

**THE PREPARATION OF RENAISSANCE:  
DIETRICH OF FREIBERG, MEISTER ECKHART,  
NICHOLAS OF CUSA**

**Rein Undusk**

*The Under and Tuglas Literature Centre, Tallinn*

**Abstract.** The Renaissance can surely be called a great amalgam of diverse historical, cultural and philosophical impulses. Its outwardly impressive traits hide a pedigree of a confused and enigmatic nature that had combined the bulk of Christian, ancient and medieval motifs in their mutual interaction. The marks of the Renaissance are therefore ambiguous, allowing for explanations from differing or even contradictory positions. Focusing on German Dominican thinking of the later medieval period, the present article argues how some characteristics of the Renaissance can be deduced from the background of Albert the Great, Dietrich of Freiberg, and Meister Eckhart, and how they provided material for the symbiotic work in the person of Nicholas of Cusa.

**Keywords:** German Dominican *Sonderentwicklung*, nominalism, beatific vision, Franciscan philosophy, intellect, being, volition

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## **1. Introduction**

The intricacy of the concept of the Renaissance, as witnessed at least since the middle of the 19th century, has matched the historical import of the substance (for a survey of the topic see e.g. Horowitz 2005, Black 2001, Kristeller 1979, Hay 1973, and Bouwsma 1959). The debates on the issue have not only reminded us of the continuities between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (e.g. Kristeller 1956:553–583), but have also delineated the possibility of speaking about different Renaissances on the grounds of respective internal, temporal, or geographical aspects.<sup>1</sup> However, to give the contestable side of the matter a wide berth here, I

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<sup>1</sup> The thesis of different 'Renaissances' have been advanced and discussed, for example, by Gilson 1953[1938]:124–144, Curtius 1984[1948]:30, 260, Le Goff 1993[1957]:5ff, Panofsky 1990[1960]:57–117, Konrad 1974.

will set my eye on the two rather patent features of the phenomenon. First, Renaissance, as is signaled by the word itself and attested to also by the avowals of its first Italian representatives, actually enclosed a sharp experience of rebirth articulated in resistance to the so-called glut of darkness of the former historical period.<sup>2</sup> That is, the revival of antiquity, at least in the case of the Italian Renaissance, is something to which I would wish to award reliability. Second, Renaissance studies have revealed quite convincingly that humanism possessed a central place in the intellectual and moral yardsticks of *renasci* (Kraye 1979, Kristeller 1956). Without doubt, the new accent on the relatedness of knowledge to the human, as set against the transcendent cravings of the age of *tenebrae*, can be taken as another aspect of a reversion to the ancient values that had become lost in the meantime. I would like to pitch at both statements a bit more spatial undergirding and to say that together with the recovery of ancient humanism, the Renaissance adopted to a degree as well the ancient concept of space, where the *locus* – understood in the metaphysical sense as something providing us with a hypertext for our statements about the world – was taken as derivative from bodies, or even identified with them.<sup>3</sup> This kind of corporeal rendition of space was given an exemplary definition by Aristotle (see *Physics*, 212a27f). However, to achieve a correct footing for our investigation into the Renaissance, the elements of antiquity need to be complemented with the characteristics connecting the Renaissance with the heredity of medieval culture. The transcendent, including infinity, which was located in the Middle Ages in the God, was surely not undone in the Renaissance, but was exactly integrated into its explanative space, true, at the price of certain enigma of the system. My claim is that the Renaissance's embodied space, building on the extension and interrelationship of bodies, came to be provided on its borders with some kind of transcendent clues that implied, quite paradoxically, the annihilation of the extended matter and of the spatial articulation offered by it. Suggesting that the Renaissance was a period that started first to consider seriously and in a mathematical way the possible empirical intimations of the medieval divine infinity, I propose to take the schema of embodied space with a sign of infinite on its border as a symbol for much of the metaphysical, artistic and scientific deliberations that the present article claims to follow.

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<sup>2</sup> Boccaccio uses the metaphor of 'dark age' in *Decameron* 6.5, where the painter Giotto is claimed to have brought back to light the art that had lain buried – under the great error of somebody – for centuries. For Petrarch's concept of Dark Age, see Mommsen 1942.

<sup>3</sup> In a sense, I have in mind here the centrality of body and, of corporeality in general, in Renaissance constructions of explanative space. Even if a non-corporeal infinity was basically aimed at, it was derived from and hinted at out of bodies. Erwin Panofsky's comment on Renaissance theory of perspective is to the point here: "For perspective is by nature a two-edged sword: it creates room for bodies to expand plastically and move gesturally, and yet at the same time it enables light to spread out in space and in a painterly way dissolve the bodies. ... Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual ..." (Panofsky 1997:67.) A certain collision of Aristotelianism with Platonism can be read in the background of all this.

Actually we can say that the Renaissance was beaten to the punch by some pagan traditions in its provoking a submission of corporeal quantities to the, so to say, transcendent nonchalance. As is well known, the metaphor of the infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere played a pivotal role in Nicholas of Cusa's ponderings about how the different geometrical figures approach each other when related to infinity (see Mahnke 1937:76ff–109 *et al.*; Harries 2001, Brient 2002). Thus, Nicholas infers, the curves of the sphere, being augmented to infinity, should become more and more similar to their tangents, that is, the curved lines should approach straight ones and the curved spaces should become increasingly flat (*Docta ignorantia* 1. 13). In the same way Nicholas argues, for example, for the coincidence of triangle and circle if enlarged to infinity (*Docta ignorantia* 1. 15), or for the polygon nearing a circle if adjoined to an infinite number of angles (*Docta ignorantia* 1. 3). The reverse procedure of moving towards the infinite minimum exemplifies, in the seemingly opposite but in essentially the same way, the senselessness of any measurability in the face of the mathematical non-magnitude, that is, of the point. The metaphor of the infinite sphere itself derived from the Middle Ages and had a non-Christian and Hermetic background (see Mahnke 1937, Flasch 2011). The adoption of it by Nicholas could thus be seen as functioning in the same – of the medieval and so much more of the Renaissance – frame of mind that had cherished a hope of encountering divine infinity in a kind of occult and pseudo-scientific interpretation of the signs of the world.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Hermetic conception of infinity had made itself historically salient by its wish to reveal the internal unity of the world on the basis of pagan rationality, that is, by the aid of certain verified material connections and processes, apart from the revelatory accents of Christians. The geometrical integral of the cardinal from Cusa, although accomplished on Christian ground, and with specifically Christian aims in mind, thus made a strong and a typically Renaissance hint at the residence of the Trinitarian mysteries in our mathematical capture of the universe. In a broader sense, a close touch was implied between the presumptive and rational mode of reasoning, and at the same time the relevance of Christian epistemology was pleaded outside of its specifically Christian context.

The occurrence of the infinite as an operator in the functions that should deliver us some scientific truth about the world features the Renaissance as an initiator of the modern age and as an owner of a double historical legacy. I would wish to suggest that the real drift of the operator can be grasped only if we realize that in managing our knowledge about the world, the operator acted in a certain sense as a content free signifier, as a mark of ignorance. Being transposed from Christian negative theology to Renaissance mathematics, the infinite, itself inconceivable, substituted for the mystery that granted the system reliability to all appearances, without acting in the algorithm of the system itself. This disjuncture, or more

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<sup>4</sup> See e. g. Yates 1964:144–156 (also Yates 1972, Yates 1979), Kristeller 1979:52 *et al.*, Ruh 1996:33ff. *et al.*, Schmidt-Biggemann 1998:63ff. For Brian Vickers' argument with Yates see Vickers 1984.

appropriately, a close compact of rationale and of aestheticism in the reproduction of the texture of universe, fashioned in my view the Renaissance cognition that was gripped in its background by a perspective of apophaticism envisaged by Christian theology. A kind of syncretism in cognitive demands and in appropriation of historical material profited the specific fruits of Renaissance culture.

## 2. Albert the Great, Dietrich of Freiberg

To paraphrase in a simple way the idea betokened by the infinite sphere with its centre everywhere, we should say: thanks to God's infinite expansion every point in the universe has been afforded a divinity. The glorification of an extreme particular results from – and is a counterpoint to – the utmost dilatation of the universal. It has to be noticed here that the kernel of the argument significantly defies the position usually deemed as ancient. Despite the momentous difference between Plato and Aristotle in their treatment of sensuous particulars, the claim for substantiality of every possible point, gushing uninhibitedly from the argument, strikes us as something entirely impalpable in the context of the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. On the other hand, the dashing of the transcendent infinite right into the midst of particulars and offering itself to them incorruptibly and in full, is something we could find difficult to choreograph to the medieval tenets. What I am purporting to say here is that the coming together of transcendent and human in the speculative space of the Renaissance presumes, in fact, an accomplishment, and a consideration of certain steps taken by the preceding medieval philosophy in its accommodation of the Aristotelian tradition.

However, our quest for the medieval antecedent of elevated particularism is belayed almost from the start, for nominalism and Franciscan tradition, with a crowning touch from William of Ockham, and provides us with a precise answer here. I will avoid entering at this stage the discussion about nominalist points in Nicholas' philosophy and will sketch briefly, taking a certain sway of nominalism in the period for granted, the outlines of its influence. History, especially the history of thinking, has proceeded often by way of repercussions. The transaction of influence attested to in nominalism results from the demand to inscribe the absolute will into the foundation of human knowledge, which could make possible, as we know from Duns Scotus, a kind of univocity of divine and mortal being, but which will actually segregate them both even further in their operations. For while consenting to hard wilfulness on the part of the God in his creation, men come necessarily to deny themselves a possible grasp of certain cognitive ground-structures of the world, for which they have to compensate by the act of assuming the same self-assertive role in regard of their epistemic structures as God is supposed to have had in regard to his created universe. The topic of the late medieval rebounding of God's transcendent will into the anthropocentric and atheist form of *libera voluntas* in nominalism has been given ample discussion by Hans Blumenberg in his *Legitimität der Neuzeit*. The aspect I wish to highlight

here is the mutually related thematic complex of divine will, of contingency, and of the epistemic valorization of particulars: as the *Selbstbehauptung* of nominalistic knowledge had been a recoil from God's absolute will and had thus provided a soil for rationalist grip on contingent, so it had under the same stroke of pathos conferred a legitimacy to particulars as the sole representatives of God's infinite will in the world. Let this statement tell us how the very singularity of cognitive items was conceived by medievals to convey some reliable truths about the world. What it does not tell us, though, is how these same items could be unified under some kind of generality, or transcendence, and this is the question we have a compulsion to ask in an equal degree, because otherwise the singulars will be denied the ability to participate in any comprehensive structure, like the sphere of infinite volume.

By grasping at commonplaces, one opens oneself surely to a suspicion of indulging in platitudinous reading of history. The use of the epithets of 'Franciscan' and 'Dominican', especially when related to the Augustinian, or Platonic, and Aristotelian trunk, to characterize the philosophical plaits of the later medieval world, involves without doubt a germ of distrust of the kind just stated (see e.g. Leff 1958:181).<sup>5</sup> To say nothing of the 14th century, the reciprocal induction of Platonic and Aristotelian elements started developing in Hellenism and was given a further ferment in Christian philosophy by its substantial paradoxes (see Ruh 1989:88). The fact that Duns Scotus, a Franciscan friar who was supposed to repudiate Aristotelian sensualism, was forced on the other hand to save it on the grounds of the so-called Christian realism indicates the complexities of the thinking of the era and the discretion demanded in dealing with it (Gilson 1950:269–272). In any case, the commonplaces assigned a proper profile may be very informative as regards the partition of the intellectual landscape. Thus the pitting of Franciscan voluntarism against Dominican noetics might seem a bit shallow in essence, but it proffers us, on the grounds of historical self-cognition of the friars, a handle with which to map an important perspective in our present stage of discussion. Namely, the opposition implies the possibility of a Christian philosophy in which the contingency, as issuing from the facticity of creation, is conceived not specifically in terms of will, with its prolongation to sensual multiplicity as attested by Franciscans, but in which the fact of contingency is framed on the basis of intellect. In other words, the opposition intimates the prospect of an intellectually perceptible figure of will. In anticipating the course of things, I would like to sharpen the point of this deduction even further. If there exists a feasibility of coordinating contingency, as freedom of will, with intellect, there is also forced notable shift in the content of intellect, at least in regard of the one that Aristotle had stamped with his law of non-contradiction. If the non-determinant

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<sup>5</sup> The fact, for example, that the Dominican Eckhart holds backhandedly his arm out to the Franciscan Ockham has been discussed by Leff 1967:259–260: "In both cases, the emphasis was upon God's indefinability in terms of external wisdom – ineffability for the mystic; unpredictability for the Ockhamist." Kurt Flasch has noted that the nominalist Ockham can as well be called 'a naive realist (a realist in the modern meaning of the word)' (Flasch 2000:511).

character that the will is supposed to own, can be made an ingredient of the production of an intelligent figure, then causation and contradiction should be rejected as the usual nominees of intelligence, and the latter itself should be envisaged rather in terms of indivisibility and of negation of all the conceivable negativities. The strip of land I am here drifting to belongs, of course, to Nicholas of Cusa, where *ratio* and *intellectus* have been meted their respective and different duties.

Another commonplace providing us with a good stay for the sequent discussion is the centrality of Thomas Aquinas in the Dominican tradition of thinking.<sup>6</sup> Not only the fact that the setting of Thomas side by side with, for example, Duns Scotus makes definitely audible the dissimilar volitional contours of the concepts on both sides (Gilson 1952:582–583), but also the Aquinian overall intellectual claim on the world, save some factions, could surely be held as representative of Dominican noetics. Now, the closer inspection of history has shown that the Dominican school had been, in fact, quite heterogeneous, and that from one of its founders, Albert the Great, had originated certain Platonic-flavoured trends elaborated further by his German Dominican colleagues (Flasch 2008a:45, Libera 1994:10). Besides focusing on the universalist shaft of cognition, the merit of German Dominicans is made manifest by their introduction of noetical bliss or immediacy, which the epistemology of Thomas Aquinas, founded on *analogia entis*, was not destined to propose nor to accommodate (Flasch 2008a:69). The gist of this argument meets us more easily if we embrace it in the medium of certain historical supplements. Namely, the idea of cognitive immediacy had been bound up in the history of Christian thinking quite invariably with the query about the possibility of seeing God.<sup>7</sup> Stripped of its vector of religious hope and read in reverse order, the question reveals an even more fundamental cognitive dilemma: why is it that we need to abstract from the perception of presence (intuition) to come to the knowledge of things, when we still feel incontestably that there is a kind of perfection in the presence that becomes irretrievably lost in abstraction. In other words, the question about the possibility of seeing God concealed a problem about the possibility of making abstraction, as the functional basis of our intellect, to converge with the visual presence of things. The conviction we notice is becoming solidified in the Scotian thinking, namely, that the capacity possessed by lower cognitive power should pertain to the higher one as well – that is, the intellect should be able to see as does our visual sense – is a testimony to the work in that direction (see Duns Scotus 1987:72–74). Still stronger evidence in this line is provided by Scotus' concept of the univocity of being (see Duns Scotus 1987: 20ff.), which confers on the human mind, if not in its present state of sinfulness, a principal closeness to God and breaks in this sense sharply with Thomas whose analogical theory cancels, according to Scotus, any road for human intellect to the

<sup>6</sup> For the triumph of Thomas' philosophy, especially after his canonization by Johannes XXII in 1323, in the Dominican order as well as in the whole church, see Flasch 2008a: 38–45.

<sup>7</sup> See Beierwaltes 1988: 5–9, Beierwaltes 1981: 11ff, 32ff; also Cappuyns 1929, Kreuzer 1995, Kreuzer 2000, THWNT: 5. 315–382.

*visio beatifica* (Gilson 1952:60). The nuance in Scotus' teaching is but that the ultimate vision of God comes to depend for him more on volition than on intellect, suggesting thus that men could have beatific vision if God wishes them to have it. By this move he relegates some important parts of his system as intellectual lacunae to the domain that, not inhabitable with noetical content by God himself, could not be filled with anything other than volitional substance on the part of humans. I would like to suggest here that the extreme particularism of Ockham, which disposes contingency in terms of sensuous plurality and harbors a real difficulty for the realization of universal concepts, was a kind of continuation of this Scotian path. If God enters the world under his will, which defies noetical coronation, then the prospect of coming to see God by intellect becomes severely endangered by the liberty of the will, which could ground the discernability of a moment but, in fact, makes its meaning ungraspable in terms of any larger unit. The complementarity of Dominican noetical immediacy, or vision, makes itself, in my opinion, distinctly readable exactly from this comparative aspect with the Franciscan concept of *visio beatifica*.

The laying by Albert Magnus, often considered as rather like-minded with his pupil Thomas, of a foundation for the German Dominican *Sonderentwicklung*, in fact quite anti-Thomistic in some respect and platonically inclined in its character (Libera 2005:50–52, Flasch 67–69), is a disclosure environed with other revealings in German philosophical historiography. The tenor of the German Dominicans was enclosed in the concept of intellectual felicity (Libera 1990:268 ff., Flasch 2008a:69) which, because attesting to the exquisite nearness of the human mind to God, broke not only with traditional Thomism, but also forced an elaboration of a conceptual framework on which such an intellectual immediacy could be founded. In other words, it incurred an emptying of some *distinctiones*, foremost of that between human intellectual capacity and ultimate divine truths, like Trinity and *creation*, that Thomas had let stay, as insurmountable for the human mind, in the vestibule of his Christian Aristotelian edifice. According to Thomas, there exists a double verity as to what we can know about the God:

*There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of the natural reason. (Summa contra gentiles I.3.3; quot. Thomas 1975: 63.)*

This kind of double-mindedness is not specifically featured by Thomas but is, in fact, an attendant symptom of the medieval system of university which had adopted Aristotelianism in its faculty of arts, while keeping on the grounds of Christian revelation contrary fundamentals in the faculty of theology (Libera 1991: 133; also 122–129). The historical paradox is that Thomas, himself insisting on the twin truth of both eternity and *creatio* of the world, came to impute the principle of *duplex veritas* to the so-called Latin Averroists (Siger of Brabant, Boethius of

Dacia) and to their doctrine of the unity of intellect which, inspired by Averroes, had had, in fact, quite an eminent role in preparing a new unison between faith and reason in the nascent Teutonic philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Averroes' thinking, accepted by Latins in the first half of the 13th century as part of an Arabian legacy that had also helped to re-introduce Aristotle into the Western world, had built in its tenet on the concert of scientific and religious truths which were supposed to play only different parts of the same socio-musical piece: presented by secular sciences to the philosopher through a demonstrative, that is, an apodictic proof, the truth of the Quran was considered to be mediated by theologians in its dialectical, that is, in probabilistic form, and was made at its lowest level accessible to the masses – to a most simple believer – through its rhetorical presentation (see Flasch 2008a: 29). A kind of apotheosis of human intellect is already inferable from this systematics of approaches to truth, yet it gains much in force when considered in relation to the thesis that came to have its maximum 'Averroist' impact on the Westerners in the 13th century. Monopsychism, or the thesis of the unity of the intellect, associated especially with the so-called 'second Averroism', states that there exists one separate (from the bodies) intellect for all humans as a guarantee of the universality of knowledge. The uneasiness of the argument revealed itself

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<sup>8</sup> 'Latin Averroism', often still partitioned in the case of the 13th century into the First and Second Averroism, is a much debated label deriving from Ernest Renan which conceals a cluster of images reflective of the complexities of the period that introduces Aristotelian thinking by the aid of the Arabian lens into Christian ambience (see DMA 2004:118–120, Hayoun and Libera 1991). While the problem of conciliating Aristotelian rationality and Christian faith had formed the backbone of the Averroist debates, the so-called theory of double truth, or of *duplex veritas*, manifests well the intricacies of the concept's formation. Although Thomas Aquinas in his *De unitate intellectus contra averroistas* implicitly charges Siger of Brabant with adopting the theory of two truths (one for philosophers and the other for theologians), the real inventor of the double truth has in fact been shown to be Thomas himself in his same treatise, because nothing in Siger refers to his exposing multiple truths (but he is only claiming certain autonomy for philosophy) (see DMA 2004:1440, Libera 1994:56–57), and it has been questioned as well how much Siger had known Averroes at all (Libera 1994:41). (An additional correction needed concerns Averroes who is probably insisting in his works only on the different forms in which the truth is presented for philosophers, theologians and common people, but is not making a claim for different verities.) The formulation of double truth had been accepted and used by the Bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, in his condemnation of 219 Averroist or radically Aristotelian propositions on 7 March 1277. Interesting is that this condemnation was partly targeted as well at articles deriving from Thomas (true, revoked together with his canonization in 1325) (see Schulthess and Imbach 1996:199ff, Libera 2004:416). Still more interesting is that Thomas' attack on Siger and Tempier's attack on Averroists had had its pre-history which proves that the combat against Averroists had in fact its roots in the rift between Franciscan and Dominican views and that certain of Thomas's propositions (his clinging to *creatio* in theology and his concession to eternity in philosophy), together with their more or less supposed Averroism, had exactly been in the backsight of Franciscan friars (among these of Bonaventure) before the escalation of events in the 1270s (Gilson 2006:26–30). Thomas appears thus with his Aristotelianism to have been in a rather delicate position, and the construction of the meaning of 'Averroism' in the period demands considering different aspects. In any case, the strong belief injected by radical Aristotelians or Averroists into the capacity of the human intellect, and the development they thereby promoted, has prompted seeing them as representatives of a kind of enlightenment movement (see Flasch 2000:408–417).



for the Christians from different angles: it made the act of intellection a property not of individuals (*hic homo non intelligit!*) but of an intellect distinct *in toto* from them; it dissolved the idea of immortality and personality of the human soul; at last, it corrupted the whole Christian edifice of the responsibility of individuals for their life in this world together with its prolongation to after-death and to the Last Judgment (see Ebbesen 2003:278–280). No wonder then that Thomas had launched a vigorous attack on the ‘Latin descendants’ of the Cordovan philosopher by his *De unitate intellectus contra averroistas* in 1270 (see Thomas 1994). In fact, the same title is carried nowadays by a work of Albert the Great which dates back to the middle of the fifties of the same century and which was prepared at the request of the pope Alexander IV to be delivered by Albert at the Curia in Anagni or in Rome in 1256 (see Libera 1994:13–20). As Alain de Libera has demonstrated, the relation of Albert to Averroes was actually quite nuanced and was very far from the downright imputations Thomas had laid on the Cordovan. Not only that Albert charges the Arabs in general, and not particularly Averroes, with the intellectual unity thesis but he discriminates perceptibly between the different strands of Averroean argument and shows up a remarkable fondness for a part of it that comes reflected in the gist of his own thought as well. According to Libera, there are two different contents of the ‘separation of intellect’, an adequate and an inadequate one, dealt with by Albert in his discussions of the matter in his *De unitate intellectus* and *De anima*: on the one hand, there is a meaning, considered by Albert truly Averroean, and subscribed to by him as well, in which the separation of intellect is understood to signal – against the materialist conception of Alexander of Aphrodisias – intellect’s detachment from body and from any possible material substrate; second, there is a false meaning, according to which the intellect is ‘separated’ because of its being numerically one (unique) in all men and, as such, is considered to be isolated from any manifestation of individuality (Libera 2005:285–287, Flasch 2008a:70ff.; Albert 1997:367–368, 395–399). What was at stake here was the fundamental issue of divinity in its relation to human soul: if intellect, considered as essence of God, is held to think uniquely, it is held also to be situated outside of soul, and, the proposition being driven further, a necessary inference will be that all humans should think at a certain moment one and the same idea. Thus, as a Christian, Albert had to save the human soul, that is, he had to make the intellection to partake of man’s psyche, which he really does by stating that it is exactly the intellectual soul that constitutes the individuality of a human (Libera 2005:299). A concession to the multiplicity of *intellectus agens* as well as of *intellectus possibilis* on the level of humanity was a corollary of the statement (Libera 2005:293). At the same time Albert had to reserve the invincible impact made on him by the Aristotelian-Averroean God as Intellect and as a source of pure separate intelligibles being fancied to be caught by man in their authenticity. The acceptance of this bias fostered a conviction that, first, the supreme agent Intellect should have a prolongation in the human soul that in its turn should be determined – as species – to admit the intelligibles, and second, that the continuation of Intellect in the

individual should be imagined to have as its apogee a kind of *conjunction* in which the personal soul connects in its act of intellection directly to the Intellect itself. (Libera 2005:300–311, Flasch 2008a:79, Albertus Magnus 1997:399–413; see also Craemer-Ruegenberg 1981.) Whatever difficulties the historians might have felt with ‘Latin Averroism’, the interpretation of Averroes by the 13th–14th century German Dominicans was clearly of instrumental import in developing their idea of an independent (separate) conceptual reality of being and of a divinization of a human (*homo divinus*) in his/her conjunction with the godly Intellect (see Niewöhner and Sturlese 1994; also Ruh 1996:124–129, Sturlese 2007).

The subject injected by the intellect under discussion into the syntax of 13th century thinking conduced to some adversatives which, being probably not thoroughly exclusive of each other in their final imports, benefited a surfacing and a mapping of disjunctions (e. g. between volition and intellect) that bore, in fact, a mark of some common route on their forehead. The theory of intellect, especially in its extension to the divine particle in humanity, devalorized to a significant degree the contingent and volitional undergirding of infinity (say, of divinity) and stated the possibility of its being made operative in the intellectual grasp of the universe. The enterprise included a patent rupture with some theses that could be said to be reflective of the Aquinian unsurpassable *difference* between natural (*lumen naturale*) and supernatural (*lumen divinae scientiae*) sciences (Schulthess and Imbach 1996:171). The interpretation of the Eucharist emerged in this context as a kind of litmus paper. Being acceded to the status of Christian dogma in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, transubstantiation, as a concept of the Eucharist, was agreed upon to tell us that in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper there occurs a full substantial transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, while on the accidental (visible) level a retention of the characters of natural bread and wine is kept manifest.<sup>9</sup> An explication of this kind had clashed abruptly with the idea of Aristotle’s metaphysics according to which no accident could exist independently of substance (see *Metaphysics* IV.1007a33–b18). If so, how can bread be bread as accident, while still being Christ by substance? The disharmony between the arguments used for the explanation of natural processes and the ones engaged for the clinch of Christian kernel events had aroused a discomfort in various medieval thinkers which they had succeeded to abate by a maneuver similar to Thomas’, that is, by allowing, at the price of stronger or lesser hesitation, for the explanation of supernaturality and wonder in the cases of God (*Summa theologiae* 3a.75.4). The resistance remarkable in Albert to this kind of indulgence in one’s reasoning (Flasch 2007:257) amounted in Dietrich of Freiberg to recording his aversion in a separate work about accidents (*Tractatus de accidentibus*, see Dietrich 1994), which, not pressing on the theological side of arguments, discards openly as irrational and unacceptable the hocus-pocus of assigning an autonomous existence to accident (Flasch 2007:260–276, König-

<sup>9</sup> For the formation of the dogma of transubstantiation and for the inconveniences it caused for rationality see Karl-Hermann Kandler’s *Einleitung* (pp. IX–XLVIII) in Dietrich 1994; see also Flasch 2007:255–259.

Pralong 2009). We will see that the battle going on was not only about consistency of thinking but also about the claim for true substantiality of human intellect, which, if derivative from God and stated to be able to conjoin with him, cannot cognize God only indirectly, or through something – through a miracle – that is an adjunct and in this sense an accident in relation to human thinking, but the concept of intellect should vindicate its proposition in terms of substantial self-sufficiency, not conditional on accidents even in its cognition of God.

The exemplary line drawn by Thomas into the field of being had been the so-called real distinction between essence and existence in all creatures standing after the uncreated God. According to the argument, the created world is marked by an irretrievable discreteness between the ‘what’ (*quod est*) of a thing and its act of existence (*esse*) (see e. g. *De ente et essentia* IV:75), which means, if followed further, that we are afforded to think (know) something without being ensured about the fact of existence of the thing thought. In short, rational cognition is not necessarily paralleled by the reality of existence, nor constitutes it as such. The only exception to it is considered by Thomas to be God himself in whom the act of existence is stated to coincide entirely with his essence, that is, God’s essence being declared to be the unlimited (non-definitive) actuality itself. The implication of this reasoning was that the essential delimitation of creatures makes it impossible for them to think of the infinite existence, that is, of the existence *ex necessitate*. The position was subjected to a brisk refutation from Dietrich of Freiberg who believes the existence not to be advening to essence from outside (of intellect) but holds it to be pertinent to something focused on by intellect in its work of intellection:

*It is said that in all created beings the essence is distinct from its existence by a real difference (reali differentia) and that the identity of the two is possible only in the first cause which is the God. ... But this reasoning that supposes that ‘all essence could be thought without anything being thought of its actual existence, because I can think what a man is’ etc., is defective at its base. ... Actually, if we speak about the signification of an essence as for the thing signified, the assumption made, namely, that ‘all essence could be thought’, is wrong. In fact, when I think ‘a man’ I think ‘man’ according to its act of existence in nature (quando enim intelligo hominem, intelligo hominem secundum actum suum essendi in rerum natura). This is what was mentioned above with the sentence of Augustine, namely ‘that the sole reason that makes of an essence an essence is that it is’ (omnis essentia non ob aliud essentia est, nisi quia est). Accordingly, I cannot think the essence of a man without thinking man’s real existence (secundum hoc ergo non possum intelligere essentiam hominis, nisi intelligam esse actuale eius). (*De ente et essentia* 2.1.1–4; quot. Thomas and Dietrich 1996: 195.)*

The statement of Dietrich effaces not only the distinction in reality between whatness and existence, or strictly speaking, that between man and God, but it highlights, by its line of reasoning, the origin of effectuation of such an effacement. Dietrich’s contribution to medieval philosophy has usually been seen encapsulated in his notion of *ens conceptionale*, which, as differentiated from *ens*

*naturae*, pleads for the independent cause of conceptuality in the process of human cognition (Flasch 2007:120–122, 238–246, et al.; Mojsisch 1984): not so, as supposed in Thomism, that the sensible reality, or *ens naturae*, subsists as an unexceptional provider of mind with basic cognitive material (to be elaborated further in abstraction and conceptualization), but the conceptual entities do have their own independent *origo* in intellect in which they become persistently activated in essence as well as in existence (Dietrich 2012: 201–203; Libera 2009: 59, Flasch 2007:245 et al.)<sup>10</sup>. Thinking the things the intellect thus thinks not the receipts from nature, but the intellect intellectualizes itself, that is, it constitutes the things out of intellect in its act of thinking. The cleavage opened up by Aristotelianism between the concrete existential grasp of thing and the abstract grasp of the thing's whatness has been rubbed out unequivocally in Dietrich's statement, but still, it seems to me, to reach the real meaning of Dietrich we have to ask further and not to content ourselves with his possibly metaphorical phrasing on the identity of essence and existence. What does Dietrich have in mind?

I propose here a possible message of Dietrich not so much through diligent inspection of his works but by sketching the connotative field that could be taken as issuing from his statements in the context of the era under discussion. The question about *visio beatifica*, that is, of seeing God in actuality, could not be separated in the history of Christian thinking from the contention for harmonizing the experience of existence, delivered to us foremost by vision, and the fact of knowledge as such at its summit: while the expected beatific vision is surely something from which nothing greater could be expected nor could be known, that is, it should be a vision of God in his essence, our worldly sensibility provides us with episodes of visions that attest not necessarily, or even not at all, to the evidence of knowledge. Thus, when Thomas contests the possibility of coincidence of existence and essence in creation, he in fact comes to deny the possibility of seeing God for the creatures, at least with the aid of powers of themselves. This is the topic we will revert to later, when we come to speak of Dietrich's consenting in fact to the same possibility. At the moment let us spell out on the grounds of the assumptions some indicative deductions for Dietrich's intellect as constituent of existence. If the intellect really makes up the existence, in its act of intellection, we should be allowed to say that it is the intellect that grounds the visibility of the world: not so that the evasive appearances catching us from outward engender in us the pictures to be seen, but the visibility in its essence is an internal work of intellect, an act of knowing and of conferring a form to the things. What we see, we see primarily not because of its external occurrence

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<sup>10</sup> A discussion on Dietrich's schema (steps) of cognition and on the respective roles of intellect and *cogitativum* (*ratio particularis*) in it has been given also in Libera 2009. The inference of Libera, as regards Dietrich's theory, seems to be that while the intellect intellectualizes independently and on autonomous ground, the cogitative power, which proceeds by the aid abstract representations achieved out of sensual perceptions (*ens naturae*), is needed to prepare the intellect in human for the act of intellectualization, that is, the *cogitativum* brings the mind to the disposition where it could grasp intellectually the world (Libera 2009:57–62, also Flasch 2008a:94–99).

in nature but because of its being heeded in our mind as a result of an activity of thinking. It follows from that quite understandably that if the intellect heeds the things it thinks, the things heeded should comply with the rules substantial to the intellection itself. The thinking intellect cannot, in inviting the existence, see the things that do not obey its commands. Let me point out here that Dietrich's laying in an Augustinian manner the roots of the world, in its real and, say, evident sense, into the mind, and positing nature as an outgrowth or as a kind of accidental occurrence of it, proved effective in outdoing the multiplicity and unconnectedness of natural incidents that came to be averred by nominalists. This historical juncture has been highlighted first of all by the preferential antagonism between Dietrich (and other German Dominicans) and the Franciscans (as well as Thomas) in their resorting, respectively, to intellect or to being in their conceptions of God. Dietrich's pronouncement of God in terms of intellect surely spotlights his thought. His philosophy itself has been held to be collecting different strands from Arabian Aristotelianism, from the Neoplatonic emanatism and hierarchism of Dionysian kind, as well as from the Augustinian interiorization of reality and promise of immediacy in human's relation to God (see Flasch 2008a:86–111). Let us pick up from the conglomerate here the equalization Dietrich enforces between the *abditum mentis* of Augustine and the *intellectus agens* of Aristotle (Flasch 2008a: 104). The Augustinian abditory of soul, its foremost secret, or a kind of *Seelengrund*, refers to the hidden repository of 'inner word' that is not operated by any of the human languages but stands still and mute, without any demand and possibility of outward vocalization, in the mind alone (see *De Trinitate* XV.10.19, XV.11.20 et al.). The register in which Augustine disposes the retreat of the mind into the truth in its interiority is flagged with the marks of *amor*, and the arrival of the point itself is reflected, as a kind of anticipation of seeing God himself, in terms of meeting in the things seen the look of God – as that which makes up the visibility of the world and the vision of the see-er in its truth (see Kreuzer 1995: 223ff.). The coupling of these stratagems by Dietrich with Aristotle's agent intellect signals his penchant for pinning the Augustinian immediacy promise, with its affective underpinning, to the buckles of intellect. Another ingredient of Dietrich's conglomeration, that is, Neoplatonism, ties his project of intellectual immediacy to the Neoplatonic gradation of being: however, in Dietrich's interpretation, each soul possesses, despite its being placed in the emanative hierarchy of being, an option for a *coniunctio* with God because it contains in its secret depth a piece of agent intellect that is truly God and that constitutes in fact the human soul at the bottom.<sup>11</sup> We could call it an intellectually based dissipation of the One to the level of individual souls. For our principal point of view it says that the existence conferred by intellect to the things thought should be understood in its

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<sup>11</sup> In this sense the agent intellect could be said to be, despite its conveying a message of divine noetics, individual in each human (Robin Fabre 2012:51) and, as second consequence, the agent intellect should contain, contrary to corporeal being whose integrity derives from the presence of all its parts, in each of its part the whole of itself (Flasch 2007:319).

ultimate form as deriving, and not only in our affection but really in our thinking, from the thing's subjection to the One as an intellectually conceived entity.

Is this thing thought a universal or a particular? No doubt, as far as the *ens conceptionale* is envisaged by Dietrich as contrasting with *ens naturae* it should carry in itself a pith of universal nature: it not only informs us and a thing of the generic character, and is set, as part of self-sufficient intellect, out of efficient and final causality typical of natural endowments, but it also defies all the amplitude of accidental properties advening to entities in nature (Flasch 2007:119–121, 261; Flasch 2008a:98, 108). However, as being in existence in its highest degree, *ens conceptionale* should, according to the overall logic inherited from the ancients, display the signs of an emphatic singularity. This overturning of the conceptions in the intellectual world has been expressed by Dietrich in this way:

*In corporeal things that are capable of generation and corruption, the more universal something is, the more it is in potency. And the more it descends from universality, the more it approaches act, as is apparent in genus, species, and individual. With separate beings the opposite is the case: the more universal they are, the more they are in act. The more they are removed from universality, the more they are removed from act and fall into potential being. (Dietrich 1992:67.)*

The same idea could be paraphrased by saying that in the case of the intelligences the notions of universal and individual are simply inapplicable because they presume the abstraction from singular as the basis of knowledge which does not obtain in the intellectual world (Calma 2009: 87–89).<sup>12</sup> The lack of a real distinction between essence and existence disqualifies the argument of abstraction. We could perceive here coming somehow near the proposition of Scotus about the individual difference, or *haecceitas*, which brings, while being itself absolutely individual, the substantial form to ultimate actuality. In any case, we must keep in mind that the thisness of Dietrich, that is, the being of something *in actu*, follows unmistakably from the interior intellectual quality of being thought in the mind. Something is, because the mind thinks it; something is *in actu* because the mind sees it. It is indubitable that all the certainty about the being *in actu* has nothing to do with the data we get by our exterior senses – it belongs to the row different from that of the external world. The intellect as property of God thinks, for sure, eternally, but this fact of thinking eternally can never be attested to by whatever of the fact we obtain from the external world because the intellect as thinking can never be visible outside of itself. Two characteristics of utmost importance release themselves from this conceptual reality of being. First, the qualities of *ens conceptionale* as of a thing thought *in actu* should be accounted exclusively as emerging from the activity of thinking, that is, the *ens conceptionale* cannot display any accidental properties that should be acquired more credibly out of passivity rather than of activity. The activity of thinking constitutes

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<sup>12</sup> For the pure intuitive intellect – as set apart from abstraction – in the case of Albert, see Libera 2005: 306–307.

the thing in its most essential way. Second, if the thing is brought forth in its visibility by the intellect that is in its depth the visibility of God himself, the seeing of the intellect should be, to a degree, the same with God; that is, it should, as an image and mirroring of God, be turned back to the divine substance together with attesting to the equivalent creative capacity.

The critical point in Dietrich's departure from Thomas is locked into his stance on *visio beatifica* proposed in his *Tractatus de visione beatifica*<sup>13</sup> (Flasch 2007: 209–252). Dietrich's attitude to the possibility of seeing God is clearly deducible from the overall frame of his mind. As is known, Thomas had stipulated that *visio beatifica* could occur, even in the case of angels, only by the special aid of *lumen gloriae* provided by God; that is, Thomas held it in fact inconceivable that any intellect below God could attain a beatific vision out of his own capacity. For him the grace and mercy of God stood in the way as *conditio sine qua non*. The argument was combined in Thomas with the supposition that *intellectus agens* itself participates in fact not in the supreme vision but only renders *intellectus possibilis* capable of the act. The perilous rocks of this kind of reasoning were patent for Dietrich from different angles. If beatific vision is said to demand *lumen gloriae* as God's help (see *De visione beatifica* 3.2.3), it is stated quite unequivocally that the decisive power in enacting the vision of God is, from the viewpoint of human intellect, of an additive and accidental character which clashes manifestly with Dietrich's intention to work in the direction of substantial sameness of intellect and to build onto the thesis some of his most eminent impacts in the history of ideas. The similar discursive disharmony is evinced, according to Dietrich, by the claim that the agent intellect, the supreme part of mind, is not engaged in the seeing of God but only confers its ability to its lower counterpart (see *De visione beatifica* 3.1). The inauthenticity of the argument of letting a completion of the highest knowledge to be an acquisition of qualities and actions of something other is in the eyes of Dietrich only another version of assigning to the human intellect a second-rate disposition. The aim of Dietrich's contravention of Thomas in the matter was not exactly proclaiming that *visio beatifica* occurs really in the lifetime of a blessed man, but only confirming that the possibility of the occurrence of beatific vision in human life is legitimate on the grounds of intellectual hypotheses. The invalidation of some crucial differences between divine and human substance invalidates the disbelief of meeting and seeing something in an intellectual way.

### 3. Meister Eckhart

While Dietrich had remained quite reticent about the possible theological charge of his theory of intellect, his fellow friar Meister Eckhart laid it on lavishly and explicitly. It is witnessed not only by Eckhart as a sole theologian of a very

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<sup>13</sup> See Dietrich 2012, for its anti-Thomistic disposition see Flasch 2007: 213ff, Robin 2009.

high rank who had been tried for heresy in the Middle Ages, but first of all by Eckhart's brave theoretical unfolding of the consequences of the intellect that remains in principle the same in divine Trinity as in humans. The linguistic side of the 'philosophical problem of Eckhart' is linked to his placement on the crossroad of the Latin Scholastic tradition and the emergence of German language philosophical thinking in the form of Dominican preaching.<sup>14</sup> This encounter of two discursive regimes in Eckhart, which we can witness already in Albert and in Dietrich (Ruh 1996:112, 195ff.), could explain on the grounds of different expectations of audiences the collision between some of Eckhart's arguments. The epistemological core of Eckhart's problem has been encapsulated by Eckhart himself in the seemingly antagonistic formulations of *deus* in the first part of *Quaestiones Parisienses* and in the general prologue of *Opus tripartitum*. In the background of this dilemma a question has been revealed about the analogical and univocal belongingness that had been pondered by Duns Scotus dominantly under the horizon of being but was given a different slant by Eckhart with his introduction of intellect as a source of univocal light (Mojsisch 1983:57 ff., Ruh 1989: 85).<sup>15</sup>

Eckhart's definition of God as intellect invokes quite manifestly the context of his deliberations: the polemics with the Franciscans and the reliance on Dietrich.

*Third, I declare that it is not my present opinion that God understands because he exists, but rather that he exists because he understands (quia sit, ideo intelligat, sed quia intelligit, ideo est). God is an intellect and understanding, and his understanding itself is the ground of his existence (deus est intellectus et intelligere et est ipsum intelligere fundamentum ipsius esse). It is said in John 1: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' The Evangelist did not say: 'In the beginning was being, and God was being.' A word is completely related to an intellect, where it is either the speaker or what is spoken, and not existence or a composite being. ... After the text of John 1 quoted above there follows: 'All things that were made through him.' This should be read, 'All things that were made through him, exist,' so that existence itself comes to creatures afterward. ... So God, who is the creator and is not creatable, is an intellect and understanding; he is not being or existence. In order to clarify this, my first claim is that understanding is superior to existence and belongs to a different order. (Quaestio Parisensis I, 4–5; quot. Meister Eckhart 1974:45–46.)*

We could say that it is difficult to imagine a harsher positing of difference between creator and creature than is done here. In severing being from the principle of God, Eckhart comes very close to the positions of the Neoplatonists; still, we have to notice that the identification of God with intellect by Eckhart

<sup>14</sup> The fact that there actually exists no philosophical rivalry between Eckhart's German and Latin works has been stated for example by Flasch (2010:226–227) and Koch (1973:208–209). According to Ruh (Ruh 1996:231), it has to be taken for proven that Eckhart was in his time already in command of a quite well-formed German spiritual terminology.

<sup>15</sup> See as well Muller-Thym's account (1939) about Eckhart's relationship to Thomas, Albert, the German Dominican school, but also to Eriugena.



shows him at his core as a factual Christian rather than as a follower of Plotinus who had stated clearly that God even does no thinking. The catch in Eckhart is that this same ultimate difference, or *negatio*, between God and creation serves him, in its turn, for proving the paramount reflexive univocity of the two in the innermost secrecy of the soul, that is, in the space actually situated outside of being; accordingly, we could even say that Eckhart comes to negate the *negationes* in a far higher degree than he states their presence in creation. But let us first let sound in full voice the string of disharmony Eckhart had deliberately twisted into his work.

*Now existence is the essence of God, or God himself (sed esse est essentia dei sive deus). Consequently it is an eternal truth that God exists. It follows that he exists. The conclusion is evident, for everything that exists, exists through existence, and existence is God (esse autem deus est). This is what is written in Exodus 3: 'He who is sent me.' ... Creation is the giving of existence. ... It follows that God, and he alone, creates or has created, because he is existence. (Prologus generalis in Opus tripartitum 13, 16; quot. Meister Eckhart 1974: 87–88.)*

Etienne Gilson has maintained that in fact there occurs no break in Eckhart's thinking and the discrepancy in argumentation rests simply on Eckhart's different presentation of his continued thesis of intellectually centered being (Gilson 1955: 439, see also Ruh 1989:107–108, Imbach 1976). Admittedly, Eckhart himself had conceded in his *Parisian Questions* (I.8) to the possibility of calling his God (as intellection) a being under certain circumstances. The collision of different viewpoints in Eckhart has thus been said to result from the shift of perspective Eckhart applies to God in his explicative enterprise: as a Christian he should conceive God as being, but as the 14th century German Dominican he wishes to contrive a model for postulating a unitive contact – and for invalidating the real distinction – between creator and creation on the basis of an intellectual (universal) property, and not that of volition. The engagement with being opens for Eckhart a realm of analogical kinship (as a hypertextual model for speaking about God); the elevation of the aspect of intellect, sometimes in the form of cancelling the being, pinpoints the act of knowing itself without any homological intermediary agency (see Mojsisch 1983:136, Imbach 1976:186 ff.). In any event, it is not Eckhart's idiosyncrasy of combining analogy with univocity that interests us here the most, but rather his very striking way – which, by the way, also made of him the great heretic – of uniting the transcendent and the immediate, that is, of affording the most universal (i.e. the entity most in act) an access to the private soul, where it comes to hold a place even more realistic than 'God' himself. Eckhart's penchant for demolishing differences in the name of authentic knowledge involves him in a series of epistemic decisions which take him from the area of natural philosophy to the substantial problems of the Trinitarian God and make him incur in his defiance of differences – not only between creator and creation but also in God – the anger of those who were set to oversee the orthodoxy of religion (Ruh 1989:121). The bull *In agro dominico* (see Eckhart 1981:77–81),

released by pope Johannes XXII on 27 March 1329, when Eckhart was in fact already dead, condemns the German master on the basis of his statements that seem to leave no room for doubt about his haughtiness and the heresy in which he had involved himself: Eckhart appears quite clearly to be resisting the personal distinction between God the Father and God the Son, but still worse, in identifying manifestly his own 'I' with the Son generated by the Father, who are really One, he creates space for theses that should be scared of being announced. The point and the crux of the matter is that the foundation on which Eckhart builds his haughty statements is termed by him himself as extreme poverty (*Armut*), or *Gelassenheit*, understood as an absolute abandonment of personality and will, as a procurement of empty space for God to be filled in, that is, Eckhart conceives the identification (of differences) as happening under the condition of total relinquishing, where any conceptual restriction and determination is given up, even in regard to God himself, for achieving an absolute simplicity (*Einfachheit*) and unanimity (*Einhelligkeit*) with God:

*You should love God apart from his loveableness, that is, not because he is loveable, for God is unloveable. He is above all love and loveableness. ... You should love God unspiritually, that is, your soul should be unspiritual and stripped of all spirituality, for so long as your soul has a spirit's form, it has images, and so long as it has images, it has a medium, and so long as it has a medium, it has not unity or simplicity. ... You should love him as he is a non-God, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright 'One', separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of 'something' into 'nothing'. May God help us to that. Amen. (Predigt 83, Renouamini spiritu; quot. Meister Eckhart 1981:208.)*

In his powerful attempt to ground the immediacy of the most universal (as, of most actual) in a human mind had Eckhart accredited the example of a just man and of justice (*des Gerechten und der Gerechtigkeit*) with extensive argumentative import.<sup>16</sup> So Eckhart claims in his sixth sermon, entitled *Iusti vivent in aeternum*, that anyone who understands his doctrine of justice and just men, 'understands everything I am saying'. The kernel of the argument of *Gerechte und Gerechtigkeit* – of a wise man and of wisdom, of a truthful man and of truth – aims at postulating the most direct and intimate relationship between a man and the transcendent and, accordingly, at announcing the fact of principal identity and coincidence of the divine transcendental qualities (as justice and goodness) with the actuality of a man (as just and good):

*In the good man goodness gives birth to itself and to everything that it is. Being, knowing, loving and working – goodness pours all this into the good man, and the good man accepts all his being, knowing, loving and working from the innermost heart of goodness, and from it alone. That which is good and goodness are nothing else than one single goodness in everything, apart from the one bearing and the other being born; but that goodness does bear and that it is*

<sup>16</sup> See *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Johannem* 14ff. and *Predigt* 6; for comments see Flasch 2010:52–55, Mojsisch 1983:65 ff.

*born in the good man, this is all one being, one life. Everything the good man has, he receives both from goodness and also in goodness. (Liber "Benedictus" 1; quot. Meister Eckhart 1981:210.)*

This gesture of identifying the universal as real with its singular incident replicates Eckhart's theory of *Seelenfünklein* as of God himself at the bottom of the human soul: in fact the identity of the universal and of the singular is accompanied in Eckhart, as in Dietrich, by the annulment of the relationship of causality (efficient or final) between the two and by presenting their link in the mode of generation – on the example of the Father's begetting of his Son – where one becomes fully the other (Flasch 2010:149. Mojsisch 1983:132–133). This should, according to Eckhart, be another testimony to the uncreated part in the human soul, which in turn grounds the possibility of the soul's univocal contact with the transcendentals – *der Gerechte* as one with *der Gerechtigkeit*.

The typography of Eckhart's thought exposes a Christian to different kinds of dangers. The immediacy promised by him in communication with the divine and the immanency of this contact in the very soul itself, do radically defy the autonomy of immortal existence that Christianity had accustomed to preserve. Not the least among the cords tackled violently by Eckhart was the *creatio*-principle that Christianity had used to subsume the whole history of the world under one arbitrary moment of incipience – God's voluntary decision to make the world. The Eckhartian appropriation and explication of the existence *in toto* in intellectual key, plus his thesis that the self-cognition of God that is enacted through generation of his Son is in fact the same as that started through 'me' at now, impels a parallelization between the creation of the world and God's generation of his Son, and confers on the former the same a-temporal and eternal modality in which is discussed the latter. The idea of *creatio* as of a notch made by God for reading on the otherwise indiscernible ray of eternity the history in its spatio-temporal sequence becomes disqualified if it is conceded that the only things worth reading have been from eternity anyway, and the others are simply *Nichts*. If God is intellect, and this intellect proceeds in part in me, my world is also from eternity. We are coming here very close to the disintegration of some fundamentals of Christianity and to the espousal of the postulate of eternity of the world by Aristotle. The characteristic of Eckhart's project of eternity is that it takes its whole relevance from cognition as such – the intellect cognizing itself founds eternity, because the intellect is an essence of God; in any case, this eternity is always and already converged to the point of now because eternity as intellection is apprehension, and apprehension forms a content of any actual being – in the present. No doubt, something could be said to have existed in the past and to be existing in the future but this assertion bears no relevance to the being in actuality which is triggered up only by intellect in its 'now' of self-cognition. A faraway recall from the Stoics is brought into our mind by these considerations; it was they who had vehemently pressed on the (corporeal) reality of presence apart from the purely constructive quality of past and future. Another reminiscence in this context approaches from the side of John Duns Scotus, who had in turn forged his grasp

and validation of presence into the concept of *haecceitas*. At any rate, neither the corporeal presence of the Stoics nor the ultimate individuation of Scotus bears testimony to Eckhart, who is keen to absolve the presence, in its strict sense, from any of natural perceptions, be it corporeal or individual, and to state as the primary quality of presence its location in the cognition of intellect: presence as cognition is not derived from the natural incidents but is constituted by the autonomous intellectual reality of the mind. The mind has, so to say, the things in itself by its own immanent capacity. Does this mean that the mind does not see the things in nature, nor do the two, the things in mind and the things in nature, have any coincidence, or relationship?

This is surely not the case, although Eckhart dwells on the supremacy and independence of intellection. Although he sets the theory of categories and efficiency, as well as final causality out of intellect, which deals with the substances caused not by something *ab alio* but generated by the intellect itself, the difference between the two rows of beings, of intellect and of nature, of pure being and of determinate being, is not that of excluding communication: “It should be noted well in advance that it is always the case that the prior and superior takes absolutely nothing from the posterior, nor is it affected by anything in it. On the contrary, the prior and superior influences the inferior and posterior and descends into it with its own properties and assimilates it to itself ...” (*Prologus generalis* 10; quot. Meister Eckhart 1974:84.) In other words, Eckhart purposes in his planned chefs-d’oeuvre *Opus tripartitum* to lay out, as part of his theology, an explication of Christian faith and of the Scripture on the grounds of natural reasonings (*per rationes naturales*)<sup>17</sup>, that is, he intends to propose beside the metaphysics and ethics also a philosophy of nature, because, be it stated again, “what is produced or proceeds from anything is precontained in it. This is universally and naturally true, both in the Godhead and in natural and artificial things” (*Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Johannem* 4; quot. Meister Eckhart 1981:123). Applied to the activity of an artist, the deliberation of Eckhart aims to say that the visibility that the artist makes outwardly available in imitating natural objects and in reasoning according to certain laws should be seen as originating in the innermost mind of the artist, as in the ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ (Lk 1:35), with the proviso that the Luke’s ‘upon’ is here understood as ‘within’<sup>18</sup>. Eckhart’s most telling parable in his interpretation of visibility in line with his proposed typology of *Gerechte* and *Gerechtigkeit* is that of *Auge-Holz*, that is, the comparison implying the eye’s becoming real wood in its visual grasp of the wood

<sup>17</sup> *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Johannem* 4; Flasch 2010:98–112, Flasch 2008a:115ff.

<sup>18</sup> “Here it is better to remember that an exemplar that is beheld from without is never the principle of the artist’s work unless it comes with the idea of the inhering form. Otherwise, a dabbler could make a picture as well as an artist, since both can see the external exemplar equally well. The work that is ‘with’, ‘outside’ and ‘above’ the artist must become his work ‘within’, by informing him so that he can make a work of art, as it says in Luke chapter one: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ (Lk. 1:35), that is, so that the ‘upon’ may become ‘within’.” (*Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Johannem* 41; quot. Meister Eckhart 1981:136.)

(*Predigt* 48; Flasch 2010:247–253).<sup>19</sup> Intended as an allegory of whole comprehension, the comparison is purposed to say that the eye's 'understanding' of the wood it sees in the outward object is realized by the eye's becoming factually identical with the wood in its more spiritual terms and, accordingly, by the eye's assumption and repetition of the primordial role of creative eye – as a kind of antitype of God's creation. The eye, like the light, should itself be free of any qualities, it should be absolutely naked to accomplish the role of an enactor of comprehension ("If my eye is to see color, it must be free of all color" – *Predigt* 12, quot. Meister Eckhart 1986:270); by forcing the world forth out of nothing, the eye brings us not only to see God, but it claims in fact the identity of the two ("The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one and the same eye and one seeing, one knowing and one loving" – *Predigt* 12, quot. Meister Eckhart 1986:270).

The crossing place of Eckhart's realism of universals and his theory of vision is dovetailed in its substructure by the *imago*-conception which draws on Augustine and his explanation of the inner-trinitarian relations as the model of self-cognition of the mind.<sup>20</sup> The Eckhartian *Bild* combines a Neoplatonic cognitive scheme of *moné-próodos-épistrophé* with the stressed unity of substance of the three stages: while the act of knowing supposes a kind of leaving itself (a forming of image) and of returning to it anew (a recognition), the elevated substantial unity of this image formation lends the image not only an apparent but an active and essential identity with the progenitor: the nature of the Father, from which the image is, is taken completely over also into his image in the Son, as well as to human intellect, that is, to the soul at its bottom. The inner-trinitarian intellection includes *Bild* as part of cognition, which is always a self-cognition, because of the unity of God. For the proof of his argument, Eckhart adduces the difference between spiritual and material vessels (*Predigt* 16b). The wine inside a material wooden vessel exists apart from the boards the vessel consists of; being drunk up the wine ceases to be while the vessel remains in its full constitution. The case is different with a spiritual vessel which forms a whole in its nature with its content – this vessel cannot be removed and the thing it embraces left. So is the image of God not a simple appearance of the lineaments of mouth, nose, and eyes in a mirror image, but it is a complete bursting-forth of his essence into the image, while yet remaining entirely in itself. In its confirmation of the immediacy with the divine, the image is not posing some reductive and superficial visual representation, but belongs substantially to the original as part of the reflection the intellect is appointed to perform. We should take it as a very strong claim not only to the intellectual nature of vision and to its procession out of One, which clasps

<sup>19</sup> For more on the topic consult also *Predigt* 12 (*Qui audit me*) and 69 (*Modicum et iam non videbitis me*). On Eckhart's intellectual vision see Duclow 2006:195ff.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. *Predigt* 9 (*Quasi stella matutina ...*), 16b (*Quasi vas auri solidum ornatum omni lapide pretioso*), 24, *Expositio sancti evangelii secundum Johannem* 23 ff.; Flasch 2010:117–120, Libera 1994:242ff., Imbach 1976:179–180, 198–200, Duclow 2006:175–186.

indistinctly God and me, but also to the power of my intellect to invoke visuality in its most realistic form from the intellect itself.

There is a trait in Eckhart which exposes his heresy, but also the cognitive, reflective, and intellectual underpinning of his God beyond any misapprehension. This is made manifest in the strong grip his *negatio negationis* – as annihilation of conceptual hinges and a disclosure of sheer being in ‘my’ direct perception of nowness – takes even on the concept of God and provokes thus the positing of the *origo* of the world into ‘me’. The implication is, as stated by Burkhard Mojsisch, that the ‘I’ is conceded to be even something more real than the God himself:

*Now, the specific interest of Eckhart was to grant the I, inasmuch as it is I, a special position, plainly said: I as such should step into the place of divinity. ... God is for Eckhart God only when it stands in relation to creature. But the ground of the soul (Seelengrund) is uncreated. That is why it possessed for Eckhart even priority over God. God stands in relation to something other, but the ground of the soul is only in relation to itself. ... If now God is considered always in relation to his creation, then is the ground of the soul, the I as I, a superior notion compared to God. (Mojsisch 1997:101, 108; see also Mojsisch 1983:123.)<sup>21</sup>*

The univocity Eckhart promises either under the guise of intellect or pure being, drives him thus in some final point to release even from the most probable authentic names of God, that is, from ‘intellect’, ‘One’, or ‘God’, to achieve in the total release (*Gelassenheit*) from creation an extreme emptiness and poverty (*Armut*) of me – a confirmation of me being me in its most original and self-reflective meaning of the word God.

*But in the breaking-through, when I come to be free of will of myself and of God’s will and of all his works and of God himself, then I am above all created things, and I am neither God nor creature, but I am what I was and what I shall remain, now, eternally. ... Here God finds no place in man, for with poverty man achieves what he has been eternally and will evermore remain. Here God is one with the spirit, and that is the most intimate poverty one can find. (Predigt 52, *Beati pauperes spiritu*; quot. Meister Eckhart 1981:203.)*

#### 4. Nicholas of Cusa

I began with a note on the Renaissance as a period that came to coordinate in its pictogram of the world the corporeal substances, as a kind of rediscovery of its roots in antiquity, with clues to infinity on their edges. (Cf. Cassirer 1964: 7ff.) The coordination was enacted in a strict mathematical mood and was performed

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Predigt 52, Beati pauperes spiritu*. “In my birth all things were born and I was the cause of myself and of all things; and if I would have wished it, I would not be nor would all other things be. And if I did not exist, ‘God’ would also not exist. That God is ‘God’, of that I am a cause; if I did not exist, God too would not be ‘God’. There is no need to understand this” (quot. Meister Eckhart 1981:203).

through a subjection of corporeal reality to a rigid metrical systematization (in the hope of touching infinity one day) which, however, proved poor in the eyes of infinity itself discrediting any *mensura* as its possible qualification. (See Mahnke 1937: 80.) The heteronomy of the epistemological apparatus, where that which is, is brought forth by the disparate power of that which is not, is a corollary of Renaissance accommodation of extensional reality to the embraces of infinity. The two facets of the Renaissance prevailing in our glance at it, namely, its transcription of the infinite characteristics of God to its account of the world and, second, the *enracinement* of its episteme in the empirical reality devised by its metrical qualities, should surely be ascribed in their mutual linkage to different late medieval pursuits of univocity between human and divine substance, although the path in this direction had gone by complex rather than by straight route. The achievement of a new epistemic stance out of a kind of recoiling movement has already been a matter of talk. Before entering the discussion of Nicholas of Cusa as a conveyor of the sample weave deposited in the Renaissance's texture of thought, I would wish to offer to read the Renaissance initiation of infinite space in a perspective signalled by some similar earlier attempts that the Renaissance had in fact been eager to pick up. The precariousness of the concept of space, especially in its tendency to autonomize its reality as different from bodies which it furnishes with room of being, had been well perceived by ancient philosophers (see Grant 1981:5–8, Jammer 1954:23–24, Lossev 1963:289 et al., THWNT: 8.191–193), of whom Aristotle had pinned the menace down in a most eminent way in his reduction of the place of a thing to an outer limit or exterior boundary of another, encompassing body (*Physics*, 212a27f). The too much focusing on space as separate entity endangered thinking with making the bodily existence dependent on the reality that in fact assumed a position of holding up, as another, the existence, and that was thus compellingly introducing an element of defiance into the definition of the world by corporeality. The depreciated atomists had made the point clear by incurring the wrath of some of their celebrated fellows through having posited two different kinds of reality, the infinite void space (as non-being) and the numberless tiny corporeal substances, i.e. atoms (as beings), moving irregularly in the void (see DK 68b125, 165). As had been shown pungently by the acrid paradoxes of Gorgias, the postulate of place risks relativization of the whole intellectual enterprise because it introduces an additional (hetero)topy there where one is supposed to have a fox in a trap.<sup>22</sup> I consider it important to note that the

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<sup>22</sup> The thought experiment Gorgias offers us in his *On the nonexistent or on nature* about the impossibility to speak logically about existence in its finite or infinite form – because to speak about one the room is needed to be made for the other – illuminatingly tests not only to the knots of language but seems somehow revealing as well in regards a paradoxical attempt of Renaissance at accommodating infinite hypertext and finite subtext: “Moreover, the existent does not exist either. For if the existent exists, it is either eternal or generated, or at the same time eternal and generated. But it is neither eternal nor generated nor both, as we shall show. The existent therefore does not exist. For if the existent is eternal (one must begin with this point) it does not have any beginning. For everything which is generated has some beginning, but the eternal, being ungenerated, did not have any beginning. And not having a beginning it is without

ancient agitation about space involved in itself two sides, the physical and the semantic side. The atomistic postulate of a physical void had surely contributed in a substantial way to the ‘scientific’ explanation of natural motion by its fragmentation of a body and by disclosing in it the ‘places’, free of material necessity, where invisible and irregular collisions of atoms could take place. The equivocality of the explanation is worth being highlighted: while the atomic movements should provide us with an explanation of the necessity of natural occurrences, because of exposing reasons of what we perceive in nature, the necessity involved there will come in fact very close to randomness, because the collisions happening in free or empty space are stripped of any fundamental meaning in themselves.<sup>23</sup> The reproach for abandoning a teleological argument in the explanation of physical events presided in Aristotle’s rebukes to atomists (*Generation of animals* 789b2). The space promulgated by atomists emits thus some fragrance of nonchalance and senselessness that brings it near, in the view of Hans Blumenberg, to the world of nominalism, although the conclusions drawn from it for further actions are quite different for both (Blumenberg 1996: 166–168). This atomists’ coin of space, not favoured too much by Plato and Aristotle, has but its other side in the ancient tutelage of eloquence which was given a stout spur by Greek sophists, opposed by the great ancients not on the grounds of empty space but that of empty speech. The instruction in rhetoric afforded by sophists, tending to make rocky the comprehensibility of the world, possibly aimed at the initiation of individual linguistic activity of a person in his or her grasp of things; that is, there was inserted a strong claim in favour of the humanistic *mensura* of the world that is allocated to each individual personally and that is to be revealed in his or her inventive semantic coverage of reality. The point relevant here is that the investment of humanistic perspective in the order of things was achieved out of a kind of spatialization of reasoning, not only in the sense that the sophists have been deemed to inaugurate *koinós tópos* and to be the forefathers of rhetorical topics, but also because the sophistic perception of the possible inherence of oppositional viewpoints in the same matter of course – laid down in their *in utramque partem* principle – was couched by dint of foregrounding the space in its semantic terms, that is, they discerned the spatialization of meaningfulness to be a source for their relativistic interpretation of the world. The affiliation of some basic considerations of the Greek atomists and sophists to the premises about space and to the *tópoi* of meanings is remarkable and probably not fortuitous.

The exploit of Nicholas of Cusa in the history of philosophy has been characterized by Hans Blumenberg as an effort for the intensification of the moment of

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limit. And if it is without limit it is nowhere. For if it is somewhere, that in which it is, is something other than it, and thus if the existent is contained in something it will no longer be without limit. For the container is greater than the contained, but nothing is greater than the unlimited, so that the unlimited cannot exist anywhere. Moreover, it is not contained in itself. ...” Sprague 1972:43.)

<sup>23</sup> On the closeness of the terms chance and necessity in the usage of atomists see Gadamer 1999: 273–276, Guthrie 1965:414–419.



transcendence, while at the same time advancing man as well as the cosmos closer to it (Blumenberg 1966:559). In his other redaction of the thought, Blumenberg has presented Nicholas' middle way position as steering between the Scylla of scholastic rationalism and the Charybdis of nominalistic particularism (Blumenberg 1966:602). Although the universal had, according to Blumenberg, become disowned in the nominalism of its traditional role in the constitution of meaning, the realm of the concrete will still not be granted, as a result, a new meaningful status, but will be envisaged rather as an amorphous mass of existents. In his struggle for the establishment of a new import of the individual, not on a volitional basis but as part of the individual's engagement in the structure of comprehensibility, Nicholas surely received distinct backing from Eckhart, for whom he had sensed a keen sympathy.<sup>24</sup> He had been in possession of a very complete collection of Eckhart's Latin manuscripts, and it is quite obvious that the metaphor of infinite sphere with its centre everywhere had also made its way into Nicholas' mind through the intermediary of Eckhart (Mahnke 1937:77–78, 145, et al.). The elevation of man that Cusanus could have learned from his predecessor from Hochheim had been anchored in Eckhart's *Fünklein*, making God audible in men in his virtual identity with them and causing thus a crash of some fundamental distinctions of orthodox Christianity (Harries 2001:185ff.). A more ambitious statement of human nobility than the one echoed by Eckhart is hardly imaginable. And we have to bear in mind that Eckhart's thought, notwithstanding its final enunciations, which tends to suggest a blinking love rather than underlying the contrast of thinking to affection or volition (Libera 1994a:293–295), had built on the intellect as that which is God in the truest sense. However, Nicholas was surely not disposed to afford man a closeness with God, amounting to identity, that had been announced by Eckhart; and in turn, while this identity, buried at the bottom of the human soul, had made the world in its appearances a sheer nothing for Eckhart, Nicholas persists in believing in the accompaniment of divine knowledge in the world, although the knowledge in itself seems incomprehensible to the human mind (Mandrella 2011:81–82, Duclow 2006:300ff., Miller 2002:113). Men cannot understand perfectly the divine infinite One, encompassing the whole gamut of existence, but they can form a privative concept of it by imagining, for example, a polygon approaching a perfect circle if its number of angles is increased to infinity. The key of Nicholas' doctrine, as it came to be settled in his *docta ignorantia*, was the participation of God in man's knowledge by way of human ignorance, whereas the knowledge itself was presented as a mathematically

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholas' suspected association with Eckhart had been expressed manifestly by Johannes Wenck in his invective (*De ignota litteratura*) against Nicholas' *De docta ignorantia* in 1442/43. In his defence six years later (*Apologia doctae ignorantiae* 1449), Nicholas – presenting himself, by the way, in a stylized manner as a disciple of Cusanus – was set to express himself directly on the issue: "... he [Cusanus – R.U.] praised Eckhart's genius and ardor. Yet, he wished that his books would be removed from public places; for the people are not suited for the statements which Eckhart often intersperses, contrary to the custom of other teachers; nevertheless, intelligent men find in them many subtle and useful points." (Hopkins 1981:59.)

readable texture of sensuous reality, on which the mark of ignorance, that is, the sign of mathematical unreadability, was set in coordination with the personal aspect of knowledge. The Eckhartian promotion of the individual in his/her innermost me to the position of the God became filtered in Nicholas by the figure of human ignorance, a kind of anticipation of divinity in man's capacity, but it has to be noticed that notwithstanding all the vagueness suggested by the figure, it was inserted into the medium of strong mathematical exactitude, and even operated it by way of contrariety, or of antitype.

To read Cusanus' thought more closely in the context of his respective age, the projection of it onto the plane of late medieval controversy between nominalism (Ockhamism) and realism should serve the purpose. The emergence of Ockhamism had drawn some very distinctive lines to the intellectual map of the period and impacted vigorously on the scholarly climate and divisions in universities.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the association of Ockhamism with *via moderna*, that has been documented in about 1425 in Cologne University (Gilbert 1974:107), supplements the controversy with an additional seduction of meaning, although the opposition of *modernus* to *antiquus* should here be treated with great circumspection and with attention to the extreme relativity of the terms, as depending on context.<sup>26</sup> In line with our principal aim at the moment, that is, of delineating the preparation for the Renaissance in late medieval thinking, let us set our first anchor of the term *antiquus* into the sense of 'Renaissance' as a revival of certain ancient and humanistic rationality. An enmity of Renaissance humanism to

<sup>25</sup> See Gilbert 1974, Leff 1968, Leff 1967, Ritter 1922, Ritter 1921.

<sup>26</sup> The University of Cologne (1388), unlike that of Heidelberg (1386), where, by the way, the nominalist line became dominant in the first half of 15th century, was founded as a city university, which is explained by Cologne's long academic traditions and its eminent cultural as well as economic position in Germany of the day (see Schneider 1938). Important is also that the beginning of pedagogical life in Cologne is linked directly to Albert the Great (also called Albertus Coloniensis) who had been in the head of *studia generalia* opened there by Dominicans in 1248 (Senner 2000). Later, Meister Eckhart studied and taught in Cologne until his death in 1327. The formation from Cologne university a spokesman for *via antiqua* at the beginning of the 15th century is surely connected to this pre-history and, in more concrete terms, to the arrival in Cologne at that time of some Albertists from Paris, of whom Heymeric de Campo (van de Velde), coming in 1422, was the most outstanding. The statement of Cologne masters in defense of realism from 1425 is part of this course of things. (See Kaluza 1995, Gabriel 1975, Senger 1981, Włodek 1981.)

Even if the terms *antiqui* (for realists) and *moderni* (for nominalists) have certain consistency in the usage of contemporaries since the beginning of the 15th century (see Gilbert 1974:85 et al.), the great variability in their meaning as dependent on context should always be considered. Thus an argument for realism in the period may include a claim for its (realism's) novelty because being able to integrate Christian values that were not available for the ancients (Swiezawski 1974:91, Gilbert 1974:109–110). While the ecclesiastic authorities had sided in the first half of the 15th century more with *moderni*, they changed their mind in favour of Christian Aristotelianism afterwards (Swiezawski 1974:487, Gilbert 1974:109–110). In addition, the separation of the two *viae* among the contemporaries and in universities was far from harsh and in historical terms they both could be said to have contributed to the development of modern culture.

Ockhamism seems quite plainly to become implied by the move, but this implication should really be taken as only the first ring of an otherwise much longer thread of a thought on a reel.<sup>27</sup> The positioning of the crux of Nicholas' thought into the tensional field between nominalism and realism is seemingly something very justified and has been done rather often.<sup>28</sup> Surely, it lies beyond dispute that Ockhamism had given a powerful impetus to reading the essence of reality out of man's empirical sensations of the individual exemplars of nature. The universal is only a mental construction and, as such, poses no claim for separate existence. The confidence Nicholas invests in mathematics in submitting natural items to metrical inspection for them to make sense to us, is very probably an outgrowth from the soil that had been fertilized by Ockham (Hoffmann 1975:139–145 et al.). By establishing singular existence as a real object of investigation, Nicholas had significantly conduced to the empirical touch with the world manifested in the vivification of physical and mathematical sciences of the period (Flasch 2008b: 146, Beierwaltes 2004:360ff.). Anyhow, we have to know that beside the empiricism issuing from Ockham there had also existed during the period other kinds of commitments to the empirical approach which had believed, for quite different reasons than Ockham, to elucidate God's laws through our direct experience with nature.<sup>29</sup> To be understood correctly, the scientific empiricism of Ockham should be viewed as a corollary of his God's *potentia absoluta*, which means that the empirical knowledge, to which we are forced in the lack of universals, never comes to know the truth of God; that is, Ockham professes on the grounds of God's will an absolute abyss between God's transcendence and human knowledge. As a result, a mark of arbitrariness has been cast on the whole of human knowledge. It marshals, on the one hand, the argument for experience and vindicates the self-assertive arrangement of data obtained from empirics, but, on the other hand, it leaves the whole edifice of knowledge floating in the sea. From this viewpoint, Cusanus' manoeuvring between nominalism and Platonism can be viewed as a kind of attempt at mooring the boat.

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<sup>27</sup> The clear dislike of (earlier) humanists (and of Petrarch) for *moderni* seems to have undergone a change somewhere at the turn of the 15th century (Gilbert 1974:110, 121; Swiezawski 1974: 491). See also Ritter's discussion about the impossibility of linking humanists directly to either moderns or ancients (1922:115–131).

<sup>28</sup> See Senger 1981:233, 236, Moran 2003:194–195, Watts 1982: 70ff., Hoffmann 1975, Blumenberg 1966. The supposed meeting of the two contemporary vectors in Nicholas looks abetted as well by his scholarly path: he entered the university of Heidelberg (the then centre of nominalism) in 1416 and that of Cologne (known for its realism) in 1425, having studied in between (1417–1423) in Padua, which, free of the ideological controversy between arts and theology, had achieved a remarkable level in medicine, jurisprudence, and natural sciences.

<sup>29</sup> I have in view here Thomas Bradwardine as he has been depicted by Gordon Leff: the empiricism of Bradwardine derives not from the concept of God's freedom but rather from his omnicausality: "Bradwardine, on the other hand, was so strictly orthodox in his views on the regularity of God's ways and the certain manifestation of his attributes that he went to the opposite extreme, in combating Ockhamism, of virtually reducing all human and created actions to a mere extension of God's." (Leff 1968:299.)

Supposing that Cusanus had wished to fit together the two poles, it appears patent that he simply must have believed in some readable clues of divinity involved in the sensible world. In other words, he could not have agreed to the reduction of the greatest truths to the simple volition of God.<sup>30</sup> This is the point where we presumably come to meet the influence of German Dominicans' intellectual theory on Cusanus: strictly speaking, the point of re-definition of infinity as wish into terms with certain intellectual coverage (Dupré 1996:209ff). However, let us first try to specify somewhat the position of sensible things for Nicholas. While the turn to empirical reality can be linked with nominalist distrust of concepts, the pressure that Nicholas should have felt in himself to associate empiricism with divinity, must have urged him to substantiate the relevance of sensible experience from some more reliable perspective as well. In other words, he should have asked: why sensibility to know something about God at all? Why is it necessary? Cannot we do without it? In truly Neoplatonic fashion Nicholas seems to locate the full reality of things into the mind, which creates these out of itself; anyhow, the mind in its human mode remains in need of things in their outward appearance to which it should assimilate itself to become aware of the intellectual foundation of the world, that is, to return through sensibility to itself – as to a kind of recognition accomplished.<sup>31</sup> The parallelism of the two rows of things, of sensible things and of things in the mind, confronting us somewhat with mystery about their connectivity, reminds us of some basic lines from the thinking of Dietrich. What matters here foremost is but the vast panorama of mutual linkages made visible in the field of cognition by that approach. To put it explicitly, Nicholas is supposedly stating that a strictly detectable path goes from the senses to rationality, and from there onwards to the intellect and to God marked by ignorance as *coincidentia oppositorum* in our envisioning of him. It is important to note here that this series of links is not conceived so much metaphorically as earlier in the Middle Ages, but rather mathematically, that is, the identity or non-identity in the series is deduced from the submission (or comparison) of sensual perception to a certain metrical etalon. However, all this metrics is related by Cusanus on its upper grade to the regulative idea of divine ignorance cancelling the validity of metrics in its conjectural reference to intellect as the content of God. The fact that, on the one hand, the precise reality of the world is set into the mind, which comes in apprehending the outward world to actually apprehend itself and which, as image of God in the human, is always somehow as well about God in the human – and, on the other hand, that this road of mental self-apprehension supposes always the mind's first assimilating itself to the physical world, which behaves like its trigger, brings us to some of characteristic features of Cusan texture (Miller 2003:128–141).

<sup>30</sup> Theo Kobusch has noticed that what connects the modern thinkers with the later medieval philosophy is their common repugnance for nominalist morality, that is, for the Ockhamist concept of freedom, which they counter by posing a kind of univocal morality for humans as well as for the God (Kobusch 2004:260).

<sup>31</sup> See Flasch 2008b:292–297, 306ff, 462–464, Bormann 1975, Stallmach 1975.

First, the anchoring of knowledge to the compliance of sensual data with certain *metrum* and the persevering with this action until non-metrical infinity, comprised in each *mens*, tells us that every human epistemology should necessarily be geared to theology. They are linked with each other, and in a very direct way, because in measuring the things, we are in fact also measuring the non-measurability of divine intellect (Flasch 2008b:53–54, Haubst 1975). The retention of the two rows as part of human cognition confirms the paradoxical transitivity between sensible world and divine noesis. Second, if Cusanus' theory of knowledge is a theology, and as such involves in itself an element of transcendent non-knowledge, it can also be said to be an aesthetic – and that in the two senses to which the word is amenable.<sup>32</sup> Taking *aisthetá* as the origin of every apprehension that should offer raw material and first impulse for reason to start its back movement in the unfoldings of *mens*, Cusanus' theory could be called aesthetics because of being based on the things sensed. The immediacy provided by sensual perception is taken at this stage as something uniquely valuable connoting the reliability of experience and the trustworthiness of the world outside. However, as any *exitus* obtains its meaning in Platonism only as a counterpart of *reditus*, the immediacy sensed should be nothing if not rediscovered in the content of intellect. From that angle, Cusanus' theory of cognition is aesthetics in its more modern sense, that is, it is aesthetics by proposing all knowledge as an artistic product and as an aesthetic hint at something other, so superbly other for Nicholas that it equals *non-aliud* and as such is catchable only by human ignorance.

The supposition of the full unrolling of the divine mind to the senses, implying in turn the possibility of its *complicatio* in a contrary direction, is something very characteristic of Nicholas and also explains the interfacial value of the cognition intended by him. Indeed, the piece of the world snapped by our senses provides the mind with material for knowing, but, being regulated in its essence by a certain *je ne sais quoi*, as a counterpart of divine One, this knowing must involuntarily go over to the aesthetic wondering at the creation of God. In other words, every pictogram of the world is multileveled: it involves sensual agitation, it is a promise of rational knowledge, but it also functions as a piece of art – of God as well as of us who approach God's creation in its image. Exactly the passing of one and the same messenger, or say cursor, through different spaces with messages changing according to the properties of the spatial section passed, is something which comes parabolically very close to the integrity and intertextualism of Cusanus' cognitive schema. It implies that the marks of *coincidentia oppositorum* should be, however differently, readable on every level of existence, on the lowest as well as on the highest. This permeation of the essence of mark through the whole specter of being is given by Cusanus a spectacular expression in his commanding of visibility in his system. While on the physical plane we can claim to see something

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<sup>32</sup> For the connections of Nicholas' thought with arts and aesthetics see Flasch 1965:286–306, Flasch 2008b:292, Beierwaltes 1994:119, Cassirer 1964:61ff., et al.; for broader context see Beierwaltes 1975.

because of the impact of the material world made in our senses, to understand this ‘something’ in our mind we have to transpose it from its material concoction to its rational content, which means, in the idiom of Nicholas, that we have to translate it into the numerical language of lines and angles. This is the first step in our arising from physical seeing to the stage of *visio intellectualis*. Anyhow, as this rational pictogram achieved from the sensual impressions is, according to Nicholas’ deep conviction, already embedding in itself a mark of divine unity, all the diversity of being that emerges in our subjective sensuous perceptions and in their subsequent rational interpretations must also be subjected implicitly to the unity of the One. In other words, the numbers as a source of difference should abdicate in the face of *non-aliud*. The profound mystical tenor revealed by Nicholas at this point is based on his understanding of God as active infinity which comprises the whole – infinite – gamut of existence and as such is not only seeing all things at once but, because his seeing is also his understanding and the overall cause of things, is looking back to us from the things we are looking to.

*If, then, Your essence penetrates all things, then so too does Your sight, which is Your essence. Therefore, just as none of all existing things can escape from its own being, so neither can it escape from Your essence, which gives to all things their essential being. Consequently, no existing thing can escape from Your sight, either. (De visione dei 9: 37.1–5; quot. Hopkins 1988:157.)*

As mentioned above, the means by which Nicholas hopes to dispose of the distinctive features of things to reach the viewpoint of their principal sameness, is through relating them to the infinite, that is, by imagining their measurable properties as proceeding to infinity. The loss of difference between polygon and a circle is the result of this kind of invention. To expound Cusanus’ move, we might say that he makes an attempt at comprehending the existential and perspectival singularity of creation in the infinite clasp of God. Or more explicitly, he is attributing to a thing in the world an aspect that dissolves its particularity up to the thing’s yielding entirely to the One. The power of the One to embrace all existence is interpreted by Nicholas again as God’s absolute vision which sees all the seers in their seeing incessantly from all possible angles, like the omnivoyant person on the ‘icon of God’ that Cusanus had sent to the monks of Tegernsee Abbey together with his *De visione dei*. As the painting sensed by sensible eyes leads the seer in its depth onward to the eye of God, Nicholas enjoins us to work through the impressions of the material world to *visio intellectualis* and promises as the uppermost step of the staircase a kind of *visio facialis*, or face-to-face vision of God. The vision there is surely knowledge, as it has been obtained by passing through rationality, but surely it is also, and even more so, an affection because, more than our grasp of intellect, it is a love of God (Turner 2004:412ff., Flasch 2008b:439).

The metatext of infinity inherited by the Renaissance from the Middle Ages had forced an emergence of respective explanative space regulating the epistemics of the age. Cusanus’ embroiling himself in the intellectual dissensions of his time and his attempted conciliatory outcome in intellectual, as well as in schismatic

matters should be read to my mind against the foil of a sort. There are, however, some filaments in the story that need to be examined with special care to catch the complexity of the whole. The emergence of the Renaissance postulate of *homo faber*, manifesting the belief in a human maker and artistic creation as the truest way of coming to the knowledge of what something is, had stood definitely in some connection with Protagoras' *homo mensura* sentence (Harries 2001:184–199, Trinkaus 1976); but only after considering Protagoras' role as a founder of ancient rhetoric can we guess the cognitive specter the postulate was stemming from. Being itself a pivotal part of Renaissance humanist learning, rhetoric acted on the surface film of the age as a counter-power to medieval scholastic thinking; however, interpreted by its more radical content, rhetoric marked the implementation of certain patterns of argumentation that stood to a degree in acute contrast to the ones a self-respecting philosopher could afford. The danger to philosophy posed by the invention of Greek rhetoric had been the extreme relativization of the field of argumentation, annulling almost completely the inherent hope of a philosopher to work from sense experience to some general concept that could hold for all, or at least for many. In this sense, rhetoric had bound the act of thinking to the respective – and always subjective – value judgment. The other and happier side of the coin had been that rhetoric provided persons quite overwhelmingly with an opportunity of giving sense to their more or less troublesome situation, because the tacit supposition of rhetoric had been that it is possible to find a convincing argument even where philosophical reasoning had come to its wits' end. In their specifically humanistic purport, the Greek sophists had thus covered the world with a net of arguments where a reasonable place was reserved not just to the conceptual but rather to the personal reality. This ascription of subjective slant to every meaning in the world informs the sophistic-rhetorical argument with ambiguity which solicits treatment in terms of topology of argumentation, that is, in terms of the bending moment of an argument rather than of its definite content. Being situated always in a certain embracing *topos*, the argument is convertible and subjective in its intent. In turn, intimated by this topology of argumentation is an idea of language which banks on the integrity of the emotional, rational, and sensual aspect of persuasion and, as such, forwards an *eiconic* idea of communication diverging remarkably from any hope of separating some remote intellectual truth. As part of this world, the truth is averred to be something that shines forth and appears always in certain likelihood, that is, the truth has a visible face. The very idea of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* had been that Helen, the daughter of Zeus, had been pushed to elope with Paris to Troy as a result of the persuasion of the beauty of his speech that equates for Gorgias to the truth, or *aletheia* of Paris' intention: as we live in the world of conjectures, where every word borders on precariousness, the power exerted by a speech on our soul is testimony to the trustworthiness of the word in a given moment. Reverting to our previous point, we can say that the sophistic skepticism and agnosticism acquits the senses of suspicion and prescribes, conversely, a reliance on them in our cognition. This is one side of Protagoras' *homo mensura* phrase that describes

fittingly the Renaissance trust and reliance on the senses. However, to approach the meaning – of Renaissance and of Nicholas – that we are actually intending, it is compulsory to ask an additional question, namely, how much could the investment in human senses and freedom be coupled with something trustworthy standing apart from them and making a claim for validity for all conceivable existence. In the case of Protagoras, who had stated openly that “concerning the gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have” (DK80b4, quot. Sprague 1972:20), the question seems to disappear, although there are also signs for his advocating some innate divine knowledge in man (Plato, *Protagoras* 320c–322d), which seems to have caused confusion in Ficino’s attitude to Protagoras and has been discussed more widely (Trinkaus 1976:207–213, Guthrie: 1971:66). In the case of Nicholas it seems quite clear from the beginning that his project comes to depend on the task of submitting sensual information to the One attended in his parlance by a nearly fixed epithet ‘infinite’. The way Nicholas tackles the exercise reminds us of some basic lines from Eckhartian thinking because it is exactly thanks to certain minimal but principal commonality of human and divine *mens*, a kind of residue of the God in man that the bridge from the multiplicity sensed to the nucleus demanded by understanding can be built. As every *mens* loaded in man is measured by the God and is supposed to extend in however feeble a form until the reality is sensed, the subjective persuasiveness intended by rhetoric and a humanist should form, according to Cusanus’ interpretation, part of the core understanding in which we know all things in One – because our mind in itself is the One.

The motivation standing behind this reasoning derives basically from the strong belief in the overall probabilistic nature of episteme, first because of a certain agnosticism, but also because of a supposed continuity between divine *mens* and senses, so that humans themselves, taking as their point of departure the *aistheta* and proceeding through *ratio* towards intellect, can re-create and thereby understand the world, while imitating respectively their own mental origin in the God. The appreciation of the persuasion via senses, that is, the entrusting of the subjective and apparent cognitive material with something viable, certainly belongs to the intentions of Cusanus, provided that the appearance persuading us is coordinated with infinity as a primeval source of all creation. Every concrete material shaping should be seen as accommodating in itself a potential for all other conceivable forms, and for this purpose there is professed a point of transition – to the infinity of forms – in the shaping. Prompting us thus for conjecture and verisimilitude in our grasp of the universe, and calling, accordingly, for the figures of meaning, Nicholas is still pushing an entirely new note in the rhetorical-philosophical gallery of argumentation, because the figures, or images, that he is intending are not the metaphorical ‘pictures’ of language, indicating actually some lack in our ability to signify and understand the things, but they are the exterior geometrical figures which should impress and persuade us through their own visual likeness to the things denoted, while being at the same time reducible to



purely mathematical (numerical) substance and carrying in their physical-visual presence a mark of God's omnivoyant infinite eye.

It has been noted, by the way, that the Renaissance bears witness to a kind of re-composing of Horace's famous prescription for the poets – to be in their use of words as immediate and impressive as are pictures: *ut pictura poesis* –, because the subject as seen instructed by this dictum was supposed in the Renaissance to be not any more a poet but rather a drawer, or a painter, and the kernel was accordingly overturned to mean that Horace is in fact talking about a figurative picture (and, thus, consulting a visual artist) rather than about figurative speech (and advising a poet) (Braider 1999:170ff.). The persuasion in the Renaissance, we could say, goes through the eyes which are supposed to see in the pictures performed by human *ars* a verisimilitude and a replication of God's creation, because these *pictura*, being mathematically sound metrical images of the world outside, must and shall overall involve an a-metrical and supra-rational reference to the One – to be the representations of mind.

## 5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has purported to schematize some principal radices of the Renaissance in later medieval thought. If the Renaissance, understood as a re-discovery of antiquity, is featured by the new appreciation of sensible reality and corporeality, these same characteristics can be deduced out of the voluntarism of nominalist thinking. The infinity of God, conceived in terms of his absolute and indeterminable wish, left the followers of nominalism no other chance than to rely on their senses and to fill the gap disclosed under whatever rationality with an anchor in the will of themselves. Being promotive of empiricism and the natural sciences, this new intimate contact with the senses conduced to the prospect of surrendering reality to the volitional objectives of humanity, comparable somehow to the perspective opened up by Greek rhetoric under the hands of the sophists. This kind of platform for the divinization of man without the God was counteracted in late medieval philosophy by the suppositions for the divinization of man with God, deriving basically from German Dominican thinking. Launching a hope to accommodate the infinity of the Christian God in terms of intellect, these men had elaborated convincingly in favour of the univocal mind between God and humans, fostering, in their striving for *negatio negationis*, an obliteration of some fundamental distinctions of Christianinty, but also of Aristotelianism. A denunciation of sensibility and of the outward world together with setting the full reality of things and of creation into the intellect was a corollary of their thinking. I have proposed to view the settling of the Renaissance on the example of Nicholas of Cusa as an activity employing these two contradictory strategies in chorus, from which is also derived the Renaissance's specific wish to work from the senses via rationality back to the intellect in God. In interdisciplinary terms, it brings about Cusanus' aestheticization and theologization of his episteme

because the real designatum of knowledge is always postulated to stand above what we really know in our human rationality and position.

Address:

Rein Undusk  
The Under and Tuglas Literature Centre  
Roosikrantsi 6  
Tallinn 10119

E-mail: rein@utkk.ee

Tel. and fax: 372 6440 177

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