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Medieval Philosophy as a 'Second Voyage'. The case of Anselm of Canterbury and of Nicholas of Cusa

In the dramatic dialogue *Phaedo* — which ends with Socrates' drinking the poison — Socrates looks back on his philosophical career. He relates how at first he was a pupil of the philosophers of nature, and afterwards was fascinated by Anaxagoras. Especially Anaxagoras' idea that there was a divine *Nous* or rationality, origin of the All and founder of the cosmos, moving force and principle of all order, harmony and further rationality, appealed to him. The only thing he disliked about Anaxagoras' theory was its practical elaboration: Anaxagoras came up with so many genericly different *ad hoc* explanations for different phenomena, that it was very hard — if not impossible — to see 1° *how* they were (to be) connected to that divine rationality, and 2° how all of them could alike and together be connected to *one and the same single* divine rationality. Moreover — and Socrates regards this as a serious flaw — Anaxagoras took it more or less for granted that this divine rationality uses human categories of thinking and is therefore directly and immediately accessible to human reason. Disappointed about the elaboration but convinced of the fundamental intuition behind the theory Socrates starts casting about for a new Atlas, a new unifying principle of rationality that in due way (*to deon*) could bind together (*syn-dei*) everything in the universe; for Anaxagoras failed precisely in this 'binding together', whereas it is self-

-evident that without connection there is no rationality at all. And the reason for this failure is his naive assumption that human categories can weave the tissue with which to establish the connection [1].

So, after Socrates has found a new appropriately binding (*to deon*) principle, i.e. the Good, and in order to avoid Anaxagoras' mistake, he embarks upon what he calls 'a second voyage' (*deuteros plous*). Philosophy is a search for the ultimate cause [2], and Plato identifies it, at the end of book VI of the *Republic*, with the first principle, the universal cause, the absolutely unconditional (*anhypotheton*): the Idea of the Good [3]. This Idea of the Good — as is well enough known [4] — is not being itself but beyond being (epekeina tès ousias), exceeding being both in dignity (presbeiai: age) and power (dynamei). In spite of this Idea of the Good being the final aim of every soul's striving (philosophy is a journey to the first principle or anhypotheton or Idea of the Good, and the voyager is the soul), the soul can never truly grasp it and gain solid knowledge about it in the way it can achieve this with respect to all other things [5].

In order to explain in what sense the Idea of the Good can nevertheless be somehow approached, Socrates uses the metaphor of a 'second voyage'. It is a technical term for a sea-voyage whereby the ship is moved forward not through the power of the wind blowing in the sails, but — due to a calm or to adverse wind — by oars rown by men. A second voyage takes much more effort than a first one, it takes a slower and a longer trip and — in case of adverse wind — one is not directly steering one's course for one's destiny but constantly tacking about against the wind.

The message Socrates/Plato want to convey to us is the following. The last real true ground of all reality is not directly accessible to us. We cannot contemplate it without being blinded; the Idea of the Good is compared to the sun, and directly gazing into it would destroy our eyes. Precisely this state of affairs wrecks Anaxagoras'

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[1] Cf. PLATO, *Phaedo*, 96 A - 100 A.
[2] Cf. *ibid.*, 99 D.
[3] Cf. PLATO, *Republic*, VI, 511 A-B.
[4] Cf. *ibid.*, VI, 509 B.
[5] Cf. *ibid.*, VI, 505 E.

attempt. We can only look into the sun or contemplate the divine indirectly, in something which acts as a medium; e.g. in a pond we can see the sun. But we actually see the water, and not the sun, although we see in the water the sun, i.e. at least we see a copy of the original in something else that is different from that original. Thus in this life we can only catch a dim glimpse of what is truly divine. And we can only do so in a movement of dialectical ascent of the soul [6]: starting from scientific (pro)positions (*theseis*) we travel up to their conditions of possibility and grounding principles (*hypo--theseis*; task of *dianoia*) which we can use as a flight of steps up in order to finally pass on (*poreuetai*) to vaguely surmizing the presence and nature of the First Origin [7], which is the proper task of the highest intellectual power *noèsis* [8].

This moderate conception of the capacities of human reason in respect to the ultimate ground of reality is particularly cherished by almost all medieval thinkers (although not always to the same extent; perhaps the mystics go furthest in this direction). One might even venture saying that in this respect all medieval philosophy is 'mystical' in the very broad sense of the term, and that this marks it off from the rationalism of Modernity, that to some extent picks up again the Anaxagorean project. The aim of this contribution is to highlight the former part of the above assertion, by illustrating what we would call a mystical flavour in the thinking of Anselm of Canterbury, the «father of scholasticism» [9], and Nicholas of Cusa, in whom medieval thinking culminates and is left behind at the same time.

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[6] Cf. *ibid.*, VI, 511 B.

[7] Cf. *ibid.*, VII, 533 C.

[8] Cf. *ibid.*, VI, 511 D.

[9] Cf. Gregory SCHUFREIDER, *Confessions of a Rational Mystic. Anselm's Early Writings* (Purdue University Series in the History of Philosophy), Purdue U.P., West Lafayette (Ind.), 1994, p. 1. By the time I had received and read the book it was too late to incorporate its rich materials into this essay; I am nevertheless grateful to prof. Schufreider for his thorough lectures on Anselm's *Monologion* and *Proslogion* during the academic year 1993-94 at K. U. Leuven, and for the opportunity to discuss with him the so-called 'mystical interpretation' which has found two more advocates in him and in myself. I think he could by and large agree with the way in which Anselm is presented here.

1. Anselm of Canterbury

«Lord, I do not attempt to comprehend Your sublimity, because my intellect is not at all equal to such a task. But I yearn to understand some measure of Your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe» [10]. This well-known sentence of Anselm is nearly always quoted for its second part: Anselm indicates in it what he conceives to be the right order between reason and faith. But I would like to highlight here its first part, that is mostly overlooked.

In focusing on this first part of the sentence, where Anselm declares to be yearning to understand *some measure* of the divine truth, I will be following the so-called mystical interpretation of the *Proslogion*, one of the not only most promising interpretations, it seems to me, but perhaps also one of the readings that is most faithful to the medieval cultural environment [11]. Since confronting this mystical interpretation with all other interpretations that have been proposed obviously goes beyond the scope of this contribution, I will try to bring out its attractiveness in summarizing it.

Its basic strength lies, it seems to me, in its starting point: whereas other interpretations generally focus almost exclusively on the

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[10] ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, *Proslogion*, c. 1 (*Anselm of Canterbury*, 4 vol.), edited and translated by J. Hopkins and H. Richardson, Queenston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1974, vol. 1, p. 93.

[11] See, for this mystical interpretation, Anselm STOLZ, *Anselm's Theology in the Proslogion*, in *Catholica*, 1, 1933, p. 1-24 (also edited in: *The Many-Faced Argument.* Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God, edited by John HICK and Arthur McGILL, Macmillan, London, 1968, p. 183-206); ID., *'Vere esse' im Proslogion des hl. Anselm*, in *Scholastik*, 9, 1934, p. 400-409; Henri de LUBAC s.j., *«Seigneur, je cherche Ton visage». Sur le ch. XIV du Proslogion de saint Anselme*, in *Spicilegium Beccense.* Congrès international du IX.ème centenaire de l'arrivée d'Anselme au Bec, Paris, J. Vrin, 1959, p. 295-312; G. SCHUFREIDER, *Confessions of a Rational Mystic*, pp. 7-17 distinguishes a purely logical from a hermeneutical, a phenomenological and a deconstructivist approach to Anselm's text; his aim is a thorough analysis of the cognitive experience of Anselm, which requires a profound study of the historical environment of Anselm's *Proslogion.*

chapters 2-3 or 2-4 (the so-called ontological argument), the mystical interpretation pays heed to the entire *Proslogion* as one whole, and to the ontological argument only secondarily as a part of that whole that consequently derives its function and meaning from the totality it is included in. This totality, further, is beautifully divided into two parallel parts of equal length (ch. 1-13 and 14-26), each starting with a prayer (1 and 14), followed by the introduction of a new formula to approach God (2 and 15) from which some knowledge about the divine is deduced. Due to their unique interest in the proof of the *existence* of God — which to the medievals was no problem, or at least not the greatest one — modern people have misread the argument, Anselm's intention and the *Proslogion*; focusing on ch. 2--4 and thus creating an «optical illusion» [12] they failed to see the work primarily as a piece of mystical theology, in which Anselm wants to pass from faith into the vision of the ever-present God. They failed to see that Anselm hopes to achieve this goal, i.e. advancing toward God, through the *intellectus fidei*, through an understanding of the dogmas about God. They failed to see that in the Middle Ages, as Paul Vignaux remarks [13], there is no mutually exclusive opposition between scholasticism and mysticism, between prayer and dialectical reasoning, between faith and reason.

«Upon the insistent adjurations of certain brothers», Anselm tells us in the Preface to the *Proslogion*, «I wrote the following short work ... in the role of someone endeavouring to elevate his mind toward contemplating God and seeking to understand what he believes» [14]. Anselm's purpose, thus, is not so much to bring about a general insight into the teaching of faith. He wants to attain a vision of God through an understanding of what faith tells us about God. He expects his intellectual insight into the dogmas to wind up in a vision of God. He is craving for penetrating into the unapproachable light so as to achieve what he had been created for: beatific vision. This

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[12] Cf. A. STOLZ, *Anselm's Theology* ..., p. 9 (p. 191).

[13] Paul VIGNAUX, *Philosophie au moyen âge*. Précédé d'une introduction nouvelle et suivi de «Lire Duns Scot aujourd'hui», Albeuve (Suisse), Castella, 1987, p. 86-89.

[14] ANSELM, *Proslogion*, p. 89.

aim is in accord with the title: the work is an allocution to God, an address (*proslogion*) of somebody whose faith is in search of God through insight (subtitle: *fides quaerens intellectum*). It is also in accord with the first chapter, in which Anselm, well aware that such a direct gaze is impossible in this earthly life, wants to arouse the mind to some limited experience of God, so far as that is possible this side of the grave. He therefore withdraws into the inner chamber of his heart to be alone with God and to seek His face. But alas, (original) sin has darkened the image of God in him. Out of himself alone, Anselm is ignorant of where to seek or to find God. This leads him into a mournful lament over the painful loss that occurred through Adam's sin, and into a renewed prayer in which Anselm beseeches God's help for his enterprise. For God alone can enable him to find Him. The opening chapter is clearly more than a «long introductory invocation» [15] in poetical and elevated language; it actually voices the deep desire animating the whole work.

If these observations are valid, one would only be surprised at finding out that what Anselm is really setting out for is: an attempt to prove the *existence* of the One Whom he has already addressed in the preceding chapter. Obviously it does not make any sense to pray to somebody whose existence is doubtful and needs demonstration. Moreover, how could one, doubting of somebody else's existence, reasonably implore that other person to help one to prove his existence? This is a blatant contradiction, and also the reason why most defenders of the argument nowadays hold that what Anselm proves in ch. 2-4 is not God's existence. Something else is at stake.

According to the mystical line of interpretation — we do not further specify this «something else», for interpretations from here on sometimes widely diverge [16] — the two formulae of ch. 2 and 15 will

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[15] Karl BARTH, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum.* Translated by I. Robertson, London, SCM Press, 1960, p. 13.

[16] For instance: it is not God's existence that is proved, but rather God's both general and special existence (K. Barth), or God's mode of existence (A. Stolz), or God's necessary existence (N. Malcolm, on the assumption that necessary existence is a predicate whereas existence is not), or only God's abstract existence and not His concrete actuality (Ch. Hartshorne).

guide our exploration of what Anselm was really out for in writing this tract. In the first formula God is called That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived (*id quo maius cogitari nequit* or *non potest*), an IQM. This formula is very peculiar for, as Anselm puts it in his reply to Gaunilo, «this idea IQM proves through itself about itself» (*de se per se ipsum probat*) [17] — in a very crucial passage where he emphasizes the fact that his formula is not at all randomly chosen. The peculiarity of the IQM-formula lies in that it does not inform us about the content of the concept or reality it denotes. It only describes the relationship between that reality and human thinking: 'God' is that than which nothing greater can be thought. Yet, Anselm pretends, this formula can indirectly teach us a lot about God — in fact we can deduce His existence as well as His attributes from it. Thus the formula to refer to the object of the proof is also the means of the proof: one single argument needing nothing else except itself to prove itself. In technical language we say that the IQM-formula has *no ontic content*. It is not referring to any idea with a positive content, like the idea of a tree, a triangle etc. If it would be such an idea, it would indeed be a glaring fallacy to deduce existence from its content, just as it would be an obvious absurdity to infer the existence of trees and triangles from the corresponding mere ideas we conceive. Instead of being an idea that provides us with a clearly delimited mental content of a corresponding object, this 'idea' is rather a *noetic rule*: it stipulates how we *should think* about that (inconceivable infinite) object. The 'idea' is a norm prescribing how human beings should think about God, or rather confronting them with a prohibition that must be obeyed, saying that we should not think of God in terms of a being that actually or possibly can be surpassed by another one.

And yet, curiously enough, this noetic rule can tell us something about the nature and existence of divinity in spite of its total lack of any positive mental content. For the rule prescribes how to think correctly about an otherwise unknown object. But our thinking is only correct (noetically speaking) if it somehow thinks the truth, and

[17] ANSELM, *Proslogion*, p. 130.

our thinking is (noetically) true only if it adequately corresponds to an (ontologically) existing true being. In other words, the noetic truth of my thinking implies and requires the ontic truth of the object of my thought. As a matter of fact, truth as such is defined by Anselm as the 'rectitude' (*rectitudo*) between the two truths [18]. It follows, then, that this rule, though dealing exclusively with my thinking, reveals something of the nature of the object of my thought. In this way Anselm thinks he can draw the following implications. If God is truly an 'IQM', He has to exist, not only intramentally but also extramentally (ch. 2), and He has to exist in such a way that His nonexistence is even inconceivable (ch. 3). Further we can deduce that God is greater than all that exists, i.e. that He is the Creator of all that exists (ch. 4), and that He is whatever it is greater to be than not to be (ch. 5). Thus God is perceptivity (ch. 6), omnipotence (ch. 7), mercy (ch. 8), justice and impassibility (ch. 9-11), life (ch. 12) and unlimited eternity (ch. 13).

So what we can rationally find about God is not to be underestimated, though it is necessarily limited and always inadequate with respect to its object, God. Anselm reminds us of this inevitable limitation in the next chapter: «O Lord God, why does my soul not perceive You if it has found You ?» [19] Rationally he has found God (*invenit*), but he does not feel His presence (*sed non sentit*), he does not yet experience God. Hence a feeling of tremendous (though not desperate, as we shall see) frustration, that at first sight might surprise us. The deception Anselm repeatedly voices in ch. 14, 16, 17 and 18, seems to arise from an acute consciousness that his attempt, i.e. his desire to contemplate God, has failed. Yet, what has failed is not the intellectual process. Reason has been very successful up to now in discovering decisive features of the divine Reality. Nor is the disappointment due to the impenetrability and ineffability of divine nature. Though Anselm knew that his reason could achieve only limited results with respect to God and though his reason is satisfied and content, what is dissatisfied and discontent in him is the

[18] Cf. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, *De veritate*, c. 3 (*Anselm of Canterbury*, 4 vol.), 1976, vol. 2, p. 81.

[19] ANSELM, *Proslogion*, p. 103.

desire that first set his reason in motion. Anselm had hoped to find God's face and to feel His presence through rational insight into the dogmas of faith; now he painfully realizes that rational proofs do not lead, at least not automatically, to experiencing God in his heart. To his own dismay Anselm finds out that rational ambition and mystical aspiration — though both emerge from faith — are not identical [20]. Anselm's initial ambition was to feel the joy of God's presence through understanding. Joy is the goal of all understanding, which enables us to foretaste eternal blessedness piecemeal, and in this life. Joy is supposed to result from knowledge, and is intensified with increasing knowledge. In ch. 14, however, this hope is shattered Hence disentchantment and frustration arising not from the analysis of faith itself but from a reflection on the results of that intellectual effort. The initial desire is still not appeased, and Anselm is in imminent danger of falling in painful despair; for the desire seems to reveal itself as pointless and in vain. «In Adam, we all lost that which we, desiring, do not know how to seek; seeking it do not find; finding, do not find to be what we are seeking» [21].

This moment of crisis, however, is not the final word of the *Proslogion*. Anselm musters up courage, again beseeches God to help him in his search for Him (ch. 14, 16, 17 and 18) and takes a second start. He tries to prolong his speculative effort by pondering on a new formula to denote God's sublimity. It is introduced right at the beginning of ch. 15: «Therefore, O Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought» [22]. God is not only *Id quo maius cogitari nequit*, He is also *quiddam maius quam cogitari possit.*

Again this formula is conspicuous by its lack of ontic content. It is not representing a positive mental content that is clearly delimited and the object of a process of rational unravelling. Rather it is a noetic rule, imposing upon human reason a criterion to judge our statements about God. Whatever we assert or think about God,

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[20] Cf. H. de LUBAC, «*Seigneur* ...», p. 307-312.

[21] ANSELM, *Proslogion*, ch. 18, p. 105.

[22] ID., *ibid.*, p.104.

it must be in conformity with the rule dictating that God is greater than whatever can be thought [23].

The impact of this second formula on Anselm's state of disappointment is obvious. If God is truly greater than anything that can be thought, how could we ever expect to find Him through thinking? The frustration Anselm has fallen victim to in ch. 14 is but too normal. Anselm comes to *understand* the *necessity* of this kind of disentchantment. Since God is greater than can be thought, thinking can never find God though seeking Him desperately, and whatever it finds is not God. The rational insight into the necessity of this frustration gives Anselm new hope and forms the impetus stirring him up to venture a renewed and perhaps more profound intellectual analysis.

In fact, the two formulae are connected, since the latter is logically deducible from the former. If God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived He is the greatest conceivable thing. This greatest conceivable thing, however, is not the greatest thing *we* can conceive. Whatever we can positively conceive is necessarily finite. The greatest conceivable thing, therefore, is something transcending human understanding. For apart from conceiving limited essences with all kinds of positive characteristics we can also conceive inconceivability. So the greatest conceivable thing or the greatest possible thing we could ever conceive is something we cannot positively conceive, i.e. something of which we can only conceive its inconceivability. Hence the IQM-formula enables Anselm to *understand* the *necessity* of i) the impossibility of God's nonexistence (ch. 2-4); ii) certain divine attributes (ch. 5-13); iii) the frustration following upon his attempt to feel God's presence as the result of a rational analysis, because God is greater than whatever can be thought by human reason (ch. 14-15).

This logical connection has another surprising consequence. Indeed, it follows that, though we cannot conceive God, we can conceive that He is inconceivable. Though we cannot conceive incon-

[23] Cf. S. DANGELMAYR, *Maximum und Cogitare bei Anselm und Cusanus. Zur Problematik des Proslogion-Arguments*, in *Analecta Anselmiana*, Frankfurt a. M., Minerva, 1975, vol. 4/1, p. 207-209.

ceivable things, we can conceive the inconceivability of something. Hence we are in a position to carry on our intellectual analysis, our search for insight that is supposed to approach us to God, as Anselm explicitly asserts: «For since something of this kind can be thought (viz. something which is greater than can be thought), if You were not this being then something greater than You could be thought — a consequence which is impossible» [24].

Since God's unintelligibility is intelligible to us, we have to modify the results obtained in the previous analysis. Or, one could say, the prolongation of intellectual analysis precisely consists in that qualification. Anselm now realizes that God dwells in an *inaccessible* light [25]; that He possesses all kinds of features in an *ineffable* way [26]; that in spite of God's possessing numerous attributes He is undividedly One [27] and therefore *inexplicable*, for Anselm's «limited understanding cannot in a single view behold so many at once *in order to delight* in all at once» [28]; that God is encompassing all things temporal and eternal [29]; that only God truly *is* in a proper and unqualified but to us *incomprehensible* sense [30]; that He is, in an *unfathomable* way, unique and one and yet triune, the one necessary being and the only complete Good [31].

This identification of God with Goodness introduces the last part of the *Proslogion*. As we mentioned earlier, the purpose of insight is joy (ch. 1, 18, 26). Good things are enjoyable. So, joy must arise from intellectually concentrating upon divine goodness. «If there are many great joys in enjoyable things, how rich and how great must be the joy to be found in Him Who made these enjoyable things!» [32] Anselm then goes on to enumerate the kinds of goods for those who are or will ever be capable of enjoying this Su-

[24] ANSELM, *Proslogion*, ch. 15, p. 104.
[25] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 16, p. 104.
[26] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 17, p. 105.
[27] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 18, p. 105.
[28] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 18, p. 105.
[29] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 19-21, p. 106-107.
[30] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 22, p. 108.
[31] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, ch. 23, p. 108-109.
[32] ID., *ibid.*, ch. 24, p. 110.

preme Good: the seven bodily and the seven spiritual goods (ch. 25). Alas, again we are confronted with human finitude: «each shall so rejoice that his whole heart, whole mind, and whole soul will not be able to contain the fullness of that joy» [33].

Thus it is possible to achieve the goal of understanding God, i.e. joy, through understanding. To know God is to love Him, to love Him is to rejoice in God. The only problem is that to know God, in this life, implies knowing His unknowability. Yet, this awareness or His unknowability does not entirely prevent us from tasting some joy, viz., the joy that is inspired by *hope*. For if we know that God is *unknowable*, He is *not completely unknown*. If we know that God is unknowable, we know God «to some extent, as far as is possible in this life», and to that extent we foretaste to some degree the full joy that we will abound in in the next life. This partial foretaste of the future joy is brought about by *hope*.

What is hope? In the early Middle Ages it is defined as the confident expectation of future (eternal and spiritual, and hence in this life invisible) goods, as the trustful reliance on future beatitude [34]. So, Anselm starts his intellectual search for God from faith and, after some time, realizes that God is beyond whatever can be thought. This provides a new starting point for further rationalization, in the course of which Anselm comes to *understand* the *necessity* of God's absence, invisibility, incomprehensibility. This insight, however, definitely marks a progress in the soul's ascent toward God. This step forward provokes the partial joy that is a foretaste of the full joy. It is the joy following upon the seeing of God's invisibility, upon the knowing of His unknowability. In other words this is the joy of *hope*, which is «directed toward those things which are unseen» [35]. There is some genuine form of seeing and knowing God (and consequently some joy), viz., to the extent that we can see and know Him in

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[33] ID., *ibid.*, ch. 25, p. 111.

[34] Cf. Jacques-Guy BOUGEROL, *La théologie de l'espérance aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles* (*Etudes Augustiniennes*), Paris, Vrin, 1985, p. 97-99.

[35] ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, *The Harmony of Knowledge, the Predestination and the Grace of God with Free Choice* (*Anselm of Canterbury*, 4 vol.), vol. 2, p. 212.

this life: as invisible and unknowable. Nevertheless there is some undeniable experience of joy, i.e. the joy of hope, and this is the basis for Anselm's unshakable confidence in the future joy that awaits for us in the next life.

Anselm has finally found (limited) joy through intellectual analysis which guides the soul's journey to God. He has experienced the frustration of that search and understood it as one of the necessary stages the soul has to pass through in its ascent towards God. Only when one has understood that God is beyond understanding one can find God and experience — in hope — part of the full joy that accompanies that finding. In this life we can only find God through understanding if we truly understand that He is ununderst andable to us. This insight, however, is the fruit of a rational analysis carried out by a humble believer.

Faith tells us *that* the Christian needs hope in this life [36], reason tells us *why* this is so. For reason aims at a rational insight that is won in an analysis of the contents of faith. This insight consists in understanding that the proper understanding of God in this life is to *understand* that He is unintelligible and invisible, inaccessible and impenetrable — whence the need for hope.

2. Nicholas of Cusa

Nicholas of Cusa, it seems to us, is engaged in a similar «second voyage» (*deuteros plous*) [37] in search of the Ultimate Ground. In writings like De visione Dei (1453) or in his later writings, such as *Trialogus de Possest* (1463) or *De apice theoriae* (1464), Nicholas is clearly motivated by the same thirst for contemplating God [38] we

[36] Cf. *Rom.* 5, 1-5; 15, 13; *II Cor.* 3, 12; *Hebr.* 6, 19; 3, 1.

[37] Cf. PLATO, *Phaedo*, 99 D.

[38] NICOLAI DE CUSA, *De apice theoriae. Die höchste Stufe der Betrachtung.* Lateinisch-Deutsch. Auf Grundlage des Textes der kritische Edition übersetzt und mit Einleitung, Kommentar und Anmerkungen herausgegeben von Hans Gerhard SENGER (*Philosophische Bibliothek*, Bd. 383), Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1986, n. 16, l. 12-13: «Eris, spero, acceptus Dei contemplator et pro me inter sacra indesinenter orabis».

have already observed in the *Proslogion*. The aim of *De apice theoriae* is to satiate the desire of the mind. Mind's intellectual desire can only be acquiesced when it is immersed in the glory of the divine majesty of the *Posse* itself [39]. Therefore the desire of the intellect is a desire for that *Posse* itself, which is its initial starting-point and its final good [40].

The urgent question is, then: how to reach that Ultimate Good of the *Posse* itself? In his *Trialogus de Possest* Nicholas had indicated the road to be followed, falling back on St. Paul's famous quote from the Epistle to the Romans: «The invisible things of Him, including His eternal power and divinity, are clearly seen from the creation of the world, by means of understanding created things» [41]. So the Apostle, and in his wake Nicholas, advices us to start from the visible world as creature in order to elevate ourselves to the Creator [42].

According to the Neoplatonic current both Anselm and Nicholas represent, there is a hierarchy of being. Nicholas restricts it to the bare minimum in *De apice theoriae*, i.e. to the hierarchy of *esse - vivere - intelligere*: to be - to live - to understand. Understanding is a better, more perfect image of the divine *Posse* than living is, and so is living with respect to being [43]. So the intellect is the favourite instrument for bringing our search for God to a successful end.

Now man can know a wide variety of things. He can know sensible things on the basis of sense experience, he can further calculate relationships between things with his reason, finally he can specu-

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[39] ID., *ibid.*, n. 11, l. 23-25: «quia posse ipsum est solum potens, cum apparuerit in gloria maiestatis, satiare mentis desiderium».

[40] ID., *ibid.*, n. 12, l. 10-15: «Recte igitur vides solum posse ipsum, hoc quid quod quaeritur per omnem mentem, esse principium mentalis desiderii, quia est quo nihil prius esse potest, et finem eiusdem mentalis desiderii, cum nihil ultra posse ipsum desiderari possit».

[41] *Rom.* I, 20.

[42] Cf. especially NICOLAI DE CUSA, *Trialogus de Possest*, n. 3.

[43] ID., *De apice theoriae*, n. 20, l. 1-6: «Posse cum addito imago est ipsius posse, quo nihil simplicius. Ita posse esse est imago ipsius posse, et posse vivere imago ipsius posse, et posse intelligere imago ipsius posse. Verior tamen imago eius est posse vivere, et adhuc verior posse intelligere».

late with his intellect to «see» intelligible objects and try to catch a glimpse of the Intelligible excelling all other intelligible objects: *Posse* itself.

In spite of the wide range of objects it can reach, however, man's intellect is not infinite. Here we come across the important distinction between infinite (*infinitus*) and unlimited *(interminatus)*. In Cusanus' conceptuality only God is truly, or absolutely, infinite. The universe is only privatively infinite, because creation depends on matter and the finite mass of matter cannot be extended infinitely, although it can be extended in all directions since no limits are set to it. So the universe is unlimited, though not infinite. The same holds for the intellect. Theoretically speaking, no limit is set to it and every knowable object can be known by it; factually, however, the human mind is always finite and practically speaking no human mind ever knows all possibly knowable objects. Thus the human mind, like the universe, is interminate, not infinite.

One boundary, nevertheless, is set to this unlimitedness of the human mind: it is the limit set by that which is infinite by nature and therefore in principle incomprehensible to the human mind: the *Posse* itself, transcending all intelligibility. That is why Cusanus says that the mind is unlimited this side of the *Posse* itself: *interminatum citra posse ipsum* [44]. The mind can move and shift and focus its attention in all directions: it will always remain actually finite, and never be capable of crossing the border set by Him Who is incomprehensible, Whom even the Apostle Paul, taken away into the third sky, could not understand [45]. Nicholas repeatedly confirms that we cannot trespass this threshold [46]: we cannot comprehend the incomprehensible *Posse*.

To realize, however, the facticity of this boundary set to the intellect, it is necessary that we know some things about the incomprehensible *Posse*. At least two things: first, that it exists, and secon-

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[44] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, n. 11, l. 11.

[45] ID., *ibid.*, n. 2, l. 6-10: «Si apostolus Paulus in tertium caelum raptus nondum comprehendit incomprehensibilem, nemo umquam ipsum qui maior est omni comprehensioni satiabitur quin semper instet, ut melius comprehendat».

[46] Cf. ID., *ibid.* n. 8, 10, 11, 12, 19; cf. also *De visione Dei*, c. 17.

dly, that it exists beyond comprehension. Thus, while not embracing or grasping it with the logical categories of our reason, we somehow have some 'sight' of it. So we can progressively discover some true predicates of the Ultimate. Nicholas describes the most important steps of this discovery as so many landmarks of his own intellectual evolution laid down in different of his works [47]. At first, he recapitulates, and already many years ago, he realized that the Ultimate was beyond our comprehension and beyond all diversity and contrariety *(coincidentia oppositorum,* in *De docta ignorantia).* Later he paid attention to the fact that this Ultimate was one, single, self-subsistent and the unique hypostasis of all the rest. Still later, in *Trialogus de Possest,* he found out that this subsistent hypostasis could not not exist because it was the ground of all actual and possible being; he therefore called it «Actualized Possibility» *(Possest),* or, because nothing can be without the being of possibility itself, the *Posse* itself [48]. This intellectual odyssey, then, reflects Anselm's emotional evolution in the *Proslogion* from naive rationalistic optimism through desperate frustration to humble and moderate speculative sight of the Incomprehensible accompanied by the joy of hope.

A similar intellectual odyssey is described in *De visione Dei.* Nicholas wants to introduce the monks of Tegernsee into mystical theology by means of an experiment with a *figura cuncta videntis,* i.e. a painting of a face the eyes of which seem to look in all directions at the same time. This was a very popular illusionistic painting technique in the fifteenth century, and Nicholas quotes several examples of similar paintings. The *figura cuncta videntis* or the portrait with the face seeing every singular thing and all things together (*cuncta et singula*) is put up at the northern wall, and Nicholas asks the monks to stand in a half circle around the portrait. This portrait, or *icona Dei,* symbolizes the divine look, Nicholas pretends. For the monk in the west will have the impression that the portrait is looking at (also: after) him and only at (also: after) him, whereas the monk in the east will have the impression that the eyes are gazing

[47] Cf. ID., *ibid.,* n. 4, l. 1-17.

[48] ID., *ibid.,* n. 8, l. 1-3: «Hinc posse ipsum est omnium quiditas et hypostasis, in cuius potestate tam ea quae sunt quam quae non sunt necessario continentur».

at him and exclusively at him — which is incomprehensible to reason. Second, if one monk moves along the half circle, he will have the impression that the look is following him, i.e. is moving along with him, whereas all the other monks will have the impression that the look does not move at all since it is facing all the time each of the monks separately (and all together) — which is again incomprehensible to reason. Third, if one monk moves from west to east and another from east to west, both will have the impression that the look moves along with each of them — in opposite directions however, which again is incomprehensible to reason. Thus the threefold experiment faces us with an undeniable evidence of sense-experience (*sensibilis apparentia*), which nevertheless cannot be understood by reason. Consequently reason experiences some frustration and also some admiration at its own incapacity to understand what is happening. Later on this admiration and frustration will turn out to be an inevitable stage on the way to the real vision of God.

Also Anselm's comprehending of the incomprehensibility of God finds its counterpart in Nicholas' analysis. If the Ultimate is defined as *Posse* itself, we can understand why it is necessarily unintelligible to us. For any possibility we can comprehend is a qualified possibility (*posse cum addito*): the possibilities of a child, of a plant, of an author etc. An unqualified possibility, which in fact must be the possibility of all possibilities [49], cannot be thought by our thinking. We cannot think about possibilities unless in terms of possibilities of this or that (e.g. child, author, etc.); in adding those qualifications, however, we do not enlarge or enrich the concept of possibility, rather we restrict and impoverish it. We cannot think pure Possibility, the *Posse* itself, as the possibility of all possibilities on which all further actuality and possibility depends and which therefore can properly be called God. Yet we can think its unthinkability. And in doing so, we nevertheless manage to catch some glimpse, to have some vision (*visio* as Nicholas calls it) of the Invisible.

For the Invisible manifests Himself in visible things. In order to explain the meaning of *manifestatio*, Nicholas uses the comparison

[49] ID., *ibid.*, n. 17, l. 5-6: «Ad posse ipsum nihil addi potest, cum sit posse omnis posse».

of light [50]. We are able to see various colours and various coloured objects, which are as many manifestations, or modes of being, of light itself. Yet, on the one hand we know that without light no (potentially) visible object would ever be actually visible and that no eye capable of seeing would actually see; on the other hand we do not see the light itself. The light is that which enables an eye to see and renders an object actually visible, the condition of possibility of an eye's actual seeing and of an object's being actually seen. The light is that which, while enabling a concrete act of seeing and being seen, at the same time transcends it; that which, while manifesting itself, withdraws itself in its manifestations. *Manifestatio* is a technical term for the becoming visible of that which is in itself invisible; it is at the same time the act and the result of appearing. That which in itself does not appear is appearing in something else representing it. The purpose of this manifestation is not to make itself visible *as it is in itself*, rather to remain hidden and concealed as it is in itself while at the same time appearing in some other thing.

Now apply this example of sensible reality to intelligible reality, Nicholas tells us [51]. Just like various colours can be seen by the sense

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[50] ID., *ibid.*, n. 8, l. 10-26: «Respicias igitur ad lucem sensibilem, sine qua non potest esse sensibilis visio, et attende quomodo in omni colore et omni visibili nulla est alia hypostasis quam lux varie in variis essendi modis colorum apparens, ac quod luce subtracta nec color nec visibile nec visus manere potest. Claritas vero lucis, ut in se est, visivam potentiam excellit. Non igitur videtur, uti est, sed in visibilibus se manifestat, in uno clarius, in alio obscurius. Et quanto visibile magis clare lucem repraesentat, tanto nobilius et pulchrius. Lux vero omnium visibilium claritatem et pulchritudinem complicat et excellit. Nec lux se in visibilibus manifestat, ut se visibilem ostendat, immo ut potius se invisibilem manifestet, quando in visibilibus eius claritas capi nequit. Qui enim claritatem lucis in visibilibus invisibilem videt, verius ipsam videt».

[51] ID., *ibid.*, n. 9, l.1-11: «Transfer igitur haec sensibilia ad intelligibilia, puta posse lucis ad posse simpliciter seu posse ipsum absolutum et esse coloris ad esse simplex. Nam ita se habet esse simplex sola mente visibile ad mentem, sicut esse coloris ad sensum visus. Et introspicias, quid videat mens in variis entibus, quae nihil sunt nisi quod esse possunt, et hoc solum habere possunt quod ab ipso posse habent. Et non videbis varia entia nisi apparitionis ipsius posse varios modos; quiditatem autem non posse variam esse, quia est posse ipsum varie apparens».

of sight and are as many various ways or modes of appearing of the light itself, so various beings can be known by the intellect and are as many various modes of being of the absolute *Posse* itself. Since *Posse* itself is one and unique, immutable and invariable, the various beings must be various ways of appearing of *Posse* itself *(est posse ipsum varie apparens).*

The description of the look of the *figura cuncta videntis* aims at making the same point. When one reflects on the marvellous capacities of the look, one discovers that it accompanies one constantly wherever one goes or stands. Not only is it a permanent companion, it also foresees or foreknows already now the position one is about to take the next moment, for it sees all things apart and everything together at any moment. In this sense the look symbolizes divine providence. This way of looking at us is God's taking care of us, His way of manifesting His activity [52]. Upon further reflection something very strange is happening here. On the one hand the divine look contains every possible perspective in itself and it is the origin of every actual and possible human point of view. So whatever we see in the portrait depends on our standpoint, and not on the portrait. If we see its eyes looking eastward it is because *we* are in the east, and if we see them looking westward it is because *we* are in the west. So *what* we see is not merely depending on, but simply *is* our own point of view. So every look we have of the portrait, every representation we have of God is anthropomorphic [53], partial, finite, relative, and falls necessarily short of adequately rendering the divine reality. On the other hand we know that some reality must be there — although we cannot represent or think it — in order for that which we all see happening, being conceivable to really happen. That which we do not see is a condition of possibility of that which we do see. So God manifests Himself in the portrait in a double way [54]: as seen in a finite and confined manifestation, whereby the image we have of God reflects our perspective but nevertheless represents a facet of the divine reality as well, however out of draw-

[52] Cf. ID., *De visione Dei*, c. 5.

[53] Cf. *ibid.*, c. 6.

[54] Cf. *ibid.*, c. 6.

ing (God's concealed manifestation); and as unseen, i.e. as the presence of an absence at the presence of what is finite, as that which is infinite and which transcends all images and concepts, as that which withdraws itself behind its finite manifestations and that does only become visible as the presence of an absence (God's unconcealed manifestation). This is Nicholas' typical way of taking anthropomorphisms seriously: any look we have of the portrait or any vision we have of God, however naive it may be, is a genuine though finite manifestation of God Himself. Under these circumstances the best picture we can have is the one that evokes its own inadequacy at best, that highlights its own conjectural character at best, that presents itself as insufficient, unsatisfactory. The best possible picture is the one that evokes at best the irrepresentability of that which is irrepresentable, i.e. the picture undermines its own 'truth' by demonstrating its own inadequacy and superfluity. At the same time, however, it underlines its own necessity, insuperability, inevitablility: if God is truly irrepresentable we can only use finite anthropomorphic images and words (philosophical and theological concepts, stories, rites etc.) to talk about Him.

Thus an intellect realizing what the real meaning of *manifestatio* is by the same stroke realizes that that which manifests itself is beyond understanding. The truest act of understanding the *Posse* itself is the act of understanding it as beyond all cognitive powers, as excelling all capacities of intelligible faculties. On the other hand, this act of understanding is the act of a spiritual faculty, our mind, and insofar an actualization of a capacity, a manifestation of *Posse* itself. What the intellect grasps, it comprehends. But when mind realizes, in an actualization of its own capacities, i.e. in a manifestation of absolute *Posse* itself, that that *Posse* itself cannot be comprehended because of its excellence, then it somehow «sees» something it cannot comprehend. In other words the mind's capacity to see *(visio)* reaches beyond its capacity to comprehend [55].

[55] ID., *De apice theoriae*, n. 10, l. 11-21: «Sed in se posse ipsum supra omnem potentiam cognitivam, medio tamen intelligibilis posse, videtur verius, quando videtur excellere omnem vim capazcitatis intelligibilis posse. Id quod intellectus capit intelligit. Quando igitur mens in posse suo videt posse ipsum ob suam excellentiam

In De visione Dei this idea is symbolized in the metaphor of the 'wall': the 'wall of paradise', the 'wall of coincidence of opposites'. According to this metaphor paradise is only found *behind* the wall which functions as an obstacle one has to overcome: one has to climb or jump over (transilire) the wall in order to see God in paradisiac joy. The wall is that which prevents us from contemplating the divine essence directly with our reason; the wall is the coincidence of opposites [56], the rock of scandal to reason or the rock wrecking reason and its capacities, and God is only behind the wall. If we want to see Him we must surpass reason, or rather leave it behind (epistemological meaning). Yet, surpassing reason *(ratio)* is not only possible for us in this life, it is even a necessary condition for attaining salvation; it is the gate in the wall [57] through which we can enter paradise (soteriological meaning). True enough, reason crashes against this wall. It gets desperately entangled in insurmountable contradictions if it wants to think the infinite by means of finite categories. At first, we may feel frustrated and disappointed. But on second thoughts two further reflections emerge: first, this seeming failure does not destroy, bur rather intensifies our desire for seeing what is behind the wall; and second, this collision was inevitable and is indispensable, for it brings us *salvation*. For that which is to be seen behind the wall cannot be seen with finite categories; therefore we first have to get rid of them before what is to be seen can become visible to us. Only then can it 'appear' to us, as that which we do not and cannot see, as the presence of an absence, as that which can only manifest itself to us as excaping and defying all our concepts and categories.

So the mind can *see* the Invisible without comprehending it. What does the mind see, then, or what is the object of such a *visio?* The answer to this final question again forms a striking parallel with

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capi non posse, tunc visu supra suam capacitatem videt, sicut puer videt quantitatem lapidis maiorem, quam fortitudo suae potentiae portare posset. Posse igitur videre mentis excellit posse comprehendere».

[56] Cf. ID., *De visione Dei,* c. 12: Nicholas calls the coincidence of *creare* and *creari* a «murus absurditatis».

[57] Cf. ID., *ibid.*, c. 10; c. 11; Jesus' saying «ego sum ostium» (*John* 10:9).

Anselm. Obviously the mind does not comprehend the *Posse* itself in the cognitive way reason comprehends objects belonging to the cognitive order. Nor does the mind gaze at an object without understanding it or catch that object in an intuitive contemplation; this is reserved for the afterlife, when we will dwell in God's glorious majesty and see Him «face to face», or perhaps also for some exceptionally blessed mystics who can momentarily foretaste beatific vision already in this life. What the mind «sees» without comprehending is that in all those things it can comprehend the *Posse* itself is at work. All things it can comprehend are but *manifestationes* of that one absolute *Posse* it cannot comprehend, including its own activity. So the mind sees that *Posse*, in that for instance it cannot not be and is the condition of possibility of all the rest, but it sees it as above comprehension. In other words the mind sees its surpassing all cognitive powers, and understands the unintelligibility of the *Posse* itself. The activity of *visio* beyond comprehension, now, is on the one hand the highest activity of the human mind *(posse supremum mentis)* [58], the peak of contemplation *(apex theoriae);* for the loftier the object of contemplation, the loftier also its act. On the other hand the mind is aware of its own activity as being also a manifestation of that *Posse* itself. This awareness is an awareness of finitude, of a border that cannot be crossed. This awareness is one's realizing, one's «seeing» of something one cannot comprehend. The object one sees without comprehending is not a real object; rather it is the self-reflexive activity of the mind revealing to and at the same time concealing from itself the *Posse* itself, while being itself nothing but a manifestation of this *Posse* at that.

A similar type of non-objectifiable thinking is described by the metaphors *intrare in caliginem, ignote ascendere, non intelligendo*

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[58] ID., *De apice theoriae*, n. 11, l. 1-11: «Unde simplex visio mentis non est visio comprehensiva, sed de comprehensiva se elevat ad videndum incomprehensibile. Uti dum videt unum maius alio comprehensive, se elevat, ut videat illud quo non potest esse maius. Et hoc quidem est infinitum, maius omni mensurabili seu comprehensibili. Et hoc posse videre mentis supra omnem comprehensibilem virtutem et potentiam est posse supremum mentis, in quo posse ipsum maxime se manifestat».

intelligere that pop up frequently in *De visione Dei*. In a normal visual process we see one object in a context or against a background, an object demarcated from that background and also from other different objects. In the experiment with the portrait, however, the focus of attention shifts to the act of seeing: when we look at the portrait we see nothing but the portrait's looking back at us. What is seen in this portrait's looking back at us is precisely the perspective from which we looked at the portrait first, i.e. our own act of seeing. What our act of seeing sees when looking at the portrait is nothing but its own act of seeing — as a finite manifestation, however, of a divine transcendent look encompassing all actual and possible perspectives. Here the act of seeing (and thinking) is considered in its own and for its own sake, apart from all intentionality or object-directedness and apart from all differentiation with other possible visible objects. Only if these conditions are fulfilled can thinking and seeing discover what they truly and in essence are: a finite mode of the activity, a tiny confined modality of the operation of something truly infinite. Seeing and thinking discover themselves as modality and as activity of an incomprehensible all finite modalities and activities transcending infinity. In one sense nothing is understood: we are in darkness, ignorance, incomprehension, for we cannot understand this infinite as it is in itself. In another sense some progress has nevertheless been made: we *enter* darkness, we *mount* ignorantly, we *understand* through not understanding, for we experience the activity of a divine reality in a twofold way. On the one hand we have a clear awareness of the presence of an absence (God as unconcealed and invisible), on the other hand we have the certainty of a finite manifestation of the infinite (God as concealed and visible). Something is being seen, although there is no some *thing* that is being seen. What is experienced is a background that can never be reduced to an object without withdrawing itself behind it and that yet is constitutive of each visible object, that yet is the condition of possibility of seeing (anything) as such. What is experienced is something that is 'seen' without being an object: light. What we 'see' is a light without an object, and as a consequence «we see, but we see no-thing». We see the light that blinds our eyes and throws us in darkness.

So the object is its own activity, and its activity is nothing but the *Posse* itself. *Apex theoriae est posse ipsum, posse omnis posse* [59]. The highest level of contemplation is a manifestation of *Posse* itself understanding this contemplation and all the rest as nothing but a manifestation of *Posse* itself. It is *Posse* itself understanding itself.

This is also what the title of *De visione Dei* reveals. The 'vision of God' seems to refer, at first sight, to our seeing an object or an essence (*genitivus obiectivus*). Our seeing of God, however, turns out to be nothing but our seeing of God's act of seeing which is identical with our own act of seeing; or it is our seeing that our act of seeing is nothing but a finite manifestation of the infinite divine act of seeing. Our seeing of God is our seeing of God's seeing *(genitivus subiectivus)* manifesting itself in a finite modality.

Neoplatonism imposes a hierarchy on the universe. There is a gradation of increasingly higher and clearer manifestations of *Posse* itself, starting, from dead objects *(esse)* through living beings *(vivere),* sensible animals *(sensus),* rational beings *(ratio)* to intellectual beings *(intellectus).* The closer one is to the transcendent source of all being, the more pure and more obvious the theophany is. To the same extent there is a hierarchical finality in things and an increasing desire for unification with the transcendent source. The closer one is, the more one will be attracted by it. In our being aware of the incomprehensible which we see without grasping we also become aware of the finality of our intellectual efforts, of the final goal towards which we have to direct our steps [60]. Hence our seeing without understanding is also a seeing, from a distance, of the finish of all our movements, desires and aspirations, a finish we must run to, as the Apostle advices us, in such a way that we gain the prize; other-

[59] ID., *ibid.*, n. 17, l. 1.

[60] ID., *ibd.*, n. 11, l. 12-20: «Nam est posse videre ad posse ipsum tantum ordinatum, ut mens praevidere possit, quorsum tendit; sicut viator praevidet terminum motus, ut ad desideratum terminum gressus dirigere possit. Mens igitur nisi quietis et desiderii ac laetitiae suae felicitatisque terminum a remotis videre posset, quomodo curreret, ut comprehendat? Apostolus recte admonebat sic per nos esse currendum, ut comprehendamus».

wise our natural desire for what is beyond our (natural human) reach would be painfully in vain. Eventually, thus, Nicholas winds up, like Anselm, in resorting to hope. Intellectual effort, pushed to the summit of its capacity, finds its reward in the joy of hope: the unshakable confidence in and firm expectation of a good that, unseen though it is at the present moment, is sure to come.