a means to help with grieving have been used with great success in the Netherlands, with many studies affirming their benefits, especially in conjunction with some form of talk-therapy.[105] In particular, studies have focused on using musically guided visualizations to stimulate certain emotions, and simultaneously have clients draw. Other forms of suggested activities include meditation as a means by which to become in touch with and accept one's feelings about the deceased and one's new life situation; or to reconnect with the deceased to promote a sense of connection or reconciliation.[106] Or, the creation of new rites of passage (this could be something simple like a pilgrimage to a grave site) which help to construct a new, post-bereavement world, have also been proposed as a helpful solution, particularly where the bereaved desires some form of 'purification' after a complicated relationship ends, or a new way in which to remember the deceased.[107] This has been shown to be helpful in structuring disorganized grief, and is known to be especially effective when done in social contexts, which may include bereaved siblings, or a close group of friends to which both the bereaved and deceased belonged.

5.6 A Merging of Speech and an Acted Grief Ritual: The Wind Telephone

Overall, it has been noted that active emotional coping has produced the best outcomes versus talk-therapy in matters relating to grief, but a mix of the two is ideal in most circumstances.[108] This allows the person to explore the issues impacting them without necessarily being led by someone who cannot wholly know their experience and needs in a time of crisis and adjustment. It seems that letting the feelings come up through activities and then voicing them, and then being further aided in building narratives and assigning meanings to these feelings and situations is the most helpful.

The role of the Listener in this instance becomes one of solidarity, and an observer who watches for signs of issues which indicate a need for further professional help. This is particularly an issue pertaining to the identity of the Speaker, who is vulnerable to over-identifying with the deceased. In a sense, the Listener teaches the Speaker precisely their own method developed in this text: holding the Other (in this case, the Speaker holds the deceased), while remaining distinct

---

[105] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 109.
[106] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 66–68.
[107] Burke and Rynearson, 75.
[108] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 67–68.

from them: continuing bonds means the bereaved must be able to remember the deceased without the deceased becoming a cause for fixation, or a force which begins to pilot their own life.

An issue presents itself in the talk-therapy techniques suggested which is difficult to resolve. The general functionality of discussion is dependent upon the Speaker feeling fully able to discuss and express as much as possible, but from a realistic standpoint it is unlikely that they will not feel the need to keep some secrets to themselves. The need to respect privacy is paramount, and yet if a certain fact or feeling is so intense that it must be kept secret, there is a high likelihood that such secrets could be a focal point in any instance of complicated grief.

One essay in the Burke and Rynearson collection, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased* brings to light something which manages to resolve this. Owing to the radical importance of speech – since Worden claims it is so important to speak rather than simply think or write – but with the need for privacy, expression, and connection to the deceased, the Listener themselves is not an appropriate surrogate. Craig Van Dyke writes in his essay, *Grieving in the Wind Telephone Booth* about a man in Japan who had a disconnected telephone booth in his garden, which he used to occasionally talk to a deceased cousin of his. After the 2011 tsunami, which devastated the nearby coastal village, he opened this phone booth to the general public. To this day, thousands of people make pilgrimage to this phone booth in order to communicate with their deceased loved ones.[109]

The ramifications of this are immediately transparent. Evers' need for a 'silent listener' is met, while the grieving person has privacy in which to physically vocalize their grief in a pseudo-social context. This primarily uses the vastly-important element of speech, while incorporating a rich range of ritual elements. One might imagine the profundity experienced by a user today, where they have to arrange travel plans, make pilgrimage, and stand in line with dozens of other people waiting for their turn to speak to the deceased. The social aspect is two-fold, in that the griever speaks to the deceased, and likewise is among a group of people waiting to use the same ritual object. With the combination of speech, activity, ritual, and the pre-meditation required in arranging such a trip, many needs are met which allow uninhibited expression and a sense,

---

[109] Burke and Rynearson, *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased*, 111–20.

hopefully, of connection to the deceased. Additionally, privacy is maintained; this makes it an ideal source of inspiration for something to bring into to a Speaker-Listener relationship, since the Speaker can attain full expression in the phone booth, and still be selective about what details the Listener learns.

6. Conclusion and Further Questions

Contemplative listening denotes a technique geared towards the most authentic form of attending to an Other person. It refers to the attitude of a Listener which aims to set their selves aside in order to hear the experience of the Speaker, losing as little 'in translation' as possible. This is done through a careful grooming of one's identity, being distinct from, but able to hold the Speaker in the same way a vessel holds its contents. It also acknowledges the supreme benefits of turning speech into action; from Mary into Martha; and incorporating the core values of the Speaker into activities and rituals which allow them to establish and maintain a healthy level of connection-but-detachment with the deceased. In this way, in many instances the Listener aims to teach the Speaker much of the contents of this thesis; for the Speaker also wishes to maintain their own identity from the deceased, but still remember and love them, and bring them forward into their life without the deceased being 'in the driver's seat'.

My exploration began with an overview of contemporary thoughts on contemplative listening, where I pointed out flaws, gaps and failures. I then brought these lackings into my reading of Meister Eckhart, whose sermons and instructions sought to help people establish a sense of connection and union with an Unknowable God. His corpus in this way inadvertently helped to inform how we can best connect with one another; also unknowable, ineffable, but desiring still to be heard and connect with one another. Yet, the elements I have selected from his writings only serve to paint a general picture of the attitude one might don, and hence laid the groundwork for such connection to take place at the most authentic level possible, though complete knowledge of the Other is regrettably, and by necessity, imperfect.

To further inform my tract on contemplative listening, and to ensure the safety of all parties, I brought in a rich array of contemporary literature, which focused dually on themes of *presence in absence*, hence being compatible with the apophatic notions purported already; in addition to empirical psychological and thanatological studies which highlighted what theories and techniques have thus far produced the best outcomes. I then merged all this information into a brief outline of techniques based on their relevance to encounters between Listener and Speaker, assuming a context of helping the Speaker through a major crisis of grief. These techniques showed the

importance of both speech and activity, and I highlighted one which elegantly merges both in the *Wind Telephone.*

This naturally leads to some questions which may be a fruitful focus for further research. The *Wind Telephone* seems a poignant illustration of a method which merges *contemplation* and *action*; speech and an exercise which permits emotional release or closure or closeness. It is also noted strongly that this combination of both has the highest correspondence with improved coping. In what ways specifically has this ritual helped those who have used it? What parts of it are the most satisfying to the bereaved? Is there anything specific to Japanese culture which emphasises the catharsis one achieves using this method of connection to the deceased, or can the concept be universally applied? Most importantly, what are some similar techniques that so potently combine the majority of what the literature supports (being speech and activity) as effective ways by which to manage grief?

While I maintain such concerns regarding coping and wellbeing, I must also remark on comments by both Evers and Eckhart pertaining to human satisfaction not being 'the goal'. While I have described the ultimate goals of Sardello, Evers, Eckhart, in addition to those espoused by contemporary literature, I must admit to finding the lack of distinction rather unsatisfying. The irony is not lost on me; yet if human satisfaction cannot be fully achieved, that in itself suggests an enormous gap in well-being that deserves its own research. In what ways can people learn to accept their lack of satisfaction, or is it possible to learn how to be satisfied with less? There always seems to be a certain 'striving' quality to the grieving people I have worked with, which is only slightly more accentuated than the same quality I notice more generally in people. This being the case I would be interested in investigating the boundaries of where satisfaction can truly be achieved, most particularly in cases pertaining to loss or grief. Perhaps the Eckhart-inspired sense of detachment has value here; not only in a listening context, but also in becoming detached from ones expectations and desires.

In a similar vein I would also like to further investigate a concept that has come up in this thesis many times, in addition to my previous theses on asceticism: the concept of 'meaning conversion' or the transference of various forms of pain and suffering into something that

generates a quality of meaningfulness. This occurs when the painful absence of the deceased is converted into a positive force; this can have a great deal of energy behind it, such as when the bereaved becomes involved in volunteer work to honour the deceased. This mechanism seems to function in asceticism as well, including (especially) in secular forms such as minimalism, where what is negated from one's life becomes a crux of one's life's meaning and purpose. This mechanism fascinates me, and I see a profound benefit to defining it and making it accessible to those suffering from profound grief or any other major life crisis.

This research on contemplative listening hoped to shed light on the most effective way to provide a grieving person with solidarity and an authentic encounter, in which they are heard to the fullest degree possible by a Listener. This necessarily was a generic undertaking, owing to the profound variety of individuals and circumstances which may precipitate the need for such support. The metaphors of Eckhart in his use of the vessel, and describing the difference between *contemplation* and *action* through the characters of Mary and Martha have helped to inform the best mode of attention when listening. With a combination of this and contemporary research I have outlined the foundations of the best attitude to take as a Listener, and how to integrate activity into meetings in a way which provides the necessary safety and privacy for everyone involved. Therefore it is my hope to bring this method into my meetings with those encountering grief, and do the utmost to maximize comprehension of Others, who by their humanity and related limitations, must always remain fundamentally unknowable to me.

Works Cited

Bacon, Ingrid, and Jeff Conway. "Co-Dependency and Enmeshment — a Fusion of Concepts." *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, April 11, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00810-4.

Burke, Laurie A., and Edward K. Rynearson, eds. *The Restorative Nature of Ongoing Connections with the Deceased: Exploring Presence within Absence*. The Series in Death, Dying, and Bereavement. New York, NY: Routledge, 2022.

Davis, John. "An Overview of Transpersonal Psychology." *The Humanistic Psychologist* 31, no. 2–3 (2003): 6–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2003.9986924.

Eckhart, Edmund Colledge, and Bernard McGinn. *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. The Classics of Western Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press, 1981.

Eckhart, and Maurice O'C Walshe. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2009.

Evers, Hans. "Contemplative Listening: A Rhetorical-Critical Approach To Facilitate Internal Dialog." *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling: Advancing Theory and Professional Practice through Scholarly and Reflective Publications* 71, no. 2 (June 2017): 114–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305017708154.

Hackett, Jeremiah, ed. *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 1871-6377, v. 36. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2012.

Klass, Dennis, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, eds. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Series in Death Education, Aging, and Health Care. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1996.

Partridge, Christopher. *Understanding the Dark Side: Western Demonology, Satanic Panics and Alien Abduction*. University of Chester, 2006.

Perelman, Chaim, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Chaim Perelman. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Reprinted. Notre Dame, Ind: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2006.

Sardello, Robert. *Contemplative Listening - Unpublished Manuscript*, 2022.

Worden, J. William. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. Fifth edition. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2018.