Mystagogy beyond Onto-theology.

Looking back to Post-modernity with

Nicholas of Cusa

The philosopher on the bridge

In his obituary *The Laugh of Michel Foucault*, Certeau recalls the philosopher on the bridge in the introductory scene of Cusa’s trialogue *The Layman on Mind* (ch. 1 n. 51). Contemplating the pilgrims, coming in flocks to Rome on Good Friday in the jubilee of 1450, the philosopher gets ‘besides himself’ in the face of the unambitious devotion of the flock. A mumbling crowd ‘displaces’ his mind.

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1 This essay was written in 2008 as a preliminary study to my forthcoming book: Hoff, Johannes, *The Analogical Turn. Re-thinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa* (Grand Rapids, 2013).

2 Certeau, Michel de, *Theoretische Fiktionen. Geschichte und Psychoanalyse* (Wien, 1997), pp. 54f. This version of the text was originally published in *Le Débat* (no. 41, 1986, pp. 140-156); a variant of the passage is to be found in: Michel de Certeau, "The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa. Transl. by Catherine Porter." In: Diacritics. A review of contemporary criticism 17.3 (1987), pp.2-38, p. 34.
This ‘displacement’ relates, according to Certeau, the late-medieval cardinal to the marveling laugh of Michel Foucault. It relates Cusa to Foucault, as it relates Foucault to his successors Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze; and predecessors Martin Heidegger, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jacques Lacan. Following Robert Musil’s novel of 1931/32, *The man Without Properties*, Certeau summarizes this tentative comparison by pointing out the ambiguous source of the *late-modern* experience of displacement: The philosophical quest for the truth is now provoked by the ‘layman’, the ‘man without properties and position’; the philosophical centre of gravity has become lost in a mumbling crowd. Cusa, the *late-medieval* counterpart of this late-modern movement, confirms this comparison when he confesses in his letter of 22 September 1452 to the monks of the Bavarian monastery Tegernsee, “that the revelation, which occurs to the many, remains hidden to the wise”.

In Cusa’s trialogue the displacing “conversion scene” (Certeau) on the bridge is followed by a remarkable sequence of scene changes which may retrospectively be read as a divination of the dusk of the epoch, dawning in the 15th century. A rhetorician appears, rip-

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ping the pale man out of his immersion into the laypeople’s devotion and reminding him of
the cause of his pilgrimage: Following the call of the oracle of Delphi, he was striving to
know himself; but now the crowd seems to have changed his mind. The truth of simple be-
lievers seems to be unreachable for wise men; but this does not prevent the philosopher
from asking for a place, which allegedly contains many writings on the recurrent topic of
his strive for the truth – a pagan temple, dedicated to ‘Mind’ by the Roman praetor T. Atti-
lus Crassus in 217 BC. The rhetorician recalls the multitude of devastations Rome had un-
dergone, and that no one knows any longer anything of these books. Disappointed by this
devastating news, the philosopher fears to have come in vain, but the rhetorician suggests
guiding him to a supplement of the missing books that remarkably turns out to be a sup-
plement of the unreachable flock as well: a nameless ‘layman’ (idiot).

After a short instant of hesitation, this proposal provokes what the psychoanalyst
Jacques Lacan would have called a ‘precipitated will to believe’: “I ask that this be done
straight away” (n. 53). And immediately the rhetorician guides his peer, passing a pagan
temple which seems no longer to be of interest, to “a small subterranean room” were the
layman is carving a wooden spoon. The rhetorician, who had admired the wisdom of the
layman already in the foregoing dialogue On Wisdom, is embarrassed by the menial en-
gagement of his hero; but the philosopher rejects his apologies. He beholds the wood; and
this is the point of departure of a further chain of metonymic transference operations.

Starting from a point of conversion (bridge) which led, via an instant of hesitation, to a
layman-supplement of the missing books, the philosopher is finally guided to the truth he
desired to discover. However, he is supported now not by the doctrines of pagan bookmen,
but by the layman’s reflections on his measuring occupation with a piece of wood: “Mind is
that from which derive the boundary and the measurement of everything. Indeed, I surmise that mind [mens] takes its name from measuring [mensurare]”.5 The well-educated philosopher is surprised at this outlandish etymology; but his mind has caught fire. *Bona fide* he allows himself to be guided to a truth that transcends his academic aspirations.

The un-scholastic, metonymic use of etymologies relates Cusa to post-structuralist philosophers in the wake of Heidegger and Lévi-Strauss. It is even possible to use the above introductory scene as a narrative plot that delineates the main concerns of his late-modern successors. The first chapter of this essay (1) will unfold these concerns, viz. the late-modern experience of displacement. I will then point out how Cusa’s philosophy might be read ‘retrospectively’ in the light of late- or post-modernity (2). Eventually, in the last chapter (3), I will point out how Cusa’s philosophy might be used as a guide that leads beyond the perplexities of modern and post-modern thinking. In accordance with this triadic outline, I will especially draw attention to three features of Cusa’s mystagogy:

1. *Displacement*: the truth has become lost in the mumbling crowd. ‘Something is missing at its place.’

5 *Mentem esse, ex qua omnium rerum terminus et mensura. Mentem quidem a mensurando dici conicio. Idiota de mente*. In: Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera omnia, iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidem edita* (Leipzig-Hamburg, 1932ff.) h 5.1, n.57,4-7. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are based on the *Complete philosophical and theological treatises of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, 2001) (http://www.cla.umn.edu/jhopkins/). The numbering system is based on the above critical edition (h). Deviations in the numbering system of the translated text are indicated as “Hp.”.
2. *Attraction*: someone (a layman) or something (a spoon, an icon, an eyeglass, etc.) crops up which ‘attracts’ our attention. Something provides a supplement for what is ‘missing at its place’.

3. *Supplementation*: metaphysical speculations are unexpectedly rediscovered, but now they appear as ‘makeshifts’\(^6\), destined to provide guidance to the displaced truth of the flock. The truth is no longer separable from the perplexing experience that something is ‘missing at its place’.

1. Displacement

1.1 Reflexive modernisation and the crisis of modern basic-concepts

In contrast to the analytic tradition of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, ‘philosophy’ in the continental sense of the word is incompatible with specialisation.\(^7\) Similar to Aristotle’s account of metaphysics as ‘first philosophy’, the philosophical pursuit of wisdom cannot but start with the clarification of basic-concepts that transcend the limitations of specialized disciplines. However, although philosophy has always to start with the presuppositions of science, art, and action in general, the interminable challenge to clarify these pre-suppositions is not iso-


\(^7\) See also Heidegger, Martin, *Being and time. Translation of Sein und Zeit* (Albany, NY, 1996), § 3.
lable from the considerations on their ‘historicity’, in the sense of Martin Heidegger. As Michel Foucault has put it, tracing the problem of historicity back to Immanuel Kant, modern philosophy can never abstract from the question: “What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?”

Given the ‘post-modern’ suspicion against anything that might appear as fundamental or unalterable, we might answer this question provisionally by pointing to, what sociologists call, the phenomenon of ‘reflexive modernisation’ in ‘post-traditional’ societies. ‘Reflexivity’ is to be considered as a characteristic sign of modernity as a whole. An increasing erosion of the tacit knowledge of authoritative traditions accompanied the rise of our modern world. The call for ‘critical’ justification of what seemed to be no longer self-evident was the hallmark of the Enlightenment tradition and the ensuing history of political emancipation. The attitude of public criticism and scientific reflexivity undermined the authority of traditional narratives and habits.

However, only in ‘post-traditional’ (or ‘globalised’) societies does this attitude become a general feature of our everyday life. And this second step of ‘reflexive modernisation’ is of philosophical significance, since the popularisation of the reflexive basic attitude of modern societies affects the authority of scientific reflexivity as well. In post-modern societies, the


liquidation of the bonds of tradition is no longer convergent with the belief in ‘scientific progress’. Rather we are becoming increasingly aware that the scientific standards of Western rationality are also entangled in the imprecise logic of pre-scientific narratives. As Martin Heidegger has put it already in 1927, the cultivation of scientific knowledge is part of our contingent ‘being in the world’ (Being and Time § 4). Consequently, scientists can no longer claim to have a privileged access to the truth. While classical modernity undermined the authority of narrative traditions under the guide of the authority of ‘enlightened rationality’, in post-modernity the power of this ‘deconstructive’ movement turns likewise against the authority of its guide. Lost without unquestionable orientation marks, we have to cope with an overall experience of displacement – something is missing at its place.

In order to develop a more precise understanding of the modern phenomenon of reflexivity, we might imagine a ‘simple believer’ in the age of Rousseau and Voltaire. He kneels down and starts his daily prayers, when suddenly a friendly intellectual appears behind his back, saying, ‘Very interesting, what you are doing here. Do you know that the native peoples in southern Brazil have cultivated completely different prayer practices?’ The believer may reject this comparison. However, the shadow of an ‘observer perspective’ will start to undermine his pious activities. The temptation to adopt a disengaged, reflexive attitude with regard to his daily prayers will weaken his conviction that he is doing something of universal significance. Hence, his religious world will appear from now at least subliminally as somewhat arbitrary and interchangeable.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} For an autobiographical-ethnological account of the subversive logic of scenarios like these, see Lévi-Strauss, Claude, Tristes tropiques (Harmondsworth, 1976).
It might be argued that experiences like these caused the invention of the modern concept of ‘culture’ in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, the ‘second order perspective’ of ‘cultural comparison’ was at this time primarily the attitude of educated elites. In ‘postmodernity’ it becomes, by contrast, an inescapable feature of our everyday life. The disengaged observer is no longer a philanthropic humanist who lives in a distant metropolis. Distributed through digitalized media, the invisible interactivity of social networks, and the increased social and cultural mobility of globalized societies, the second order perspectives of Voltaire and Rousseau has become part of the everyday life of almost any inhabitant of our ‘global village’.

In order to assess the corrosion of academic rationality standards, which accompanies this second move of reflexive modernization, we may consider one of the most significant semantic basic distinctions of modern societies: The distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. According to Jacques Derrida, this distinction is exemplary for one of the most deeply rooted metaphysical prejudgments of our modern world. It builds on the mythical imagination of an untouched ‘inner space’, which is secluded from the (‘cultural’) contingencies of everyday life, and confirms the dualist assumption that it is possible to separate an ‘inner’ from an ‘outer’ space, in order to distinguish between what is natural and what is merely conventional or arbitrary. Prototypical examples of this modern fiction are Descartes’ attempts to delineate the ‘inner space’ of an autonomously thinking subject (cogito), the ‘la-


boratory’ of modern empiricism, and the Galilean fiction of a body which, when left to itself and isolated from the impact of external forces, is no longer compelled to change its state (corpus quod a viribus impressis non cogitur). The latter fiction became, one generation after Galileo and Descartes, included into the first principle of Newton’s *Philosophia Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1686-87). Hence, it has become one of the most fundamental presuppositions of the modern concepts of nature (physis), space and motion.14

Examples like these demonstrate two different things: They show why it is not possible to draw a sharp separating line between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘scientific facts’ and ‘symbolic images’, ‘objective data’ and ‘subjective fictions’, etc. And they show why the modern fiction of a ‘neural space’ that is not affected by the contingencies of everyday life is insufficient to safeguard the impartiality of scientific research. Jean-François prediction of 1982 that the design of scientific theories will become increasingly controlled by non-scientific economic interests in post-modern societies has become a truism in age of third-party funded research.15 In globalised societies the decision about the question ‘what counts as a serious matter of scientific research’ is governed by the economic interests such as the growth strategies of the drug, food and entertainment industry, and not by scientists that in-


habit a neutral space of research that is ‘free of value and interest’. And the Early Romantic idea, supported by late-modern philosophers such as the Jürgen Habermas, that the democratic interest in social, cultural and scientific progress might compensate for the missing ‘neutral space’ of scientific research has proved to be a pious fable of liberal academics.

Given this disenchancing outcome of the modern Enlightenment project, pre-modern philosophers had good reasons to identify the scientific pursuit of knowledge with the seeking of the beautiful, the good and the truth that enables us to contemplate the world for its own sake. However, we should at this point not rush to pre-mature conclusions that support non-realist solutions to the conundrums of the late-modern stock tacking of philosophical basic concepts. To conclude form deconstructive accounts of the modern dualism between nature and culture that modern sciences are ‘only’ the outcome of ‘cultural constructions’ would be equivalent with a simple reversion of the modern assumption that ‘scientific evidences’ are more fundamental than ‘cultural conventions’. Post-modern constructivists or non-realist only confirm the semantic dualism between ‘natural facts’ and ‘cultural fictions’ that provoked the emergence of the modern ‘metaphysics of space’. They do not question the dualist mythology that made this metaphysics appear as plausible.

This explains why the Anglophone reception of continental philosophers, such as Heidegger and Derrida, did not always do justice to the philosophical rigor of their ‘deconstructive’ responses to the challenges of late-modernity. In the wake of Edmund Husserl, Derrida considered himself immune against any kind of skepticism, relativism or non-

16 Habermas, Jürgen, Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston, 1971).
realism. The ‘foundational crisis’ (*Grundlagenkrise*)\(^\text{17}\) of modern rationality required in his view more rigorous a stocktaking of philosophical basic concepts. Similar to the ‘task of deconstructing’ in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (§ 6), his ‘deconstructivism’ pursued a two-fold goal: To reconstruct the conditions of the possibility of modern concepts of ‘realism’; and to open the possibility of investigating alternative accounts of the foundations of ‘scientific reason’ that were not yet affected by the dualist semantic of Western modernity, such as the pre-Socratics (in the case of the late Heidegger) or Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart (in the case of the late Derrida).

1.2 Cusa’s doxological response to this challenge

Against this background, we may now turn back to Nicholas of Cusa. For the experience of displacement *as such* is not an exclusive fate of post-modernity. As a sixteen-year-old student from the tiny Mosel village of Cusa (today Bernkastel-Kues), Nicholas may have learned to know this fate already after arriving in Renaissance Italy in 1417. In order to attain a pre-understanding of his alternative response to this challenge we may compare the above account of the modern experience of displacement with another introductory scene of Cusa’s writings, which is included in his little dialogue *On the Hidden God*. As in our above example, this introductory dialogue focuses on a ‘simple believer’:

1.2 Cusa’s doxological response to this challenge

According to Cusa, the ‘simple believer’ is the most fundamental kind of believer. The ‘simple believer’ is one who does not have any pre-existing ideas or concepts about God. For Cusa, the ‘simple believer’ is the most honest believer because he does not have any biases or preconceptions about God.

Pagan: I see that you have most devoutly prostrated yourself and are shedding tears of love – not hypocritical tears but heart-felt ones. Who are you, I ask? / Christian: I am a Christian. / Pagan: What are you worshipping? / Christian: God. / Pagan: Who is [this] God whom you worship? / Christian: I don't know. / Pagan: How is it that you worship so seriously that of which you have no knowledge? / Christian: It’s exactly because I am without knowledge, that I worship him (quia ignoro adoro).\textsuperscript{18}

This introductory passage of a frequently neglected little tractate displays in the shortest possible way what might be called Cusa’s method of ‘doxological reduction’. Similar to Edmund Husserl’s ‘phenomenological reduction’, Cusa’s mystagogy puts aside any mundane knowledge about what might or might not exist, and any attachment to the tacit knowledge of narratives and traditions. However, in contrast to Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, Cusa’s reduction does not retain a kind of the purified intuition of immediately ‘given’ phenomena or things; nor does he feel compelled to restore the detached observer perspective of a Cartesian ‘ego’ in order to ensure that the ‘givenness’ of phenomena has an addressee. In the face of the reflexive attitude of his pagan observer, he retains nothing but apophatic acts of prayer and praise: the doxological address to an unknown God.

This doxological reduction does not support the post-Kantian conviction that our ability to turn our face to God has first to be approved based on a rational investigation of the limitations of human reason, and the ‘conditions of the possibility’ of religious practices. Cusa’s mystagogy is incompatible with the assumption of modern ‘philosophers of religion’

\textsuperscript{18} Dialogus de deo abscondito h 3 (Opuscula 1) n. 1,4-12
that it is possible to reconstruct a quasi-natural ‘religion within the limits of reason alone’\textsuperscript{19} and the accompanying assumption that we can know what religious traditions are talking about without being attached to the historically contingent doxological and contemplative practices of a specific religious tradition.

However, Cusa does not fall into the opposite extreme either; that is, he neither adopts a sceptical attitude with regard to our desire for knowledge, nor does he take refuge to mysterious revelations or the tacit knowledge of pre-scientific narratives. Cusa’s has not the slightest doubt that we can know the ‘universal truth’, albeit only in the mode of a knowing unknowing. But this truth is neither deducible from a metaphysical principles, nor from the quasi-natural principles of a Kantian concept of ‘freedom’; it is only to be found in contemplative and doxological practices that reveal that something is missing at its place: \textit{quia ignoro adoro}.

But why is the above ‘unknown God’ the God of a Christian? Cusa does not hesitate to conclude that his unknowable God is identical with the ‘only God’ (Deut. 6:4) of the Holy Scriptures. However, he is well aware that this, in post-modern terms, astonishing conclusion is not philosophically self-evident. Rather he considers it as the result of a sophisticated combination of both theological and philosophical considerations.

The theological strand of his justification builds on the iconoclastic roots of the Abrahamic tradition: As long as we are praying to what we can imagine or explain, we are pray-

ing to something finite; and “such worship is idolatry; it ascribes to the image that which befits only the reality itself”.\textsuperscript{20} Only the reality of God himself can deliver us from the idolatrous attachment to narratives, myths or scientific theories; and this reality is truly acknowledged only where it is venerated for its own sake – without regard to the appreciation of reflexive reasons or the attraction of elevating imaginations. As Cusa puts it in his first sermon of 1431, to shore up the unconditioned certainty of faith through the relative certainty of rational or imaginative ‘evidences’ would be a sign of sickness; a symptom of the incapacity to stand on one’s own feet.\textsuperscript{21} Everything has to start with the apophatic knowledge of prayer, and everything has to lead back to this apophatic mode of knowledge. For God “fashioned all things from out of His praises and for the sake of His praise”\textsuperscript{22}

Cusa’s Augustinian concept of \textit{docta ignorantia} receives its full weight at this point.\textsuperscript{23} But this does not prevent him from providing simultaneously a philosophical account of our ignorance, that makes it retrospectively appear as suitable to stand the deconstructive ‘crash test’ of reflexive modernisation. My ability to know that I do not know has the character of a reflexive mode of knowledge; and this reflexive knowledge is in Cusa, like in Kant’s \textit{En-}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Et talis cultura idolatria est, quae hoc imaginis tribuit, quod tum convenit veritati. De docta ignorantia} 1, n. 87, 16-17.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ex his appodiaculis probationum et pignorum intellectus infirmus, sicut homo in pedibus debilis, ex multitudine appodiaculorum iudicatur. Baculi autem infirmum non sanant, sic nec pignora intellectum; quare nec virtuosum faciunt. Sermo 4 (Sermones 1 h 16/1) n. 11,7-12.}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{De venatione sapientiae} h 12, 18 n. 53,8-3 (own translation).
lightenment project, designed to enable us to “use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another”\textsuperscript{24}. However, Cusa’s philosophical strategy to perform this task does not build on rationalist apriority assumptions that a meant to be of universal significance, as Kant did in his groundbreaking three critiques. Cusa’s ‘wisdom of unknowing’\textsuperscript{25} rather aims to overcome the attachment to any narrative or philosophical support structure whatsoever.

Unlike in Kant, we do not have access to a rational concept of the ‘unknown God’; not even in the precarious sense of a ‘regulative idea’.\textsuperscript{26} Rather the universal truth Cusa’s docta ignorantia aims to reveal is uni-versal in the literal sense of the word: apt to turn (versare) ‘everything’ to one (unum) contingently revealed centre of attraction that is worth to be acknowledged and praised for its own sake. His philosophy does not provide us with a doctrine ‘about’ God; it is rather designed to gather every-thing together in the light of a contingently mediated truth, which transcends both the idolatry of pagan myths and the conjectural power of human reason.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{enumerate}
\item For this alternative translation of Cusa’s docta ignorantia, see Josef Stallmach, Ineinsfall der Gegenstände und Weisheit des Nichtwissens. Grundzüge der Philosophie des Nikolaus von Kues (Münster, 1989).
\item See Kant, Immanuel, Critique of pure reason (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2\textsuperscript{nd}2003) B377-396.
\item Cf. De coniecturis in 3.1.1-2 and 4-7.
\end{enumerate}
In theological terms, this response to the challenge of reflexive modernisation might be described as a radicalized form of iconoclasm that works in two directions. To begin with, the problem of idolatry is not to be solved ‘within the limits of reason alone’. We are rather invited to cultivate doxological and spiritual practices that enable us to ‘distinguish’ between deceptive and reliable guideposts to the universal truth on a case-by-case basis. Consequently, the philosophical requirement “to orient oneself in thinking” is not detachable from contingent imageries. The seeker has to trust in symbolical makeshifts: “As someone who vaults over a ditch using a pole (baculo)”, we have to rely on the “assistance of imagination ( ... ) in order to arrive at the truth”.

However, the seeker is at the same time required to use this makeshifts skilfully. The jumper will reach his goal only if he has learned to drop his stick as soon as the time has come to trust in the gift of ‘free flight’. Our mind is dependent on imaginative or conjectural makeshifts. However, the guidance (manuductio) of images and rational conjectures

30 Nisi enim mens nostra indigeret adiutorio imaginationis, ut ad veritatem, quae imaginationem excedit, quam solum quaerit, perveniat – quasi saltator fossati baculo –, non esset in nobis imaginationi coniuncta. De ludo globi h 11, 2, n.88,14-17.
31 Cf. De pace fidei h 7.2
is not desirable for its own sake. Narrative or scientific makeshifts are reliable only to the extent that they lead to a freedom of worship that stands on its own feet (*Sermo* 4).

1.3 Cusa’s response to the modern experience of pluralisation

At this point, it is again important not to rush to premature relativist conclusions. Cusa mystagogy confirms the post-modern insight that our thinking cannot but rely on contingent makeshifts. However, as his 1453 dialogue *On Peaceful Unity of Faith* unmistakeably demonstrates, this ‘deconstructive’ insight is in Cusa’s thinking not accompanied by a kind of relativism or scepticism with regard to the plurality of religious traditions. Cusa does not at all support the pluralist conclusion of late modern ‘philosophers of religion’ that the symbolisms and narratives of different religious traditions are reducible to exchangeable ‘cultural’ articulations of an inconceivable ‘universal truth’. But what enables us to decide between reliable and deceptive narratives and symbols, or between more and less suitable articulations of the universal truth?

Cusa was convinced that the Jewish *tetragrammaton*, i.e. the unique and inexpressible four letter-name YHWH, provided initially the most reliable guidance to the truth of ‘knowing unknowing’; and that this name became eventually most suitably replaced by the

human proper name ‘Jesus’. However, this conviction did not require him to deny the displacing experience that religious narratives, symbols and names are contingent and exchangeable. He was rather convinced that only the Jewish-Christian grammar of prayer and praise enables us to reconcile the philosophical demand for a universal truth with the theological attachment to contingent narratives and symbols; and that this conviction is true not despite, but precisely because of the reflexive features of our modern way of thinking. Only the name of ‘Jesus’ can account for the nominalist experience that even the most unique proper name is exchangeable and replaceable by other names without sliding down the slippery slope of a nihilistic relativism.

Seen from a late modern point of view, the value religious traditions attribute to symbols and names like ‘Abraham’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Mohammed’ and ‘Buddha’ is comparable with the value of money that might gain or lose its significance. Nothing is immune against, what the sociologist Niklas Luhmann calls, the dynamics of ‘inflation’, i.e. the devaluation of symbols that happens to take place when the supply of competing names and symbols increases. It might be argued that the nominalist decline of Christian learning in the Late

34 *Sermo 20 (Sermones 1 h 16/3)* is dedicated to this topic.


Middle ages was primarily the consequence of such an experience. Not least thanks to the decreasing paper prices after the 13th century, the written and spoken word had become (in the literal and in the figurative sense) “cheaper” than ever before in the history of the human race. However, Cusa did not perceived this phenomenon as a cause for concern, since he was convinced that the tradition of Christian learning is compatible with both the experience of an inflationary proliferation, and the experience of a shortage of names, that happens to take place when we encounter an inexpressible mystery.

In order to understand this serene attitude with regard to nominalist crisis of Cusa’s time, we have the recall the arguably most fundamental mystery of the tradition of Christian learning, namely the mystery of ‘hypostatical union’ of God and man in Jesus Christ, which was defined at Chalcedon in 451. As Cusa points out most emphatically in his sermons, the divine ‘hypostasis’ of Christ reveals in one person not only the unity of a perishable human nature with the imperishable nature of God; it reveals at the same time the unity of an expressible with in inexpressible name. Or more precisely, the incarnated son of God

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37 For an introduction to Cusa’s interpretation of this dogma, see McGinn, Bernard, Maximum Contractum et Absolutum: The Motive for the Incarnation in Nicholas of Cusanus and his Predecessors. In: Izbicki, Thomas M. and Bellito, Christopher M. (Ed.), Nicholas of Cusa and his age: intellect and spirituality (Leiden - Bosten - Köln, 2002), pp.175-196; and Haubst, Rudolf, Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues (Freiburg/Br., 1956).
unites in one ‘hypostasis’ the contingent proper name of ‘Jesus’ with an inexpressible and unique name “beyond all names” (Phil. 2:9), that is, the divine Word (Logos) itself.\textsuperscript{38}

The traditional character of this insight does not prevent Cusa from making a quite innovative use of its philosophical implications. Since contingent names are always substitutable through other names, the expressible name of God (‘Jesus’) is at least in principle substitutable through every other name. Considered in terms of finite names the man of Galilee is, as it were, only ‘one person besides others’; just as his story is only one story besides others. Nothing enables Christians to ‘out narrate’ competing religious, secular or scientific stories in the name of this unique story; it is always possible to respond: “Nice story, But so what?”\textsuperscript{39}

Yet Cusa does not interpret this relativist possibility as a calamity, but as a sign of grace. And he has good reasons to do so, since the God who reveals himself through an exemplary finite person is not only essentially different from contingent ‘other things’. He is at the same time indistinct from every ‘other thing’, and consequently nameable by the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{38} Cf. De docta ignorantia 1,24 n.74; III. 4; Sermo 1, n.3-7 (Sermones 1 h 16/1); Sermo 17 (Sermones 1 h 16/3); Sermo 20, n.6 (ibid.); Sermo 23, n.20, n.29, n.28f., n.34f. (Sermones 1 h 16/4); Sermo 48 n.29-30 (Sermones 2 h 17/2); De li non aliud h 13.22, p.52, 9-12 inter alia; see also Bader, Günter, Die Emergenz des Namens. Amnesie, Aphasie, Theologie (Tübingen, 2006), 9-14, and Casarella, Peter J., His Name is Jesus. Negative Theology and Christology in Two Writings of Nicholas of Cusa from 1440. In: Christianson, Gerald and Izbicki, Thomas M. (Ed.), Nicholas of Cusa on Christ and the Church (Leiden, 1996), pp.281-307.

\end{footnotesize}
name of everything. To use again the language of late-modern sociologists: The hypostatistic union of Christ encourages both, an unfettered proliferation of religious makeshifts, and an uncompromising shortening of their availability.

Cusa use of makeshift-names for the mystery of his wisdom of unknowing is exemplary for his adoption of this ambiguous policy of naming, as becomes most evident in his meditation on the divine name ‘nothing other’ (non aliud) in his late tetralogue De li non aliud (1462, h 13). Cusa builds in this tetralogue on Meister Eckhart’s considerations on the God as indistinctum (the ‘undifferentiated’), and the medieval logic of definition, which informed the scholastic teaching that every entity (ens) is ‘another thing’ (aliud). According to this tradition, everything is de-fined by its distinction to ‘other things’. Thus, every entity has the character of a limited “other thing” inasmuch as it is distinct from something else. Yet the in-finite is ‘by definition’ un-limited. Consequently, it cannot be distinct from ‘other things’, or more precisely, it is distinct from every ‘other thing’ (aliud) paradoxically just in being ‘nothing other’ (non aliud) than what ‘other things’ are. God is distinct from ‘other things’ precisely in that she is not limited to the reality of ‘another thing’ (aliud).

However, according to Cusa we touch on this paradox not only when we consider the infinity of God. It reveals itself likewise if we focus on ‘other things’ as such. For every ‘other thing’ (aliud) is at the same time ‘nothing other’ (non aliud) than what it is. Using an everyday expression, we can always say ‘it is what it is’, or better ‘it is nothing other than

what it is’ – for example when we wonder about the monochrome blue paintings of Yves Klein, or about a deep blue sky, and say the ‘sky is nothing other than the sky’ (see De li non-aliud ch. 6).

Seen from an ontological point of view, these are only varying expressions for the Aristotelian insight that everything is substantially identical with itself. However, given that the expression ‘nothing other’ can be considered at the same time as a most fitting name of the ‘unknown God’, the application of this name to every creature reveals simultaneously that the simplicity of every creature is an image of its creator, and inversely, that every creature can be seen in the ultimate simplicity its divine creator. Consequently, God is to be considered as ‘nothing other’ (non aliud) than what contingently happens to be ‘another thing’ (aliud). Every created ‘other thing’ is essentially ‘nothing other’ than what it happens to be; thus its substantial reality is ‘nothing other’ than an enigmatic revelation of the ultimate simplicity of God.

It is no accident that God revealed himself to Moses as the ‘I am who I am’ (Ex. 3:13). God is essentially nothing other than what he is, and this explains why every creature reveals its creator inasmuch as it ‘is what it is’. To use the language of De li non aliud: God is other than every ‘other thing’ just in being not limited to be ‘another thing’; and he is not other than ‘other things’ in so far as every ‘other thing’ is what it uniquely is: ‘nothing other’ (non aliud). Consequently, it is possible to call God by every name of every ‘other thing’, just as it is possible to call every ‘other thing’ by the name of God.
De li non aliud includes the most comprehensive meditation on this mystical inflation of divine names. However, Cusa’s meditates on the possibility of an unlimited proliferation of divine names already in his first sermon, where he marvels the plurality of sacred names used in the languages of different nations and religions (Sermo 1). The concluding chapters of the first book of De docta ignorantia provide then a concise Christological account of this possibility, immediately before the above-cited chapter on idolatry and true worship (ch. 24-25).

Cusa builds in these chapters on Hermes Trismegistos’ suggestion either to call “God by every name or else all things (...) by His name” and he relates this suggestion to the Christian synthesis of the Jewish and the Pagan traditions of worship and praise. The pagan use of divine names is essentially affirmative. Hence, it goes along with virtually unlimited multiplication and pluralisation of sacred names. The spiritual and liturgical practices of pagans are, so to speak, accompanied by an inflationary tendency. As opposed to this tendency, the spiritual grammar of the Jewish tradition privileges the logic of negation, since it aims to protect the uniqueness of the divine name against its abuse. Hence, the Jewish tradition focuses on the deflationary tendency of apophatic negations. Only in Christianity we find, according to Cusa, a perfect synthesis of these heterogeneous spiritual traditions, and this leads us back to the core of his response of the problem of exchangeability: Only in the

41 See also De genesi (1447, h 4 Opuscula 1), and with regard to De genesi and De li non-aliud, Dangelmayr, Siegfried, Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesbegriff in den philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues (Meisenheim am Glan, 1969), pp. 175ff., 226ff.

42 De docta ignorantia 1.24, n.74. See also De dato patris luminum h 4 (Opuscula 1) 2, n.102
‘hypostatical union’ of Christ (the topic of the third volume of *De docta ignorantia*) the possibility of naming God with *exchangeable* names (like ‘Jesus’) becomes inextricably united with an inexpressible and *unique* name (namely, the divine ‘Word’ itself).

This response to the problem of naming not only resists the formalist temptation of Kant and his modern successors to separate philosophical definitions of the ‘absolute’ from culturally contingent practices of naming God; it also resists the reformed temptation to reduce the problem of naming God to a matter of kerygmatic confessions. Cusa does not simply *proclaim* the uniqueness of Jesus Christ; he rather argues that the event of incarnation reveals a unique *liturgical procedure* to solve the aporia of naming.

We may recall at this point an illuminating passage of Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans that includes the grammatical key to this liturgical procedure: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:9). The inexpressible truth of Christianity is, according to this liturgical grammar, neither reducible to something *naturally hidden* under the surface of delusive and essentially exchangeable procedures of naming God (as in Buddhism or in formalist philosophical accounts of the ‘absolute’); nor to a revealed secret that has to be protected.


against its profanation (as in the case of the Jewish *tetragrammaton*, or in the a tabooing of sacred names in Islam). Rather the truth of Christian faith builds on a liturgical ‘lip service’ and the apocalyptic conviction that the words of our lips will become alive when the times has come for the Messiah to return.

In the ideal case, this lip service reveals what the believer ‘believes in his heart’; but this possibility is not enforceable. Only God himself can raise us from the dead and fill the words of our lips with life. For it is God himself that leads the seeing mind from the contingently ‘unique’ name of Jesus through the exchangeability of sacred names to the adoration of the *inexpressible Word itself*, which will be revealed to us in the vision of God.45 As Cusa puts it in *Sermo 23*, quoting Matthew 10:20 and 1 Corinthians 12:1: “For Christ says the truth to the preachers: ‘For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking

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through you.’ And Paul says: ‘No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.’” (n. 34, 18-23).

2. Attraction

The following chapter will focus on the second feature of late modernity that corresponds to Cusa’s way of thinking, outlined in the introduction, namely Cusa’s use of make-shifts that have the power to direct our attention to the ultimate truth. The first section (2.1) will outline how Cusa’s transformed the analogical ontology of the Middle Ages in the face of the modern experience of displacement into a mystagogical ontology that is consistent with his ‘doxological reduction’. The second section (2.2) will show how Cusa’s mystagogical strategy to use exemplary objects that attract the attention of his dialogue partners, in order to reveal the truth of his docta ignorantia, might be interpreted as a response to this modern experience.

2.1 Cusa’s mystagogical transformation of the analogical ontology of the Middle Ages

Subsequent to Immanuel Kant’s comprehensive account of the foundations of modern science, ethics and culture in the 18th century, it might be argued that the concept of subjective autonomy marked the mediating link between the heterogeneous spheres of ‘theoretical’, ‘practical’, and ‘aesthetical’ reasoning in the modern age. Hence, it came not as a sur-
prise that the late-modern deconstruction of our modern understanding of subjective autonomy emerged almost simultaneously with the deconstruction of the related concept of scientific autonomy. While Sigmund Freud demonstrated that Kant’s ‘autonomous subject’ is not ‘master in his own house’, philosophers and logicians like Heidegger and Kurt Gödel demonstrated that we are not able to control the borderline between the axiomatically incomplete rules of scientific research and the contingencies of pre-scientific language games.

According to Heidegger’s disputed monograph on “Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics”, Kant was not ignorant of these aporetic limitations. However, only in the 20th century we started to realize, that “we have never been modern”, that is, that the authority of the seemingly clear and distinct evidences of scientific reason is not separable from their symbolic authority as part our everyday life. Against this background, Cusa’s late medieval attempt to recover the analogical rationality of the Middle Ages has become more relevant than ever before.

As outlined above, Cusa’s apophatic realism is incompatible with the early modern attempts to segregate an autonomous space of research (such as the modern laboratory) from the world that we inhabit in order to create a ‘clear and distinct’ picture of the world that is not infected by the symbolic ambiguities of our everyday life. However, his philosophical

46 As to Freud’s impact on the deconstructive stock taking of late modernity, see Derrida, Jacques, *Resistances of psychoanalysis* (Stanford, Calif, 1998).


mystagogy supports just as little the ambiguities of an unbridled pluralism that turns the modern prioritization of scientific evidences against the contingencies of cultural conventions upside down, without questioning its metaphysical presuppositions. He rather adopts a middle path that avoids the false alternative between the seemingly black-and-white univocal rationality of modern sciences, and the equivocity of our post-modern pop-culture.

This middle path is comparable with Thomas Aquinas’ middle path between univocal and equivocal ways to the truth, though this comparison might come as a surprise. Despite Rudolf Haubst strong support of this reading, already published in 1961,49 modern interpreters of Cusa’s tend to deny any connection of Cusa’s philosophy with Aquinas’ analogi-
cal ontology. However, the modern ignorance with regard to this connection can easily be explained if we take into account that it is usually based on a misreading of Aquinas.

We will come back to this point after a short outline of the innovative features of Cusa’s analogical rationality, since he does indeed not simply restore the analogical ontology of the High Middle Ages. Cusa rather radicalizes it in at least two respects: On one hand, his mystagogy has more in common with late modern accounts of philosophy as ‘way of life’ (in the sense of Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault) than with the scholastic culture of the Middle Ages, as we will see in the next section of this chapter. On the other, Cusa’s radicalizes Aquinas’s concept of analogy in a way that might occasionally look like an ultra-radical variant of nominalism, though it can be simultaneously interpreted as an attempt to


defeat the unvocal rationality of Scotist and nominalist teaching of late medieval scholasticism by its own means. The following section will focus on this ‘deconstructive’ feature of Cusa’s mystagogy.

The Scholastic tradition of the Late Middle Ages tended to broaden the possibility to speak *univocally* about created and uncreated entities up to the point where even God appeared as an entity besides other entities that is subordinated to the metaphysical principles of a univocal ontology. But Cusa’s did not appreciate the book learning of, what he called polemically, the “Aristotelian Sects”\(^{53}\) of his time. His writings can even be interpreted as a full blown deconstruction of the ‘univocal turn’ that provoked the decline of Christian learning in the Late Middle Ages. In contrast to Duns Scotus and his scholastic successors, Cusa generalised the possibility to speak *analogically* up to the point were even our possibility to speak about finite entities and essences becomes a case of analogical reference.\(^{54}\)

This becomes most evident if we compare Cusa with early modern philosophers, such as Descartes and Leibniz, who radicalised (in the wake of Francesco Suarez) the univocal turn of late medieval scholasticism in order to create a scientific ‘Picture of the World’ (in the sense of Heidegger and Foucault).\(^{55}\) Up to a certain point, Cusa agrees, for example, with

\(^{53}\) Cf. *Apologia doctae ignorantia* h 2, n. 7-9.

\(^{54}\) See *De docta ignorantia* 1.3, n.10.

Leibniz that, on the level of rational comparisons, nothing can occur in our world twice in the same way. Every individual has unique attributes; not even two individuals can be equal in every respect.\textsuperscript{56} However, unlike Leibniz, Cusa does not assume that these “two” are distinct in a strictly determinable sense. We may articulate rational conjectures about the identity of individual substances, but conjectures like these can never be analytically precise. Even the plurality of abstract universals is, in Cusa, nothing but an effect of contingent deviations.\textsuperscript{57} No distinction can be precisely formalised. Everything is involved in interminably shifting “approximations”\textsuperscript{58} that ceaselessly tend toward the opposite of what it is.

\textsuperscript{56} Cf. De ludo globi I, h 9, n. 6, 3-4

\textsuperscript{57} Alteritas sequitur multiplicationem contingenter. De mente, h 5, 6 n. 96,5; cf. also De docta ignorantia 2.2; and Thomas P. McTighe, "Contingentia and Alterteritas in Cusa's Metaphysics." In: American Catholic philosophical quarterly 64 (1990), pp.55-71.

\textsuperscript{58} As John Milbank has put it: ‘In the face of nominalism and univocity, Nicholas of Cusa realized that both realism about universals, and analogical participation, require one to see the limited scope of the law of identity – for Ockham says with some truth that a common essence would be in the same respect both particular and universal (this would apply especially to Aquinas's view that the common forma is in things as this particular substance). Likewise he says that an analogous essentia would be in the same respect both shared and proper (and this would apply especially to Aquinas's view that the participated esse is the particular existence of a finite being). Nicholas saw that outside finite limits the law of identity no longer holds, although he also sustained a Platonic view that only the eternal has an unalterable identity and is fully non aliud. Finite things, though they exclude, and cannot be their opposite, are also involved in an infinite shifting 'approximation', and ceaselessly tend toward the opposite of what they are. For this reason, that which exceeds the law of identity also alone upholds it.’ Milbank, John, Being reconciled. Ontology and pardon (London, 2003), 135.
The contrast to Leibniz could hardly be sharper. ‘Nothing is identical with itself (save the One itself) and all differentiation is extrinsic;’ and inversely, ‘far from asserting purely formal differentiation, Cusa is saying, in effect, that in the order of finite realities only material diversity obtains. There is no formal diversity.’ Leibniz’ assumption that every individual is analytically identical with its essence is, according to Cusa, not applicable to created entities. If at all, it is only applicable to the simplicity of God herself; but in this case we are required to transcend the law of contradiction that, according to the Scotist, Nominalist, and post-Cartesian tradition governs rational accounts of identities and differences. Hence, we have to calculate with logical and mathematical ambiguities that undermine the modern utopia of univocal ‘theory of everything’ from the outset.

However, Cusa does not support modern or post-modern counteractions against totalizing scientific theories either. He neither compromises with the late medieval inclination to distinguish between ‘hard scientific’ and ‘soft religious’ truths, as if it were possible to participate simultaneously in two incompatible ‘language games’; nor does he support an unrestricted pluralism of truths in the sense of Jean-François’ Lyotard’s post-modernist (miss-)


60 As Simon Frank has pointed out, following Cusa’s consideration on the ‘non other’, even the sentence ‘A is A’ is not reducible to a simple case of univocity. It can be read as a tautology. But, it includes simultaneously a contradiction, since it is evident that the first ‘A’ of this sentence is not the second ‘A’. Consequently the sentence declares that something (A’), which is not something other (A’”), is identical with what it is not. Cf. Frank, Simon L., Erkenntnis und Sein 2. Die metaphysischen Grundlagen der begrifflichen Erkenntnis1929), pp.231-261, p. 237.
reading of Wittgenstein. Cusa rather self-evidently assumes that it is possible to distinguish between true references, which provide us with a reliable guide to the universal truth of learned ignorance, and equivocal references, which entangle our desire for knowledge in idolatry. However, this possibility cannot be assured within the (conjectural) limits of reason alone. Rather it requires us to look out for spiritual guidance. Our access the truth depends on contemplative exercises that sharpen our ability to distinguish the seemingly indistinguishable (or equivocal) based on our intellectual capacity of mental vision (visio mentis).

The last point explains why Cusa’s ‘doxological reduction’ is of more than spiritual significance. As outlined above, in connection with his meditations on the ‘nothing other’, Cusa’s concept of universality is uncompromisingly theocentric. It is not possible to talk about

61 Cf. Lyotard, Jean François, The differend. Phrases in dispute (Minneapolis, 1988). For a critical discussion, cf. Frank, Manfred, The boundaries of agreement (Aurora, CO, 2005). Genealogically, the post-modern pluralisation of ‘truths’ might be traced back to the late medieval controversies about the radical Aristotelianism of Siger of Brabant, which prefigured the modern distinction between ‘hard scientific’ and ‘soft religious’ truth. Etienne Tempier’s condemnations of 1270 and 1277 might only present a caricature of Siger’s teaching. However, as Henry de Lubac has argued, an attenuated version of the condemned “double truth” theory provided, ironically, the tacit foundation of the Early modern, scholastic distinction between a ‘natural’ and a ‘supernatural’ truths that emerged in response to this condemnation. Cf. Lubac, Henri de, Augustinianism and modern theology (New York, NY, 2000), pp. 212f.; and Lubac, The mystery of the supernatural, p. 178.

62 See (besides De visione Dei) De li non aliud 5, n.17, n.33, n.99; De apice theoriae h 12, n.11; Apologia doctae ignorantia h 2, n.9-10 (Hp. n.7-8) inter alia.
the creation without relating it to its creator. To say, for example, ‘the sky is nothing other than the sky’ (see De li non-aliud ch. 6) is tantamount with saying that God is present in the sky. Since God is the only reality subsistent in itself, every ‘other reality’ has to be interpreted as a theophanic manifestation of this unique actuality. Everything is from eternity ‘unfolded’ in the unity and simplicity of the divine Word through which, according to the gospel of John, everything is created. If this hypostatic reality ceased to exist, nothing else could persist either.63

Consequently, every reference to created entities is inextricably interlaced with the use of symbolic indicators that relate them back to the divine Word through which they are created. However, since this Word has revealed itself in the unexchangeable face of a unique creature, its ‘oneness’ is not reducible to an abstract principle. It rather is the principle of both, the universal and the unique features of every creature.64 Hence, it is not possible to account for our ability to refer to this unifying principle based on abstract epistemological accounts of the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge, or a ‘general theory of reference’.

This does, of course, not mean that our ability to refer to the universal truth cannot be accounted for at all. Already Cusa’s magnum opus De docta ignorantia includes a concise

63 Unum igitur exaltatum est hypostasis omnium hypostaseum, quo non existente nihil est et quo existente omnia id sunt, quod sunt. De principio h 10, n. 28 ; cf. also n. 20-25, n. 34, n. 37-38 (inter alia).

account of this possibility. But such an account cannot be based on generalizable, rational principles alone. It rather requires us to accept two limitations: (1) That our knowledge cannot exclusively build on the evidences of rational comparisons, or, to put it more positively, that “faith is necessary to all knowledge and all knowledge presupposes faith.” (2) And that our ability to approximate the ultimate truth requires us to rely on the symbols that direct our attention and help us to orient ourselves in thinking.

In this sense, it might be argued that Cusa’s account of the possibility to refer to God has more in common it with a ‘formal indication’ (in the sense of Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time). His wisdom of unknowing consists in an open-ended series of attempts to indicate something that cannot be formally determined. An illuminating side note of De li non aliud might illustrate how this mystagogical strategy to approximate the truth works:


66 “Nicholas differs from Augustine in that he uses knowing ignorance as a method applicable to all areas. No single thing can be comprehended by us because none exists except through its relation to a God who is beyond all comprehension. Faith is necessary to all knowledge and all knowledge presupposes faith.” Cranz, "Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa in the Tradition of Western Christian Thought" (see Fn. 23), p. 311.
‘That name of God (not other) is not that what is before every name nameable in Heaven and on earth. (By comparison, the way which directs a pilgrim to a city is not the name of that city). 67

The bracketed last sentence of this citation includes the key to Cusa’s mystagogical theory of naming. According to this theory, our reference to God cannot be based on some sort of likeness or comparison. We cannot refer to God by using, for example, a four-term relationships like a:b = c:d, resp. by using what was later called an analogy of proper proportionality. 68 In fact, Cusa frequently uses four-term comparisons like ‘The creator (a) is related to the creation (b), as the human mind (c) is related to its artificial creations (d)’. 69 But these are only second order comparisons, viz. rational ‘conjectures’ that are not considered to be fundamental. On a more fundamental level, Cusa’s understanding of analogy is based on the assignment of two or more terms to a common focus, resp. a ‘pros hen’ analogy or analogy of attribution, as it is the case with the above example: We might follow different ways but ultimately every true guidepost will direct everyone to the same city.

Accordingly, words like ‘God’ or ‘not other’ are not straightforwardly ‘referring’ to the infinite, as if they were pointing to a discrete object. Our reference (a) to God (b) is not metalinguistically comparable with the indexical reference (c) to a distinguished empirical object (d)); and it is just as little possible to explain the referential power of divine names

67 Non sit nomen Dei, quod est ante omne nomen in caelo et terra nominabile, sicut via peregrinantem ad civitatem dirigens non est nomen civitatis. De li non-aliud 2, n.7,9-12 (transl. modified; my stress).

68 “We must leap beyond simple likeness” (simplicem similitudinem translire necesse est), says Cusa in the already mentioned twelfth chapter of De docta ignorantia 1.12, n.33.

69 See for example De coniecturis 1.4, n.14.
by more sophisticated metalinguistic analogies, as it is the case with Putnam’s or Kripke’s ‘causal theory of reference’. Rather, if we dare to refer to God, and Cusa is well aware that the possibility to perform this task successfully is never warranted, we are referring to a uni-versal truth in the literary sense of this word: we are veering (versare) everything to a unique focus (‘pros hen’). And this ultimately means that our names are ‘referring’ to God only in so far as they are suitable to turn our attention back to one centre of attraction, that is, the final cause of the universe which is at the same time its first principle. Consequently, our names are suitable to refer to a unique and universal truth only to the extent that they are guiding us to this truth, or, better to say, only to the extent that they allow us to be guided to the truth by the truth itself, which is the divine Word. Divine names are not straight-way denomi-nating the kingdom of God. Rather they mark the way that directs us to an un-nameable kingdom.

This concept of analogy is in its essential aspects consistent with Aquinas’ analogical ontology. But in order to recognize this agreement we have to avoid a deep-rooted modern misreading of Aquinas that can be traced back to his most influential 16th century interpret-

70 In this case, our allocation of divine names would be comparable with anthropomorphic procedures of ‘name giving’ or ‘baptizing’. However, Putnam has excluded this possibility by himself. Cf. Hilary Putnam, "On negative theology." In: Faith and philosophy 14 (1997), pp.407-422. His late philosophy supports the implication of Cusa’s analogical account of referencing that the modern search for a universal ‘theory of reference’ is intrinsically flawed. Putnam, Hilary, Renewing philosophy (Cambridge, Mass, 1992), ch. 8.

71 “Insofar as it be granted him” (quantum sibi concessum fuerit) says Cusa, for example, in De theologicis complementis h. 10, n.3.
er, Thomas Cajetan. Unlike Cajetan, Aquinas never developed an explicit account of his concept of analogy; and the Aristotelian example he employed to illustrate his use of analogies might invite readings that are incompatible with Cusa’s unmistakable statements that it is not possible to relate the infinite to the finite. However, Aquinas’ understanding of analogy is de facto not based on some sort of analogy of proper proportionality, as Cajetan suggested in his work De nominum analologia, but on a kind of analogy of attribution.

The Aristotelian example Thomas uses to illustrate this type of analogy is healthiness. Animals, urine, and medicine are ‘healthy’: The animal is healthy, medicine causes healthiness, and urine is a sign of healthiness. But does this analogy not presuppose that the absolute being of God (a) is related to created beings (b) like the healthiness of a body (c) to urine or medicine (d)? If we interpret the example of healthiness in this strictly relational sense, it turns out to be incompatible with Cusa’s mystagogy, indeed. A strictly relational reading has to assume that the relation between the true being of God (a) and the being of created entities (b) can be known, and precisely this possibility is unambiguously excluded in Cusa: “there is no comparative relation of the infinite to the finite”. However, like in

\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{72} For the following see especially Aquinas’ discussion of the “Names of God” in Summa theologia I q. 13.}}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{73} This is the most important achievement of McInerny’s pervasive analysis of Aquinas’ text. See Ralph M. McInerny, "Aquinas and Analogy: Where Cajetan Went Wrong." In: Philosophical Topics 20.2 (1992), pp.103-124; and McInerny, Ralph M., Aquinas and analogy (Washington, D.C, 1996).}}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize \text{\textsuperscript{74} Infiniti ad finitum proportionem non esse. De docta ignorantia 1.3, n.9,3-4; see also De venatione sapiens- tiae h 12.26, n.79.}}\]
Cusa and unlike in Cajetan, the concept of analogy of attribution is in Aquinas more fundamental than four-term analogies. Aquinas’ concept of analogy is not based on a comparative knowledge about the proportion between the creator and his creation. Rather it is focused on the inconceivable true being of God from the outset – up to the (in Cajetan’s eyes) confusing point that ‘being’ is strictly speaking only an intrinsic property of the self-subsistent being of God, whereas it is attributed to creatures only in an accidental mode.

The critical point of Aquinas’ example is to be located precisely here. Like in the case of health, which is strictly speaking only in the animal (medicine or urine cannot be healthy in themselves), the truth of ‘being’ is strictly speaking only actualized in the universal focus of our created reality. In the case of finite creatures ‘being’ is only attributed contingently, like in the case of urine and medicine, which are ‘healthy’ only in an extrinsic sense. Hence, Aquinas’ analogical ontology confirms Cusa’s conviction that “all existence exists actually insofar as it exists actually in the Infinite”.75 Created modes of subsistence are only contingent modes of participating in the per se subsistent being of God.76

To summarize, Aquinas and Cusa agree that the extremities of univocity and equivocality are only to be avoided if everything is related to a common focus. However, Cusa empha-

75 *Omnis existentia pro tanto existit actu, pro quanto in ipso infinito actu est. De docta ignorantia* 1.23, n.70.

76 “Nothing … for Aquinas, in the finite realm, properly ‘is’ of itself, nor is ‘subsistent’ of itself nor is essentially formed of itself” John Milbank, “*Intensities.*” In: Modern Theology 15:4 (1999), pp.445-497, p. 460. As for the Thomist concept of *forma dat esse*, which marks the background of this participatory ontology, see *De dato patris luminum* 2, n.98. As to the concept of substantial participation in Aquinas, cf. Velde, Rudi te, *Participation and Substantiality. Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden - New York - Köln, 1995).
sizes more radically than Aquinas does the mystagogical character of this middle path, namely that it is designed to guide us to a mystery that cannot be conceived.

This radicalisation explains why Cusa’s philosophy was better prepared to face the phenomenon of reflexive modernisation that provoked and reinforced the univocal turn of late medieval scholasticism. Instead of providing his readers with a clear road map to the mystery of the creation, as Aquinas did in his *Summa Theologica*, he provided them, as it were, with a mystagogical user’s guide that enabled them to do what Aquinas did on a case-by-case basis. Cusa’s *docta ignorantia* did no longer self-evidently assume that the guideposts, that lead the seeking mind to the truth, are visible for everyone; the necessity to contemplate them as guideposts became reflexive.

2.2. The modern ‘metaphysics of space’

in the light of Cusa’s strategy of ‘composing the place’

This ‘modern’ feature of Cusa’s philosophy leads us to mystagogical use of objects that attract our attention. Subsequent to his four books on the “Layman” (1450), Cusa writings almost universally dispense with the systemic guidelines of Scholastic scholarship; as if the lack of a reliable hermeneutical framework, which allows us to elaborate the presentation of a problem *before* looking out for possible responses, forced him to turn the academic rules of scholastic erudition upside down. The occasion of his thoughts creates the context, which helps to decide what might be considered as a serious matter of scientific explora-
tion. A find (a wooden spoon, a mustard seed, or a play of words) attracts the attention of the dialogue partners and structures the horizon of their common hunt for wisdom. ‘Wisdom shouts outside in the alleys and squares‘ (‘sapientia foris ‘ clamat ‘in plateis‘)\(^77\); the prose of the world marks the starting point of mystagogical expeditions that aim to demonstrate the superiority of the wisdom of ‘those who are small, or humble’ in contrast to the booklore of Cusa’s humanist contemporaries.\(^78\) Paraphrasing an infamous dictum of Pablo Picasso (‘Yo no busco, yo encuentro’), we might say, “The mystagogue no longer seeks, he finds”.

To a certain extent, this mystagogical method characterises already Cusa’s early writings; it becomes only more obvious in his later work. Instead of asking a question by presupposing that every well educated reader will be able to conceive its significance, he relies on the guidance of curiosities which attract our attention: mathematical thought experiments (\textit{Docta ignorantia}), a play on letters or words (\textit{De Genesi}, \textit{De li non-aluid}), an icon (\textit{De visione Dei}), or exemplary objects like the beryl of \textit{De beryllo}, the whipping-top of \textit{De possesst}, the bowling game of \textit{De ludo globi}, etc. Our capacity of ‘mental vision’ becomes suddenly captured by a curious finding which reveals itself as a suitable guide to the divine attractor of our pursuit for wisdom; and thus the philosophical procedure of ‘referencing back’ to the unique truth of the divine Word is set in action.

We may at this point again recall the wooden spoon of \textit{De mente}. A simple everyday object (which is in turn a metonymic substitute for the displaced truth of the pious crowd) at-

\(^77\) \textit{De sapientia} I n. 3 (own translation); cf. \textit{Proverbs} 1:20.

\(^78\) Cf. \textit{De sapientia} I n. 8f.
tracts the attention of the philosopher, and provides him with a guide to the truth that has slipped his mind. It would be misleading to marginalise mystagogical exercises like these as if they were nothing but decorations of a more fundamental ‘philosophical theory’. Cusa’s use of examples is symptomatic of his way of thinking as a whole. The cardinal no longer relies on the interpretative frameworks of his predecessors. Something needs to be exhibited before the owl of philosophical consideration starts its flight. The decision about the question ‘what counts as a serious matter of scientific research’ is to be taken case by case, departing from a ‘mirror image’ of our desire for wisdom that attracts our attention.

This contextualized, mystagogical proceeding distinguishes Cusa not only from the scholastics of the 13th century, who relied on the interpretative framework of the church, and on the authority of ‘the philosopher’ (Aristotle); it distinguishes his thinking also from the mainstream of post-Cartesian scientists and philosophers that relied and still rely on the hermeneutical framework of the modern metaphysics of space. As Michel de Certeau has put it, Cusa develops his insatiable quests

as if the object ‘formed’ the place of reflection, in the absence of any other formative agent, and as if the perception of the thing (at this level of observation or depiction) ‘stood in’ for the seemingly indeterminate authorities who should have created this place. The truth is already there, one has only to see it – thus begins De beryllo; wisdom cries out in public places, one has only to hear it – so begins the Idiota.79

79 Certeau, "The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa" (Fn. 2), pp.8 and 10.
As Certeau has pointed out, this experimental procedure is not reducible to a ‘theoretical operation’. It has at the same time the character of a theoretical experiment and spiritual exercise. Everything begins with a perceptible or visible experiment,

which, by dislodging its addresses from their prejudicial position, ‘makes way’ for the Cusan theory. It is a question of an ‘exercise’ (praxis). A doing will make possible a saying. This propedeutics is moreover customary in spiritual development and in the relation between master and disciple: ‘Do it, and you will understand afterward’. It also has the import of a laboratory observation whose theoretical interpretation will come later. It plays on the double register of a ‘spiritual exercise’ and a scientific experiment.\(^80\)

This ‘double register’, that plays simultaneously the scientific language game of a modern laboratory and the mystagogical language game of a spiritual exercise, is not only symptomatic of Cusa’s attempts to synthesize the poles of science and spirituality that were already drifting apart since the 12\(^{th}\) century. It is also symptomatic of his vision of a concordance between the great syntheses of the medieval time and the modern age that emerged in his time.

Certeau’s description of Cusa’s procedure of ‘composing the place’ bears the unmistakeable features of the *Spiritual Exercises* (1522/24) of own spiritual master, Ignatius of Loyola. However, the Medieval synthesis of science and spirituality was already about to collapse, when Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus. Certeau has demonstrated this convincingly in his magnum opus *The Mystical Fable*; though it is worth to be noticed that even Descartes was still writing in the style of a meditation (*Meditationes*, 1641), as Michel

\(^{80}\) Certeau, "The Gaze. Nicholas of Cusa" (Fn. 2), p. 11.
Foucault has pointed out in one of the key writings of the post-modern upheaval.\textsuperscript{81} Only the outcome of Descartes’ mediation turned out to be incompatible with this tradition. Destined to safeguard the autonomy of scientific reason against the contingencies of everyday life (the topic of his unfinished \textit{Regulae ad directionem ingenii}, already begun in 1619), Descartes’ philosophy was still rooted in the tradition it tried to overcome; but the ‘Cartesian age’ replaced it by the modern fiction of a clinically neutralised laboratory of reasoning.

Cusa’s Mystagogy leaves no space of this modern fiction. The space, which gives access to the incorruptible foundations of human reason is rather to be discovered amidst the curiosities of our everyday life. And this is a never ending task: our rational “conjectures” are never more than an attempt to approach “what has hitherto been sought by all and is always to be sought in the future”.\textsuperscript{82}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ab omnibus quaecum semperque quaeendum in posterum. De li non-aliud} 24, n.113,8-9 (my translation).
\end{itemize}
3. Supplementation

The following last chapter will outline how the ‘metaphysical’ speculations of Cusa’s writings are related to his mystagogical way of thinking. As outlined in the foregoing chapters, Cusa’s mystagogy is focused on the ‘here and now’: Wisdom cries out in public places, and only afterwards we may look out for a suitable philosophical language in order to interpret the inconceivable truth that has touched our mind. Metaphysical speculations are reduced to mystagogical makeshifts destined to prevent us from misreading the book of the world. Starting from a short outline of the problem of ‘onto-theology’, I will subsequently show how this mystagogical way of thinking might be recovered as an unexploited response to the perplexities of our post-modern world.

3.1. The challenge of the late-modern deconstruction of

‘Western onto-theology’

‘Why is there something rather than nothing in reality?’ This sentence summarizes, according to Martin Heidegger, in a few words the primordial question of Western metaphysics. However, it is worth to be noticed that Heidegger’s summary, which builds on Leibniz, was only introduced by Thomas Aquinas’ opponent Siger of Brabant, namely in Siger’s
commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Hence, it might be argued that it only represents a specific strand of the philosophical tradition of the Western world, since Siger’s commentaries of Aristotle marked at the same time the starting point of philosophical attempts to disentangle the Greek from the Judaeo-Christian roots of Western philosophy.

We will come back to this point later. What is more important from Heidegger’s point of view is the fact that Siger’s summary became problematic in the aftermath of Leibniz. To cut the matter short, modern philosophers who persist in asking Siger’s question arouse the suspicion that the tradition of Western metaphysics was obsessed with empty phrases.

The obstacle that causes this suspicion may be illustrated by an everyday expression picked up in Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics*: ‘I wonder at the existence of the world’. Why should I wonder about the existence of something, which is always there? To speak with Wittgenstein, I may wonder about the existence of a house that I have not visited for many years after imagining that it has been pulled down in the meantime. But why should I wonder about something the non-existence of which is completely inconceivable? We may

\[\text{Si enim quaeratur quare est magis aliquid in rerum natura quam nihil. Sigerus, Quaestiones in metaphysicam. Edition revue de la reportation de Munich, texte inédit de la reportation de Vienne (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981), pp. 169f.}\]

ask why something happens that could also fail to happen, but it is not self-evident why we should worry about the question ‘why there is something rather than nothing’, given that it is completely inconceivable that there might be ‘nothing rather than something’.

It is not without a certain irony that Rudolf Carnap’s notorious polemic against the language use of the metaphysical tradition was of all things based on a parody of Heidegger’s lecture *What is metaphysics?* No text did ever display more awareness that the metaphysical language of the past has become problematic than this text did. Heidegger’s ‘fundamental ontology’ no longer continued reconsidering Leibniz’ considerations *On the ultimate origin of things* as if it were responding to a problem that is still of unquestionable interest. He rather articulated for the first time what Jacques Derrida later called the “question of the origin of the question of being”.86

As Heidegger argues in his above lecture, if we want to recover the meaning of Leibniz’ and Siger’s question, we have to consider first what ‘nothing’ means. This explains why he considered existential basic experiences like the experiences of angst or boredom as key to his philosophical endeavour to recover the basic problems of Western metaphysics.

In tempers like angst or boredom, I discover that everything becomes indifferent. Everything ‘slips away’; no matter matters any longer. According to Heidegger, moods like these are not reducible to subjective emotions. For they indicate also our ‘fundamental attune-

85 Leibniz reformulated Siger’s question most effectively in his 1697 essay Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, *De rerum originatione radicali*, Philosophische Schriften Bd. VII (Berlin, 1890).

ment of being situated’ (*Grundbefindlichkeit*)

an existential basic-disposition which allows us to understand why our access to the ‘being’ of the world is not self-evident, and why the habits and narratives that shape our everyday attempts to make sense of the world can lose their validity. The habitualised grammar of scientific, political, religious or artistic ‘language games’ is part of our situatedness in the world; and this is why it can ‘slip away’ after fundamental changes of our historical ‘attunement’ (*Befindlichkeit*) in the same manner as my ‘private world’ might slip after a biographical crisis. The possibility for me to become estranged from the world is of more than of private significance; it has the value of an indicator that helps us to understand a deeper-rooted possibility that is of historical, cultural and even scientific significance.

As is well known, Heidegger’s magnum opus *Being and time* is particularly focused on one distinguished example of this displacing experience: the encounter with the possibility of ‘my death’ (§§46-60). No one can take on death for another person; and it is primarily ‘my death’ that reveals this to me, since this death is the only death that is not exchangeable with other possible events in my world. My death will be not an event in my world; it will be the end of my world. To understand what it means for another person ‘to die’ presupposes, according to Heidegger, that I am able to face something completely inconceivable: The possibility that ‘my world’ is ‘no more’; that the horizon of my unlimited possibilities to be in this world becomes impossible. To put it with Heidegger’s own words: “Death is the

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88 See also Derrida, Jacques, *The gift of death* (Chicago, 1995), pp. 31ff.
possibility of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein”\textsuperscript{89} – it is the hyperbolic sign of an \textit{inconceivable} possibility.

Negative existential possibilities like these are not the only exemplary experiences that might draw our attention to the possibility of the ‘impossible’.\textsuperscript{90} However, Heidegger’s analysis reveals at least this: Though the awareness of the possibility ‘not to be’ is a borderline experience, it is nevertheless part of our everyday life; and it might be argued that it affects the ‘mumbling crowd’ as long as people die – at least as long as they have not yet lost what common men would call common sense. Hence, Heidegger’s analysis provides arguably a most suitable starting point, if we want to recall what Western metaphysicians were talking about when they were asking the ‘question of being’.

Antonyms to the word ‘being’ like ‘not-being’ or ‘nothingness’ are hardly more than makeshifts that draw our attention to the fact that we have, indeed, no idea of what it means ‘to be not’. However, it is at least possible to see that we \textit{have} no idea of the possibility ‘not to be’; and that this ‘impossibility’ is nevertheless a serious possibility. Everyone, so the

\textsuperscript{89} Heidegger, \textit{Being and time} (Fn. 7), §50, p. 232.

\textsuperscript{90} Cf. Cusa \textit{De visione Dei} 9, nn.36-37; 13 n.53; Derrida, Jacques, \textit{Politics of friendship} (London, 1997); and (with regard to Derrida) Caputo, John D., \textit{Apostles of the Impossible. On God and the Gift in Marion and Derrida}. In: Caputo, John D. and Scanlon, Michael J. (Ed.), God, the gift, and postmodernism (Bloomington, IN, 1999), pp.185-223. See also Derrida, Jacques, \textit{Post-Scriptum. Apories, voies et voix}. In: Coward, Harold and Foshay, Toby (Ed.), Derrida and Negative Theologie (New York, 1992), pp. 290f.: “what Heidegger says of death: … ‘the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein’ … I wonder if that is a matter of a purely formal analogy. What if negative theology were speaking at bottom of the mortality of \textit{Dasein}?”
argument of Heidegger’s early writings goes, has a pre-understanding of what the word ‘being’ means, not despite the fact that no one can extract any meaning of the antonym ‘nothing’, but precisely because of this fact. In this sense Carnap’s suspicion that Heidegger’s concept of ‘nothingness’ was meaningless was in a certain respect justified; he only missed the point of Heidegger’s use of this concept.

In sum, Heidegger’s existential analysis tried to demonstrate that everyday tempers like angst, boredom or happiness are of more than ‘subjective’ significance. They draw attention to the possibility that we might become detached from the ‘grammatical rules’ that allow us normally to interpret the world without worrying about their validity. Philosophical make-shifts, like the antonym ‘nothing’ are suitable to indicate in the direction of this possibility, not despite the fact that this possibility is not explicable in terms of the grammatical rules that enable us normally to keep our world in order, but precisely because of this fact. We cannot exclude the possibility that everything might become ‘messed up’ or, to use a more Wittgensteinian expression, that the ‘river-bed’91 of our pre-scientific narratives and habits might change its orientation. And it is per definitionem impossible to get a grip of this problem based on the rules that enable us normally to orient ourselves in the world.

91 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, On certainty. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright; translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell 1969), §97: ‘The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.’ Wittgenstein was aware of the possibility that the river-bed of our language games might change, but Heidegger was better prepared to account for this possibility. Cf. Luchte (Fn. 84)
Events like 9/11, or the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 might be interpreted as historical examples of this confusing possibility. What we perceived beforehand as utterly improbable appears to us now as an almost necessary fulfilment of the divinations of the past. However, this does not mean that paradigm-shifting events are predictable from the outset. Rather their paradoxical features indicate a change our assessment of interpretational rules such that, what appeared previously as improbable, appears as predictable with the benefit of hindsight.

The fact that our highly organised Western societies are usually not prepared to cope with unpredictable possibilities like these leads us to the second step of Heidegger’s ontological stocktaking of metaphysical basic-concepts. Namely his criticism that the history of Western metaphysics was accompanied by an increasing forgetfulness of being (Seinsvergessenheit), which desensitised us for the temporality of our being in the world. According to Heidegger, Aristotle’s Metaphysics provided Western philosophers with a canonical articulation of the question of the origin of being. However, they tended to treat the eventfulness of ‘being’ as if it were a case of application of a general grammar, and not as a phenomenon that puts the validity of grammatical considerations in question. More precisely Heidegger distinguishes between a genealogical and a methodological aspect of this critical point:

He criticizes, to begin with, a certain ambiguity with regard to Aristotle’s classical description of metaphysics as ‘first philosophy’. Aristotel’s Metaphysics can be read simult-

taneously as both, and ontology and a theology. On one hand, it contemplates the ‘beings in their beingness’, namely their anything but self-evident eventfulness. On the other, it contemplates a distinguished, supreme ‘being’; namely Aristotle’s ‘first mover’, which is curiously called ‘being’ as well; as if it were possible to reduce the question of ‘being’ to an explanatory problem that might be sorted out by theologically educated specialists. For this reason, Heidegger argued that ontology has become onto-theology since Aristotle at the latest: Since the time of Plato and Aristotle God appeared in the occidental tradition simultaneously as the cause of ‘being’ and as a special case of ‘being’ (resp. as the first cause in a chain of ‘beings’).

This leads us to the second more ‘methodological’ aspect of Heidegger’s criticism (in the broadest sense of this word which denotes our ‘way’ of thinking). The philosophical method of the onto-theological tradition tended to proceed as if the question of being were nothing but an explanatory problem (like “Why has this house not been pulled down?” or “Why did the big bang happen?”). And this was equivalent with making us forget why metaphysical questions are significant at all. For the significance of metaphysical resp. ontological questions is not due to an ‘explanatory gap’. Questions like these are significant because of our deeply rooted pre-theoretical awareness that our confidence in rule-oriented explanations is insufficient to account for our being in the world.

We may recall at this point the key question of Foucault’s attempt to recover the Kantian roots of Heidegger’s concept of historicity: “What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?” What we rely on today may become unreliable tomorrow, and this affects secular and religious language games alike; the narratives, symbols and names we are used to rely on in our attempts to ‘make sense’ of the world may become empty and mean-
ingless tomorrow, including the names that we attribute to the highest ‘beings’ of our world.

The main representatives of the post-modern upheaval of the late 20th century built on this presentation of problem the philosophical tradition, though their re-articulation of this problem was not always as rigorous as Heidegger’s stocktaking of the basic concept of Western metaphysics justly claimed to be. However, Heidegger’s postmodern successors drew simultaneously attention to the suppressed Jewish-Christian roots of Heidegger’s way of thinking, and this enabled them to see the shortcomings of Heidegger’s somewhat simplistic account of the history of Western metaphysics. This critical point becomes most evident in connection with Derrida’s methodologically congenial attempt to recover the apocalyptic roots of Heidegger’s temporalisation of philosophical basic-concepts.93 A prototypical example of the related apocalyptic experience of temporality appears is the Revelation of John:

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. Wake. (...) If you will not awake, I will come like a thief (...). Keep that, and repent. (Rev. 3:1-3)

Derrida’s thinking built on Jewish and Christian traditions like these, when he introduced conceptual makeshifts that radicalize Heidegger’s account of the ‘ontological difference’ like his infamous concept *différance*. In contrast to Heidegger, this neologism left the question open what the word ‘difference’ relates to: Does it signify the difference between ‘entities’ and the original experience of ‘being’, or does it refer to something else that is equally affected by the displacing experience of temporality?

It might be argued that this radicalisation of Heidegger’s stocktaking of the metaphysical tradition was the result of a meta-reflexive reformulation of his presentation of the problem of metaphysics. Derrida did no longer exclusively focus on the magic word ‘being’, which marked the focus of attention of the Greek tradition subsequent to Aristotle and his Western commentators, such as Siger of Brabant. Derrida rather asked a more general question: How do we account for the fact that the meaning of magic words, names and makeshifts like “Being”, “God”, or Plotinus’ “One” has an irresistible tendency to slip our mind?

Similar to Cusa, Derrida assumed that the necessity to orient ourselves in thinking requires us to rely on proper names, narratives and symbolic makeshifts. He then pointed out that the experience of the unrepeatable uniqueness (*difference*) of materialized signifiers, which is accompanied by a temporal *deferment* of their ‘original’ meaning when we try to recall it again (*différance*), does not only affect the meaning of the word “being”. Heidegger’s restriction of the phenomenon of temporal deferment to an ontological problem rather demonstrates that his account of the ‘ontological difference’ was still attached to a kind of onto-theological reification. The challenge of a truly rigorous stocktaking of the

basic concepts of Western metaphysics requires us to overcome this constriction; the idolatrous attachment to philosophical master-signifiers (like ‘being’) is to be suspended tout court.

This is the background of the most characteristic double gesture of Derrida’s deconstructive writings, which becomes most evident with regard to his treatment of proper names. On the one hand, we have nothing to rely on despite of names. On the other hand, the symbolic power of names gives easily way to the idolatrous attachments that attribute to the name what belongs alone to the truth they are destined to reveal. Hence, the virtue of apocalyptic vigilance requires us both to save the name that guides us to the truth and to negate it. As Derrida puts it in his essay *Sauf le nom*:

As if it was necessary both to save the name (*sau le nom*) and to save everything except the name, save the name (*sau le nom*), as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that toward which one goes through the name.95

Up to a certain point, Derrida’s considerations on the aporia of naming focused on the same ‘crisis experience’ as Heidegger did: The experience of a temporal ‘fading’ that undermines the ‘grammar’ of our everyday life. But Derrida’s apocalyptic interpretation of this experience recalled at the same time one of the most characteristic features of the Jewish-Christian ‘way of life’: The necessity of humility, confession, circumcision, and conversion (*metánoia*), which distinguished the Christian tradition of late antiquity from its Neo-Platonic counterpart, and provoked in the 19th century Nietzsche’s Hellenising polemic

against the ‘slave-morality’ of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Hence, Derrida’s deconstruction of Heidegger’s still “onto-theological” criticism of the “onto-theological tradition” of Western metaphysics coincided with the deconstruction of philosophical attempts to disentangle the Greek from the Jewish roots of Western learning in the wake of Siger of Brabant. As Derrida puts it in the last sentence of his landmark essay *Violence and Metaphysics*, which quotes a sentence of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: *Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet* (see Fn. 86).

Derrida’s much-debated essay *How to avoid speaking* makes a similar point when it draws attention to the fact that the apophatic tradition in the wake of Dionysius the Areopagite does actually not fit in the framework of Heidegger’s account of the tradition of occidental onto-theology. Already the Neo-Platonic tradition considered the divine as a mystery that transcends the ontic sphere of distinguishable entities. The Platonic ‘One’ is not only relatively but absolutely different from the “being” of (objectifiable) entities. As Werner Beierwaltes has put it, it is not an entity besides other entities but “different from every-
thing other, the Nothing of all” (Anders zu Allem Anderen, Nichts von Allem). However, Derrida criticism of Heidegger’s simplified historiography goes a significant step further than Beierwaltes did in that it draws attention to the apophatic displacement of interpretative frameworks that distinguishes the tradition of Christian Platonism from its pagan counterpart and relates it to its apocalyptic roots.

Already Dionysius tended to use his apophatic language as a makeshift that reflects only afterwards on what is previously asserted in the non-predicative language of prayer and contemplation. In the face of the mystery of the mystagogical ascent the mystagogue discovers himself to be addressed by God, and this makes him appear as compelled to move on untraced paths. Hence, his language becomes deconstructive: The experience of ‘being addressed’ provokes him to change his mind (in the sense of metánoia), and this puts the metaphysical framework of his way of thinking in question. Like in Cusa’s doxological reduction, the Dionysian mystagogue is called to free himself from the inclination to reduce the mystery of the divine to the case of application of a general grammar. The narratives and metaphysical makeshifts of his philosophical teachers are reliable only to the extent


99 “Mystical theology … tends to pass, through the way of eminence, from predication (affirmative and/or negative) to a decidedly non-predicative form of speech, namely the prayer which praises”: Marion, Jean-Luc, In the Name. How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’ / Response By Jacques Derrida. In: Caputo, John D. and Scanlon, Michael J. (Ed.), God, the gift, and postmodernism (Bloomington, IN, 1999), pp.20-53, p. 23. See also, with regard to Cusa, p.25. As for Marion’s misleading criticism of Derrida in these passages see the final discussion between Derrida and Marion in the same volume (“On the Gift”, pp. 54-78).
that they lead to the freedom of worship, which, according the Dionysius-interpreter Cusa enables us to stand on our own feet.

Cusa builds on this Christian this tradition when he de-constructs the analogical cosmology of High Medieval ‘road maps’ to the mystery of the creation in order to re-construct it on a case-by-case basis. This explains not least his puzzling disrespectful handling of the core concepts of philosophical sects and schools. In contrast to Beierwaltes reading of Cusa, the place of the philosophical centre of attraction is no longer clearly marked by Platonistic concept of the ‘one’. As Arne Moritz has pointed out, starting from Cusa’s most ‘Neo-platonic’ writing De principio, he deliberately counteracts the tendency of his later writings to focus on the Plotinian and especially Proclean ‘One’ (*unum*) by speculations that reintroduce Aristotelian concepts such as ‘existent per se’ (*per se subsistent*) or ‘*authypostaton*’.\(^{100}\) However, Cusa’s does not univocally support Aristotelian conceptualisations either. The position of the metaphysical “master signifier” rather remains unmarked.

If we interpreted this lack of systematic focus as a sign of inconclusiveness or fickleness, as the German scholar Kurt Flasch does in his comprehensive monograph on Cusa’s writings,\(^{101}\) we would fail to notice that Cusa’s playful way of using the speculative idols of ancient wisdom was a genuine expression of his apophatic spirituality. Derrida was aware of this deconstructive feature of Cusa’s way of thinking. His philosophical teacher and lifelong mentor Maurice de Gandillac was also one of the leading Cusa scholars of his time;

\(^{100}\) Cf. *De principio*, n.20, n.25, n.34.

and in his latest writings he confessed that his familiarity with the library of his teacher was more than a biographical coincidence.102

3.2 ‘Confussimum chaos’:
looking back to post-Kantian philosophy

Cusa’s mystagogy can be read as a guide that leads us at least one step beyond the perplexities of modern and post-modern thinking. The following last section will focus on this unexploited feature of his way of thinking, starting from a comparison of Cusa’s deconstruction of the scholastic tradition with Derrida’s deconstruction of Heidegger’s philosophical stocktaking of Western metaphysics.

As outlined in the previous section, Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ was concerned with possibilities that transcend the horizon of what we might consider to be possible within the hermeneutic framework of pre-set ways of thinking. To put it in Derrida’s own words, his thinking was concerned with the “open possibility” and with hyperboles that provoke an “opening of a possibility”.103 This concern relates Derrida to Cusa, and particularly to Cusa’s last writings that focus explicitly on the “open possibility”. Already his 1460 dialogue


103 Derrida, Post-Scriptum (Fn. 90), p. 306.
*De possest* deals with God as “actualised possibility”; his last dialogue *De apice theoriae* (1464) takes yet a further step in this direction when it conceives God as the “possibility itself” (*posse ipsum*).104

Cusa’s last dialogue does not question the High Medieval prioritisation of actuality over ontological or hypothetical possibilities. As Peter Casarella has pointed out, he rather articulates this priority now *ex negativo*: “Possibility itself is not the possibility of existing (…) Nevertheless, Possibility itself is the Possibility of the possibility-of-existing.”105 In God the ‘possibility-of-existence’ coincides with the existence of the ‘possibility itself’. Hence, she is neither an actuality that precedes possibility, nor a possibility that precedes actuality.

This apophatic gesture is consistent with, what I called above, Cusa’s ‘doxological reduction’: dogmatic preliminary decisions about priories have to be put in brackets. However, seen from a modern point of view, it comes as a surprise that this ‘bracketing’ does not include the existence of God. In contrast to Derrida, Cusa’s mystagogy seems to leave no


room for the ‘possibility’ of atheism, or the nihilist possibility that our prayers are meaningless.

Derrida’s writings take it for granted that the ‘opening of a possibility’ includes this possibility as well. As he confessed in his late writings, Derrida was all his life unable to exclude that his “prayers”\(^{106}\) were nothing but empty words. He did not exclude the possibility of negative theology; but he just as little excluded that everything may finally dissipate in what he called, referring to Plato’s *Timaeus*, the ‘gulf and chaos of the *Khora*’.\(^{107}\)

As outlined above, Cusa was familiar with the experience of empty spaces. His relentless attempts to discover new names for the inexpressible were driven by the unsettling late-medieval experience that an atmosphere of nothingness had infected the symbolic universe of the Middle Ages, as Romano Guardini has pointed out in general terms.\(^{108}\) Cusa’s philosophical writings engage explicitly with this problem, and relate it, as Derrida does, to the ‘empty space’ of the Platonic ‘chaos’.\(^{109}\) Cusa even dares to place the ‘most confusing

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chaos’ (confussisimum chaos) beyond the Neo-platonic ‘One’, shortly beneath the divine name non aliud (n. 23-24). However, like in Meister Eckhart,\textsuperscript{110} the experience of emptiness marks only the threshold to the plenitude God – it represents nothing but the darkness of the mist that hides the divine glory.

How do we justify this prioritisation? As John Caputo has put it with regard to the experience of Holy Terror, which was traditionally clearly distinguished from the experience of a horror vacui: “How do we know that we have been visited by a supereminent excess and not just simply invaded by khora? How do we know that the source of the confusion is God, not khora?”\textsuperscript{111}

In accordance with Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, Derrida insists on suspending his judgement about this matter.\textsuperscript{112} He even makes use of theological arguments in order to emphasize the ineluctability of this suspension. The possibility to relate to God has to be received as a gift of grace: “This is why apophatic discourse must also open with a prayer that recognizes, assigns, or ensures its destination: the Other as Referent of a legein


\textsuperscript{110}See Derrida, \textit{How to Avoid Speaking} (Fn. 97), pp. 121-123.

\textsuperscript{111}Marion, Jean-Luc and Derrida, Jacques, \textit{On the Gift. A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearny}. In: Caputo, John D. and Scanlon, Michael J. (Ed.), God, the gift, and postmodernism (Bloomington, IN, 1999), pp.54-78, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{112}Cf. Derrida, \textit{How to Avoid Speaking} (Fn. 97), pp. 127f.; and Derrida, \textit{Post-Scriptum} (Fn. 90), p. 314.
which is none other than its Cause.”¹¹³ In accordance with the apophatic tradition, Derrida insists that the ‘gift’ of divine presence can only arrive if we do not exclude her possible absence. A true gift cannot be enforced; it can only arrive if we do not calculate with its possibility. But the conclusion he draws form the possibility that God might be absent goes beyond the apophatic tradition: According to Derrida, we can no longer exclude the possibility of a total emptiness that annuls every expectation whatsoever.¹¹⁴

Orthodox theologians never granted the possibility that our speaking (legein) might be ultimately empty; and Derrida was aware of the fact that his deconstructive iconoclasm was heterodox in this respect. While his own thinking was concerned with the thinking of the open possibility of a différance, he stated already in his early writings unmistakably that he considered God not to be “the différance”. God is “not at the same time the transcendence onto death and the transcendence onto life”.¹¹⁵ Derrida’s deconstruction was hospitable to negative theology, but it did not allow for a (pre-) decision in favour of negative theology. This heretical gesture was effectively the price he had to pay for this uncompromising attachment to the Kantian enlightenment project: The modern history of freedom does not permit us “to revert (…) to an infinitist dogmatism in pre-Kantian style, one which does not pose the question of responsibility for its own finite philosophical discourse.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³Derrida, How to Avoid Speaking (Fn. 97), p. 98.
¹¹⁴Cf. Derrida, in: Marion; Derrida, On the Gift (Fn. 111), pp. 57-78.
¹¹⁵Derrida, Violence and Metaphysics (Fn. 86), p. 102; see also Derrida, How to Avoid Speaking (Fn. 97), p. 99.
¹¹⁶Derrida, Violence and Metaphysics (Fn. 86), 130.
Given this rigorous gesture of ‘bracketing’, it is important to note that Cusa’s apophaticism was not based on a dogmatic (pre-) decision either. Cusa does not assume that the universe is ultimately meaningful; he rather takes it for granted that this is not possible. Unlike Anselm or Aquinas, he avoids any gesture that might indicate that his mystagogy is dependent on the ‘decision’ to take this theological path or the exclusion of competing ‘options’. His writings display, for example, not the slightest interest in ‘proofs’ of the existence of God.\(^{117}\) How do we explain this ignorance? Is it symptomatic of ‘an infinitist dogmatism’, or is it consistent with a ‘doxological reduction’ that brackets dogmatic prejudgements?

Cusa agreed with Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neo-Platonic tradition, that God is beyond ‘being’ and ‘not-being’; hence, he was happy to grant that ‘not-being proceeds being’.\(^{118}\) But he applies this iconoclastic logic not indiscriminately; he explicitly rejects, for example, the possibility to apply it to the transcendental predicate ‘good’: ‘not-good is not better than good’ (ibid.). ‘God’ is beyond being and not-being, but it is not ‘beyond good and evil’.

The logic of this exception is consistent with Cusa’s analogical ontology, outlined above. Just as it is impossible to ‘refer’ to the non aliud as if it were a distinct entity (aliud), so it is impossible to refer to the being of God, as if it were simply distinct from nothing (or


\(^{118}\) Cf. De li non-aliud 13, n. 107.
the *confusissimum chaos*). However, the mystagogical use of negations and affirmations is motivated by the goodness of its ultimate *end*. Hence, the *goodness* of God cannot be negated. We may distinguish between divine predicates and discriminate them from their semantic counterpart in order transgress our dialectical use of language in the direction of a ‘hyperbolic’ possibility; but we are not justified to apply this rule to the predicate ‘good’, since its antonym ‘evil’ is not an ontological possibility, that is, it has no power to actualize a meaningful possibility to be.

Every creature has, according to Cusa, an essential potential to be, and this assumption has far-reaching implications, if we read it in the context of Medieval doctrine of the transcategorial properties of being (*transcendentals*), which taught the convertibility of ontological basic concepts such as ‘being’, ‘one’, ‘true’, ‘good’, and ‘beauty’. Cusa builds on this tradition; hence, to say that every creature has a potential to be is in his eyes equivalent with saying that every creature has a potential to be good. God created neither evil nor sin. Rather, everything she created participates in her perfection and goodness. Consequently, evil has to be interpreted as a ‘lack of perfection’ (*privatio boni*). Evil ‘as such’ does not exist (*peccatum nihil est*). What we perceive to be evil is but a ‘privation’ of the good; it displays that something has *not yet* actualised its potentiality to be good.

119Cf. Jan Aertsen, *Medieval philosophy and the transcendentals. The case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden, 1996). As for Cusa use of this doctrine, see *De venatione spientiae* 15, n.24; and 16, n.46.

120See *De ludo globi* 2, n. 81.

121*Sermo* 7, n.2,10; see also *Sermo* 1, n.16,4, and Augustine: *In Joannis Evangelium I* 1.13 (PL 35:1385).
Moreover, and this is critical for our investigation of the difference between Cusa and Derrida, Cusa agreed with Augustine that the possibility of evil has to be “passed over as darkness and silence”.\textsuperscript{122} As John Milbank has pointed out in his just quoted, landmark essay \textit{Darkness and Silence}, our modern hesitation to understand this \textit{docta ignorantia} with regard to the conditions of the possibility of evil, has a twofold root: The univocal ontology of the post-Scotist tradition of late-medieval philosophy, which made it possible to treat the difference between good and evil on the cognitive level like the difference between ontic neutral matters-of-fact; and the concomitant possibility to disconnect intellect and will, which made it possible to reduce the good to a matter of mere good will. In contrast to this univocal turn, the analogical ontology of the pre-Scotist tradition assumed that intellect and will are analogically related to each other in every respect: our desire to know is not separable from the desire for the good, and inversely, the desire for the good not separable from the desire to know.

The first consequence of this analogical approach was that the origin and essence of evil cannot be known. Our desire to know the truth is by nature oriented to know what makes something meaningful, good and one with itself, i.e. the desire to know gathers together what appears to be dissipated, and not inversely. Consequently, philosophical attempts to investigate the conditions of the possibility of evil can never yield a ‘true insight’ in the proper sense of this word. In the best case philosophical accounts of the facticity of evil provide us with mythological supplements for a missing explanation, like with Plato’s ac-

count of Khora in his Timaeus; in the worst case they amount to distracted acts of pointless curiosity. As Augustine had put it in De civitate dei, to investigate the origin and essence of evil would be “as if someone wanted to see darkness, or to hear silence (si quisquam uelit uidere tenebras uel audire silentium).

The second consequence leads us to the crux of our modern struggle to make sense of Cusa’s ‘learned ignorance’ with regard to the possibility of evil. As indicated, our ability to do the good is according the pre-Scotist tradition not reducible to a matter of good will. The devil, as prototype of the most consistently evil person, is not an intrinsically evil ‘subject’ that wants to do evil things; rather he is the victim of a self-created narcissistic fantasy-world that prevents him from being in unity with himself. For this reason, Cusa assumes that those that “inhabit hell” are surrounded by the “chaos of nothingness”. Evil creatures are unable to distinguish between darkness and light; but this failure is not caused by a lack of desire for the good; it is rather indicative of a profound confusion. Similar to Taylor Hackford’s film The Devil’s Advocate, the “inhabitants of hell” are like zombielike autonomous subjects that never offend the liberal principles of fairness and equality; but everything they do is messed up, self-deceptive, and pointless.

In accordance with this tradition, Cusa assumes self-evidently that even the devil has a natural desire for the good and that our ability to achieve what we desire is simultaneously a matter of knowledge and will. My ethical desire to do the good coincides with the philo-

123 Cf. Hoff, Kontingenz, Berührung, Überschreitung, 351ff. (Fn. 65); see also Thiel (Fn. 109).
125 De possest n. 72.
so phical desire to know myself; and inversely, my philosophical desire to know myself with the ethical desire to actualize my natural perfection as a rational creature. To put it briefly, the desire to do the good is a natural expression of the fact that every creature is by nature driven to actualize its essential potentialities, and this includes in the case of rational creatures to potentialities of their intellect. As Cusa puts it in the first sentence of the first chapter of *De docta ignorantia*: “There is present in all things a natural desire to exist in the best manner in which the condition of each thing's nature permits this.”

In the light of this teleological account of the good, Cusa interprets the phenomenon of evil as the sign of a perversion that corrupts both our cognitive and volitional faculties, as already Augustine did.\(^\text{126}\) On the most elementary level these twofold defect coincides (1) with an habitual lack of focus with regard to the ultimate end of our natural desire for the good, resp. the concupiscent attachment to ephemeral things; and (2) the attachment to narcissistic habits of self-deception that undermine our capacity to distinguish between deceptive and reliable means to achieve this end. This is the reason why Cusa and Augustine perceived Jesus as a mystagogical guide that provides us with the cognitive and volitional power to achieve what we are no longer able to achieve out of our own power. Narcissism (*superbia*) is the most luxurious vice a creature can have; since no one can get rid of it out of our own power. Only the sublime beauty of a creature that is simultaneously both, infinitely humble and infinitely desirable can redeem us form the narcissistic illusion that we can get a handle on the darkness of our self-deceptions out of our own power.

In contrast to this pre-modern account of the problem of evil, Kant provided in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* the most concise summery of the modern dualism between intellects and will:

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will.\(^{127}\)

To be good is according to this most fundamental principle of Kant’s moral philosophy equivalent with the autonomous self-binding of a ‘good will’. My ability to do the good coincides with the formal possibility to do the good for its own sake, as opposed to heteronomous actions, that a motivated by extrinsic motives like pleasure, profit or survival. My ability to actualize the possibility to be good is no longer motivated by the beauty and goodness of creatures that arouse the desire for the good and guide me to the truth. However, Kant’s formalistic attempt to demythologize the erotic universe of the Platonic tradition was accompanied by a disturbing aporia: The teleologically neutralized power of Kant’s autonomous ‘will’ is no longer pre-determined by the attractive power of God; it has to determine itself, and this means it has to *take a decision in favour of the good*, to wit spontaneously, out of itself. Hence, my ability to determine myself goes along with a neutralisation of the difference between good and evil in cognitive terms: The possibility to draw a decision *in favour* of the good logically presupposes that a decision in favour of evil is (at least formally) *equally possible*.\(^{128}\)

\(^{127}\)Kant, Immanuel, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (Cambridge, 1999).

If we accept this starting position, it seems natural to conclude that the necessity to take a spontaneous decision in favour of the good presupposes (at least formally) also the possibility to do the exact opposite, namely the ‘evil for its own sake’. Kant hesitated to investigate this ‘satanic’ possibility; however, as Jacques Lacan has pointed out, his contemporary Marquis de Sade did not hesitate to do what Kant refused to do.\textsuperscript{129} If we are obliged to do the good for its own sake, why should it then not be equally possibility to imagine a perfectly honest evil person who does the evil for its own sake, without regard to any secondary advantage like pleasure, profit or survival?

Against this background, it comes not as a surprise that considerations on the possibility of autonomous evil acts became part of the legacy of the Kantian revolution since Schelling’s landmark \textit{Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom} (1809) at the latest.\textsuperscript{130} Heidegger tried to overcome Kant’s onto-theological account of subjectivity; but he did not reject his formalist neutralisation of the difference between good and evil, as Heidegger’s 1936 lectures on Schelling’s \textit{Philosophical Investigations} demonstrate. What appeared in Kant and Schelling as an archetypical battle (\textit{Kampf}) between the principles of good and evil, returned in Heidegger’s thinking as an \textit{open possibility}.\textsuperscript{131}


Most certainly, Heidegger’s *Dasein* is not identical with a Kantian ‘subject’ that is called to justify itself before the moral law; it is rather called to listen to the silent (and occasionally egregious) voice of an opening of a *possibility*. But this opening has still the character of a neutralized possibility; the facticity of our ‘being-there’ (Da-sein) bears still the traces of Kant’s account of freedom as a ‘quasi-factum’ of reason. In contrast to Cusa, Heidegger’s opening does not coincide with the actuality of a potentiality that opens our ‘being there’ for the possibility of the good. Rather the open possibility of our *Dasein* pre-cedes actuality, that is, the orientation of this opening is utterly undetermined. As Heidegger puts it in his 1927 magnum opus *Being and Time*: “Higher than actuality stands possibility.”

Hence, the striking similarities between Cusa’s meditations on the ‘possibility itself’ and Heidegger’s considerations on the ‘open possibility’ are to be interpreted in the light of profoundly dissimilar ontological background assumptions; even if we take it for granted that both thinkers focus on the opening of an apocalyptic event that transcends the framework of dogmatic or narrative background assumptions.

The incompatibility between these heterogeneous ontologies becomes most evident in Heidegger’s late writings. In his *Letter on Humanism*, for example, Heidegger speaks of the “quiet power of the ‘loving potency’ (*mögende Vermögen*)”, and this might be interpreted as an invitation to discover in Heidegger echoes of Cusa’s last dialog on ‘possibility itself’, as Peter Casarella suggests in his lucid essay on the ‘power of the possible’.

\[^{132}\text{Heidegger, Being and time (Fn. 7) §7, p. 38 (German pagination).}\]


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Cusa’s enthusiasm for ‘possibility itself’ was rooted in a completely different understanding of freedom. Unlike Heidegger, Cusa never considered freedom as “The Possibility of Good and Evil”; let alone that he would have agreed with Heidegger’s considerations on the “actuality of evil”. Rather the possibility ‘to be’ coincided in Cusa with the possibility to actualize what I am; and I am a creature that is essentially destined to become an image of the inconceivable plenitude of God. “Be your own and I will be yours (Sis tu tuus et ego ero tuus)”, says the voice God in On the Vision of God (7 n. 25, 12-14).

My ‘possibility to be’ is, accordingly, not the result of a spontaneous decision or an ineffable event that takes place in the neutral space of an axiologically indifferent ‘opening’. Cusa’s Augustinian ontology leaves no room for the possible to actualize meaningless possibilities. To be sure, Adam tried to actualize such a pointless possibility. However, Adams fall had not the character of a truth event, i.e. it did not coincide with the invention of a new possibility to act. Adam rather fell without cause; he did not actualise a possibility to act, but confused a ground- and reasonless counter-possibility with a realistic ‘option’. His ‘original sin’ was not the outcome of a wrong decision. It rather coincided with the misleading conviction that it is possible to take such a decision. As Milbank puts it in his above essay, I’m a sinner exactly thus far as I consider myself to be a ‘Kantian subject’; an autonomous creature that feels called by an unknown (and in fact demonic) voice to take a spon-

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taneous decision ‘in favour’ of the good. “Evil is self-governing autonomy – evil is the Kantian good, the modern good.”"135

This leads us to the crossroads between pre- and post-modernity, which separates Cusa’s meditations on the ‘possibility itself’ from post-Heideggerian attempts to recover the ‘opening of a possibility’. In the erotic universe of the Platonic tradition, ‘possibilities’ always indicate a ‘potential’ to actualize the good. Heidegger’s considerations on the ‘silent voice’ of the unknown possibility are incompatible with this tradition, since they are based on an attitude of indifference with regard to the ‘possibilities’ of good and evil. But how do these heterogeneous traditions relate to each other? Is it really the case that the older tradition is more ‘dogmatic’ than the younger?

I will try to answer these questions in two stages. To begin with, the second question needs to be reformulated. Cusa’s ‘infinitism’ is ‘pre-Kantian’, indeed. However, considering our above exploration of the difference between univocal and analogical ontologies, Cusa’s position is no more dependent on dogmatic background assumptions as Heidegger’s essentially Kantian ‘possibilism’ is. Hence, we might be inclined to conclude that the difference between Heidegger and Cusa is a matter of mere choice. However, if this were the case, then the position of Heidegger and Derrida would be more appropriate: the difference between Heidegger und Cusa would be equivalent with the difference between a biased and

an unbiased account of the ‘open possibility’; and only the latter, unbiased account would be able to account for the fact that both accounts of the ‘open possibility’ are possible. But is Heidegger’s position really as unbiased as it presents itself to be?

In order to answer this more refined question we have to take a second look on Heidegger’s account of the open possibility. As already indicated, Heidegger’s concept of ‘openness’ built on Schelling concept of freedom, which was in turn the result of a radicalized account of Kant’s concept of autonomy: The possibility to be good is the outcome of the free decision to bind oneself to the good; and this presupposes the ‘non-ground’ (Ungrund) of a ‘meaningless indifference’ (Gleichgültigkeit), i.e. the chaotic frenzy of an undecidedness which precedes the loving affirmation of the good, even in the case of God. Plato’s Khora is no longer the mist, which hides the divine glory. It appears as an essential feature of the origin of everything; since it recalls an indifferent ‘dark ground’ that precedes both the gracious self-revelation of the divine glory, and the human possibility to participate in this glory.

A second motive that becomes important in Heidegger’s philosophical articulation of the ‘opening of a possibility’ can be traced back to Kant’s philosophy of religion. Already Kant associated the possibility of the good with a battle: A “battle (Kampf) of the good against the evil principle for dominion (Herrschaft) over the human being”\textsuperscript{136} will precede the arrival of the ‘Kingdom of God’. Up to a certain point, this imagery is consistent with the Augustinian tradition. However, the image of a final battle (Kampf) was in Kant accompanied by an unsettling ambiguity. For it appeared no longer as a means to a predetermined end,

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\textsuperscript{136}Kant, \textit{Religion within the boundaries of mere reason and other writings} (Fn. 128), part 2.
but as a decision-battle about the *determination* of this end. Certainly, Augustine would have happily agreed with the Kantian assumption that no one is guarded against the ruses of delusions and self-deceptions; and in this sense, the battle of good and evil is at the same time a struggle for clarification. However, in the Augustinian tradition this lack of determination was only the consequence of a lack of clarity with regard to the appropriate *means to a pre-determined* end. It did not make the *end itself* appear as undetermined.

By contrast, Heidegger’s battle is a battle between symmetric forces, and this explains, as Derrida has pointed out, the political ambiguity of his hermeneutics of the ‘history of being’. According to Derrida, this ambiguity is particularly detectable in his use of the words *Kampf* (Greek *polemos*) and *friendship* (*philia*) in the context of his considerations on the arrival of ‘the God’ of the 1930’s.137 As Heidegger put it in the preliminary note to his 1934/34 lectures on Hölderlin’s hymns *Germanien* and *Der Rhein*, the history to come will “arise with the battle (*Kampf*) for the decision on the arrival and flight of the God.”138

The words *friendship* and *Kampf* indicate here two heterogeneous aspects of what Heraclitus called *Logos*. To begin with, the word *Logos* designates a simple voice, namely the ‘voice’ that speaks to attentively listening *philosophers, poets and politicians* who try to fathom the opening of a possibility. However, as Heidegger points out, in Heraclitus’ this


Logos is simultaneously both, a voice that calls us together in ‘accordance’ and ‘friendship’ (Logos, philia), and a voice that obliges us to oppose each other (Logos, polemos). The logic of friendship confirms this duality: proper friendship includes opposition; that is the way friendship is ‘carried out’. Consequently, ‘opposition’ (polemos, Kampf) and ‘accordance’ (philia) are not separable from each other. But does this plausible observation already justify the conclusion that philosophers have to adopt a completely unbiased or (in Schelling’s sense of this word) indifferent position with regard to these possibilities?

We may accentuate the word philia in order to uncover, in Heidegger, echoes of Cusa’s considerations on possibility itself, as Casarella does. However, as Derrida points out, it is equally possible to accentuate the word Kampf; and this is retrospectively worrying, given that Heidegger’s use of the word Kampf (polemos) opened a broad scope of political appropriations of this possibility, for example by the Deutsche Volk in Being and Time (1927).\footnote{Cf. Heidegger, Being and time (Fn. 7), §75, p. 384 (German pagination).}

To make it perfectly clear, Heidegger’s text on Hölderlin indicates unmistakably that Heidegger did not support the nationalist ideology of his time. Derrida’s reconstruction of the political ambiguities of Heidegger’s hermeneutics of the ‘history of being’ is more subtle; it does not accuse him of political partisanship. To the contrary, Derrida rather argues that Heidegger’s indifferent use of the word Kampf is the problem. It was precisely his unbiased attitude with regard to the possibility of paradigm-shifting events that facilitated the historical appropriation of his hermeneutic by political decision-makers who were keen to fight their own Kampf.\footnote{Cf. Derrida, Heidegger’s Ear (Fn. 137), ch. 4.} Heidegger’s philosophical writings were not designed to promote
a specific decision. Like the writings of Carl Schmitt, they only *prepared the battlefield* in which the decision had to be taken by those that felt called to do what philosophers are by profession obliged to forborne if they take Husserl’s ‘suspension of judgement’ (*epoché*) as seriously as Heidegger did. Hence, it is precisely the neutrality of Heidegger’s philosophical ‘path of thought’ that makes it difficult to take with the benefit of hindsight.

This leads us back to Milbank’s criticism of the modern ontology of evil. Our modern way of thinking seems to leave little space for Cusa’s support of Augustine’s account of evil as ‘privation of the good’. Cusa’s mystagogy seems to support a ‘banalising’ attitude towards evil, which has to be rejected in the face of the inconceivable horrors of the 20th century. However, it is at least equally possible to support Hannah Arendt’s essentially Augustinian account of the modern evil;\(^{141}\) or even to conclude that it was precisely the Kantian neutralisation of the dynamics of good and evil that enabled the horrors of the 20th century to emerge.\(^ {142}\)

Against this background, we may return again to the crossroads that separates Cusa’s meditations on the ‘possibility itself’ from late modern accounts of the ‘opening of a possibility’. Philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida agree with Cusa that this opening requires us to suspend our judgement: nothing is to be decided in advance; the possibility of the (im-) possible has to be kept open. Cusa would have even agreed with Heidegger and Derrida, that the ‘book of the world’ has become infected by an atmosphere of ‘nothingness’ that is

\(^{141}\)Hannah Arendt’s classical case study on Adolf Eichmann and the ‘banality of evil’ was evidently rooted in her appreciation of Augustine. Cf. Arendt, Hannah, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago, 1996).

\(^{142}\)Milbank, *Darkness and Silence* (Fn. 122), pp. 293f.; see p. 290, and pp. 293-296.
neither to be overcome by fideist acts of decision making, nor by philosophical proves that support the attachment to an ultimate truth: No one can exclude that the *Summae* of the great scholastics might turn into empty straw in the future; and no one can exclude that the *Solus Christus* of committed confessions may become an empty word. Would it be otherwise, the ‘good’ would not be a free-gift of grace; not a “gift of the father of lights”.143

Hence, we might conclude that Cusa’s account of the ‘possibility itself’ is almost indistinguishable of late modern accounts of the ‘opening of possibilities’. Cusa did not even *believe* more than Derrida and Heidegger did when he performed his iconoclastic prayers. He rather believed less. Like his forerunners Augustine and Dionysius, he did not believe that evil is an open possibility.

Johannes Hoff

143This is the topic of Cusa’s 1445/46 opusculum *De dato patris luminis*, which Cusa emphatically recommends to read again in the light of his ultimate book on the *posse ipsum*, arguing that “if rightly understood” it “contains the same thing as this present book.” *De apice theoriae* n.16.4-5.
Suggestions for further reading

*Primary sources*

De apice theoriae (h 12)
De dato patris luminum (h 4, Opuscula 1)
De docta ignorantia (h 1)
De filiatione dei (h 4, Opuscula 1)
De principio (h 10/2b)
De querendo deum (h 4, Opuscula 1)
De venatione sapientiae (h 12)
De visione Dei (h 6)
Dialogus de deo abscondito (h 3, Opuscula 1)
Directio speculantis seu de non aliud (h 13)
Idiota de mente (h 5)
Idiota de sapientia (h 5)
Tota pulchra es (Sermo 243 h 19/3)
Literature on Cusa


*Further Literature*


