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***Detachment and poverty of spirit
in the German Dominican Mystics of XIII-XIVth centuries***

I. Introduction

Living in difficult times, when the Church was assaulted by many problematic movements and doctrines, but also sustained by new forms of religious life and by a true spirit of reform, the German mystics had a great impact on the spirituality of their time. *Meister Eckhart*, as the pioneer of this German mystic spirituality, distinguished himself by his eloquent writings, using pure language and a simple style. His favourite themes are the Divine essence, the relation between God and man, the faculties, gifts and operations of the human soul and the return of all created things to God. However, the untechnicality of his language made his writings to be misunderstood, misunderstanding that led to the condemnation of some of his sayings in *In agro dominico* (1329), by pope John XXII.¹ He was forced to profess his faith, to repudiate the unorthodox sense in which some of his utterances could be interpreted and to retract all possible errors.

Blessed Henry Suso, a disciple of Meister Eckhart, was highly influenced by him, and even defended him through his writings. However, he did not follow the style of “the Master”, avoiding very carefully his problematic language. His book *Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* is considered “the most beautiful fruit of German mysticism”² and his *Horologium Sapientiae* became a favourite book in the cloisters at the close of the Middle Ages (not only in Germany, but also in the Netherlands, France, Italy and England). Thomas à Kempis and Blessed Peter Canisius were among his readers and admirers. His principal theme is the mutual love of God and man, his language is very warm and coloured and his teaching has no trace of unorthodox tendency. He was declared blessed in 1831, by pope Gregory XVI.

John Tauler, another German Dominican (as Eckhart and Suso), was a master of the Scriptures and a great preacher of his time. In the centre of his mystical doctrine is *visio essentiae Dei*, that he takes from Saint Thomas Aquinas, but which he pushes forward, believing that this vision is attainable in this world by a perfect man.³ He stresses also very much the doctrine of the indwelling of God in man, indwelling which is possible when all sinful activities cease and one is inflamed by the Divine love.

¹ Seventeen of his propositions were condemned as heretical, and another eleven as ill-sounding, rash and suspected of heresy (DS 501-529).

² S.v. *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, www.newadvent.org/cathen/07238c.htm.

³ See *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, www.newadvent.org/cathen/14465c.htm. Saint Thomas restrains this possibility to Moses and Saint Paul (see S.T., Ia, q. 12, a. 11, ad secundum and IIa IIae, q 175, a. 3, corpus et ad primum).

In this present essay we will try to focus on Meister Eckhart's doctrine of detachment and union with God, adding the helpful clarifications of Blessed Henry Suso and completing with some ideas taken from John Tauler.

II. The noble man, *imago Dei*

Man was created in the image and after the likeness of God,⁴ that is, as a free rational (and therefore spiritual) being. Moreover, he was created for God, for the spiritual loving union with Him. That is why "He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us" (James 4: 5). Through sin he went astray from this noble purpose of his life and he lost also the likeness with God.⁵ However, the image of God remained untouched in the depths of his soul, as an imprint of the divine essence in him, as an act of his true identity. Sin could not destroy this image, but it just covered it with the darkness of vices. Meister Eckhart, quoting Origen, says: "Because God has sowed and planted and given life to this seed, even though it may be overgrown and hidden, it will never be destroyed or extinguished completely; it will glow and shine, gleam and burn, and it will never cease to turn toward God."⁶ Furthermore, this image of God that "is in the ground of the soul as a fount of living water"⁷ is understood by Eckhart to be "God's Son",⁸ since we were predestined to be conformed to His image (Rom. 8: 29). He (Eckhart) distinguishes between the outer man (the bodily one) and the inner man, Adam, who is spiritual, and whom he calls "the noble man."⁹ In order to recover the divine likeness and to make this image of God shine in him, man has to purify his soul, or better to accept to be purified by God. But above all he "shall receive the Son, and become Son in the bosom and heart of the Father."¹⁰

In a similar way Tauler, following Augustine, speaks about the *abditum mentis*, the spirit's secret hiding place, "a hidden abyss, untouched by time and space, which is far superior

⁴ Gen. 1: 26.

⁵ The Fathers, following the rabbinical commentaries, distinguish between "image of God" in man (his spiritual being, the imprint of the divine essence in us) and "likeness to God", which is the possession of virtue, the radiance of God's glory in us.

⁶ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of "Benedictus": Of the Nobleman*, in *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. By Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn (Paulist Press: New York, Ramsey, Toronto), p. 241.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 242.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 243.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

to anything that gives life and movement to the body.”¹¹ He distinguishes *three men* (specifying more Eckhart’s twofold distinction): *animal*, *rational* and *noble man*. The latter is *deiform*, that is, “in the form of God,”¹² and “he is led into another Heaven which is the Divine Essence itself, where the [human] spirit loses itself so completely that no trace of self remains.”¹³ Tauler believes, as we said in the introductory chapter of this essay, in the possibility that the perfect man can see the Divine Essence *in this life*, and the unity between man and God is expressed in similar strong words as Eckhart. However, their words need some qualification, and here we should appeal to Henry Suso’s defence of his master. To say that “no trace of self remains,”¹⁴ that God will wholly become “as much my own as His own, neither less nor more,”¹⁵ and many similar statements may create confusion and may give the impression of heresy. Blessed Suso shows that there can be another interpretation of these sayings, for

“a person never becomes so completely annihilated in this nothing that his senses are not aware of the difference of their origin or his reason not aware of its free choice, *even if all this is ignored in his primal ground . . . (. . .) . . .* If a person were to lose his distinctness (from God) *in being*, as he does in how he perceives (himself in God), then one could agree with this view. But *this is not the case*, as has already been said. It is important always to keep this *distinction* in mind.”¹⁶

This interpretation is confirmed both by Eckhart and Tauler. For example, the former says that “one as one does not produce love, two as two does not produce love; two as one perforce produces natural, consenting, fiery love.”¹⁷ Therefore, since what unites God and man is love, there must be supposed a distinction between them. The mystics express in poetic words what they experience, and often they do not care to put it in a much elaborated dogmatic statement. As Blessed Suso says, “this describes human perception of the event but does not affect the mode of being,” for “there is a difference between separation and distinctness.”¹⁸ That is, Eckhart and his followers *want to distinguish without separating*, for *love requires both unity* (the opposite of separation) *and distinction* (the opposite of absolute identity) in the same time. This is true in one way when one refers to the experiential level (for love is essentially ecstatic, presupposing a movement towards another), and in a more radical way when one refers to the

¹¹ John Tauler, *Sermons*, trans. by Maria Shradly, Paulist Press, Ser. 24, p. 89.

¹² Ibidem, Ser. 59, p. 110.

¹³ Ibidem, Ser. 21 p. 77.

¹⁴ Vide supra.

¹⁵ Meister Eckhart, op. cit., p. 281.

¹⁶ Henry Suso, *Little Book of Truth*, in *The Exemplar, With Two German Sermons*, trans. Frank Tobin (Paulist Press: New York, Mahwah), p. 327.

¹⁷ Meister Eckhart, *The Book of Divine Consolation*, in idem, p. 221.

¹⁸ Blessed Suso, op. cit., p. 327.

level of being. As Blessed Suso says, “nothing truly exists that can be separate from the simple being (of God), because this gives being to all being . . . (. . .) . . . nothing is more within (creatures) than God, just as nothing is more distinct (from them).”¹⁹

Coming back to the union between the “noble man” and God, it is to be said that Christ is seen as the model of perfection, the fullness of grace, the perfect image according to which one is to be shaped. In fact, as Meister Eckhart says, Christ’s image is already in man’s inmost part of the soul, but it is covered by his (man’s) sins and vices. The recovery of this image is similar to the unfolding of a figure in a statue, figure which is covered by fragments of wood that the craftsman takes away.²⁰ The figure is always in the wood, but it needs to be set free.

When this “Adam” is recovered, man becomes a son of the Father, *alter Christus*. Again the language in which Eckhart expresses his insights becomes problematic for one who takes it out of the context. That is why when he (Eckhart) says that “everything which is given to Christ is also given to me”²¹ Blessed Suso wants to recall the deciding distinction:

“This ‘everything’ that is given to Christ is the perfect possession of substantial blessedness . . . (. . .) . . . This same ‘everything’ He has given to us, but in a different manner. And he (Eckhart) says in many places that He (Christ) has this ‘everything’ through the incarnation, and we (have it) through conforming union with God.”²²

Taken in this way, the saying of the Master is perfectly orthodox. We are adoptive sons in the Son, who is God’s Only-Begotten by nature. That is why Saint Paul himself asks: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave Him up for us all, will he not also *give us all things with Him?*” (Rom. 8: 32) The blessed are *heirs of the kingdom* (Matt. 25: 34), *temples of the Holy Spirit* (I Cor. 6: 19), *members of the Body of Christ* (I Cor. 12), and they receive these gifts not simply as “also given to them”, but as given “with Him”. Christ Himself is the supreme gift of God for men, and all the other gifts are given *in, with and for* Christ. Man was foreordained to these gifts, and this foreordination²³ to divine adoption through grace accounts for his spirit as made in the image of God. The nobility of man’s soul follows upon his foreordination to *visio Dei*.

III. Detachment – the path of the noble man

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 329.

²⁰ Meister Eckhart, *On the Nobleman*, in idem, p. 243.

²¹ A saying that has been qualified as heretical in 1329, *In agro Dominico*, see DS 511.

²² Blessed Suso, op. cit., p. 328.

As we have seen, man is called to a lofty union with God, so that he may be “one spirit with Him” (I Cor. 6: 17) and God “yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us” (James 4: 5). What does then this jealousy mean? As Meister Eckhart observes, “He wishes us to have nothing that is our own” and, in fact, “we ought to have everything as if it were loaned to us and not given . . . because He wants Himself to be, *solely and wholly, what we possess*.”²⁴ God is the final cause of everything, and His love, which is “the desire of the Good for the Good for the sake of the Good,”²⁵ moves everything towards Him. To go astray from this divine movement (which is only morally, not metaphysically possible) would mean to resist God. This happens when one has a disordered attachment to the created things, taking them as an end in themselves, or at least as a means to another disordered end. This prevents man to attain happiness, to answer to his ontological call, that is, to live according to his nobility of spirit.

Therefore, a true moral freedom is needed for one who wants to be united with God. As Tauler says, “if my eye is to receive an image on the wall, or anything whatever, it must first be free from other images.”²⁶ And, if one renounces to all his attachments to created things, he should not be afraid of this emptiness. God does not leave anything empty, for this would be “contrary to His nature and to His ordinances.”²⁷ He is *bonum diffusivus sui*,²⁸ that is why “the greater the void, the greater the divine influx.”²⁹ In this context one should understand also Meister Eckhart’s conclusion, namely, that “all our being consists in nothing but becoming nothing.”³⁰ It is clear then that “nothingness” is not to be taken here in the Buddhist’s sense, as dissolution of self into void – spiritual suicide, but as a consequence of ecstatic love. Man is called to this radical love, to this radical gift of self, that is why he finds his true identity when he lives this love: “whoever wants to be the one must become the other.”³¹

²³ We take foreordination here as regards the antecedent will of God, by which He wants all men to be saved (I Tim. 2: 4). See Saint Thomas, S.T. Ia, q. 19.

²⁴ Meister Eckhart, *On the Noble Man*, apud idem, p. 281.

²⁵ This is the definition given to the Divine Love by Saint Dionysius the Areopagite in *On the Divine Names*.

²⁶ Tauler, op. cit., Ser. 1, p. 54.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ See Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, IV, and St. Thomas Aquinas, S.T., Ia, q. 5, a.4, ad secundum.

²⁹ Tauler, ibidem.

³⁰ Meister Eckhart, ibidem, p. 281.

³¹ Ibidem. Or St. Augustine’s “go out of yourself, so that you may enter” – vide Tauler, Ser. 1, p. 4.

However, one can fail to love God with all his heart and he can lose his moral freedom. Tauler distinguishes “*five types of activity* in which men are held in this world”: *dependence on creatures, self-love, natural reason, spiritual sweetness, and self-will*.³² Let us analyse them one by one.

a) dependence on creatures

Saint John warns us: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” (I Jn. 2: 15). Moreover, “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4: 4), for “all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world” (I Jn. 2: 16). However, there is an enmity between the love for God and the love for creation only when the latter is not ordered to the former. One should love the creation inasmuch it is an image of the Creator and leads to Him. If disordered attachments to created things appear, the soul is darkened, the mind cannot see God through His works anymore and the will becomes enslaved and source of conflict. One should be detached from everything, making use of this world as if he did not (I Cor. 7: 31), for “the more we possess all things, the less do we possess Him, and the less the love we have for all things, the more do we have Him and all that He has to stow.”³³ To be greedy and to want to possess things means to mistrust God's loving care. Actually, “all that we should complain about is that we have too much.”³⁴

b) self-love

There are people who in whatever activity are engaged in (internal or external, material or spiritual), they seek themselves, their own interest. The most important thing for them is the personal advantage, and they make use even of God for that. As Tauler says, they become “no better than a rabid dog or a raging wolf,”³⁵ for they neither accept any rebuke nor rebuke themselves. That is why they can hardly convert, it is necessary a miracle of grace to turn them to holiness. They have a miserable life, for “if you do not begin by getting away from yourself, wherever you run to, you will find obstacles and trouble wherever it may be.”³⁶ The disordered love of self is the cause of all evils, and the saying “our creaturely selves must be brought to

³² See Tauler, op. cit., Ser. 19, pp. 72-76.

³³ Meister Eckhart, *ibidem*, pp. 281-282.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Tauler, op. cit., Ser. 19, p. 70.

³⁶ Meister Eckhart, *Counsels on Discernment*, apud *ibidem*, p. 249.

nothing”³⁷ would be a good medicine for those sick of this terrible disease. They need to humble themselves, to remember that “we are those who are not”³⁸ and that “all our being consists in nothing but becoming nothing.”³⁹ There is no happiness but in this self-emptiness for the love of another.

c) natural reason

Though one’s reason should guide him to God, when pride comes into play reason becomes one of his worst enemies. There are divine truths that cannot be understood in a natural way, and those who try to reduce and make them fit in their narrow mind deform and mutilate them. They are full of self-esteem, having high thoughts above themselves, and this attitude determines them to despise the true and divine insight. This happens especially with those who study the divine things without conforming their life to what they come to know. Little by little their evil choices and habits cause a perversion of judgement, for they have to justify to themselves their evil acts, and this is possible only by accepting false reasons. They live in “illusory peace, for they still hold on their own will.”⁴⁰ Also, they cannot live in the presence of God, for He is “essentially present, not as a thought only” being “far above the notions of men and of created things.”⁴¹

On the other hand, the *noble souls* “permit God to prepare the ground, leaving themselves entirely to Him.”⁴² Their attitude can be described as loving self-surrender of mind and will to God, total obedience, humility and purity of intention. God “works through indirect means within the first kind of people, but . . . in these noble and blessed souls He works directly, without means,”⁴³ on account of His profound union with them. He leads them to lofty contemplations and reveals them unspeakable truths, by touching them in the depths of their souls. Thus they are free with respect to their reasoning, a freedom that comes through the humble obedience of faith.

d) spiritual sweetness

³⁷Tauler, op. cit., Ser. 55, p. 102.

³⁸ According to the words of Our Lord to Saint Catherine of Sienna.

³⁹ Meister Eckhart, *On the Noble Man*, apud ibidem, p. 281. This is to be understood in the sense explained on page 5, especially note 31.

⁴⁰ Tauler, Ser. 5, p. 62.

⁴¹ Meister Eckhart, *Counsels on Discernment*, apud idem, p. 253. Eckhart is always very close to the mystic theology exposed by Dionysius the Areopagite.

⁴² Tauler, ibidem.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 9.

Another form of captivity that one can fall in is *disordered attachment to the spiritual sweetness* that he may experience in his prayer. Then he seeks for it more than for God Himself, and if it disappears he loses his peace and comes to grief. He is not experiencing God in his prayer (even if in the beginning his consolation might have been true and divine), but he arrives to create an entire false interior world. And if one day the falsehood of this world is proven, he becomes so confused that he may either lose his mind completely or at least fall in despair and finally in laxity. Therefore, what one should strive for is a detached heart, for “the most powerful prayer . . . and the most honourable of all works is that which proceeds from an empty spirit”⁴⁴ and “with such an attitude you could tread upon a stone, and that would be a more godly thing for you to do that to receive the Body of our Lord, if then you were thinking more of yourself with less detachment.”⁴⁵ However, what should one do if he feels consolation in his prayer or in his exercise or virtue? Should he reject it, should he deny it? Tauler provides us with a simple and very profound answer: he should “practice it and forget oneself in the process.”⁴⁶ One venerable brother, speaking about Virgin Mary, argued that she is the only woman that never looked in a mirror, for her attention was completely turned away from herself. To this an old saying of the Fathers fits very well: “one who truly prays does not know that he prays”, for his mind sees neither itself nor something else but God alone.

e) self-will

The deepest captivity and the most difficult to be released from is one’s self-will. This is very much related to self-love, for it springs out of it. The first act of will is love, and one is obstinate in his will only if he is obstinate in his love for himself. In fact, self-love and self-will differ from one another only insofar as the former refers to a passion and the latter to the will as disobeying someone else. But it is clear that this disobedience comes from self-love as opposed to the love for another, so they are always together.

Moreover, since every disordered act that one performs has at its basis this perverse self-love,⁴⁷ cutting the latter means cutting all disordered acts. “He withdraws from himself and all things withdraw along with this self,”⁴⁸ says Blessed Suso. In other words, if the root is

⁴⁴ Meister Eckhart, *ibidem*, p. 248.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 251.

⁴⁶ Tauler, *op. cit.*, Ser. 59, p. 108.

⁴⁷ For there is also a true love of self, which is in absolute harmony with the love for God.

⁴⁸ Blessed Henry Suso, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

healthy, the fruits are healthy too. That is why “the will is complete and just when it is without any self-seeking, and when it has forsaken itself, and has been formed and shaped into God’s will.”⁴⁹ This conformity to God’s will is worked out through charity, which moves the human will towards its final end and informs also all other virtues, giving them the force and direction. One who falls from charity to self-love becomes his own miserable slave, for he binds himself to seek happiness where he will never find it.

There are many people, even religious, who emphasize the external works of virtue, but very often they fail to see the root of their problems, root which is their self-love and self-will. Instead of working at that profound level, they fight in vain, giving only an impression of virtue and detachment. But, as Tauler says, the condition of the third birth of Christ (in us)⁵⁰ is “a definite introversion, a gathering up, an inward recollection of faculties without any dispersal,”⁵¹ and afterwards a total offering of this soul made one to God. “Be one so that you may find God,”⁵² say Eckhart, for the lack of unity in man prevents Him to be completely united with his Creator. One’s love should be complete, without reservation, and therefore nothing should be kept for oneself. This is true detachment, not external solitude, silence or other actions. However, this interior sacrifice can overflow in external actions, but the interior ground should be always preserved. Eckhart expresses this idea in a very beautiful way: one “should learn to work in it [his inwardness] and with it and from it, *so that he can transform inwardness into activity and bring his activities into his inwardness, and so that he can train himself to act in freedom.*”⁵³ He insists on the unity of the person, unity between interior and exterior life, between soul and body. Once this unity is achieved, the person attains true freedom. Of course, this freedom does not mean *unrestrained liberty*, as the Brethren of the Free Spirit have wrongly understood at that time, but “the reason that he [the perfect man] is unfettered is that he himself does (freely) out of (an attitude of) detachment what ordinary people do under compulsion.”⁵⁴

For Meister Eckhart however *the interior work has primacy over the exterior work*, as a cause has primacy over its effects. He advises his readers that “if an exterior activity is hindering our interior work, *we should prefer what is interior,*” though “if both could exist

⁴⁹ Meister Eckhart, *ibidem*, p. 257.

⁵⁰ That is, the liberation of the noble man and the transformation in the likeness of Christ.

⁵¹ Tauler, *op. cit.*, Ser. 1, p. 52.

⁵² Meister Eckhart, *On the Noble Man*, *apud idem*, p. 244.

⁵³ *Idem*, *Counsels On Discernment*, *apud idem*, p. 280.

together in one form of working, *that would be the best*, for man and God to work together.”⁵⁵ It is clear from these words that the accusations brought against him⁵⁶ in which he is said to deny the usefulness of the exterior act are not founded, even if he used often strong words in order to defend the primacy of the interior acts. The most important fruit and the summit of true detachment is freedom of heart in the poverty of spirit, through which one remains unoccupied in whatever he may do, because he remains “calm in action and unoccupied by his achievement.”⁵⁷ Such detachment leads to *pure forms of activity and work*, for when a man becomes one and gives himself to God, so that he becomes “one will with Him, He [God] gives Himself to him and lets Himself be in him, with everything that He is.”⁵⁸ Then “a person accomplishes everything that Christ accomplished,”⁵⁹ for is Christ who works in him “both to will and to work” (Phil. 2: 13). The degree to which one co-acts with Christ depends on the fact that he is “more or less born of Him.”⁶⁰

In order to come to such a perfection of life one has, of course, to pass through different purifications. The human acts of will can be either *accidental and inessential* or *determining and habitual*, and the latter kind of acts, if they are of an evil kind, cannot be annihilated but through serious effort that affects man “to the marrow.”⁶¹ One needs *to acquire* this well-exercised detachment, he should try himself often, and he should wish and long for other people to exercise and try him as well. However, he has to be careful not to reduce these efforts to external deeds, but also to strive to have the appropriate disposition of mind and will. The external works of virtue are good, but one “must find and learn to possess God in works, or he must abandon all works.”⁶²

Another form of purification is *the passive one*, by which the soul is worked on by God. The only work proper to man (his own) is the active “annihilation and diminution of self” – but this work will remain incomplete “unless it is God who completes it in the self.”⁶³ He is the only one who can uproot the deep disorders from man’s soul, He alone knows the appropriate

⁵⁴ Blessed Suso, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

⁵⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Counsels On Discernment*, apud idem, p. 280.

⁵⁶ Vide DS 516-519.

⁵⁷ Blessed Suso, *ibidem*.

⁵⁸ Meister Eckhart, *ibidem*, p. 276.

⁵⁹ Blessed Suso, *ibidem*, p. 328.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 330.

⁶² Meister Eckhart, *ibidem*, p. 255

medicine for each one. One should wait for God's time, and he should endure the weight of his defects till God decides to come and free him. Tauler was very much concerned with respect to some people who

“go astray, for they want to free themselves from their innumerable ties without waiting for God to set them free by the sending of His Angel . . . (. . .) . . . Such people refuse to endure the chains of captivity in the darkness which is Egypt.”⁶⁴

If one knows to abandon himself to God, he finds profound peace and he is not concerned about anything. God is working both with nature and above nature, since both belong to Him, and one should achieve this loving submission to God's work in him if he wants to find peace. For such a man, Eckhart says, “just as no multiplicity can disturb God, nothing can disturb or fragment him, for he is one in that One where all multiplicity is one and is one unmultiplicity.”⁶⁵

IV. Conclusion

We have seen that for these German mystics detachment and poverty of spirit has an irreplaceable role in the achievement of man's spiritual destiny, being a *corner-stone* in one's spiritual life. One cannot attain his divine transformation in God's son unless he frees *the noble man* from all attachments. Though Tauler firmly believed that “until a man has reached his fortieth year, he will never attain lasting peace, never be truly formed into God, try as he may,”⁶⁶ this should not discourage anyone. Our task is to strive to attain this divine likeness, and to let God to decide the time of its fulfilment.

⁶³ Ibidem, 280.

⁶⁴ Tauler, op. cit., Ser. 2, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Meister Eckhart, ibidem, p. 252.

⁶⁶ Tauler, idem, Ser. 19, p. 72.